



Ernest James Mehew — In Memoriam

Ernest James Mehew

23 September 1923 - 24 October 2011

Ernest James Mehew, the world's pre-eminent authority on the nineteenth-century Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, died peacefully in his sleep on 24 October 2011, a month after his eighty-eighth birthday. For approximately the last year, he had resided with his wife of more than fifty years, Joyce, in an Edgware, Middlesex, nursing home to provide her with support and companionship in her progressive and losing struggle with advanced-age dementia. She survives him; the Mehews had no children.

Ernest Mehew was born on 23 September 1923 at Bluntisham, Huntingdon and educated at Huntingdon Grammar School. In June 1942, at the age of eighteen, he joined the British Army and served with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps in the UK, France, Belgium, and India. Already fond of Stevenson from his school days, it was Janet Adam Smith's 1938 biographical study, Mehew later recalled, that in 1942 made him a serious student of the author. After his time in the army, Mehew joined the Civil Service in 1947 and served in the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Food, and (for most of his distinguished thirty-year career) the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food. He retired in 1983 at the level of Principal (G7).

He took advantage of his hour-long commute on the Bakerloo Line of the London Underground to and from his home in Stanmore to read not only everything that Stevenson himself wrote but practically everything that Stevenson himself had read and everything that had been written about him or about his family, his friends, and his times - whenever possible, from primary sources. Mehew's knowledge was, as a

result, encyclopaedic, not narrow, and besides frequent visits to second-hand bookshops in Charing Cross Road, he and his wife Joyce (herself a keen student of the period, and of the English author Maurice Baring) spent many a weekend searching bookshops for still more about Stevenson - notably in Peter Eaton's sprawling establishment at Lilies near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire and, later, in the many bookshops in Hay-on-Wye. The collection of books, periodical versions, reminiscences, and much else, soon filled every available corner of the house and attic.

From the early 1950s, in part from his letters to the *Times Literary Supplement* correcting errors and omissions and setting the record straight, often for the first time, Mehew became recognized not only for his knowledge of Stevenson but of the late nineteenth-century literary scene generally. Forming life-long friendships in the process, he helped with Janet Adam Smith's editions of Stevenson's *Collected Poems* (1950, 1971), with the British edition of J. C. Furnas's biography of Stevenson, *Voyage to Windward* (1952), and with Rupert Hart-Davis's major edition of Oscar Wilde's letters (1962). 'Mr. Mehew has unearthed several dozen letters unknown to me', Hart-Davis wrote in his introduction, 'besides doing the most acute detective work on behalf of the footnotes: any of them that seem particularly ingenious, amusing or recondite can safely be attributed to him, while Mrs Joyce Mehew's extensive knowledge of the Bible has proved invaluable'. He was a mentor, too, to a younger generation of scholars, notably the Stevenson bibliographer Roger G. Swearingen, whom he first met in 1969 when Swearingen was in graduate school and with whom he maintained an active friendship and correspondence for more than forty years, practically to the day of his death.

In 1966, Mehew was asked by Yale University Press to comment on an edition of Stevenson's letters then in preparation by Professor Bradford A. Booth. Mehew submitted a commentary so lengthy, useful, authoritative, and detailed that he was asked to become assistant editor of the Yale letters - a task which became his alone when Professor Booth died suddenly on 1 December 1968.

The eight volumes of *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, published twenty-five years later in 1994 and 1995, included more than 2,800 letters, almost two-thirds of them never before published. Mehew's careful transcriptions, dating, and detailed and incisive annotations, together with his introduction and linking commentaries, not only placed the study of Stevenson upon a whole new foundation of fact, but also set a standard for the scholarly editing and accessible presentation of such material that will never be surpassed. It is a testimony to the thoroughness and completeness of Mehew's work that in the fifteen years since the publication of the Yale Letters fewer than a dozen new letters have come to light, none of them of any great importance, and that the physical locations of only a dozen or so other letters, then untraced, have now become known.

Mehew's *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (1997) is an engaging and balanced selection illuminated throughout by Mehew's introduction, annotations, and linking commentary. The result, in effect, is an authoritative and highly readable short biography. Another masterpiece of compression and detail is Mehew's entry on Stevenson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

In addition to his work on Stevenson's letters, Mehew also - somehow - found time to respond positively and in detail in the *TLS*, 13

November 1970, to Graham Greene's observation that Stevenson's comic novel written in collaboration with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrong Box* (1889), had never been published correctly. This was indeed the case, and the book was a special favourite of Mehew's. He was an enthusiastic, contributing member of The Wrong Box Club that dined annually in London for some years in the 1960s - and his definitive edition of *The Wrong Box* appeared in 1989.

Mehew's thoroughness and passionate commitment to accuracy earned him, at times, an undeserved reputation for irascibility. All he ever wanted was that people get things right. He was disappointed when they did not, and took great pains to correct errors wherever he found them. A striking example was his meticulous, detailed riposte to Frank McLynn's biography of Stevenson in an article, 2 July 1993, and subsequent correspondence in the *TLS*. Like Stevenson himself, Mehew had an unlimited respect and thirst for knowledge - and no patience at all with prejudice, errors or with what RLS called 'Bummkopfery', whether in the form of laboured pedantry or its flourishing modern counterpart, academic ingenuity. Scholars worldwide benefited from Mehew's never-failing willingness to answer questions and to suggest improvements, however disconcerting to one's self-esteem his helpful comments might occasionally have been at first. The only goal was to get things right.

In recognition of his life's work, in July 1997 the University of Edinburgh awarded Mehew an Honorary Doctor of Letters, noting in the citation that with no academic affiliation Ernest Mehew 'has achieved . . . a contribution to literary studies which would be the envy of many a university-based academic, and has done so with a generosity to others and a self-effacing modesty which are the marks of a true scholar'. In

1999, Dr Mehew was elected as one of the 500 Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature.

Scholars and friends worldwide mourn his loss while celebrating his lasting and extraordinary achievements.

— Roger G. Swearingen

TRIBUTES

**Roger G. Swearingen, Stevenson scholar and author of
*The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide (1980)***

Ernest Mehew and I were friends for more than forty years: somewhat more than half of Ernest's adult life and nearly the whole of mine so far. His death is the close of a major chapter.

Ernest and Joyce and I first met in the spring of 1969, when they were just beginning work on the Yale Letters and I was finishing up as a graduate student at Yale.

We were introduced by Marjorie Wynne, who for forty-five years as a librarian at Yale, first in the Rare Book Room and then at the Edwin J. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, looked after generations of students and scholars with wit, verve, humor, and insight. Yale's collection of Robert Louis Stevenson, begun by Edwin J. Beinecke, was then and still is the largest of its kind in the world.

'There's somebody here I think you might like to meet', Marjorie said to me one fine spring day in 1969 — and the rest was history.

Ernest's lifetime of scholarship speaks for itself, in quantity and above all in its superlative quality.

The many tributes that have come in since his death — literally from Tahiti to Toronto and many points between — add another dimension, one that somewhat surprised me, in fact, until I realized that this too was Ernest.

Thanks to him, there is a worldwide community of scholars indebted not only to his work but to his never-failing personal attention. I have found that I am very far from being alone in finding that Ernest was never too busy to answer a question.

Therefore in this brief tribute — three anecdotes — I would like to remember Ernest as a friend and to recall his wonderful sense of humor.

When my wife Sarah and I were planning our visit to Britain for the first time together, in the summer of 1973, Ernest wrote and said that he and Joyce would be delighted if we would tour Stevenson places in Scotland with them for Ernest's fortnight of summer vacation. We went everywhere — Pitlochry, Strathpeffer, the Falls of Rogie, and many a place in addition.

But it wasn't until years later that Sarah and I realized what a masterpiece of planning and detail that trip was. Ernest had carefully chosen to visit places that we couldn't readily get to by public transportation. Edinburgh we could (and did) see for ourselves.

When our older son Taylor was three, we met up with Ernest and Joyce for a week in York, where we had spent a night on our first expedition — Old York, as Ernest and Taylor, under Ernest's tutelage,

were soon calling it in fun. And the two of them — no question who was the ring-leader here, either — somehow managed to have, always, a never-ending supply of fruit pastilles.

Ernest was not only a scholar and a planner and a friend, he was a much-loved companion to both of our boys.

James and Taylor both remember Ernest's wonderful response to a couple of children who came to the door of Ernest's and Joyce's home in Stanmore when we were all visiting on 4 November of the year 2000.

The children had come seeking rewards for Guy Fawkes Day. 'You've got the wrong day!' Ernest thundered indignantly, 'you must come back tomorrow' — and closed the door in their faces.

'You've got the wrong day!' has been a watchword in our family every since.

So, too, is Ernest's fondness for sending along 'things you never knew before' — these being the latest ludicrous bits of theory and legend about Stevenson that he had run across.

And so is his warning us, in the midst of a restaurant dinner in California in which everything was going wrong: 'You must forgive me, I am about to do my imitation of an Englishman losing his temper'.

He then called over the waiter — and the maitre d' — and gave them both a wonderful, emphatic, semi-indignant, semi-droll tongue-lashing: a brief and pungent lecture to the effect that in England, where he came from, the dish of boiled carrots that we had been served was not considered an acceptable substitute for the menu's enticing offering of 'fresh, mixed California garden vegetables'.

In San Francisco, in late February 1880 — Letter 690 in the Yale Letters — Stevenson wrote to his friend Sidney Colvin with a sketch of his tomb and an inscription.

'*Nitor Aquis*' reads one motto, Stevenson picking up a schoolboy's attempt to render into Latin a passage in *An Inland Voyage* which in a phone conversation no more than eighteen months ago, in response to a question of mine, Ernest guessed may have been: 'He clung to his paddle'.

'Home is the sailor, home from sea, / And the hunter home from the hill' reads the second motto, looking ahead to RLS's most famous poem, 'Requiem'.

And the third is in prose:

You, who pass this grave, put aside hatred; love kindness; be all services remembered in your heart and all offences pardoned; and as you go down again among the living, let this be your question: Can I make some one happier this day before I lie down to sleep? Thus the dead man speaks to you from the dust: you will hear no more from him.

We will hear no more of Ernest personally, whose words these words of Stevenson's might have been also.

And yet we will always hear him, in the splendid work that he did and left behind for us in libraries and on bookshelves worldwide, and in his many letters and conversations — and among those of us he also touched more personally, in his friendship, love, and his sense of fun.

We all miss him and treasure his memory.

**James S. Winegar, President, R.L.S. Foundation, Inc.,
Apia, Samoa, and Phoenix, Arizona**

ERNEST MEHEW: An extraordinary man of 'LETTERS'

If you ask anyone on the street if they have ever heard of Ernest Mehew, you'd better be prepared for a lot of quizzical looks and curious responses, like, "who?" or "I'm sorry — the name means nothing to me." But, for any Stevensonian, his name invokes immediate familiarity, interest and curiosity.

Having never had the opportunity to meet him personally, he is known to me only by his reputation and his good works for the 'cause.' His quiet and humble demeanor belies the monumental contribution he made because of his passion, love and superb attention to Louis's life.

I've often fantasized about posing a trick question to Ernest. It goes something like this:

"Ernest, where was Louis on, say, 12 August 1892?" (any date would work!)

Ernest might reply, "Morning or afternoon?"

This fantasy has two facets of appreciation. First, to the wonderfully compulsive R.L.S., who penned thoughts to his circle of family and friends. Secondly, however, for the priceless contribution that Ernest made through his meticulous cataloging and documenting the 'LETTERS.'

Ask me the question, "Have you ever heard of Ernest Mehew?" My head bows in respect — even in AWE — at what he did, how he did it and what his work means to sustaining the memory of Tusitala.

**Robert Louis Stevenson Museum,
St. Helena, Napa Valley, California**

It is with great sadness that the Robert Louis Stevenson Silverado Museum's staff and trustees have learned of the death of the legendary scholar Ernest Mehew. The ties that bind us all, as part of the Stevensonian community, are strong and the ripples this loss have stirred will be felt the world over. We are blessed to have had Mehew's presence for as long as we did, and even more so to have contained part of his undefinable knowledge in print so as to pass along to further generations his remarkable gifts. Our heartfelt prayers go out to his wife Joyce, family and friends. Now, another hunter is "home from the hill."

**Sarah (Sue) Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts,
Huntington Library, San Marino, California**

Thank you very much for including me in your notice of Ernest Mehew's passing. It is indeed sad news. We are all the beneficiaries of his fine scholarship over many years.

I'll pass the news along to our Reader Services Department so they can post it for staff and readers.

**Neil Macara Brown, database compiler,
Robert Louis Stevenson's Library**

I have just read the sad news about he upon who so many of us have often relied. The library database, and much else in a similar vein, would not have come about but for his edition of the *Letters*. It was receiving the volumes of these — in one case seemingly hot off the press — for review from *Scottish Book Collector*, which got me going as regards RLS's library.

Mention is made of the *Oxford DNB*. Ernest Mehew also wrote the incredibly clear and concise RLS entry in the *Collins Encyclopaedia of Scotland* (1994, 2000), for which I also had the honour of being a contributor.

In this he says memorably, 'Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes (1878) is the classic account of the city whose climate he hated but which always haunted his imagination'.

In conclusion he also said — in a warning to us all: 'The romantic legend created by sentimental admirers has helped obscure the recognition of Stevenson as a serious writer, and academic critics have largely ignored him or patronised him; but those readers prepared to explore behind the popular works that made him famous will find a wealth of good things'.

I love that 'wealth of good things'.

**Roger Neill, consultant on creativity and innovation in
business and author of *Robert Louis Stevenson and
Count Nerli in Samoa: The Story of a Portrait (1997)***

I guess the only gap in [the published history] is what [Ernest] actually did at the Ministry of Food etc. When we first met, we talked a lot about his work with the advertising agencies on various important campaigns — of course that had been my own background. I don't recall which he was responsible for, but there were several that were memorable in his time, notable both for their lasting impact and their concision. The latter the mark of the man!

"Go to work on an egg!", "Naughty but Nice" (for cream cakes) and "Drinka Pinta Milka Day!" were among them, the writers including Salman Rushdie and Fay Weldon.

I'm sure that he would have been thoroughly irritated by the waftiness of my recollections, but I'm equally sure that he made an important contribution in this field.

**Ian Campbell, Professor of Scottish and
Victorian Literature, University of Edinburgh,
and among the senior editors of the Duke-Edinburgh edition
of the *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle***

Sad news. I'm very glad that (at David Daiches' urging) I piloted through an honorary degree for Mehew. Anyone who has edited, especially a multi-volume edition, can only have the deepest admiration for what he achieved.

**Dr Hilary Beattie, Ph.D., psychologist and lecturer in the
Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, New York.
Author of several articles on Stevenson.**

Thanks so much for forwarding [the obituary] to me. I was very saddened by the news. Ernest Mehew seemed like an unalterable star in the Stevensonian firmament, and an unfailing source of guidance when all other options had failed. He was a great scholar in the best English "amateur" tradition, and an inspiration especially to those, like myself, who come to the study of literature from unorthodox backgrounds.

I suppose his works are his best memorial, but it would be nice if a way could be found to commemorate him at the next RLS meeting, in Sydney [2013], and/or in the next *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, as well as in the *Newsletter*.

**Ann C. Colley, SUNY Distinguished Professor of
English, Buffalo State College, New York.
Author of *Robert Louis Stevenson and the
Colonial Imagination* (2003) and other studies.**

Many, many thanks for writing to let me know about the death of Ernest Mehew. The obituary and photograph reinforces my sense that when thinking or writing about Stevenson, I am a member of a large and international community of people who care about his work. Thank you for reminding me of that reassuring reality. I never met Ernest Mehew in person; I had thought that I would like to. I have, however, spent hours with him through Stevenson's letters.

**Professor Roland A. Paxton, School of the Built
Environment, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.
Author (with Jean Leslie) of *Bright Lights:
The Stevenson Engineers 1752–1971 (1999)* and of *Dynasty of
Engineers: The Stevensons and the Bell Rock (2011)*.**

Thank you very much for letting me know about Ernest Mehew's death. I was in touch with him several times when working with Jean Leslie [great grand-daughter of RLS's uncle David Stevenson] on *Bright Lights*. The world has lost a great scholar!

**John W. S. Macfie, President,
The Robert Louis Stevenson Club, Edinburgh,
and current resident of 17 Heriot Row.**

An era passes. To see his work described unadorned but fully as it is here, is sobering. Would that we all could appear before our maker and give such good account of ourselves.

**Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, Ph.D.,
Université de la Polynésie française, Tahiti**

Please allow me to express my condolences for the loss of Ernest Mehew. Thank you for the beautiful obituary.

**Dr Roslyn Jolly, University of New South Wales,
author of *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific:
Travel, Empire and the Author's Profession* (2009)
and other studies and editions.**

What would I like you to say about Ernest? That he was the best. That he knew everything and shared everything. That his edition is elegant and beautiful and changed everything in the Stevenson studies world.

And also that he was very cute. He once wrote me a letter that ended 'Best wishes to you, and give Alice [my daughter, then a baby] a tickle for me.' I liked him very much and I am so grateful for all the help he gave me.

**Elaine Greig, Former Curator,
The Writers' Museum, Edinburgh**

Just a short email to say how sorry I am to hear the news of Ernest Mehew. He had such a wealth of knowledge and I was greatly indebted to him on more than one occasion for his advice on relatively modest enquiries I had to deal with at TWM and also for the exhibition in 1994. The 'Letters' are an invaluable resource to Stevenson scholars the world over. Although I didn't keep in touch with him in recent years, it was sad to learn of his passing and it brought back fond memories of 1994 and I pictured again Ernest, you, Robin [Hill] and was it Nick Rankin (?) all crammed into my wee office at TWM poring over the photo albums!

**Michael Millgate, University Professor of English Emeritus,
University of Toronto, biographer of Thomas Hardy**

Many thanks for thinking of me as worthy of inclusion among those who should be notified of Ernest Mehew's death. Alas, Hardy has continued to prove too demanding to allow me ever to become much of a Stevensonian, let alone one who knew Ernest Mehew personally, but you have written very movingly of him and if by any chance (not that I can readily imagine one!) you should find it appropriate or useful to mention my name among those wishing to honour Mehew I would be happy for you to do so.

**Katherine Linehan, Professor Emerita,
Department of English, Oberlin College, Ohio**

A TRIBUTE TO ERNEST MEHEW

In 1998, when I was commissioned to produce a critical edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* for the Norton publishing company, I could scarcely have contemplated beginning a correspondence with Ernest Mehew.

My invitation to do the Norton edition came well along in a career spent teaching Victorian literature at the college level and publishing a handful of articles on George Eliot, George Gissing, and Stevenson. My increasing interest in Stevenson had led me to read my way through all eight volumes of the 1994-95 Yale *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, of which I soon learned that Ernest Mehew was virtually the sole editor. I stood in absolute awe of the level of scholarship represented in the work

of that editor. Despite the quietness with which he had subordinated himself to the task of accurate service to Stevenson's life and letters, there was no mistaking the monumentality of his blend of erudition, writerly grace, and energy of affection for Stevenson. It showed vibrantly through the Yale *Letters* and put Stevenson before us anew.

Then in the spring of 2000, the one thing capable of emboldening me to approach this paragon of an editor occurred. I stumbled across, tucked away in an obscure American archive, three evidently authentic but not yet published short letters written by Stevenson to Thomas Russell Sullivan, the American stage adapter of *Jekyll and Hyde*. One of Stevenson's letters to Sullivan struck me as a candidate for inclusion in my book.

So write Ernest Mehew I did. I sent photocopies of the unpublished letters with a request for advice on their authenticity and on the accuracy of my proposed transcription of Stevenson's quirky handwriting.

What came back to me from 6 Abercorn Road, Stanmore, Middlesex, was an enormously heartening response. It was generous in its tone of welcome to my finding, in its sharing of biographical and historical knowledge bearing on the letters, in its tact in setting me straight on several mistranscriptions, and most astonishingly, in its closing offer to serve as a consultant, should I wish it, on the textual annotations I was preparing for my edition.

Over the course of the two year correspondence that followed, "Mr. Mehew" became "Ernest" to me, and I "Kathie" to him. His invaluable draft-stage review of my textual annotations expanded to include equally invaluable draft-stage review of all the other components of my edition. His robust comments and criticisms of my materials added richly to my

knowledge and saved me from many a mistake. As he unbent a little, I enjoyed his bracing assurance that despite my lack of editorial experience, all I needed in order to do a good job with my critical edition was a solidity on the scholarly facts, plus — and I quote — "common sense and a healthy skepticism of some of the loony theories".

Though we never met face to face, I treasured and happily reciprocated the feeling that led him to say in one of our last exchanges of letters: "Although we do not know each other personally I feel that we have become friends".

My sympathies to others who felt his friendship as a gift. I hope they may share in what is to me the consoling thought that Ernest's unsurpassably masterful, elegant, well-judged editions of Stevenson's letters and *The Wrong Box* will continue to stand as a gift to generations of literary scholars and Stevenson enthusiasts.

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