Remembering RLS: Stevenson & Cultural Memory

By Craig Lamont

Robert Louis Stevenson died on the veranda of his home, Vailima, Samoa, on 3 December 1894.[1] On the centenary of his death the house became the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum. During his final years, Stevenson had become known in that part of the world as 'Tusitala' (Samoan: 'Writer of Tales'), and the locals saw fit to bury him on the summit of Mount Vaea, where a tomb was placed some years later. In 1903 Abbot Handerson Thayer painted his *Stevenson Memorial*, depicting an angelic figure sitting on a rock inscribed 'VAEA'. All around the world, in fact, Stevenson's legacy is marked with statues, plaques, and other honorary dedications. His works are celebrated globally; none more so, perhaps, than *Treasure Island* (1883; serialised as *The Sea Cook* 1881–82) and *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886). It would take a very long time to find the cultural manifestations of these texts in film, computer games, and other visual media. According to Lavoie, *Treasure Island* is the most widely held Scottish work in library collections globally.[2] The shape of the island, the 'x' on the map, and other motifs have become synonymous with the work and, by extension, the author. Even as recently as 2011, a stone plaque dedicated to *Treasure Island* and Stevenson was unveiled in North Berwick. There is no doubt, then, that Stevenson's legacy is fruitful and long-lasting. But in order to fully understand the true nature of Stevenson's 'cultural memory', and how it was formed, there are many factors to consider. We can think of cultural memory as a shared understanding or interpretation of any one thing built up over several generations, as opposed to 'collective memory', which is more concerned with living witnesses. But before we go any further, an honourable mention should be made to this very online journal, named after the Stevenson short story. Just type 'Stevenson' in the search bar and you will find dozens of great articles and book reviews related to the author already published here.

Stevenson was born at 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh, on 13 November 1850, into a family of renowned lighthouse engineers. At the time of his birth, the city had

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> *The character of a place is often most perfectly expressed in its associations […] in this spirit [Scott] made the 'Lady of the Lake' for Ben Venue, the 'Heart of Midlothian' for Edinburgh, and the 'Pirate' […] for the desolate islands and roaring tideways of the North.*[4]

More than just individuals, there was a turn in the second half of the nineteenth century to remember old ideas, customs, and architecture. In 1853 John Ruskin delivered a series of lectures on architecture and painting. According to Richard Roger, 'stone inscriptions had begun to appear' on Edinburgh buildings within a decade of Ruskin's lectures, 'and from the late 1870s […] heraldic shields were common additions to the external decoration of property.'[5] In 1886 Edinburgh held an International Exhibition showcasing an old fictional street in which Mary of Guise, Symson the Printer, and Cardinal Beaton were all neighbours, and in 1891 a Heraldic Exhibition was held in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Unlike Burns and Scott, who became icons of this new culture, Stevenson was born into it, and came of age as it reached its peak. This cultural fascination for the past undoubtedly shaped Stevenson's own views of literature and of commemoration.

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Stevenson memorial in Colinton, Edinburgh. Wikimedia Commons

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> *But rather say: In the afternoon of time*
> *A strenuous family dusted from its hands*
> *The sand of granite, and beholding far*
> *Along the sounding coast its pyramids*
> *And tall memorials catch the dying sun,*
> *Smiled well content, and to this childish task*
> *Around the fire addressed its evening hours.*[13]

Whatever Stevenson's true thoughts on being commemorated, there are several markers to consider in a review of his legacy. We find sculptures of Stevenson, including the portrait bust in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (c. 1894–95) and the portrait statue in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum (c. 1902). In

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Unveiling of the Stevenson Memorial in San Francisco, from Stevensoniana: An Anecdotal Life and Appreciation of Robert Louis Stevenson (1907)

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So, what does all this mean? 'What is the relation,' asks Adrian Poole, 'of all these memorials to Stevenson's writings?' Poole – whose contextual analysis of the St. Giles memorial casts its planners in a very poor light – laments the 'ever-widening gap between the experience of actually reading an author and the paraphernalia

for preserving his public "memory".'[18] But memory does not rest forever in the cast sculptures of the great and good. It changes, renewed with each generation, so that monuments take on new meaning and scrutiny. But why ask ourselves what Stevenson would make of this or that sculpture? We would be as well asking how Burns would have voted in the Scottish Independence Referendum, as some indeed have. After all, the monuments, plaques and paintings are just part of the great web of cultural memory surrounding Stevenson. They do not prevent anyone from reading his work, though they might serve as timely reminders. In fact, since the foundation of RLS Day in November 2011, there have been commemorative reading events, giveaways, and other activities in schools and libraries. Together with the One Book One Edinburgh initiative (2007), during which there was mass (re)publications and group readings of *Kidnapped* (2007) and *Jekyll & Hyde* (2008), the words of Stevenson have been given new prominence. This 'collective gaze', as Corbett calls it, is arguably more powerful in the short-term than any static monument or plaque.[19] In any event, these events form part of the whole memory picture, and there is no telling how it might be altered with time. Robert Louis Stevenson died on the veranda of his home, Vailima, Samoa, on 3 December 1894.[20] On the centenary of his death the house became the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum. During his final years, Stevenson had become known in that part of the world as 'Tusitala' (Samoan: 'Writer of Tales'), and the locals saw fit to bury him on the summit of Mount Vaea, where a tomb was placed some years later. In 1903 Abbot Handerson Thayer painted his *Stevenson Memorial*, depicting an angelic figure sitting on a rock inscribed 'VAEA'. All around the world, in fact, Stevenson's legacy is marked with statues, plaques, and other honorary dedications. His works are celebrated globally; none more so, perhaps, than *Treasure Island* (1883; serialised as *The Sea Cook* 1881–82) and *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886). It would take a very long time to find the cultural manifestations of these texts in film, computer games, and other visual media. According to Lavoie, *Treasure Island* is the most widely held Scottish work in library collections globally.[21] The shape of the island, the 'x' on the map, and other motifs have become synonymous with the work and, by extension, the author. Even as recently as 2011, a stone plaque dedicated to *Treasure Island* and Stevenson was unveiled in North Berwick. There is no doubt, then, that Stevenson's legacy is fruitful and long-lasting. But in order to fully understand the true nature of Stevenson's 'cultural memory', and how it was formed, there are

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Unveiling of the Stevenson Memorial in San Francisco, from Stevensoniana: An Anecdotal Life and Appreciation of Robert Louis Stevenson (1907)

The inscription 'To Remember | Robert Louis | Stevenson' is followed with a long extract from *Across the Plains* (1892). There is a Stevenson House at 350 Houston Street, Monterey, CA, and a Stevenson Cottage at Saranac Lake, NY. These visitor sites are important, not just for their nomenclature but for the relics and lore which help perpetuate cultural memory in an active way. On Mount Saint Helena, in the San Francisco Bay Area, a stone tablet in the shape of an open book was placed at the site of Stevenson's honeymoon cabin in 1911 by the Clubwomen of Napa County, kicking off pilgrimages to the site. In 1959 the surrounding park lands were given the dedication of Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, surely the largest memorial we have of the author.

So, what does all this mean? ‘What is the relation,’ asks Adrian Poole, ‘of all these memorials to Stevenson’s writings?’ Poole – whose contextual analysis of the St. Giles memorial casts its planners in a very poor light – laments the ‘ever-widening gap between the experience of actually reading an author and the paraphernalia for preserving his public “memory”.’[37] But memory does not rest forever in the cast sculptures of the great and good. It changes, renewed with each generation, so that monuments take on new meaning and scrutiny. But why ask ourselves what Stevenson would make of this or that sculpture? We would be as well asking how Burns would have voted in the Scottish Independence Referendum, as some indeed have. After all, the monuments, plaques and paintings are just part of the great web of cultural memory surrounding Stevenson. They do not prevent anyone from reading his work, though they might serve as timely reminders. In fact, since the foundation of RLS Day in November 2011, there have been commemorative reading events, giveaways, and other activities in schools and libraries. Together with the One Book One Edinburgh initiative (2007), during which there was mass (re)publications and group readings of *Kidnapped* (2007) and *Jekyll & Hyde* (2008), the words of Stevenson have been given new prominence. This ‘collective gaze’, as Corbett calls it, is arguably more powerful in the short-term than any static monument or plaque.[38] In any event, these events form part of the whole memory picture, and there is no telling how it might be altered with time.

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