

Kidnapped

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'Treasure Island' was along with 'Robinson Crusoe' my favorite book as a child. But if it made such a deep impression on me¹ would not other books by Stevenson make a similar impact? For some reason as a child I never came across any other of Stevenson's books for boys, as a father I did get a Swedish translation of 'Kidnapped' and I have some vague memory of having read it or parts thereof for my son, but nothing specific stuck in memory. Hardly promising. And so now I made a renewed attempt. How did it go?

Not very well, I must admit. It took some time to get into the book, in spite of its 'Gothic' beginnings encountering the dilapidated mansion of an uncle, whose very existence the recently orphaned young man - Daniel Balfour - had only recently become privy to. Otherwise the setting in the aftermath of the last attempt to re-institute the Stewarts (which ended in the debacle of Culloden in 1745²) is rather promising. There are echoes of 'Treasure Island' written three years earlier. The encounter with the sea and a bristling port, as well as a friendly captain, which makes you think of John Silver. Then of course a sea voyage, but under very different circumstances, and of course the overhearing the plot to rob and kill Breck initiated by the captain (as in the apple barrel on the voyage out) and the subsequent shoot out with the captain and the crew which makes you think of the storming of the fort in Treasure Island. 'Kidnapped' relies more than the former book on quirks of the plot, such that of Alan Breck's miraculous rescue from a rammed boat onto the bowsprit, the shoot-out with the crew and the truce that followed, as well as some other coincidences. The main action in 'Kidnapped' is the extended escape through the inhospitable wilderness of the Highlands, patrolled by read-coated soldiers representing the Hanoverian king. In the view of the authorities the likes of Alan Breck are outlaws and in modern terminology terrorists, this of course makes for some interesting parallels with modern life. The Lowlander David, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is after the eventual shipwreck washed ashore an island having to fend for himself, which he does but poorly (only through the friendly advice of some Gaelic fisherman is he alerted to the possibility of fording the separating divide of the island from the mainland). Had he not, more or less accidentally teamed up with Breck in connection with the assassination of one of the Kings Men - belonging to the loyal clan Campbell - an assassination of which he becomes the prime suspect liable to be hanged for, he would have been lost. Now follows a prolonged odyssey, aided by Highlanders loyal to the Stewarts, interrupted by spells of sickness, that eventually leads to the return and the successful appropriation of the protagonists rightful inheritance. An ending which is rather flat and anti-climactic, (and hence would later on be followed by not such a successful sequel). The tedium of

¹ When I at sixteen was to write an essay on a character in a book for graduation I chose John Silver and 'Treasure Island'

² The story is set in 1751

the long escape is relieved by a quarrel between the protagonist and the outlaw Alan, not without some psychological truth. After an outburst by the young Balfour, he realizes that an apology would be pointless, but an appeal for help and an open avowal of his precarious position would be far more effective in serving that purpose. When they finally make up, the outlaw notes that while he before thought he liked his young progress because they never quarreled, now he realized after their quarrel that he liked him even better for it. The pairing of the two characters is a bit incongruous, after all Balfour is ostensible a Lowlander and loyal subject of the King, referred derogatorily by Breck as a 'Whig', and Breck a devoted Stewart, or 'Jacobite', serving as a liaison between the loyal Stewart clan and their clan leader in French exile³.

It is interesting to note that while the 'Treasure Island' was based on imagination alone, depicting places and circumstances of which Stevenson had little first hand knowledge, in 'Kidnapped' he finds himself on much more familiar terrain, being a Scotsman himself, be it of the Lowland variety. The novel is also based on historical facts, such as the assassination, and historical characters, such as Alan Breck. Thus the conditions for a more realistic, (and hence captivating?) story are much stronger, yet 'Treasure Island' is far more fascinating and engaging.

One may learn a little Scottish history, or at least have that one knows revived, but from a Scottish angle, the most satisfying are the various Scottish words, a fair amount shared with Scandinavia (such as bairn (barn), keek (kik) muckle (mycket)) and not to be found in Standard English, which Stevenson peppers his dialogues with.

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³ The reason for their pair-up was the young Balfour's spontaneous sympathy for Breck when over-hearing the plot to murder him, at the time utterly ignorant of his politics.