

# The Poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson

(By Robert Watson, Vernon, B.C.)

(Copyright)

Robert Louis Stevenson, that well-nigh incomparable literary craftsman, is probably best known to the general reading public as an essayist and romantic novelist, but, had he never made a name for himself in these particular branches of literature, his fame would still be assured him through the medium of his poetry.

In no sphere of his literary endeavour does he display his true, simple, singing, happy-go-lucky, childlike self—the irrepressible, spontaneous, nature-loving boy—as he does in his poems. In these we see the child bubbling up through the man; the Peter Pan who never grew up; the gnome playing tirelessly on his double pipes and, as he plays, conjuring fairy elves gaily to dance their accompaniment to his piping. We see Stevenson—light of heart and buoyant of step—swinging along the country roads of his reality, and more often of his imagination; laughing, whistling and singing as he goes, until the passers-by are constrained to stop, turn and take another look at this strange individual who dares to go through life with a laugh and a hop-skip-and-leap as if all of it were a vast holiday. But the passers-by, after all, would merely be glimpsing surface impressions, for underneath the gay exterior there was ever in R.L.S. the undercurrent, suggesting the deeper and more serious aspects of the life here and the life hereafter.

For just such an impression as this, let me commend a reading of that tuneful measure of his, "Song of the Road."

The gauger walked with willing foot,  
And aye the gauger played the flute;  
And what should master gauger play  
But 'over the hills and far away.'

Whene'er I buckle on my pack  
And foot it gaily in the track,  
O pleasant gauger, long since dead,  
I hear you fluting on ahead.

You go with me the self-same way—  
The self-same air for me you play;  
For I do think and so do you  
It is the tune to travel to.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then follow you, wherever hie  
The travelling mountains of the sky.  
Or let the streams in civil mode  
Direct your choice upon a road;  
For one and all, or high or low,  
Will lead you where you wish to go;  
And one and all go night and day  
'Over the hills and far away.'

As a typical son of Scotia, Robert Louis Stevenson was proud of his native land and all its traditions. He was not ashamed of his homely Doric and was equally at ease in it as in the so-called more cultured English. What, for instance, could be more tuneful or more happily expressed than 'A Mile an' a Bittock.'

A mile an' a bittock, a mile or twa,  
Abune the burn, ayont the law,  
Davie, an' Donal' an' Cherlie, an' a',  
An' the mune was shinin' clearly!

Ane went hame wi' the ither, an' then  
The ither went hame wi' the ither twa men,  
An' baith wad return him the service again,  
An' the mune was shinin' clearly!

Noo, Davie was first to get sleep in his head,  
'The best o' frien's maun twine,' he said;  
'I'm weariet, an' here I'm awa' to my bed,'  
An' the mune was shinin' clearly!

Twa o' them walkin' and crackin' their lane,  
The mornin' licht cam gray an' plain,  
An' the birds they yammert on stick an' stane,  
An' the mune was shinin' clearly!

\* \* \* \* \*

It would be hard to find words quite expressive enough in the English language to convey just what Stevenson here conveys to the ear and mind of his 'brither Scot.' What, for instance, could bring a better picture before the mind's eye than this one line:—

'An the birds they yammert on stick an' stane.'

It is only on rare occasions that we come across such arresting, clear-cut cameos, even among the foremost of our inspired poets. We find them in the lyrics of Robert Burns, as in his poem 'To Mary in Heaven,' when he sings:—

'The flowers sprang wanton to be prest.'

Again, in the wonderful verses of that beautiful Scottish song, 'Annie Laurie,' attributed to William Douglas, where the poet completes a wonderful word-picture of a bonnie lass with, as it were, one single sweep of his brush, in the line:—

'And dark blue is her e'e.'

When he tells us that—after what has gone before—he enables us to see the Annie Laurie that he sees, in all her native loveliness. Yet, not contented with this master-stroke, he makes a whole verse of them, as if to show how easy it is when one is so deeply and sincerely in love as he was:—

'Like dew on the gowan lying  
Is the fa' o' her fairy feet,  
And like winds in the summer sighing,  
Her voice is low and sweet.'

Where in all the world's literature can one find sweeter music?

It is a little soon, even yet, to place Robert Louis Stevenson in his final position in English literature, although his permanence is definitely assured. Already he is in the forefront and every year that passes adds more to his great reputation.

Burns is undoubtedly the greatest of Scottish Bards; head and shoulders above his fellows; but time should place many of Robert Louis Stevenson's lyrics and short poems next to the Immortal Robbie's.

A short quotation from one other of Stevenson's Doric poems might not come amiss before passing on. This from 'The Spaewife', a Scots word meaning Fortune-teller.

O I wad like to ken—to the beggar-wife said I—  
Why chops are guid to brander and nane sae guid to fry.

An' sillar, that's sae braw to keep, is brawer still to gi'e.  
—It's gey an' easy speirin', says the beggar-wife to me.

O I wad like to ken—to the beggar-wife says I—  
Hoo a' things come to be whaur we find them when we try,

The lasses in their claes an' the fishes in the sea.  
—It's gey an' easy speirin', says the beggar-wife to me.