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David Angus

Robert Louis Stevenson The Secret Sources

It is fascinating to speculate on the workings of a creative mind; particularly so in the case of Robert Louis Stevenson. Speculation, of course, is a hazardous occupation, and may lead one along tortuous paths into the realms of purest fantasy. Yet every now and then one comes across something that looks suspiciously like hard proof.

Stevenson, we know, loved to weave personal and family detail into his writings. Often his family history is used as a quarry. On other occasions Stevenson ranges freely through Edinburgh history, picking up details that take his fancy. Janet M'Clour ("Thrawn Janet") turns out to have been the wife of a villainous Edinburgh publican (Kenneth Mackenzie of Jock's Lodge) involved in the "Worcester" affair of 1705. Burchell Fenn, on whose peculiar nocturnal transport system the fugitive hero of *St. Ives* depends, owes his odd name to an English soldier (Burchell Venn) involved in the Siege of Leith (1560). But the personalia has more interest for us, when Stevenson is trawling through his own or his family's experience.

The villain of *Weir of Hermiston*—Frank Innes—owes his name to an Edinburgh gunsmith (Francis Innes) to whom Stevenson's grandfather, Robert Stevenson, was apprenticed in the 1780s. In *Kidnapped* the village of Essendean in Chapter I appears to have been Sorn, in Ayrshire, where Stevenson's other grandfather, the minister Dr. Lewis Balfour, had his first charge (1806-1823).

A certain Reverend Mr. Campbell was a witness to the purchase by Robert Louis Stevenson's father Thomas Stevenson of 17 Heriot Row, from 1857 the Stevenson family residence in the New Town of Edinburgh. The

transaction took place at Campbeltown in Argyllshire. To use Mr. Campbell's name and designation, the surname Balfour and a thinly-disguised Sorn in the first chapter of his first full-length adult novel may have been Stevenson's way of setting a kind of ancestral imprimatur on his work.

As well as such family details, churchyards were often raided by Robert Louis Stevenson to provide ideas and names. The picturesque pre-Reformation kirkyard at Logie in Stirlingshire, in the lee of the Carlins' (Witches') Craig modelled for that in "Thrawn Janet." In 1881 Stevenson was planning *The Master of Ballantrae* while travelling by coach from Pitlochry to Braemar. He was evidently searching for a surname for his chief narrator. In the churchyard at Kirkmichael, where the Stevensons must have stopped for lunch at the Inn, he would have seen a tombstone which read:

IN MEMORY OF
THE LATE
ALEXANDER MCKELLAR
FOR 17 YEARS
MINISTER IN THIS PARISH
DIED 1866.

Coincidence? "Ephraim" (Mackellar's Christian name) he evidently borrowed from the title of a short story planned in 1868-9.¹

Places, as well as people's names, and houses of personal and family significance were freely used by Stevenson in his writings. The point where the Allan Water flows into the River Forth (familiar to Robert Louis Stevenson from youthful holidays in Bridge of Allan) features prominently in *Kidnapped*, as do many other holiday haunts. Swanston Cottage, the Stevenson's summer residence from 1867, at the foot of the Pentland Hills, forms the setting of much of *St. Ives*. The house in Murrayfield where the murdered body is found in "The Misadventures of John Nicholson," Duncliffe, was one which Stevenson played about as a boy. Other examples are too numerous to mention.

Sometimes Stevenson's real-life sources are explicit and obvious. But not always. At times a good deal of detective digging is required to trace them, as the rest of this article will, I believe, demonstrate.

Is there any point to this digging? Does the irritant grain of sand round which the pearl is formed really matter? I think it does. Anything which

¹Roger G. Swearingen, *The Prose Writing of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (London, 1980), p. 6. The title in question reads: "Some passages in the life of singular, worthy, pious, excellent Mr. Ephraim Blethers, as communicated to that whited sepulchre, etc."

clarifies the links between Life and Art, the processes whereby one becomes the other, sheds light necessarily on the artist in whom these processes occur, and on his inner as well as his outer life. In this essay I am concerned with the prolonged gestation (as I think it was) of R. L. Stevenson's last, unfinished novel, *Weir of Hermiston*.

Some years ago I had reason to study the title deeds of 17 Heriot Row, where Stevenson and his family lived from 1857 until his sudden, furtive departure for the United States twenty-two years later. Out of curiosity I looked back through the deeds to see who the original owner/occupier was in the very early years of the 19th century.

I found it was the first Lord Meadowbank (1748-1816), a celebrated judge of that period. (Curiously, I was seated in Meadowbank House when I made the discovery.) I recalled that as a law student Louis Stevenson had once walked the floor of Parliament House with a descendant of Meadowbank (the family name was Maconochie), and promised to use his name in a story. So he did in *The Master of Ballantrae*. And, incidentally, I recalled that another fellow law student of Stevenson had been Robert MacQueen, presumably a descendant of Lord Braxfield, the original of Adam Weir of Hermiston.

I wondered. Could Stevenson, that indefatigable investigator of his own family history, have known of the intimate link between Allan Maconochie, Lord Meadowbank and his own home? And did he use the judge as an original for one of his characters? The obvious work to look at was *Weir of Hermiston*. If Robert MacQueen, Lord Braxfield (1722-1799), was the coarse, domineering Lord Weir, as he undoubtedly was, who might Lord Meadowbank be?

Of the secondary figures in the novel who were also judges the most interesting, I found, was young Archie Weir's friend and mentor, Lord Glenalmond. Readers of the novel will remember that when Weir's son Archie decides to read law, it is not to emulate his brilliant but coarse-grained father, but his father's friend and fellow-judge, Lord Glenalmond. Glenalmond is exactly the man Archie would have had for a father, if he could have arranged it so. He, like Archie, is gentle, cultured, sensitive and refined. Adam Weir has, in truth little time for either of them. "Signor Feedle-eerie" is the phrase he uses to sum all they stand for. Though Glenalmond tries hard to prevent this, his mere friendship with young Archie helps to widen the gulf between father and son. Describing the surrogate father, Stevenson tells us:

Lord Glenalmond was tall and emaciated, with long features and long delicate hands. He was often compared with the statue of [Duncan] Forbes of Culloden in the Parliament House; and his blue eyes, at more than sixty, preserved some of the

fire of youth . . . his appearance as of an artist and an aristocrat . . . riveted the boy's [Archie's] attention . . .²

My next port of call, therefore, in pursuit of Glenalmond—and Meadowbank?—was Parliament House, off the High Street of Edinburgh, where Forbes's splendidly ascetic head still peers above us through the gloom of one corner of the Hall. I then did what I might have done earlier: I went to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. On asking to see a likeness of the first Lord Meadowbank, I was directed upstairs to that mighty battery of Raeburns on the top floor. There, sure enough, hung Meadowbank, and though the eyes were of a different color from Glenalmond's, the near resemblance to Duncan Forbes was indubitable. A few yards away hung the celebrated portrait of Braxfield, itself the direct inspiration (along with Cockburn's written description) of Weir the character.

It did not take long to discover that both these portraits had gone on public display in Edinburgh in 1876, at the great Raeburn exhibition described by Stevenson in his essay "Some Portraits of Raeburn."³ It is true that in the latter he makes no mention of the Meadowbank picture, but the striking contrast between the two faces—the coarse, sardonic, vinous Braxfield; the pale, gently musing Meadowbank—must have struck him forcibly. Stevenson may have discovered other intriguing things about Lord Meadowbank. As a law student at Edinburgh in 1765 Allan Maconochie was one of the six founders of the Speculative Society—Stevenson's beloved "Spec.," which he thought "about the best thing in Edinburgh." Meadowbank, like Stevenson himself, was given to speculating aloud on any subject under the sun—Lord Cockburn wrote of him:

He questioned everything, he demonstrated everything, his whole life was a discussion . . . He had more pleasure in inventing ingenious reasons for being wrong than in being quietly right.⁴

I cannot help wondering if Maconochie named the Society. And I wonder to what extent Stevenson modelled himself on the earliest occupant of

²*The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Tusitala Edition (London, 1927), XVI, 19. Subsequent references will be to this edition, and will appear in the text.

³XXV, 98 ff. "A portrait of Maconochie (Meadowbank), painted by Henry Raeburn in 1814, was exhibited at the Raeburn exhibition in Edinburgh in 1876 (No. 77)"; *D.N.B.* entry for Allan Maconochie, Lord Meadowbank. The action of *Weir of Hermiston* is set in 1814.

⁴Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time*, ed. Karl F. C. Miller (Chicago and London, 1974), p. 130.

No. 17. Finally, most striking of all, Meadowbank's mother, like Stevenson's, was a daughter of Colinton Manse. (They even shared a Christian name—Isabella.) Both men, as small boys must have known Colinton village, manse and garden, and the Water of Leith there, as intimately as only small boys can.

In *Weir of Hermiston* Lord Glenalmond does not show Meadowbank's more eccentric characteristics, but he does figure, as I have said, as the beloved, idealized father-substitute who acts as Archie's consolation when his own stern, heavy-handed father is too much for him. Care should be taken not to identify Adam Weir too closely with Thomas Stevenson—in many ways they were very different—but there is no doubt that when things were at their worst between the diligent, traditionalist Thomas and the apparently idle, free-thinking Louis, the latter must have seen his father in much the same light as Archie sees his.

It is pleasant to think that young Louis may have created for himself a spectral, sympathetic father-figure at 17 Heriot Row, to sit with him and talk with him in his hours of misery. Perhaps he remembered this when, at the start of Chapter IV, he brought Archie, "after a disordered walk," (XVI, 38) into Lord Glenalmond's dining-room to seek advice and sympathy. Now Meadowbank at Glenalmond's age was already ensconced at Heriot Row, so, if my theory holds, the room in question was none other than the familiar Stevenson dining-room at No. 17.

Archie Weir's dishevelled and distraught entry into it follows directly upon a dreadful scene with his father. Lord Weir has heard of a one-man demonstration mounted by his only son at the hanging of Duncan Jopp, whom Archie has seen being cruelly treated by his father on the bench. Weir has told Archie his law studies are at an end. He must go off to the family estate of Hermiston, to manage it and to keep out of trouble. With some difficulty Glenalmond persuades Archie to accept all this with good grace.

At Hermiston, however, Archie falls in love with the ineligible but enchanting Kirstie Elliot; then alienates her and drives her into the arms of his dashing but false friend and fellow-student, Frank Innes. When Kirstie is to have a child and Frank is murdered, Archie falls foul of his father, the law, and, for a time, Kirstie's four strong-minded brothers, known collectively as the Black Brothers. Only Kirstie's aunt (another Kirstie Elliot), the house-keeper at Hermiston, tries to stand by Archie through all this. A redoubtable termagant, she has a soft spot for her employer's son—indeed is more than half in love with him.

Whence came all this? I think I can suggest where some of it came from.

For possible sources of inspiration we should look, I believe, to the Old Calton Burial Ground, the main part now entered from Waterloo Place

(engineered by Stevenson's grandfather Robert), the eastward extension of Princes Street, Edinburgh.

This graveyard features largely in another work of Stevenson's, *Old Mortality*. There, he writes, "in the hot fits of youth, I came to be unhappy" (XXIX, 19). Put less dramatically, it was evidently a favorite lounging place of his when playing truant from University classes. But I suspect it was also a place where his creative imagination went to work. Stevenson planned many of his stories long before he wrote them; they required lengthy periods of gestation. For example, he noted down the title "The Story of Thrawn Janet" first in 1868-69, while he was yet in his teens.⁵ He did not actually write it until he was thirty.

That he may have been pondering the outline or the basis or the essential elements of his *last* novel while still a student is not in the least impossible. So it is, at the very least, worthy of notice that the great, smoke-blackened obelisk that dominates the Old Calton Burying Ground was raised in 1844 to commemorate Thomas Muir of Huntershill and four other Radicals condemned to transportation by Lord Braxfield in 1793-4; that the name "Adam Weir" is carved on a stone a few yards away; that a Christina Ann Black (she died in the 1870s) is buried in one corner of the graveyard, and a Margaret Elliot (wife of Adam Elliot) in another. Were they combined to make up the two Kirstie Elliots—and did "Black" suggest the Black Brothers?

Then there is the matter of the buildings on each side of the graveyard. At the eastern and upper end stood—and stands—the grim, turreted Governor's House of the old Calton Jail. (The latter institution was replaced by St. Andrews House, seat of Government in Scotland.) Now Stevenson knew "governor" as a slang term for "father," and used it so. Was this, then, the model for Hermiston, which was Archie's "governor's" house in the Lammermuirs?

At the western end of the Old Calton in Stevenson's day stood the New Waverley Temperance Hotel. (The building survives, but now contains offices.) In the essay "Old Mortality" he tells us that "a beautiful housemaid of the hotel once, for some days together, dumbly flirted with me from a window and kept my wild heart flying" (XXIX, 19). Was this humble beauty, at once appealing, ineligible and unattainable, the source for Young Kirstie of Cauldstaneslap Farm?

And in the center of the graveyard, between the obelisk and the "Adam Weir" stone, is the gap (or "slap") in the original south wall, through which Stevenson must have passed to reach the corner (the "Elliot" corner) where he "dumbly flirted" with his housemaid. Archie and Kirstie, it will be remembered, would meet at the Cauldstaneslap, a hill-pass between her coun-

⁵Swearingen, pp. 6, 59.

try house and his. (There is, of course, a pass of that name in the Pentlands, some twelve miles S.W. of Edinburgh.)

All of this, I believe, is translated in the novel to the hills south of Edinburgh and suitably enlarged in scale, but it will be seen that the basic properties are identical. There is even a Francis Howden buried beside the "slap" in the Old Calton, and we recall that in the book the cairn marking the spot where Frank Innes was killed became known as "Francie's Cairn"—not Frank's. On the other hand, we may owe that to Francis Innes, the gunsmith.

Lord Braxfield is not buried in the Old Calton, but one who may have (physically) reminded Stevenson of him is. The sole individual interred there who impressed Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote *Old Mortality* was the free-thinking philosopher David Hume, a hero to the youthful atheist, "with his comely, florid countenance, bewigged and habited in scarlet . . . The memory of a painted picture and what we call the immortality of a name" (XXIX, 20)⁶ Who knows? We may owe Braxfield-as-Weir as much to Hume as to that sooty obelisk, or Raeburn's portrait, or Cockburn's description.

The essay "Old Mortality" was itself inspired directly by the memory of Stevenson's brilliant student friend (and hero), James Walter Ferrier, who died in London on September 9, 1883, the victim of vice and dissipation. The latter part of the essay is a discreetly worded tribute to the man, intended to please Ferrier's relations. In a letter he wrote to Ferrier's sister on November 22, 1883, Stevenson remarks: "Many a long hour we passed in graveyards, the man who has gone and I . . ." (XXXII, 283), and it seems very likely that the Old Calton was one of these. In the essay Stevenson comments on the "soulless" quality of Walter Ferrier, even in youth. "He would astonish us by sallies, innocent, witty and inhumane; and by a misapplied Johnsonian pleasantry, demolish honest sentiment" (XXIX, 25).

That does make Ferrier sound remarkably like Frank Innes in *Weir of Hermiston*. The chapter in which Innes visits Archie at Hermiston is entitled "Enter Mephistopheles," and Stevenson and Ferrier were reading (acting out) the second part of Goethe's *Faust* in the original German, not long before Ferrier's death, as Stevenson tells Miss Ferrier in that same letter.

One final touch. If we examine the professions of the five condemned Radicals whose names appear on the Calton obelisk, we find that they coincide remarkably with those of Archie Weir and the four Black Brothers (i.e., young Kirstie's brothers) in the novel:

⁶Stevenson was probably thinking of Allan Ramsay's portrait of David Hume, now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Thomas Muir was an advocate, which is what Archie had aimed to be.

Thomas Fyshe Palmer was a preacher, like Gib Elliot.

William Skirving was a farmer, like Hob Elliot.

Maurice Margarot was a merchant, like Clem Elliot.

Joseph Gerrald was not, of course, a Burnsian poet, like Dand Elliot, but being an orator, he *was* a wordsmith, we may say. Coincidence may serve to explain much. I doubt if it can explain all that.

There is much doubt as to how Stevenson would have ended the story which death interrupted, but one of his ideas was to have the Black Brothers rescue Archie Weir (whom they had at first suspected of seducing Kirstie) from prison before he could be executed for murdering Frank Innes. Archie and young Kirstie were to sail off to America, and presumably the brothers would have gone with them. And with Adam Weir already dead of a stroke, overcome by his son's disgrace and the strain of simultaneously loving and condemning him (also Stevenson's idea), we see how real life was to have been stood on its head, with "the judge" implicitly sentenced to death, and the young "lawyer" and his four "brothers" transported in a very different sense, to a new world.⁷

One of the quotations on the Calton obelisk is from a speech made in the Court of Justiciary by William Skirving after Braxfield had pronounced judgment. It reads, "I know that what has been done these two days will be REJUDGED." And so it was, a century later exactly, by Robert Louis Stevenson. But even earlier than that, I would suggest, when, as a truant from his law studies, he mooned and dreamed among the tombs of the Old Calton, and scribbled in a notebook.

One other possible source of inspiration for *Weir* may be mentioned, and that is Swanston Cottage, beside the Pentlands, which became the Stevenson's holiday home the year Louis started his desultory studies at Edinburgh University.

For Swanston Cottage, too, may have contributed something to *Hermiston*, in addition to appearing as itself in *St. Ives*, that other late, unfinished novel. Above Swanston there was—and is—a hill-pass called the Cat's Nick, which may have doubled as Cauldstaneslap.

Across the hills lie Glencorse Kirk, now a ruin, and the Fishers' Tryst Inn at Milton Bridge, now a modern building. Both the kirk and the old inn were once familiar to Stevenson. He worshipped at the former, walking over from Swanston, and drank at the latter.

⁷XVI, 125ff. Sidney Colvin's editorial note on Stevenson's intentions for *Weir of Hermiston*, reproduced from the first and Edinburgh editions. See also *Weir of Hermiston*, ed. J. T. Low (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 168.

In *Weir of Hermiston* he makes no effort to disguise the identity of the country kirk where Archie Weir first sees and is smitten by young Kirstie Elliot. It is Glencorse. He does not trouble even to change the name or the appearance of the Glencorse minister he remembered from his youth—Mr. Alexander Torrance (1789-1877; charge 1818-1877). It is, by the way, interesting that the Lord Justice-Clerk of Stevenson's day (counterpart to Lord Weir) worshipped at Glencorse too, sitting attentively under the frail and aging Torrance.⁸

One poem of Stevenson's suggests a personal source for Archie and Kirstie's romantic first encounter—and this too was probably at Glencorse. Elsewhere Louis was usually at worship with members of his family, but he was sometimes alone at Swanston, and went to church alone from there. The poem reads:

You looked so tempting in the pew,
 You looked so sly and calm—
 My trembling fingers played with yours
 As both looked out the Psalm.

Your heart beat hard against my arm,
 My foot to yours was set,
 Your loosened ringlet burned my cheek,
 Whenever they too met.

O little, little we hearkened, dear,
 And little, little cared,
 Although the parson sermonised,
 The congregation stared.

(XXIII, 106; New Poems XXXI)

In another poem Stevenson describes himself as seated in what appears to be the Fishers' Tryst Inn, near a window, and seeing (or thinking he is seeing) the form of his sweetheart, outside. The sonnet reads:

As in the hostel by the bridge, I sate
 Mailed with indifference fondly deemed complete
 And (O strange chance, more sorrowful than sweet)
 The counterfeit of her that was my fate,
 Dressed in like vesture, graceful and sedate,
 Went quietly up the vacant village street,
 The still, small sound of her most dainty feet
 Shook, like a trumpet blast, my soul's estate.
 Instant revolt ran riot through my brain;

⁸XXXI, 238. Letter to Mrs. Fanny Sitwell.

And all night long, thereafter, hour by hour,
 The pageant of dead love before my eyes
 Went proudly; and old hopes broke loose again
 From the restraint of wisely temperate power,
 With ineffectual ardour sought to rise.

(XXIII, 205; New Poems CLXIV, Sonnet X)

Did Louis Stevenson and this lost or estranged love meet, in happier times, at the Cat's Nick? Did Walter Ferrier ever stay with Louis at Swanston, go with him to Glencorse church, spot the attractive "dairymaid" and steal her away? We may never know. But it is not impossible that the events in the novel involving Archie, Kirstie and Frank may owe something to real-life events involving Louis, the unknown sweetheart, and Walter.

Why, it may be asked, is there no actual hard proof of any of this? Stevenson depended a great deal on reality, on real life, for his fictions. At the same time he was extremely conscious of (indeed ultra-sensitive to) the effect of his writings when published. On more than one occasion in his earlier career he wrote or co-wrote a complete novel, and then destroyed it, or had it destroyed, ostensibly because it ran counter to the taste of his day.⁹ With them he must have destroyed his notes for them. Stevenson, like all popular novelists, was writing primarily for the reading public of his own time, which necessarily included close friends, lovers and relatives. Naturally he did not wish to publish easily-detectable revelations about these. Nor did he wish to disclose details of what might be regarded as discreditable chapters in his own life or his family's.

It was Stevenson's way to appear forthright and frank—it was part of the essential charm of his person and his writing—while in fact covering up a good deal. He wrote much about his sources and his methods of composition, for instance—simultaneously raising an impenetrable smoke-screen. In the essay "My First Book" he is almost desperately frank on the writing of *Treasure Island*, but remains silent on the many frantic alterations he had to make in turning the magazine serial into a book.¹⁰

The Stevensons in general were (or could be) a secretive family. Robert Louis Stevenson's great-grandmother Jean Lillie was—according to family writings—married only twice, to Allan Stevenson and to Thomas Smith. It is now generally accepted that between these she married a Glasgow mer-

⁹See Swearingen, p. 28, privately circulated novel; p. 41, "What was on the Slate," co-written with James Walter Ferrier.

¹⁰See my article, "Youth on the Prow: The First Publication of *Treasure Island*," *SSL*, 25 (1990), 83-99.

chant, James Hogg. A few years ago I stumbled on incontrovertible proof that she divorced Hogg before marrying Smith. The records of the divorce are preserved in General Register House, Edinburgh, and make fascinating reading. I mentioned earlier her son Robert Stevenson's apprenticeship to Francis Innes, gunsmith. This is another chapter of Stevenson history in which the family maintained a stony silence, for whatever reason.

R. L. Stevenson was in the sensitive position of depending a great deal on real life for material for his fictions—of quite deliberately *wishing* to weave details of family and personal history into these, to preserve them, as it were, in the aspic of Art—while at the same time having to cover up and disguise actuality in order to transform it convincingly into what appeared as pure fiction. He became an expert, perforce, in simultaneously telling and not telling the truth. Even his frankest-seeming essays are subtly-crafted artefacts. Anyone who does not understand this has not begun to understand Stevenson.

By nature, it must be said he was a most scrupulous truth-teller—he had a Calvinistical passion for the truth—but, as we all know, there are times when the truth will not help us; when, indeed, truth and the telling of truth may be most hurtful (to others, or to ourselves) and must be concealed at all costs. Stevenson (whom his wife correctly described as a most complicated person—like his mother, unlike his father) was cleverer than most at reconciling these two irreconcilables, Truth and Concealment. Much of Stevenson's art is life encoded.

To investigate that art, to investigate that life, must lead us into fields generally "terra incognita" to literary researchers. The above article represents an elementary exercise in such detective work. It gives only the merest glimpse of what is there to be discovered.

Bridge of Allan