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*Literature*


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Robert Louis Stevenson

THE HAIR TRUNK OR THE IDEAL  
COMMONWEALTH

An extravaganza

Edited by Roger G. Swearingen

202pp. Humming Earth. £35.

978 1 84622 050 0

This book's copious notes, amounting at times to a mini-encyclopædia of all matters touched on even tangentially by Robert Louis Stevenson in this youthful tale, explain that a trunk is "a box, usually lined with paper or linen, and with a rounded top, for carrying clothes and other personal items when travelling", while the "hair" part of the title is explained by reference to Mark Twain's satirical description of a portrait by Bassano in the Doge's Palace in Venice. The appendix has a delightful element of erudite chaos, with many numbers in the text referring to no notes at all, while subjects covered range from Manet to balloon ascents, taking in the commercial sale of sauces, the nature of quaternions, the *Theogony* of Hesiod and many other topics. Roger G. Swearingen's already awesome reputation as the Stevenson scholar for all seasons is confirmed.

This "comic novel" was written in the period 1877–9, when Stevenson was embarking on fiction, but was left unfinished. At that time Stevenson was a crusader for youthful values, author of *An Apology for Idlers* and an advocate of the freedom from responsibility that was justified by the term "bohemian". Here, a group of high-spirited, mischievous Cambridge students find themselves facing an uncertain future with poor degrees, no resources and no identifiable skills. An outsider named Blackburn is introduced into their company and he outlines a wild visionary scheme to set sail for the Navigator Islands, later known as Samoa, and there establish a utopia of their own making, where life can be enjoyed in ease without the use of vulgar stuff such as money. The paradox is that money is needed to establish a commonwealth free of the nuisance of it. Their quest takes them to a Scottish island

where treasure is known to be available inside a hairy trunk, inside a ghostly, pseudo-baronial but private villa.

There, frustratingly, the tale runs out. It is curious to note the pull of Samoa, where Stevenson would spend his last years and where the need for money would be keenly felt by him. In this exuberant story he can play about with overturning values, making the immoral standards of international affairs justify domestic theft. The optimism that remained among his best qualities is in evidence and he displays a mastery of descriptive prose together with a command of narrative drive, as well as undue lushness of style which he would later temper.

JOSEPH FARRELL

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*History*


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Stephen Green

## RELUCTANT MEISTER

How Germany's past is shaping its

European future

338pp. Haus. £25.

978 1 908323 68 2

Stephen Green's *Reluctant Meister* is a readable and personal introduction to German history – and above all its art, literature and music. Green – a former chairman of HSBC and briefly a trade minister in David Cameron's government – writes that he had always been "fascinated by all things German". Like other British writers such as Peter Watson and Simon Winder, he sets out to correct and enlarge British perceptions of Germany, which, he argues, focus excessively on the Third Reich. "Nothing much in Germany is interesting of the 12 years from 1933 to 1945". His alternative history is poetry: from Andreas Gryphius to the idea of Germany, from post-war Federal Republic to the Nazi past.

To Green, the story of universal significance is caricatured as a descriptive history of Germany.

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