

Robert Louis Stevenson and Golf

In 1992, golf and the Eastern Radiology Society took us to Silverado in the Napa valley just north of San Francisco. Unknown to me this delightful golf resort takes its name from the novel 'Silverado Squatters'. Here Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS) describes his honeymoon with Fanny at a disused silver mine on Mount St Helena, a large mountain overlooking the valley. Despite having read Treasure Island, I knew little of RLS, or indeed Scotland's other famous authors - Robert Burns and even less of Walter Scott.

As an active member of the Eastern, although recently retired, I was expected to give a talk. Always believing there is nothing worse than 'aged Professors' continuing to give talks, I was stuck for a topic. Flying home from the previous meeting I read of the connection. Despite an abysmal knowledge of Stevenson, (English was never a strong subject) I decided to improve my knowledge. During the ensuing year, and with immense help from the R L S Club in Edinburgh, **I came to know Robert Louis Stevenson.**

My theme '**RLS and Golf**', with its unusual associations, was difficult - '*Like croquet young RLS disliked golf!*' Nevertheless to my surprise and great pleasure the talk went well. The largely American audience were surprisingly well informed about RLS. They much enjoyed hearing about him and greatly appreciated N C Wyeth's magnificent illustrations.

With the help of Ian Nimmo, the editor, this lecture was published in the RLS Club News.



'RLS and Golf' - an unlikely association, indeed young Louis disliked most games and rarely, if ever, played golf. References to golf are few and far between.

Yet the Writers Museum in Edinburgh, has a valuable 'guttie' golf ball, stamped RLS, and found near the Stevenson holiday home at Swanston. This suggests that young Louis might well have knocked a ball around. In an unpublished book, RLS' cousin Charles is quoted '*Croquet was very fashionable but, like golf, it was hated by Louis*'. His book 'Catriona' refers to - 'the Tee'd Ball' - '*seeing me (RLS) so firm with the advocate, and persuaded I was to fly high and far, they had taken a word from the golfing green, and called me the Tee'd Ball. I was told I was one of themselves*'. Even then, showing great promise with the Edinburgh advocates, who were steeped in the traditions of golf and Muirfield, RLS did not take up golf. Indeed he not only gave up golf but also abandoned advocacy for writing.

Despite all this, RLS is immortalised in two famous Californian golf courses! The Silverado Golf and Country Club in the Napa Valley and Spyglass Hill on the Monterey peninsula, where there is a Robert Louis Stevenson School nearby! The magnificent Napa valley rich in vineyards, just one hour's drive north of San Francisco, nestles between mountains and claims most of the wine country's deluxe golf resorts and gastronomic delights. The best known is the Silverado Golf and Country Club, its name inspired by Stevenson's book, 'Silverado Squatters', describing his honeymoon spent remarkably at a deserted silver mine in 1880 on the slopes of Mount St Helena overlooking the Napa Valley. RLS loved California describing Napa's wine as *'bottled poetry predicting that the smack of Californian earth will linger on the palate of your grandson'*. Their golfing equivalent is found in the North and South courses among the vineyards at Silverado. A magnificent setting, designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr, framed by burly oaks and crisscrossed by creeks. A visit to Silverado and the Napa valley can be highly recommended.

RLS heaped glorious and unqualified praise upon the Monterey peninsula describing it as *'the finest meeting of land and sea'*. This magnificent golfing area is now home to many famous courses - Pebble Beach, Cypress Point, Spanish Bay, the Monterey Peninsula Country Club and Spyglass Hill - the name of the high point on the map of 'Treasure Island'. One of the world's best loved novels and an enduringly popular tale with all the elements of a happy story - a lost map, buried treasure, pirates, a teenage hero Jim Hawkins and a safe return to England. Californians claim the idea of 'Treasure Island' was born on the Monterey peninsula rather than Royal Deeside where the story was written one bleak October in 1881.

Spyglass Hill - 'The Spyglass' - lying close to the 17 Mile Drive on the Peninsula was opened in 1966. Created by a fellow R&A member and good friend Bob Hanna, then executive director of the Northern California Golf Association and designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr, this course has proved to be the most difficult. Bob wrote the description for the holes, taking the names from a mixture of Scottish tradition and Stevenson's imagination.

The first - 'Treasure Island' - is indeed an island in the wonderful sandy wasteland and scrub which characterise the early holes of this course. The second - 'Billy Bones' - named after the pirate with Captain Flint's map, appears early and is long remembered. The sixth - 'Israel Hands' - a real rogue, the eighth - 'Signal Hill' and the sixteenth - 'Black Dog' - the most scurrilous rogue of all the pirates, are reckoned to be among the toughest of the Tour. A homing device rather than a spyglass would be more useful to the average golfer! Legend has it that some players, struggling with the course, claim to have heard the laughter of pirates in the distance. Nevertheless it is a beautiful course in an outstanding setting and certainly worth a visit. The Robert Louis Stevenson School, a private boarding school, adjoins the back nine of Spyglass Hill. Their admirable high school golf team uses 'The Spyglass' as their home course for competitions.

The story 'A Pavilion on the Links', set in the Archerfield Estate, close to the new golf courses and Muirfield, tantalisingly makes no mention of golf! A more tenuous association is the lighthouse, built by the Stevenson family, on Turnberry golf course. This well known landmark is an outstanding icon for this world famous golf course, home to many international championships.

So the many connections between RLS and Golf become clear. A guttie ball stamped RLS - now in the Writers Museum in Edinburgh: the story 'A Pavilion on the Links': the lighthouse, built by the Stevenson family, at Turnberry: the 'Silverado Golf and Country Club', taking its

name from RLS' book 'Silverado Squatters': 'Spyglass Hill' golf course, where the holes are named after the map in Treasure Island, and the characters RLS imagined.

Quite a remarkable achievement that RLS, who never liked golf or swung a club in earnest, should be immortalized in two famous Californian golf courses – Silverado Country Club and Spyglass Hill, the mountain on the Treasure island map. The envy of many of us who do and struggle for immortality!

Several members of the delightful RLS club were an immense help, especially Ian Nimmo and Alan Marchbank, lately Director of the National Library of Scotland. **'Getting to know RLS'** has been great fun. RLS is a world renowned writer, one of Edinburgh's and Scotland's most famous sons. The annual lunch at the fashionable New Club, Edinburgh, is a lovely occasion. Literary meetings are held throughout the year in RLS' former home in Heriot Row and at the historic Hawes Inn in South Queensferry, of 'Kidnapped fame'. We have enjoyed many fascinating trips, bringing Scottish history to life. 'The Kidnapped Trail', led by Ian Nimmo, follows the footsteps of David Balfour through Appin and Lettermore wood to Glencoe. The walk along the beach from Fidra to North Berwick, recalls 'Catriona' with Alan Breck Stewart running across the beach to board a French ship lying off Fidra; that evening Ann Gray hosted a superb ceilidh at her home. Other trips, including the 'Covenanter' tales in the Pentland hills, all good fun and memorable.

Having close family in Sydney NSW, we are regular visitors and were pleasantly surprised to discover RLS has many associations with this dramatic city. This abridged article was published in the RLS Club News



Sydney today is vastly different from 1893, when RLS last visited. Now a thriving, dynamic city and host to the successful 2000 Olympic Games, millions from around the globe were entranced by TV glimpses of this city by the sea. The Harbour Bridge and adjoining Opera House are world famous icons.

Between 1890 and 1893, RLS made four visits to Sydney seeking medical advice and consulting architects about his new house in Vailima. Then New South Wales was still a colony: only after Federation, in 1901, did Australia become a country. The city with its many Victorian buildings was centred around the beautiful Harbour. RLS would have landed at Circular Quay, where the First Fleet stepped ashore in 1780.

Now Writers Walk encircles Circular Quay where over 100 plaques commemorate Australian and other famous writers, artists and singers. The RLS plaque records:

Robert Louis Stevenson,
1850 – 1890

*.... there is material for a dozen
buccaneering stories to be picked up in
the hotels at Circular Quay*

Today Circular Quay bustles with cruise ships and ferries bringing commuters to the skyscraper offices. Many 'Sydneyiders' and tourists throng the Quay watching the world go by and are entertained by some brilliant street theatre. I'm sure RLS would find fascinating stories in the many pavement bars.

My trail took me to St James' Church, a leading Anglican church where RLS worshipped. This still stands at the corner of King Street and Queen's Square. But the nearby Oxford hotel, where RLS stayed in 1893, is no more. Next stop was the Union club in Bent Street, one of Sydney's oldest and most prestigious clubs. RLS *'found the club delightful, characteristically dressed in white, he was an inveterate smoker and most congenial of companions'*. A brass plaque above the mantelpiece is a reminder that RLS wrote his famous 'Open Letter to the Reverend Dr Hyde' in the Union Club.

The nearby Domain is still a delightful city park where excellent open air concerts are held in summer. RLS often strolled here with his stepson Lloyd. Amusingly RLS quotes English as spoken in the Antipodes – *'They are a dyngerous lot of people about this park. My word, it doesn't do to ply with them. We should all mike histe to imitite them.'* The General Post Office, a lovely Victorian building, still stands nearby. Not one of RLS' favourites – *'an ungainly structure with a tower'..*

The last visit of my Trail took me to the famous artists' camp at Balmoral. There RLS met Julian Ashton, and other famous artists, including Percy Spencer, whose pencil sketch of RLS, is now in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Today Balmoral beach has not changed much – still a popular inner city beach and only ten minutes by bus to the city. The Thirties-style Bathers Pavilion is restored to a fashionable restaurant and the Gazebo is a focal point for open air theatre and concerts. Very close to our son's home, Balmoral beach is a family favourite.

Jake Davidson