

The adventure story

Hi. I'm Paul Young. I'm senior lecturer in Victorian literature and culture in the Department of English here at the University of Exeter. My research and teaching interests focus predominantly upon the cultural dimensions of imperialism and globalisation in the Victorian period.

Today I'm going to be focusing on the adventure story and its relations to British imperialism. I want us to think especially about the idea that the adventure story formed a cultural force that naturalised and energised Britain's overseas expansion. But towards the end of the section we'll turn to consider how adventure stories might have worked explicitly or implicitly to complicate or problematise the aims, ambitions, and ideologies we associate with empire.

So here I am deep in the University of Exeter's archival holdings, and I'm surrounded by books that make up part of the Chris Brooks collection - a collection that's particularly strong in Victorian, Edwardian, adult, and juvenile fiction. As you'll see from the titles and spines of many of these books, adventure is a genre that's strongly represented here.

And that's significant because, while adventure stories have historically been incredibly popular, they're often not works that have received a great deal of attention from literary scholars. One work that bucks this trend, however, is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel first published in 1719 that famously tells the story of a shipwrecked Englishman who succeeds not only in surviving, but in prospering on his island home. Many critics have noted how Crusoe's industrious, prudent, and God-fearing nature gives form to qualities associated with Britain's increasingly powerful middle classes.

But if in the sense the novel can be read as a bourgeois fantasy, so too it's an imperial fantasy. Robinson Crusoe heroically transforms and cultivates his island environment, subduing it and the native people he encounters in order that they serve his own ends. At a moment in history when Britain's economic and political interests were more and more bound up with imperial expansion, perhaps most notably in the form of the slave trade then, Daniel Defoe writes a novel celebrating Britain's rights to conquer, rule over, and draw wealth from distant lands and their inhabitants.

Although Defoe's novel was incredibly popular when first published, it became even more popular in the Victorian era. 41 editions of *Robinson Crusoe* were published in Britain within 40 years of its publication. The total had risen to at least 200 by the end of the 19th century. In fact, this edition here is a second edition from 1719.

Moreover though, we should think about adventure stories that became known as Robinson aids, a multitude of books that reworked the story of Robinson Crusoe in slightly different guises. Here we have a little known novel, *Perseverance Island*, or the Robinson Crusoe of the 19th century, published in 1884 by the American author Douglas Frazar. This is notable, in fact, because it contains a goat powered submarine.

Here we have an annual of *The Girl's Own Paper* from 1882 to 1883 that features an interestingly regendered working of the Crusoe story, Robina Crusoe and her lonely island home.

One of my favourite Robinson aids, however, is the Scottish adventure writer R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, which was published in 1857 and which featured three teenage sailors shipwrecked on an island. This passage from early on in the novel sees one of the heroes expressing confidence about the boy's situation. "'Do you know what conclusion I've come to?'" said Peterkin. "I've made up my mind that it's capital - first-rate - the best thing that ever happened to us, and the most splendid prospect that ever lay before three jolly young tars. 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."

Things don't quite work out that way, but Peterkin's imperial confidence underlines the way in which adventure stories in general - and the Crusoe story in particular - were such potent vehicles for expansionist ideology. While the Crusoe story featured a hero creating a world after his or her own image, other late 19th century adventure tales featured encounters with extraordinary lands and peoples that often seemed to defy such transformation. These tales, known today as imperial romances, were typically set in real or imagined non-European lands, either in the past, the present, or the future where adventurous British heroes would encounter strange savage tribes, fierce creatures, and magical forces.

Often the tales begin with a discoloured, tattered map only partly legible and with crucial information missing. We might think here about Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, or we might turn to Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, published some two years after *Treasure Island* in 1885 and advertised with the modest slogan "The Most Amazing Book Ever Written." Dedicated by its narrator, Allan Quartermain, to all the big and little boys who read it, *King Solomon's Mines* tells the story of three English adventures penetrating the interior of a hidden African land.

While at times there's a violent racism to the way in which Haggard portrays African peoples, it's also the case that Haggard is drawn to the supposed savagery of Africa because it allows his protagonists to prove their masculinity. On one hand, this novel could be read as a critique of the damaging impact of modern, urban, civilised life in metropolitan Britain. But if in this sense it celebrates an escape from Victorian modernity, it's notable too that it also plots the return of its heroes to Britain laden down with the diamonds they've "liberated".

Again then, we need to think about the way in which adventures open up distant lands as spaces that are resource rich but underdeveloped, "primitive" but penetrable, hostile but unable to resist the righteous exertion of British power. And as I've said, this kind of narrative of might and right can be understood with regard to a contemporary historical situation which saw Britain and other industrialised powers scrambling to penetrate, possess, and profit upon non-European terrains and populations.

So we've thought about the way in which the 18th and 19th century adventure story can be understood to legitimise and galvanise imperial activity. But I want to conclude by stressing that, in common with all forms of literature, adventure stories are often complex and contradictory. Many adventure stories encode jingoism and racial chauvinism, but so too they configure Britain's imperial relations ambivalently, generating doubt and anxiety as well as confidence and conviction.

Joseph Conrad's turn of the century novella *Heart of Darkness* has been famously attacked by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe for its racist portrayal of Africa, but it also presents a horrific picture of the rapacity and greed at the heart of European imperialism, leading its narrator, Marlow, to reflect that "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."

Less well known is *The Purple Land* that *England Lost*, a novel set in Uruguay by the naturalist and writer W.H. Hudson and published in the same year as *King Solomon's Mines*. Hudson's English protagonist begins the novel as a violent imperialist intent on colonising the land, but he quickly falls in love with the people and their way of life so that by the end of the novel he's thankful that Uruguay has not, as he puts it, "been conquered and recolonised by England, and all that is crooked in it made straight according to our notions." Adventure stories can certainly be understood to promote imperialism, but so too it seems at times that they can work against it.