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Robert I. Hillier

*In the South Seas*



No matter how much success or popularity authors enjoy, they still envision writing a masterpiece that will guarantee their lasting repute. This article focuses on Robert Louis Stevenson's South Seas travel writing and contrasts his hopes for his planned masterpiece *In the South Seas* with the humble reality of its posthumous publication. This article chronicles the emotions Stevenson felt at different stages in the writing and the conflicts he had with his editor and his wife about the content and purposes of the book and then discusses flaws and strengths of the book and reasons for its relative unpopularity both in serial and book form. Since Stevenson originally planned for his South Seas book to include his observations of life in Hawaii and his study of Samoan history, treatment of *In the South Seas* incorporates the "Hawaii Letters" and *A Footnote to History*.<sup>1</sup>

Stevenson began his literary career as a travel writer with accounts of a canoeing trip on the Sambre Canal and Oise River in Belgium and France in *An Inland Voyage* and a hike from Velay to St. Jean du Gard, France over the Cevennes Mountains in *Travels with a Donkey*. Charm is the main quality of these books, as Stevenson becomes the slightly absurd comic hero of each account, humorously explaining such things as that the Oise River was hardly one

which either commercial navigators or recreational boatmen traveled, or telling about his ineptness in packing his gear or trying to command a donkey. Stevenson tells more about how he feels than what he sees. The books remind a reader of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* minus the implied sexuality, because sentiment, geniality, and kind feelings toward one's fellow creatures dominate these stylistically fluid but somewhat empty works.

Stevenson is also the comic hero of *The Silverado Squatters* telling how he, his wife, Fanny, and his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne homesteaded in a deserted California mining camp after the marriage. Stevenson creates slightly absurd portraits of himself doing such things as rising early to observe the sunrise or the fog and making porridge or hiking the mile down to the tollhouse on guard for rattlesnakes. Because style eclipses content, one recalls enjoying these three travel works but does not remember much that has occurred.

The two parts of another travel book, *The Amateur Immigrant* have a more serious purpose and a much harsher tone. Stevenson writes in disgust at the shiftless lack of purpose of the immigrants to America with whom he crosses the Atlantic and traverses the American continent and at the anonymity with which he and his fellow travelers are regarded. In describing the voyage and the train trip, he shifts his focus from petty events in his own life to the things he observes and their significance. The seediness of his surroundings augmented by his own declining health produce almost surreal descriptions. However, Stevenson's contemporaries did not get to read *The Amateur Immigrant* except those portions printed in magazines, because Thomas Stevenson prevailed on his son not to publish it.

The popularity of *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey*, which rivaled his lesser fiction in sales, and unfamiliarity with his one venture into realistic and serious travel writing led American publisher S. S. McClure to offer Stevenson ten thousand dollars to do a series of articles on travels he might make, giving him a choice of the Caribbean or the Pacific. McClure reasoned that if somewhat commonplace regions of Europe could elicit minor gems from Stevenson, the South Seas might inspire sensational writing. On June 28, 1888, Stevenson, accompanied by his wife and his stepson, embarked on a cruise into the Pacific which would end only with his premature death in 1894.

By 1888, Stevenson had mastered most forms of literature. The popularity of *Treasure Island*, *Dr. Jekyll*

and *Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped*, plus royalties from dramas based on *Jekyll and Hyde*, had brought fame and financial independence. Yet he hoped that this literary success was only a prelude to some greater work. He saw in his first glimpse of the Marquesas an initiation into beauty beyond anything previously imaginable, as he wrote, "The first experience can never be repeated. The first love, the first sunrise, the first South Sea island are memories apart, and touch . . . a virginity of sense."<sup>2</sup> He felt that the complex savagery and grandeur he was experiencing could inspire an epic masterpiece, which he would call *In the South Seas* and which would encompass history, ethnology, geology, and folklore, rather than the mere collection of observations and anecdotes on exotica McClure had hired him to write.

Stevenson's correspondence reveals the progression and regression of his aspirations for *In the South Seas*. As early as 6 September 1888, he promised Charles Baxter that he would be able "to tell . . . more of the South Seas after . . . [a] few months than any other writer has done--except Herman Melville perhaps."<sup>3</sup> Fifteen months later along with the chapter outline for the book, he boasted to Colvin, "Not many people have seen more of [the South Seas] than I, perhaps no one--certainly no one capable of using the material."<sup>4</sup>

Yet with Stevenson's growing awareness of the complexity of Pacific cultures came misgivings. In December 1889, he boasted, "My book is now practically modelled: if I can execute what is designed, then there are few better books now extant on this globe, bar the epics, and the big tragedies, and histories, and the choice lyric poetics, and a novel or so--none."<sup>5</sup> Yet about the same time he confessed to Charles Baxter, "It is very difficult to see what is the right thing. All I am sure of is that I must stay."<sup>6</sup> By February 1890, Stevenson saw that the Letters he was writing for McClure were "simply patches" for the travel volume, with the history of recent politics in Samoa likely to become an additional book.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the year Stevenson could report to Colvin only the completion of eight "Letters," and these accompanied with the warning not to judge them as finished products and an exclamation of agony--"The job is immense; I stagger under the material."<sup>8</sup> --which Colvin omitted from the published correspondence.

Frustration and despair dominate most of the rest of Stevenson's comments on his South Seas travel writing. To Henry James he confided,

Gracious what a strain is a long book! The time it took me to design this volume before I could dream of putting pen to paper, was excessive; and think of writing books of travel on the spot, when I am continually extending my information, revising my opinions, and seeing the most finely finished portions of my work come part-by-part to pieces. Very soon I shall have no opinions left. And without an opinion how to string artistically vast accumulations of fact.<sup>9</sup>

To Colvin he raged, "All the good I can express is just this; some day when style revisits me, they will be excellent matter to rewrite. . . I haven't the least anxiety about this book; unless I die I shall find time to make it good."<sup>10</sup>

Part of Stevenson's retreat from optimism to despair came from the realization that his subject matter exceeded his capacity to control it. Yet part came from the criticism he faced from those whose advice he most valued, his wife Fanny and his editor Sidney Colvin. Two long quotations from letters to Colvin convey this frustration.

One thing embarrasses me. No one ever seems to understand my attitude about that book; the stuff sent was never meant for other than a first state; I never meant it to appear as a book. Know well that I have never had one hour of inspiration since it was begun, and have only beaten out my metal by brute force and patient repetition, I had hoped some day to get a 'spate of style' and burnish it--fine mixed metaphor. I am now so sick that I intend, when the letters are done and some more written that will be wanted, simply to make a book of it by the pruning knife. I cannot fight longer; I am sensible of having done worse than I hoped, worse than I feared; all I can do now is to do the best I can for the future, and clear the book like a piece of bush, with axe and cutlass. Even to produce the MS of this will occupy me at the most favorable opinion till the middle of next year; really five years were wanting, when I could have made a book; but I have a family, and perhaps I could not make the book after all.<sup>11</sup>

One word more about the *South Seas* in answer to a question I observe I have forgotten to answer. The Tahiti part has never turned up, because it has never been written. . . . As for telling you where I went or when, or anything about Honolulu, I would rather die; that is fair and plain. How can anybody care when or how I left Honolulu? A man upwards of forty cannot waste his time in communicating matter of that indifference. The letters, it appears, are tedious; they would be more tedious still if I wasted my time upon such infantile and sucking bottle details. If ever I put in any such detail, it is because it leads into something, or serves as a transition. To tell it for its own sake; never! the mistake is that all through I have told too much, I have not had sufficient confidence in the reader and have overfed him.<sup>12</sup>

Although Stevenson announced after completing thirty-seven Letters that he would write no more, privately he asserted the merits of what he had written. In some of his final words to Colvin he wrote:

I am strong for making a volume out of selections from the *South Seas* letters; I read over again the King of Apemama, and it is good in spite of your teeth, and a real curiosity, a thing that can never be seen again, and the group is annexed and Tembinoka dead. I wonder, couldn't you send out to me the first five Butaritari letters and the Low Archipelago [Tuamotu] ones (both of which I lost or mislaid) and I can chop out a perfectly fair volume of what I wish to be preserved. It can keep for the last of the series [of collected works].<sup>13</sup>

Stevenson's frustration with his audience parallels that of Herman Melville, who while writing works of profound philosophical and moral depth could not rise above his literary reputation as "the man who had lived among cannibals." Stevenson did not mind gaining increased notoriety for dwelling among "cannibals," but he also wanted to teach his audience that the Pacific was a fascinating and complex region, "a no man's land of the ages, a stir-about of epochs and races, barbarisms and civilizations, virtues and crimes."<sup>14</sup>

A sampling of editorial comments from Sydney Colvin and passages from the correspondence of Mrs. Stevenson show the

extent of their influence on the South Seas book. The region that entranced Stevenson bored Colvin from his distant perspective at the British Museum. Colvin's introduction to *In the South Seas* discourages the reader from proceeding into the book. "Before serial production had gone very far, . . . [Stevenson] realized that the personal and the impersonal elements were not very successfully combined nor in proportions that contented his readers."<sup>15</sup> In a biographical sketch of Stevenson Colvin asserts that "from living permanently in that outlandish world and far from cultural society both he and his writing must deteriorate."<sup>16</sup> In a prefacing note to Stevenson's Pacific correspondence, Colvin again condemns Stevenson's "South Seas Letters:" "Unfortunately, he persisted in the endeavour to make his work impersonal and full of information, or what he called 'serious interest' exactly in the manner which his wife had foreseen before they left Honolulu, and from which she had wisely tried to dissuade him."<sup>17</sup>

While Colvin expressed his disappointment with Stevenson's "South Seas Letters" from a distance of over ten thousand miles, Fanny sustained a barrage against the way her husband was going about organizing and writing the Letters and the time involved in this research. She was a powerful and able woman who guarded her husband's health and who endured a great deal for him, including over twenty-five thousand miles of ocean cruises on which she was often sick; but she was also strong-willed, single-minded, and almost unopposable, especially in her criticism of her husband's writing. David Daiches notes that, "in spite of her unconventional upbringing, she tried to act as Victorian censor of Louis' writing and must share part of the responsibility for his timidity in his handling of women in his novels."<sup>18</sup> Part of Stevenson's reaction to pressure from his editor and his wife was to produce travel writing which pleased neither them nor himself and finally to put aside his great South Seas book.

Some incidents during their marriage help explain some of Fanny's behavior in the Pacific. Although a writer of only moderate talent, she had literary aspirations. Early in their marriage she collaborated with her husband on *The Dynamiter* and on an almost unreadable play entitled *The Hanging Judge*. When Stevenson's cousin Katherine da Mattos showed Fanny a story she had written but had been unable to publish, Fanny suggested that she might be able "to do something with it." Altering the story slightly, Fanny

published it as "The Nixie" in *Scribner's Magazine* under her name. When W. E. Henley read the story and wrote to Stevenson in Saranac Lake accusing Fanny of plagiarism, Stevenson furiously defended his wife and ended what had been one of his closest friendships. She enjoyed her visits to the Marquesas and Tahiti, and she withstood the hardships of living in the Tuamotus and the Gilberts, but when she realized that for her husband's health and even his pleasure they might settle in Samoa, the Pacific lost some of its radiance. To Colvin she admitted her misgivings, "I'm assured that I shall like the [Samoan] natives very much when I really know them; perhaps I may, but I have my doubts."<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the nature of their marriage changed. Except for several months during the early part of the courtship at Gretz and Paris, Fanny had been as much a nurse and a mother to Louis as a lover and wife. When she proceeded with her hurried divorce from Samuel Osbourne and marriage to Stevenson, she knew she might as quickly become a widow. When after eight years of frequent convalescence under Fanny's care Stevenson suddenly enjoyed, albeit with relapses, the best health of his life, he no longer needed the nurse.

Investigation of the manuscripts of Stevenson's correspondence reveals that in 1893 Fanny suffered a mental breakdown, all mention of which Colvin deleted from the *Vailima Letters* as "beneath scorn."<sup>20</sup> In a letter to his mother Stevenson describes Fanny's condition as influenza, but an insert in Isobel's handwriting interjects, "Fanny is not recovering. She lies in bed, doesn't smoke, doesn't want to eat or speak. . . . I would like to see her take an interest in something."<sup>21</sup> Among the many comments from Stevenson on the situation, two stand out. "She passes from death-bed scenes to states of stupor. The last was a hell of a scene which lasted all night--I will never tell anyone what about, it could not be believed and was so unlike herself or any of us--in which Belle and I held her for about two hours; she wanted to run away." "Today's fit (which was the most insane she has yet had) was still gentle and melancholy. I am broken on the wheel."<sup>22</sup>

Concerning *In the South Seas* Fanny at first agreed that the South Seas book could become a masterpiece, but she countered her husband on what the book should include. Like Colvin and McClure she wanted her husband to write in the same modes as his earlier travel works and to remain



faithful to archetypal depictions of the South Seas, as her complaint to Colvin in a May 1889 letter reveals.

Louis has the most enchanting material that anyone ever had in the whole world for his book, and I am afraid he is going to spoil it all. He has taken into his Scotch Stevenson head, that a stern duty lies before him, and that his book must be a sort of scientific and historical impersonal thing, comparing the different languages (of which he knows nothing really) and the different people, the object being to settle the question as to whether they are of common Malay or not.

Also to compare the Protestant and Catholic missions, etc., and the whole thing to be impersonal, leaving out all he knows of the people themselves. . . Think of a small treatise on the Polynesian races being offered to people who are dying to hear about Ori a Ori, the making of brothers with cannibals, the strange stories they told, and the extraordinary adventures that befell us;--suppose Herman Melville had given us theories as to the Polynesian language and the probable good and evil results of the missionary influences instead of *Omoo* or *Typee*.<sup>23</sup>

The comments on Melville show the extent to which she absorbed Melville's fictional inventions designed to pander to the romantic stereotypes his readers had of the South Pacific and the extent to which she ignored Melville's carefully researched factual information about Polynesia and his chronicling of abuses of islanders by trader and missionary alike.<sup>24</sup>

In subsequent letters Fanny confides in Colvin that she discouraged including in the book such topics as the formation of coral reefs, the origin of South Sea peoples, possible language patterns; and that she tried to get her husband to eschew the South Seas works of any other writers. She felt that the book should contain "only what Louis' own experiences were," adding that the more serious topics "would have ruined the book . . . but for [her] brutality."<sup>25</sup>

In fairness to Mrs. Stevenson, it must be admitted that her husband's pursuit of information could become absurd. On one occasion in Apemama he exhausted himself trying to chip off a chunk of coral which Fanny notes he could have picked up off the beach in Hawaii. In addition to being no journalist, Stevenson severely underestimated the magnitude

of his subject. Its remoteness from western law and morality has sometimes made the entire Pacific seem even to the modern reader like a single community in which the creations of Stevenson, Maugham, Melville, Conrad, and Becke intersect, but it is a vast region with three separate cultural groups, over two hundred different languages, and infinite variation within each tribe of people. Even one hundred years later scholars debate many of the same issues which fascinated Stevenson. However, the conclusion to the same letter from Fanny to Colvin--"always please fall upon me when his work goes wrong. He will stubbornly hold to his own position, but is apt to give way if he thinks I am getting the blame"<sup>26</sup>--reveals the extent to which she would manipulate her husband's writing.

Fanny, however, could also side with her husband. Whereas Colvin disparaged Stevenson's involvement in Samoan politics and stated that he would rather Stevenson write ten family histories than another letter to the *London Times*, Fanny was Louis' partner in their political participation. She supported the the writing and publication of *A Footnote to History* in hopes that it would help Mataafa, their friend and claimant to the Samoan throne.

It is possible that Colvin and Mrs. Stevenson were correct, that a volume of light chatter on the famous author's experiences in Polynesia would have delighted his readership and made a successful book, and that Stevenson was intellectually and artistically unsuited to comprehend the cultural history of Pacific Islanders. If *In the South Seas* is indeed a wasted effort, two reasons can explain its failure. If Colvin and Fanny were correct, then Stevenson stubbornly went ahead with doomed material in spite of their good council. Yet the flaws of the book may be the result of Stevenson's accepting their advice and trying to insert personal anecdotes into scholarly writing. A third possibility exists: that despite the difficulty he had writing his "Letters" and the conflicting advice he was assailed with, Stevenson still managed to write a flawed but comprehensive book, a draft of what could have become a monumental study.

While Harry J. Moors, a friend of Stevenson in Apia, denigrates *In the South Seas* and claims to have secured Stevenson's release from having to write further "Letters" for McClure, several other writers knowledgeable about the region, including one who opposed Stevenson's advocacy of Polynesian self-determination, testify to the depth and accuracy of Stevenson's research and writing. Henry Adams

admits in his correspondence that in touring the South Seas he is imitating Stevenson, but after having visited him berates the manner in which he lived while extolling his knowledge of the region. For example, Adams writes "Stevenson has bought . . . four hundred acres of land at ten dollars an acre. . . . As his land is largely mountain, and wholly impenetrable forest, I think that two hundred acres would have been enough, and the balance might have been profitably invested in soap." Or on Stevenson's departure for Australia, "Stevenson so loves dirty vessels that he has gone to Sydney to get more seadirt on, the land-dirt having become monotonous."<sup>27</sup> Despite this disparagement, Adams recognizes Stevenson's knowledge of the South Seas:

[Stevenson] has seen more of the islands than any literary or scientific man ever did before, and knows all that he has seen. He had much to say about his experiences, and about . . . atolls, *French gens d'armes*, beach-combers, natives, and Chinamen. . . . He will tell his experiences in the form of travels, and I was rather surprised to find that his range of study included pretty much everything: geology, sociology, laws, politics, and ethnology.<sup>28</sup>

Adams' fascination with the South Seas was such that when he returned to the United States, he privately printed *Tahiti: Memoires of Arii Taimai Oo Marama of Eimeo*, his interpretation of the oral history shared with him by his hosts in Tahiti.

Arthur Johnstone, publisher of the *Honolulu Pacific Commercial Advertiser* and author of *Recollections of Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, accuses Stevenson of naivete in undercutting "the innate capacity of Anglo-Saxons to rule" with his support of Polynesian leaders, but praises the methods by which Stevenson gathered information.

He was not satisfied with the mere gathering of material for stories, as his predecessors had been, but he went deeply into the habits of savage life and tribal customs of the different groups. In the Marquesas Islands and Low Archipelago, besides the native side of the question, he made a careful study of French laws in force, and examined as closely as his time would permit into their effect on Polynesian customs and nationality. Folklore, with the customs concerning

death, marriage, and adoptions, he examined quite fully, and took great store of facts with him for future use. He was extremely interested in the revolting and somewhat obscene habit of cannibalism which lingers in a few of the southern islands of the Pacific. And to him no sacrifice was too great where there was knowledge or a fact to be gained; he would traverse an island or cross a sea to secure such in his notebook.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Vailima Letters* Colvin mentions that his own letter which announced "the disappointment felt by Stevenson's friends at home at the impersonal and even tedious character of some portions of the South Seas Letters" provoked Stevenson's despairing letter of 29 April 1891. Having sabotaged Stevenson's hope for his South Seas book and diminished his confidence in Polynesia as a useful setting for his fiction and poetry, Colvin, in this commentary written in 1901, adds, "As a corrective of this opinion, I may perhaps mention that there is a certain many voyaged master-mariner as well as master writer--no less a person than Mr. Joseph Conrad--who does not at all share it, and prefers *In the South Seas to Treasure Island*."<sup>30</sup>

Colvin's belated qualification reveals several things. Appreciation of Stevenson's Polynesian works seems to require some personal interest in, and possibly experience with, the South Seas. Adams disdained Stevenson's style of living yet admired his ability as a writer and his knowledge of the South Seas. In contrast, Stevenson's friends and readership in England and America were unreceptive to information about Polynesia and hence the "South Seas Letters." Significantly, nowhere in his editorial or biographical commentary does Colvin criticize Stevenson's other minor works such as *Memoire of Fleeming Jenkin*, *A Family of Engineers*, or *Edinburgh, Picturesque Notes*, but only berates him for writing about "Blacks and Chocolates," involving himself in their politics, and believing that such people could be the proper subjects for serious literature.

Colvin's praise for Joseph Conrad, whom he served in much the same capacity as he did with Stevenson, reveals another barrier which Stevenson could not get past. Because Conrad was first a seaman and adventurer and later a man of letters, no one questioned his use of exotic settings, situations, or characters for his works of fiction. One senses in Conrad such a confidence in the experiential backgrounds of his works, that had an editor suggested that

Malay river villages or the skirmishing among Bugi tribesmen, native Malays, Arab carpetbaggers, and renegade whites were not proper material for literature, Conrad probably would have replied that this was the material he had. While critical and commercial success pleased Conrad and exceeded his expectations when he first wrote *Almayer's Folly*, he probably would have gone on writing with or without the sanction of the English literary establishment or reading public.

In contrast, Stevenson first embarked on a literary career at age sixteen, went through a literary apprenticeship during which he turned out articles, essays, stories, and romantic fantasies, and first met critical recognition as a stylist, and popular success as a creator of adventure novels. That he became an adventurer was almost an accident caused by his poor health. With his literary roots and his intellectual nurturing, he was keenly sensitive both to the advice of his literary friends such as Colvin, Edmund Gosse, Andrew Lang, Henry James, and Arthur Symonds and to the popularity of what he wrote. Paul Maixner summarizes the conflict Stevenson faced in writing his South Seas works. Among the barriers he faced were "having to live up to [others'] ideas of what he should accomplish, . . . [being] obliged to expend too much of his limited energy trying to placate supporters by doing work they would approve of or trying to justify work he knew would not."<sup>31</sup>

Among more recent criticism, only that of J. C. Furnas-- whose own book about the region is called *Anatomy of Paradise* -- praises *In the South Seas*. Furnas states that Stevenson lacked the reporter's essential skill of ordering details to build to a conclusion, but he so admires the quantity and accuracy of information, that he rates *In the South Seas* as "still one of the dozen things that a beginning student [of the South Pacific] must know."<sup>32</sup>

The thirty-five chapters of *In the South Seas* are the thirty-seven "Letters"--minus the "Hawaii Letters"--only slightly revised from the form they took when McClure ran them in the *New York Sun* and *Black and White* between February and December 1891.<sup>33</sup> The book takes readers through three groups of islands, with a fourth explored in the unpublished "Letters" from Hawaii, and a fifth covered in *A Footnote to History*.

The first fifteen chapters deal with the Marquesas and go into the greatest detail because these islands were Stevenson's initiation into tropical life. The next six chapters contrast the vitality of Polynesians in the Tuamotu

atolls with degeneration in the Marquesas and reveal Stevenson's fascination with the ghost stories that are central to Tuamotuan oral tradition. Stevenson does not write about The Society Islands--Tahiti--except for points of comparison and contrast in other sections of the book. He also writes little about Honolulu, but instead devotes five of his Hawaii Letters to his visit to the Kona coast of the Island of Hawaii and five to his visit to the Leper Colony of Kalaupapa on a tiny promontory on Molokai. The Kona "Letters" are the most folksy and personal, the most in line with what Fanny wanted and least in line with what Stevenson hoped to accomplish. The Molokai "Letters" focus on the scourge of leprosy, material basic to the "Open Letter on Father Damien," so that publication would have repeated information already provided in that widely read polemic. The final Molokai letter tells how a Hawaiian leper escaped from Kalaupapa around 1883, either miraculously sailed his own boat or stowed away in a trading schooner, and landed in Jaluit of the Marshall Islands, where he spread his contamination.

The most frequently excerpted sections of *In the South Seas* come from the seven chapters dealing with Butaritari and the seven chapters on Apemama, regions which are part of the Gilbert Islands and are populated by Micronesian people. These sections come alive largely because of depictions of the contrasting weak and strong monarchs Tebureimoa and Tembinok'. The daily doings of the Stevensons play a larger part, but not to the author's discomfort, as the family routine in Butaritari and Apemama illuminates the nature of two similar societies under two very different rulers.

*A Footnote to History* consists of eleven chapters describing Samoan struggles against German, British, and American imperialism during the decade before Stevenson arrived. One memorable chapter depicts the pride of naval captains from each nation which causes them to remain in Apia harbor as a hurricane approaches and the courage of Samoans trying to save the lives of the sailors as ships go down.

This totals almost eight hundred pages. The writing is filled with information: sketches of interesting characters, appealing anecdotes and yarns, descriptions of scenic beauty, attempts to explain contradictions and complexities in South Seas culture. But two things impede the reader. First, numerous associations and sub-topics make the book hard to follow. Each scene leads Stevenson to describe each

interesting character associated with the scene. Each episode recalls parallel situations.

For example, when discussing the missionary prohibitions as a contribution to the obliteration of Marquesan culture, Stevenson also discusses missionary influence on other archipelagoes, and then interjects that despite several items of criticism he is writing to praise the missions, not to bury them. The ostensible subject of the fifth chapter is "Depopulation," yet this subject leads Stevenson into the barely related topics of patterns of Polynesian settlement, famine, cannibalism, degrees of agricultural development, infanticide, child rearing practices, adoption, and prostitution, all within three pages. The setting is the Marquesas, yet Stevenson first propels the reader through Hawaii, the Tuamotus, the Ellices, and Tahiti. Most of Stevenson's information is accurate, and the opening subject, the possible extinction of a people, is worth writing about; but the details are too varied for easy absorption and the style of writing more suited to scholars than newspaper readers.

Secondly, while the archetype of the South Seas lured Stevenson into the region, he found the reality far more fascinating. His readership most likely wanted sequels to the depictions of the love lives of Fletcher Christian, Pierre Loti, Tommo, and Charles Warren Stoddard. A Victorian novelist whose fiction was nearly devoid of female characters was more likely to offer them a treatise on such topics as depopulation and cannibalism. And while Stevenson could make up stories of buried treasure, barratry, and plank-walking, the seedier real-life adventures he witnessed among Polynesians and beachcombers more fully excited his imagination. Compounding the problem of disunity which afflicts the book is Stevenson's shifting focus. Rather than observing the South Seas from above, Stevenson's vantage is from the yacht and the trading schooners on which he traveled. This gives him a continually changing perspective which acts on his imagination as the wind, currents, calms and storms act on sailing vessels.

*In the South Seas* can be best appreciated when regarded as an informative fragment. The book is the posthumous publication of mostly unrevised "Letters," certain of which have been omitted, one major island group ignored, and observations on another area placed in a separate volume. The reader must overlook the obvious and numerous flaws and relish the wealth of information and the intelligent sympathy of the author for the people and situations he

encounters. More significantly, *In the South Seas* is Stevenson's writer's notebook which provided him settings, plot ideas, and characters for his South Seas fiction. In one of his enraged letters to Colvin he wrote, "Can I find no form of words which will at last convey to your intelligence the fact that *these letters were never meant, and are not now meant, to be other than a quarry of material from which the book may be drawn?*"<sup>34</sup>

Stevenson's exact use of *In the South Seas* in his narrative poetry and fiction could become the topic of an additional article, so that a summary of some of his uses must suffice here. Much of the book reveals Stevenson's fascination with Polynesian and Micronesian folklore. Cannibal stories dominate the Marquesas letters; ghost stories run through the Tuamotus chapters; folk beliefs and superstitions are recounted in the Hawaii Letters, the *Footnote to History*, and the Gilbert Islands sections. Stevenson's narrative poem about cannibalism "The Feast of Famine" is his attempt to recreate Marquesan folklore, and "The Song of Rahero" is an exact retelling of a Tahitian revenge story. Superstitions of the Tuamotu atolls and the Hawaiian islands permeate his story "The Isle of Voices." And most effectively, Polynesian superstition is the basis for Case's power over the islanders in *The Beach of Falesá* just as Wiltshire's victory comes revealing the fraudulence of Case's "magic."

Balancing island oral tradition is the white oral tradition of sea yarns, with their focus on piracy, buried treasure, barratry, "blackbirding," insurance swindle, and murder in the Pacific. Such swashbuckling tales become the basis for the two novels Stevenson wrote in collaboration with Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb Tide*; except that in both works Stevenson transcends his previous ideas for "the novel of adventure" by vividly depicting the ironical ennui and despair white outcasts feel in what should be a paradise.

The hundreds of human beings briefly described in *In the South Seas* remain somehow flat, as if in limbo awaiting a story or novel in which to take on life. Actual people whom Stevenson heard about or met become minor characters in his South Seas fiction. The heroes, heroines, and villains of these works are composites of other people described in the travel writing and of characters in Stevenson's fertile imagination.

And finally, the various island settings which seem to keep shifting in *In the South Seas* become more focused



settings for the fiction. "The Isle of Voices" wonderfully contrasts the western mercantilism on even the most remote of Hawaiian islands with the aboriginal life on such atolls as Tarawa or Fakarava in the Tuamotus. Compounds of Polynesian heritage and mission education, Keawe and Kokuia in "The Bottle Imp" adjust to life both in such colonial capitals as Honolulu and Papeete and in the more traditional Kona coast. The reader does not need to see much of the beach life near Papeete nor the mission compound of an unnamed pearling island to fully accept both settings in *The Ebb Tide*. *The Wrecker* is possibly the most dismal of Victorian novels until the settings shift to deserted Midway Island and the smuggling capital, Honolulu. While vaguely Samoan, Falesa is more a creation of Stevenson's imagination, yet the landscape takes on a clarity and vividness equal to Twain's St. Petersburg or Faulkner's Yawknawpatawpha County.

One can lament that *In the South Seas* never received final editing and revision. Yet even as a fragment, it provides a detailed guide to Polynesia at the end of the nineteenth century, as informative and enjoyable as any other travel book. Read together with Stevenson's South Seas fiction *In the South Seas* becomes as valuable to the reader as a well-written guidebook is to a tourist traveling into unfamiliar territory.

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## NOTES

1. In the discussion of Stevenson's South Seas travel writing *ISS* refers to the book *In the South Seas*, first published in 1896; the "Hawaii Letters" refers to ten chapters written about Hawaii but not include in *In the South Seas*, reprinted as "The Eight Islands" in Stevenson, *Travels in Hawaii*, ed. A. Grove Day; and the term "Letters" refers to the travel letters which S.S. McClure syndicated in 1891 and which with the omission of the "Hawaii Letters" became with minimal revision *In the South Seas*. With the same word being used to describe different pieces of writing, as much as possible Stevenson's personal letters are referred to as correspondence.

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3. Delancey Ferguson and Marshall Waingrow, *Robert Louis Stevenson: Stevenson's Letters to Charles Baxter* (New Haven, 1956) p. 236.
4. Stevenson, *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Sidney Colvin, Vailima ed. 26 vols. (New York, 1974), 22, 204.
5. To Sidney Colvin, *Works*, 22, 204.
6. Ferguson and Waingrow, p. 252.
7. To E.L. Burlingame, *Works*, 22, 225.
8. 6 November 1890, Widener Collection 225, Vailima Letter 1, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
9. 19 December 1890, *Works*, 22, 347.
10. 19 March 1891, Widener Collection 225, Vailima Letter 7.
11. 18 April 1891, Widener Collection 225, Vailima Letter 7.
12. 7 September 1891, *Works*, 22, 403.
13. 7 August 1894, *Works*, 23, 417.
14. To Colvin, June 1889, *Works*, 22, 186.
15. *Works*, 16, 4.
16. Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places* (New York, 1921), p. 145.
17. *Works*, 22, 100.
18. David Daiches, "Which Robert Louis Stevenson?" *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 6 (1951), 63.
19. E.V. Lucas, *The Colvins and Their Friends* (New York, 1928), p. 225.
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21. To Margaret Stevenson, 17 Ap. 1893, Beinecke Collection 3431, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
22. To Colvin, Ap. 1893, Beinecke 3114.
23. *Works*, 3, 176-77.
24. Charles Roberts Anderson, *Melville in the South Seas* (New York, 1967), pp. 179-95.
25. Sir Sidney Colvin, "More Letters of Mrs. R.L. Stevenson," *Scribner's*, 75 (1924), 416, 417.
26. Colvin, "More Letters," p. 417.
27. Henry Adams, *Henry Adams and His Friends*, ed. Harold Dean Carter (Boston, 1947) pp. 202, 238.
28. Henry Adams, *Letters*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, 2 vols. (Boston, 1930-38), 1, 426, 440.
29. (London, 1905), pp. 49-50.
30. *Works*, 22, 367.
31. *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1981), p. 2.
32. "Stevenson and Exile," *Stevenson and Victorian Scotland*, ed. Jenni Calder (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 136.
33. Roger E. Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Hamden, 1980), pp. 136-39.
34. *Works*, 22, pp. 370-71.