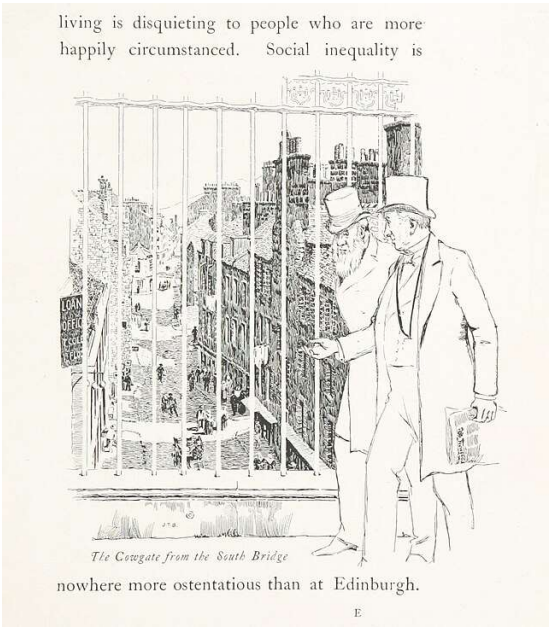
‘Like a Great Disordered Heart’: Robert Louis Stevenson in the City

By Kirsti Wishart

In a review of two new histories of Edinburgh, Stuart Kelly bemoaned the strange absence of literary explorers charting the city’s streets. ‘Narrating any city is an endless task, and it does surprise me that there is no psychogeography, no Iain Sinclair, for Edinburgh. We have no books that encompass Gilmerton Cove, the Craigentinny Marbles, the Ballardian interzone of Plantinum Point, the talismanically rubbed toe of Stoddart’s David Hume, the Gormleys in the Water of Leith, the Phoebe Traquair murals.’[1]

It may seem ridiculous to suggest there exists a peculiar blindness to the urban variety of Edinburgh, a city the skyline of which has graced a thousand tourist marketing campaigns. Yet, in parallel with TV adaptations of an Edinburgh-based novel featuring an obligatory yet completely pointless drive past Arthur’s Seat or trip down the Royal Mile, in non-fiction the same pathways tend to be followed. The actual texture of Edinburgh streets, its hidden treasures remain concealed.

This lack of Scottish city strollers becomes more perplexing when we discover none other than Robert Louis Stevenson being as one of the early psychogeographers in Merlin Coverley’s *Psychogeography*. The surprise is two-fold, in part because the movement is so closely associated with French Situationists and the London of Dickens, Iain Sinclair and Will Self but also because of the thought of Stevenson as a chronicler of the city. This doesn’t fit our image of the writer more commonly associated with his adventure stories, *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. It’s telling though that the work Coverley focuses on is *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Hyde*, set in London. While it has been argued the novel is informed thematically by Edinburgh with the tropes of the divided city and self as inspired by Deacon Brodie, the possible Scottish-themed psychogeographic strand is elided. When it comes to cities, as seen in the furore surrounding the disappearance of Glasgow from the film adaptation of *Poor Things,* Scotland remains a realm of bens and glens rather than streetlights and bustle.



Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, p. 67 [Wikimedia Commons]

The work presenting a far stronger argument for Stevenson as a precursor of the urban recorder Kelly longs for is one firmly rooted in Scottish streets. Published in book form in 1878, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes* was Stevenson's second non-fiction work and initially written as a series of magazine articles. This perhaps accounts for their light, conversational feel and sense of immediacy. Reading them is to be granted direct insight into what it was like to wander Edinburgh's streets in the 1870s. Psychogeographic writing is notoriously difficult to define but can be said to encompass accounts that attempt to capture the fleeting experiences, the layering of sensations that can take place during an average stroll. At its best it can provide a space where geography, psychology, history and memoir intermingle. In other words, it is a literary 'ramble',[2] the perfect phrase used by Alexander McCall Smith in his introduction to the Manderley Press edition of *Edinburgh Pictureseque Notes* with Stevenson the ideal walking companion, chatty and eccentric in his interests.

The appropriately named Rob A. Walker in his excellent book, *The Art of Noticing*, provides ways in which we can see familiar scenes afresh by focusing on sensations or imagery we might usually ignore to enrich our personal interactions with the city, such as sound, scent or colour.[3] Similarly, *Notes* suggests alternative means of mapping the city through the visceral, physical intensity of Stevenson's descriptions. We can *hear* the sound of his city echoing through the centuries:

> *Meanwhile every hour the bell of the University rings out over the hum of the*

streets, and every hour a double tide of students, coming and going fills the deep archways. And lastly, one night in the springtime – or say one morning rather, at the peep of day – late folk may hear voices of many men singing a psalm in unison from a church on one side of the old High Street; and a little after, or perhaps a little before, the sound of many men singing a psalm in unison on the opposite side of the way.[4]

We shiver with the chill winds he braces himself against and it proves impossible to walk about the New Town on a windy day without his phrase referencing 'draughty parallelograms'[5] bringing a smile to your face. He draws attention to how remarkably green the city is, his references to nature bringing to mind the Situationist credo that 'sous les pavés, la plage':

Into no other city does the sight of the country enter so far; if you do not meet a butterfly, you shall certainly catch a glimpse of far-away trees upon your walk; and the place is full of theatre tricks in the way of scenery. You peep under an arch, you descend stairs that look as if they would land you in a cellar, you turn to the back-window of a grimy tenement in a lane: – and behold! You are face-to-face with distant and bright prospects.[6]

Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, Edinburgh. Picturesque Notes, p. 123 [Wikimedia Commons]

He is sensitive to its unexpected wildness, its bird and animal life: 'Greyfriars is continually overrun by cats. I have seen one afternoon, as many of thirteen of them seated on the grass beside old Milne, the Master Builder, all sleek and fat, and complacently blinking, as if they had fed upon strange meats,'[7] a macabre suggestion to bear in mind when getting in the way of with tourists taking their way of shots of Greyfriar's Bobby.

It is less a tourist guide and more one that encourages a mindful approach, encouraging you to absorb Edinburgh's sheer physicality. If psychogeograpy can be described as 'a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities … just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them in a new awareness of the urban landscape'[8] then Stevenson is the perfect mentor for any trainee psychogeographer. He celebrates the creative and energising potential of a sudden shift in perspective, disorientation becoming a positive rather than a negative:

> *Here, you come into a court where the children are at play and the grown people sit upon their doorsteps, and perhaps a church spire shows itself above the roofs. Here, in the narrowest of the entry, you find a great old mansion still erect, with some insignia of its former state – some scutcheon, some holy or courageous motto, on the lintel. The local antiquary points out where famous and well-born people had their lodging; and as you look up, out pops the head of a slatternly woman from the countess's window.*[9]

These pleasurable jolts apply to the contemporary reader in the time-slips experienced when reading Stevenson in the locations he describes, history becoming layered in uncanny fashion. Compare the tourist or protestor filled plazas near Scotland's own Parliament at the foot of the Royal Mile with the Palace of Holyrood in Stevenson's time which had been, 'left aside in the growth of Edinburgh…grey and silent in a workman's quarter and among breweries and gas works.'[10] His description of newly built villas in Morningside and Newington suggest the 'Ballardian interzones' referred to by Kelly, reminiscent of the complaints towards the student flats springing up over the city, reminding us of how the architectural outrages of the present can turn over the years into quaint remnants of yesteryear, 'dismallest structures [that] keep springing up like

mushrooms.'[11]

Coverley comments that psychogeography 'seeks to overcome the process of 'banalsation' through which the experience of our familiar surroundings is rendered one of drab monotony,' by introducing us to 'the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting; the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings.'[12] Stevenson 'others' his findings, discovering strange sights behind private doors that you would expect to find in the pages of a fantasy novel rather than in the basement of Parliament House:

> *At length, as you continue to descend, you see a peep of yellow gaslight and hear a jostling, whispering noise ahead; next moment you turn a corner, and there, in a whitewashed passage, is a machinery belt industriously turning on its wheels. You would think the engine had grown there of it its own accord, like a cellar fungus, and would soon spin itself out and fill the vaults from end to end with its mysterious labours. In truth, it is only some gear of the steam ventilator; and you will find the engineers at hand, and may step out of their door into the sunlight.*[13]

He is not some distanced flaneur, admiring solely its fine architectural backdrops but is sensitive to the residents of the city, alert to the stories he brushes past. His comment on an Edinburgh tenement that 'In the first room there is a birth, in another a death, in a third a sordid drinking-bout, and the detective and the Bible-reader cross upon the stairs,'[14] sets the template for all Scottish crime fiction to come. In our present time, when division seems rife, he reminds us of the common society of city life, how it inevitably brings us into contact with those who have radically different backgrounds, views and experiences to our own and how this can only be enriching. His depiction of a land in the Grassmarket is a wonderfully moving reminder of the unforced, at times hidden, daily intimacy of city life, how we are constantly in the orbit of strangers, sharing their breath, a heartbeat away from making contact, exchanging stories:

> *The moon touched upon its chimneys, and shone blankly on the upper windows; there was no light anywhere in the great bulk of building; but as I stood there it seemed to me that I could hear quite a body of quiet sounds from the interior; doubtless there were many clocks ticking, and people snoring on their backs.*

> *And thus, as I fancied, the dense life within made itself faintly audible in my ears, family after family contributing its quota to the general hum, and the whole pile beating in tune to its timepieces, like a great disordered heart.*[15]

Reading this reminded me of the photos taken of the Grassmarket during lock-down, the number of unlit windows indicative of the number of properties empty due to their being holiday lets and how Edinburgh needs to work against a hollowing out, ensuring affordable housing helps to maintain its constant heartbeat, sustaining a living, breathing community rather than existing only as a scenic backdrop for selfies.

Similarly, his view from Calton Hill, watching lights coming on over the city is remarkable for its blend of the domestic and the panoramic, a vision providing a useful corrective to the image of the lonely city, the predominate experience being one of alienation. Here, it is a site and sight both spectacular and homely, the lights of firesides resembling the heavens:

> *An hour or so before, the gas was turned on; lamplighters scoured the city; in every house, from kitchen to attic, the windows kindled and gleamed forth into the dusk. And so now, although the town lies blue and darkling on her hills, innumerable spot of the bright element shine far and near along the pavements and upon the high facades. Moving lights of the railway pass and repass below the stationary lights upon the bridge. Lights burn in the jail. Lights burn high up in the tall lands and on Castle turrets, they burn low down in Greenside or along the Park. The run out one beyond the other into the dark country. They walk in procession down to Leith, and shine singly far along Leith Pier. Thus the plan of the city and her suburbs is mapped out upon the ground of blackness, as when a child pricks a drawing full of pinholes and exposes it before a candle; not the darkest night of winter can conceal her high station and fanciful design; every evening in the year she proceeds to illuminate herself in honour of her own beauty.*[16]

In a world where we find ourselves increasingly caught staring at our own reflections in black mirrors, hearing our voices echoed back to us in cyber silos, Stevenson reminds us of the beauty of city life, the opportunity paying attention provides to expanding our imagination, enriching our daily commute, turning it

into something magical. By stepping outside, following in his footsteps, we look up at the stars and streetlights and rediscover ourselves.

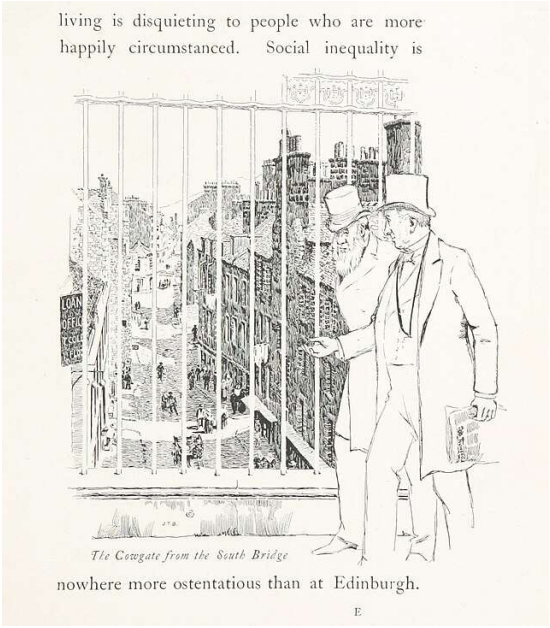
Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, p. 179 [Wikimedia Commons]

In a review of two new histories of Edinburgh, Stuart Kelly bemoaned the strange absence of literary explorers charting the city's streets. 'Narrating any city is an endless task, and it does surprise me that there is no psychogeography, no Iain Sinclair, for Edinburgh. We have no books that encompass Gilmerton Cove, the Craigentinny Marbles, the Ballardian interzone of Plantinum Point, the talismanically rubbed toe of Stoddart's David Hume, the Gormleys in the Water of Leith, the Phoebe Traquair murals.'[17]

It may seem ridiculous to suggest there exists a peculiar blindness to the urban variety of Edinburgh, a city the skyline of which has graced a thousand tourist marketing campaigns. Yet, in parallel with TV adaptations of an Edinburgh-based novel featuring an obligatory yet completely pointless drive past Arthur's Seat or trip down the Royal Mile, in non-fiction the same pathways tend to be followed. The actual texture of Edinburgh streets, its hidden treasures remain concealed.

This lack of Scottish city strollers becomes more perplexing when we discover none other than Robert Louis Stevenson being as one of the early psychogeographers in Merlin Coverley's *Psychogeography*. The surprise is two-fold, in part because the movement is so closely associated with French

Situationists and the London of Dickens, Iain Sinclair and Will Self but also because of the thought of Stevenson as a chronicler of the city. This doesn't fit our image of the writer more commonly associated with his adventure stories, *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. It's telling though that the work Coverley focuses on is *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Hyde*, set in London. While it has been argued the novel is informed thematically by Edinburgh with the tropes of the divided city and self as inspired by Deacon Brodie, the possible Scottish-themed psychogeographic strand is elided. When it comes to cities, as seen in the furore surrounding the disappearance of Glasgow from the film adaptation of *Poor Things,* Scotland remains a realm of bens and glens rather than streetlights and bustle.



Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, p. 67 [Wikimedia Commons]

The work presenting a far stronger argument for Stevenson as a precursor of the urban recorder Kelly longs for is one firmly rooted in Scottish streets. Published in book form in 1878, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes* was Stevenson's second non-fiction work and initially written as a series of magazine articles. This perhaps accounts for their light, conversational feel and sense of immediacy. Reading them is to be granted direct insight into what it was like to wander Edinburgh's streets in the 1870s. Psychogeographic writing is notoriously difficult to define but can be said to encompass accounts that attempt to capture the fleeting experiences, the layering of sensations that can take place during an average stroll. At its best it can provide a space where geography, psychology, history and memoir intermingle. In other words, it is a literary 'ramble',[18] the perfect phrase

used by Alexander McCall Smith in his introduction to the Manderley Press edition of *Edinburgh Pictureseque Notes* with Stevenson the ideal walking companion, chatty and eccentric in his interests.

The appropriately named Rob A. Walker in his excellent book, *The Art of Noticing*, provides ways in which we can see familiar scenes afresh by focusing on sensations or imagery we might usually ignore to enrich our personal interactions with the city, such as sound, scent or colour.[19] Similarly, *Notes* suggests alternative means of mapping the city through the visceral, physical intensity of Stevenson's descriptions. We can *hear* the sound of his city echoing through the centuries:

> *Meanwhile every hour the bell of the University rings out over the hum of the streets, and every hour a double tide of students, coming and going fills the deep archways. And lastly, one night in the springtime – or say one morning rather, at the peep of day – late folk may hear voices of many men singing a psalm in unison from a church on one side of the old High Street; and a little after, or perhaps a little before, the sound of many men singing a psalm in unison on the opposite side of the way.*[20]

We shiver with the chill winds he braces himself against and it proves impossible to walk about the New Town on a windy day without his phrase referencing 'draughty parallelograms'[21] bringing a smile to your face. He draws attention to how remarkably green the city is, his references to nature bringing to mind the Situationist credo that 'sous les pavés, la plage':

> *Into no other city does the sight of the country enter so far; if you do not meet a butterfly, you shall certainly catch a glimpse of far-away trees upon your walk; and the place is full of theatre tricks in the way of scenery. You peep under an arch, you descend stairs that look as if they would land you in a cellar, you turn to the back-window of a grimy tenement in a lane: – and behold! You are face-to-face with distant and bright prospects.*[22]

Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, Edinburgh. Picturesque Notes, p. 123 [Wikimedia Commons]

He is sensitive to its unexpected wildness, its bird and animal life: 'Greyfriars is continually overrun by cats. I have seen one afternoon, as many of thirteen of them seated on the grass beside old Milne, the Master Builder, all sleek and fat, and complacently blinking, as if they had fed upon strange meats,'[23] a macabre suggestion to bear in mind when getting in the way of with tourists taking their way of shots of Greyfriar's Bobby.

It is less a tourist guide and more one that encourages a mindful approach, encouraging you to absorb Edinburgh's sheer physicality. If psychogeograpy can be described as 'a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities … just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them in a new awareness of the urban landscape'[24] then Stevenson is the perfect mentor for any trainee psychogeographer. He celebrates the creative and energising potential of a sudden shift in perspective, disorientation becoming a positive rather than a negative:

> *Here, you come into a court where the children are at play and the grown people sit upon their doorsteps, and perhaps a church spire shows itself above the roofs. Here, in the narrowest of the entry, you find a great old mansion still erect, with some insignia of its former state – some scutcheon, some holy or courageous motto, on the lintel. The local antiquary points out where famous*

and well-born people had their lodging; and as you look up, out pops the head of a slatternly woman from the countess's window.[25]

These pleasurable jolts apply to the contemporary reader in the time-slips experienced when reading Stevenson in the locations he describes, history becoming layered in uncanny fashion. Compare the tourist or protestor filled plazas near Scotland's own Parliament at the foot of the Royal Mile with the Palace of Holyrood in Stevenson's time which had been, 'left aside in the growth of Edinburgh…grey and silent in a workman's quarter and among breweries and gas works.'[26] His description of newly built villas in Morningside and Newington suggest the 'Ballardian interzones' referred to by Kelly, reminiscent of the complaints towards the student flats springing up over the city, reminding us of how the architectural outrages of the present can turn over the years into quaint remnants of yesteryear, 'dismallest structures [that] keep springing up like mushrooms.'[27]

Coverley comments that psychogeography 'seeks to overcome the process of 'banalsation' through which the experience of our familiar surroundings is rendered one of drab monotony,' by introducing us to 'the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting; the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings.'[28] Stevenson 'others' his findings, discovering strange sights behind private doors that you would expect to find in the pages of a fantasy novel rather than in the basement of Parliament House:

At length, as you continue to descend, you see a peep of yellow gaslight and hear a jostling, whispering noise ahead; next moment you turn a corner, and there, in a whitewashed passage, is a machinery belt industriously turning on its wheels. You would think the engine had grown there of it its own accord, like a cellar fungus, and would soon spin itself out and fill the vaults from end to end with its mysterious labours. In truth, it is only some gear of the steam ventilator; and you will find the engineers at hand, and may step out of their door into the sunlight.[29]

He is not some distanced flaneur, admiring solely its fine architectural backdrops but is sensitive to the residents of the city, alert to the stories he brushes past.

His comment on an Edinburgh tenement that 'In the first room there is a birth, in another a death, in a third a sordid drinking-bout, and the detective and the Bible-reader cross upon the stairs,'[30] sets the template for all Scottish crime fiction to come. In our present time, when division seems rife, he reminds us of the common society of city life, how it inevitably brings us into contact with those who have radically different backgrounds, views and experiences to our own and how this can only be enriching. His depiction of a land in the Grassmarket is a wonderfully moving reminder of the unforced, at times hidden, daily intimacy of city life, how we are constantly in the orbit of strangers, sharing their breath, a heartbeat away from making contact, exchanging stories:

> *The moon touched upon its chimneys, and shone blankly on the upper windows; there was no light anywhere in the great bulk of building; but as I stood there it seemed to me that I could hear quite a body of quiet sounds from the interior; doubtless there were many clocks ticking, and people snoring on their backs. And thus, as I fancied, the dense life within made itself faintly audible in my ears, family after family contributing its quota to the general hum, and the whole pile beating in tune to its timepieces, like a great disordered heart.*[31]

Reading this reminded me of the photos taken of the Grassmarket during lock-down, the number of unlit windows indicative of the number of properties empty due to their being holiday lets and how Edinburgh needs to work against a hollowing out, ensuring affordable housing helps to maintain its constant heartbeat, sustaining a living, breathing community rather than existing only as a scenic backdrop for selfies.

Similarly, his view from Calton Hill, watching lights coming on over the city is remarkable for its blend of the domestic and the panoramic, a vision providing a useful corrective to the image of the lonely city, the predominate experience being one of alienation. Here, it is a site and sight both spectacular and homely, the lights of firesides resembling the heavens:

> *An hour or so before, the gas was turned on; lamplighters scoured the city; in every house, from kitchen to attic, the windows kindled and gleamed forth into the dusk. And so now, although the town lies blue and darkling on her hills, innumerable spot of the bright element shine far and near along the pavements and upon the high facades. Moving lights of the railway pass and repass below*

the stationary lights upon the bridge. Lights burn in the jail. Lights burn high up in the tall lands and on Castle turrets, they burn low down in Greenside or along the Park. The run out one beyond the other into the dark country. They walk in procession down to Leith, and shine singly far along Leith Pier. Thus the plan of the city and her suburbs is mapped out upon the ground of blackness, as when a child pricks a drawing full of pinholes and exposes it before a candle; not the darkest night of winter can conceal her high station and fanciful design; every evening in the year she proceeds to illuminate herself in honour of her own beauty.[32]

In a world where we find ourselves increasingly caught staring at our own reflections in black mirrors, hearing our voices echoed back to us in cyber silos, Stevenson reminds us of the beauty of city life, the opportunity paying attention provides to expanding our imagination, enriching our daily commute, turning it into something magical. By stepping outside, following in his footsteps, we look up at the stars and streetlights and rediscover ourselves.

Etching by A. Brunet-Debaines, *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, p. 179 [Wikimedia Commons]

(c) The Bottle Imp