

The background of the book cover is a detailed landscape painting. It depicts a dirt path winding through a lush forest. On the right side, a stream flows over rocks, creating a small waterfall. In the lower-left foreground, a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat and dark clothing is walking away from the viewer along the path. The background shows rolling hills under a clear blue sky. The entire scene is framed by a decorative green border with a repeating geometric pattern.

KING PENGUIN

RICHARD HOLMES

FOOTSTEPS

Adventures of a Romantic Biographer

'I found myself reading it continuously and with enormous
admiration and pleasure...'

— *Sunday Telegraph*

KING PENGUIN

FOOTSTEPS

Richard Holmes was born in London in 1945, and educated at Downside School and Churchill College, Cambridge. In 1974 he published his first book, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, which won the Somerset Maugham Award, and was described by Stephen Spender as 'surely the best biography of Shelley ever written . . . an extraordinary achievement'. He has since translated and introduced a selection of Théophile Gautier's supernatural stories, *My Fantoms*; scripted an experimental radio-drama about the death of Gérard de Nerval; edited an anthology of Shelley's prose and written a highly-praised short study, *Coleridge*, for the OUP Past Masters series. For many years Richard Holmes has been a regular feature writer and reviewer for *The Times* and an occasional contributor to *Harper's* (New York). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and is currently working on a full-scale biography of Coleridge.

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ADVENTURES
OF A ROMANTIC BIOGRAPHER



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For Vicki and those children

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(photo courtesy of Albert E. Norman collection, California Historical Society,
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(reproduced by kind permission of The National Portrait Gallery)

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(from the author's own collection)

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Gérard de Nerval in Paris, 1855

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Théophile Gautier *circa* 1854

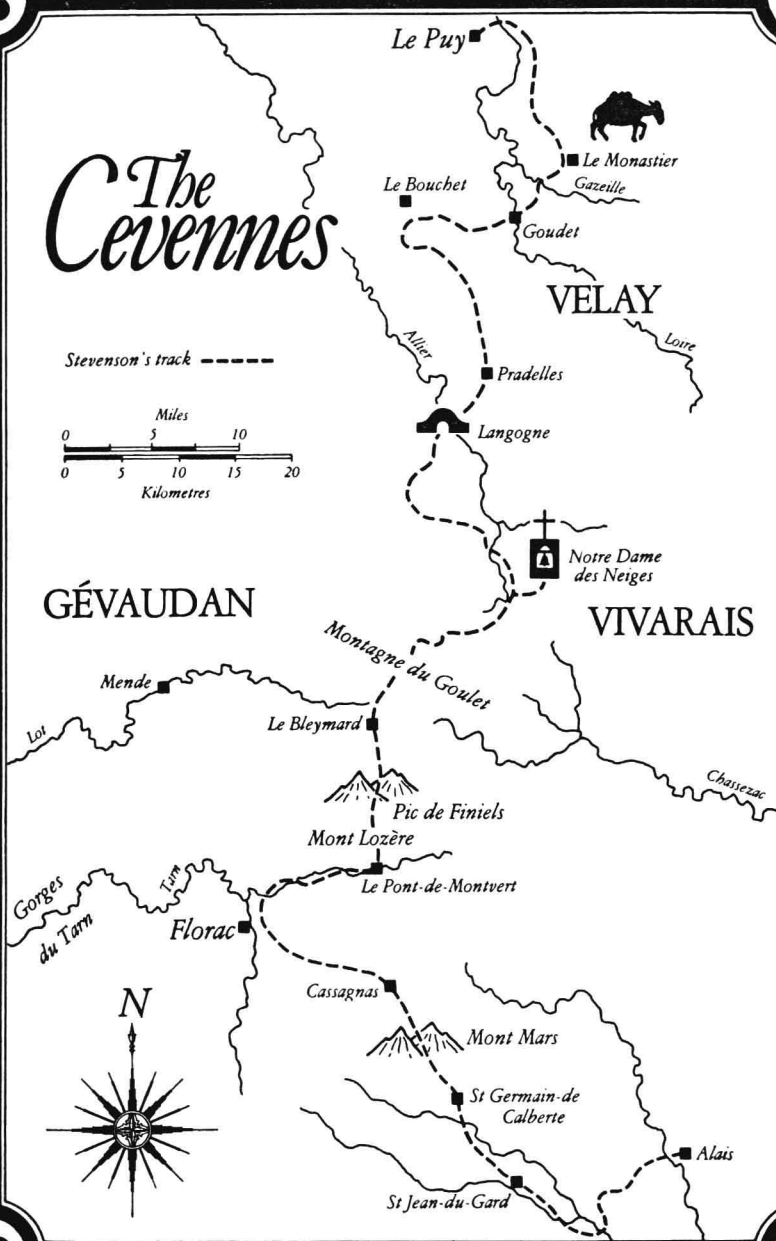
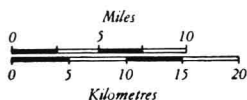
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ONE

1964 : Travels

The Cevennes

Stevenson's track - - - -



1

All that night I heard footsteps: down by the river through the dark trees, or up on the moonlit road from Le Puy to Le Monastier. But I saw nothing except the stars, hanging over me where I wanted to be, with my head on a rucksack, and my rucksack on the grass, lying alone somewhere in the Massif Central of France, dreaming of the dead coming back to life again. I was eighteen.

I had started a travel-diary, teaching myself to write, and trying to find out what was happening to me, what I was feeling. I kept it simple:

Found a wide soft dry ditch under thorn hedge between the track and the little Loire. Here lit candle once more, studied ground for red ants, then set out bed-roll with all spare clothes between me and my waterproof cloak-sheet. Soon I was gazing up at stars, thinking of all the beats and tramps and travellers *à la belle étoile* from RLS to JK. Story of snakes that are drawn to body-heat and slide into your sleeping-bag. Cicadas and strange sounds river makes at night flowing over rocks. Slept fitfully but without disturbance from man or beast, except a spider in my ear. Saw a green glow-worm like a spark.

I woke at 5 a.m. in a glowing mist, my green sleeping-bag blackened with the dew, for the whole plateau of the Velay is above two thousand feet. I made a fire with twigs gathered the night before, and set water to boil for coffee, in a *petit pois* tin with wire twisted round it as a handle. Then I went down to the Loire, here little more than a stream, and sat naked in a pool cleaning my teeth. Behind me the sun came out and the woodfire smoke turned blue. I felt rapturous and slightly mad.

I reached Le Monastier two hours later, in the local grocer's van, one of those square Citroëns like a corrugated garden privy, which smelt of camembert and apples. Monsieur Crèspy, chauffeur and patron, examined my pack and soaking bag as we jounced along

through rolling uplands. Our conversation took place in a sort of no-man's-land of irregular French. M. Crèspy's patois and Midi twang battled for meaning against my stonewall classroom phrases. After initial skirmishing, he adopted a firm line of attack.

"You are walking on foot?" he said, leaning back into the depths of the van with one arm and presenting me with a huge yellow pear.

"Yes, yes. I am searching for *un Ecosais*, a Scotsman, a writer, who walked on foot through all this beautiful country."

"He is a friend of yours? You have lost him?" enquired M. Crèspy with a little frown.

"No, no. Well . . . Yes. You see, I want to find him." My chin streamed hopelessly with pear juice.

M. Crèspy nodded encouragingly: "The pear is good, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, it is very good."

The Citroën lurched round a bend and plunged down towards a rocky valley, broken with trees and scattered stone farmhouses, with pink tiled roofs and goats tethered in small bright pastures where the sun struck and steamed. The spire of a church, perched on the far hillside, pointed the horizon.

"There is Le Monastier. Look! Perhaps your friend is waiting for you," said M. Crèspy with great confidence.

"No, no, I don't think so," I said. But it was exactly what I hoped.

I rummaged in my rucksack. "You see, here is his book. It tells the story of his walk on foot."

M. Crèspy peered at the little brown volume, and the Citroën swung back and forth across the road, the sound of rolling fruit growing thunderous behind us. I hastily propped the book up on the dashboard, being careful not to cover the St Christophe medal or the picture of Our Lady mounted above a cone of paper flowers. I ran my finger down the sketch map on the title page: Le Monastier, Pradelles, Langogne, Notre Dame des Neiges, Montagne du Goulet, Pic de Finiels, Le Pont-de-Montvert, Florac, Gorges du Tarn, St Jean-du-Gard—to me already magic names, a litany of hills and rivers, with a lone figure striding along them, laughing, beckoning, even mocking: follow! follow!

M. Crèspy considered the map, and then my face, then the map again, and changed gear with a reflective air. "It is far, it is far."

"Yes," I said, "it is two hundred and twenty kilometres."

M. Crèspy raised a finger from the steering wheel. "And you, you are Scottish then?"

"No, no. I am English. My friend—that is to say, Mr Stevenson

—was Scottish. He walked on foot with a donkey. He slept à la belle étoile. He . . .”

“Ah, *that!*” broke in M. Crèspy with a shout, taking both hands from the steering wheel, and striking his forehead. “I understand, I understand! You are on the traces of Monsieur Robert Louis Steamson. Bravo, bravo!”

“Yes, yes, I am following his paces!”

We both laughed and the Citroën proceeded by divine guidance.

“I understand, I understand,” repeated M. Crèspy. And I believe he was the first person who ever did.

Robert Louis Stevenson came to Le Monastier in September 1878. He was twenty-seven, spoke good French, and had already spent several summers abroad; near Fontainebleau, and on the canals of Holland, paddling a canoe with a friend. The experience had produced his first book, *An Inland Voyage*, which despite its whimsical style captured an attitude to travel that enthralled me, a child of the Sixties.

I take it, in short, that I was about as near Nirvana as would be convenient in practical life; and if this be so, I make the Buddhists my sincere compliments . . . It may be best figured by supposing yourself to get dead drunk, and yet keep sober to enjoy it . . . A pity to go to the expense of laudanum, when here is a better paradise for nothing! This frame of mind was the great exploit of our voyage, take it all in all. It was the farthest piece of travel accomplished.

That was the kind of travel which interested me too: as far out in Nirvana as possible. After ten years of English boarding schools, brought up by Roman Catholic monks, I was desperate to slip the leash. Free thought, free travel, free love was what I wanted. I suppose a foreign *affaire de coeur* would have been the best thing of all; and that, in a way, was what I got.

It did not immediately occur to me to wonder what Stevenson himself was doing in that remote little town “in the French highlands”. I knew he wanted to be a writer, had published essays in the London reviews, but was still struggling to establish his independence from his family in Edinburgh. They had brought him up a strict Calvinist, an outlook which he had rejected; and they had wanted him to be an engineer. Instead he had adopted the life of a literary bohemian, was a friend of Edmund Gosse and Sidney Colvin, affected wide-brimmed hats and velvet jackets, and fled to France whenever he could.

Staying at the little hotel at Le Monastier that autumn, he made friends with the local doctor and “Conductor of Roads and Bridges” and completed a little sketch of the place, *A Mountain Town in France*. His account had immediately captivated me.

Le Monastier is the chief place of a hilly canton in Haute-Loire, the ancient Velay. As the name betokens, the town is of monastic origin; and it still contains a towered bulk of monastery and church . . . It stands on the side of a hill above the river Gazeille, about fifteen miles from Le Puy, up a steep road where the wolves sometimes pursue the diligence in winter . . .

Stevenson had decided to pursue the road south himself, but on foot, in the company of a donkey to carry his baggage. This second voyage resulted in his second book—the little brown volume I now carried as my bible—his *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

At Le Monastier that morning, the question of Stevenson’s donkey bulked large. Unloaded from the van, I was taken into the backroom of the *épicerie* and given breakfast by Madame Crèspy.

“When Monsieur Steamson was here, they used to make lace,” she said, also using the local pronunciation. “But you will want your donkey, like him. You must go and see Le Docteur Ollier.”

Mlle Crèspy, who looked at me with dark dancing eyes, was deputed to take me to the doctor. “It’s no fun without the donkey,” she observed, prettily rolling the colloquial word, *rigolo*, and seizing me by the hand. Mlle Crèspy was about nine.

Le Docteur, a tall patient man, ushered me into his surgery and poured me a yellow medicine, which turned out to be a liqueur. “Of course, there is the question of the donkey. You will have to consult the Mayor. Everyone takes a donkey.”

“Everyone?”

“Mlle Singer took a donkey. She was lost in a storm, on the Lozère. It is high up there. The fire brigade from Bleymard went out to find her with lanterns.”

I accepted another yellow medicine. “This was recently, Miss Singer?”

“Oh yes, this was in 1949. You must pay attention to the vipers,” concluded Dr Ollier.

“So you desire to hire a donkey,” said the Mayor, as we paced in the cobbled courtyard of the old Bishop’s palace.

I looked abashed. “I am following Stevenson. But I have my sack.”

The Mayor reflected. “You see, Monsieur Steamson, he had a