An Imperialist's Garden of Eden: Images of Oceania in R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*

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Abstract: This paper discusses how Oceania is depicted in an example of Victorian children's literature, in Ballantyne's The Coral Island. The island is described as a garden of Eden, in which the protagonists of the novel can build a model colonial civilisation. The idea of civilisation is also central to Ballantyne's representation of Pacific Islanders, who are described with typical racist stereotypes as childish and cruel, but whose inferiority is described as cultural rather than biological and who should be civilised and christianised.

Introduction

The 19th century was the century of industrialisation and the high tide of colonialism and imperialism. But, while large parts of the world were divided up between European powers, while cities grew and technology developed, writers still searched for a life close to and in harmony with nature, unspoilt by industrialisation, for a paradise on Earth. This paradise many writers believed to have found in Oceania. The Scottish author Robert Michael Ballantyne was one of them, and in this research note, which is based on my master thesis in Anthropology, I want to look at how Oceania and its inhabitants are represented in Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*.

The novel tells the story of three boys – Ralph, Jack and Peterkin – who serve in the merchant navy. When they are shipwrecked, they manage to reach a nearby island. In the course of their adventures there, they get caught in a conflict between two groups of indigenous people, who visit the island. Later in the book, Ralph is abducted by pirates. After he manages to escape, the boys continue to have adventures on other islands. The second half of the book focuses on them trying to find a way home and is more serious in tone than the first half, emphasising moral and religious questions.

Island Myths

In the 19th century, the "wild" and "unknown" seemed to grow scarce. New and faster means of transport disenchanted many parts of the world, newspapers and other media made various information easier to access, and writers of adventure books had to find new and more remote settings for their heroes to get lost in. Fulton (2013) argues that the fascination with Oceania for writers lies in its remoteness, in its being terra incognita. While other regions of the world were quite well-known by the middle of the 19th century, Oceania was not. Children in Victorian England could gain a lot of knowledge about places like India or Australia, but information about Oceania was difficult to come by. The South Seas therefore offered a lot of freedom for writers' imagination and made an ideal scene of instruction for the European reader, a setting, where "there is no resistance from history itself", because there was no factual information available (Edmond 1997: 132).

This interest in Oceania can be seen as part of a wider theme of fascination with remoteness and with islands in particular. Gerber (1959: 37) even speaks of an "island myth" in British literature. In *The Coral Island*, we also witness a South Sea myth, because

we see Oceania recreated through a European's eye, overlaying, using and transforming indigenous visions in the process (cf. Jolly 2007). Hau'ofa (1994) points out that even the connection between islands and remoteness is an idea that is projected onto Oceania by Europeans, and that Pacific Islanders might consider the sea something connecting rather than separating islands.

In literature, this remoteness functions as a narrative device. Because of the separation from home and from "civilisation", the conflict of the narrative has to be solved without outside influence, and the protagonists gain agency and control of the situation (Bristow 1991). This is especially the case in children's literature: to become the main movers of events it is necessary for children to be removed from the control of adults. Islands thus become imperialist classrooms "representing colonialist dreams and fears in miniature" (Bristow 1991: 94). There are dangers, but in this miniature, controlled environment they are easily overcome, and the children always emerge as masters of the situation. The island serves as a model for how to build a civilisation. Children's literature seems at first relatively remote from discourses of power and politics, but due to didactic intent, imperialist ideol-

ogy is often particularly pronounced in children's books. After all, imperialism is a system of belief that is learnt, or, as Hall (1991: 51) notes, it is "a complex process by which a group of potentially noncolonial infants becomes a nation of active colonizers".

In *The Coral Island*, the boys explore the island, conduct scientific experiments, build a camp and construct weapons. Hulme (1986: 122) sees "an imperialist production of Robinson Crusoe as a boys' adventure in the nineteenth century", but this always serves the colonial endeavour, is always "colonial alibi". Accordingly, in *The Coral Island*, immediately after their arrival the boys declare the island a British possession. One of the three children protagonists in the book, Jack, says: "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." (Ballantyne 1991: 16)

A Garden of Eden?

When the French explorer Louis de Bougainville arrived in Tahiti in 1768, he described the island as Elysium and its inhabitants as embodiments of the Greek gods. Since then, similar descriptions have never ceased to be a central element of the image of the South Seas in European imagination. Smith (1985) argues that the descriptions of Oceania that can be found in early travel reports, especially in the reports from James Cook's pacific journeys, continued to be influential for a long time and that similar motives can be observed in the imaginings of Oceania for several centuries, with many writers taking up – perhaps sometimes unconsciously – elements from literature rather than relying on their own observations. Hoomanawanui (2012) compares such descriptions to a process of elimination of indigenous cultures. European writers submit the South Seas to their own preconceptions, reducing indigenous cultures to stereotypes that are constantly repeated, and appropriating indigenous cultural elements that they perceive as worth preserving.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the idea of paradise appeared prominently in poetry but also in travel literature. Byron (1823: 16) describes Tahiti as the land "[w]here all partake the earth without dispute", and Ten-
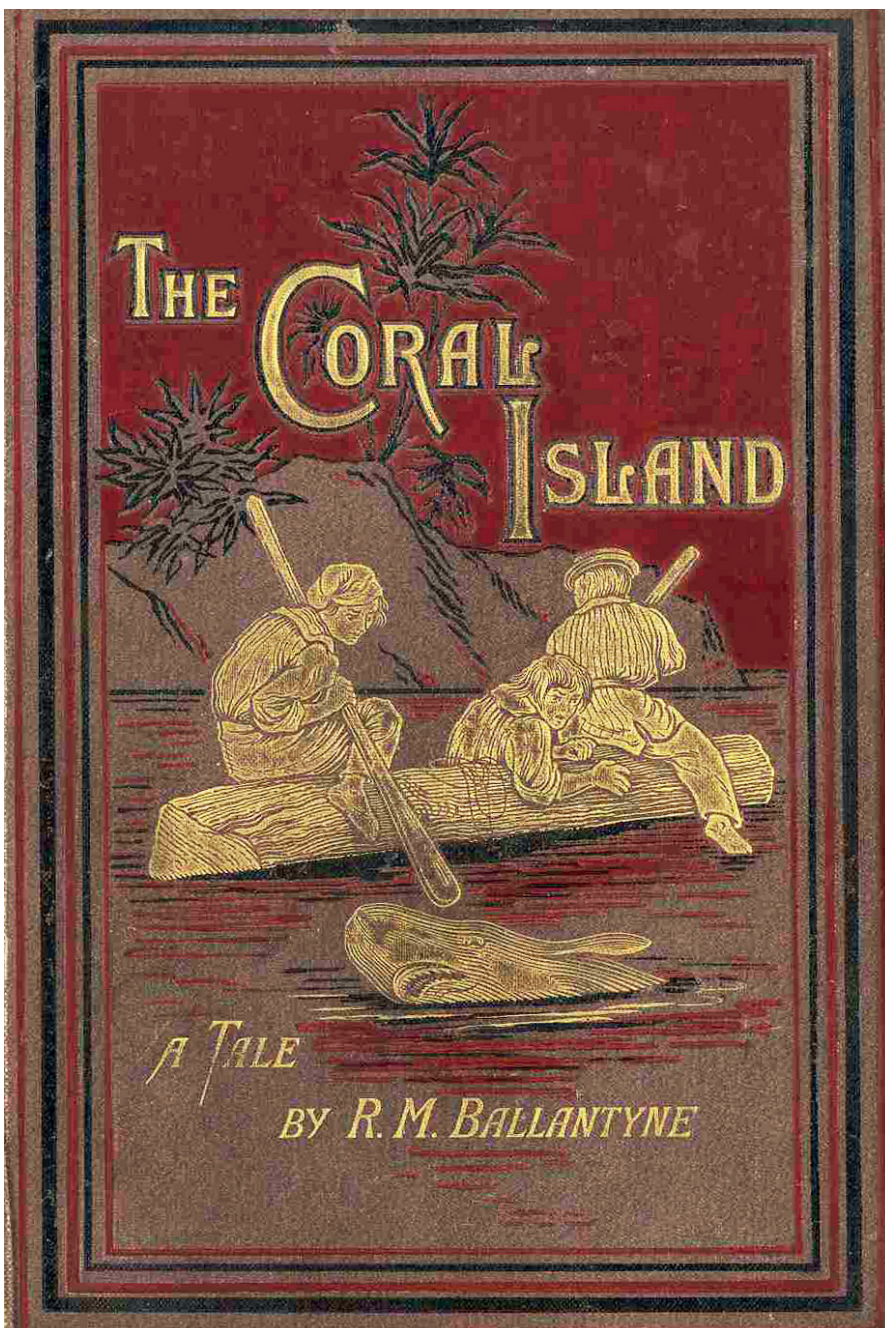

Figure 1: Book cover page of an edition from 1894.

nyson (1992: 33-34) dreams of "[s]ummer isles of Eden", where "never floats a European flag". In 19th-century South Seas' novels, the image of Eden appears frequently (Schulz 1985), and it survives well into the 21st century. This is apparent in Disney's 2016 film *Moana*, though Tamaira (2018: 302-303) highlights that it is not necessarily something projected onto the region from outside but is also "rooted in a lived reality" of Pacific Islanders today. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* is depicted as a paradise on Earth, far removed from European influence:

"The island on which we stood was hilly, and covered almost everywhere with the most beautiful and richly coloured trees, bushes, and shrubs […]. A sandy beech of dazzling whiteness lined this bright green shore, and upon it there fell a gentle ripple of the sea." (Ballantyne 1991: 21)

Everything the boys need to survive is readily available on the island, without the necessity of work. There is food and drink, a tree that provides them with fabric to make clothes from, another tree grows in planks that they can simply cut off to build a shelter. There are no seasons with most fruit-trees being evergreens, and the boys might "when we wished, pluck the blossom and the ripe fruit from the same tree" (Ballantyne 1991: 44-45). The island is not only physically remote but appears to be

Figure 2: Shipwrecked (original illustration)

taken out of time, a place where nothing ever changes, what Spurr (1993: 127) calls "a realm outside of time". The protagonists themselves perceive the island as Garden of Eden: Peterkin describes it as "the ancient Paradise" (Ballantyne 1991: 27-28), and Ralph wonders "whether Adam or Eve had found Eden more sweet" (ibid: 187).

A conflict between two traditions, which led to inconsistencies in the works of many 19th-century writers, is apparent in *The Coral Island*: The literary tradition of romanticism that celebrated an Edenic setting and a life close to nature contends with a more modern belief in progress and civilisation (Street 1975). In *The Coral Island*, the children are forced to discover that the island is a fragile paradise that is easily lost. Only the children of the ship reach the island, and their existence there is dependent on their innocence (Ballantyne 1991). When they stop being content with life on the island and start to explore and strive for knowledge and power, they grow up, and this means loss of innocence and subsequently loss of the island. Bratton (1991) describes the diamond cave the boys discover as a symbol of this loss. Peterkin, who, like the other children, is at first happy with life on the island, can't reach the cave, because he can't dive as well as the others, and becomes obsessed with reaching it. Carelessly leaving the cave leads to Ralph's abduction by pirates. When he returns to the island, he no longer wants to remain there (Ballantyne 1991). The return to civilisation,

which in the beginning didn't interest the boys at all, is their goal now. The other islands they visit are neither as Edenic nor as removed from civilisation as the Coral Island, and no similar idealised existence is possible in this world of adults.

Noble Savages?

Before Cook's Pacific journeys little was known about the South Pacific and its inhabitants. Reports dating back to the 17th century place the peoples of the South Pacific more in the realm of fairy tale than fact. Even Joseph Banks' reports from Cook's journeys say little about the actual culture of the people he met, and like Bougainville, he describes them as resembling ancient Greeks (Smith 1985).

The way non-European people are described in European literature tends to fall into one of two categories. Popular in the 18th century and, to a lesser extent, in the 19th century was the concept of the "noble savage", who was "closely related to his natural setting, for he was, in a sense, a personification of the eighteenth-century belief in the nobility and simplicity of Nature" (Smith 1985:42). Non-European people were considered closer to nature and to creation than Europeans and therefore became an ideal to aspire to, in their way of life and in an essential nobility in their character that was unspoilt by civilisation, a natural feeling for Right and Wrong (Landsdown 2006). The concept of the noble savage, while popular throughout the 18th century, came into conflict with the aim of missionary societies, who regarded non-European people as morally inferior, decadent and promiscuous, as "heathens", who had to be civilised and converted to Christianity to be saved (Samson 1998; cf. Kittelmann 2021 in this volume). The perceived difference remained a cultural rather than a biological one, but some 18th-century texts anticipated aspects that would feature in racialist theory, e.g., an emphasis on physical features and a ranking of peoples in stages between savagery and civilisation (Jolly 2007).

This second, racialist viewpoint assumed a general inferiority of non-European peoples. The concept of different "races" was first formalised by Blumenbach in 1795 and was adopted in literature especially in the late 19th century. It was now believed that

non-European people could only be civilised to some degree and that they would never achieve the same "level" of civilisation as Europeans (Street 1975).

In *The Coral Island*, the Pacific Islanders are in a state of nature, not yet raised to civilisation:

"As they were almost entirely naked, and had to bound, stoop, leap, and run in their terrible hand-to-hand encounters, they looked more like demons than human beings. […] the man's body was as black as coal, and I felt convinced that the hair must have been dyed. He was tattooed from head to foot, and his face, besides being tattooed was besmeared with red paint, and streaked with white. Altogether with his yellow, turban-like hair, his Herculean black frame, his glittering eyes and white teeth, he seemed the most terrible monster I ever beheld." (Ballantyne 1991: 173-174)

Like other writers before him, Ballantyne combines elements of the material culture of Polynesia with features that seem to have their place in the realm of fairy tales. He works quite consciously with colours and light. The indigenous people are naked, their bodies are not just described as dark but as "black as coal", contrasted by "glittering eyes and white teeth" (Ballantyne 1991: 173). The coloured hair gives the impression of decadence, while the turban creates a connection to the Orient. Dutheil (2001) argues that the colours red and white hint at the bloodshed that is to follow. She points out that the physical bodies of the Pacific Islanders are described in more detail than the Europeans and refers to the body of the Other as one of the "repressed fantasies of Victorian society" (Dutheil 2001: 112).

The indigenous people are described as childish but at the same time very cruel, killing indiscriminately, even women, children and prisoners (Ballantyne 1991). Ballantyne argues that the natives are bad, because they have not received the blessings of civilisation and "true" religion. They frequently conform to typical racist stereotypes: cannibals, tyrants, infanticidal mothers (Elleray 2013). In *The Coral Island*, Ralph points out that the boys think of stereotypical images, even before they meet any Pacific Islanders:

"[M]y companions afterwards confessed that their thoughts at this

moment had been instantly filled with all they had ever heard or read of wild beasts and savages, torturings at the stake, roastings alive, and such like horrible things." (Ballantyne 1991: 42)

But the novel creates two kinds of natives: The bad one that has not been civilised and remains heathen conforms to typical stereotypes, while the good, Christian one becomes a role model to the protagonists. The best example is the Pacific Islander missionary, who is "held up to British boys as a model of masculinity, civility and faith" (Elleray (2013: 168). Yet Ballantyne doesn't completely escape racism beyond the idea of civilisation: the British protagonists are the most active characters in the novel, while the Pacific Islanders remain passive and inactive, standing in one scene "powerless and petrified with surprise" (Ballantyne 1991: 311). At the same time, Jack is fighting to protect a Christian woman from being forced to marry a "heathen".

However, the pirates, who behave as badly as the indigenous people while having a European background, are judged far more harshly. After spending time with the pirates, Ralph notices that he is becoming inured to the cruelties that are committed around him and finds he can't judge the Pacific Islanders, who know nothing else:

"I came to the conclusion that if I, who hated, abhorred and detested such bloody deeds as I had witnessed within the last few weeks, could so soon come to be less sensitive about them, how little wonder that these poor ignorant savages, who were born and bred in familiarity therewith, should think nothing of them at all, and should hold human life in so very slight esteem!" (Ballantyne 1991: 243)

Conclusion

Ballantyne's book uses the didactic format of a children's novel to imagine an island that serves as a model for colonial civilisation. The island provides the boys with an environment separated from the European and the adult world, where they learn to become imperialists. The Edenic setting of the novel is not only a typical element of many South Sea tales but also mirrors the children's innocence. Yet the life in

harmony with nature has to be replaced with the civilising mission that Ballantyne believed in and that is at the centre of the second part of the novel.

This idea of a civilising mission also determines the description of the Pacific Islanders. They are described as childish, cruel and savage, but, when they come in contact with European culture and are Christianised and "civilised", they can become role models and teachers to the boys. But the novel denies the indigenous peoples' own voice, a problem that even contemporary cinema films like *Moana* continue to face (Dittmer 2021 in this volume). Indigenous people only exist as Europe's Other and are always compared to European "civilisation".

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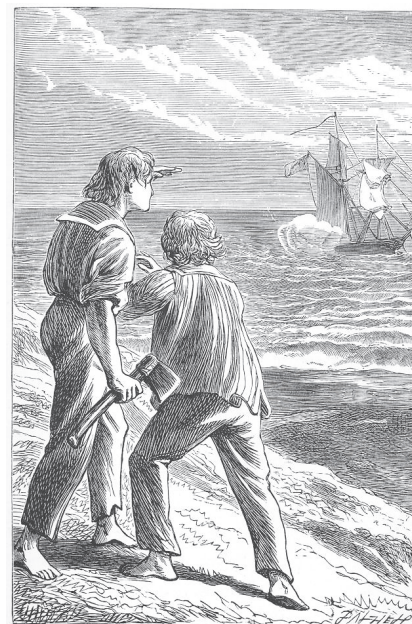
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Figure 3: A threat (original illustration)

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Coral_Island_-_A_threat.jpg

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