Tales of Crusoes

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When Gabriel Betteredge, in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, gives his heartfelt encomium to the unique spiritual, practical and medical use of *Robinson Crusoe:*

> When my spirits are bad – *Robinson Crusoe.* When I want advice – *Robinson Crusoe.* In past times when my wife plagued me; in present times, when I have had a drop too much – *Robinson Crusoe.* I have worn out six stout *Robinson Crusoes* with hard work in my service.[1]

he is expressing, albeit in a somewhat baroque manner, a not atypical mid-nineteenth century enthusiasm for that particular work. *Robinson Crusoe* was an extremely popular book with the Victorian reader. In 1854 traveller and novelist Percy B. St. John said with great confidence: "No work was ever published which has proved so delightful as 'Robinson Crusoe.' "[2] And Betteredge was not alone in attributing to the book a certain extra-literary importance. George Borrow writing in the 1840's recalled his childhood reading of the book: " . . . a book . . . to which, from the hardy deeds it narrates, and the spirit of strange and romantic enterprise which it tends to awaken, England owes many of her astonishing discoveries both by sea and land, and no inconsiderable part of her naval glory."[3]

Canny writers, perceiving the popularity of the Crusoe tale and sparked by its potential, determined to try their pens at the castaway theme. Harvey Darton lists a dozen of the numerous nineteenth century examples and, in 1852, when Catherine Parr Traill published *Canadian Crusoes* she was working within a flourishing genre. Clara Thomas in an article published in this journal examines *Canadian Crusoes* in the context of Mrs. Traill's early background, her immigrant experiences in Canada and her belief in the survival strength of balance and integration. Thomas shows the relationship between *Canadian Crusoes* and Mrs. Traill's earlier work *The Young Emigrants* and calls *Canadian Crusoes* "an exercise in myth-making for a new land."[4] The character of this myth can also be elucidated in another context, that of other Crusoe tales of the mid-nineteenth century. Within the conventions of the Robinsonnade Traill conveys a view of childhood and society that differs notably from European-based Crusoe tales of the period.

In Traill's story three young cousins, Hector and Louis, both

fourteen, and twelve-year old Catherine, wander away from their home on the shores of Lake Ontario and become lost on the Rice Lake Plains. The only relics of civilization that they carry with them into the wilderness are an axe and a knife. But the children display great ingenuity and resourcefulness and the story continues along well-worn lines as the Crusoes build a shelter, cope with illness and wild animals, fashion household implements and find and store food. Wolfe, their faithful family dog, finds them but cannot lead them home. As winter comes the boys build a more permanent home of logs, and the cast expands as the children rescue Indiana, a Mohawk girl who had been tortured and left for dead by attacking Ojibwas. With Indiana's additional knowledge and skills the children are able to attempt more ambitious projects such as planting crops and sugarmaking.

Such domesticity is interrupted when Catherine is captured by an Indian band. But she is freed by the brave intervention of Indiana and the story ends as the children are discovered by an old family friend who leads them back to their home, only seven miles away. They have spent three years in isolated survival.

The shape of this story, distilling as it does the story of creating civilization, contains the potential for confronting basic moral and religious questions. Traill deals with these questions in a tone that is reminiscent of an earlier period. Her shifts to scriptural language and her didactic stance are comparable to Ann Fraser Tytler's *Leila* or *The Island* (1833). This early Crusoe tale has a cast of eight-year old Leila, her father Mr. Howard, and an un-named nanny, who are the survivors of a ship that wrecked on its India-to-England run. The bulk of the story consists of a series of emblems from nature in which the father explains to Leila various aspects of theology, natural history, science and morality in response to her questions about the strange world of the island. We learn the value of industry and patience from observing the white ant colony; goats left hungry in a pit show us how wilderness is tamed through suffering; and Leila who fails to mend a broken flower learns that only God can make a tree.

We are here presented with an idea of childhood that hearkens back to Mary Butt Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family* (1812). Children are to be given constant surveillance and exclusive attention in order that they may be taught through example and explication. In *Leila* this attitude is overlaid with the romantic image of the small girl sitting playing her guitar (a useful piece of salvage) and singing "Where the bee sucks."

But Catherine Parr Traill's Rice Lake Plains are neither Mr. Sherwood's drawing room nor Leila's island. Louis, Hector and

Catherine are far more independent than the Fairchild children and are of a hardier breed than Leila. The Canadian Crusoes are too busy with the realistic essentials of survival to have the leisure for introspection, and in the first part of the story Traill confines her moral teaching to passages of authorial interruption. Her choice of an all-child cast precludes the possibility of an adult moral guardian and mouthpiece. She works within the conventions of the genre but her expression of a more emancipated view of childhood does create a lack of narrative unity.

In the second part of the adventure, with the appearance of Indiana, there is a shift to a more unified and conventional approach as the Indian girl assumes the role of child. Here is Leila in another guise – the beautiful child in almost mystical communication with nature who nonetheless needs to be molded, educated, civilized. Catherine takes on the role of adult in the education of Indiana and it is in these passages that some of the ubiquitous questions of the Robinsonnade arise.

The Crusoe story enabled its practitioners to deal with the issues of civilization in miniature and the concept of language as a bond that links humankind is viewed at a fundamental level. Once again, Traill's Canadian version is illuminated by comparison with other variants. In Frederick Marryat's fascinating *The Little Savage* (1848) we are given a portrait of the exhilaration of language. Young Frank Henniker has grown from infancy on a desert island, his sole companion Jackson, the morose and cruel murderer of Frank's father. When Frank achieves power over Jackson his first demand is for conversation, and after a day of stories and explanations he says, "I was positively almost drunk with words."[5] A questioning of the function and nature of language is exhibited as Marryat makes a distinction between two kinds of words. The words that Frank learns from Jackson, "ship," "year," "gold", are words whose use succeeds the knowledge of the thing. But the words he learns subsequently, from a rescuing missionary, "God," "judgement," "sin," reflect the notion that one cannot conceive of the thing until one has the word.

Traill raises this same distinction as she discusses the education of Indiana by Catherine. Hector reminds Catherine that she is neglecting Indiana's spiritual education and Catherine replies: "She cannot understand what we say . . . for she knows so little of our language yet, that of course she cannot comprehend the prayers, which are in other sort of words than what we use in speaking of hunting, and fishing, and cooking, and such matters."[6] The possibilities raised by this naturalistic bit of dialogue are left tantalizingly unrealized as Traill switches to her vaguer scriptural style to describe how Indiana is led to the light.

The question of what distinguishes the civilized from the natural being is further discussed in a catalogue of Indiana's abilities:

> Attention, memory, and imitation appeared to form the three most remarkable of the mental faculties developed by the Indian girl. She examined (when once her attention was roused) any object with critical minuteness. Any knowledge she had once acquired she retained; her memory was great, she never missed a path she had once trodden; she seemed even to single out particular birds in a flock, to know them from their companions. Her powers of imitation were also great. She brought patience and perserverance to assist her: when once thoroughly interested in any work she began, she would toil on untiringly till it was completed; and then what triumph shone in her eyes! At such times they became darkly brilliant with the joy that filled her heart. But she possessed little talent for invention; what she had seen done, after a few imperfect attempts, she could do again, but she rarely struck out any new path for herself.[7]

This passage is strongly reminiscent of another such discussion in Marryat's *Masterman Ready* (1841). In this desert island story, the Seagrave family along with the aging sea salt Ready survive a shipwreck and various of the usual disasters. Describing man's unique place in creation to his son Mr. Seagrave discusses the capacities of animals. They may exhibit reason as well as instinct through their memory, power of attention, association of ideas and knowledge of time, but they have no "instinctive evidence of future existence."[8] This kind of analysis of man's place in God's creation is endemic to the castaway story and Traill follows the conventional pattern.

In one respect, however, Traill diverges from this pattern. She exhibits an atypically warm and hopeful view of mankind. In other Robinsonnades of the mid-nineteenth century there is a deep strain of misanathropy. Mankind, especially mankind in cities, is seen as a sickness. In Mayne Reid's *A Desert Home* (1851), a Crusoe tale set in the American southwest, one character declares: "The world . . . what care we for the world? Remember how little we have in that world, remember how it has used us so far. Have we ever been happy in it? No; I have enjoyed more happiness here than I ever did in the midst of that society of which you speak."[9] And her husband replies: "It is strange, that, of all others, man was the animal we most dreaded to meet."[10]

If man is the sickness, nature is the cure. It is a significant convention of the Robinsonnade that characters increase in health and vigour even as they endure hardship and deprivation. What impresses visitors to the family in *The Desert Home* is their blooming health.

The ailing Mrs. Seagrave of *Masterman Ready*, revives on the island. And Leila who is on the ship in recuperation from a Calcutta illness grows strong and healthy.

But in *Canadian Crusoes* the children are seen as already in tune with their natural surroundings, and as hearty, inventive, strong and brave from the outset of the story. The line between civilization and wilderness is not clearly defined in their world. In contrast to other little cast-aways whose experience is limited to sheltered nursery or schoolroom, the Canadian Crusoes have a pioneer background that seems to provide them with the education and experience to actually survive in the wilderness. As Clara Thomas points out, this competence is in itself mythic, a late recreation of an earlier pioneer time.[11] But in terms of the fiction it has the effect of providing a veneer of versimilitude unique in Crusoe tales.

But the lack of delineation between a busy, peopled world and isolation also gives the book a much smaller scope than Marryat's or St. John's or Reid's. An all-encompassing ironic view of civilization seen against the cleansing, curing and awe-inspiring powers of nature is not present. Marryat's Masterman Ready looks at nature and says: "These inaccessible things seem to have been designed by the creator to afford us objects for sublime contemplation - objects far above the reach of mortal man, and that never can be rendered common by his contact."[12] Traill looks at nature and gets out her field notebook to describe, identify and classify.

This matter-of-factness and lack of grandeur are typical also of her use of character. The versimilitude she imparts to details of survival is lacking in her presentation of psychological realities. The children seem to weather their three years in isolation with no genuine grief or loneliness. In other Robinsonnades of the period loneliness is an important theme. Mr. Seagrave goes into deep melancholia and Ready realizes that the mental capacity to survive depends on creating a new world, banishing longing for the old. In Percy B. St. John's *Arctic Crusoes* (1854) the hero contemplates suicide. Frank, in *The Little Savage*, desperately reaches out for human contact. In these agonies one senses a kind of deep loneliness at the heart of Victorian experience and thinks of Newman writing in his *Apologia*, "You may think how lonely I am . . . It is like going on the open sea."[13] The experiences of castaways are, perhaps, expressions of the open sea that life had become by the middle of the nineteenth century. But Traill's children have no time for such sadness: "To be up and doing is the maxim of a Canadian; and it is this that nerves his arm to do and bear."[14]

The fascination with details of survival is a traditional motivation behind much literature for children, from *Little House on the Prairie* to *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. One suspects that many young readers enjoy *Robinson Crusoe* only after their own personal editing, where Robinson's contemplation of higher things is elided in favour of learning how to make candles or cope with cannibals. And in this respect *Canadian Crusoes* is a superior work. The lore is genuine, based on experience and observation. The conventions are played out against a setting that is distinct and cherished.

But it is more than a footnote explaining "mandrake or may-apple" that makes us aware that we are in a new world. Permeating Traill's book is a feeling of energy, simplicity and confidence, of hope and vitality. As in other Robinsonnades of the period the isolation experience is exciting and intriguing. But in *Canadian Crusoes* the home that the children return to is one of joy and potential, unadulterated by doubt, misanthropy or despair.

NOTES

[1]Wilkie Collins. *The Moonstone* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 41.

[2]Percy B. St. John. *The Arctic Crusoe, A Tale of the Polar Sea* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1890), p. 3.

[3]Amy Cruse. *The Victorians and their Reading* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 308. Ian Watt sees in *Robinson Crusoe* the idea of economic and spiritual individualism, an idea that made possible the development of the novel but did not permeate society as a whole until the nineteenth century. Thus the Victorian reader found in the work an expression of a contemporary social ideology. Ian Watt. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 60-92.

[4]Clara Thomas, "Traill's Canadian Settlers" *Canadian Children's Literature*, #5/6, 1976, p. 38. See also comments by Muriel Whitaker in "Child in the Wilderness: the Romantic View", same issue, pp. 26-27.

[5]Frederick Marryat. *The Little Savage* (London: J.M. Dent, 1896), p. 26.

[6]Catherine Parr Traill. *Lost in the Backwoods* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1884), p. 176. First published as *Canadian Crusoes*.

[7]Traill, p. 163.

[8]Frederick Marryat. *Masterman Ready* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1898), p. 79.

[9]Mayne Reid. *The Desert Home* or *The Adventures of a Lost Family in the Wilderness* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1851), p. 153.

[10]Reid, p. 131.

[11]Thomas, p. 35-6.

[12]Marryat. *Ready*, p. 166-7.

[13]Quoted in Walter Houghton. *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1957), p. 84.

[14]Traill, p. 224.

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