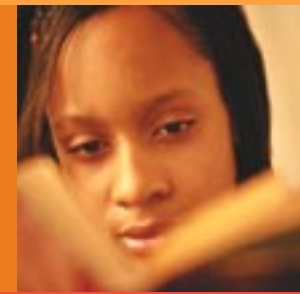




Bristol 2008
european capital of culture bid



Fifteen men on the dead man's chest –
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest –
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!

The Bristol Reading Group 2003

A Guide To *Treasure Island*

Melanie Kelly



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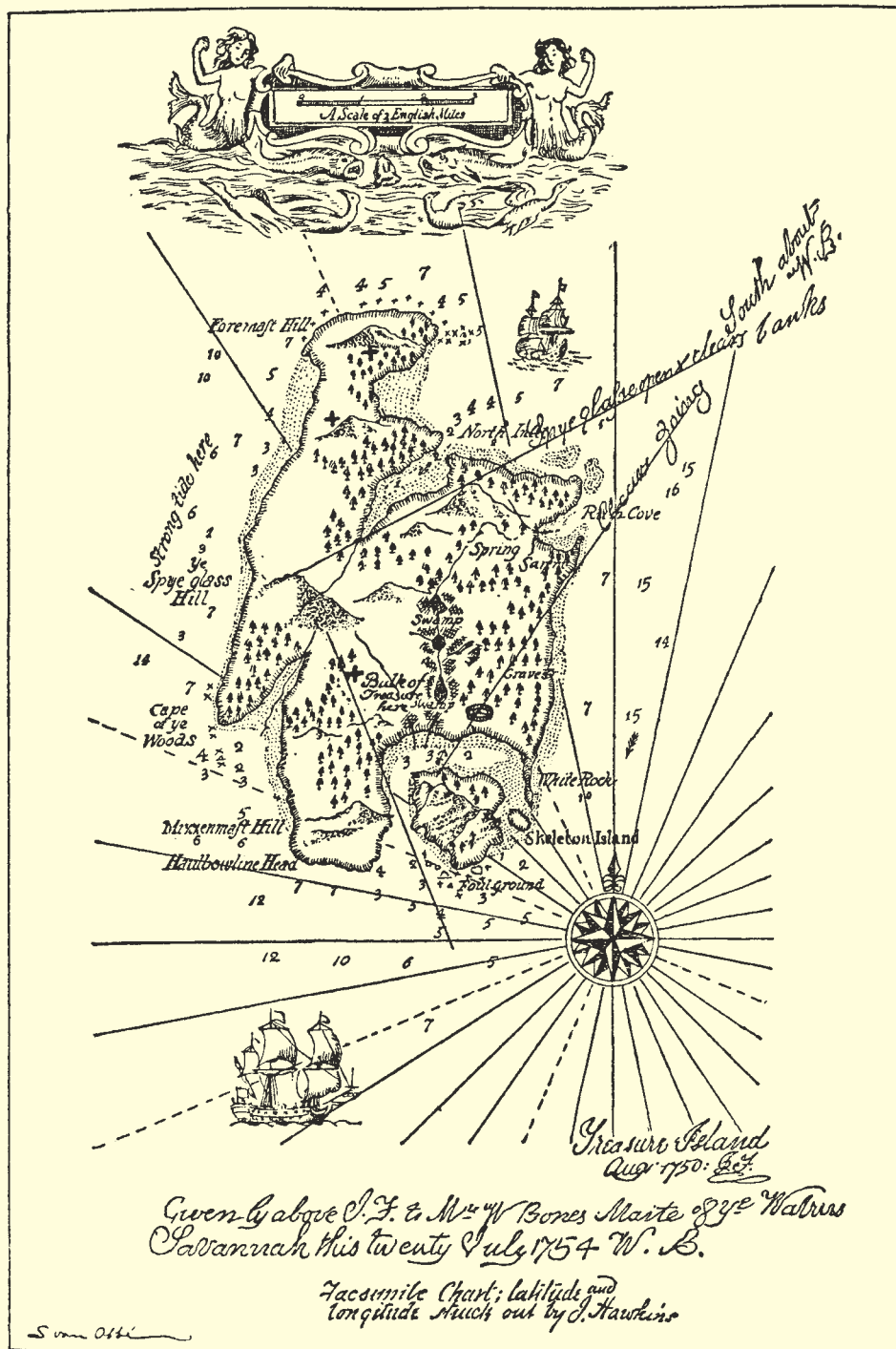




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Opposite:
Long John Silver by Mervyn Peake



Introduction

In 1998 in Seattle a public librarian had the idea of encouraging everyone in the city to read the same book at the same time to bring people together and raise standards of literacy. *If All Seattle Read the Same Book* has now become an annual event with groups of people meeting in schools, homes, offices, churches, libraries, coffee shops and bookstores to discuss that year's selection. Inspired by the Seattle experience, *One Book, One Chicago* was launched in 2001 with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The book was chosen by a group of librarians from suggestions sent in by local residents.

Bristol now launches its own citywide reading group with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, a book with a Bristol association as key scenes are based in the city's docks. The book appeals to both children and adults. It is a rattling good yarn. And it remains great literature.

Bristol-based author and poet Helen Dunmore, winner of the first Orange Prize for Fiction, says:

The Treasure Island project is a wonderful idea. I can't think of a better book to choose. It's a superb, gripping story which appeals to readers of all ages, and has compelling links with Bristol's past.

Opposite:
Captain Flint's map

The Bristol Reading Group has a simple mission: to encourage reading and writing by the widest range of people in the city. This readers' guide will tell you about the life of Robert Louis Stevenson, the plot and characters of *Treasure Island*, and the historical background to the story. It includes information on the different editions of the book and on related resource material, and gives questions to use in group discussions and to think about while you read. Visit Bristol's *Treasure Island* website at www.bristol2008.com/treasureisland for further information and for details of the activities we have planned as part of the project.



Flint's gunner, Israel Hands

So.... read the book that all Bristol is talking about and join your family, friends, neighbours and fellow Bristolians in the discussions and events.



Billy Bones arrives at the 'Admiral Benbow' in *Treasure Island* (1920)

Treasure Island
Aug. 1750: G.F.



Treasure Island: the story

Jim Hawkins' parents kept the 'Admiral Benbow', an inn located on a quiet stretch of coastline near the Bristol road. One of their guests was a rough-mannered, down-at-heel old pirate named Captain Billy Bones who was fond of his rum, his songs and his bloodthirsty tales of the buccaneers. Every day he went down to the cove or up on the cliffs with his telescope, on the lookout for ships, and on his return to the inn he would always ask if any seafaring men had passed by. He also paid Jim to bring him news if he should see a one-legged seaman in the area. Jim later learned that Billy was being pursued by the remnants of Captain Flint's crew and that they were after Billy's sea-chest. Flint, now dead, was one of the cruellest and most feared of all the pirates.

One day Billy received the traditional pirates' summons, the black spot, from a malevolent blind pirate called Pew. Billy died from the shock. Jim and Mrs Hawkins searched Billy's sea-chest, looking for the money he owed them, and found a bag of coin and a bundle tied in oilcloth. Outside Jim heard the tapping of Pew's cane on the road and the rattle of the door. Pew went away to fetch the other pirates, and Jim and his mother escaped, taking the bundle and what few coins they could with them.

The pirate gang, led by Pew, turned the inn upside down, but they could not find what they were looking for. A lookout sent a signal that danger was approaching and Pew was abandoned as the men fled. He was killed beneath the galloping hooves of one of the horses belonging to the revenue officers. Jim went to see Dr Livesey, the local physician and magistrate, who was dining at the home of his friend Mr Trelawney, the squire. They opened the bundle to reveal Billy's account book and Flint's detailed map of the island on which he had buried his treasure.

Mr Trelawney travelled to Bristol where he bought a schooner called the *Hispaniola* and hired the men to sail her so they might



Jim Hawkins and Billy Bones



The death of Pew

Opposite: The frontispiece of the first edition



Jim meets Long John Silver

go in search of the booty. Jim was to be cabin-boy and Livesey the ship's doctor, and three of the squire's servants, Redruth, Joyce and Hunter, were to join them as well. The squire was particularly pleased to have made the acquaintance of Long John Silver, a one-legged seaman, who had recruited most of the crew and was to join them as cook.

Jim was amazed when he reached Bristol to see all the ships and activity at the dockside, and was excited at the prospect of going to sea. His first duty was to take a message to Silver at the dockside inn he owned, which was called the 'Spy-glass'. Jim was at first suspicious of Silver – could this be the one-legged seaman Billy Bones was so afraid of? – but he was soon convinced of Silver's honesty and found him a cheerful companion.

The ship set sail under the command of Captain Smollett and Jim was sent to work with Silver in the galley. One evening, towards the end of the voyage, Jim, hiding in an apple barrel, overheard Silver talking to a couple of the men and realised that most of the crew were pirates who planned to take the ship and the treasure, killing all who stood in their way. Silver was their leader. Jim told the doctor, squire and captain what he had heard.

The following day they reached Treasure Island and the captain decided to let the men go on shore. Silver left six of his men on board, while the rest set off in the boats. On an impulse, Jim joined them, running off into the trees alone as soon as they landed. While he was exploring he heard a terrible cry as the pirates killed one of the remaining honest seamen, Alan, and witnessed Silver kill Tom, another who had refused to join him.

Jim fled the scene and encountered a strange-looking man, dressed in rags. He was Ben Gunn, a pirate who had been marooned on the island three years before. Gunn had first come to the island as a member of Flint's crew. Later, sailing in another company,



Jim overhears the pirates' plot

Gunn had persuaded his fellow pirates to search for Flint's treasure. After 12 days his companions gave up and left Gunn behind. He asked Jim to put in a good word for him with the squire and told him he had a boat hidden nearby. Suddenly they heard cannon fire and a volley of small arms, and Jim saw the Union Jack flying above the trees.

Livesey had managed to leave the ship and get some supplies to Flint's old stockade on the island with the help of Joyce and Hunter. On his final trip he was accompanied by the squire, the captain, Redruth and one of the six crewmen, Abraham Gray, who had escaped from the others. Israel Hands, Flint's old gunner, fired a cannon at them from the ship, swamping their boat. They waded to shore and raced across the clearing to the stockade, exchanging fire with the pirates as they went. Redruth was mortally wounded. Having reached the safety of the block house, Smollett ran up the flag in defiance. Jim climbed in over the stockade wall and he told the others all about Ben Gunn.

The next morning, Silver appeared outside the stockade, accompanied by a pirate holding a white flag of truce. He had come to make a deal, but Smollett would not negotiate with mutineers. Silver swore that within the hour the captain and his party would either be dead or wish that they were. When the attack came, five of the pirates were killed, as were Joyce and Hunter. Smollett was wounded.

The pirates were driven off and later, after consulting with the captain and squire, Livesey went out to find Ben Gunn. Jim was fed up at being left behind and decided he would go out on his own, telling no one. He found Gunn's fragile boat and used it to reach the *Hispaniola* which he cut free, hoping she would drift out of reach of the pirates. Jim let himself back down into the boat, intending to return to the shore. To his dismay he found himself



Jim meets Ben Gunn

Abandoning the *Hispaniola*

being dragged out to sea. He lay down, certain he was close to death, and fell asleep.

When he awoke he was at the south-west end of the island and in front of him was the *Hispaniola*. It was soon evident that no one was steering her. The coracle was mown down and Jim had to leap onto the ship to avoid drowning. Once on deck he discovered one pirate, O'Brien, dead and another, Israel Hands, stabbed in the thigh. No one else was on board. Hands offered to help Jim sail the ship to safe anchorage, but no sooner were they at anchor than Hands attacked Jim. Jim climbed into the rigging and was pinned to the mast by Hands' knife. By luck, the pistols Jim was carrying went off in his hands and the pirate was killed.

Jim made his way back to the stockade, intending to surprise his friends. However, he heard Silver's parrot, Captain Flint, squawking and found he was now in the enemy's camp. He was swiftly captured. There were just six pirates remaining, one seriously wounded, but no sign of Smollett and the others.

The pirates had grown mutinous again and were all for killing Jim and deposing Silver. Jim heard that the previous day Livesey had offered the pirates access to the stockade, all its provisions and his services as a doctor if he and his party could go free. While the other pirates were holding council outside, Silver told Jim he had switched allegiances and was in with the squire as Livesey had secretly given him the map. The pirates returned, bearing the black spot, but Silver rallied them to him again, saying that Jim was a valuable hostage and producing the map as final proof of his superiority.

The following morning Livesey arrived to tend to those who were injured or coming down with fever. He treated Jim coolly at first until, in a private conversation, he heard what Jim had done with the ship. Silver also spoke to the doctor out of earshot of the others,

saying he was now on their side and would look after Jim. Before he left, Livesey warned Silver to watch out when he reached the point where the treasure had been buried.

The pirates set off following the map, Silver pulling Jim behind him with a rope. They were shocked to find Flint had left a skeleton as a marker on the trail and, superstitious by nature, they began to talk in whispers of spirits that walked. They hurried on and as they drew nearer to the treasure it seemed to Jim that Silver had forgotten his promise and the doctor's warning, and to have become a ruthless pirate once more.

However, the pirates found someone had beaten them to it, leaving nothing behind of the treasure trove but a large hole and a two-guinea piece. Shots rang out and two pirates were killed. Silver stayed with Jim while the three remaining pirates fled as Livesey, Gray and Gunn stepped out from their hiding place. Jim learned how Gunn had finally located the treasure and had carried it away to his cave two months before. It was there that Livesey had led the others after making his pact with Silver. The doctor destroyed one of the two boats left by the pirates and, in the other, the group rowed to where the squire and captain awaited them. On the way they came upon the *Hispaniola*, drifting free again, and made her secure.

Over the next three days, most of the treasure was loaded into the ship and then, leaving a stock of provisions behind for the marooned pirates, the party set sail for the nearest port in Spanish America where they might pick up supplies and a fresh crew. While they were in port, Silver made off with a bag of coin and was neither seen nor heard of again.



Jim pursued by Israel Hands



The skeleton compass

Robert Louis Stevenson and *Treasure Island*



Portrait of Stevenson by
W B Richmond (1887)



Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850. His father came from four generations of lighthouse engineers and it was assumed that Stevenson would follow in the family tradition. He enrolled at Edinburgh University in 1867 to study engineering but later switched to the law. He never entered the profession, however, as by the time he had 'passed advocate' in 1875 he knew that he wanted to be a writer. Thus he embarked on a financially precarious but personally rewarding career, writing in a variety of genres including plays, poems, essays, reportage, romances, action stories, fantasies and fables.

In France in 1876, Stevenson met the woman who would be his future wife, the American Fanny Osbourne. His parents and many of his friends were scandalised by their association as she was ten years his senior and already married. In 1879, Fanny asked Stevenson to join her in Monterey and the following year, having obtained her divorce, the two were wed. His book *The Amateur Emigrant* (1895) recalls his experiences travelling to California and *The Silverado Squatters* (1883) tells of his honeymoon trip. The couple returned to Europe and, after much travelling, eventually settled in Bournemouth.

Stevenson's first book was *An Inland Voyage* (1878), an account of a journey he took by canoe from Antwerp to northern France. This was followed by another travelogue, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, in 1879. These books established his reputation as a charming, debonair bohemian. Much of his travelling was necessitated by his ill health as he suffered from bronchial problems and sought more amenable climates to relieve the discomfort. However, he also enjoyed the spirit of adventure and seeing new places.

His first published fictional work was the story 'A Lodging for the Night' (1877) and his first short story collection was *New Arabian*



Robert Louis Stevenson

Nights (1882). Stevenson continued to write short stories throughout his life, including the collections *The Merry Men and Other Tales and Fables* (1887) and *Island Nights' Entertainments* (1893). The writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle rated Stevenson's short stories highly. He wrote:

[Stevenson's] short stories are certain to retain their position in English literature. His serious rivals are few indeed. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Stevenson; those are the three...who are the greatest exponents of the short story in our language.

Treasure Island (1883) was Stevenson's first full-length fictional narrative. It was originally published in serial form in *Young Folks* magazine, under the pseudonym of 'Captain George North'. Its origins lay in a family holiday spent in the Scottish Highlands during the summer of 1881. The miserable weather kept the family indoors, and Stevenson and his stepson Lloyd amused themselves drawing and annotating a treasure map of an imaginary island. While at their rented cottage in Braemar, Stevenson began to write a story based around the map, as he described later in 'My First Book' (1894):

....as I pored upon my map "Treasure Island", the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of flat projection.

Stevenson tested out each chapter on Lloyd, to whom the book would later be dedicated, and his father, who provided the idea of the apple barrel and the inventory of Billy Bones' sea-chest.

The poet W E Henley, Stevenson's temperamental friend, is credited with being the inspiration behind the sea cook Long John Silver, a character similarly missing one foot and having a domineering

personality. Stevenson later wrote:

... I had an idea for John Silver from which I promised myself funds of entertainment; to take an admired friend of mine... to deprive him of all his finer qualities and higher graces of temperament, to leave him with nothing but his strength, his courage, his quickness, and his magnificent geniality, and to try to express these in terms of the culture of a raw tarpaulin.

In creating Silver, Stevenson said he wanted to capture the 'maimed strength and masterfulness' of Henley. The book was originally to be called *The Sea Cook* as, aside from Jim Hawkins, Silver is the central figure in the narrative and the most memorable character. The name of John Silver is thought to have come from a man living near Braemar at the time.

In writing *Treasure Island* Stevenson readily acknowledged that he was writing in the tradition of Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *The King of Pirates* (1720). Another of Stevenson's literary heroes was Edgar Allan Poe and it was from reading Poe's story of buried pirate treasure, 'The Gold Bug' (1843), that Stevenson may have conceived the image of the skeleton found on the trail in *Treasure Island*. The story has a Bristol connection as it was based on the journal of Llewellyn Penrose, a seaman whose final years were spent in the Merchant Seamen's Almshouse in King Street. His journal was published in the early nineteenth century with illustrations by the Bristol artists Nicholas Pocock and Edward Bird.

Stevenson also greatly admired the writer Washington Irving who, like him, had had a passion for travel and voyages of discovery. Irving's story 'Wolfert Webber, or Golden Dreams' from the second volume of his *Tales of a Traveller* (1824) is thought to have been particularly influential on *Treasure Island* as it introduces a character similar to that of Billy Bones. Stevenson heard of Dead Man's Chest from a Charles Kingsley piece called *At Last: A Christmas in the*



Long John Silver and
Captain Flint



The old salts

West Indies (1871): the song is based on the legend of the pirate Blackbeard marooning 15 of his crew in the Virgin Islands. Another source of inspiration was Captain Johnson's *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, published in 1724.

The first of 17 instalments of *Treasure Island* appeared in October 1881, and is generally thought to have been received with little enthusiasm by the magazine's readers. In his biography of Stevenson, James Pope Hennessy describes how this was put to the test:

...part of the paper was devoted to Question and Answers, a correspondence column in which the boy and girl readers would sign their inquiries under pseudonyms taken from the current serials in the magazine. Fanny writes that she and Louis looked in vain for the names of Jim Hawkins or John Silver.

In addition, the circulation figures for the magazine did not increase during the period of the serialisation, normally proof of a successful story.

Writing in 1911, the critic Richard Middleton wondered why children – particularly boys – might have failed to appreciate *Treasure Island* on its first outing. He concluded that Jim Hawkins was perhaps insufficiently heroic as 'his splendid achievements are due to luck rather than judgment, and he emerges from his adventures without a halo'. In addition, Silver was perhaps insufficiently villainous as 'he achieved by guile the ends that a proper pirate captain would have attained by force'. As an alternative, the story of Captain Flint might have been 'the book that a healthy-minded, blood-thirsty boy would wish to read'.

The work was also at first dismissed by some of Stevenson's literary friends. However, when a revised version came out in book form in 1883, it found its literary and popular audience and

marked a significant breakthrough for the author. The writer J M Barrie remarked: 'Over *Treasure Island* I let my fire die in winter without knowing I was freezing.' It was followed by other works for children which have since enjoyed an adult appeal. These include *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), *Kidnapped* (1886) and *The Black Arrow* (1888).

In 1887, on the advice of his doctors, Stevenson left England, going first to the USA and then in 1888 setting off with his extended family to explore the Pacific, using the money he had inherited from the recent death of his father. In 1889 they arrived at the port of Apia in the Samoan islands where they built what would be Stevenson's final home. The novel *The Master of Ballantrae*, which features another of his 'Glittering Scoundrels', was published in book form the following year.

Stevenson's voluntary exile fired his imagination and, for a time, renewed his health, reinvigorating his writing. He became known among the Samoans as Tusitala or the Teller of Tales. He died in December 1894 and was buried on Mount Vaea. On his gravestone were inscribed the words of his poem 'Requiem':

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And laid me down with a will.*

*This be the verse that you 'grave for me:
Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

At the time of his death and in the years immediately following, his reputation as a writer was high and he could count Henry James, Gerald Manley Hopkins, G K Chesterton and Mark Twain among



The Stevenson household in Samoa

his many admirers. John Galsworthy wrote of him:

...compare with his novels all the romantic novels written since...and you will see how high he stands. Next to Dumas, he is the best of all romantic novelists [and] of British nineteenth century writers, he will live longer than any except Dickens.

As well as appreciating the quality of his writing, the public was fascinated by the romantic image of the pale invalid voyaging to exotic climes.

As the twentieth century progressed, critical opinion changed and Stevenson was increasingly dismissed as a lightweight, old-fashioned and marginal figure in the British literary canon. The writer Lisa St Aubin de Terán suggests why Stevenson was a particular challenge for academic critics. She writes:

...the cliff-hanging and the spell-binding, the banging of guns and the bantering with bandits, the sheer serial-worthy excitement of the tale has led us in and out of the magic box before criticism has had time to wipe its hands and cough.

Stevenson himself appeared not to take his writing seriously and had said 'Fiction is to grown men what play is to the child'. He was also, in some minds, too closely associated with the Victorian imperialism that had led Britain into the horrors of the First World War.

However, in the second half of the century Stevenson was once again acknowledged as one of the most imaginative, talented and perceptive of writers. Italian academic Richard Ambrosini has said that what was particularly impressive about Stevenson was his 'unique ability to combine the art of writing and the pleasure of reading'. Jorge Luis Borges, William Golding, Vladimir Nabokov and Italo Calvino were among Stevenson's latter-day supporters

and he is now admired by such authors as Donna Tartt, Justin Cartwright and P D James, who says that *Treasure Island* is her favourite book. Writer Michael Morpurgo wrote in the foreword to the Kingfisher edition of *Treasure Island* (2001):

It's the one book I should love to have written myself. But ... although I hope I might have told the tale well enough, Stevenson told it wonderfully, beautifully, poetically. For Robert Louis Stevenson wasn't just a fine storyteller – he was one of the greatest of writers, and, to my mind, Treasure Island is the most masterly of all his masterpieces.

The Readers' Encyclopedia says that 'his work is marked by his power of invention, his command of horror and the supernatural, and the psychological depth which he was able to bring to romance'. *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature* says that although he is most closely associated with adventure stories for younger readers, at which he has few rivals, he also 'has much to offer adult readers, who would be well rewarded for getting to know him better'.

The Bristol Reading Group hopes the *Treasure Island* project will introduce Stevenson to new readers as well as reunite him with those who may have left him behind with childhood. It also embraces those who have already fallen under Stevenson's spell and never ceased to dwell there.



Photograph of Stevenson taken by Fanny





Principal Characters

Jim Hawkins is the main narrator of the book and it is through his eyes that we see the other characters. He does not describe himself or give his age but he is likely to be around 13 or 14 years old. He is an innkeeper's son from a quiet coastal hamlet who has seen little of the world until he is caught up in the adventure of pirates and hidden treasure.

He finds this new life exciting and marvellous at times but he also experiences great fear and witnesses some terrible sights. He has to fight for his life and kills a man, disposing of the dead body of another. He takes many risks, sometimes foolish ones, though they usually turn out well in the end. He is at a transitional stage of growing up and, although he can still at times behave like a child, he rapidly matures. He proves to be brave and capable, and behaves with honour when courage is needed.

Long John Silver is the treacherous innkeeper and sea cook who is also a pirate captain. Silver is probably rivalled only by J M Barrie's Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* as the most famous of fictional pirates. He possesses both good humour and charm, and utter ruthlessness and brutality. Stevenson was interested in the inner conflict between good and evil, and this was a recurrent theme in his work. It was perhaps most dramatically expressed in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Silver is kind to Jim at times and sometimes cruel, but although Jim comes to distrust and even fear him he retains a grudging affection. Silver is more sensible than the other pirates and more open than the squire and his party in his greed for the treasure. He wants to plan for a comfortable future but has to go along with his crew's recklessness in order to retain command. He is physically powerful despite his amputated leg.

Dr Livesey is the doctor and local magistrate who is first encountered standing up to Billy Bones. He is fair minded, intelligent and composed, and acts with great professionalism. He tends to the pirates and

Opposite: Jim in Pew's grip
by Mervyn Peake

leaves supplies for those who are marooned even though he disapproves of their way of life. He believes in the law, science and duty. He proves a great asset on the island because it is he who finds the stockade and loads the stores, and he is the one to rendezvous with Ben Gunn. He narrates a section of the book to explain what happened to the rest of the party when Jim went ashore.

Mr Trelawney is the squire and sponsor of the treasure hunt. Unlike his friend Dr Livesey he is a blabbermouth and a fool with no sense of responsibility for the danger that lies ahead for his friends, even though he is well travelled. It is all rather a game to him which allows him to dress up and have some fun. It is his gullibility and lack of perception that allows Silver to get his pirates on board the ship. However, once he realises he is in the wrong he knuckles down to business and his skill with a gun is invaluable during a fight. He believes in tradition and the superiority of the Englishman.

Captain Smollett is the commander of the vessel. At first only Dr Livesey, the most perceptive of the group, appreciates that he is a highly capable man; the squire and Jim are put off by his stiffness and lack of warmth. The captain is brave and defiant, and believes in honour, obedience and discipline.

Ben Gunn is the marooned pirate who helps Jim and the others. Although, as would be expected, he is somewhat crazed following his years alone and at times is rather a comical character, he also demonstrates great cunning and agility, and a skill for survival. The other pirates had always thought him an idiot, but he still outwits them. He is a little childlike in his behaviour, and certainly Jim seems more mature than him, and he soon loses all his money once they return home. Gunn is reminiscent of the true-life figure Alexander Selkirk who in 1704 had been abandoned on an island by his captain during a privateering venture. He was found in 1709 by the Bristol privateer Woodes Rogers and possibly served as an inspiration for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.



Ben Gunn

Charles Ogle as Silver in *Treasure Island* (1920)



Historical Background

The port of Bristol

In *Treasure Island*, the *Hispaniola* sets sail from Bristol and Stevenson provides a wonderful description of life on the quayside in the eighteenth century (we do not have a specific date for the action). The scene is viewed through the eyes of Jim Hawkins who has lived all his life by a peaceful cove in the country and never visited a city before.

Mr Trelawney had taken up his residence at an inn far down the docks, to superintend the work upon the schooner. Thither we had now to walk, and our way, to my great delight, lay along the quays and beside the great multitude of ships of all sizes and rigs and nations. In one, sailors were singing at their work; in another, there were men aloft, high over my head, hanging to threads that seemed no thicker than a spider's. Though I had lived by the shore all my life, I seemed never to have been near the sea till then. The smell of tar and salt was something new. I saw the most wonderful figureheads, that had all been far over the ocean. I saw, besides, many old sailors, with rings in their ears, and whiskers curled in ringlets, and tarry pigtails, and their swaggering, clumsy sea-walk; and if I had seen as many kings or archbishops I could not have been more delighted.

Bristol was then a major centre of trade and one of the leading English provincial cities, specialising in shipbuilding, tobacco and sugar. Between 1720 and the end of the century the population rose from around 25,000 to 70,000. From the 1730s until it was overtaken by Liverpool, Bristol was the country's main slaving port and the starting point of over 2,100 slaving voyages. Most of the city's prominent merchants were connected with this odious trade. The city has many public monuments to those who benefited from slavery, but until the opening of Pero's bridge in 1999 had nothing to mark all those thousands who suffered and died from it.

Opposite:
Jim and Silver in Bristol

A life at sea

As Bristol was a trading rather than naval port, most of its seamen served on merchant ships. Historian Jonathan Press describes life in the city streets at that time:

By the 1780s, a large part of central Bristol was the exclusive preserve of her seafaring community, and the streets and alleys around the Backs were thronged by the many seamen who inhabited the boarding-houses of King Street, Queen Street, Prince Street, Pipe Lane and Denmark Street. Some of the many public houses which flourished in this area are still in existence, notably the Llandoger Trow and the Seven Stars... Bristol's sailor town was emphatically not for the landsman, for it was the scene of frequent drunken brawls, and the unwary landlubber or even the "outlandish" seaman, stood a good chance of being knocked on the head and robbed. Crimping, too, came early to Bristol, and many crews were assembled from the unwary customers of the public houses and boarding houses...

('Crimping' means tricking someone into signing on as a merchant seaman, usually by making them drunk or getting them into debt.)

Like the pirates in *Treasure Island*, many of Bristol's seamen had spent all their hard-earned money through carousing within weeks of landing on shore, forcing them to go back to sea again. Many ended their days supported by the Hospital Fund to which all seamen contributed.

During the eighteenth century, a Bristol seaman on a long haul voyage was likely to earn around 25 to 30 shillings a month. He would be provided with all his food for the duration of the trip and, although his diet may seem deficient in vitamins and monotonous by modern standards, it was as good as, if not better than, what his contemporaries had on land. The crew of the *Hispaniola* are depicted as faring particularly well with their regular servings of plum-duff and their barrel of fresh apples.

The most precarious occupation for a merchant seaman was serving on a slaving ship, as he stood a good chance of catching fever off the African coast and being abandoned by the captain once he reached the West Indies to save on the company's wage bill. It was for this reason that some owners and officers lied about the route and cargo until the crew was recruited, the ship had left Bristol behind and there was no turning back. A round trip for a slaver could take eleven months, though the actual time spent at sea was far less.

Fatalities and serious injury occurred on any voyage and one of the most hazardous tasks was handling the sails, particularly in heavy seas. Complicated fractures or infected limbs were usually treated with amputation and Stevenson may have known that disabled seamen were often offered the position of cook, just like Silver. Most crew members were under 30 years old as the rheumatism, arthritis and consumption they were prone to meant few could carry on working into middle age.



Privateers



The Southwell Frigate 'Tradeing on ye coast of Africa' by Nicholas Pocock (c1760)

Privateering was another particularly dangerous occupation at sea. 'Privateer' refers to a ship that is privately owned and has been authorised to engage in naval warfare. The word is also used to refer to its company and crew. In his tally of the 88 Bristol ships lost while privateering during the Seven Years War (1756 – 1763) and the American War of Independence (1775 – 1783), Jonathan Press found that 27 were wrecked or foundered (many having suffered damage in action) and the rest taken by the enemy.

Among the most famous British privateers were Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and Sir Henry Morgan. Although for those under attack the mode of operation of the privateer was little different from that of a pirate ship, the crucial difference was that the privateer had government authorisation. However, this authorisation could be revoked if political allegiances changed and former national enemies became allies, and thus many privateers came home to find that they were pirates after all and liable for punishment.

In eighteenth-century Bristol, the most well known privateer was Woodes Rogers, a merchant with interests in the slave trade. Rogers was commissioned by a group of his fellow merchants to attack Spanish shipping off the Spanish American coast. He set out in 1708 on his ship *The Duke* from the Llandoger Trow accompanied by a sister ship, *The Duchess*. He returned in 1711, having circumnavigated the world, bearing bullion and precious stones from the ships and coastal towns he had ransacked. According to the *Bristol Times*, on his arrival he had to fight off both the East India Company, who tried to seize his goods, and the navy, who attempted to press gang his men. The sponsoring merchants doubled their original stake, making £50,000 on the venture, but Rogers only made £150 while his crew had to take their case to the House of Lords before they got their share of the booty.

Treasure Island
Aug. 1750: G.F.

Rogers published an account of his trip in 1712 called *A Cruising Voyage Around the World*. He later suffered serious debt and had to sell his house and estates. In 1717 he was appointed governor of the Bahamas on condition that he rid the area of pirates by offering pardons to those prepared to settle down to a law-abiding, tax-paying way of life. More than 2,000 men accepted his offer. Rogers died in 1732 in what some have considered mysterious circumstances, possibly the victim of poisoning. There is a plaque in Queen Square marking his former home.

Another notable West Country figure of the time was William Dampier, pilot of *The Duchess*. Before joining Rogers, Dampier had had an interesting life at sea. He served two stints in the Royal Navy, was a merchant seaman, a privateer, an explorer and for many years a buccaneer (the name given to pirates who operated in the Caribbean). His book *A New Voyage Around the World* (1697) not only recalled his buccaneering experience but also provided a fascinating insight into distant lands, native people, strange flora and fauna. Dampier always wrote detailed journals during his travels and in later years these proved invaluable reference material for other navigators. His second book *A Voyage to New Holland* (the name given to Australia at that time) was published in 1709 and told of how he and his crew were shipwrecked off Ascension Island during his second period of navy service. On his return to Britain he was court-martialled for losing his ship. Goldney Tower in Bristol, built by the merchant Thomas Goldney who funded Rogers' privateering, is said to be decorated with the shells Dampier brought back from the South Seas. His portrait now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London.



Top: Captain Woodes Rogers and his family by William Hogarth (1729)



Bottom: Portrait of William Dampier by Thomas Murray (1698)

Pirates

Although Stevenson had only encountered pirates in books, he provides a convincing portrayal of their cruelty, ignorance and treachery. According to historian David Cordingly, many of Stevenson's more fictional imaginings in *Treasure Island*, while having little basis in fact, have since entered pirate lore. He writes:

Stevenson linked pirates for ever with maps, black schooners, tropical islands, and one-legged seamen with parrots on their shoulders. The map with the cross marking the location of the buried treasure has become one of the most familiar piratical props...

The skull and crossbones was just one of many visual devices used to instil terror among those under attack, but it has since become known as the official pirate flag.

Cordingly also points out that it was household goods and equipment, rather than the more glamorous gold and jewels, which made up much of the pirates' stolen loot.

Real pirates were certainly interested in treasure, which was the motivating force behind most pirate raids, but they also needed food and drink as well as ropes and sails for their ships.

Pirates were not in a position to stop off and buy the essential supplies they needed in port.

Pirates were mainly professional seafarers and many were former merchant seamen who had joined up after their own ships had been taken. Their life on board was as physically arduous as for any crew at sea and for that reason the average age of a pirate in the eighteenth century was only 27. The majority of British pirates were London born, but several came from Bristol and the South West and most crews were multinational in make-up. A high proportion of Caribbean pirates were black men, but they were often used little better than slaves on board and risked being sold



Robert Newton and Bobby Driscoll in *Treasure Island* (1950)

on by their white shipmates when in port. A few pirates were women, including Mary Read and Anne Bonny who were found guilty of piracy in Jamaica in 1721 and only escaped execution because they were pregnant. Captains were elected to their post by the votes of the crew. There is no record of any eighteenth-century pirate being of aristocratic blood, although this had been known in previous times and has since become a popular image for fictional depictions.

One of the most notorious and barbarous of pirates is believed to have come from Bristol. Edward Teach, otherwise known as Blackbeard, is thought to have grown up outside the city's walls and, alongside the fictional Hook and Silver, it is his image that lives on as that of the typical pirate captain. A big, heavily bearded man, he is rumoured to have woven wicks laced with gunpowder into this hair and set them alight during battle. He wore a crimson coat, two swords at his waist, and bandoleers across his chest packed with pistols and knives.

Little is known of his origins but he is thought to have begun his brief piratical career around 1713 in the service of the pirate Benjamin Hornigold who, in 1716, gave him command of a captured vessel. Hornigold was among those who accepted Woodes Rogers' pardon in 1717, but Blackbeard refused. With his ship *Queen Anne's Revenge*, he continued to wreak havoc in the Caribbean before sailing north to Charleston, Carolina, which he blockaded for a week in 1718. Blackbeard sailed on up the coast towards Bathtown, Virginia. The province's governor ordered the Royal Navy to capture him and Blackbeard died in the ensuing bloody battle, his head carried back as proof of his death. Among his crew was one Israel Hands who was pardoned because he had been shot by Blackbeard. Hands was among those few who made their way back home to the West Country. Many of the others were hanged.



Edward Teach, alias 'Blackbeard'



Billy Bones

Discussion Topics

The following section is designed to encourage you to think about some of the issues relating to *Treasure Island*, its characters and plot, the way it was written, its historical background.



Perhaps the most memorable character in the book is the morally ambiguous Long John Silver. Which are his good qualities? Which are his bad? Look at passages when he changes his allegiance or his demeanour. What is the effect of this upon the other characters and upon the reader? Is he a sympathetic villain? Is he really the book's hero?



A biographer of Stevenson has described Silver as 'an untrustworthy surrogate father' for Jim Hawkins. How is this relationship portrayed? Are there other potential father figures for Jim? What guidance does Jim get from his mother and what can he learn from her own actions? Besides Silver, which other characters are unreliable or untrustworthy? How important is the nature of trust as a theme in the book? What do we also learn about the nature of authority?



The main narrator of the book is the boy Jim Hawkins. What does he learn from his experiences? Is he a convincing child in thought and deed? Is his narrative voice that of a child or an adult? Jim is the catalyst for many of the plot turns. Imagine what might have happened if he had acted differently at key moments.

What techniques does Stevenson use to portray his characters? Look particularly at the use of physical descriptions and speech. What other clues are we given? Are the characters individuals or representative of a type? Are they believable? Other than Jim, do we get any sense of their inner life or psychology?



What are the rewards the pirates expect to take from their way of life? Re-read the passages referring to the 'bad ends' many of them come to – the death of Captain Flint, the poverty of Pew and Billy Bones – and descriptions of the punishments that await them if caught. Is any hope offered them? Do they show remorse or regret for their actions? Does Stevenson make a moral judgement about them?



Stevenson's literary reputation suffered for many years because he was so closely associated with adventure stories for children. How do we judge what is good fiction? How does *Treasure Island* stand up against these criteria? Can something be of quality but also accessible and popular? Look at other examples of children's books that have been popular with all ages. What is it that makes them so appealing?



A biographer of Stevenson has said that 'there is no more spare flesh on *Treasure Island* than there was on its author'. How accurate is this verdict? Think about the structure of the narrative and its pacing, the information we are given, the descriptions. What more could have been added? What could have been taken away? How would this have changed the nature of the book?



Bibliography and Other Resources



There had been many fictional works about piracy prior to *Treasure Island* but, for David Cordingly, 'it was Robert Louis Stevenson who was to bring the distant world of pirates to life'. How does Stevenson achieve this effect? Think about the imagery, the characters, their actions, the use of speech. What is it that makes his depiction so convincing?



The voyagers set out from the port of Bristol. We see Bristol from the point of view of Jim. How does this influence the way in which it is depicted? How might other characters have described the scene? Re-read the description of the activity on the quayside and think about the waterfront of Bristol today. What might you draw upon to convey a sense of the place now?



What do we learn from the relationship of the squire to his servants about eighteenth-century society? Is Stevenson critical of the class system or does he take it as a given? What other clues are given about the way society was structured? How has this changed today? What elements of 'civilised society' do the pirates retain and how do they subvert them?



Mr Trelawney

This section provides guidance on the different editions of *Treasure Island* that are available, the audio and film versions, and related books and websites. A more detailed bibliography and resource guide is on our website at www.bristol2008.com/treasureisland.

There are many full-text editions of *Treasure Island* in print. Cheaper paperbacks include those published by Dover Thrift Editions, Penguin Popular Classics and Wordsworth Editions. Mid-price paperbacks generally come with introductions and notes. These include editions from Modern Library Classics, Oxford World's Classics, Penguin Classics and Scholastic Classics. Edinburgh University Press has published what they claim to be the definitive edition, based upon the 1883 original copy-text. There are also some attractive illustrated hardbacks available with illustrations by such eminent artists as Mervyn Peake and N C Wyeth.

For those not able to read the full text, there are abridged versions available including books from Evans Brothers, Ladybird Books and the Oxford Reading Tree series. Running Press has published a hardback abridged version with illustrations by N C Wyeth.

There are a number of audio versions of the book available on cassette or CD. Cover-to-Cover has an unabridged version on cassette. Abridged versions are available from Naxos, New Millennium Audio, Penguin and Puffin Books, among others. In the BBC Radio Collection there is a dramatised version starring Buster Merryfield, Jack Shepherd and Iain Cuthbertson. In 1973 there was a London stage version starring Bernard Miles and Spike Milligan, and the original soundtrack of this is available from Prestige Elite.

Over 20 films have been based on *Treasure Island*, the most recent of which is Disney's *Treasure Planet* released earlier this year. Some versions, including those from the silent era, are now lost but there are many still available for loan or purchase on DVD or video. These include the 1950 Disney version starring Bobby Driscoll and Robert

Newton, a Charlton Heston version from 1990 and *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996). Films have also been made from other books by Stevenson including *Kidnapped*, *The Black Arrow*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Body Snatcher* and stories from *The Suicide Club*.

Treasure Island has spawned sequels, prequels and guides for readers, and is covered in many biographies of Stevenson. There are "crammer"-type guides from Cliffsnotes and Sparks, for example, and Francis Bryan's recent book, *Jim Hawkins and the Curse of Treasure Island*, brings many of the familiar characters together again to retrieve the last of Flint's treasure. Among the biographies referred to in writing this readers' guide were Ian Bell's *Dreams of Exile*, Jenni Calder's *Robert Louis Stevenson: a life study* and James Pope Hennessy's *Robert Louis Stevenson*. Claire Harman, who has edited some of Stevenson's work, is currently writing a biography of him. Bella Bathurst's *The Lighthouse Stevensons* may also be of interest as it tells the fascinating story of the engineering feats of the Stevenson family.

For historical background on piracy, David Cordingly's *Life Among the Pirates: the romance and the reality* is an excellent source of information. The Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery sells several books on local history including Jonathan Press' *The Merchant Seamen of Bristol 1747 – 1789*.

There are many websites devoted to *Treasure Island*, Stevenson and piracy. They include *Dreamcatchers: Treasure Island* (www.dreamcatchers.net/treasure/index.html), *Pirates of the Spanish Main* (www.sonic.net/~press/), *ClassicNote on Treasure Island* (www.gradesaver.com/ClassicNotes/sources/treasure.html), and *The Robert Louis Stevenson Website* (http://www.westerni.unibg.it/siti_esterni/rls/rls.htm)

Much of Stevenson's work remains in print and you should check your library, bookshop or online bookstore for further details. There are also collected and selected editions available of his essays, letters, poems, shorter fiction and short stories.



Visual development artwork based on images of Bristol: *Treasure Planet* (2002)



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Long John Silver and crew from *Treasure Island* (1950)

