On 12 June, a small group of the Friends were welcomed to the Book and Paper Conservation Studio in the Library of the University of Dundee by conservationists Vanessa Charles and Philippa Sterlini, graduates of Camberwell College of Arts. In the course of an hour-and-a-half, they conveyed their enthusiasm for the conservation and preservation of all sorts of archival material; parchments, plans, posters and photographs, touching on disaster planning and the salvage of smoke and water-damaged materials.

Their professional jargon ‘high alpha cellulose’ paper and ‘iron gall ink corrosion’ drew us into informative discussion. They explained that the former, the highest grade of wood pulp paper contains residual lignum which causes embrittlement and acidification over time and that for archival purposes, the use of ‘acid free’ paper made from mulberry in Japan or from cotton or linen rag with an ‘alkali reserve’ added to counter pollutants in the painting process or in the atmosphere, is preferred. (see www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/paper1.html for more information about this).

All of us familiar with the faded brown ink of old writings, the latter ‘ferrugallic’ ink made from oak galls, iron nails, vinegar, gum arabic and a colorant like indigo intrigued us even more. The iron content in this destroys paper (see the ink corrosion website at ink-corrosion.org).

Philippa and Vanessa clearly presented their problems - how they solve them remains matter for another visit! But we did pick up a couple of tips: in your own repairs use only tape you wet to stick (easier to deconstruct); gloves, in their opinion, are only really necessary when handling smoke smirched items.

To obtain the services of a conservator, consult The Institute of Conservation’s Register: (www.conservationregister.org; or e-mail Helen Holden, the Studio’s administrator: h.holden@dundee.ac.uk.

In the afternoon we adjourned to the McManus, Dundee’s art gallery and museum (Gilbert Scott 1867) which only recently emerged from a £11,500,000 makeover designed by architects Page & Park. Back in place was the gallery’s own collection of Scottish artists 1910 to 1980 titled Consider the Lilies, a very interesting, representative show and a very pleasing end to a good day out!

Ronald Singleton
Robert Louis Stevenson and the Theatre

On 20 April Dr John Cairney treated an exceptionally well-attended meeting of the Friends to a highly entertaining and enlightening talk on the subject of Robert Louis Stevenson and the theatre. Probably better known as the actor who for many years made the role of Robert Burns his inimitable own, John Cairney, also achieved considerable successes in UK theatre with the Citizens, Dundee Rep and Bristol Old Vic as well as performances on television and in film. He studied acting at Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and subsequently was awarded M.Litt. by the University of Glasgow and PhD by the Victoria University, New Zealand. He is the author of several books.

Abstract:

Everything Robert Louis Stevenson did was executed with flair, but with a tendency to excess. This is on record. However in spite of the countless words written around and about him scant notice has been given to his literal theatrical activity.

Five full-length plays in collaboration plus the fragment of another may seem a skimpy output compared to his fourteen novels, but, as will be shown, his dramatic work has a relevance to his total artistic development and also underscores his vital relationship to W.E. Henley. Three full-length plays were written with him - Deacon Brodie, Beau Austin and Admiral Guinea - and the writing of them tells much about both men. No consideration will be given to their final work, Macaire, as this was an adaptation of an existing melodrama and not an original dramatic collaboration. In the same way, only formal notice is given to The Hanging Judge, an original collaboration with his wife, Fanny. The Hanging Judge, the last complete play in which Stevenson was involved, takes its place with the first, Monmouth, in being notable only for being completed.

The first ideas of the stage came to Stevenson in the form of Mr Skelt’s Toy Theatre. The drama sheets - ‘Penny Plain and Tuppence Coloured’ bought from Wilson’s shop at the corner of Leith Walk and Antigua St were his passports to his Theatre of the Imagination and in Mr Skelt’s Model Theatre for Juveniles lay the basis of his thraldom to Thalia.

The paradox of theatre is that it is truth revealed in a lie. The tragedy for Stevenson and theatre was that he leaned towards a kind of stage pretence that was never true to itself and was therefore unacceptable to an audience. Theatre is artifice but plays themselves are not artificial. Neither Stevenson nor Henley ever learned this and the good lie stayed on their lips. Stevenson always regretted this.

Dr John Cairney

Dates for your Diary


THURSDAY 25.11.10: Talk by Dr Theo van Heijnsbergen, Department of Scottish Literature; (provisional title) Fugitive Scottish Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

THURSDAY 24.2.11: Talk by Mr Geoffrey Roger, Department of Modern Languages: Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles (MS Hunter 252).

TUESDAY 19.4.11: Talk by Professor Christian Kay on the Saltire Award winning publication The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary.

All meetings are at 6pm in the Henry Heaney Room, level 12 in the Library

AGM is at 5.30