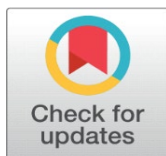# R. M. BALLANTYNE'S THE CORAL ISLAND: NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY, NATION AND THE EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

R.M Ballantyne's writings were seen as greatly influential in forging an understanding of juvenile masculinity that involved views on supremacy of Christian, British young men involved in the colonial enterprise. As an influence on Boys Own para-literary material, The Coral Island reinforces this view of a just and Christian Empire. This paper examines these connections between the nation, the empire and the working class boy.

Keywords: Boys Own, Robinsonade, Island Narrative, Pirate, Sailor, Nationalism, Empire, Christianity, Boyhood

1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the *Boy's Own* magazines in the nineteenth century British literary market place acted as a catalyst for adventure writing. The cult of masculinity perpetrated by the colonial and industrial movement in England provided themes as well as the raison d'être for this kind of literature. Between 1855 and 1920, there were in total over a dozen serials using the title *Boys Own*. The contents of these papers were in keeping with the contemporary socio-economic and religious scenario. They often published adventure stories, notes on how to practice nature study, sports and games, puzzles, and essay competitions. In the first few decades, these papers unselfconsciously promoted the British Empire as the highest achievement of their civilization, and reflected fully the racist attitudes which were taken for granted in Britain at the time. In 1885, for example, *Boy's Own Paper* described its vision of 'the typical negro' as follows: "The arm is two inches longer in proportion than that of a Caucasian, and the hands hang level with the kneecaps; the facial angle is seventy as against eighty three, the brain weighs thirty five as against forty five; the skull is much thicker ... there is no growth in intelligence once manhood is reached."[1] This description is not far from the kind provided in many early autobiographical accounts by sailors and explorers too. Steeped in the false philosophy of white supremacy and the right

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[1] p. 87. *Wascana review*, Volume 12. (1977) University of Saskatchewan.

of the British over the riches of the world, these writings had a great impact on the young Christian inheritors of the Empire. It is significant that the 'boy's own' papers initially attempted to appeal to boys of all classes, but by the 1890s began to concentrate on boys from wealthier backgrounds. One reason behind this abandoning of the working class boys, who were as 'boyish' as any other boys, may be sought in the rising discontent and rebellion among the workers and labourers involved in massive industrialization of England. The economic chasm between the classes in England was widening at an unprecedented pace. The dreams, aspirations and destinies of boys from disparate, unequal and incongruent backgrounds could no longer be reconciled in one single magazine. Also their sense of masculinity and manhood differed greatly. The boys own literature sided therefore with the moneyed class- the class where boys had time for cerebral entertainment and arm chair adventure. Their working class counterparts in the meanwhile, indulged in real life 'adventure'- mining, naval pursuits, factory jobs, bread-winning and going to remote colonies as petty handymen.

The nexus between adventure writing, popularity of boys own papers, colonialism and industrialization of England is crucial to the growth of the Robinsonade/ island novel. *The Coral Island,* and *Treasure Island*, the two most successful island novels of nineteenth century owed their success to a great extent to the growing interest of the reading public in the adventures off the shores of England. This interest in turn emanated from the growing involvement of the common British citizen in the affairs of the Empire. It would be fruitful perhaps at this point to take a look at the picture of British colonial power, its nature and expanse, in the nineteenth century. In his book, *British Imperialism: Histories and Controversies* (2003), Robert Johnson points towards some policies which ensured the longevity of the Empire. One of these policies was the encouragement of free trade:

> By the mid-nineteenth century, the mercantilism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with state restrictions on imports and control of exchange, had given way to free trade principles. In 1599, the Crown had been directly involved in the granting of chartered company status to the East India Company, and the Hudson's Bay Company was formed in 1670. These monopolistic ventures indirectly benefited Britain as a whole, but, by the mid-nineteenth century, their charters had all been abrogated in favour of free trade arrangements. Although chartered companies were resurrected in the late nineteenth century (as a means of controlling regions without the expense of direct rule) they were relatively short-lived. (Johnson 20)

Free trade opened up newer avenues for the Empire. The steady multiplication of the imperial profits and power due to free trade was also accompanied by Britain's increasing interest in the Orient. The East consisted of Britain's most values jewels- India and Burma. Britain's 'swing to the east' was coupled with its quest for power in Africa too: By 1870s, Britain "acquired 5 million square miles and 88 million new subjects. Strategically valued regions became the focus of intense diplomatic interest or of military operations. When European powers began to rival Britain's widely flung possessions, the existing toeholds became springboards for expansion into the interior of Africa and Asia". (Johnson 4) The empire grew steadily through the whole of nineteenth century and in 1900, the British Empire covered "one-fifth of the globe and governed 400 million subjects of many faiths and ethnic groups. There were 60 dependencies covering 3.2 million square miles, and British India consisted of a further 2 million square miles and 322 million subjects. In addition, Britain possessed five dominions covering 7.6 million square miles and 24 million people. As the hub in a system of trade, financial services, communications, migratory patterns, naval and military power, Britain had become... 'the centre of the world'". (Johnson 1)

This massive Empire could not have been a monolithic entity united by the British Crown, and governed from London throughout the total 300 years of its existence. The empire on which the 'sun never set' employed a mixed approach towards administration which changed from case-to-case. But the absence of a fixed colonial policy did not mean that there was no definitive view on the way the empire was to function. Johnson notes that:

> In 1878, the Earl of Carnarvon envisaged an imperialism which bound together "a great English-speaking community" and delivered "wise laws, good government, and a well ordered finance . . . a system where the humblest may enjoy *freedom from oppression and wrong* equally with the greatest; *where the light of religion and morality can penetrate into the darkest dwelling places*. This is the true fulfilment of *our duties*; this...is the true strength and meaning of imperialism."[2] Therefore imperialism was seen by some of its practitioners as a set of values that were essentially benign. This was not propaganda or window-dressing; the benevolent mission was a genuine belief for the overwhelming majority of imperial administrators and for many of the settlers too. (Johnson 3)

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[2] Emphasis mine.

Till the nineteenth century, the empire still held on to the belief that its subjects needed it. This belief was also tied to their ever-improving sense of the self- in terms of both Christianity and Englishness. The Earl's emphasis on religion and morality is evidence of this deep-seated confidence in English superiority and supremacy.

This same English supremacy and confidence in its Christian values and moral codes forms the basis of *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne published in the tumultuous year of 1857. As a part of the Victorian moral machine and a participant in the literary tradition upholding imperialist values, this novel remained extremely popular till mid-twentieth century. It provides a good peek into the nationalist and colonial subtexts under the concept of Victorian boyhood and the emergent codes of masculinity in England. The conversation between Ralph, Peterkin and Jack which takes place when they finally confront the fact that they have been stranded on an island, underlines the crux of this code of masculinity: "We've got an island all to ourselves. *We'll take possession in the name of the king*; we'll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course *we'll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries.* You shall be *king*, Jack." (Ballantyne Chapter III)[3] This exchange is a good sample of all the philosophies which guide the three quintessentially English boys through their adventures amongst the pirates and natives of the island of the South Seas. Peterkin's thought of 'taking possession in the name of the king' is indicative of an English as well as Christian consciousness. The king in this claim is symbolic of the British monarchy as well as the Christian God. The protagonists display dominion on both these fields. The boys' ambition to 'farm the land, plant, sow, reap, eat, sleep, and be merry', far from stressing on immediate survival, foregrounds their desire to work the island and own it. As mentioned earlier, these are ideal, quintessential English boys- who can face trouble with a smile, change the terrain of an island with their hard work, fight fierce cannibals, facilitate their conversion to Christianity, confront and defeat mercenary pirates, stand for English ideals of honour, heroism and comradeship, and still manage to have a lot of fun on a virgin tropical island.

True to this spirit of Englishness, they name different locations on the island (Spouting Cliff, Diamond Cave, Valley of Wreck, etc.) in accordance with their experiences there. They survey 'their' island from a tall peak like monarchs to ascertain its topography. Their understanding that white men always do well in all circumstances must have added to their appeal to the readers of the Victorian age. The racism inherent in the attitudes of these sailor boys finds outlets at several points in the novel. There is also criticism of white men for errant acts which Ralph, the narrator thinks, bring a bad name to the British. He aptly labels the English pirates who eventually capture him as "white savages" (Ballantyne Chapter XXI) The evil pirate acts as a foil to the Christian spirit of the three boys. The pirates' mercenary attitude towards Christianity is frequently juxtaposed against the Christian innocence and compassion of Ralph. A quick exchange between two pirates sheds light on this attitude of the pirates: " 'Why, Dick, you must be new to these seas if you don't know that,' cried another. 'The captain cares as much for the gospel as you do (an' that's precious little), but he knows, and everybody knows, that the only place among the southern islands where a ship can put in and get what she wants in comfort, is where the gospel has been sent to. There are hundreds o' islands, at this blessed moment, where you might as well jump straight into a shark's maw as land without a band o' thirty comrades armed to the teeth to back you.' " (Ballantyne Chapter XXIII) Even Bloody Bill, the pirate with a heart who meets a tragic but heroic end in the arms of Ralph, has a dysfunctional relation with Christianity: " 'We find that wherever the savages take up with Christianity they always give over their bloody ways, and are safe to be trusted. I never cared for Christianity myself,' he continued, in a soliloquizing voice, 'and I don't well know what it means; but a man with half an eye can see what it does for these black critters.' " (Ballantyne Chapter XXIV)

A small digression here to examine the sailors' attitudes to the nation, religion and values such as loyalty and humanism may be useful. While examining the nature of and the reasons behind any sense of loyalty shown by British sailors from mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, Isaac Land in his book *War, Nationalism and The British Sailor:1750-1850* observes a pattern of disloyalty and hunting for better perks amongst British sailors. Through a close reading of the autobiographical writings of two sailors John Barlow[4] and Edward Coxere[5], he concludes that matters of nationality and nationalism were associated more deeply with those of benefits and comfort for average sailors than to those of loyalty and faithfulness.

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[3] Emphasis mine.

[4] Edward Barlow. *Barlow's Journal of his life at sea in King's Ships, East and West Indiamen and other Merchantmen from 1659 to 1703.* Transcribed by Basil Lubbock. 2 vols. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1934.

[5] Edward Coxere. *Adventures by Sea of Edward Coxere*, ed. E. H. W. Meyerstein. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

In fact, British identity entailed benefits which superseded those given by other countries. If these sailors did not all turn pirates, the sole reason was that attaching oneself to a nation ensured a safe old age in Europe. Many veterans on the sea would have preferred to live under the "Atlantic Flag"- the flag of the nation on the ocean. They would have preferred a citizenship of this watery country instead. Many pirate ships even went to the extent of offering such a citizenship to their new recruits. But the fact remains that "there was certainly no "Atlantic" pension plan for the elderly or disabled sailor. As veterans, it would—once again—be the nation-state that had the power to provide them with a hospital bed, or deny their claim." (Land 19) They also paid a price for this kind of security: "No one who "used the sea," even a part-time herring fisherman, was likely to escape at least a period in the King's service… About half of the Royal Navy's wartime complement was made up through this form of conscription." (Land 20) This proposition however was not the most desirable for the sailors as they were not paid enough by the Royal Navy. Their pay was definitely not comparable to what they earned as crew of merchant ships. "Many men who were qualified for those jobs felt cheated and promptly deserted, setting off new waves of impressment as warships struggled to fill their empty hammocks. The demand for sailors increased with each war over the course of the eighteenth century, resulting in a vast mobilization and amalgamation of seafarers from a myriad of provincial backgrounds and different maritime occupations." (Land 20) Land quotes Barlow in his book to illustrate the sailor's constant search for better rewards- "I served the Spaniards against the French, then the Hollanders against the English; then I was taken by the English out of a Dunkirker; and then I served the English against the Hollanders; and last I was taken by the Turks, where I was forced to serve then against the English, French, Dutch, and Spaniards, and all Christendom." (Land 17) Constancy is something either not known or not advantageous to the sailor. However, much has been said about the sailor's loyalty. Most sailors served loyally whichever master they chose. This could be an outcome of their worries about their future.

In other words, the nineteenth century sailor understood loyalty but not nationalism. Their relationship with Christianity was just as problematic and enigmatic as with their nation. Land remarks that many autobiographies mention a sailor's deliberate disgust and distaste for religion. Many of them, on confronting death, refused to pray, but would only curse the storm. Sailors who prided themselves on their courage and toughness felt profound shame if they were ever made to appear less than heroic. A 'true British seaman' would rather die than acknowledge a force greater than his own. Sceptical sailors have been described as using religious tracts to light their pipes. Evangelists who often sought to reform sailors faced problems in finding an appropriate language, or format, for communicating their message. It has also been noted that the sailors' stunted religiosity owed a lot to the attitudes and insecurities of their superiors. "Many officers in both the army and the Navy…preferred their subordinates to be 'senseless'; religion among the lower ranks, they feared, would take the dangerous form of politically inflected 'enthusiasm'. Deep religious feeling was associated with Nonconformity, and religious dissent had often resulted in political treason." (Land 116)

The ease with which these seamen gave up their loyalty and turned pirates or rebellious has been subject of a great many novels, the most remarkable amongst them being *Treasure Island.* But coming back to the pirates of *The Coral Island,* given all these factors, the response of the captain of the pirate ship in the novel to the missionaries and the 'savages' does not seem unlikely. His crew's mercenary and callous approach towards human life reflects him in the most un-Christian and un-British approach:

The men smiled significantly as they pulled from the shore, which was now crowded with a dense mass of savages, amounting, probably, to five or six hundred. We had not rowed off above a couple of hundred yards when a loud roar thundered over the sea, and the big brass gun sent a withering shower of grape point blank into the midst of the living mass, through which a wide lane was cut, while a yell, the like of which I could not have imagined, burst from the miserable survivors as they fled to the woods. Amongst the heaps of dead that lay on the sand, just where they had fallen, I could distinguish mutilated forms writhing in agony, while ever and anon one and another rose convulsively from out the mass, endeavoured to stagger towards the wood, and ere they had taken a few steps, fell and wallowed on the bloody sand. My blood curdled within me as I witnessed this frightful and wanton slaughter; but I had little time to think, for the captain's deep voice came again over the water towards us: "Pull ashore, lads, and fill your water casks." The men obeyed in silence, and it seemed to me as if even their hard hearts were shocked by the ruthless deed…

And "this is the man who favours the missionaries because they are useful to him and can tame the savages better than any one else can do it!" Then I wondered in my mind whether it were possible for any missionary to tame *him*! (Ballantyne Chapter XXIII)

This 'wanton' massacre and unnecessary bloodshed places the ship and its crew in direct opposition with Ralph, Jack and Peterkin. In fact, Ballantyne often seems to be suggesting that the pirates are no better than the un-Christian natives who also indulge in violence and bloodshed and find entertainment in 'sinful' acts such as cannibalism. His boys are antithetical to both the natives and the pirates. They are British *and* Christian. They are therefore superior to the pirates who are British but un-Christian. They are twice superior to the natives who are neither British nor Christian. Jack is projected as the quintessential English male. No wonder that he is even dressed like the Union Jack, the national flag: "Jack wore a red flannel shirt, a blue jacket, and a red Kilmarnock bonnet or night-cap, besides a pair of worsted socks, and a cotton pocket-handkerchief, with sixteen portraits of Lord Nelson printed on it, and a union Jack in the middle." (Ballantyne Chapter IV) The narrator's insistence on the colour scheme of red, white and blue, and the name Jack provide an unmistakable symbolism in the novel. Jack, as the most intelligent, resourceful, meticulous, courageous and brave of the three boys, stands for England and the Union Jack, literally! Ballantyne had very firm views on the correct ingredients of boyhood and his characters personified his views. In his novel *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861) he says, "boys (should be) inured from childhood to trifling risks and slight dangers of every possible description, such as tumbling into ponds and off of trees, etc., in order to strengthen their nervous system.... They ought to practice leaping off heights into deep water. They ought never to hesitate to cross a stream over a narrow unsafe plank for fear of a ducking. They ought never to decline to climb up a tree, to pull fruit merely because there is a possibility of their falling off and breaking their necks. I firmly believe that boys were intended to encounter all kinds of risks, in order to prepare them to meet and grapple with risks and dangers incident to man's career with cool, cautious self-possession." His boys in *The Coral Island* of course do much more than the somersaults he mentions here.

As Christians, the three boys identify with the Protestant ethic of hard work. Furthermore, Ralph believes in prayer and tries hard to fulfill the promise he made to his mother of reading the *Bible* every day. When their ship is wrecked, they of course lose everything including the *Bible.* Ralph goes on to at least partly fulfill his promise by saying his prayers daily. Just as the boys' work ethic is delimited by their lack of knowledge of the place they find themselves in viz. a tropical island, their piety is also restricted by the unavailability of a copy of *Bible.* The three British boys are therefore much behind in efficiency from the natives of the place who are in control of their material as well as abstract culture. This is the reason precisely why the nationalism of the three heroic lads tilts towards jingoism. In Britain, they would have been just three common boys with scanty information on just about anything. Their underestimation of the natives as heathen, ruthless and ignorant takes a beating when they observe them closely: "Next day we walked out with this interesting man, and were much entertained and instructed by his conversation, as we rambled through the cool shady groves of bananas, citrons, limes, and other trees, or sauntered among the cottages of the natives, and watched them while they laboured diligently in the taro beds, or manufactured the tapa or native cloth. To some of these Jack put questions through the medium of the missionary; and the replies were such as to surprise us at the extent of their knowledge. Indeed, Peterkin very truly remarked that 'they seemed to know a considerable deal more than Jack himself!' " (Ballantyne, Chapter XXX). They learn about coral formation only from the natives though they've lived on a coral island for above a year and even given it the name 'Coral Island'. Michael Adas in his book *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance,* comments on this disjunction and misbalance between the average awareness of the dominant British male and his tendency to subjugate those who do not conform to his cultural norms. He notes their racist refusal to acknowledge the ingenuity of another culture and their denial to see beyond the skin colour and daily habits of the natives:

Most of the Europeans who went overseas had a very limited knowledge of their own societies' achievements in these areas, and few were as interested in the tools and cosmologies of the peoples they encountered as in physical appearance, customs, and ceremonies. Whether they were merchants or missionaries, European travellers in this era viewed their Christian faith, rather than their mastery of the natural world, as the key source of their distinctiveness from and superiority to non-Western peoples. But assessments of the sophistication of African and Asian science and technology as aspects of larger configurations of material culture did affect European attitudes toward different peoples and cultures. This was especially evident in the contrasts they perceived between African and Asian societies and in their tendency to elevate China above all the civilizations they had "discovered." Exploration of both the reasons for the relatively marginal role of scientific and technological measures of human achievement in this era and the situations in which these standards were invoked reveals much about the Europeans' sense of themselves and their own culture. It also tells us a good deal about the nature of their interaction with non-western peoples in the first phase of overseas expansion. (Adas 22)

This sense of the self was therefore forged by visualising the 'other' in a particular manner. The Asian 'other' was treated better than the African 'other' because of a difference in their perceived material culture. Adas goes on to suggest that the greater the parallels with the European material culture exhibited by a society, the better the treatment meted out to it. And the guardians of the English cultural 'supremacy' were themselves not even properly aware of many crucial facts necessary to administer a people so different form them. The average administrator or merchant was an ordinary man with only functional knowledge of the world he inhabited. Jack, Ralph and Peterkin are ordinary English boys except that they have been elevated to an extraordinarily ideal platform.

Except for the best educated, their understanding of the natural world was very similar to that of the ordinary people of the societies they visited, and it was decidedly inferior on many subjects to that of the scholars and priests of these societies. Perhaps most important, European belief systems were at least as firmly grounded in religion as those of the Africans and Asians. The first phase of expansion coincided after all with the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the centuries of bitter debate, unbounded polemic, and brutal persecution that these movements spawned. European merchants and missionaries also shared with African and Asian peoples a reverence for tradition and ancient authorities, which in the European case included both sacred scripture and Greco-Roman writings. In short, their most valued truths were religious, not scientific. Thus, for almost all European observers, including the well educated, the most decisive distinction between themselves and the peoples they encountered was religious. They were Christians; most Africans and Asians were not. A good deal more space in their accounts was devoted to pointing up differences in religious beliefs and practices than in attempting to explain or compare African and Asian ideas about eclipses or techniques of numerical calculation. (Adas 31)

So the English supremacy rested largely on the shoulders of Christianity. Ralph's reaction to the natives and their customs is more of a Christian response than just a human one. Even Bloody Bill, the diabolical anti-heroic pirate who has participated in many mercenary as well as wanton murders does not hesitate in passing a judgement on the natives: "The South-Sea islanders are such incarnate fiends that they are the better of being tamed, and the missionaries are the only men who can do it." (Ballantyne Chapter XXIII) Somehow, the natives are seen as a 'problem' which lived quietly and flourished for centuries away from the 'civilized' world but now suddenly needs to be tackled, to be reformed and recast as humanity merely because it has been 'discovered' by the alpha-Christian Britishers. And Christianity is perceived as the panacea to this problem. The missionary in the novel claims: "it's a curious fact, that wherever the missionaries get a footin' all these things come to an end *at once*, an' the savages take to doin' each other good, and singin' psalms, *just like Methodists*."[6] (Ballantyne Chapter XXIV) So Christianity is the instant medicine which can cure all evils including cannibalism, the greatest sin in which humans can indulge. The portrayal of the islanders as 'monsters' who do not value human life, who consume human flesh and even sacrifice their own newly-born children (several sociological studies do not support these claims of 'perverse' animalistic behavior amongst the South Sea Islanders) to their 'false gods' seeks to polarize any willing reader against them. And the nineteenth century reading public was much inclined to believe what Ralph has got to say. After all, this was the period of intense imperialist and proselytization campaign and therefore, also the period of very high susceptibility to stereotyping and ethnocentrism. So the nineteenth century juvenile reader is persuaded till he is convinced that Christian light is the true light which is needed for the savages of the "heart of darkness". Ballantyne even provides his reader with an inventory of the Christian congregations trying to solve the problems of the natives in the South Sea Islands: " 'The London Missionary Society have a great many (missionary stations) in the Tahiti group, and other islands in that quarter. Then the Wesleyans have the Feejee Islands all to themselves, and the Americans have many stations in other groups. But still, my friend, there are hundreds of islands here the natives of which have never heard of Jesus, or the good word of God, or the Holy Spirit; and thousands are living and dying in the practice of those terrible sins and bloody murders of which you have already heard. I trust, my friends,' he added, looking earnestly into our faces, 'I trust that if you ever return to England, you will tell your Christian friends that the horrors which they hear of in regard to these islands are *literally true*, and that when they have heard the worst, the '*half has not been told them*;' for there are perpetrated here foul deeds of darkness of which man may not speak. You may also tell them,' he said, looking around with a smile, while a tear of gratitude trembled in his eye and rolled down his coal-black cheek,— 'tell them of the blessings that the gospel has wrought *here*!' " (Ballantyne Chapter XXX) So the code of masculinity forwarded by *The Coral Island* unmistakably has two major aspects to it- Christianity and Englishness.

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[6] Emphasis mine.

In conclusion, one recognizes a clear and tangible connection between the code of masculinity forwarded by the Boys Own literature and the nineteenth century British understanding of the nation as an entity founded on English values and Christianity. This reading of manliness in turn contributed to the exponential growth of the Empire. Further, subsumed within this idea of masculinity is the masculinity of the sailor, the missionary, the adventurer, pirate and the colonist. While these lesser masculinities are subservient to the larger, grander ideas of the nation and the empire, religious supremacy of Christianity underlines their play in smaller, limited pockets of autonomy. In the scenario of clash of civilizations which characterize most colonial encounters, these supremacies provide a 'just' rationale for the subjugation of the colonial subjects.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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