

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON DID NOT VISIT ILLAWARRA (yet another Osbourne story)

On Saturday July 23, 1994 Gillian Cumming published a three page colour feature as the cover story for the *Illawarra Mercury's* 'Weekender' supplement. entitled 'Robert Louis Stevenson: Adventures in the Illawarra.'

At the time Gillian Cumming contacted me seeking assistance with the story because I believe, that the then Wollongong City Councillor Michael Samaras noticed that I had mentioned in my *D.H. Lawrence at Thirroul* that Stevenson had passed through Thirroul railway station on his visits to NSW and that he penned a few lines about the railway line falling into the sea at "South Clifton" [now called Scarborough] in his novel *The Wrecker* (chapter 22).

When Cumming rang me I suggested that her story probably wasn't a good idea as five years after writing my book on Lawrence I now suspected that Stevenson hadn't visited the South Coast at all. All the subsequent reading I'd done on Stevenson indicated clearly to me that he would've been too sick during his February 1890 visit to Sydney than to do much more than roll around in his hotel bed. Ill health forced him to return to Samoa in April.

Stevenson's novel, *The Wrecker* (containing the only mention of Illawarra in a work by RLS), has a co-author: Stevenson's step-son, Lloyd Osbourne. I remember telling Ms Cumming after she rang me at school that it was probably Osbourne who penned the lines about South Clifton not RLS and that it would be embarrassing for her to publish as I felt sure there would be at least one Stevenson buff in the Illawarra who would see that her feature would be unencumbered by anything even approaching solid evidence of Stevenson's visit.

But I was wrong. No-one surfaced. And so Cumming's article has remained publicly unquestioned for over two years.

Cumming eased in to her argument hesitantly enough - "Although evidence is scant" - but then spoils it somewhat by adding, "there is growing opinion that Stevenson made the

journey by train down the south coast on the advice of his doctor." Then, as now, the conversations of doctor and patient were meant to be private and so Ms Cumming's stumbling upon some record of the advice a Sydney doctor gave Stevenson in February, 1890 seemed to me an impressive find.

I was a little disconcerted, however, that a mere five paragraphs after her admission that "evidence is scant" she could write: "How far he [RLS] travelled south, and for how long remains unknown. What is certain is that the trip made an indelible impression on the writer, who immortalised the rail line and the Illawarra coastal cliffs forever in literature."

The *Illawarra Mercury* for February 22, 1890 records that "the railway line between Clifton and Stanwell Park was reported very shaky in places...Large masses of rock, accompanied with other earthy material, broke away from the precipitous side of the mountain." The event made an impression on the Mercury journalist covering the story who at one point describes the occurrence as an "avalanche".

Cumming claims it "made an indelible impression on" RLS. Well, it made an "impression" on someone but back in 1994 I felt pretty sure that it wasn't Robert Louis Stevenson - who was surely too sick to be riding south coast trains in bad weather.

The only person connected with *The Wrecker* who I felt could have seen such an event was Lloyd Osbourne, the co-author whom Cumming never mentions once in her article.

Well I am now, in late 1996, a lot more confident that, instead of R.L. Stevenson, it was Lloyd Osbourne who used his own experience in February 1890 to write the South Coast sections of *The Wrecker*.

Just last weekend I bought a second hand copy of Compton Mackenzie's 1969 biography of Robert Louis Stevenson (International Profiles Series, Ure Smith, North Sydney) for the princely sum of 50 cents. Sure enough at pages 62-64 Mackenzie states that "Lloyd Osbourne told me all of that part of the book [*The Wrecker*] set outside Europe was written by himself with of course frequent changes of style by Louis" - no doubt, to put his stepson firmly in his place when it came to the question of who was a famous author and who wasn't.

Mackenzie seems to have first met Osbourne while they were staying together on the Isle

of Capri in 1919. I suppose Osbourne could have been lying to Mackenzie in order to big-note himself that he helped the great RLS. But although *The Wrecker* had much success in America, (outselling, much to Stevenson's annoyance, *The Master of Ballantrae*) even by 1919, Osbourne's three collaborations with Stevenson - *The Wrong Box* (1889), *The Wrecker* (1892) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) - were hardly such highly regarded works that there would be much point in lying about having written most of them when, at least after *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), it is pretty clear that Stevenson is a spent force. I'm inclined to agree with the 1932 Oxford Companion to English Literature description of the fragment entitled '*The Weir of Hermiston*' (published in 1896) as an "unfinished masterpiece" (p.783) but the fact that he couldn't finish it suggests Stevenson had really lost his power to actually produce rather than simply imagine the outlines of great literature.

As the notion that RLS visited Wollongong first appeared in our hallowed *IHS Bulletin* (at least that's where I ripped off the idea for my book in 1989), I think it's time we put to rest the furphy that RLS has an Illawarra connection.

It's a pity really because the line "Lloyd Osbourne once passed through Thirroul railway station" which will appear in my next book does not have quite the magic of a sentence containing the name of the man known by the initials RLS.

The Wrecker by Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson [Samuel] Lloyd Osbourne is available (but not for loan) in the Wollongong Local Studies Library but for my taste at least it's a little bit tedious. Admittedly, it is hard to read a whole novel in a library but I doubt that even if I had my own copy I'd be able to wade through all of it. But I'm willing to reserve judgement on its literary merits until I've read it at least a couple of times in bed and then had a whole lot longer to consider the other works that Osbourne wrote on his own.

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