

STAYING POWER

Almost 40 years after her death, the author DE Stevenson is still so popular that fans from across the world are coming to Moffat for the re-issue of one of her books. **Mary Smith** reports

Photography by Phil Rigby



DE Stevenson's granddaughter Wendy Simpson with a few of the dozens of novels written by her 'lovely cuddly granny'

Moffat Book Events is holding its first event in the town on April 16 – and the DEssies are coming. They are coming – some from as far away as America, others from within Britain – for the Champagne launch of the re-issue of a book first published in 1936.

The DEssies are fans of author DE Stevenson who lived for many years in Moffat, where she wrote the majority of her 40-plus books. Persephone Press is re-issuing *Miss Buncle Married*, a sequel to the hugely popular *Miss Buncle's Book*, written in 1934. Persephone republished it very successfully in 2008.

Dorothy Emily Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1892. Her father, the lighthouse engineer David Alan Stevenson, was a cousin of the author Robert Louis Stevenson. Dorothy enjoyed a privileged upbringing and was educated at home by a series of governesses. In an interview in 1963 in *The Quest* she said she wanted to go to university but her father did not want a “blue stocking

girl in the family”. From the age of eight she was passionate about writing, often having to hide herself away “in a nest in the box room”, where she “wrote and wrote” as her parents and governesses did not approve.

In 1916 she married a captain in the 6th Ghurkha Rifles, James Reid Peplow, who was related to the Scottish colourist Samuel Peplow.

Dorothy's granddaughter, Wendy Simpson, who lives in Moffat, says: “Samuel Peplow's wife brought all his paintings to Moffat for safekeeping during the war. We've always regretted that she took them all away again afterwards.”

As DE Stevenson, Dorothy published two volumes of poetry and, despite being kept busy as a young mother and army wife, her first novel, *Peter West* (which was not particularly successful) came out in 1923.

It was almost a decade before she enjoyed her first real success.

“When a friend's daughter was going to marry an army officer, my grandmother lent them her private diary so she could find out

what her life was going to be like. The family read the diary out loud and said they laughed until they cried and persuaded her to turn it into a book,” says Wendy.

Mrs Tim of the Regiment came out in 1932, followed by *Golden Days* then *Miss Buncle's Book*. In fact, DES more or less wrote a book a year until her final volume, *Gerald and Elizabeth*, published in 1969.

“That was the year my grandfather died,” says Wendy, “and she stopped writing then.”

The family moved to Moffat during the early days of World War Two. Wendy remembers visiting her grandmother often.

“We used to play Scrabble. She was a lovely cuddly granny,” she says.

“When she was writing she sat on the sofa with her feet up and a green baize board on her lap and smoked her cigarettes in a holder.”

DE Stevenson died in 1973 and is buried, alongside her husband, in Moffat churchyard. Her novels topped the bestselling lists in Britain, South Africa and Australia and were translated into several

European languages, transcribed into Braille and read in talking Books for the Blind. The United States education authorities included some of her books on their list of prescribed readings and, in Finland, extracts were included in a booklet called *Everyday English*.

More than four million copies of her books had been sold in Britain alone and a further three million in the United States. For a long time, however, most have been out of print so her fans are delighted that publishers are once again re-issuing some titles.

DE Stevenson's books are difficult to categorise. Although there is a romantic element, it is not the main focus of the books, which are very much character-led.

DEssie Jerri Chase, from Madison County, USA, says some fans describe the books as “fictional biographies” and Wendy says they are very soothing books to read. To whatever genre they belong, their popularity is proving to be enduring and Jerri will give a talk at the Moffat launch of *Miss Buncle Married* on what it means to be a DEssie.

To describe the DEssies simply as fans in no way conveys the passion these people share for DE Stevenson and her writing, and the extraordinary depth of knowledge they have of her work.

There is an active Yahoo group and several websites. One site looked after by Susan Daly in Canada (www.destevenson.org) includes a biography, lists of books, limericks, links to other sites, and scenes from some of the books created in miniature. It even has a video of a trip to the Bell Rock Lighthouse.

Susan, a retired systems analyst, became an avid DES reader in her late teens.

“I got started on one, then another, then another and started ransacking the libraries. There were many in the library then and Collins was re-issuing nearly all of them as Fontana paperbacks so I could buy, for about 80 cents, any that showed up,” she explains.

For Susan the attraction is the character, the incidents and the familiarity: “The characters have kindness and humour and integrity. And they are so like us. When a character muses on why her two best friends don't like each other, or wonders if her ankles are nicer than her sister's, we get it.

“Another attraction is the DES universe, which she has built and peopled with characters from series of books. It's a pleasure to pick up a book and meet characters from another book.”

It was partly a need to share things she and other DEssies had discovered about DES which prompted Susan's website. She is also one of the moderators for the Yahoo group, which has over 330 members in America, Canada, France, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.

Jerri Chase discovered DES through her mother, who bought *Miss Buncle's Book* and *Miss Buncle Married* in the Forties. For Jerri, the descriptions of places appeals, allowing



DE Stevenson published her first novel in 1923. Below: with her nanny circa 1900



An old copy of *Miss Buncle Married*, which is being re-issued by Persephone Press

her to feel she is travelling to another place and time.

And, like Susan, she loves the characters. “They seem so real. I enjoy DES's sense of humour. The two *Miss Buncle* books are the most overtly funny, but I find bits of humour in all her books that delight me,” she says.

“I believe DES is becoming popular today for much the same reason that some adults have enjoyed the *Harry Potter* books so much. There is an audience of adults poorly served by current literature, who want stories with a clear moral/ethical background, well-defined characters about whom they can care, precise use of language, and a straightforward plotline.

“The internet has helped people find DES, and has helped those who love her book find each other.”

Jerri collects different editions and owns several copies of most of the books – there are, fans have discovered, differences between different editions of some titles, including missing titles. She is coming to Moffat with fellow DEssie Laura Bodon-Campbell, who runs the Yahoo group. They will also visit Kirkcudbright, which DES mentions in one of her books.

There is only one disappointment. These two DEssies cannot stay on for an event which is causing huge excitement among DES fans everywhere – the issue of two previously unpublished books by Greyladies Books of Edinburgh.

The *Fair Miss Fortune* and *Emily Dennistoun* (Truth is the Strong Thing), both written in the Thirties, will be launched with a party in the St Trinnean's Room of St Leonard's Hall, Edinburgh University, on Saturday, May 7 at 3pm.

Greyladies owner Shirley Neilson says: “Wendy's sister, Penny, deals with DE Stevenson's rights. She emailed to see if we would be interested in publishing them. The manuscripts were in a box, typed with her [DE Stevenson's] handwritten corrections.

“She was a bestseller in her day and even when her books were out of print she was always strong in the second-hand market.”

There will be plenty of interest for the DEssies at the Champagne launch event in Moffat, which is called *Love and Marriage in Moffat*.

Scottish author Aline Templeton, whose crime novels are set in Wigtownshire, and who wrote the preface to Persephone's *Miss Buncle's Book*, will be giving a talk. Wendy Simpson is planning a small exhibition of DES-related materials including a silver charm bracelet presented to her on the DEssies last visit. **DEG**

■ See *The Guide* (page 145) and www.moffatbookevents.co.uk for more information about Moffat Book Events' launch of *Miss Buncle Married* on April 16. Tickets for the *Love and Marriage in Moffat* events are available from dgArts at the *Midsteeple in Dumfries* on 01387 253383.