

**“This Was the World, and I Was King¹”:
Robert Louis Stevenson, Nature, and undermining the Imperial Adventure Narrative**

There is perhaps no author more closely associated with pirates and the imperial adventure narrative than Robert Louis Stevenson, whose literary reputation is built on such works as *Treasure Island* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*. While *Treasure Island* and poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses* deal with pirates, buried treasure and adventure, it is a mistake to believe that Stevenson's works glorified the British Empire and its conquests. Instead, his negative construction of the island in *Treasure Island* and his appropriation of imperialist imagery to create a redefined idea of childhood and empire in *A Child's Garden of Verses* are proof that he used the imperial narrative of pirates and buried treasure to question the ethics of the imperial enterprise.

Through his depictions of the landscape in *Treasure Island* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Robert Louis Stevenson denounces British imperialism as common piracy disguised by romantic language. Using the theoretically respectable English characters Squire Trelawney and Dr. Livesey, Stevenson dashes the idea of imperialism as a noble enterprise by associating their rhetoric about treasure-hunting with naïveté and blatant propaganda. The negative experience of the island enables Stevenson to demonstrate that British imperialists are no better than pirates, since both groups pillage the island of its treasure, though they use different language to describe their quest.

Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* – a collection of poetry written after *Treasure Island*—combines the language of the imperial narrative with children's imaginative play to teach readers about the glories of nature and to undermine the ideal of British imperialism. In his poems, children still go adventuring and conquering, but their kingdoms are the woods and lakes and their colonized natives are birds and fish. Total immersion in nature allows the protagonist to have complete imaginative freedom in play without any negative effects. This essay will explore ways in which Stevenson's depictions of nature and landscape in *A Child's Garden of Verses* to define Scottish childhood and undermine the romantic imperial narrative of pirates and adventure that is celebrated in the works of literary contemporaries such as R.M. Ballantyne and H. Rider Haggard.

¹ The title of this dissertation is taken from Stevenson's poem “My Kingdom” in *A Child's Garden of Verses*.