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The Bottle Imp

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***The New Edinburgh Edition of the
Collected Works of Robert Louis
Stevenson***
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A new edition of Stevenson is an exciting and demanding project. There have, of course, been many excellent volumes of Stevenson in recent years from Emma Letley's well-researched and still useful Oxford World's Classics volumes to Barry Menikoff's indispensable manuscript-based edition of *The Beach of Falesá*. But not since the period 1894–1924 when numerous collected editions of Stevenson were published, have readers been given the change to evaluate Stevenson's work afresh as a life-time writing career. And although there have been a number of important scholarly single editions (Ernest Mehew's *Wrong Box*, Roger Swearingen's *Amateur Emigrant*, among others) these have remained single projects and not always easy to obtain. Now, for the first time, the *New Edinburgh Edition* is producing a coordinated series of texts, all prepared by careful study of manuscripts and variant readings and following unified scholarly procedures. It has taken many years of planning and research and now, with the help of a grant from the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and vital assistance from the RLS Club of Edinburgh, the first volumes are nearing publication in 2013. The following short introduction gives an account of the choices that face the general editors of a large collected edition of an author.

Every complete works needs a sense of where to start, and a printed edition must decide on what text it will take as its starting point. We are conscious that Stevenson is a popular author, as well as one who has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention in recent years. Our edition aims to offer a text that will be useful for the widest possible

readership, as well as providing the scholarly apparatus necessary to understand the full textual and publishing history. Scholarly editions have three broad choices for their 'copy text': manuscript, first edition or last lifetime edition; usually each of these will provide interesting variants, and it is difficult but imperative to choose between them. The *New Edinburgh* will generally take as copy text the most authoritative early edition—usually the first volume rather than magazine version—from the period, that is, when the author worked with greatest concentration and effort and was still involved in the process of creation. Our aim is to publish accurate versions of texts mediated by the circumstances of production in which the author collaborated—a text that is useful for readers today and which would be recognised by original readers. But this policy for the choice of copy text is only a first preference: the choice can never be an automatic, or even a straightforward one. The conditions of publication for Stevenson were constantly changing as he moved around the world: in some ways he was the first global author, living and working in Europe, America and the South Pacific. Some works were published first in the UK, some in the USA. And although Stevenson was a very careful corrector of proofs, they did not always reach him, and he when he died in 1894 some works were left uncorrected or incomplete. Many of the texts that have been reprinted since Stevenson's death were corrected (or otherwise changed) by Sidney Colvin, his friend and literary executor.

So, with an author like Stevenson, who used many different publishers and sent material from all points of the globe, choice of copy text is not an easy matter—we do not always have a clear trail from manuscript to proof to first edition. A particularly difficult case is *The Ebb-Tide*, where the manuscript was laid aside after being used for two separate typewritten copies: one was used for the London magazine version (and then for the London book publication), the other for the New York magazine version (and then for the US book publication). Stevenson never saw proofs but put corrections on a copy of the London magazine version that was then used by Colvin in correcting proofs of the US book publication.

In the first wave of volumes we will publish another complicated text—*The Amateur Emigrant*, Stevenson's account of his journey first across the Atlantic and overland to

California. Stevenson wrote the manuscript between September 1879 and June 1880 and late April 1880 the first part was in type; in May Stevenson marked up the galley proofs, some of which survive. While staying with his parents in Strathpeffer in August 1880 Stevenson complied with his father's desire to withdraw the volume from publication. The second part of the manuscript was later published in *Longman's Magazine*, but the first part remained unpublished in Stevenson's lifetime. With a case like this it is impossible to identify a single text that fits the *New Edinburgh* guidelines for choice of a copy text. We have some manuscript, some corrected proofs, magazine versions and a late volume version in the *Edinburgh Edition* of 1894–9 with changes made both by Stevenson and by Colvin. The volume editor, Julia Reid, is working on a text that assembles a reading version to give the closest possible indication of the text that Stevenson would have published from his original manuscript, using the manuscript where it exists, and later versions where it does not.

Preliminary work by Gillian Hughes on the manuscripts and early printings of the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston* is indicating that Colvin was overly correct—even fussy—when preparing the novel for posthumous publication and the nearest state to the text that Stevenson would have finalised for the press may be the manuscript that he dictated to his stepdaughter Isobel (Belle) Strong. Of course this raises further problems for the editor—Belle lacked Stevenson's familiarity with languages and the Bible and occasionally misses what Stevenson says to her so the manuscript is not a direct record of his oral communication. As in any edition where there is no clear textual progression, there must always be an element of conjecture.

One of the key early phases of the edition—and perhaps among the most exciting for Stevenson scholars—will be a 5-volume set of his essays, the first time these have been collected together. The edition of the essays will, for the first time, produce a text of the essays by careful transcription, proofing and collation between the different 'witnesses' (draft, MS, proofs, magazine and volume editions). The editors (Robert-Louis Abrahamson, Richard Dury, Lesley Graham and Alex Thomson) hope that the result of this slow and meticulous work will be an opportunity for readers to look at these fascinating texts with new

eyes. Another important aim is to provide explanatory notes to accompany the essays so that they may be as useful a resource for scholars of Stevenson as the *Letters* edited by Ernest Mehew have become. Finally, the editors hope to transmit their enthusiasm for Stevenson's work, which they believe rank him among the great English-language essayists. The received opinion, handed down without thought from the 1890s onwards, is that the essays are 'mere exercises in style', 'imitative of other essayists', works of 'over-elaborate, self-conscious style'. By presenting the essays together in a clean and reliable reading version, they hope to persuade a new generation that even the earliest of his essays offer memorable reading experiences as well as an archive of information about nineteenth-century literary culture.

Work on a collected edition generates a great deal of information and the essays are also a useful way of tracking Stevenson's reception and reputation. The editors' survey of anthologised essays has had some interesting results. Up to 1950 the essay that appeared most frequently in anthologies was the now little-read early meditation on death, 'Aes Triplex'. From 1950, the increasing acceptance of Stevenson as an important theorist of literature in the debates about literary realism and romance in the 1880s changes the scene dramatically. 'A Gossip on Romance' is the top choice for anthologists, with 'A Humble Remonstrance' (Stevenson's reply to Henry James' *Art of Fiction*) not far behind.

The edition will appear in three phases. Along with the essays, some of the first volumes to appear will be *Prince Otto*, *Weir of Hermiston*, *The Amateur Emigrant*, *St Ives* and a volume of Stevenson's short stories. As we generate digital material for the printed copies of the volumes we will move towards an electronic edition, where all textual variants and a great deal more contextual material will be made available. We are also working in collaboration with the National Library of Scotland to make the actual digital texts available in various forms. The *New Edinburgh Edition* is a long (but we hope not too slow) project, and also very much a community endeavour: it involves collaboration between editors, research assistants, postgraduates, volunteers, and Scottish institutions with the aim of promoting and serving one of Scotland's greatest writers, now increasingly appreciated.

The *New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* will be published by Edinburgh University Press. The General Editors are Stephen Arata, Richard Dury, Penny Fielding and Anthony Mandal. For the latest news or further information about the progress of the edition and to collaborate with us on reading the manuscripts, visit edrls.wordpress.com



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