

THE SWISS FAMILY LANDERS FAMILY JOHANN DAVID WYSS

Introduction by Edward Packard



THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

The Swiss Family Robinson was first published in 1812
Bantam Classic edition published March 1992
Bantam reissue / April 2008

Published by Bantam Dell A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, New York

All rights reserved
Introduction copyright © 1992 by Edward Packard
Cover art: The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, 1624 by Abraham
Bloemaert/The Bridgeman Art Library
Cover design by Elizabeth Shapiro

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Bantam Books and the rooster colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

ISBN 978-0-553-21403-1

Printed in the United States of America Published simultaneously in Canada

www.bantamdell.com

JOHANN DAVID WYSS (1743–1818) was a clergyman in Berne, Switzerland. A former military chaplain, Wyss spoke four languages, loved nature, and was deeply involved in the raising of his four boys, reading to them and taking them on hikes and hunting trips. To teach them moral lessons and entertain them, he read them a story he had written about a family just like theirs (each boy in the story is based on one of Wyss's four sons) who had been shipwrecked on a tropical island. This handwritten manuscript was more than eight hundred pages long and one of his sons, Johann Emmanuel, helped him illustrate it. Years later another son, Johann Rudolph, by then a professor at the Berne Academy, found his father's manuscript, edited it, and published it in 1812-1813 as The Swiss Family Robinson. The first English translation appeared in 1814, and there have since been nearly two hundred versions of this novel, as well as two films and a television movie.

INTRODUCTION

MAGINE FOR a moment that you are Johann David Wyss, the author of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. You are living in Switzerland about two hundred years ago, and you've decided to write a novel.

What has been happening lately? On one side of your country France has been going through a violent revolution. On another side Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart has been composing some of the greatest music in history. Across the Atlantic Ocean a new nation called the United States has adopted a Constitution. A man named George Washington seems to be doing a good job as its first president.

Nothing so momentous is occurring in Switzerland. It's a peaceful, quiet country with lots of high mountains and no seacoast at all. It would be easy enough to write a tale about being trapped on a glacier—there are plenty of them around. But you decide you'd rather write about something more distant, more exciting, more mysterious—a book about an undiscovered island.

Anyone writing today who wants to set a novel in some exotic, unknown world must find it in outer space. But in Wyss's time a writer and his readers could still imagine landing on an uncharted, unexplored island right here on Earth. No wonder so many novelists shipwrecked their heroes.

The first fictional mariner to be cast upon unknown shores may have been Odysseus, the hero of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, composed over 2,500 years ago. Among the characters Odysseus meets on his voyages are Greek gods, sea nymphs, hypnotic fruit eaters, and a one-eyed monster. Besides being one of the greatest adventure stories of all time, *The Odyssey* holds moral lessons. For example, Odysseus is tempted to stay on a very interesting island, one he might never get around to leaving. But he is anxious to get home to his wife, and nothing can stop him.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the voyages of Columbus had set the age of exploration and discovery into full swing. People began thinking about unknown, faraway lands. And that most wonderful new machine—the printing press—was intriguing everyone who knew how to write. Books about imaginary islands were soon to come.

In 1727 Jonathan Swift published his famous satire, Gulliver's Travels. The book tells a wonderful story about the six-inch-high people of Lilliput, who take Gulliver prisoner by tying him to the ground with thousands of what to them were ropes but to him were mere threads. Swift had more on his mind than telling a good story. By describing the stupid and mean-spirited attitudes and practices of the Lilliputians, he was calling attention to conditions in his native England.

Of course, not all writers were so interested in putting across ideas. Some of the best books were almost pure adventure stories. My favorite among them is the colorful and exciting pirate story written in 1883 by Robert Louis Stevenson, the book with that unforgettable title, *Treasure Island*.

Apart from The Odyssey, not one of these works is as gripping and intriguing a tale as Daniel Defoe's novel pub-

lished in 1720 and titled *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner*. This work has endured as the quintessential story of shipwreck and survival and it inspired Johann David Wyss to write *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

Some years after Wyss completed his manuscript, one of his sons, Johann Rudolph Wyss, edited it and published it for the first time. This was the original German edition, which appeared in 1812–13. French and English translations came soon thereafter. This Bantam Classic edition follows the standard English translation of W.H.G. Kingston in 1889.

Though the style and language of the present edition reflect the formal and rather elaborate speech one might expect of the Victorian English gentleman who translated it, the substance is probably quite faithful to what was originally written by Johann David Wyss almost a hundred years earlier. Wyss made it clear that he wrote the book to amuse and instruct his four sons. And nearly every page reflects the mind and attitudes of an attentive father, the work of a teacher of lessons both moral and practical.

Like Robinson Crusoe, the narrator of Wyss's book was cast up on an uninhabited island, and like Robinson Crusoe, he is able to salvage stores, seeds, animals, and equipment, including guns and ammunition, from the wrecked ship. Wyss's use of the English name "Robinson" for the Swiss-German family that is featured in his novel indicates how much debt he felt he owed to Defoe's masterpiece. But *The Swiss Family Robinson* is by no means a reprise of *Robinson Crusoe*. The differences between the two books reflect the differences in the concerns of the men who wrote them.

Daniel Defoe commented that the story of Robinson Crusoe was an allegory of his own life. From this we may

infer that as a young man Defoe, like Robinson Crusoe, was an adventurer with uncertain convictions, but that by weathering and reflecting upon all the experiences and difficulties of his life, he developed into a man of strong character and purpose. Accordingly, Defoe was concerned not merely with Robinson Crusoe's physical survival but also with how Crusoe's beliefs and doubts were affected by the trials and crises that beset him.

After pulling himself out of the surf, Crusoe finds that the island he has landed upon is fertile and that game is abundant. But his troubles aren't over. He learns that he has to deal with loneliness, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown—problems that arise not just on uninhabited islands, but in everyday life all over the world.

At the beginning of the story Crusoe is by no means a model of courage and resourcefulness. He is just an ordinary man, one with fears and doubts, one who is ingenious in dealing with the challenges that face him but who also makes huge mistakes, such as building a boat too heavy to move down the beach.

Crusoe realizes that he is going to have to pull himself together and meet the challenges that face him. He tries to be rational. He makes lists about what is good and what is bad about his condition. He begins to understand what is truly important. When he stares at the gold and silver he took from the wreck, he exclaims to himself, "I would have given it all for sixpennyworth of turnip and carrot seed out of England or for a handful of peas and beans and a bottle of ink."

He reflects about life in a way that would never have occurred to him before: "All our discontents about what we want appeared to me to spring from the want of thankfulness for what we have." He learns about his intuition, his "secret dictate," the voice within him that tells him what is the right thing to do.

He develops a firmer religious belief and finds "deliverance from sin a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction." Then, thinking it over, he admits to himself that he doesn't feel blessed at all—that he wants desperately to escape from his island prison. On still further reflection he is able at least to give thanks to God for opening his eyes so that he can "see the former condition of his life."

Johann David Wyss had equally serious concerns when he wrote *The Swiss Family Robinson*. What was most important to him, I think, was his own family. For this reason, when he shipwrecked the narrator of his book, he did not cast him upon the beach alone, like Robinson Crusoe, but set him ashore with his wife and four sons. The shipwrecked family is clearly modeled after the author's own wife and four sons. Because *The Swiss Family Robinson* is a book about a family, it concerns how members of a family organize themselves, how they work and play together, how their interests and desires differ, and how all these questions are resolved so as to ensure the survival and happiness of them all.

That *The Swiss Family Robinson* is more about family life than about survival is evidenced by the abundance of supplies, stores, and equipment salvaged from the ship, which because it was bound for a new colony was stocked with all manner of seeds and plants, livestock, indeed "every conceivable article" that would be useful in establishing a settlement. The ship's cargo also included a collection of books so valuable that the narrator could offer his sons "every sort of educational advantage." Thanks to favorable tides and winds all these things are brought ashore with relative ease. And when the ship is destroyed,

a fine supply of boards and planks conveniently washes up on the beach.

The author might have told a tale about castaways, crawling in the sand, broiling in the sun, desperate for food and water, helpless against predators. But he chose to spare the narrator and his family from all but a few inconveniences. None of the characters suffer dehydration or malnourishment. Nor do they spend any time lamenting their fate or anxiously scanning the horizon, hoping to see a sail. Rather, it's a matter of "Here we are, folks. Let's get down to business and make ourselves a good home." Or rather several good homes. One encampment after another is established, some of them strikingly elaborate, as the author contrives to establish an island colony that, despite a population of only six people, will be a model of human organization, industry, ingenuity, and harmony.

Thus, like Daniel Defoe, Johann Wyss is less concerned with the question "How can one survive in a primitive environment?" than with the question "How should life be lived?" For Defoe—and Robinson Crusoe—this meant coming to terms with doubts, uncertainties, and confusions. In contrast, the narrator of *The Swiss Family Robinson* is singularly free of doubts. He arrives on the island with an unshakable religious conviction, with a strong sense of the rights and duties of each member of a family, and with an unquestioned determination to apply all his energy to the building of an exemplary community.

Wyss's chief concern, then, was not with overcoming doubt and despair, but with teaching his sons the religious and moral principles in which he so strongly believed. And of course he wanted to teach readers the same principles. Near the end of the book he writes that his "great wish is that young people who read this record of our lives and adventures should learn from it how admirably suited is the

peaceful, industrious, and pious life of a cheerful united family to the formation of a strong, pure, and manly character." (Wyss's children were all male; unfortunately, we never learn what moral precepts he would have addressed to a daughter.)

Reading this book, it's not hard to guess that it will have a happy ending, and indeed, the narrator's sons all grow up to be "honorable, God-fearing young men, dutiful and affectionate to their mother and myself and warmly attached to each other." This doesn't sound like a realistic description of the average family today, nor of one in Wyss's time, nor of Wyss's own, I suspect. The book is clearly not a portrayal of reality in family life, but of an ideal that all families should strive for.

What are Wyss's moral lessons? There is surely wisdom in some of them. I found much to admire, for example, in the narrator's stalwartness and determination. Do not be easily discouraged, he advises his sons. Your resources may be greater than you imagine. He suggests that taking care of your body as well as your mind is essential to achieving self-reliance and courage. Never quiet an enemy in a revengeful spirit. An angry person losing control of himself can cause much more harm than he reckons. Patience and courage always.

Though Wyss was religious, he was not otherworldly. His religion and his morality were linked to practicality. When the question arises as to the fate of the crew members who had taken the ship's boat and left the narrator and his family to their fate, the oldest boys asks, "Why should we trouble ourselves about them?" The father replies, "In the first place, we should not return evil for evil; then, again, they might be of great assistance to us in building a house..."

Indeed, Wyss seems a good deal more interested in

practical matters than in spiritual ones. The narrator has something to say about an astonishing number of plants and animals—Wyss obviously read many of the natural history books of his day. Though no coconuts grow in Switzerland, he is able to explain how coconuts germinate, when they ripen, and what is a good way to get them down from a tree. (The answer: Throw something up at monkeys, and they will throw coconuts down at you.)

He knows a good deal about plants and animals, including some I've never heard of, about cultivating fruit trees, and about getting honey from bees. He even figures out a method for making shoes. (To make a mold, stuff a pair of socks full of sand; coat them with a thin layer of clay; let the clay dry in the sun.)

The narrator can make clothes from wild flax and a canoe from the bark of a tree. He applies his knowledge of geometry to planning an elaborate tree house. He knows all about gallinaceous birds and that it's a myth that a porcupine can shoot its quills. He knows that the odoriferous gland of a certain wild pig must be removed immediately after slaughter or it will taint the meat. He's familiar with the fig-bearing mangrove of the Antilles and can describe the anatomy of the baleen whale. His instruction as to how to make bottles out of gourds is most fascinating: "If you want a more shapely vessel, you must take it in hand when it is younger. To give it a neck, for instance, you must tie a bandage round the young gourd while it is still on the tree...."

In short, this book is filled with practical knowledge, so much so that it reminds us how dependent we are on specialists to perform any complicated task, and on modern technology in general. The conclusion one reaches is that most of us would be far less able than our ancestors to fend for ourselves in the wild.

This being said, any modern reader will observe that *The Swiss Family Robinson* is in some respects far from realistic. It is true that wildlife in many places was far more abundant before people with firearms, and then chain saws, arrived. Even so, the locale of *The Swiss Family Robinson* resembles Noah's Ark more than a real piece of geography. On a single tropical island the author has gathered a most impossible assortment of animals. Penguins abound (in reality confined to the Antarctic), presumably competing with the neighboring flocks of flamingos. Lions and ostriches (native to Africa), boa constrictors and capybaras (South America), bears and buffalo (Asia or North America), walruses (the Arctic), and kangaroos (Australia) are all assembled here. The plenitude and variety of plants and animals are among the most astonishing things about the book.

Of course, it is quite possible that the author had no intention of being realistic. Since he thought of himself as a teacher as well as a storyteller, he may have wanted to draw on his entire fund of knowledge and to describe not just an island, but the world.

Then, too, Wyss could not have been aware of many facts that we take for granted. He was writing more than fifty years prior to the publication of Darwin's On the Origin of Species. He would not have known that lions could not have evolved in more than one place, for example, or that virtually no species of large animal is indigenous to more than a single continent. Indeed, the number of continents hadn't even been established until the mid-1700s when Captain Cook's lengthy voyages revealed that there was no great southern land mass in the South Pacific.

Though Wyss was evidently well read, particularly in natural history, horticulture, and mechanics, he was evidently less informed about seamanship, geography, and astronomy. He does not tell us where his ship sailed from or where it was bound when it was wrecked. As to the art of sailing, he had to be content with having the narrator say things like "the sea being calm and the wind favorable, we found we could spread the sail, and our progress was very satisfactory."

The narrator surmises that he is in the tropics by the rapidity with which darkness overtakes daylight, but his explanation is a bit muddled and misses the point. And for most of the book we don't know where in the world the story is taking place. Near the end we learn that another ship was wrecked on the same island while it was a week out of Calcutta, bound for England (and therefore presumably for the Cape of Good Hope). From this we can surmise that the story of *The Swiss Family Robinson* is set in the middle of the Indian Ocean, most likely a few hundred miles below the equator. By way of contrast, Swift tells us at the outset (a map is supplied in my edition) that Gulliver's ship foundered near Sumatra, and Defoe advises us early on that Robinson Crusoe was washed ashore in the Lesser Antilles, near the coast of South America.

Had the author of *The Swiss Family Robinson* had any interest in or knowledge of astronomy, he would surely have had the narrator try to determine the island's latitude by looking up at the sky. Had he done so he would probably have observed that the North Star was absent (it can't be seen south of the equator), or at least pointed out to his family the greatly changed appearance of the heavens.

Finally, despite Wyss's piousness and goodwill, he had an attitude toward his wife that failed to transcend his own narrow culture. Though the narrator expresses himself solicitously about his wife and portrays her as exemplary in every way, he doesn't even tell us her name (Elizabeth) until well into the book. And not once does he have her address a word to his sons, nor they to her. His idea of a wonderful gift to her is a "lovely workbox, filled with every imaginable requirement for a lady's worktable." She accepts it "with equal surprise and delight." It's evident that the rights of a wife in Wyss's ideal family are strictly limited by the kindness of the husband. The narrator is kind enough, but the absolute master of the household nonetheless. Luckily for his wife, she rarely complains, and she cooks, sews, and gardens to perfection.

Like all good books set on strange islands, *The Swiss Family Robinson* is much more than an adventure story. Just as *The Odyssey* is more about Greek history and mythology than about the perils of the Mediterranean Sea, *Gulliver's Travels* more about social and political ills in England than about the strange people living on a South Sea island, and *Robinson Crusoe* more about a man's struggle to deal with his fears and doubts than about physical survival, *The Swiss Family Robinson* is most of all a story about the author, his homeland, and his times. And that, perhaps more than anything else, is what makes this book so interesting.

Edward Packard

THE SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON

CONTENTS

| Introduction |
|------------------------------------------|
| 1. SHIPWRECKED AND ALONE |
| 2. A DESOLATE ISLAND |
| 3. WE EXPLORE OUR ISLAND |
| 4. THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY |
| 5. WE REVISIT THE WRECK |
| 6. MOTHER MAKES A SUGGESTION |
| 7. WE BUILD A BRIDGE |
| 8. THE JOURNEY TO THE WONDERFUL TREES 60 |
| 9. THE TREE-HOUSE |
| 10. A VISIT TO TENTHOLM |
| 11. THE STRANGE ANIMAL81 |
| 12. TOWED BY A TURTLE 89 |
| 13. AN IMPORTANT EXPERIMENT96 |
| 14. THE PINNACE AND THE PETARD103 |
| 15. THE CALABASH WOOD |
| 16. LAST VISIT TO THE WRECK |