

= The Coral Island =

The Coral Island : A Tale of the Pacific Ocean ( 1858 ) is a novel written by Scottish author R. M. Ballantyne . One of the first works of juvenile fiction to feature exclusively juvenile heroes , the story relates the adventures of three boys marooned on a South Pacific island , the only survivors of a shipwreck .

A typical Robinsonade ? a genre of fiction inspired by Daniel Defoe 's Robinson Crusoe ? and one of the most popular of its type , the book first went on sale in late 1857 and has never been out of print . Among the novel 's major themes are the civilising effect of Christianity , 19th @-@ century British imperialism in the South Pacific , and the importance of hierarchy and leadership . It was the inspiration for William Golding 's dystopian novel Lord of the Flies ( 1954 ) , which inverted the morality of The Coral Island ; in Ballantyne 's story the children encounter evil , but in Lord of the Flies evil is within them .

In the early 20th century , the novel was considered a classic for primary school children in the UK , and in the United States it was a staple of high @-@ school suggested reading lists . Modern critics consider the book 's worldview to be dated and imperialist , but although less popular today , The Coral Island was adapted into a four @-@ part children 's television drama broadcast by ITV in 2000 .

= = Background = =

= = = Biographical background and publication = = =

Born in Edinburgh in 1825 , and raised there , Ballantyne was the ninth of ten children and the youngest son . Tutored by his mother and sisters , his only formal education was a brief period at Edinburgh Academy in 1835 ? 37 . At the age of 16 he travelled to Canada , where he spent five years working for the Hudson 's Bay Company , trading with the Native Americans for furs . He returned to Scotland in 1847 and for some years worked for the publisher Messrs Constable , first as a clerk and then as a partner in the business . During his time in Canada he had helped to pass the time by writing long letters to his mother ? to which he attributed " whatever small amount of facility in composition [ he ] may have acquired " ? and began his first book . Ballantyne 's Canadian experiences formed the basis of his first novel , The Young Fur Traders , published in 1856 , the year he decided to become a full @-@ time writer and embarked on the adventure stories for the young with which his name is popularly associated .

Ballantyne never visited the coral islands of the South Pacific , relying instead on the accounts of others that were then beginning to emerge in Britain , which he exaggerated for theatrical effect by including " plenty of gore and violence meant to titillate his juvenile readership " . His ignorance of the South Pacific caused him to erroneously describe coconuts as being soft and easily opened ; a stickler for accuracy he resolved that in future , whenever possible , he would write only about things he had personal experience of . Ballantyne wrote The Coral Island while staying in a house on the Burntisland seafront opposite Edinburgh on the Firth of Forth in Fife . According to Ballantyne biographer Eric Quayle he borrowed extensively from an 1852 novel by the American author James F. Bowman , The Island Home . He also borrowed from John Williams ' Narrative of Missionary Enterprises ( 1837 ) , to the extent that cultural historian Rod Edmond has suggested that Ballantyne must have written one chapter of The Coral Island with Williams ' book open in front of him , so similar is the text . Edmond describes the novel as " a fruit cocktail of other writing about the Pacific " , adding that " by modern standards Ballantyne 's plagiarism in The Coral Island is startling " .

Although the first edition is dated 1858 it was on sale in bookshops from early December 1857 ; dating books forward was a common practice at the time , especially during the Christmas period , to " preserve their newness " into the new year . The Coral Island is Ballantyne 's second novel , and has never been out of print . He was an exceedingly prolific author who wrote more than 100 books

in his 40 @-@ year career . According to professor and author John Rennie Short , Ballantyne had a " deep religious conviction " , and felt it his duty to educate Victorian middle @-@ class boys ? his target audience ? in " codes of honour , decency , and religiosity " .

The first edition of *The Coral Island* was published by T. Nelson & Sons , who in common with many other publishers of the time had a policy when accepting a manuscript of buying the copyright from the author rather than paying royalties ; as a result , authors generally did not receive any income from the sale of subsequent editions . Ballantyne received between £ 50 and £ 60 , equivalent to about £ 5800 as of 2012 , but when the novel 's popularity became evident and the number of editions increased he tried unsuccessfully to buy back the copyright . He wrote bitterly to Nelsons in 1893 about the copyrights they held on his books while he had earned nothing : " for thirty @-@ eight years [ you have ] reaped the whole profits " .

*The Coral Island* ? still considered a classic ? was republished by Penguin Books in 1995 , in their Popular Classics series .

= = = Literary and historical context = = =

Published during the " first golden age of children 's fiction " , *The Coral Island* began a trend in boys ' fiction by using boys as the main characters , a device now commonplace in the genre . It preserves , according to literary critic Minnie Singh , the moralizing aspects of didactic texts , but does so ( and in this regard it is a " founding text " ) by the " congruence of subject and implied reader " : the story is about boys and written retrospectively as though by a boy , for an audience of boys .

According to literary critic Frank Kermode , *The Coral Island* " could be used as a document in the history of ideas " . A scientific and social background for the novel is found in Darwinism , of the natural and the social kind . For instance , Charles Darwin 's 1842 *The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs* was one of the best @-@ known contemporary accounts of the growth of coral . Published a year before Darwin 's *Origin of Species* ( whose ideas were already being circulated and discussed widely ) , *The Coral Island* reflects the then prevalent view of evolutionary theory ; the Victorian age based its imperialist ideology in part on the idea that evolution had resulted in " white , English superiority that was anchored in the notion of a civilized nation elected by God to rule inferior peoples . " Ballantyne had been reading books by Darwin and by his rival Alfred Russel Wallace ; in later publications he also acknowledged the naturalist Henry Ogg Forbes . The interest in evolutionary theory was reflected in much contemporary popular literature , and social Darwinism was an important factor contributing to the world view of the Victorians and their empire building .

= = Plot summary = =

The story is written as a first person narrative from the perspective of 15 @-@ year @-@ old Ralph Rover , one of three boys shipwrecked on the coral reef of a large but uninhabited Polynesian island . Ralph tells the story retrospectively , looking back on his boyhood adventure : " I was a boy when I went through the wonderful adventures herein set down . With the memory of my boyish feelings strong upon me , I present my book specially to boys , in the earnest hope that they may derive valuable information , much pleasure , great profit , and unbounded amusement from its pages . "

The account starts briskly ; only four pages are devoted to Ralph 's early life and a further fourteen to his voyage to the Pacific Ocean on board the *Arrow* . He and his two companions ? 18 @-@ year @-@ old Jack Martin and 13 @-@ year @-@ old Peterkin Gay ? are the sole survivors of the shipwreck . The narrative is in two parts . The first describes how the boys feed themselves , what they drink , the clothing and shelter they fashion , and how they cope with having to rely on their own resources . The second half of the novel is more action @-@ packed , featuring conflicts with pirates , fighting between the native Polynesians , and the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries .

Fruit , fish and wild pigs provide plentiful food , and at first the boys ' life on the island is idyllic . They build a shelter and construct a small boat using their only possessions : a broken telescope ,

an iron @-@ bound oar , and a small axe . Their first contact with other humans comes after several months when they observe two large outrigger canoes in the distance , one pursued by the other . The two groups of Polynesians disembark on the beach and engage in battle ; the victors take fifteen prisoners , and kill and eat one immediately . But when they threaten to kill one of the three women captured , along with two children , the boys intervene to defeat the pursuers , earning them the gratitude of the chief , Tararo . The next morning they prevent another act of cannibalism . The natives leave , and the boys are alone once more .

More unwelcome visitors then arrive in the shape of British pirates , who make a living by trading or stealing sandalwood . The three boys hide in a cave , but Ralph is captured when he ventures out to see if the intruders have left , and is taken on board the pirate schooner . He strikes up a friendship with one of the crew , Bloody Bill , and when the ship calls at the island of Emo to trade for more wood Ralph experiences many facets of the island 's culture : the popular sport of surfing , the sacrificing of babies to eel gods , rape , and cannibalism .

Rising tensions result in the inhabitants attacking the pirates , leaving only Ralph and Bloody Bill alive . The pair succeed in making their escape in the schooner , but Bill is mortally wounded . He makes a death @-@ bed repentance for his evil life , leaving Ralph to sail back to the Coral Island alone , where he is reunited with his friends .

The three boys sail to the island of Mango , where a missionary has converted some of the population to Christianity . There they once again meet Tararo , whose daughter Avatea wishes to become a Christian against her father 's wishes . The boys attempt to take Avatea in a small boat to a nearby island the chief of which has been converted , but en route they are overtaken by one of Tararo 's war canoes and taken prisoner . They are released a month later after the arrival of another missionary , and Tararo 's conversion to Christianity . The " false gods " of Mango are consigned to the flames , and the boys set sail for home , older and wiser . They return as adults for another adventure in Ballantyne 's 1861 novel *The Gorilla Hunters* , a sequel to *The Coral Island* .

= = Genre and style = =

All Ballantyne 's novels are , in his own words , " adventure stories for young folks " , and *The Coral Island* is no exception . It is a Robinsonade , a genre of fiction inspired by Daniel Defoe 's *Robinson Crusoe* ( 1719 ) , one of the most popular of its type , and one of the first works of juvenile fiction to feature exclusively juvenile heroes . Susan Maher , professor of English , notes that in comparison to *Robinson Crusoe* such books generally replaced some of the original 's romance with a " pedestrian realism " , exemplified by works such as *The Coral Island* and Frederick Marryat 's 1841 novel *Masterman Ready* , or *The Wreck of the Pacific* . Romance , with its attention to character development , was only restored to the genre of boys ' fiction with Robert Louis Stevenson 's *Treasure Island* argues literary critic Lisa Honaker . *The Coral Island* , for all its adventure , is greatly occupied with the realism of domestic fiction ( the domain of the realist novel ) ; Ballantyne devotes about a third of the book to descriptions of the boys ' living arrangements . The book exhibits a " light @-@ hearted confidence " in its description of an adventure that was above all fun . As Ralph says in his preface : " If there is any boy or man who loves to be melancholy and morose , and who cannot enter with kindly sympathy into the regions of fun , let me seriously advise him to shut my book and put it away . It is not meant for him . " Professor of English M. Daphne Kutzer has observed that " the swift movement of the story from coastal England to exotic Pacific island is similar to the swift movement from the real world to the fantastic in children 's fantasy " .

To a modern reader Ballantyne 's books can seem overly concerned with accounts of flora and fauna , an " ethnographic gloss " intended to suggest that their settings are real places offering adventures to those who can reach them . They can also seem " obtrusively pious " , but according to John Rennie Short , the moral tone of Ballantyne 's writing is compensated for by his ability to tell a " cracking good yarn in an accessible and well @-@ fashioned prose style " .

= = Themes = =

The major themes of the novel revolve around the influence of Christianity , the importance of social hierarchies , and the inherent superiority of civilised Europeans over the South Sea islanders ; Martine Duthell , professor of English , considers the novel " a key text mapping out colonial relations in the Victorian period " . The basic subject of the novel is popular and widespread : " castaway children assuming adult responsibilities without adult supervision " , and *The Coral Island* is considered the classic example of such a book .

The supposed civilising influence of missionaries in spreading Christianity among the natives of the South Seas is an important theme of the second half of the story ; as Jack remarks to Peterkin , " all the natives of the South Sea Islands are fierce cannibals , and they have little respect for strangers " . Modern critics view this aspect of the novel less benevolently ; Jerry Phillips , in a 1995 article , sees in *The Coral Island* the " perfect realiz [ ation ] " of " the official discourse of 19th century Pacific imperialism " , which he argues was " obsessed with the purity of God , Trade , and the Nation . "

The importance of hierarchy and leadership is also a significant element . The overarching hierarchy of race is informed by Victorian concepts , influenced by the new theories of evolution proposed by Darwin and others . In morals and culture , the natives are placed lower on the evolutionary ladder than are Europeans , as is evidenced in the battle over the native woman Avatea , which pits " the forces of civilization versus the forces of cannibalism " . Another hierarchy is seen in the organisation of the boys . Although Jack , Ralph and Peterkin each have a say in how they should organise themselves , ultimately the younger boys defer to Jack , " a natural leader " , particularly in a crisis , forming a natural hierarchy . The pirates also have a hierarchy , but one without democracy , and as a consequence are wiped out . The hierarchy of the natives is imposed by savagery . Ballantyne 's message is that leaders should be respected by those they lead , and govern with their consent . This educational message is especially appropriate considering Ballantyne 's adolescent audience , " the future rulers of the world " .

Modern critics find darker undertones in the novel . In an essay published in *College English* in 2001 , Martine Duthell states that *The Coral Island* can be thought of as epitomising a move away from " the confidence and optimism of the early Victorian proponents of British imperialism " toward " self @-@ consciousness and anxiety about colonial domination " . She locates this anxiety in what she calls the " rhetoric of excess " that features in the descriptions of cannibalism , and especially in the accounts of Fijian savagery provided by Bloody Bill ( most notably that of the sacrifice of children to the eel gods ) and the missionary , a representative of the London Missionary Society , an " emblematic figure of colonial fiction " . Others have also linked popular boys ' fiction of the period with imperialism ; Joseph Bristow 's *Empire Boys* ( 1991 ) claimed to see an " ' imperialist manhood , ' which shaped British attitudes towards empire and masculinity . " The novel 's portrayal of Pacific culture and the effects of colonisation are analyzed in studies such as Brian Street 's *The Savage in Literature : Representations of ' Primitive ' Society in English Fiction* ( 1975 ) and Rod Edmond 's *Representing the South Pacific : Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* ( 1998 ) . The domination imposed by " geographical mapping of a territory and policing of its native inhabitants " is an important theme in the novel both specifically and in general , in the topography of the island as mapped by the boys and the South Pacific 's " eventual subjugation and conversion to Christianity " , a topic continued in Stevenson 's *Treasure Island* .

The exploration of the relationship between nature and evangelical Christianity is another typically Victorian theme . Coral connects the two ideas . Literary critic Katharine Anderson explains that coral jewellery , popular in the period , had a " pious significance " . The " enchanted garden " of coral the boys discover at the bottom of their island 's lagoon is suggestive of " missionary encounters with the societies of the Pacific Island " . In Victorian society coral had been given an " evangelical framing " , and the little " coral insect " responsible for building coral reefs mirrored the " child reader 's productive capacity as a fundraiser for the missionary cause " ; literary critic Michelle Elleray discusses numerous children 's books from the early to mid @-@ 19th century , including *The Coral Island* , in which coral plays such an educational role .

The novel 's setting provides the backdrop for a meditation in the style of Jean @-@ Jacques Rousseau , who promoted an educational setting in which lessons are provided by direct

interactions with the natural world rather than by books and coercive teachers . Singh points out that Rousseau , in *Emile* , or *On Education* , promotes the reading and even imitation of Robinson Crusoe ; literary critic Fiona McCulloch argues that the unmediated knowledge the boys gain on their coral island resembles the " direct language for children " Rousseau advocates in *Emile* .

= = Critical reception = =

The *Coral Island* was an almost instant success , and was translated into almost every European language within fifty years of its publication . It was widely admired by its contemporary readers , although modern critics view the text as featuring " dated colonialist themes and arguably racist undertones " . Ballantyne 's blend of blood @-@ thirsty adventure and pious imperialism appealed not just to his target juvenile audience but also to their parents and teachers . He is today mainly remembered for *The Coral Island* , to the exclusion of much of his other work .

The novel was still considered a classic for English primary school children in the early 20th century . In the United States it was long a staple of suggested reading lists for high @-@ school students ; such a list , discussed in a 1915 article in *The English Journal* , recommends the novel in the category " Stories for Boys in Easy Style " . A simplified adaptation of the book was recommended in the 1950s for American 12 ? 14 year olds . Although mostly neglected by modern scholars and generally considered to be dated in many aspects , in 2006 it was voted one of the top twenty Scottish novels at the 15th International World Wide Web Conference .

= = Influence = =

Robert Louis Stevenson 's 1882 novel *Treasure Island* was in part inspired by *The Coral Island* , which he admired for its " better qualities " , as was J. M. Barrie 's character Peter Pan ; both Stevenson and Barrie had been " fervent boy readers " of the novel . Novelist G. A. Henty was also influenced by Ballantyne 's audience @-@ friendly method of didacticism .

William Golding 's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies* was written as a counterpoint to ( or even a parody of ) *The Coral Island* , and Golding makes explicit references to it . At the end of the novel , for instance , one of the naval officers who rescues the children mentions the book , commenting on the hunt for one of their number , Ralph , as a " jolly good show . Like the *Coral Island* " . Jack also makes an appearance in *Lord of the Flies* as Jack Merridew , representing the irrational nature of the boys . Indeed , Golding 's three central characters ? Ralph , Piggy and Jack ? are caricatures of Ballantyne 's heroes . Despite having enjoyed *The Coral Island* many times as a child , Golding strongly disagreed with the views that it espoused , and in contrast *Lord of the Flies* depicts the English boys as savages themselves , who forget more than they learn , unlike Ballantyne 's boys . Golding described the relationship between the two books by saying that *The Coral Island* " rotted to compost " in his mind , and in the compost " a new myth put down roots " . Neither is the idyllic nature of Ballantyne 's coral island to be found on Stevenson 's treasure island , which is unsuitable for settlement " but exists merely as a site from which to excavate treasure , a view consistent with the late @-@ Victorian imperial mission " according to Honaker .

= = Television adaptations = =

The *Coral Island* was adapted into a children 's television series in a joint venture between Thames Television and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1980 , first shown on Australian and British television in 1983 . It was also adapted into a four @-@ part children 's television drama by Zenith Productions , broadcast by ITV in 2000 .