

Le Vrai Arbre

The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe was born into the world on 25 April 1719. (The feast day of St George, an early Christian martyr born in Cappadocia who somehow got to be patron saint of England, is 23 April; Shakespeare's date of baptism and my mother's birthday were both 26 April: there's a little cluster here.) Defoe wrote seven other works in 1719, as well as contributing to several newspapers, and by the end of the summer had published a sequel, *The Farther Adventures*. In 1720 he added *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. He was sixty years old. He needed to provide a dowry for one of his daughters, Hannah (who never, as it turned out, married). He needed cash; he needed to make ends meet.

Also in 1719, Defoe sold his shares in the South Sea Company – a company founded in 1711 to manage the national debt and awarded a contract to supply the Spanish colonies in South America with several thousand African slaves per year. Bribery, corruption and insider dealing combined with public credulity to drive the share price unsustainably high; in 1720 the South Sea Bubble burst, causing financial ruin to many investors. Defoe was in favour of the establishment of colonies for commercial reasons and, a man of his time, believed that slavery was necessary for business, but he disapproved of get-rich-quick schemes. In February 1719 – two months before

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the publication of *Crusoe* – he proposed in the *Weekly Journal* that instead of devoting itself to manipulating the financial market the South Sea Company should oversee the founding of a colony at the mouth of the River Orinoco on the north coast of South America: it would cost ‘500000 £ Sterling’ and the government would be required ‘to furnish six Men of War, and 4000 regular Troops, with some Engineers and 100 pieces of Cannon, and military Stores in Proportion for the maintaining and supporting the Design’, but ‘the Revenue it shall bring to the Kingdom will be a full amends’. A further colony, ‘above 400 Leagues from the first Settlement’, would ‘bring home’ as much gold as the Portuguese were getting out of Brazil, ‘as well as to cause a prodigious Consumption of our British Manufactures’.³ Defoe chose to locate the fictional island on which Robinson Crusoe is stranded around 40 miles from the mouth of the Orinoco and furnish it with a kinder climate than that of the actual island on which Alexander Selkirk, the presumed model for Crusoe, was marooned; his book (no one was calling it a ‘novel’ at the time⁴) was a prospectus for potential investors, with glossy photos of beaches and palm trees.

Colonies were absorbing a lot of attention. In 1717 the Transportation Act provided for the transportation of criminals to the British American colonies; by 1776, when the colonies declared independence, 50,000 men, women and children convicted for crimes as minor as petty theft had been despatched to Virginia and Maryland.⁵ In a sermon delivered in February 1719 in the church of St Mary le Bow, London, to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Samuel Bradford, Bishop of Carlisle, denounced ‘the deplorable state of the heathen world’ and urged his congregation to continue their work of ‘converting the Gentiles to God, and bringing them to repentance and obedience’. Taken as

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read, here, was that the Christian god trumps all other gods; the subtext was the perceived need to counteract the Roman Catholic influence in Spanish and French overseas territories with Protestant, Church of England missions.

As well as a prospectus, *Robinson Crusoe* was a how-to book for colonists, foregrounding practical skills and good husbandry and honest accounting, and shares in Defoe's book would have been a better investment than in the South Sea Company. The book was reprinted in May, June and August; within months of the first publication there were pirated versions on the market, and by the 19th century *Robinson Crusoe* had cruised far beyond the point where a book's success can be reckoned by the usual markers. Many of the new editions were published specifically for children. An 1868 edition was written entirely in words of one syllable, like an Oulipian exercise. From the foreword to an edition of *Crusoe* first published in 1905 (and reissued in 2006): '[Defoe's] story was not designed for children, and therefore it contained a great deal of hard reading. There was much in it, however, that was interesting to young people, and from that day to this, the marvelous tale of Robinson Crusoe has been a favorite with boys as well as men. I have rewritten the story in words easy for every child, and have shortened it by leaving out all the dull parts.'⁶ As a result of the proliferating editions – which the flaws of the original attracted⁷ – Defoe's book, Virginia Woolf wrote, 'resembles one of the anonymous productions of the race rather than the effort of a single mind', and during the period in which I grew up and learned to read most households in the UK in which there were books included among them a version of *Robinson Crusoe*.

The covers of the multiplying editions of *Crusoe* usually depicted a weather-beaten figure with musket and umbrella in the act of discovering the footprint in the sand that tells him he is not alone: the breaching of solitude, occasion for vast dismay.

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Many of the illustrations were overtly racist: a black man bows down in the sand before Crusoe, whose hand is extended in a gesture that suggests not so much mercy as ‘Rise, and do some useful work for me.’

Writing in a *Guardian* series on ‘The 100 Best Novels Written in English’ in 2013, Robert McCrum noted that ‘By the end of the nineteenth century, no book in English literary history had enjoyed more editions, spin-offs and translations than *Robinson Crusoe*, with more than 700 alternative versions.’ The making of lists is a very Crusoe activity; just one fifth of the books on McCrum’s list are by women; a third are by American writers; from the literatures of countries which are not majority English-speaking but where English has been an official language since colonial times and novels are written in it, zero entries. McCrum maintains that Defoe’s ‘classic novel is English literature at its finest’. For myself, reading *Robinson Crusoe* is a dull plod. This book will argue that the reasons for its inclusion on any list of ‘best’ novels have little to do with literary merit and more because it surfed a wave of approval in which some ugly flotsam was swept up, and still is.

One of the best known of the 19th-century spin-offs was *Der Schweizerische Robinson* by Johann David Wyss, published in 1812 and translated (many times) into English under the title *The Swiss Family Robinson*. I haven’t read it. Walter de la Mare tells me that ‘It is full of that complacent and pacifying kind of instruction which glides into and out of the mind like water off a duck’s back . . . It can be read on and on with an eye bordering on vacancy; and can be shut up without remorse.’ Mr Robinson is ‘infinite in resource and in sententiousness. His wilds are merely a daylong pulpit.’ He and his family, ‘tented in by a Robinsonian heaven, enjoy a prolonged picnic’.

Picnics I like, as long as they come without sermons, and