

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850 and went to France with his parents when he was 13 years old. It was to be the first of many visits and the beginning of a long-standing love-affair with that country.

His book, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* was written from diaries kept whilst on a walking tour in September 1878. Missing Fanny Osbourne, an American, ten years his senior, with whom he had formed a deep attachment (she had returned to California in an attempt to sort out her personal entanglements), he decided to embark on this lone expedition through the wild countryside of the Cévennes. On the trip he kept a daily journal which he usually wrote first thing in the morning, as he said, when he was fresh, or, sometimes, in an inn at lunchtime. From the outset, he had every intention of publishing the diary. It was, in fact, published the next year in 1879, entitled *The Cévennes Journal*.

Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes is a charming account of this Romantic's walk, through the rugged countryside, in all weathers, accompanied by his obstinate donkey, Modestine. Indeed, Modestine has such a character that she has become one of literature's famous underdog companions along with Sancho Panza and many others. It is as though in Robert Louis Stevenson's eyes she becomes a surrogate for all life's ills.

The attention to detail vividly brings to life the quiet, every-day scenes of pastoral France and illuminates not only Robert Louis Stevenson's love of France but his love/hate relationship with Scotland. We see this through his constant comparisons of the scenery and the climate and through the pleasure he shows when reminded of things Scottish, as when he observes a gentle, devout community pouring out of church one Sunday morning.

Religion plays an important part in his thoughts on this walk. He is fascinated by the French Protestant rebels of the region – the Camisards – who remind him of the stories that his nanny used to tell him about the Scottish Covenanters. And he shows his underlying loyalty to the Presbyterian tradition, despite his open-mindedness, as illustrated in his description of the Trappist monastery.

Surprisingly, throughout his twelve day walk, Robert Louis Stevenson never mentions Fanny. However, we read of his appreciation of beautiful women, we share his love of sleeping under the stars and we luxuriate with him in his sense of freedom.

This short account by the author of, amongst others, *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*, reveals the passionate, impulsive and yet determined and loyal side of Robert Louis Stevenson's nature. His dedication of *Travels with a Donkey* to Sidney Colvin, an eminent man of letters, illustrates this:

My Dear Sidney Colvin,

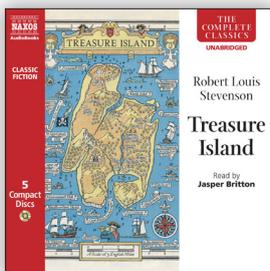
The journey which this little book is to describe was very agreeable and fortunate for me. After an uncouth beginning, I had the best of luck to the end. But we are all travellers in what John Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world – all, too, travellers with a donkey; and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel, indeed, to find them. They are the end and the reward of life. They keep us worthy of ourselves; and, when we are alone, we are only nearer to the absent.

Every book is, in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning; they find private messages, assurances of love, and expressions of gratitude dropped for them in every corner. The public is but a generous patron who defrays the postage. Yet though the letter is directed to all, we have an old and kindly custom of addressing it on the outside to one. Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends? And so, my dear Sidney Colvin, it is with pride that I sign myself affectionately yours,

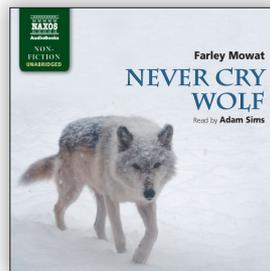
R.L.S.

Notes by Jan Fielden

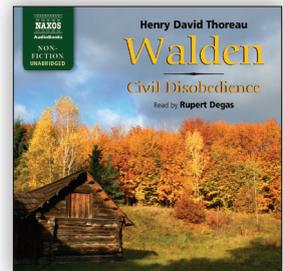
Other works on Naxos AudioBooks



Robert Louis Stevenson
Treasure Island
Read by Jasper Britton



Farley Mowat
Never Cry Wolf
Read by Adam Sims



Henry David Thoreau
Walden, and Civil Disobedience
Read by Rupert Degas