

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Regret for Sites Unseen

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Literary tourism is almost always characterised by belatedness – inevitably the tourist arrives too late to observe the famous writer at work. When embarking on expeditions to literary sites, I often have the feeling that I will never see everything, pay enough attention and miss minute details that I will need when writing it up later.

Over the last twenty years, I have travelled to the Northern Hemisphere, seeking out far-flung literary sites in an attempt to understand how and why commemorative conventions were transported to the colonies. It can become a compulsive pursuit after a while. The more writers' houses I visit, the more I want to add to my mental repertoire.

I freely admit to being an anxious literary tourist. This anxiety tends to detract from my enjoyment. I never seem to be able to have a leisurely wander through around a literary site, taking in the details, because I usually make flying visits from Australia, either leaving young children at home or taking them with me, neither of which seem entirely satisfactory.

While enduring lockdown in Melbourne, I was visited by strong feelings of regret for all the literary tourism sites I've inadvertently missed during my travels. Reading Andrew O'Hagan's article 'The Bournemouth Set' in the *London Review of Books* – which focusses on the friendship between Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James that bloomed in Bournemouth – triggered a painful sense of disappointment which lingered for days.

When visiting Bournemouth with my son in 2016 on the way to Thomas Hardy country, I had not known of the ruins of Robert Louis Stevenson's old house 'Skerryvore' at 61 Alum Chine Road (O'Hagan 2020: 7-14). Bombed during the Second World War and left in ruins, Skerryvore was the Stevensons' home from July 1884 – August 1887, where he wrote 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884), *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), *The Dynamiter* (1885), *Prince*

Otto (1885), *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886), *Kidnapped* (1886) *The Merry Men* (1887) and 'Pastoral' before moving to Samoa.

O'Hagan's article made me feel irrationally envious of the sprig of ivy sitting in a jar on his desk. He admits to taking a clipping after seeing it peeping out from underneath the foundations. It's tempting to souvenir a tiny fragment of a place (a leaf, a shard of broken crockery, a dried flower) and I have often done it myself. Thinking about the inaccessible ruins of Skerryvore and lamenting my stupidity, I was catapulted back to an earlier trip to Robert Louis Stevenson's house 'Vailima' on the island of Upolu, Samoa.

Stevenson was sent by the New York *Sun* to write a series of travel letters of the South Seas region and originally intended to return in 1889 but decided that his health was better suited to the tropical climate (Martin 1992: 4). Stevenson and his wife Fanny bought Vailima in 1889, meaning 'five waters', along with a few acres of virgin bush, at the base of Mount Vaea, which they later ran as a cacao plantation.

They cleared about eight acres of this bush and lived in a small shack for nearly a year. The U.S. historian Henry Adams arrived unannounced in 1890 and found them dressed in lava-lavas and working around their hovel. Their basic living conditions during their first year have been described as 'Rousseauian', as if they were voluntarily living in a 'state of nature'. Adams tried to explain the condition of the Stevenson's hut to his American correspondent Elizabeth Cameron in terms that she would recognise. He describes 'a clearing dotted with burned stumps exactly like a clearing in our backwoods':

In the middle stood a two-story Irish shanty with steps outside to the upper floor, and a galvanized iron roof. A pervasive atmosphere of dirt seemed to hang around it; and squalor like a railroad navy's board hut. (Adams cited by Martin 1992: 7)

The Stevenson's impoverished conditions, so disparaged by Adams, didn't last much longer because the first part of their mansion – also named Vailima – was built in 1891.

Vailima later became the residence of the Samoan Head of State until it was damaged by hurricanes in 1991 and 1992. The Robert Louis Stevenson Museum/Preservation Foundation – funded by American money - completely restored the mansion and opened it to the public as the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum on 5 December 1994, one hundred years after his death and burial.

On a sweltering December day in 2014, I left my young family at Vailima while I clambered up a steep track to see Stevenson's tomb, located at the summit of Mt Vaea. On the way, I came across a man who was doubled over with chest pains, presumably brought on by the exertion. Along with his panicky wife, I tried to render assistance, but it was clear that he needed a doctor. I called the reception at Vailima to alert them to this emergency and they promised to despatch guides as soon as possible.

Confident that I had done my duty, I kept trudging upward along the muddy track to the top where I took a few selfies with the tomb behind me. Inscribed with Stevenson's oft-quoted poem 'Requiem' featuring the lines: Here he lies where he longed to be/Home is the sailor, home from the sea/And the hunter home from the hill. I felt so euphoric that I failed to notice that Stevenson's wife Fanny's ashes were also interred there, a crucial fact I only learned many months later.

In the selfies taken on top of Mt Vaea, I look exhausted and red in the face with my sunhat askew, attesting to the arduousness of the climb. Looking back on this, I wonder why I didn't help to bring the stricken walker back down the mountain, or at least wait until assistance arrived. Evidently my desire to scale the heights of Mt Vaea trumped any sense of altruism.

During the pandemic, I finally started reading a book I bought at Vailima, *Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa: Home from Sea* (1939) by Richard A Bermann. I discovered that Stevenson himself walked up the mountain one day while weak and tubercular before a clear path had been hacked through the bush. Bermann imagines him covered in perspiration, playing his flute inexpertly, looking towards the sea:

Now his notes on the flute tuned into a cry, a plaintive sighing; it was all so unreal, so improbable, this whole mad adventure; these South Seas, this ado about the Antipodes, where he was stranded. Was this really he, R.L.S who had been imprisoned for five full years in this vast expanse of islands, lagoons and atolls? For he was a prisoner. Although he could travel by steamer, schooner or bark from one corner of this endless gaol to another out on the rim of the earth, he could not escape entirely. Here he must remain to the bitter end, always and forever gazing at the glaring water, the eternally blue sky, the pitiless sunlight! (Stevenson cited by Bermann 1939/2006: 59)

In this florid passage, Bermann suggests that this South Seas paradise was experienced as a prison by Stevenson. His advanced tuberculosis had forced him to live the constrained existence of an invalid, albeit in an idyllic setting. His feelings must have been ambivalent as he reached the summit, knowing that he would be buried there before too long.

The Stevensons' residence at Vailima coincided with the arrival of 'a dark spirit that spread across the South Seas' (Bermann 1939/2006: 3). There were sporadic influenza outbreaks between 1891-1893 that ravaged the local population which had little or no immunity. At the height of the outbreak, Vailima was decked out like a hospital with ailing staff spread across the Great Hall on mats draped with mosquito netting. Writing to J.M Barrie on 5 December 1892, Stevenson makes light of the influenza suffered at Vailima in late 1891/1892:

Take it for all in all, I suppose this island climate to be by far the healthiest in the world—even the influenza entirely lost its sting. Only two patients died, and one was a man nearly eighty, and the other a child below four months. (Stevenson 1892)

Stevenson himself was seriously weakened by his final bout of influenza yet these earlier strains were mild compared to the Spanish Flu which was brought to Apia by the *Talune* (now known as ‘the ship of death’) from New Zealand in 1918, wiping out roughly a third of the Samoan population. Painful lessons learned from the Spanish Flu have enabled Samoa, at least at the time of writing, to largely avoid the COVID19 deaths experienced elsewhere.

Walking through the spacious rooms of Vailima with animal rugs on the floors and portraits of Robert and Fanny on the walls and preserved clothes in the bedrooms, I was impressed by the energy and warmth of the local guides. But I felt slightly uncomfortable about the fact that Stevenson was the co-owner of a plantation, given their long association with slavery. Our guide repeatedly referred to him as ‘Tusitala’ which translates as ‘the teller of tales’, indicating the Samoan respect for storytellers. My subsequent research confirms that his relationship with the Samoans was suitably ambiguous. Although he supported Samoan resistance against German rule, he was the head of an estate and master of many staff. He dressed his servants in tartan outfits reminiscent of Scottish private-school uniforms, and adopted a role ‘somewhat akin to that of the chief of a clan in his part of the island’ (Bold 2017). At the same time, he also spoke out against the brutality of empire and commercial exploitation. In addition, he circulated his work to Polynesian readers and his short story ‘The Bottle Imp’ (1891) was the first literary work to be translated into Samoan.

To date, I have made countless literary pilgrimages yet I have never remained in the room of the author for days on end, as W.G Sebald did when visiting the bedroom that Jean Jacques Rousseau inhabited from 1765. Located on the first floor of a farmhouse on the Île St Pierre in the Lac de Bienne, Switzerland, the room has a trapdoor which allowed Rousseau to escape from a steady stream of visitors. Rousseau’s summer retreat was invaded by tourists who desired to undertake the walks that he documents in his book of essays *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* published in 1782 (Watson 2019). This is one of the rare cases – along with Thomas Hardy and Henry David Thoreau – of a writer attempting to fend off literary tourists while they are still alive. Sebald notes that, in his experience, modern visitors to Rousseau’s room would spend very little time taking in their surroundings.

Not one of them bent down to look at the glass display case to try to decipher Rousseau’s handwriting, nor noticed the way that the bleached deal floorboards, almost two feet wide, are so worn down in the middle of the room as to form a shallow

depression, nor that in places the knots in the wood protrude by almost an inch. No one ran a hand over the stone basin worn smooth by age in the antechamber, or noticed the smell of soot which still lingers in the fireplace, nor paused to look out of the window with its view across the orchard and a meadow to the island's southern shore (Sebald 2013: 33).

This immersion, he reflects, made him feel as if he had been 'transported back to an earlier age, an illusion I could indulge in all the more readily in as much as the island still retained the same quality of silence, undisturbed by even the most distant sound of a motor vehicle, as was still to be found everywhere in the world a century or two ago' (Sebald 2013: 43-44). Such heightened attention has its own rewards, allowing Sebald to time-shift. I am humbled by his scrupulous study of Rousseau's room over several days, especially the detailed surveillance of other visitors and their habits. Over the last twenty years, my encounters with literary sites have been hasty and breathless – I have never allowed enough time to fully experience the atmosphere of a literary site, however reconstructed and 'inauthentic' it may be.

Seasoned psychogeographer Iain Sinclair observes that after the pandemic began, 'tourism felt posthumous and questionable' (Sinclair 2020: 41). International literary tourism now feels like a privileged pursuit which is relatively unimportant in the scheme of things. Given the uncertainty of the present, I may never travel so far afield to see literary houses again.

Listening to radio recently, I heard the prediction that air travel may not go back to 'normal' until 2024. Even if people do start flying at pre-pandemic levels, I am reluctant to join them. After experiencing the horrific Australian bushfire season of late 2019/early 2020, which was clearly exacerbated by climate change, flying across the world to visit writers' houses seems like a rarified practice that I can no longer justify. Instead, I may have to rely on secondhand accounts of literary places in the Northern Hemisphere and turn my attention towards undersung literary sites closer to home.

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