

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, FATHER DAMIEN, AND THE LEPERS OF MOLOKA'I

W. W. Buchanan*

'R.L.S.'. These familiar initials are, I suppose, the best beloved in recent literature, certainly they are the sweetest to me.
Sir James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937)

In a recent review on leprosy in the *Proceedings* the author R. St C. Barnetson opined that the disease was 'one of the few infectious diseases in which there is a reasonable potential of worldwide eradication within the next ten or so years'.¹ If this indeed is the case then, like smallpox, leprosy will only be of interest to medical historians. The history of leprosy must include the visit in 1899 of the Edinburgh-born writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) (Figure 1) to the leper colony on the small island of Moloka'i among the Hawaiian Islands.



FIGURE 1
Number 8, Howard Place, Edinburgh.
Robert Louis Stevenson's birthplace.

THE BLACK ARROW

Stevenson does not record what prompted him to visit the leper colony on Moloka'i, but maybe he wanted to see for himself the disease he wrote about in one of his novels, *The Black Arrow*.² Two boys, Dick and Matcham, are frightened by a leper:

Upon this path, stepping forth from the margin of the wood, a white figure now appeared. It paused a little and seemed to look about; and then, at a slow pace, and bent almost in double, it began to draw near across the heath. At every step the bell clanked. Face, it had none; a white hood, not even pierced with eyeholes, veiled the head; and as

the creature moved, it seemed to feel its way with the tapping of a stick. Fear fell upon the lads, as cold as death. 'A leper!' said Dick, hoarsely. 'His touch is death,' said Matcham. 'Let us run.' 'Not so,' returned Dick. 'See ye not? - he is stone blind. He guideth him with a staff. Let us lie still;...he will go by and hurt us not. Alas, poor soul, and we should rather pity him!'

The leper wore a hood (Figure 2) which the boys assumed was because he was blind and perhaps wished to cover his disfigurement. As he came close, Dick moaned with fear:

'the strength is gone out of me; my legs are like water.' Matcham urged Dick to kill him with his bow, which the latter firmly refused to do: 'would ye have me shoot upon a leper?' he cried. 'The hand would fail me.' The leper suddenly with a cry sprang from a bush and ran towards the lads who: ...shrieking aloud, separated and began to run different ways. But their horrible enemy fastened upon Matcham, ran him swiftly down and had him almost instantly a prisoner. The lad gave one scream that echoed high and far over the forest, he had one spasm of struggling, and then all his limbs relaxed, and he fell limp into his captor's arms. Dick heard the cry and turned. He saw Matcham fall; and on the instant his spirit and his strength revived. With a cry of pity and anger, he unslung and bent his arblast.[†] But ere he had time to shoot, the leper held up his hand. 'Hold your shot, Dickon!' cried a familiar voice. 'Hold your shot mad wag! Know ye not a friend?' And then lying down Matcham on the turf, he undid the hood from his face, and disclosed the features of Sir Daniel Brackley.



FIGURE 2
Illustration of the hooded figure posing
as a leper in Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*.

[†]Arblast or arbalest is a crossbow.

*Rheumatologist, Sir William Osler Health Institute,
Hamilton, Canada

Stevenson in this evocative scene is able to convey the fear that people had of leprosy, and why lepers were made to carry bells or clappers to make their presence known, to wear a yellow cross on their clothes, and have a long stick for reaching for alms or goods in public places.

The question is: how much did Stevenson know about leprosy at the time he wrote *The Black Arrow*? Had he in mind the famous watercolour by the Scottish artist Richard Cooper (circa 1705-1764) showing people retreating up steps to escape a leper, who is ringing his bell and has, as decreed, his long stick? In their haste to avoid contact an infant has been abandoned on the roadside (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3

The famous watercolour by the Scottish artist, Richard Cooper (circa 1705-1764) showing the fear people had of leprosy. In their haste to escape an infant has been left on the road.

Stevenson probably knew of the statement by a Franciscan monk of Carlisle in the 1329 *Lanerost Chronicle* to the effect that Robert I 'The Bruce', King of Scots (1274-1329) had leprosy: *mortuus est dominus Robertus de Brus, rex Scotiae, leprosus*. If he did know, he makes no comment on it, at least to my knowledge. However, the evidence that the king suffered from the disease has only been made in recent times from plaster casts of the skull* which were made when the king's tomb was opened in Dumfermline Abbey in 1819 (Figure 4).^{3,4} Although the poem *The Bruce* in 1375⁵ by John Barbour (circa 1320-1395), Archdeacon of Aberdeen, records that King Robert had an illness in his

*There are three plaster casts of the skull of Robert 'the Bruce'. One is in the Department of Anatomy at Edinburgh University, one in the Department of Anatomy at Glasgow University, and one in the home of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) at Abbotsford, Roxburghshire.



FIGURE 4

Plaster cast of the skull of King Robert I 'The Bruce'. The changes are classic of *fasces lepros*. Photograph of the cast in the Department of Anatomy at Glasgow University.

mid-thirties before the Battle of Inverurie in Aberdeenshire in 1307, and was unable to attend the wedding festivities of his son, King David II (1324-1371) after the treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton in 1328, there is no evidence that the affliction was leprosy. Although this poem would have been known to Stevenson, and perhaps also the handsome portrait by the Scottish artist George Jamesone (?-1644), there is no reason to believe that Stevenson would have known that Robert 'The Bruce' was a leper.

The lesson to be learnt from Stevenson's novel is that epidemics arouse a series of reactions and responses from society beyond the specifics of pathogen, place, or time,

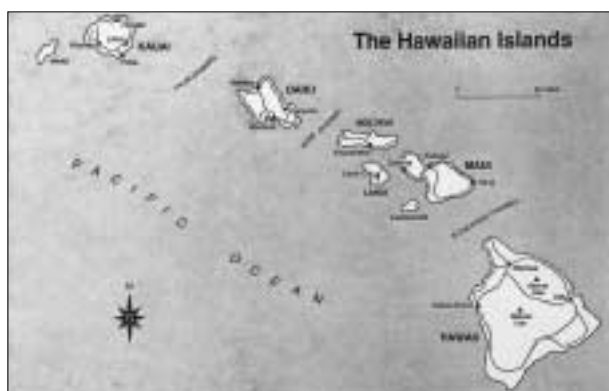


FIGURE 5

The Hawaiian Islands showing Moloka'i lying between the island of O'ahu in the north and Lana'i and Maui in the south.



FIGURE 6
Map of the islands of Moloka'i showing the Kalaupapa Peninsula on the northern shore.

whether that disease is bubonic plague or leprosy in medieval times or acquired immune deficiency (AIDS) today.⁶

It should be noted that *The Black Arrow* was first published in a magazine in 1883, and only later in 1888 in book form, a year prior to Stevenson's visit to Moloka'i.

MOLOKA'I

The island of Moloka'i (Figures 5 and 6) was always somewhat of a backwater. Indeed, to the early Hawaiians it appeared desiccated and inhospitable: the name in Polynesian is *molo* (barren) and *kai* (sea). It certainly appeared as such to Captain James Cook (1728-1779) who 'discovered' the island in November 1778. For years the island was labelled 'The Lonely Isle' or 'The Forgotten Isle', but this was to change when leprosy struck the Hawaiian Islands during the middle nineteenth century. Beginning in 1866 those suffering from the disease were banished to the wind-swept isolated Kalaupapa peninsula on the northern shore (Figures 6 and 7). Today the island airport is situated on the peninsula, and the area has been designated a provincial park and historical site. The island has a population of some 7,000 persons, largely as a result of Polynesians settling homesteads under the Hawaiian Act of 1921. Moloka'i has now become 'The Friendly Isle' with the legacy of Old Hawaii, the spirit of *aloha*. For a period American firms Dole and Del Monte produced pineapples in the richer stretches of the land, but shut down their operations in 1975 and 1982 respectively, in the face of competition from Asia. Hotels and residential accommodation have been built since the 1970s with a sprawling resort at the west end at Kaluakoi (Figure 6). Despite this the island of Moloka'i tends to be overlooked by holiday makers as they scurry between Maui and O'ahu (Figure 5).

THE LEPER COLONY

In a letter to his wife Fanny from Moloka'i in May 1889 Stevenson describes his arrival at the leper colony:

Presently we came up with the leper promontory: lowland, quite bare and bleak and harsh, a little town of wooden houses, two churches, a landing-stair, all unsightly, sour, northerly, lying athwart the sunrise, with the great wall of the *pali* cutting the world out on the south.^{7a}

There were two boats over to the island, the lepers being sent separately on one of the boats:

About a dozen, one poor child very horrid, one white man leaving a large grown family behind him in Honolulu.^{10a}

In the other boat Stevenson had the company of some nuns who were going to work at the colony:

My horror of the horrible is about my weakest point; but the moral loveliness at my elbow blotted all else out; and when I found that one of them was crying, poor soul, quietly under her veil, I cried a little myself; then I felt as right as a trivet, only a little crushed to be there so uselessly. I thought it was a sin and a shame she should feel unhappy; I turned to her, and said something like this: 'Ladies, God Himself is here to give you welcome. I'm sure it is good for me to be beside you; I hope it will be blessed to me; I thank you for myself and the good you do me.'

Soon the boat arrived:

At the landing stairs, and there a great crowd, hundreds of (God save us!) pantomime masks in poor human flesh...Every hand was offered: I had gloves, but I had made up my mind on the boat's voyage *not* to give my hand; that seemed less offensive than the gloves...To see these dread creatures smile and look happy was beautiful. On my way through Kalaupapa I was exchanging cheerful *alohas* with the patients coming galloping over on their horses; I was stopping to gossip at house-doors; I was happy, only ashamed of myself that I was here for no good. One woman was pretty and spoke good English, and was infinitely engaging and (in the old phrase) towardsly,* she thought I was the new white patient; and when she found I was only a visitor, a curious change came in her face and voice – the only sad thing, morally sad, I mean – that I met that morning. But for all that, they tell me none want to leave.^{7a}

The reason why lepers would be unhappy to leave the colony was, of course, that they knew only too well that their life would be even more miserable among the healthy



FIGURE 7
Moloka'i's isolated Kalaupapa Peninsula, backed by the world's highest sea cliffs.

**Pali*, short for *pali-bhasa*, is the language used in the canonical books of the Buddhists. I suspect the word has been misspelt and should be pale, meaning a palisade.

population. From Biblical times[†] they had been forced to live on the fringes of society, beyond contaminating contact, as unclean or even socially dead persons.[‡] It should be noted, however, that although leprosy was seen as marks of Cain, Ham, or the Devil, members of the church did offer compassionate care in the hospices and leprosaria.^{††}

In another letter to his life-long friend the essayist and art critic Sir Sidney Colvin (1845-1927) after he had returned to Honolulu in June 1889, Stevenson records:

I have seen sights that cannot be told, and heard stories that cannot be repeated: yet I never admired my poor race so much, nor (strange as it may seem) loved life more than in the settlement. A horror of moral beauty broods over the place... And this even though it was in great part Catholic, and my sympathies flew never with so much difficulty as towards Catholic virtues.^{7b}

Stevenson also records playing 'a game of croquet with seven leper girls (90 in the shade)^{7b} which he also records in a letter from Honolulu on June 13 1889 to his ageing ill friend, James Payn, of London *Cornhill Magazine* days.^{7c} Stevenson had heard his friend had become deaf, which accounts for his reference to deafness in his letter:

I am fresh now from the leper settlement of Moloka'i, playing croquet with seven leper girls, sitting and yarning with old, blind, leper beachcombers in the hospital, sickened with the spectacle of abhorrent suffering and deformation amongst the patients, touched to the heart by the sight of lovely and effective virtues in their helpers: no stranger time have I ever had, nor any so moving. I do not think it a little to be deaf,



FIGURE 8

Church know as Our Lady of Sorrows at Ualapu'e in the south east corner of the island, built by Father Damien in 1874. Father Damien also built two years later a tiny church, St Joseph Church, just west of the one known as Our Lady of Sorrows at Ualapu'e.

^{**}An archaic word meaning affable, friendly, or favourably disposed.

[†]There is no clear description of leprosy in the Bible as we know it today. References to changes in the skin being as white as snow is suggestive of psoriasis (*Exodus* Chapter IV verse 6; *Numbers* Chapter XII verse 10; *II Kings* Chapter V verse 27). The Hebrew word *Tsara'at* is no longer believed to be leprosy. No example of leprosy has been found in Biblical lands until 1000 AD (see Elliot Smith G, Derry DE. Anatomical Report. *Bulletin 6*, Archaeological Society of Nubia, Cairo; 1910).

God knows, and God defend me from the same! - but to be a leper, or one of the self-condemned, how much more awful!^{10c}

While at the leper colony Stevenson dedicated a short poem to Mother Maryanne who was in charge of the Sister's home at Kalawao. Perhaps the reader can think of more beautiful lines on leprosy, and those who cared for the afflicted, but I can't.

To Mother Maryanne

To see the infinite pity of this place,
The mangled limb, the devastated face,
The innocent sufferer smiling at the rod -
A fool were tempted to deny his God.
He sees, he shrinks. But if he gaze again,
Lo, beauty springing from the beast of pain!
He marks the sisters on the mournful shores;
And even a fool is silent and adores.

FATHER DAMIEN

In his letter to Sir Sydney Colvin, Stevenson makes his first comment on the Catholic Belgian priest, Father Damien:

Of old Damien, whose weaknesses and worse perhaps I heard fully, I think only the more. He was a European peasant: dirty, bigoted, untruthful, unwise, tricky, but superb with generosity, residual candour and fundamental good-humour: convince him he had done wrong (it might take hours of insult) and he would undo what he had done and like his corrector better. A man, with all the grime and paltriness of mankind, but a saint and hero all the more for that.^{7b}

Stevenson never met Father Damien who died on 15 April 1889, the month before Stevenson's visit. His description is therefore second-hand.

Joseph Damien de Vlenster (1840-1889) was the son of Flemish peasants, and was trained for the priesthood at Louvain in the Seminary for Foreign Missions. He arrived in Honolulu in December 1864, where he was ordained at the austere Catholic cathedral Our Lady of Peace, which was built of coral in 1843. In 1873 he volunteered to go to the leper colony at Kalawa on the east side of the Kalaupapa Peninsula, which Stevenson graphically described as 'somewhat the same relation as a bracket to a wall'. There Father Damien accomplished wonders, building hospitals, churches (Figure 8) and homes with his bare hands, and nursing patients without fear of his own life. It seems that Father Damien never regretted his decision, and gave his life to the lepers. In 1884 he became afflicted with the disease, finally succumbing in April 1889. His dedication won him universal fame as the 'Martyr of Moloka'i'. His beatification by the Pope as the 'Blessed Damien' in 1995 was one of the last steps to eventual sainthood. A monument to Father Damien was paid for by public subscription (1890) and erected in 1893 at his grave (Figures 9A & 9B). There is also a museum and statue (Figure 10) in Waikiki.

[‡]The first reference to lepers being ostracised in the Bible is in *Leviticus*, Chapter XIII, verses 44-6. Biblical scholars believe that the *Book of Leviticus* dates from 1000 BC.

^{††}A well-known example of the care lepers received in medieval Europe is the famous painting of St Elizabeth of Hungary (*circa* 1207-1231) treating the sick and leprous in the hospice in Marburg an der Drau (now Maribor in Slovenija, Yugoslavia) close to the Austrian border. The painting is by Bartoleme Esteban Murillo (1616-1682), now in the Hospital de la Santa Caridad, Seville, Spain.



FIGURES 9A & 9B

Father Damien's grave (A) in the churchyard of St Philomena Church at Kalaupapa (B) on the island of Moloka'i. The church was shipped from Honolulu in 1872, and modified by Father Damien. In 1936 his body was returned to Belgium, but his right hand was re-interred at this spot.



The peninsula of Kaunakaki is now a national park, where it is estimated some 8,000 lepers died. Today some 75 lepers continue to live in solitude, but all are free to leave. Many are elderly and have lived on this windswept peninsula most of their lives. No independent exploring is permitted, and no children under 16 are allowed into the park.⁸ Sir William Osler (1849-1919) in his first edition of *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* in 1892 makes the comment, 'in 1889 there were 1,000 lepers in the settlement at Moloka'i', but cites no reference.⁹

THE OPEN LETTER

On 2 August 1889 a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Dr Charles McEwen Hyde of Honolulu, wrote a letter to his 'dear brother', the Reverend H. H. Gage of Sydney, Australia, who had requested information on Father Damien:

The simple truth is, he was a coarse, dirty man, headstrong and bigoted. He was not sent to Moloka'i, but went there without orders; did not stay at the leper settlement (before he became one himself), but circulated freely over the whole island (less than half the island is devoted to lepers), and he came often to Honolulu. He had no hand in the reforms and improvements inaugurated, which were the work of our Board of Health, as occasion required and means were provided. He was not a pure man in his relations with women, and the leprosy of which he died should be attributed to his vices and carelessness. Others have done much for lepers, our own ministers, the government, physicians, and so forth, but never with the Catholic idea of meriting eternal life.¹⁰

The letter was not intended to be published, but appeared nevertheless in a church journal in Sydney, Australia. Stevenson, provoked to white-hot fury by what he saw as unjust criticism, wrote his famous *Father Damien: an Open Letter to the Reverend Hyde of Honolulu* which was first published in the *Scots Observer* (25 February 1890) and subsequently in the *Australian Star* (24 May 1890).¹¹ The letter is a powerful piece of writing, a bitter invective put in choice language. It was meant to wound, and it did. Stevenson expected he would be attacked in a libel action, but none was ever brought, the Reverend Dr Hyde contenting himself with describing Stevenson as a 'Bohemian crank'.¹⁵ Stevenson was always at his best as a critic, especially when attacking hypocrisy; one would have to go back to the *Satires* of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) to find his equal. Stevenson, although a Calvinist at heart, was well aware of the 'unco guid' among his fellow Protestant believers, commenting:

You belong sir, to a sect - I believe my sect, and that in which my ancestors laboured - which has enjoyed, and partly failed to utilise, an exceptional advantage in the islands of Hawaii. The first missionaries came; they found the land already self-



FIGURE 10

Statue of Father Damien in Waikiki.

purged of its old and bloody faith; they were embraced, almost on their arrival, with enthusiasm; what troubles they supported came far more from whites than from Hawaiians.¹¹

He went on to criticise the Reverend Doctor:

You have never visited the scene of Damien's life and death.

And for:

...the inertia of your Church.¹²

It would have been of interest if Stevenson had commented on today's state motto of the Hawaiian Islands: *Ula mau ke ea o/ka aina i ka pono*, i.e. the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.

Careful reading of the *Open Letter* shows that it is not entirely logical, and indeed is no proper defence of Damien. Stevenson accepts that the charges the Reverend Hyde makes are true, but despite this argues that Damien had imperfections like all other men and did splendid work under terrible conditions. Stevenson maintained:

his martyrdom and his example nothing can lessen or annul; and only a person here on the spot can properly appreciate his greatness...There are many (not Catholics merely) who require their heroes and saints to be infallible; to these the story will be painful; not to the True lovers, patrons, and servants of mankind...I will suppose...that Damien faltered and stumbled in his narrow path of duty; I will suppose that, in the horror of his isolation, perhaps in the fever of incipient disease, he, who was doing so much more than he had sworn, failed in the letter of his priestly oath - he, who was so much a better man than either you or me, who did what we have never dreamed of daring - he too tasted of our common frailty. 'O, Iago, the pity of it.'¹³

The one criticism that Stevenson could not accept was that he 'was not a pure man in his relations with women.'¹⁰ He asks:

How do you know that?...Many have visited the station before me; they seem not to have heard the rumour. When I was there I heard many shocking tales, for my informants were men speaking with the plainness of the laity; and I heard plenty of complaints of Damien. Why was this never mentioned? And how came it to you in the retirement of your clinical parlour?

Much of the letter is a criticism of the Reverend Dr Hyde, his comfortable house, his leisured and cultured life, and the fact that he never visited the leper colony. Stevenson appears to have forgotten that it was not the character and work of Hyde, but the character and work of Damien that were being challenged. This famous 'open letter' gives as much information about the character of Stevenson as it does of Father Damien.

CONCLUSION

The visit of Robert Louis Stevenson to the leper colony of Moloka'i, and the controversy over Father Damien, must be considered essential reading for those interested in the disease. After his death in Samoa in 1894 his wife Fanny received a letter which sums up the feelings of the lepers regarding her husband:

Dear Madam,
Many thousands mourn the death of Robert Louis Stevenson, but none more than the blind lepers of Moloka'i.

Perhaps no more need be said.

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