

## **Stevenson, the international author**

Robert Louis Stevenson's itinerant life has left traces of many sorts scattered across the various international sites with which he is associated. His boots are in the Writer's Museum in Edinburgh, his baby cap and beaver coat at Saranac Cottage in the state of New York while some furniture and books can be seen in the Stevenson Museum at Vailima in Samoa. His wedding ring and his toy soldiers are in the Stevenson Museum in Saint Helena; his flageolet sheet music at Stevenson House in Monterey, both in California. Plaques on the façades of dozens of buildings in Europe, North America and Oceania commemorate his residence there. People come from afar to climb to his grave on Mount Vaea or to walk in his footsteps along officially sanctioned hiking trails in Scotland, England, France, and America. The virtual universe is similarly strewn with traces of Stevenson. His online reach can be measured by the number of times aphorisms from his work – authentic and otherwise – are shared and re-shared across social media every day. In a fitting reflection of his engagement with the world and with moving through it, many of these quotations are themselves related to the practice of travel: 'we are all travellers in ... the wilderness of this world'; 'There are no foreign lands, it is the traveller only who is foreign'; 'For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move.'<sup>1</sup>

The global spread of Stevenson's footprint through the publication, distribution, adaptation and translation of his work outside Britain began in earnest with the French translations of *Treasure Island* in 1885.<sup>2</sup> Translations into Danish, Dutch, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish also appeared rapidly.<sup>3</sup> In Japan, an abridged and heavily adapted translation of *Treasure Island* was serialised in four parts in a monthly journal entitled *Bungei Kurabu* as early as 1895,<sup>4</sup> and the novel appeared in Chinese in 1904.<sup>5</sup> The ways in which the texts initially circulated internationally were not always

straightforward: translations were sometimes translations of other translations while others were so free as to be adaptations rather than translations. The first Russian version of *Treasure Island* published in Moscow in 1886 as an appendix to the magazine *Вокруг Света*, for example, was based on a French edition while Oshikawa Shunrô gave characters in the *New Arabian Nights* Japanese names but kept the British backdrop. The international transmigrations occasionally ricocheted back to augment the original as when, for instance, plates by George Roux originally produced for the first illustrated French translation were used in the first illustrated edition in English imparting a Gallic touch to the reading experience of the British public.

Stevenson is now the twenty-sixth most translated author in the world<sup>6</sup> and is generally considered to be Scotland's most translated author. He has, as Barnaby and Hubbard note, 'now appeared in eighty-nine languages, and is the only Scot translated into a significant number of non-European languages.'<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile *Jekyll and Hyde* is not only the most frequently adapted work of Scottish literature in world cinema, but according to Butt, probably the third most adapted of any works of literature, falling just behind *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Stevenson's most famous works – *Treasure Island* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – are members of that exclusive club of international popular culture phenomena that have broken free of the literary works that engendered them. Their titles, characters, plots and tropes have seeped into the subjective experience of people of most nationalities through reading, viewing and even video-gaming.

The world caught the reading bug in the nineteenth century and made Stevenson one of its first truly international celebrities so that when, in 1887, he disembarked in America for the second time the event was front page news. Journalists descended on his hotel and theatre-goers rushed to see one of the first adaptations of *Jekyll and Hyde*, the novella they had recently discovered and the main driver behind Stevenson's sudden notoriety. He used the interviews he gave in New York to draw attention to the question of international copyright, a problem

that had exercised him for some time and that worked both for and against his transatlantic literary career. Stevenson's fame was a direct consequence of the cheapness and availability of his books overseas, notably in America, but he was not gaining financially from those sales. Soon after disembarking in New York on his first visit to America in 1879, Stevenson had purchased a pirated copy of *Travels With a Donkey in the Cevennes* which somewhat surprisingly had been released there in the very same month as in Great Britain. Some years later, he claimed in an interview that just a week after the publication of *Kidnapped* (1886) in Great Britain, there were twenty-five different editions for sale in America. Occasionally the British publisher was involved in the subterfuge as Stevenson pointed out in an unpublished essay: 'I have known this same system of calling operations by other names to lead a respectable publisher into an act that was certainly illegal; I have known him (that is) to hold a book subject to a royalty, to sell the advance sheets in America, and not to account for the proceeds of the sale.' ('Authors and Publishers').

Foreign authors received no copyright protection in the United States: the accepted practice for American publishers was simply to reprint their works without paying the author. Stevenson's situation was symptomatic of a changing global book market, and clearly already thinking in terms of an imagined international professional community of writers, he framed the piracy as a threat not only to his own livelihood but also to that of American writers who simply could not compete with cheap reproductions of foreign novels. He repeatedly drew attention to the issue in interviews, essays and letters, actively lobbying for international copyright law. In an unpublished letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, secretary of the American Copyright League, Stevenson declared that 'As one of the sufferers, it is hardly necessary for me to express my sympathy for the movement; and as one who has in some way suffered least, it would be difficult to do so gracefully. The question is one which lies before the American people; and in the solution of that, and in all parts of its National affairs, I trust it may be guided well.'<sup>9</sup>

A particularly indignant letter written in 1887 to the New York publishers Harper & Brothers, denouncing their 'act of piracy' was published in *The Times* under the heading 'International Copyright'.<sup>10</sup> Shortly afterwards, an article by Stevenson's main publisher in America, Charles Scribner, appeared in the *Publishers' Weekly* confirming the author's extraordinary popularity and supporting his analysis of the situation.

Stevenson's works are now the most popular here of all living novelists. And this very popularity is assisted in large measure by the cheapness of his works, for the want of an international copyright law makes possible the publication of four of Stevenson's novels in one volume, all for twenty cents. You can readily perceive that a sale thus rendered large through the want of statutory protection tends to shut out home products through the very cheapness of the article, thus not only depriving the British author of his dues but interfering with the sale of American novels.<sup>11</sup>

Through collaboration with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne, an American citizen protected by American copyright laws, Stevenson was able to safeguard his financial interests in America to some extent. Although he denied that this was the sole objective of their collaboration, he did admit that 'the result is certainly attained by it.'<sup>12</sup> In July 1891 the United States Congress eventually passed the Chace Act, the first American International Copyright Law affording foreign authors some protection if the books were manufactured in the United States. By then, Stevenson's earnings had begun to reflect his popularity worldwide. He was, as Bell notes, the first bankable Scottish writer to capitalise on the burgeoning international market, along with J. M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle and John Buchan, 'making their marks on the metropolitan book trade and reaping the rewards of international success.'<sup>13</sup>

Stevenson initially messed up his business dealings in America, leaving himself open to

accusations of duplicity after a mix-up concerning incompatible engagements he entered into with both Scribner's and McClure and this made him wary of future contracts. He had grown up in a city that was, in his own words, part of the "world of everyday reality, connected by railway and telegraph-wire with all of the capitals of Europe."<sup>14</sup> Later, however, geographical distance from these means of rapid communication meant that he relied heavily on a network of friends at home to negotiate deals for him and to look after his literary interests. Charles Baxter and Sidney Colvin were the main elements in this network along with W. E. Henley. They often dealt with publishers and contracts, not to mention editing. Stevenson worked hard at creating, then maintaining this network of social and professional relationships that would promote and distribute his work while he was geographically distant from the centres of the literary world. Transatlantic dealings were managed in a more efficient way when in 1924, thirty years after Stevenson's death and just before his work passed out of unrestricted copyright, his four main publishers swiftly agreed to bring out a uniform edition of the complete works at two different prices (the Tusitala and Skerryvore editions) on either side of the Atlantic.<sup>15</sup>

As a traveller and expatriate Stevenson was not satisfied with simply dwelling in other parts of the world but made a conscious effort to engage with them in purposeful ways, often drawing inspiration from their literatures and cultures. Much of his travel writing was inspired by his geographical position on the globe, but also his essays, and his political writing from the Pacific. There, rather than being an instrument of colonialism, he became a particularly notable example of what Keown identifies as typical Scots radicalism in action so that while *A Footnote to History* (1892) may stop short of 'outright condemnation of European colonialism *per se*, the text criticizes the wrangling for power amongst British, German, and US settlers and colonial forces in Samoa'.<sup>16</sup>

Stevenson was influenced by writers from elsewhere — he repeatedly cited Montaigne, Dumas, Whitman and Thoreau — and he in turn influenced generations of writers and critics

working in other parts of the world and in other languages. Notable admirers abroad have included Alain-Fournier, Atushi Nakajima, Borges, Calvino, Gide, Nabokov, Le Clézio, Lev Lunts, Malraux, Proust, Jacques Rivière, Schwob, and Sôseki Natsume – many reacting enthusiastically to his work at the same time as it was being side-lined by the gatekeepers of the English literary canon. The process was one of transculturation as his work was read and accommodated in new cultural environments, modifying the literary output and altering the structures of feeling, literary trends and popular culture in diverse elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Authors recognised Stevenson's influence both as a writer and as a theorist, variously citing his work as having been significant in the development and evolution of Latin-American magic realism,<sup>18</sup> French symbolism, the European Gothic, a compromise between the realist and the psychological novel,<sup>19</sup> and the adventure novel. Given his place and standing in world literature at the end of his life, it is little wonder that Stevenson's obituarist in *Le Temps* declared that his death was a loss not only for English literature but for universal literature and indeed for humanity.<sup>20</sup>

The process of literary globalisation is certainly more complicated than the reciprocal trading of texts and influences between geographical spaces. To paraphrase Pascale Casanova, there is a struggle between competing forces in the global literary field at play in which those who emerge as international rather than national writers obtain greater freedom for their work.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, it is no coincidence that as his international reputation grew, the perception of Stevenson's national identity receded. In the process of internationalisation, as Brown has argued, Stevenson's Scottishness was effaced: 'If one accepts that world literature may be defined in terms of its commodification in production, publication, appropriation and circulation, then the global promulgation of Stevenson's novel, not to mention its many adaptations for – besides film – stage, television, radio and comics, marks it not only as a key text of 'English' literature, but also a key text of world literature [...] Jekyll and Hyde are entities in the global imaginative mindscape and have been evacuated of their Scottish

genesis.’<sup>22</sup> But although his audience may now be unaware of his Scottishness, Stevenson himself, without ever over-sentimentalising his connection to an increasingly unattainable home, never forgot where he was from. Despite his active presence elsewhere and his growing awareness of the globalisation of experience, he continued to engage with Scotland calling on his familiarity with Scottish history, particularly that of the Highlands, not only to create new fiction but also to better apprehend Pacific cultures.

Stevenson was what Henry James famously called ‘a Scotchman of the world.’<sup>23</sup> This Scot was, in fact, a resolutely *glocal* writer. He was cosmopolitan in lifestyle and world view but able to hold and promote a simultaneously international and local perspective in his work, consciously writing for a worldwide readership while upholding his subjective Scottish experience; combining his knowledge of the world with a feeling for the indigenous. However, instead of making a global product fit the local market as is usual in current commercial strategies, he made texts anchored in local realities and real localities speak to a global market. The Scribner's essays, written initially for an American readership but drawing on much Scottish subject matter, are a good example of this syncretism. In the series of twelve essays, although he wrote about universal moral topics, he also riffed on personal reminiscences of places and experiences rooted in his homeland and unfamiliar to the majority of his readers. He wrote about places like Anstruther and Wick and unselfconsciously used expressions like *well kent*, *links*, and *land* with specific meanings in Scots, trusting his American readers to shift their fields of reference accordingly. This was an international writer who expected his readers to be international readers. In creating key texts in world literature that held both the universal and the local in focus, Stevenson proved that one could be simultaneously a Scottish and a world writer.

---

<sup>1</sup> From the prefatory letter to *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes; The Silverado Squatters* and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* respectively. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey, An Inland Voyage, The Silverado Squatters*, (Dent 1984) p. 94; p. 231; p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> André Laurie (tr.), *L'Île au trésor*, serialised in *Le Temps* (from 25 Sept. 1884) then published as *L'Île au trésor* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1885); Louis Despréaux (tr.), *L'Île au trésor* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1885).

<sup>3</sup> For accounts of Stevenson in translation see Paul Barnaby and Tom Hubbard, 'The International Reception and Literary Impact of Scottish Literature of the Period 1707–1918' in Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning and Murray Pittock (eds), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), vol. 2, pp. 33-44, Tom Hubbard, 'Dva brata: Robert Louis Stevenson in translation before 1900', *Scottish Studies Review*, 8:1 (2007) pp. 17-26 and Richard Dury. 'Stevenson in Italy and Italian.' *Scottish Studies Review* 9:1 (2008), pp. 61–78. See also Mark Fitzpatrick, "'Tout à fait un grand écrivain", Stevenson's place in French literary history' in Richard Hill (ed), *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Great Affair: Movement, Memory and Modernity*, (Routledge, 2017) pp. 202-218 for an account of Stevenson's reception in France.

<sup>4</sup> Translated as *Shin Takarajima*. See Yukinobe Tanabe, *Robert Louis Stevenson's View of the Japanese*, no date, no place of publication.

<sup>5</sup> Translations of *New Arabian Nights* (1908) and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1917) followed. I am grateful to Dr Kang-yen Chiu for information about translations into Chinese.

<sup>6</sup> See the UNESCO Index Translationum *World Bibliography of Translation 1978–Present* (UNESCO, 2017) <http://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=5&nTyp=min&topN=50>. The only other author with significant Scottish connections in the top fifty is Arthur Conan Doyle at number fourteen.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Barnaby and Tom Hubbard, op. cit. p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Butt, 'Literature and the Screen Media since 1908' in Ian Brown et al (eds) op. cit. pp. 53–4.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.robert-louis-stevenson.org/richard-dury-archive/new%20letters.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, Bradford A. Booth, and Ernest Mehew (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 5, (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 1994) p. 375.

<sup>11</sup> *Publishers' Weekly*, XXXI (April 2, 1887), p. 489-90.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. Terry, *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Bell, 'The Scottish Book Trade at Home and Abroad, 1707–1918' in Ian Brown et al (eds) op. cit. p. 226. After the success of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson was regularly earning somewhere between £4000 and £5000 a year (David McKitterick (ed), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. Vol. 6, 1830-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009) p. 212).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Edinburgh, Picturesque Notes* (London, Seely, Jackson & Halliday, 1879) p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Andrew Nash, *The Culture of Collected Editions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p. 122.

Stevenson's works became public domain in December 1944, until when a 10% royalty was payable to his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne.

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Keown, 'Isles of Voices: Scotland in the Indigenous Pacific Literary Imaginary', *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 9 (Autumn / Winter 2013), p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> The term "transculturation" was coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. See Regenia Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization, Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century*, New Comparisons in World Literature (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Barnaby and Hubbard argue that 'As read by Borges, "A Humble Remonstrance" and "A Gossip on Romance" became two of the founding texts of Latin-American magic realism.' (op. cit. p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> 'Marcel Schwob bolstered his own reputation with perceptive readings of Stevenson – notably finding in him the middle-road between the realist and the psychological novel' (Fitzpatrick, p. 206).

<sup>20</sup> 'La mort de Robert-Louis Stevenson est un deuil et pour les lettres universelles et pour l'humanité', *Le Temps*, 18 December, 1894.

<sup>21</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters. Convergences : Inventories of the Present*. (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 108-110.

<sup>22</sup> Ian Brown, *Our Multiform, Our Infinite Scotland: Scottish Literature as 'Scottish', 'English' and 'World' Literature*, (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2012) p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Henry James, 'Robert Louis Stevenson' in *The Century Magazine*, XXXV, April 1888, p. 874.