



## Classics in Short No.65: Kidnapped and Catriona

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**Brian Alderson** on Robert Louis Stevenson's **Kidnapped** and **Catriona**.

Lang Scots miles and a baubeejoe in an alley: the adventures of David Balfour in **Kidnapped** and **Catriona**?

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*Scotland and the Scots*

as a presence in children's literature are not so widely remarked as they deserve. Now though is an apposite time to do so as we stand between the three hundredth anniversary of the somewhat fragile Union and the five hundredth of the introduction of printing in that land (let's say nothing of current ministerial affairs). What better than to ask Robert Louis Stevenson to stand exemplar for the greatness of their contribution?

*Treasure Island*

is, I suppose, the children's book that comes immediately to mind when he is mentioned. But that has been explored in these columns before my time (**BfK** No.102) and anyway it is, in both its setting and its writing, more an English than a Scottish book. But **Kidnapped**, which followed it a few years later (both being initially serialized in **Young Folks** magazine) is Scottish to the core.

*That cliché is an apt one;*

just look at the geography. The story almost amounts to a circular tour of the country in a kind of race-game punctuated by episodes of fierce danger. There is no let up in the pace of the (often literal) plotting from David Balfour's initial encounter with his heinous Uncle Ebenezer at the House of Shaws to his triumphant return there at the finish. The kidnapping takes place on board the brig *Covenant* in the Firth of Forth; she is wrecked amid the Western Isles; and David makes an eventful journey back through the Highlands and the Highland Line to Edinburgh.

*Just look at the history.*

The adventure takes place in 1751, six years after Bonnie Prince Charlie's failed march upon the Southron folk. Divisions between the neighbouring countries are overlaid by those between religious factions, between Highland and Lowland, and not least between the Highland clans themselves. The potential for drama upon drama is served up to the novelist on a platter.

*And just look at the people.*

At every stage of David's journey Stevenson has him record with a fine precision both his own callow and stockish youthfulness and the succession of characters he encounters ? every one living, as it were, in his (and rarely her) own skin. All are imbued with attitudes and philosophies that derive from their Scottish or their Gaelic upbringing ? most of all the famous Alan Breck of the Highland Stewarts, liegeman to the King Over the Water and thus, through his

companionship with David, bringing peril to both of them as they are hunted across the landscape by redcoats and Campbells alike.

### *All these attributes*

give a striking authenticity to the book whose central quality is surely the register of its storytelling and the music of its varied dialogues, giving it a dramatic strength beyond the different splendours of **Treasure Island**. But that is also its self-imposed limitation. For, amongst those classes and communities today who demand a swift apprehension of what printed stories are saying, an author is bound to be suspect who asks them to have some notion of eighteenth-century political quarrels; and when that author adds to their difficulties by regularly proffering sentences like 'Ay, man, ye shall taigle many a weary foot, or we get clear!' he runs the risk of contumely. (Stevenson occasionally gives a footnote translation such as 'gleg' = 'brisk', but the excellent 'and hence out-of-print' World's Classics combined-edition of **Kidnapped** and **Catriona** supplies a glossary that runs to fourteen columns.)

### *Kidnapped*

thus becomes not just a classic but one that measures both readerly skills and readerly willingness to trust the author. When a **BfK** child commentator names it as a favourite book (see 'Reading in the Middle Years, **BfK** No.165), I nurture high hopes that Stevenson's art has overcome what may be a deterrent. But I also worry that the enjoyment may have come from some sanitised edition which deprives you of all that is essential, or even from such a travesty of his art as the recently published 'modern text edition' from Barrington Stoke, where 'text' is lost behind strip cartoons.

### *These misgivings*

are redoubled when one turns to **Catriona**, the sequel to **Kidnapped** and Stevenson's last completed novel. This too was serialized 'in the girls' magazine **Atalanta** 'a fact which strengthens a case that might be made for **Kidnapped** to be labelled a yarn for boys, while **Catriona** is a teenage romance. It is, to my mind, a far richer book than its predecessor, in part because, for the first time in his career, the author gave living breath not just to one female character 'the eponymous heroine' but to two, the second being the wonderfully self-possessed eldest daughter of Scotland's Lord Advocate (an historical figure) who plays matchmaker, while herself having feelings too for Mr Balfour of Shaws.

### *Approachable*

though these relationships are, the components of the book's plot are more complex. The story had its origins in Stevenson's desire to complete the story of Alan Breck's escape and to tie up other loose ends left dangling at the end of **Kidnapped**. But these matters begin by demanding a sympathetic understanding of the Caledonian legal and political toils in which David finds himself 'elements which the author handles with much subtlety' and they end with David's journeying to Holland where he meets with what for his strait-laced contemporaries would be a position full of compromise in his relationship with **Catriona**. The matter would be solved in an instant by an historian today and the couple would blithely have jumped into bed together (an event of which, one suspects, Alan Breck would have wholly approved). But the tension that arises through the several stigmas attaching to so easy a solution lends a strength to the emotional currents of the book that is now denied to our present liberated authors.

### *Catriona*

has never had the reputation of its forebear, exchanging that book's simple, picaresque form for what turns out to be a study from various angles of the devious and the true. But both books are cut from the same deeply-plaited Scottish cloth and are a gift not often matched by Sassenach looms.

[image:CLASS Main.JPG:left]The illustrations by Rowland Hilder are taken from the Everyman's Library Children's Classics edition of **Kidnapped**, 978 1 85715 929 5, £10.99 hbk.

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.



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