

Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific: Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession

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Roslyn Jolly investigates the significant transition in Robert Louis Stevenson's sense of vocation and authorial identity that took place between 1887 and 1894. She charts the precarious course of this transformation, from an author known for his delicate, but perhaps too pleasant as to be slightly empty charm in "the graceful art of writing about nothing" (3), to a writer/journalist/anthropologist/socio-political historian, who wished to write serve others—"others" comprising a group as diverse as his British and American readers, along with the Hawaiian, Tahitian and Samoan peoples depicted in his South Pacific writings. Jolly's work is both revealing and compelling in that she presents a Stevenson who navigates several major crises with fortitude, cultural sensitivity and a remarkable measure of uncertainty and faith that he would be able to write adeptly and in a new way about cultural and political matters well beyond his (and his readers') own experiences.

In Chapter one, "1887: The Turning Point", Jolly shows us that the initial crisis Stevenson navigates is the immense tension between him and the rest of his family—a family celebrated throughout Britain for their civil engineering service and public works, most notably including lighthouses. This is not a new story, of course—the clichéd tension between familial expectation, social duty and a writer's sense of identity has fuelled much writerly angst and many domestic rebellions, but Jolly's analysis differs in how she shows that Stevenson himself seems both satisfied and unsettled by the recurring conflict to recognise the power struggle between father and son publicly, as an obstacle that initially prevents Stevenson from writing as he instinctively feels, but secondly, the yardstick that he continually compares himself against. Initially Stevenson trained as an engineer, but felt that he fell short of the profession; his family then encouraged him to study law, but while he passed the bar and was guaranteed financial security, prestigious employment and the social status that came with this, literature's call was too attractive. While his father continued to support Stevenson financially through much of his period, he condemned his son's choice of profession, this condemnation so strong that it would in no small part censor the early appearance of Stevenson as "realistic, politically provocative" writer (4), as shown in *The Amateur Emigrant* (written 1880, but not published until 1895 in a still-censored, heavily-abridged form).

This leads on to the second crisis, which Jolly delineates (mostly in the third chapter, "Our Man in Samoa: *A Footnote to History*") as the tension between the public perception of Stevenson, "the Author", and the new highly politicised path he wished to follow by forging a sense of "public service a sense of duty [a] sense of his working self" (67-8). His father and family were not the only intimates to express their disapproval of Stevenson's choice of vocation or the way he sought to redefine it—his wife and close friends, supportive of his major fiction works, were highly critical of his interest in the South Pacific not as material for escapist fiction, but as the sole focus of his investigation into problematic and unsolvable matters of colonisation, colonial politics, and ways to comprehend new cultural values. Despite the discouragement Stevenson received from his wife Fanny and close friends such as Sidney Colvin, and the reasonably hostile public reaction to the South Pacific nonfiction and newspaper articles, Jolly uncovers an author who bravely stays the course. This may be why Jolly chose to concentrate on the nonfiction and journalistic results of the South Pacific years, in that she is better able to reveal the transition from disapproval to acceptance and appreciation in literary advisors such as Colvin, as well as better analyse the

critical reception at the time—her second chapter on *In the South Seas* ends with an excellent extended comparison between those who did not quite know how to reconcile this new side of Stevenson with what they expected, to glowing reviews from critics who welcomed this mixture of anthropological observation and novelistic characterisation (62-3).

This forms the basis of the third kind of crisis Stevenson faced—and Jolly reveals how this was never completely reconciled. Like the conflict between himself and his family's vocational reputation, like the continual tension between himself and the closest friends and literary advisors, Stevenson's views on the nature and responsibility of authorship is never really settled or defined, but nor does he necessarily want them to be. Jolly describes Stevenson as continually interacting with his subject matter as an individual more interested in the way Pacific peoples might differ from and compare to him and his own cultural background, rather than a writer worried about the legitimacy of writing about such matters. Jolly shows that this is a distinction that some of his contemporary critics commented on, either accusing him of meddling in foreign affairs that mattered little, or succeeding in encouraging his readers to comprehend the cultural, politics and societies of the South Pacific through (as the *New York Times* reviewer put it) a "simple sense of kinship by which the standpoint is perceived and all actions traced to a comprehensible source" (63). In seeking to define an authorial scope which would allow "a transhistorical, transracial, commonsense view of what human beings are likely to do in certain situations" (97), Jolly examines how Stevenson conflates the seemingly disparate aspects of a travel writer, a fiction writer, a political commentator, and even a journalist with jurisprudence experience into a new mode of writing. One aspect leading on from this that I wanted to see further discussed was the conflict between Stevenson's intent to write of the cultures and socio-political issues he found with objectivity, disinterest, and skepticism, and his very personal and often partisan involvement with some of the leading players in Samoan society. Jolly tries to reconcile this two ways – by describing how Stevenson wrote from the perspective of being an outsider, consciously utilising his sense of being an outsider Scotsman (in how his legal training allowed him to recognise a distinct separation between the Scottish perspective of the law and civic, cultural values, in contrast to much of the rest of Europe – its legal and civic systems, and cultural values being derived from that of classical Rome; this concept anchors both chapters 2 and 4, "The Novelist as Lawyer: The *Times* Letters and *Catriona*"). Secondly, she describes how Stevenson very often leads the reader to actively interpret and experience cultural and socio-political aspects of the South Pacific themselves, though "he does not relinquish control over the results of that process" (88). That Stevenson himself seems to be forever unsettled but in progress regarding authorial purview and identity alongside his readers and their impressions of his South Pacific experiences seems to be a suitably uneasy conclusion to Jolly's enlightening investigation.

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