

# The birth of the boys' story and the transition from the robinsonnades to the adventure story

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IN **REVUE DE LITTÉRATURE COMPARÉE** 2002/4 n<sup>o</sup> 304 , PAGES 445 TO 454  
PUBLISHER **KLINCKSIECK**

ISSN 0035-1466

DOI 10.3917/rlc.304.0445

**Article available online at**

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-revue-de-litterature-comparee-2002-4-page-445?lang=en>



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## THE BIRTH OF THE BOYS' STORY AND THE TRANSITION FROM THE *ROBINSONNADES* TO THE ADVENTURE STORY

Since we must have books, there is one book which, to my thinking, supplies the best treatise on education according to nature... What is this wonderful book? Is it Aristotle? Pliny? Buffon? No; it is *Robinson Crusoe*.

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau) <sup>1</sup>

Although English children had access to exciting tales such as the romances of Robin Hood or the legend of Guy of Warwick from the seventeenth century at least, the true history of the modern adventure story did not really begin until 1719 when Daniel Defoe published *The Life and Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe... Written by Himself*.

Defoe's story, not originally told for children, was an immediate success, and reprinted three times within the year of publication. The key elements in his novel can be clearly identified as the account of a shipwreck, the description of the island and its exotic environment, the drama of Crusoe's solitude and his ingenious survival techniques (which may suggest an early picture of colonialism and "masculine" virtues), and finally the tracing of Crusoe's spiritual development from thoughtless amorality towards devout Christianity. Swift's *Gulliver's*

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1. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Émile*, translated by Barbara Foxley, introduction by P. D. Jimack, Dent, London, Everyman's Library, 1974, p. 147.

*Travels*, another tale of shipwreck and life on an island, which appeared shortly afterwards in 1726, though a political satire lacking many of Defoe's elements, and never quite as popular as *Robinson Crusoe*, also helped contribute to the interest in "Desert Island" stories.

*Robinson Crusoe* became immensely successful, frequently reprinted in many different editions. Defoe himself added further volumes to his original tale later in 1719 and 1720. But it was abridgements usually of the first volume that proved most popular, and the process was enhanced by Rousseau's endorsement of the book in *Emile* in 1762. For Rousseau's praise concentrated very much on the shipwreck and Crusoe's practical steps to survive on the island without any discussion of Defoe's social or spiritual development, "irrelevant matter," as Rousseau put it<sup>2</sup>. Chapbook editions, sometimes reducing Defoe's story to as few as twenty-four pages, began to appear, and the first edition abridged particularly for children was published in 1768. Indeed it has been calculated that there were approximately 150 abridgements published for children between 1719 and 1819 alone, with chapbook publishers involved right across the country<sup>3</sup>.

Even more remarkably, however, stories based upon the model of *Robinson Crusoe* began to appear. These tales, mainly concentrating on the shipwrecked victim's attempts to survive on an island, were so popular that they earned the name of *Robinsonnades*. Thus Peter Longueville produced *The English Hermit; Or, The Unparalleled Sufferings and Surprising Adventures of Mr. Philip Quarll* in 1727 and Robert Paltock *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* in 1751.

A German version of Defoe's story especially aimed at young people was produced by Joachim Heinrich Campe in 1779. First published in Hamburg as *Robinson der Jüngere*, the book was translated into English by Campe himself as *Robinson the Younger* in 1781 and was a great success. The story, framed by a discussion between Campe and some young pupils, omits much of Defoe's moralizing as well as making his hero a youth of eighteen (compared with Crusoe's being in his late twenties), but otherwise follows Defoe's main narrative quite closely with the hero alone on the island, trying to build up a new life, until, unlike Defoe's hero, he returns home to his aged father. An English version published by Stockdale in four volumes in 1788 and in one volume in 1789 as *The New Robinson Crusoe* also proved to be very popular.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

3. Hunt, Peter, (ed.), *Children's Literature; An Illustrated History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 43.

In 1812 an even more successful *Robinsonnade* appeared with the publication in Zurich of *Der Schweizerische Robinson* by J.D. Wyss. Wyss, a Swiss pastor, wrote his story of a castaway clergyman and his family, to amuse and educate his own children. First translated into English as *The Family Robinson Crusoe* by the British philosopher William Godwin in 1814, the book has remained in print ever since. Although the narrator's pious moralizing has given the book a dated quality, the adventures of the four sons, their homebuilding, encounters with wild creatures, and eventual rescue is full of suspense and surprises. The book was very popular with over three hundred different editions published in England and America since the 1840s, many based upon a famous French edition of the book by the Baroness de Montolieu<sup>4</sup>. In America, in fact, *The Swiss Family Robinson* seems to have been even more popular than Defoe's original, perhaps because, as Martin Green suggests, Wyss's tale more warmly endorses family values<sup>5</sup>.

The lasting popularity of the *Robinsonnades* can even be seen in the lasting popularity of such minor works as Barbara Hofland's *The Young Crusoe* (1829).

Barbara Hofland (1770-1844) was a professional writer who turned her hand to many different genres in her attempts to support her family, including poetry, plays, textbooks and domestic tales. Her story about young Charles Crusoe, wrecked on an island in the Indian Ocean with his father and their Indian servant Sambo, contains many of Defoe's familiar ingredients, as the thirteen year-old boy struggles to survive, using a cave for shelter, rescuing a toolbox, making his own clothes and becoming a devout Christian. Although only a modest attempt (in 13 chapters), *The Young Crusoe's* success illustrates the popularity of the genre and the way it was beginning to focus upon a young boy as hero. Mrs. Hofland's book was reprinted at least eleven times in the nineteenth century, the last as late as 1894.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century other factors began to influence the character and development of the adventure story. Defoe's adult hero was beginning to be replaced by a young boy, and, though the rise of evangelicalism with its proliferation of moral tale may not seem to have direct connections with stories of adventure, many of those tales also focus upon young boys who, by persevering with

4. Hürlimann, Bettina, *Three Centuries of Children's Books in Europe*, translated and edited by Brian W. Alderson, London, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 111-112.

5. Green, Martin, *The Robinson Crusoe Story*, London, Pennsylvania University Press, University Park 1990, p. 77.

courage and diligence, eventually achieved success, as Gillian Avery has pointed out<sup>6</sup>.

By the 1830s, furthermore, as Britain entered the industrial revolution, and felt the need for more practical and useful knowledge, so the rise of utilitarianism fostered the popularity of didactic books, such as those by “Peter Parley.” “Peter Parley,” the pseudonym for the American writer Samuel Goodrich (1793-1860), disliked what he felt was the fanciful and misleading nature of fairy tales, and from 1828 began publishing a series of books for children which emphasized factual information. Particularly popular in Britain were two periodicals, *Peter Parley’s Magazine* and *Peter Parleys’ Annual*. But, although both contained a mixture of articles on history and travel and other factual topics, they also published tales about schoolboys, wicked uncles and Cornish wreckers. “A Tale of Youthful Courage” of 1844, for example, begins by providing much preliminary information about the lengths of various rivers, before concentrating upon a story about two boys being captured by and escaping from Red Indians.

By the 1840s, of course, adults were already reading tales of adventure involving Red Indians, for J. Fenimore Cooper began his great sequence of “Leatherstocking” novels with his hero Hawkeye in *The Pioneers* in 1823 and *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), furthermore, had already begun his series of historical novels, telling of exciting adventures set in the past with *Waverley* in 1814 and such successors as *Ivanhoe* (1819). Thus one can say that by the opening decades of the nineteenth century three different models of adventure stories were available—stories of shipwreck and desert islands (inspired by Defoe), tales set in the historical past (by Scott) and tales set on the exotic frontier (by Cooper).

For British writers, however, another crucial factor in the development of the adventure story was the expansion of the British Empire. The exploits of Clive in India and of Wolfe in Canada had whetted the public’s appetite for adventure in the eighteenth century, and the more recent triumphs of Nelson and the Duke of Wellington in the Napoleonic Wars had raised patriotic feelings to great heights. The British Empire continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century. Britain already controlled Australia, Canada, New Zealand and vast parts of India, but it gradually extended its overseas territories, acquiring the whole of Burma and huge areas of Africa, including Uganda,

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6. Avery, Gillian, *Nineteenth Century Children: Heroes and Heroines in English Children’s Stories 1780-1900*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1965, p. 135.

Nigeria and South Africa. The Empire over which Queen Victoria reigned in 1897 was four times larger than at her accession in 1837.

Improvements in communications by railways, steamships and the electric telegraph, together with the availability of cheap newspapers made the British public more aware of affairs overseas, and newspaper reports from Special Correspondents, such as W. H. Russell of *The Times*, helped to sharpen public consciousness of such events as the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War or of the Indian Mutiny.

The eighteenth-century explorations of Captain Cook and Mungo Park, the wanderings of Charles Waterton in South America and the travels of Dr. Livingstone in Africa all intensified the interest in adventure in exotic places. When Britain's domestic economic situation seemed to offer only the grim alternatives of unemployment or of dreary factory work, many began to look overseas. As well as searching for opportunities for trading with British colonies, thousands of Britons began to emigrate to America, Australia, Canada and South Africa. In the process, links between Britain and its great Empire overseas were extended.

Many Victorian children, particularly boys, shared their parents' interest in the Empire, expecting to work there when they left school, in commerce, the armed forces or as public servants. (Girls would be expected to become the loyal companions and helpmates of their husbands, according to the conventions of the age, of course.) Thus the British public's interest in thrilling deeds in faraway places, normally within the hegemony of British imperialism, helped to create a cultural climate in which young people wanted to read adventure stories in which the heroes and (less often) the heroines were young people like themselves.

Thus by the 1840s the adventure story for adults was well established through the works of Defoe, Scott and Cooper, whether as tales of the sea and shipwreck, thrilling accounts of the past, or exciting chronicles of adventure on the frontier. But apart from *The Swiss Family Robinson* and other *Robinsonades* there were still few adventure stories written specifically for children. Within a few years, however, so many writers began to produce tales that, although they cannot be said to have invented the genre, established it firmly with such books as R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881) and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* in 1885. Not all of these stories deal directly with British imperialism, but their ethos of brave adventures in exotic parts, accompanied by a strong sense of innate British superiority over all other races, is a clear reflection of British expansion overseas in the nineteenth century, and of public awareness of it.

For this establishment of the adventure story for children as a dominant literary form, one man, Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848) was principally responsible. It is not surprising that Marryat should have written adventure stories, for he enjoyed a remarkably adventurous life himself. Born in London in 1792, the son of an M.P., he ran away to sea several times before his father allowed him to enlist on Lord Cochrane's ship the *Impérieuse* in 1806. He saw an extraordinary amount of action in the war against Napoleon, and in his first three years at sea alone he was involved in fifty fights. He was wounded several times, won numerous awards for gallantry, and was appointed to the rank of commander at the age of twenty-three.

After the French war ended, Marryat travelled widely in Europe but returned to sea in 1820 and saw service in the Atlantic where he commanded the ship patrolling St. Helena to prevent Napoleon escaping. He searched for smugglers in the English Channel and later took part in the Burmese War. In 1829, however, he published his first adult novel *The Naval Officer*, largely based upon his own experiences, and the book took the public by storm. In 1830 he resigned from the navy to become a full-time writer, earning large sums of money for his books.

Marryat began writing books for children in 1839 when his own children asked him to write a continuation of their own favourite *The Swiss Family Robinson*. But when Marryat came to examine Wyss's tale, he considered it so implausible, so lacking in a sense of seamanship, and above all so ignorant or careless in its account of the wild life on the island, introducing plants and animals from so many different climates, that he decided to write a new story but in the same genre<sup>7</sup>. In writing *Masterman Ready; or, The Wreck of the Pacific* (1841), therefore, Marryat was simply extending the tradition of the *Robinsonnades* for young people and using the conventional narrative device of describing the adventures of survivors on a desert island.

Marryat's story is realized with considerable authenticity. The adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Seagrave, with their four children and the veteran sailor Masterman Ready, are convincingly described from the time of the hurricane which wrecks them until their final escape from the island. Like Robinson Crusoe, the family is able to bring some provisions on shore, manage to build a shelter and discover fresh water. Recurring tensions modify the family's even progress with a succession of minor crises such as illness and by the ferocious attack of natives in the final chapters.

7. Marryat, Captain, *Masterman Ready; or, The Wreck of the Pacific*, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1841, "Preface", p. (v)-vii.

The story is occasionally didactic and evangelical. The children often either behave foolishly or ask questions which enables Mr. Seagrave or the old mariner to give moralizing or practical advice, and family prayers are regularly said. But *Masterman Ready* is saved from over-solemnity by the vivacity of the characters and by Marryat's extraordinary openness and flexibility. In one episode, for example, Mr. Seagrave and his eldest son William discuss the purpose of colonies, when Mr. Seagrave freely admits to the economic advantages gained by the mother-country and realistically anticipates the time when Britain's empire will come to an end. More vibrant than this abstract discussion, however, is the humanity embodied in the genuine tragedy of Masterman Ready's death at the end, for it is largely caused by the thoughtless behaviour of Mr. Seagrave's second son Tommy. Yet Tommy is allowed to sail away from the island never knowing what his mischief has done. He is a young child after all. There is no overt moralizing here, for the tone is one of cool detachment.

The success of *Masterman Ready* encouraged Marryat to write other books for children, and, since the appeal of exciting adventures in the wilds or on the frontiers of civilisation had already been established by James Fenimore Cooper, it is not surprising that Marryat should follow his example in his tale *The Settlers in Canada* (1844). Marryat had visited Canada and acquired several hundred acres of land on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes where he set his work.

For the story of *The Settlers in Canada* Marryat used a plot-device much imitated by his successors, that of sudden financial distress. Dr. Campbell, a prosperous landowner, loses his property in a legal suit, and decides to emigrate to Canada and farm there. Taking with him three of his sons and two nieces, he settles near Lake 1847, Ontario. Here they build house, learn to shoot and fish, sow crops and trade furs. They make friends with an eccentric but helpful hunter Malachi Bone (who owes something to Cooper's Natty Bumppo), and they survive a forest fire. They rescue young Percival from hostile Indians and welcome new immigrants to their prospering farm, and finally they return to England to reclaim their lawful inheritance. This is an agreeable if undemanding story, and though the book may derive from Cooper, the account of homemaking in adverse circumstances also owes something to the tradition of the *Robinsonnades*.

After following the influence of Defoe and Cooper in two of his adventure stories for children, Marryat showed the influence of Walter Scott when he wrote *The Children of the New Forest* (1847), the first enduring historical story for young readers. *The Children of the New Forest* tells the story of the four Beverley children who are orphaned during the British civil war. After their father dies fighting for the

Royalists, the children are taken into hiding in the New Forest, where they are disguised as the grandchildren of a poor forester, and taught hunting, housekeeping and farming. Dramatic adventures follow as the children escape capture by Parliamentary soldiers and their cottage is besieged.

The first half of the story still depends upon the appeal of the *Robinsonnades*, for although neither the New Forest nor the forester's cottage is an island, Marryat and his characters treat them almost as if they were, and the children have to learn to survive in an unfriendly environment.

The historical background is more than a decorative setting for the novel, however, for in portraying the adventures of the children Marryat uses the story to mirror some of the problems of seventeenth-century England, the tension between loyalty to the king and a sense of justice, for example. Marryat is clearly sympathetic to the royalist cause, but favours neither republican extremists nor royal absolutists, and the story's final movement, a happy marriage between Edward Beverley, the royalist, and Patience, the daughter of a Parliamentarian, symbolizes the need for political reconciliation.

Marryat's characterisation is fresh and interesting. Although the girls Alice, Edith and Clara tend to be rather passive stereotyped females of their day, Patience is portrayed as a young woman of spirit. The two sons Edward and Humphrey are more original, for while Humphrey does not look like the hero of an adventure story his patience, good humour and ingenuity make him very attractive.

But Edward, the older son, is the major figure. If his skill at hunting and his bravery in dealing with the violent robbers is clear, his impatience and rash temper are also insisted upon from the very beginning of the story. Angered by the death of his father and the defeat of the king, he is completely ignorant of the nature of the Parliamentary cause and reckless in his behaviour. His explosive temperament and longing for revenge threaten to jeopardize both his and his family's safety. Gradually, however, under the influence of the moderate Parliamentarian Heatherstone, Edward begins to appreciate the causes of the civil war, and his experiences at the Battle of Worcester continue his education. In the figure of Edward Beverley, who is only thirteen when the story opens, and is alternately fiery, arrogant, brave and sympathetic, we may say that the nineteenth-century juvenile hero had arrived.

That a change was coming over juvenile literature was obvious. The amount of pious evangelical teaching found in *Masterman Ready* in 1841 had diminished even by the time of *The Children of the New*

*Forest* in 1847, as Gillian Avery has observed <sup>8</sup>. The tone of R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* of 1858 makes the change even more noticeable.

*The Coral Island* is clearly a *Robinsonnade*, narrating the adventures of three boys Ralph, Jack and Peterkin, who are shipwrecked on a desert island in the tropics. They build an encampment, explore the island and live off the proceeds of hunting and fishing—not to mention the abundance of ripe fruit—and they get involved in struggles with both cannibals and pirates. But, although there is some evangelicism in the story—missionaries play a dramatic part, for example—there are crucial differences from earlier works. Ballantyne's story is essentially *about* and *for* boys. Adults only play minor roles, and there are no parents or older guardians. The boy-heroes are admired for their energy and courage, but also their high spirits and their humour. (It is their false innocence, of course, that William Golding was protesting about in his twentieth-century version of *The Coral Island* in his novel *Lord of the Flies* in 1954.) Although Ballantyne's story deals with high risks and death, the strongest emphasis is on the boys' enjoyment. The tone of the book is suggested by the narrator's opening words—"Roving has always been, and still is my ruling passion, the joy of my heart, the very sunshine of my existence."<sup>9</sup> And there is a real sadness when the boys sail away from their island at the end. The boys endure dangers not so much in order to survive as for fun!

This reveals the kind of change that was beginning to take place in juvenile publishing from the middle of the nineteenth century. There had sometimes been some gender emphasis in British children's books from the eighteenth century. Sarah Fielding's school story *The Governess, or, Little Female Academy* of 1749 seems more likely to have appealed to girls, for example, while the publisher Benjamin Tabbart produced *Presents for good girls* in 1804 and *Presents for good boys* in 1805. But the stratification in publishing different books and stories for boys and for girls really accelerated in the magazines and periodicals from the middle of the nineteenth century. Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Monthly Packet*, which first appeared in 1851, largely addressed to "young girls, or maidens, or young ladies"<sup>10</sup> tended to publish domestic fiction and stories about relationships. By contrast, Routledge's *Every Boys' Magazine* (1863-1889), offered articles on

8. Avery, Gillian, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

9. Ballantyne, R. M., *The Coral Island*, edited with an Introduction by J. S. Bratton, The World's Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. (I).

10. Yonge, C. M., "Introductory Letter," *The Monthly Packet*, vol. 1, January 1851, John and Charles Mozley, London, 1859 (*sic*), p. (i).

football and cricket, and R. M. Ballantyne's serial *The Wild Man of the West: a Tale of the Rocky Mountains* in 1863.

The most obvious example of the way juvenile literature was tending to bifurcate comes a little later, of course. In 1879 the Religious Tract Society began to publish its enormously popular magazine *The Boy's Own Paper*, with circulation rising to a quarter of a million, and a year later began its sister-publication *The Girl's Own Paper*. While the latter contained either domestic or romantic serials by such writers as Evelyn Everett Green and Rosa Carey, *The Boy's Own Paper* published tales of adventure, boy's stories, by such authors as R. M. Ballantyne and G. A. Henty. By the end of the nineteenth century the boy's story had become a dominant genre. Defoe's tale of *Robinson Crusoe*, which is a serious adult chronicle about physical and moral survival, had inspired a literary form for providing emotional and literary excitement for adolescent boys.

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