

Ernest Meheew, who has died aged eighty-eight, was among the great scholars of Robert Louis Stevenson. Yet he was neither a writer nor an academic, but that increasingly rare thing, an amateur expert. For most of his working life, he was employed at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. His medium of literary production was the Letters column of the *TLS*. His place of study was the Underground railway, on which he commuted from his home in Stanmore to his London office. In the dusty carriages of the Bakerloo Line, as the Stevenson scholar Roger Swearingen tells us, Meheew “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”.

Meheew’s first letter to the *TLS* (February 9, 1951) concerned a young woman whom scholars up until mid-century called “Claire”. She was said to have been RLS’s first love. He wrote poems to her. According to one early biographer, there were “people still alive” happy to tell you that Claire was an Edinburgh prostitute whose real name was Kate Drummond. RLS proposed to marry her.

What a wonderful, Stevensonian story. Then along came Meheew. Referring to a letter in an earlier issue, the civil servant wrote from a Bakerloo Line carriage (or so it would be nice to think): “Many of the details given by . . . biographers are conjectural. I should like to widen the scope of the inquiry by asking what evidence we have that Kate Drummond ever existed”. Meheew demonstrated that the main “Claire” poem was, in fact, written to Mrs Frances Sitwell. Lovely, fallen Claire – “kidnapped” in love – evaporated.

In 1966, Meheew became assistant editor to Bradford Booth on the Yale edition of RLS’s letters. When Booth died suddenly, he took charge. The eight volumes, which appeared twenty-five years later, are among the glories of late twentieth-century literary publishing.

It is an honour to have been the subject of a Meheew correction, as this column once was. A little later, when we ourselves wished to enter the correction business, following some newspaper silliness about Fanny Stevenson burning the manuscript of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, we phoned Meheew for advice. “It’s all nonsense”, he said. “I don’t know why they do it. For a good story, I suppose.”

J. C.