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Louis: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson

Philip Callow
Ivan R. Dee (Apr 25, 2001)
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Two things stand out in Stevenson's phenomenal but short life: the amount of time he was seriously ill and the amazing amount of travel he undertook in an age long before automobiles and airplanes.

Stevenson wasn't simply prone to catching colds and plagued by a chronic cough. He literally spent more of his life in bed than out. His spells of illness lasted weeks, with everyone fearing for his life as he tossed feverishly, ranted, and succumbed to severe hemorrhaging. Fortunately, he was driven enough to continue to write, even in extreme adversity. Despite his ravaged body, he wanted to create, to move, to be stimulated by change, to seek the "pure dispassionate adventure."

"Can Stevenson's wanderlust ever be emphasized enough?" Callow asks. In 1879 Stevenson traveled from London to California to claim his bride. Their life was never settled, and his wife kept her bags packed. Together they lived in Switzerland, Scotland, the South of France, England, New York, San Francisco, Hawaii, and Samoa. He thrived on this way of life. He often experienced remarkable recoveries when he started travelling and enjoyed his longest stretches of health at sea, although they never lasted. At the age of forty-four, Robert Louis Stevenson died of a cerebral hemorrhage on the island of Samoa.

Callow does a fine job bringing Stevenson's remarkable personality to life. Stevenson was an indefatigable and charming conversationalist, a verbal spell-binder. He wore a "big blue cloak fastened with a snake buckle and his Tyrolese hat" over long hair. He carried to the end a bohemian air—so much so he was often mistaken for a tramp even after his novels had made him famous. He loved the dramatic, once making an entrance into a hotel dining room through an open window. His nature was liberal and he didn't fall in with the common prejudices of his time: Stevenson spoke out for the governing rights of natives; "all his life he would speak up for prostitutes."

Callow's book is more character study than in-depth biography. It is written mostly from secondary research and contains no new major discoveries of Stevenson's life, but there's plenty to entice. Louis reads at times like an adventure story Stevenson himself might have put to paper. His life is simply good history.

NAVA HALL (May / June 2001)

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