

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Seldom-Quoted Letter From RLS

As the spring publication of The Book Club of California announces, "R. L. S. to J. M. Barrie; A Vailima Portrait." This frank, witty view of the Stevenson family in Samoa is in the form of a long, carefully composed letter that has the character of an informal, whimsical and very personal essay. Addressed to James M. Barrie, another distinguished Scottish author, the letter was written in 1893 - the year before Stevenson's death - and urges his friend and countryman to come half-way round the world for a long visit "before anything happens."

This unique document is here published in the entirety for the first time. Until now it has been known only through a few parts quoted in two books long out of print. The letter opens with Stevenson's own view of himself.

"Exceedingly lean, dark, rather ruddy-black eyes . . . crow's-footed, beginning to be grizzled, general appearance of a blasted boy - or blighted youth - or to borrow Carlyle on De Quincy "Child that has been in hell." After this self - portrait, Stevenson gives a catalogue of my menagerie," including detailed and humorous descriptions of his wife, Fanny, and her son and daughter, in this section, entitled "Family Life," Stevenson notes that their, existence is characterized by a "solid and comfortable selfishness - guests preferred to be selfish also."

Dictated by Stevenson to his stepdaughter, Isobel, the letter is not only signed by each member of the caricatured family but bears a few added comments by the amanuensis who embellished its margins with her own impressions in the form of drawings.

The letter has been set in context with an introduction by Bradford A. Booth, professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. The founder and editor of the journal, "Nineteenth Century Fiction," Prof. Booth has written several books on Anthony Trollope, another tireless novelist, traveler, and autobiographer; and he is presently editing a multi-volume edition of the collected letters of Robert Louis Stevenson.

The Grabhorn Press has printed the book in two colors to show the two inks used in the letter to distinguish between Stevenson's text and that of his stepdaughter.

One page of the original manuscript is reproduced, as are all the accompanying drawings. In addition, four amusing drawings of the staff and life at Vailima are included. These were made by Isobel Strong for her scrapbook. Once in the possession of Charles Warren Stoddard, they are now in the Bancroft Library, University of California.

The volume is bound in decorative paper sides with a linen back. The edition is limited to 475 copies and the price is \$12.50 to members of the Book Club of California. Permission to print the hitherto unpublished portions of this letter was obtained from Sam Osbourne and the Bancroft Library,