

DEACON BRODIE'S SECRET LIFE

The man who was Jekyll and Hyde

William Brodie was a well-respected man in Edinburgh in the mid-18th century. In a straitlaced city, he shone as a model of civic sobriety. The son of a prosperous cabinetmaker, he was a deacon of the masons' guild, and a city councillor.

But the deacon was also the model for one of English literature's most horrifying characters, Robert Louis Stevenson's schizophrenic scientist, Dr. Jekyll. For Brodie, like the gentle doctor, had a secret life behind his mask of virtue. By day he was a businessman. By night he was a gambler and a vicious thief.

No one knew his secrets, not even his two mistresses, who had his five children. They did not even know about each other.

Brodie was 27 when he turned to crime. In August 1768 he made copies of the keys to a city bank and robbed it of £800 (about \$4,000). But though he went on to burgle scores of buildings over the following 18 years, no hint of suspicion ever fell on him.

Getaway and capture

The beginning of the end came in 1786, when he joined forces with three petty thieves. To-

gether, they planned Brodie's most daring raid—on the headquarters of the Scottish Customs and Excise. The gang was surprised by an employee, and though Brodie got away, one of the thieves, John Brown, turned king's evidence to escape deportation for other crimes he had committed in England.

Brodie fled to Amsterdam, hoping to escape to America. But on the eve of his departure, the police caught up with him. Brodie was extradited and put on trial in Edinburgh.

The evidence was damning; the police found the proof of his double identity: false keys, pistols, and a burglar's black suit. Brodie was condemned to death. But on the night before his execution, he wired his clothes from neck to ankle to lessen the jerk of the rope and lodged a silver tube in his throat to cheat the noose.

Neither trick worked. On October 1, 1788, he died on the Edinburgh gallows.

Nearly a century later Robert Louis Stevenson and William Henley wrote a play based on Brodie's exploits. *Deacon Brodie, or The Double Life*, was first produced at the Prince's Theatre, London, in 1884. In the play the burglar explains the freedom he finds in his nocturnal life of crime.

Two years later Stevenson turned the theme into *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, his memorable short story about the darker side of man.

In the story Dr. Jekyll discovers, through experiments with a drug, that "man is not truly one, but truly two," and describes how "I learned to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man."

He explains his fascination with the experiment: "If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil."

In this way Stevenson explained the way in which the evil inherent in man took its hold on the good Deacon Brodie.



DOUBLE TROUBLE. Deacon Brodie with the dice and cards that led to his downfall.