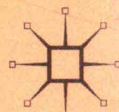


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Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and *Robinson Crusoe*

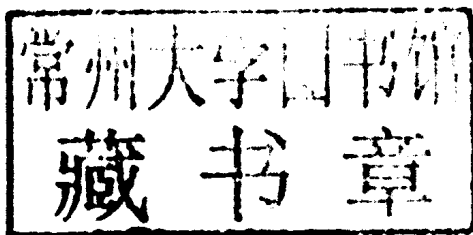


Andrew O'Malley



Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and *Robinson Crusoe*

Andrew O'Malley
Associate Professor, Ryerson University



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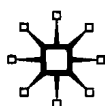
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First published 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-0-230-27270-5

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

*For Nima, Safianna, and Cyrus; if I were shipwrecked on
a desert island I would want you there with me*

Series Preface

The *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature* series was initiated in 2008 by Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford. The aim of the series is to identify and publish the best contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film, and media texts. The series is open to theoretically informed scholarship covering a wide range of critical perspectives on historical and contemporary texts from diverse national and cultural settings. *Critical Approaches* aims to make a significant contribution to the expanding field of children's literature research by publishing quality books that promote informed discussion and debate about the production and reception of children's literature and its criticism.

Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford

Acknowledgements

While Crusoe's labours may have been solitary, mine were not, and I owe debts of gratitude to many people for their help and guidance in the completion of this study. My interest in the subject of the many shapes *Robinson Crusoe* has taken in its afterlife began with my participation between 2003 and 2006 in a collaborative study of the idea of 'home' in Canadian children's literature, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My part in this project was an investigation into the robinsonade tradition in Canada by way of Catharine Parr Traill's children's novel, *Canadian Crusoes*. I would like to thank Mavis Reimer, the Principal Investigator on that project, as well as the other members of the research team: Neil Besner, Clare Bradford, Paul DePasquale, Margaret Mackey, Perry Nodelman, Anne Rusnak, Louise Saldanha, Deborah Schnitzer, Danielle Thaler, and Doris Wolf for their invaluable feedback and for helping me realize a larger study could come from this early look at robinsonades. Conversations with a number of friends and colleagues have helped shape my analysis of the materials discussed in this book but particular thanks in this regard are due to Sue Bottigheimer for her generous comments on this project in its early stages, and to Lorraine Janzen for her comments on an early proposal. For their guidance through the at times overwhelming volume of Crusoe-inspired texts and for their help locating examples of robinsonades both esoteric and familiar, I wish to thank Leslie Mcgrath and Martha Scott of the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Literature. I have been very fortunate to have been assisted in this project over the years by several students, very capable researchers in their own rights, both at the University of Winnipeg and at Ryerson University: Melanie Unrau, Robbie Richardson, Vanessa Parlette, Amanda Cosco, and Stephen Carlick – thanks for all your help. The preparation of the index was supported with a grant provided by the office of the Dean of Arts, Ryerson University. My deepest gratitude I reserve for my wife, friend, and colleague, Nima Naghibi, who read the chapters of this book as they took shape and provided both sage advice and keen

insights. Without her love, support, patience, and encouragement I would never have seen this work through.

For this book I have combined new material with some previously published work, which I have revised and expanded. An earlier version of Chapter 1 appeared in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 33.2 (Spring 2009) as 'Acting out Crusoe: Pedagogy and Performance in Eighteenth-Century Children's Literature'. Chapter 2 is a revised version of 'Island Homemaking: Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* and the Robinsonade Tradition,' which was my contribution to the collection of essays *Home Words: Discourses of Children's Literature* (Mavis Reimer, ed. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008). Chapter 3 appeared in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 35.2 (Spring 2011). Some material from an article entitled 'Crusoe at Home: Coding Domesticity in Children's Editions of *Robinson Crusoe*,' which appeared in the *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.3 (2006 – journal has since been renamed *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*), now appears in Chapters 2 and 3.

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Introduction: *Robinson Crusoe*, the Child, and the People

The sheer abundance and variety of scholarship on Daniel Defoe's most celebrated novel, *The Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* (1719), might lead one justifiably to ask: what more can be said about a text so copiously and carefully parsed and analysed? To rehearse very briefly and incompletely what is widely acknowledged, it has been famously hailed perhaps most influentially by Ian Watt as the progenitor of the realistic novel.¹ Crusoe himself has been identified as both the harbinger of a modern, Western, individualism and as the quintessential 'sovereign subject,' not unproblematically tied to the colonial and imperial aspirations and fantasies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.² Crusoe's story of not only survival but economic success through a kind of 'primitive accumulation' and an adherence to what Max Weber described as a protestant work ethic have marked him for many readers and scholars (again, not without some difficulties and caveats) as an icon of an emerging middle-class sensibility and of the capitalist economic order of which this class was to become both the engine and the chief beneficiary.³ *Robinson Crusoe* takes up and renders imaginatively, with unparalleled success, many of the central ideological concerns of the last three centuries and constructs a believable survival narrative (or at least a narrative many readers have found convincing) through the techniques of 'formal realism' Watt identifies. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the book has also achieved for many the status of modern myth, or even myth of modernity.⁴

The text itself has an unprecedented, indeed overwhelming, reception and publication history; it can be rightly said that *Robinson Crusoe* has

been and is everywhere. By the late twentieth century, according to one count, over seven hundred editions of *Robinson Crusoe* had appeared, and the book had been translated into virtually every written language, including shorthand and Esperanto.⁵ It is one of the very few works of fiction to have spawned and given its name to a literary sub-genre: the 'robinsonade,' a term coined in 1731 by Johann Gottfried Schnabel to describe an already burgeoning body of narratives of which his own *Die Insel Felsenburg* (*Felsenburg Island*) was an early example.⁶

Further, perhaps more so than any other work of fiction, the story of *Robinson Crusoe* has proven so appealing, has generated such a constant and uninterrupted demand in audiences of every station and description, that it has been adapted and remediated in almost every conceivable medium and format; it is with these adaptations and remediations, though admittedly and necessarily only a small fraction of them, that this study concerns itself chiefly. Shortly after its initial publication, chapbook editions, which edited Defoe's original so liberally as to retain at times only the barest resemblance to their source, appeared in tremendous numbers across the British Isles and in America. A pantomime stage adaptation directed by Richard Sheridan was produced at Drury Lane in 1781, and proved such a successful afterpiece that it was regularly restaged for decades and eventually became a mainstay of the English Christmas 'panto' repertoire through the Victorian period and into the twentieth century. Other stage adaptations, such as burlesques and romantic farces, followed, and in the second half of the twentieth century there was even a *Robinson Crusoe* ice show (Figure 0.1). A popular song entitled '*Robinson Crusoe*' began appearing in eight-page song garlands and on broadsheets by 1800, and indeed the popularity of Crusoe as a subject of song continued into the twentieth century, from 'Where Did *Robinson Crusoe* Go With Friday On a Saturday Night' performed by Al Jolson in the first decade of the last century, to a number of pop tunes (Sonny Cole & the Rhythm Roamers' '*Robinson Crusoe* Bop' or The Art of Noise's '*Robinson Crusoe*,' for example) in its second half. There have been countless film adaptations ranging from the faithful and serious-minded '*Robinson Crusoe*' of Luis Bunuel, to low-brow comedies ('Lt. *Robinson Crusoe*, U.S.N.,' starring Dick Van Dyke), science fiction ('*Robinson Crusoe* on Mars'), 'blue' cinema ('The Erotic Adventures of *Robinson Crusoe*'), and action serials ('The Adventures of *Robinson Crusoe* of Clipper Island'). It could be legitimately

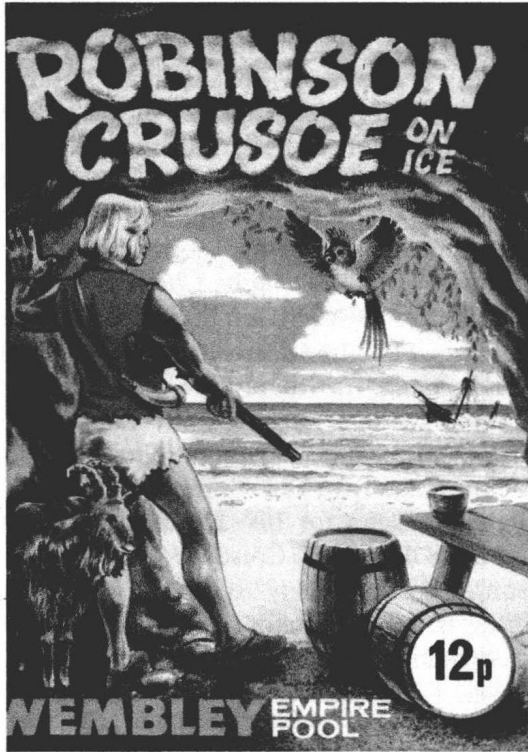


Figure 0.1 Programme cover for *Robinson Crusoe on Ice* performed at the Wembley Empire Pool; c.1970s. From the author's personal collection.

claimed that such television shows as 'Gilligan's Island' and more recently 'Survivor' and 'Lost' are also indebted to their most famous island castaway predecessor. Even consumer and household goods have borne the Crusoe imprimatur for almost two centuries, his likeness, or that on occasion of Friday, gracing such high-end wares as silver and brass bookends, table centrepieces, and silk handkerchiefs, as well as more common items such as dishes, toby jugs, cigarette cards, and brass buttons.

While the likenesses of Crusoe and to a lesser extent of Friday have appeared in countless places, and while his story has been reimagined and adapted to almost every conceivable format and market, this study focuses on the two arenas in which *Robinson Crusoe*

has featured most prominently and circulated most widely: those of children's literature and culture and of popular culture. Defoe's novel has certainly achieved an extraordinary stature in the field of academic inquiry, and remains a staple of many university-level courses on the novel or on eighteenth-century literature and culture more generally. Its place as high culture among elite, educated readers was secured long ago with the critical blessings of such luminaries as Dr Johnson and Samuel Coleridge. As James Boswell reports, Johnson felt Defoe's '*Robinson Crusoe* is enough of itself to establish his reputation'; Boswell also documents Johnson's famous remark on the lack of brevity in literature, a criticism from which Defoe's novel is spared: 'Was there ever yet any thing written by mere man that was wished longer by its readers, excepting Don Quixote, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the Pilgrim's Progress?' (III: 268; fn.1). Coleridge was enthralled with Defoe's novel as a young boy, and as an adult critic praised Defoe for 'his sacrifice of lesser interest to the greater because more universal'; Crusoe is 'the universal representative, the person, for whom every reader could substitute himself. But now nothing is done, thought, suffered, or desired, but what every man can imagine himself doing, thinking, feeling, or wishing for' (165).

Indeed, *Robinson Crusoe's* continued publication by such noted houses as Penguin and Oxford under the banner of 'Classics' or 'World Classics' testifies to its continued relevance in the more elite ends of the cultural spectrum. And yet, Defoe's work was very early linked to two other species of reader, both of whom were – and still are – understood as quite distinct and removed from elite culture: children and the 'common people.' In large part, this study seeks to trace the history of Crusoe in children's and popular culture, and tries to understand why the text was appropriated (in Roger Chartier's sense of the word)⁷ into popular usage and called into service – mostly by adults with pedagogical objectives in mind – for the improvement and entertainment of children. Because *Robinson Crusoe* has permeated both these areas of culture so thoroughly and so enduringly, it serves for my purposes as a case study in how the two newly 'discovered' categories of 'the child' and 'the people' took shape alongside one another starting in the late eighteenth century. Both groups were coming increasingly to the attention of writers, scholars, and intellectuals of the privileged classes in the period and

both were similarly posited discursively as 'other' to a rational, educated, and forward-looking adult subject.

Many scholars, myself included, have explored the 'construction' of a modern childhood in the late eighteenth century elsewhere and I see no need to revisit that subject extensively here.⁸ At around the same time that a host of educational theorists, medical experts, fiction writers, and others from a variety of backgrounds but mostly from the middle classes were imagining new ways to teach, train, maintain the health of, and prepare children (again, predominantly those of the middle classes) for their adult duties and roles, a significant number of antiquarians and later folklorists were attempting to document and unpack what they considered the rather mysterious customs, beliefs, and practices of Britain's own plebeian (and mostly rural) orders. As Peter Burke, in his landmark study of popular cultures in Europe, famously observed, Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a widespread 'discovery of the people,' sparked in large part by the gradual awareness that modern, educated, and often urban Europeans were no longer really familiar with what the common people were doing in the villages and towns around them.⁹ Sometime in the early modern period, the elite had 'retreated' from the customs, rituals, and feasts that characterized rural village life to the extent that when antiquarians such as Henry Bourne and collectors of ballads and oral tales such as Walter Scott, and his German counterparts Johann Gottfried von Herder and the Grimms began their preservational and taxonomical efforts, the ways of being of the common people had become effectively foreign and exotic to them. The people who had always been all around them took on a very alien complexion and their stories, songs, and customs – in short their 'manners' – became objects of fascination and study precisely because of how different these came to be seen from the ways and ideas of the elite and the lettered. Similarly, the differentness of children, who had likewise always been around and had likely always been understood as somehow different from adults, came to be viewed by adults at this time in a new light: as their defining quality, which needed to be better understood in order to be better managed.

The contemporaneous discovery of these two types of 'other' living among us, so to speak, produced a number of discursive overlaps between the categories of 'the child' and 'the people,' to the extent