

Known as a writer of great adventure stories, and lover of made-up games which he played with his stepson, Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh and lived a brief 44 years. This image depicts how he appeared in 1880.

As a sickly (and only) child, Stevenson would often spend time recuperating from his illnesses. He later wrote that he had three strong memories from that time of his life:

I have three powerful impressions of childhood: my sufferings when I was sick, my delights in convalescence at my grandfather's manse at Colinton, near Edinburgh, and the unnatural activity of my mind after I was in bed at night. (Memoirs of Himself, An Unfinished Autobiography by Robert Louis Stevenson, included in *The Cornhill Booklet, Volume IV*, published in Boston by Alfred Bartlett during December of 1914, at [page 57](#).)

It was that “unnatural activity” of his mind which fueled Stevenson’s stories. At the age of six, when his Uncle offered a prize for the best history of Moses, the young lad created and illustrated his own version. Dictating the words to his Mother, he entitled one of his pictures “Israelites Going Out of Egypt.”

Commenting on her son's youthful effort, which won the prize, his Mother wrote these words in her diary:

He was much pleased with it—from that time forward it was the desire of his heart to be an author.

Stevenson’s childhood nurse, Alison Cunningham - better known by her nickname “Cummy” - helped to feed her young charge’s love of stories:

A Scottish child hears much of shipwreck, outlying iron skerries, pitiless breakers, and great sealights; much of heathery mountains, wild clans, and hunted Covenanters. (*The Foreigner at Home*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, included in *The Complete Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, at [page 4641](#).)

The “Scottish child” did not forget how compelling Biblical and Scottish-history stories inspired his boyhood days. In December of 1893, he wrote a letter to J.M. Barrie, the creator of “Peter Pan,” telling him that:

My style is from the Covenanting writer. (Quoted in *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, edited by Ernest Mehew, published in 2001 by Yale University Press, at [page 569](#).)

As he grew up, he merged his love of hearing stories with his intent to write his own adventures.

To be a writer, however, Stevenson would have to go against his Father’s wishes. Instead of joining the family’s engineering firm - where his Father had a specialty in designing lighthouses - R.L.S, as he is often known, would study law. Although he qualified as a lawyer, he never earned much of a living from practicing law.

He also decided to change the spelling of one of his names. “Lewis,” he thought, was better spelled in the French way: “Louis.” It was one of the many ways in which the future writer thought about words:

All through my boyhood and youth, I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write ... indeed I had already my own private determination to be an author ... I loved the art of words. (*Memories and Portraits*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, Chapter IV, “A College Magazine,” at [page 55](#).)

He also loved his hometown of Edinburgh, but its weather was not suitable for a person prone to illness. He referred to Edinburgh’s climate as a kind of “meteorological purgatory.”

Seeking drier and warmer climes, Stevenson’s parents took their son to resorts along the French Riviera. Personally indulging his love of travel, R.L.S. took a trip with his friend, Walter Simpson, during 1876. The pair canoed along the canals and rivers of Belgium and northeastern France.

A couple of years later, Stevenson and a donkey named Modestine took a walk through the Cévennes. Such adventures gave Stevenson lots of writing topics and scenes for his invented tales. When he couldn't physically travel to exotic places, Stevenson made the trips in his mind.

During one of his actual trips, to France, Stevenson met his future wife, an American named Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne. Ten years older than R.L.S., she was studying art at Grez (and was a crack shot with a Colt pistol).

When Fanny returned to the States, around 1879, Stevenson decided to follow her. He left, on an ocean voyage, without telling his parents.

His transatlantic passage - from Greenock to New York, when the journey was by ship instead of plane - was exciting for Stevenson. Then, from New York, he took a transcontinental trip, by rail, to Monterey (in California). Travel, he said later, is both physical and emotional:

Travel is of two kinds; and this voyage of mine across the ocean combined both ... I was not only traveling out of my country in latitude and longitude, but out of myself in diet, associates and consideration. (The Amateur Emigrant, "Personal Experience and Review," by Robert Louis Stevenson, at page 69.)

One result, of Stevenson's Stateside travels, was his marriage to Fanny (in 1880). With that marriage, he also gained two stepchildren including his stepson, Lloyd Osborne. The two would become, and remain, very close for the rest of the writer's life.

After spending a year in America, Stevenson returned to Europe. During the winter months, he and his new family lived in the Alps; during the summer months, they lived in Scotland.

In the summer of 1881, while calling a cottage in Braemar home, Stevenson thought he'd amuse his stepson with a map he was creating. Instead of distracting Lloyd, however, the map began to preoccupy Stevenson:

...as I pored upon my map of "Treasure Island," the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods: and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters ... The next thing I knew, I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters. (See My First Book, "Treasure Island," included in The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Vailima Edition, Volume V, at page xxii.)

Thus was born Stevenson's most-famous book. Since its original publication, in May of 1883, it has never been out of print. With more than 74 adaptations - for the stage, radio, television and film - *Treasure Island* is one of the world's most-dramatized novels.

When Stevenson's health became more problematic than usual, in 1884, his parents persuaded him to leave the European mainland and return to the south of England. As a wedding gift for Fanny, R.L.S.'s parents purchased a home for the couple in Bournemouth (not far from the Isle of Wight).

While living in Bournemouth, Stevenson began to write another much-loved story, a novel he called *Kidnapped*. It features the adventures of David Balfour after the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 - when "Bonnie Prince Charlie" invaded England but then escaped, dressed as a woman, eventually ending-up in Rome (where he died, in 1788, in the same room in which he was born).

Before R.L.S. finished *Kidnapped*, however, he interrupted himself with a story which began as a dream. A tale of good versus evil, that story - which Stevenson published in 1886 - is known to the world as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*:

I had long been trying to write a story on that strong sense of man's double being ... for two days I went about racking my brains for a plot of any sort; and on the second night I dreamed the scene at the window, and a scene afterwards split in two, in which Hyde, pursued for some crime, took the powder and underwent the change in the presence of his pursuers. (See "A Chapter on Dreams," included in R.L. Stevenson on Fiction, An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays, edited by Glenda Norquay, at page 137.)

In 1887 - the year after he published both *Jekyll/Hyde* and *Kidnapped* - R.L.S. lost his father. He decided to return to America but, by 1888, he was once-again looking for a healthier place to live.

Chartering a sailboat, he discovered that he loved life aboard the South-Seas-bound vessel:

I slept that night, as was then my somewhat dangerous practice, on deck upon the cockpit bench. A stir at last awoke me, to see all the eastern heaven dyed with faint orange, the binnacle lamp already dulled against the brightness of the day, the steersman leaning eagerly across the wheel. "There it is, sir!" he cried, and pointed in the very eyeball of the dawn.

For a while I could see nothing but the bluish ruins of the morning bank, which lay far along the horizon, like melting icebergs. Then the sun rose, pierced a gap in these debris of vapors, and displayed an inconsiderable islet, flat as a plate upon the sea, and spiked with palms of disproportioned altitude. (See In the South Seas, by Robert Louis Stevenson, at page 154.)

Although he couldn't keep living aboard a sailboat, Stevenson realized how much he loved the South Pacific. He eventually settled on the island of Samoa where he built a home at Vailima.

Writing to his friend, R. D. Blackmore - the author of *Lorna Doone* - R.L.S. describes his new Samoan life and

home:

For the first time, I find myself a landholder and a farmer ... the work seizes and enthralls me ... I would rather do a good hour's work weeding Sensitive - our deadliest enemy - than write two pages of my best. (Quoted by Roslyn Jolly in *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, at [page 22](#).)

Stevenson's Samoan neighbors liked him. Soon the islanders were calling him by a new name - "Tusitala" - which means "Story Teller."

R.L.S. was working on *Weir of Hermiston* - a book which some critics think is his finest - during 1894. One evening, during December of that year, Stevenson was reportedly opening a bottle of wine which wasn't cooperating. Straining to remove the cork, he exclaimed "What's that!"

After asking his wife "Does my face look strange?" he collapsed, likely of a massive brain hemorrhage. Within a few hours he was dead, at the age of 44.

The last words he'd written, for his novel, were these:

It had seemed unprovoked, a wilful convulsion of brute nature ... (Quoted in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Volume 93, June 1896 to November 1896, edited by Henry Mills Alden, at [page 992](#).)

Those were not the words he intended as his epitaph, however. For those sentiments, we have to go back fourteen years before R.L.S. breathed his last. While extremely ill, in California, he penned his *Requiem*:

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.*

*This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

Samoan natives helped Stevenson's family bury his remains at the top of a hill called Mount Vaea. The grave site looks down on the sea, his Samoan home and the city of Apia.

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The following are Stevenson's major works:

- "Treasure Island" (1883) - R.L.S.' first major success, this tale of piracy, buried treasure and adventure has never been out-of-print.
- "Prince Otto" (1885) - An action romance, set in the imaginary Germanic state of Grönwald, this work is R.L.S.' third full-length narrative.
- "The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" (1886) - A still-famous novella, about a dual personality, it includes Victorian-Gothic themes.
- "Kidnapped" (1886) - Returning to his Scottish roots, and a significant time in Scottish history, R.L.S. spins a tale of history about a boy called David Balfour (one of the author's own names) as he pursues his inheritance during the time of Jacobite troubles.
- "The Merry Men and Other Fables" - Six short-stories, including "Olalla."
- "The Master of Ballantrae" (1889) - Expanding beyond Scotland to also include India and America, R.L.S. masterfully tells a story of revenge (and other things).
- "Catriona" (1893) - R.L.S. tells us more about David Balfour, and his adventures, in this sequel to Kidnapped.

- "The Ebb-Tide" (1894) - R.L.S. co-wrote this work with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne.
- "Weir of Hermiston" (1896) - Some scholars think this unfinished story, which R.L.S. was writing at the time of his death, is his best work.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Robert-Louis-Stevenson>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Robert-Louis-Stevenson>

Media Stream

Robert Louis Stevenson as a Child

Robert Louis Stevenson's Mother—Margaret Isabella Balfour Stevenson—kept a "baby book" for her only child. It is filled with interesting tidbits about RLS' early life.

The baby book was published in 1922 and includes both a facsimile of Mrs. Stevenson's handwritten entries and a transcription of her words. The image, depicted here, is the frontispiece of that book which was printed, in San Francisco, by John Henry Nash for John Howell.

Stevenson's Mother called him "Lou," but that was not his only nickname. Throughout the baby book, she variously refers to her son as:

- Boulihasker
- Smout (Scots for "young fish")
- Baron Broadnose
- Signor Sprucki
- Maister Sprook

What was Stevenson, the future writer, like as a youngster? Here are a few samples of his Mother's descriptions:

At the age of one:

Jan 13th: Smout gives up his forenoon sleep and calls books "oufs" because he expects to find pictures of dogs in them.

At the age of three:

April 17th: When Smout was drawing pictures he said "I have drawn a man's body, shall I do his soul now?"

At the age of four:

January 10th: When Lou saw the sun looking red he said "It's just like a great big orange thrown up into the sky."

Later, as a famous writer, R.L.S. was often inspired by his dreams. Apparently, the influence of dreams started early in his life. When "Lou" was four, his Mother also notes the following:

February 6th: Lou dreamt that "he heard the noise of pens writing."

March 17th: Smout's dream "I dreamt that I was going downstairs and I saw a Russian bear looking out at the pantry door, and it came up and took hold of my foot and I awoke and it was just a dream."

March 27th: Another dream. "I dreamt that I was at a marriage and a boy asked me to go to his room and when I looked out at the window I saw a basket hanging down from the sky and it was full of doors all around and somebody gave me something that wasn't good for me and I would not take it." The something appeared to be a cookie of some kind and he said the basket "was hung on a nail driven into a cloud."

Click on the image for a better view.

Image depicting Robert Louis Stevenson, as a young toddler, included in "Stevenson's Baby Book," published in San Francisco, during 1922, by John Henry Nash for John Howell.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Robert-Louis-Stevenson-as-a-Child>





Robert Louis Stevenson - Childhood Drawing

Drawing of the "Israelites going out of Egypt," by Robert Louis Stevenson, maintained by the National Library of Scotland. National Library reference: MS.9892.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Robert-Louis-Stevenson-Childhood-Drawing>

Robert Louis Stevenson as a Young Teenager

This image depicts Robert Louis Stevenson, in November of 1863, when he was 13 years old.

At the time, he was a student at Burlington Lodge Academy, located in Spring Grove, Isleworth (situated within the Borough of Hounslow in Greater London).

While his parents were staying at Menton, in the south of France—because of his Mother's poor health—"Laurie," as his family called him then, was living at the school. His Mother's sister—Jane Balfour—lived nearby and some of his cousins were also students at Burlington.



Stevenson loved his Aunt Jane very much. He wrote a poem about her:

*Chief of our aunts -- not only I,
But all the dozen nurslings cry--
What did the other children do?
And what was childhood, wanting you?*

(See *A Child's Garden of Verses*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, at [page 23](#).)

Despite his love for Aunt Jane, Stevenson was lonely at Burlington Lodge Academy. He missed his parents, very much, as evidenced by this letter which he wrote on November 12, 1863:

*My dear Papa, you told me to tell you whenever I was miserable. I do not feel well and I wish to get home. Do take me with you. (See *Letters and Miscellanies of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Volume I, published in New York by Charles Scribner's Sons, in 1902, at [page 8](#).)*

The following month, RLS told his parents that the Academy was closing on the 18th of December and that he wished to be with his parents:

*I am wearying very much you may be sure for the time when I am to come to Mentoni. (See *A Catalogue of Robert Louis Stevenson Autograph Material* published, in 1921, by The Brick Row Book Shop in New York City, at [page 5](#).)*

By the time Stevenson wrote this December letter, his Father (Thomas Stevenson, a famous lighthouse engineer) was already en route to retrieve him from Isleworth. R.L.S. stayed with his parents, at Menton, until May of 1864.

He never went back to Burlington Lodge Academy.

Image of Robert Louis Stevenson, as a student at Scotland's Burlington Lodge Academy, as he appeared during November of 1863.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Robert-Louis-Stevenson-as-a-Young-Teenager>

Birthplace of Robert Louis Stevenson - 8 Howard Place

In 1850, Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland at the home of his parents located at 8 Howard Place.

This image depicts that home, situated in the part of Edinburgh known as "New Town."

Although he loved his home town, R.L.S. did not like Edinburgh's weather. He tells us why not in *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* (which he published in 1879):

...Edinburgh pays cruelly for her high seat in one of the vilest climates under heaven. She is liable to be beaten upon by all the winds that blow, to be drenched with rain, to be buried in cold sea fogs out of the east, and powdered with the snow as it comes flying southward from the Highland hills.

*The weather is raw and boisterous in winter, shift and ungenial in summer, and a downright meteorological purgatory in the spring. (From *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, included in *Complete Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* published by Delphi Classics in 2015, at [page 4008](#).)*

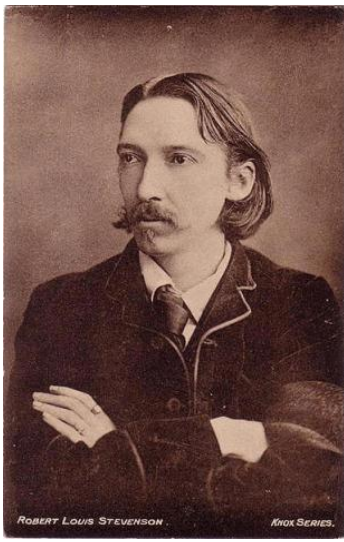
Click on the image for a better view.

Image of 8 Howard Place, Edinburgh, online via *University Libraries, Rare Books and Special Collections*, University of South Carolina.

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Robert Louis Stevenson

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