

Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific



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Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession

ROSLYN JOLLY



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Robert Louis Stevenson's departure from Europe in 1887 coincided with a vocational crisis prompted by his father's death. Impatient with his established identity as a writer, Stevenson was eager to explore different ways of writing, at the same time that living in the Pacific stimulated a range of latent intellectual and political interests. Roslyn Jolly examines the crucial period from 1887 to 1894, focusing on the self-transformation wrought in Stevenson's Pacific travel-writing and political texts. Jolly shows how Stevenson's desire to understand unfamiliar Polynesian and Micronesian cultures, and to record and intervene in the politics of Samoa, gave him opportunities to use his legal education, pursue his interest in historiography, and experiment with anthropology and journalism. Thus as his geographical and cultural horizons expanded, Stevenson's professional sphere enlarged as well, stretching the category of authorship in which his successes as a novelist had placed him. Rather than enhancing his stature as a popular writer, however, Stevenson's experiments with new styles and genres, and the Pacific subject matter of his later works, were resisted by his readers. Jolly's analysis of contemporary responses to Stevenson's writing, gleaned from an extensive collection of reviews, many of which are not readily available, provides fascinating insights into the interests, obsessions, and resistances of Victorian readers. As Stevenson sought to escape the vocational straightjacket that confined him, his readers just as strenuously expressed their loyalty to outmoded images of Stevenson the author, and their distrust of the new guises in which he presented himself.

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