

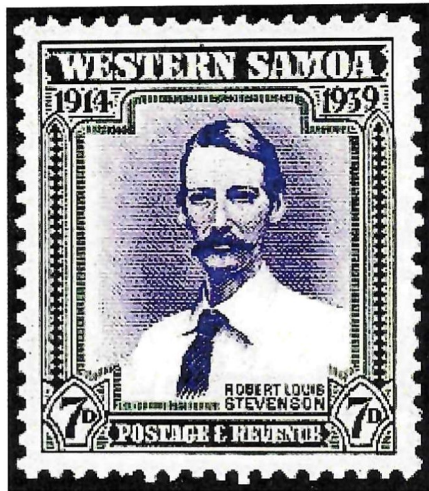
Robert Louis Stevenson: Poet

Part 1

Michael Hennessy

According to the Robert Lewis Stevenson website (robert-louis-stevenson.org), Stevenson published an astonishing 32 books in a career that lasted only 20 years, not counting 7 more that appeared shortly

after his death. He wrote fiction, non-fiction, travel books, plays, and poetry. But he is most remembered for three novels: *Treasure Island* (1883), which he called “a story for boys”; a horror tale called *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886); and *Kidnapped* (1886), a work of historical fiction.



Portraits: left, age 30; middle: Samoa Sc# 184 (1939); right, Samoa Sc# 671d (1994)

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) lived only 44 years and was in poor health during much of his life, but he squeezed a great deal of living—and writing—into that brief span. He was born in Scotland into a family of engineers. His interests did not incline in that direction, so to please his father, he earned a law degree. But by his early thirties (see photo above), he had engaged his real passion: writing stories. Stevenson maintained his Scots identity his entire life, but he was also a citizen of the world—marrying an American woman he met in France, traveling in the United States, and sailing around the Pacific and making friends with the Hawaiian king. Then, during his later years, he settled in the Samoan Islands, where he was a beloved figure, known as Tusitala (“teller of tales”).

Poems for Children: *A Child's Garden of Verses*

Stevenson is less well known as a poet. But he did publish a book of poems for children, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), that is considered a classic. He wrote this book after finishing *Treasure Island* while recuperating from a debilitating illness. The collection consists of 64 short poems written in the voice of a child. Some scholars suggest that the poems were inspired by Stevenson's memories of a lonely childhood, during which he was often confined to bed because of his chronically weak lungs.

In one of the best-known poems from the book, “The Land of Nod,” a child describes the magical



Christmas 1986 issue; illustrations by Millicent Sowerby; original poem titles (left to right): “System,” “Time to Rise,” “Auntie’s Skirts,” “Good and Bad Children.” Samoa Sc# 656–659

world encountered each night in dreams. It begins: "From Breakfast on through all the day / At home among my friends I stay, / But every night I go abroad / Afar into the land of Nod." Another famous poem, "From a Railway Carriage," uses sound and rhythm to capture the sensations of a child riding in a train and watching the scenery whiz by: "Faster than fairies, faster than witches, / Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches; / And charging along like troops in a battle, / All through the meadows the horses and cattle." Other well-known poems in the book include "My Shadow" and "The Lamplighter."

In 1986, for Christmas, Samoa issued four stamps based on poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses*. The stamps use illustrations that Millicent Sowerby (1879–1967) created for a 1908 edition of the book, though the titles of individual poems do not appear on the stamps.

The first stamp depicts a reward "system" whereby a child receives an orange each day for proper behavior. The second illustration is for a poem that touts the virtues of rising early: "A birdie with a yellow bill / Hopped upon the window sill, / Cocked his shining eye and said: / 'Ain't you 'shamed, you sleepy-head?'" And the third illustration is based on this poem:

Auntie's Skirts

Whenever Auntie moves around,
Her dresses make a curious sound,
They trail behind her up the floor,
And trundle after through the door.

The fourth stamp in the set portrays children who are "good" (the girls playing in the foreground) and "bad" (the boys playing in the background). All the poems in the book are highly didactic, which is characteristic of children's verse in the Victorian Era.

Poems for Grown-ups: *Underwoods*

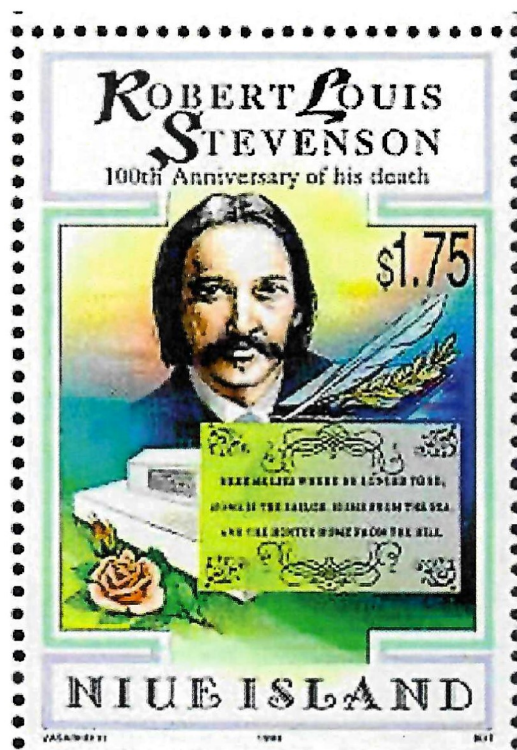
In 1887, two years after publishing *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Stevenson published *Underwoods*, a collection of poems for adult readers. The book contains 54 poems, 16 of them written in Scots dialect. The longest poem is "The Lowden Sabbath Morn," a delightful 144-line satire directed at a preacher in a rural church in Lothian (Scots = Lowden), the area of Scotland where Stevenson grew up. The poem describes villagers preparing for church and then notes their various

states of disengagement during the service. In the end, the fire-and-brimstone preacher's sermon fails to "steer" (stir) the parishioners from their sleep, and "in their restin' graves, the deid (dead) / Sleep aye (all) the deeper."

The shortest poem in *Underwoods* is the first one, called "Envoy," in which the poet sends forth his "little book" with good wishes for all readers:

Go, little book, and wish to all
Flowers in the garden, meat in the hall,
A bin of wine, a spice of wit,
A house with lawns enclosing it,
A living river by the door,
A nightingale in the sycamore.

Perhaps the best-known poem in *Underwoods* is "Requiem," which is inscribed on Stevenson's tomb, and which I discuss in the second part of this article. Four lines from the poem appear on a stamp issued by Niue in 1994. The image on the stamp is the work of renowned stamp designer Vászrhelyi Gyula László (1929–2013), who designed 7,500 stamps for more than 150 different countries. The stamp is part of a block of four, with the other three depicting scenes from Stevenson's novels.



Lines from "Requiem"
Niue Sc# 671d (1994)

Robert Louis Stevenson: Poet

Part 2

Michael Hennessy

Poems for Princess Ka'iulani

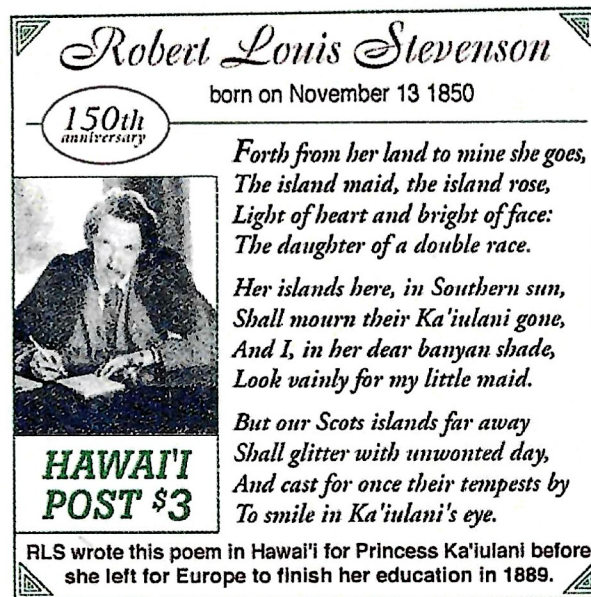
In 1888, after he had published his most famous novels and the volumes of poetry discussed in the first part of this article (JAPOS Bulletin no. 190), Stevenson and his family chartered a sailing vessel and spent an extended period exploring the south and central Pacific Ocean, visiting many island territories. During these travels, Stevenson visited the Hawaiian Islands, where he befriended King Kalākaua and the king's niece Princess Ka'iulani. These friendships are memorialized on two local stamps issued in 2000 by Hawaii Post (www.hawaii-post.com), a private company that delivered mail in Waikiki, Hawaii, from 1997 until 2014.

The Hawaii Post stamps, which mark the 150th anniversary of Stevenson's birth, are based on paintings by Hawaiian artist Wayne Takazono. The \$8 stamp (same-day rate) depicts Stevenson, wearing a traditional lei, sitting with King Kalākaua. The \$5 stamp (overnight rate) shows Stevenson reading to thirteen-year-old Princess Ka'iulani under a banyan tree on the steps of 'Āinahau, the royal residence.



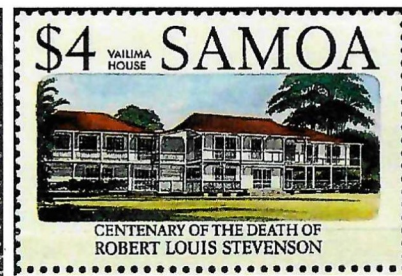
To accompany these stamps, Hawaii Post issued a minisheet that honors the princess as well as Stevenson's work as a children's poet. A likeness of Stevenson at his writing desk is paired with a poem he wrote for the princess, who was about to depart for school in England. The poem calls Princess Ka'iulani the "daughter of a double race" because her mother, who had died not long before, was Hawaiian, while

her father was a businessman "from our Scots islands far away." Stevenson's poem displays his talent for writing an accessible, memorable poem designed to appeal to young readers.



Life in Samoa—and "Requiem"

After their wanderings in the Pacific, Stevenson, his American wife Fanny, and their extended family eventually settled in Samoa. Stevenson bought a large estate on the slopes of Mt. Vaea, which he named Vailima ("Five Rivers"), and on which he built a two-story house.



Vailima, Stevenson's Samoan house
Samoa Sc# 171 (1935) and Sc# 861 (1994)

Stevenson continued to write fiction during his years in Samoa. He also became a champion of the Samoan people, deeply involved in local politics. He supported Samoan efforts to maintain independence against the economic exploitation of English, German, and American colonizers. In 1894, he addressed

a group of Samoan chiefs, telling them that the only way to defend Samoa was “to make roads, and gardens, and care for your trees, and sell their produce wisely.” He urged the chiefs to “occupy and use” their country, and said, “if you do not . . . others will” (quoted by Andrew Lang in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vol. 25).



Stevenson with Samoan Chief Tui-Ma-Le-Alh-Fano

In 1894, Stevenson died unexpectedly of a brain hemorrhage at his beloved Vailima house. To honor him, Samoans carried his body to the summit of Mt. Vaea and buried him in a tomb overlooking the sea. He was, and still is, held in high esteem in Samoa, which has honored him on 16 postage stamps, the first one issued in 1935. One of his most famous poems, published in 1887 in *Underwoods*, is inscribed on his tomb:

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.



*Stevenson's tomb on Mt. Vaea
Samoa Sc# 172 (1935) and Sc# 860 (1994)*

In addition to the stamps discussed in this article, the American Topical Association's Stevenson checklist includes others relevant stamps issued by the British Virgin Islands, Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Great Britain, Samoa, and Kirabati. Nearly all these stamps depict scenes or characters from Stevenson's novels. One of those novels, *Treasure Island*, includes a little poem with a line that many people know, even if they have never read a word of his poetry: "Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!"