

Write a 500-word magazine review in a suitable 19th century mode (think Blackwood's Magazine) of *Waverley*, the *Confessions* or *Kidnapped*, and then a scholarly essay that either disagrees with or substantiates the content of that review.

2614 words.

WE yield to none in our delight with the novel, or perhaps more properly the historical fiction, of our young countryman, Mr. Stevenson. Whilst the author may never again recover the brilliance of 'Treasure Island', we are struck by the fertility of invention found in 'Kidnapped', a tale bolstered by the potency of its skilfully drawn characters. Most striking of all is the vivid representation of Highland history, land and character offered by Mr. Stevenson, rendering David Balfour's adventure a refreshing and picturesque tale that will unquestionably inspire pleasure within its readership.

The novel's Highland scenery encapsulates a compelling sense of charming wilderness; its passages are ornamented with idyllic imagery of heath and heather, cliff and crag. Accompanying David on his travels as he breathes in the fresh air of the countryside, the reader will discover distant landscapes that, akin to their hero, they are sure to find a 'continual wonder and pleasure to sit and

behold'.¹ Accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle in the fictitious village of Essendean, the level-headed Lowlander David is thrown into this savage land when he 'takes to the heather' with the reckless and vain Highlander, Alan Breck Stewart. We find this Jacobite ruffian a fine example of Mr. Stevenson's magical pen; his vanity in dress and pugnacious nature are a marvellous triumph, forming a character full of the eccentricities and delights of Highland life. Whilst this portrayal is undoubtedly successful in its strength and verve, we cannot repudiate that Alan pales before the greatness of Sir Walter's own Highland hero, Rob Roy. Nevertheless, we must commend Mr. Stevenson for his bravery in venturing his pen into the hitherto conquered literary realm of Jacobite Romance.

The primary interest of the novel lies in the budding friendship between the Protestant Whig, David, and the Catholic Jacobite, Alan, their bond ultimately generating a pathway to the discovery of the former's personal

¹ All quotations from *Kidnapped* are taken from Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (Oxford World Classics, 2006), p. 129.

identity and inheritance. Alan's Highland lawlessness and David's Lowland steadiness produce an amusing contrast, and their ability to navigate these differences is the stuff of pleasurable artifice. The centrality of their relationship is exemplified by several scenes; after rescuing David from the cruel shipmasters of the *Covenant*, Alan guides his young companion through their flight as both mentor and brother, imparting unto him skills of combat and resolve. Our readers will be exhilarated by the sudden alteration in David when, swept away by the 'thought of the sharp swords and the cold steel', he unites with Alan in driving their

enemies 'along the deck as a sheepdog chases sheep' (p. 62).

The violence of 'Kidnapped' operates outwith danger; it is a book for boys, casting something of an impenetrable shield upon its manly hero. Innocent of sword and pistol, David is imbued with a distinct ingenuity and guile that allows him to skilfully succour Alan in the conquering of the *Covenant* and subsequently navigate an alien landscape without coming into true harm. 'Kidnapped' will be enjoyed for its exquisite prose and mastery of character, constituting an agreeable read that will struggle to disrupt sensibilities.



1. N.C. Wyeth, *On the Island of Earraid*, 1913, oil on canvas, 40 x 32 inches, Private Collection.

In his essay ‘The Foreigner at Home’, Robert Louis Stevenson observed that a ‘Scottish child hears much of shipwreck [...] much of heathery mountains, wild clans, and hunted Covenanters’, later asserting that ‘[p]overty, ill-luck, enterprise, and constant resolution are the fibres of the legend of his country's history’.² Stevenson locates an intrinsic sense of adversity within the history of his home country, mischance and trauma constituting something of Scotland’s genetic makeup. The unsigned review of *Kidnapped* published in Blackwood’s Magazine sells to its readers a novel brimming with picturesque Highland landscapes, imaginative escapades and boyish ventures. In reality, *Kidnapped* is an overwhelmingly bleak novel, symbolic of a bleak national history. Reflective of Stevenson’s opposition to nineteenth-century Scottish progressivism, this sense of desolation is conveyed in the novel by its sterile Highland landscapes, David’s acute haptic awareness as he endures intense bodily violence, and the colonial implications of the adventure narrative. Within this bleakness, the reader can discover traces of a dying Highland culture; a society still enduring the shockwaves of the traumas of 1745.

In the nineteenth century, the prevailing attitude concerning Scotland and the Union was progressivist and meliorist in nature, built on the conception that Scotland had been civilised and cultivated by its fusing with England and the decline of Jacobitism.³ Stevenson questions this mode of thought, using *Kidnapped* as a means of unveiling the devastating and divisive effects of denying a culture. The 1886 review of *Kidnapped* emphasises the ‘delights and eccentricities of Highland life’ encapsulated within the novel; however, the image of Highland life presented by Stevenson is one of a people still embroiled in destructive and oppressive contemporary politics. Alan Breck Stewart acquaints David with the tragic national heritage of the Highlands; discussing the fate his clan’s captain after the bloodshed at Culloden, he tells him:

They stripped him of his powers; they stripped him of his lands; they plucked the weapons from the hands of his clansmen, that had borne arms for thirty centuries; ay, and the very clothes off their backs—so that it's now a sin to wear a tartan plaid, and a man may be cast into a goal if he has but a kilt about his legs. (p. 73)

² Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘The Foreigner at Home’, *Memories and Portraits* (Chatto and Windus, 1895), p. 19.

³ Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 123-24.

In an attempt to pacify the Highlands, the English outlawed their native markers and ruptured their culture, leaving it in a state of decay and suffering. This cultural rupture began externally, with land being confiscated, before narrowing its focus to bodily possessions: weaponry and clothing. By carving out a past of ‘thirty centuries’, Stevenson establishes a strong sense of history and lineage, rendering the assault on Highland culture deeply tragic. Alison Lumsden notes that, ‘presenting us a Scotland in close-up, [Stevenson] seems to offer us one that is in fact not healed by moments of crisis, but rather, ravaged’.⁴ Stevenson’s representation of the Highland thus challenges the thought that a nation is always bettered by a civilising and modernising mission. Whilst the English could physically oppress the Highlanders, eradicating their land and dress, the psychological residues of clan life could not be destroyed. Alan tells David that there was ‘[o]ne thing they couldnae kill. That was the love the clansmen bore their chief’ (p. 73). Deprived of their clansmen, prohibited from speaking Gaelic, and driven from their homeland, the Highlanders are subjugated to a bleak and isolated existence, unrecognisable from the setting described in the 1886 review.

Stevenson’s resistance to the dominant narrative of national progress can be further examined in the defamiliarised and hostile Highland landscapes portrayed in *Kidnapped*. Appealing to the ubiquitous romanticisation of a foreign and picturesque Highland landscape, the 1886 review claims that the novel is full of ‘charming wilderness; its passages are ornamented with idyllic imagery of heath and heather, cliff and crag’. Concerned with the ‘fertility of invention’ found in *Kidnapped*, the unsigned review is similarly inventive. The novel’s landscape is barren and described in topographical terms, contradictory to the author’s assertion that it is picturesque and aesthetically constructed. David is dropped into this bleak landscape when he washes up on the shores of Erraid, where he observes that he ‘had never seen a place so desert and desolate’ (p. 81). Alien to his surroundings, David has no means of personal understanding; Jenni Calder argues that ‘his inability to relate to the landscape means he cannot locate himself’.⁵ This sense of inability and disorientation is intensified by the impossibility of the physical terrain traversed by David, the hero finding Mull ‘rugged and trackless [...] being all bog, and briar, and big stone’ (p. 90). Hostile and indomitable, the landscape treats the alien entity David with a ruthless brutality.

⁴ Alison Lumsden, ‘Stevenson, Scott and Scottish History’, in Penny Fielding (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 74.

⁵ Jenni Calder, ‘Figures in a Landscape: Scott, Stevenson and Routes to the Past’, in Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (eds.), *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 128.

Despite his growing familiarity with Alan and his Highland landscape, David's relationship with his physical surroundings does not improve. Reviewing *Kidnapped* for 'The Spectator' in 1886, Richard Holt Hutton argued that for 'lovers of Scotch scenery and Scotch character' the novel is 'altogether delightful'.⁶ The 1886 reader will have been surprised to discover their beloved Scotch scenery shrouded in an unsettling mist and assaulted by harsh weather conditions. David recalls how the pair:

travelled on eerie mountains and among the well-heads of wild rivers; often buried in mist, almost continually blown and rained upon, and not once cheered by any glimpse of sunshine. By day, we lay and slept in the drenching heather; by night, incessantly clambered upon breakneck hills and among rude crags. (pp. 151-52)

Obscured by mist, battered by rain and frozen from the hostile climate, David is overpowered by his environment. Far from picturesque, David is struck with terror by his 'eerie' surroundings, a landscape he can only encounter at night and in darkness. His movement in darkness further obfuscates his ability to connect with his surroundings, and he is rendered immobile by light's coming due to the necessity to remain covert.

This dramatic fluctuation between stasis and desperate clambering intensifies the physical relationship David has with his landscape. This relationship is an intimate bodily experience, Stevenson describing in powerful detail David's haptic perception of his terrain. The author of the unsigned review concludes that *Kidnapped* constitutes 'an agreeable read that will struggle to disrupt sensibilities'; this idealised take on the novel entirely ignores and undermines Stevenson's gruelling descriptions of the suffering inflicted upon David's body as he laboriously crawls through the heather. Following in Alan's trail as he moves 'with an incredible quickness', David travels through 'the lower parts of the moorland', describing how the landscape:

had been burned or at least scathed with fire; and there rose in our faces (which were close to the ground) a blinding, choking dust as fine as smoke. The water was long out; and this posture of running on the hands and knees brings an overmastering weakness and weariness, so that the joints ache and the wrists faint under your weight. (p. 174)

⁶ Robert Holt Hutton, 'Unsigned Review, 'Spectator', 24 July 1886, xlv, 5', in Paul Maixner (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 235.

As opposed to ‘the fresh air of the countryside’, David breathes in the ashes of the ground, becoming physically entwined with his landscape in this process. Despite the reviewer’s purported ‘impenetrable shield’, David’s sensory experience of his surroundings is overwhelmingly negative, blurring the boundaries between body and world. Hitherto unfamiliar with life as a pursued convict, David encounters life as experienced by many fleeing Jacobites before him; this trauma was a way for Stevenson to educate his readers in ‘the distressing realities of Highland life’.⁷ David’s experience with his landscape is intensely psychological, his haptic perception powerful enough to retrieve past memories:

I was never warm; my teeth chattered in my head; I was troubled with a very sore throat, such as I had on the isle; I had a painful stitch in my side, which never left me; and when I slept in my wet bed, with the rain beating above and the mud oozing below me, it was to live over again in fancy the worst part of my adventures— to see the tower of Shaws lit by lightning (p. 152).

David is acutely aware of his hostile environment inflicting brutality upon his person, listing with excruciating detail the bodily disorders he has developed as an effect of his arduous journey. The reviewer asserts that the novel ‘operates outwith danger’, its hero never coming into ‘true harm’; in actuality, David’s body becomes the site of numerous traumas, deromanticising the dominant whimsical narrative of Jacobite adventures propagated by works such as Walter Scott’s *Waverley*. His haptic awareness viciously reminds him of the horrors he experienced on Erraid, whilst the torrent of rain transports him to the terrifying ‘tower of Shaws’. Landscape and history are intrinsically connected, further emphasising Stevenson’s intention of bringing light to Scotland’s bleak national history by entering his hero into an overpoweringly barren landscape and harsh climate.

Finally, the bleak atmosphere of *Kidnapped* is exacerbated by the colonial undercurrents of the novel. Despite the intrinsic connection between adventure and imperialism in the 1880s, the 1886 review disregards this context in its summary of David’s travels.⁸ Throughout the novel, the Highlands are visualised by Stevenson as a colonial space, and the traumatic markers of this process are present in the dress and behaviour of the persecuted natives. Barry Menikoff argues that behind *Kidnapped* stands:

⁷ Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle*, p. 131.

⁸ Oliver S. Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 18.

a political allegory of colonial dominance, of the subjugation of a native people by an alien and aggrandizing foreign culture.⁹

As a Lowlander, David more closely resembles the coloniser, rendering the lens in which we view the narrative complicated. The people of Mull's status as colonial subjects is made clear by their discordant appearances:

Some went bare, only for a hanging cloak or great-coat, and carried their trousers on their backs like a useless burthen: some had made an imitation of the tartan with little parti-coloured stripes patched together like an old wife's quilt; others, again, still wore the Highland philabeg, but by putting a few stitches between the legs transformed it into a pair of trousers like a Dutchman's. (p. 91)

Stevenson constructs his Highlanders as Others, exoticising their dress and tongue to create a people not dissimilar to the colonials subjects of distant lands. Assembling the fragments of their ruptured culture, the people of Mull attempt to preserve their history through material transformation. An endured trauma is evident in this process of patching and stitching, their crafty needlework acting to suture the wounds of their cultural oppression. Through the construction of the Highlanders as a colonial other, Stevenson asks his readers to acknowledge Scotland's bleak and bloody history, drawing attention to the cultural, physical and psychological persecution of Highlands after 1745.

Ultimately, the 1886 review's representation of *Kidnapped* as a picturesque and charming tale is wholly inaccurate; in reality, Stevenson's novel is intensely bleak, tracking a young boy's journey through hostile scenery as he struggles to endure the physical torment inflicted upon his body. Contrary to the assessment of the reviewer, the reader's sensibilities are indeed troubled as they encounter the formidable force of the natural world, Stevenson constructing a desolate landscape that reflects the tragic national history of the Highlands. In his construction of the Highlanders themselves, Stevenson unveils traumatised colonial subjects desperately attempting to preserve their fragmented culture; this diverges entirely from the reviewer's observation of the 'delights of Highland life'. In *Kidnapped*, Stevenson asked his readers to acknowledge and empathise with this painful episode of Scottish history; this is a plea that went unnoticed for the author of the 1886 review.

⁹ Barry Menikoff, *Narrating Scotland: The Imagination of Robert Louis Stevenson* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), p. 206.

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