

# Some Thoughts about ‘Masterman Ready’ by Captain Marryat

An Analysis

by

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## 1. The Book<sup>1</sup>

I first came across *Masterman Ready* as a child, perhaps as a 10 or 11 year old, but maybe even younger. I think I was given it, though maybe it was somehow just *there*, but I do know that it was represented to me as a book which in some way I *ought* to read. I think I struggled through some of it – I do not remember finishing it, but I do remember not particularly enjoying it, and the experience left me with no desire to pick it up again. It appeared back on my horizon when I had the opportunity in my 30's to turn my interest in children's literature to some account, but that is where it remained until now, on my horizon. Recently, however, for a project that I have in mind, I have started thinking about Robinsonades, and *Masterman Ready* is nothing if not a Robinsonade, so finally I got round to reading it again, and started to analyse it, and rather to my surprise the more I thought about it the more interesting it became. The result follows below. I'll start with the plot.

## 2. The Plot

The Seagraves are travelling to Australia when a storm hits and they are wrecked on a desert island. The Seagraves are Mr & Mrs, and their children: 12 yr. old William; 7 yr. old Caroline; 6 yr. old Tommy; and Albert, the not yet 1 yr. old baby. They have a black maid, Juno. Also on the ship, and the only sailor to survive with them, is the second mate, Ready, a grizzled old seaman known as Masterman Ready, a name given to him by his godfather, a Mr. Masterman, but which more generally reflects his long experience and deep knowledge of the sea in all its moods and turbulences. Once on the island they proceed to do all the things you should do in a Robinsonade<sup>2</sup>: they rescue lots of useful tools and animals off the wreck, they build shelters, even a house, they take advantage of the natural resources of the island, they survive storms, and at the end they are attacked by savages and rescued in the nick of time. In between times Ready tells the story of his life, and Mr. Seagrave makes of his opportunities to teach William about various subjects – colonialism, the infinite variety of the natural world, how coral islands are formed, etc. He even, perhaps inevitably given when the book was published, lectures him about religion. The book breaks from genre in one respect, in that Ready himself is badly wounded by the savages at the end, and dies in William's arms.

## 3. An Initial Examination

For a modern reader the first 'problem' with the book is the religious proselytising. Ready is rather given to lecturing William on his duty to pray, to thank the Lord for his blessings, etc, and a modern reader, at any rate *this* modern reader, tends to pass over those passages rather quickly in order to get back to the story. But it then struck me that, however much I thought I was not interested, that I could not ignore such passages. They are after all part of the book.<sup>3</sup> Thus it was that when I came to an early passage in the book where Ready gets into full lecturing mode, (pp. 21-23), I thought it might be worth looking at it in some detail.<sup>4</sup> (As you will see I ended up not stopping with the first few exchanges that were directly concerned with religious matters since I found the rest of the more general discussion to be of interest too.) The next problem I was faced with was the problem of trying to offer a commentary on, in particular, the religious content of the passage. I found that thinking in terms of discourse gave me a very useful tool

with which to begin. It proved to be a helpful approach. Here is the complete passage – Ready is speaking:

“You are young, Master Willy, but you cannot think too early of your Maker, or call to mind what they say in the burial service: ‘In the midst of life we are in death.’”

“Thank you, Ready, thank you for the lesson you have given my son,” said Mr Seagrave; “and William, treasure it up in your memory.”

“Yes, Master William, they are the words of an old man who has seen many and many a one who was full of youth and spirits called away before him, and who is grateful to God that He has been pleased to preserve his life, and allow him to amend his ways. We must seek the Lord in our youth, and then we shall be prepared when He thinks fit to summon us away.”

“I have been thinking,” said Mr Seagrave, after a silence of a minute or two, “that a sailor has no right to marry.”

“I’ve always thought so, sir” replied Ready; “and I dare say many a poor deserted sailor’s wife when she has listened to the wind and the rain in her lonely bed, has thought the same.”

With my permission,” continued Mr Seagrave, “my boys shall never go to sea if there is any other profession to be found for them.”

“Well Mr Seagrave, they do say that it’s no use baulking a lad if he wishes to go to sea, and that if he is determined, he must go: now I think otherwise – I think a parent has the right to say no, if he pleases, upon that point; for you see, sir, a lad, at the early age at which he goes to sea, does not know his own mind. Every high-spirited boy wishes to go to sea – it’s quite natural; but if most of them were to speak the truth, it is not so much that they want to go to sea, is that they want to go from school or from home, where they are under the control of their masters or their parents.”

“Very true, Ready; they wish to be, as they consider they will be, independent.”

“And a pretty mistake they make of it, sir. Why, there is not a greater slave in the world than a boy who goes to sea, for the first few years after his shipping: for one they are corrected on shore, they are punished ten times at sea, and they never again meet with the love and affection they have left behind them. It is a hard life and there have been but few who have not bitterly repented it, and who would have returned, like the prodigal son, and cast themselves at their father’s feet, only that they have been ashamed.”

“That’s the truth, Ready, and it is on that account that I consider that a parent is justified in refusing his consent to his son going to sea, if he can properly provide for him in any other profession. There will never be any want of sailors, for there will be plenty of poor lads whose friends can do no better for them; and in that case the seafaring life is a good one to choose, as it requires no other capital for their advancement than activity and courage.”

“Exactly what I thought myself, sir,” replied Ready. (pp.21-23)

I would like to suggest that there are a number of discourses going on here. (I make no claims to the exclusivity of my list, there are doubtless others). There are, first of all, the discourses

related to Ready's religious encomiums. Most obviously there is the underlying discourse about the presumption of faith itself and about the necessity of observing it, and that you can't start too young: 'We must seek the Lord in our youth..' The predominant attribute of this particular version of God, as will emerge in the course of the book, is that he is the creator of the world, it is he who has made us: '...you cannot think too early of your *Maker*..' (my emphasis). The second not unrelated religious discourse is a discourse about fate, though it is a fate conceived of in terms of the exercise of the will of God. Ready makes no distinction between them, fate and the will of God are one and the same thing. No individual can know what God / fate has in store for them, people cannot control their fate, they are helpless in the face of it. Ready calls on his own experience to reinforce his argument: he has seen men younger than himself die, but he has survived to become an old man: 'who has seen many and many a one who was full of youth and spirits called away before him...' The corollary of that, of course, is that the longer someone lives the more he must thank God for allowing him to do so, 'grateful to God that He has been pleased to preserve his life, and allow him to amend his ways.' This same quote also touches on the moral discourse, which Ready does not labour at this point, but his argument is that, by dint of allowing him to live so long, God has given him the opportunity 'to amend his ways.' The implied moral blackmail is clear enough, that the young too must amend their ways in case they are called away before their time. As Ready says, 'You are young, Master Willy, but you cannot think too early of your Maker'.

Moving on from religious discourses per se, and in no particular order of priority, there are a number of other discourses in operation here. I shall first consider the discourse of power – and I may add that power is a central issue in all children's literature. In this case Ready and Mr Seagrave between them effectively present it as a struggle, a struggle for power between the adult and the young. On this particular occasion they are talking about whether a boy should be allowed to go to sea or whether he should be prevented from doing so by his parent. Mr Seagrave initiates the discussion by suggesting that he would use his power to prevent his children from having their way: '...with my permission my boys shall never go to sea..' Ready initially comes in on the other side of the argument: '...it's no use baulking a lad if he wishes to go to sea, and if he is determined he must go...' Having said that, Ready then backtracks, perhaps with a sense that he must not be seen to be too determinedly arguing against Mr Seagrave, and comes out with the age old argument that adults should exercise their authority and make decisions for and on behalf of the young on the grounds that they know better what is good for them than they do themselves: '...a parent has a right to say no...' not least because 'a lad, at the early age at which he goes to sea, does not know his own mind.'

It might be thought that that would be the end of the debate, but not so, because Ready again changes sides, and suggests that it is the very exercise of that parental power that drives many boys to rebel. Going to sea per se is not the point, the point is that young person simply wants to escape the oppression of the exercise of adult power over the choices of their lives: '... it is not so much that they want to go to sea, is that they want to go *from* school or from home, where they are under the control of their masters or their parents' (my emphasis). And Mr Seagrave even concedes the point: 'Very true, Ready; they wish to be, as they consider they will be, independent.'

Ready and Mr Seagrave continue knocking the ball back and forth in the next paragraph or two, in the course of which another discourse enters the frame, and that is a materialist economic discourse. Mr Seagrave has returned to his earlier argument that a parent is nonetheless still justified in preventing his son from going to sea, but now adds this crucial rider: ‘...*if he can properly provide for him in any other profession*’ (my emphasis), and even adds that ‘there will be plenty of poor lads whose friends can do no better for them; and in that case the seafaring life is a good one to choose, as it requires no other capital for their advancement than activity and courage.’ And one might smile as Ready hastens to concur: ‘Exactly what I thought myself, sir.’

Issues of power and issues of the material economic circumstances in which one finds oneself unable to exercise any real freedom of choice are inextricably bound up with each other, and Marryat even provides us with a hinge word that joins the two discourses, and that is the word ‘slave’. Slaves are in both a subservient economic relationship with their owner, and a subservient power relationship with their owner. The two relationships are co-dependent.

Moving on, there is also the discourse of teaching and learning, a discourse that has a salient role throughout the book. Here it is barely touched upon but it is still present. When Ready tells William that he cannot think too early of his maker, Mr Seagrave thanks him for the lesson he has taught his son. ‘Thank you, Ready, thank you for the lesson you have given my son ... and William, treasure it up in your memory.’ His comment in many ways puts his seal of approval on the central relationship of the book which is that between Ready and William in which Ready acts the older mentor and William as his eager student.

The next discourse is a discourse of gender, and it is not a simple one either. The sailor, male, should not marry because of the dangers inherent in the profession: ‘“I have been thinking,” said Mr Seagrave, after a silence of a minute or two, “that a sailor has no right to marry.”’ While the context of the discussion might suggest that Mr Seagrave is thinking of the material dependence of the woman upon her husband, Ready’s reply, while it does characterise the woman as dependent on the man, focuses interestingly not on the material but on the emotional and the sexual. The wife is ‘deserted’ and listens to the wind and the rain ‘in her lonely bed’. A queer reading might suggest that the man, by choosing the all-male society of sailors and ships instead of that of his wife, has given his love to other men rather than to the woman, but I think it is pushing it a bit. There is nothing else in the novel that I can see that might be taken even as a coded reference to the issue. As the discussion proceeds, Ready himself moves on from the sexual and reformulates the debate in more essentialist terms: ‘Every high-spirited boy wishes to go to sea – it’s quite natural.’ It is in their very nature, he argues, that boys, as opposed to girls, will want to go to sea.

Finally there is the discourse of class. It is made clear from the beginning of the book that Ready is just a seaman, while the Seagrave family are of a higher class. In the extract above, Ready calls Mr Seagrave ‘Mr Seagrave’ but Mr Seagrave only ever calls Ready ‘Ready’, it is a master servant relationship. The same applies with regard to William. Ready may use the diminutive ‘Willy’ but it is always ‘Master Willy’. And a little later, (p23), when the discussion has come to an end, Ready bids them goodnight by calling them gentleman: ‘So good-night. Gentleman, both of you.’ That it is a relationship of mutual respect is never in doubt, neither is it in any

doubt that the Seagraves will defer to Ready's experience and knowledge on innumerable occasions, but it never crosses the linguistic boundaries of a master servant relationship.

To sum up: much to my surprise I discovered that many of the major discourses that inform the novel are to be found in this passage. And indeed in the process of doing the analysis I discovered that there were discourses that I hadn't even thought of as being pertinent to a reading of the novel, but which upon reflection turned out to be of interest. Many of them can be found in this passage, but not all of them. The discourse of race, for instance, is missing, as is the discourse of the Robinsonade itself, the major discourse of the novel.

In my analysis below I have eschewed more theoretical and ideological discussion, even when it comes to discourses that invite it, such as colonialism for instance, or gender, since I wanted to examine the more direct effect of these discourses upon the characters and upon the narrative action. Apart from anything else, more ideological approaches do tend, from today's perspective, to tell us what is wrong with the novel, whereas what interests me is how the novel works, you might indeed say what is right with the novel. A more structuralist approach, perhaps, rather than an ideological one.

#### 4. The Discourse of Colonialism

As I have suggested, a full exploration of the discourse of colonialism would take us in historical and ideological directions which would lead us further outside the book than I wish to go. In a more direct manner, however, it is the actual and particular material practices of colonialism that bring the characters to where they are at the beginning of the story. By way of example, here is Marryat's account of Mr Seagrave:

Mr Seagrave, a very well informed clever man, who having for many years held office under government at Sydney, the principle town in New South Wales, was now returning from a leave of absence of three years. He had purchased from the government several thousand acres of land, it had since risen very much in value, and the sheep and cattle which he had put upon it were proving a source of great profit. (p.4)

Mr Seagrave was a British government official, responsible, presumably, for administrating in one way or another the land that the British had occupied. The British then assume ownership of that land, and can therefore sell it off. The fact that it was never their land in the first place is neither here nor there. Having bought the land, Mr Seagrave himself then sets about occupying it to his own advantage, grazing sheep and cattle on it to great personal profit. Not only that, but the land turns out to have been an excellent investment, since it has increased in value considerably since he bought it. He is indeed the very model of a very successful entrepreneurial capitalist.<sup>5</sup> In terms of the plot of the book Mr Seagrave is returning to New South Wales to resume the management of this land, land acquired in the process of colonial expansion. If he hadn't owned the land he wouldn't have been returning to it, and he and his family would never have been wrecked in the first place.



Following on from that, it is true that at one level the occupation of the island itself by the Seagrave family could perhaps be seen to constitute an imperialist act. In that sense the visit of the savages at the end in the hope of plunder could perhaps also be defined as an 'imperialist' act. But there is otherwise no suggestion that the savages have ever lived there, nor even seen it as part of their territory, and the last thing the Seagraves themselves want is to stay there and in some sense 'own' it. Nor do they wish to claim it for Britain. The island effectively 'belongs' to no-one.

The discourse of colonialism does however crop up elsewhere in the novel, most notably in one of the expositions on various topics that Mr Seagrave offers William at various points throughout the novel. On this occasion William has asked his father why the Cape of Good Hope is so called, following up the question with the rider that he wants to know about colonies per se.

"Father, you promised me the day after we left the Cape of Good Hope that you would explain to me why it is so called, and also the nature of a colony." (p.114)

In response Mr Seagrave proceeds to give him a history lesson. Our modern prejudice might assume that what is going to follow will be a simple justification for British imperialism, with the presumption that once the British, or more specifically the English, had taken over the world, that would be the end of history as we know it. The actuality proves to be quite different. In the first place Mr Seagrave places British colonialism within a historical context. To start with (p.114) he makes it clear that the English were not the first European power on the scene:

"You have been told that we English are now the masters of the sea, but such has not always been the case. The earliest navigators of modern times were the Spaniards and the Portuguese."

He continues:

"At that time, now more than three hundred years ago, England was not the powerful nation she now is, and had comparatively few ships; neither could the English, in enterprise, be compared to the Spanish and Portuguese nations."

We are, as can be seen, a long way from the 'Britain is best' narrative that we might have expected. Instead he describes how Portuguese power went into decline, and how *as* it went into decline the Dutch got into the frame, though taking possession of the Indies rather than of parts of India itself. It was then, and only then, that the English arrived and the tone now becomes more triumphalist:

"Then the English forced their way there, seized upon the colonies of both Dutch and Portuguese, and have ever since held possession. Portugal, that was once the most enterprising nation in the world, is now a mere cipher; the Dutch have gradually decreased in their importance: while the sun is said, and very truly, never to set upon the English possessions; for as the world turns round to it, the sun shines either upon one portion or another of the globe which is a colony to our country."(p.115)

But then William asks a very pertinent question:

“Yes I understand perfectly, papa; but now tell me: why are England and other nations so anxious to have what you call colonies?” replied William.

Well may he ask! But now look at Mr Seagrave’s reply:

“Because they tend so much to the prosperity of the mother country. In their infancy they generally are an expense to her, as they require her care; but as they advance, they are able to repay her by taking her manufactures, and returning for them their own produce; an exchange mutually advantageous, but more so to the mother country than to the colony, as the mother country, assuming to herself the right of supplying all the wants of the colony, has a market for the labour of her own people, without any competition.”

It is a reply couched in the most materialist economic terms. Nothing here of the rhetoric about bringing civilisation, with its attendant attributes of justice, democracy and freedom for all, to the uninitiated and primitive; not even a rhetoric about bringing Christianity to the heathen. The considerations are entirely economic, about exploiting the natural resources of the colony, and in ‘exchange’, though certainly not in fair exchange, establishing a closed market for the export of the mother country’s manufactured goods back to the colony itself, to the overall financial advantage, of course, of the mother country. And there Mr. Seagrave might have left it, with the colony for ever in thrall to the mother country, unable to break out of the economic trap in which it finds itself. But he doesn’t. Instead he suggests that even this state of affairs is only temporary, and that eventually the colony itself will become entirely self-supporting:

“As soon as the colony has grown strong and powerful enough to take care of itself, it throws off the yoke of subjection and declares itself independent; just as a son, who has grown up to manhood, leaves his father’s house, and takes up a business to gain his own livelihood. This is as certain to be the case, as it is that a bird as soon as it can fly will leave its parent’s nest. We have a great example of it in the United States, which fifty years ago were colonies to Great Britain, but are now fast becoming one of the most powerful of nations.”(p.116)

Suddenly there is something of a gap in the account, since Mr Seagrave neglects to tell William, and thus Marryat neglects to tell the reader, that the Americans had to fight the American War of Independence to break free, though there is perhaps a hint of that in the expression ‘throws off the yoke of subjection’. But basically Mr Seagrave portrays it as an entirely natural process, akin to a child growing up to become an adult, or a bird leaving the nest. It wasn’t true then, and it hasn’t been true since. Independence struggles apart however, you might then assume that Marryat would leave it at that, with the English finally in their rightful place, on top. But he doesn’t. Instead he has William ask a further question:

“You said that nations rise and fall; and you have mentioned the Portuguese as proof. Will England ever fall, and be of no more importance than Portugal is now?”(p.116)

The answer is yes. The English may not currently see how it might come about, but:

‘Yes, my dear boy, the English nation must in time meet with the fate of all others.’(p.116)

Mr Seagrave reminds William that the once great Roman empire fell, and finally turns his attention to Africa:

“How is the major portion of the continent of Africa peopled? by barbarians and savages; and who knows what they may become some future day?”

“What! the negroes become a great nation?”

“That is exactly what the Romans might have said in former days. What! the British barbarians become a great nation? and yet they have become so.”

“But the negroes, father – they are blacks.”(p.117)

And so the discourse of colonialism segues, as it must do, into the discourse of race, which I will come to below. Here, however, Mr Seagrave reminds William of the Moors:

“... the majority of the Moors are quite as black as the negroes; yet they were once a great nation., and, moreover, the most enlightened nation of their time, with many excellent qualities, full of honour, generosity, politeness, and chivalry.”(p.117)

The discourse of colonialism here offered by Marryat proves to be very different to that which might have been expected. In the first instance he has Mr Seagrave justify it in entirely materialist economic terms. He adduces no ideological justifications at all. The invading country invades in order to exploit the resources of the invaded, and then to turn it into a captive market for its own goods, thus profiting both ways round. Having made that ‘admission’, though in Marryat’s mind it was presumably not an admission, just an account of a perfectly reasonable course of action, Mr Seagrave goes on to suggest that, just as surely as empires will rise, so, just as surely will they fall. The sun may never set on the British empire, but Marryat shows it to be merely a geographical sun, not a historical one. In the historical sense the sun will inevitably, sooner or later, set on it.

To sum up, at one level the discourse of colonialism is inextricably integrated in the very action of the novel itself, for, as I have suggested, if it wasn’t for the practice of colonialism they would never have been wrecked on the desert island in the first place, but when the discourse of colonialism becomes the very subject of the text, it is shown to be a good deal more complex than might have been expected from a Victorian writer writing a book for children in the 1840’s.

From another perspective entirely Mr Seagrave is directly *teaching* William about colonialism, and by implication Marryat is doing the same for his young readers, which brings us neatly on to our next section.

## 5. The Discourse of Teaching and Learning

These days it is generally assumed that teaching and learning are things that go on exclusively in schools and other institutions of schooling. Within those institutions you have a bunch of adults who are called teachers, or lecturers – who amount to the same thing when push comes to shove – and another bunch of people called pupils or students, who can be generally bundled together as learners. It is then seen as the job of the teachers to teach and of the learners to learn, a relationship in which teachers actively tell learners what is the case, and the learners sit back and are told. And once the learners have regurgitated it in the form of exams they are deemed to have learned all there is to be learned, they can now, thank goodness, stop learning and get on with the real business of life. Take the teachers away, however, and another conceptualisation of learning emerges from the shadows, a conceptualisation in which we, the learners, are in charge. We finally get to take an active role in the process, pursuing our own interests, and more generally learning from experience. Under those circumstance it is very useful to have someone more experienced and knowledgeable than ourselves to consult and to learn from, and they, de facto, become sort of teachers too, though we don't tend to think of them in those terms. The important point is that it is now we, the learners who are in charge, and our adviser-teachers are there at *our* beck and call. Of course this is an over-simplification: I have represented these two positions as mutually exclusive, they are in fact the opposite ends of a single scale, and somewhere in the middle is a point of much greater mutuality, with learner and teacher in a much more equitable relationship. Such, most of the time, is the case in *Masterman Ready*.

In his own preface to the novel, Marryat makes his didactic purposes clear, first of all insisting that: 'Fiction, when written for young people, should, at all events, be *based* upon the truth,' (p.xii, his emphasis) and then going on to explain his aims:

My idea is to show the practical man in Ready, and the theoretical in the father of the family, and, as the work advances, to enter more deeply into questions *which may induce children to think, or, by raising their curiosity, stimulate them to seek for information.* (p.xii, my emphasis.)<sup>6</sup>

The central relationship in the book is that between Ready and William, a dyadic relationship between an adult and someone who, in today's parlance, is more often than not called a child, though Marryat refers to him as a young lad, a much more helpful term. It is a relationship between experience and inexperience, between the more knowledgeable Ready and the less knowledgeable William. Ready acts as mentor, and William is the questioning student desirous of knowledge. And time and time again it is William who is the driving force, continually wanting things explained to him or shown to him. Thus, while the general assumption is that it is the knowledgeable older person who has the power in such a relationship, in fact here it is far from the case. Ready's knowledge may constitute one sort of power, but William's curiosity is a productively countervailing power, a countervailing power that he uses to access the knowledge he needs.

But, as the above discussion of colonialism shows, there is also a strong teacher learner relationship between William and his father, a relationship that more nearly corresponds with

what we might think of as a more traditional relationship between a teacher and a pupil. I shall come to that below, but let me start with William and Ready. Their relationship is established in the very first conversational exchange of the novel. Indeed we only learn the names of the two protagonists in the course of that exchange; before that Marryat has only established the storm, and an un-named young lad and a similarly un-named weather-beaten old seaman looking over the taffrail of the vessel. The very first words that William utters are in the form of a question. He has been watching the waves and is fearful that the vessel may be swamped. He is the young and inexperienced asking the older more experienced Ready for reassurance.

The young lad, observing a heavy sea coming up to the stern of the vessel, caught hold of the old man's arm, crying out: "Won't that great wave come into us Ready?"

"No, Master William, it will not: don't you see how the ship lifts her quarters to it? (p.2)

They watch the wave pass under them, and after discussion about the dangers of their situation, William, perhaps reassured, now wants information:

"What little birds are those flying about so close to the water?"

"Those are Mother Carey's chickens, Master William, as we sailors call them. You seldom see them except in a storm, or when a storm is coming on."

Such exchanges characterise Ready and William's relationship all the way through the novel, never more so than when they are alone together. Ch. XIV provides a very good and much more sustained example of this, when they set out together to cross the island. Their conversation throughout the chapter consists almost entirely of William's seeking of knowledge, and Ready's providing of it. Sometimes Ready takes the lead, and sometimes William does. Here's an example with Ready taking the lead – they have just set off:

"Now, Master William, do you know," said Ready, stopping after they had walked 20 yards, "by what means we may find our way back again? for you see this forest of trees is rather puzzling, and there is no path to guide us:"

"No, I am sure I cannot tell: I was thinking the very same thing when you spoke.." (p.63)

Ready explains:

".... We must do as the Americans do in their woods – we must *blaze* the trees."

"Blaze them! what, set fire to them?" replied William.

"No, no, Master William. *Blaze* is a term they use .. when they cut a slice of bark off the trunk of a tree, just with one blow of a sharp axe, as a mark to find their way back again." (pp.63-64)

But now, in another example, here is William taking the lead:

"And where are we going to now, Ready?"

“Right to the leeward side of the island; and I hope we shall be there before it is dark.”

“Why do you call it the leeward side of the island?”

“Because among these islands the winds almost always blow one way: we landed on the windward side; the wind is at our back; now put up your finger, and you will feel it even among the trees.”

“No, I cannot,” replied William, as he held up his finger.

“Then wet your finger and try again.”

William wet his finger in his mouth, and held it up again: “Yes, I do feel it now,” said he; “but why is that?”

“Because the wind blows against the wet, and you feel the cold.”(p.65)

In both these examples Ready’s knowledge is practical. It is knowledge gained from experience and with practical application to the situation they are in. It is, in other words, and for all that as it happens we have been told that Ready can read and write (p.3), not book knowledge. And the relationship is mutual, with the power sometimes shifting in Ready’s favour, as when he introduces the topic, and sometimes in William’s favour as he asks questions about their actions. In the first example, though Ready takes the lead, William nudges him onwards. So Ready introduces the question of how to find their way back but William’s response – ‘I am sure I cannot tell: I was thinking of the very same thing when you spoke’ – nudges him on. Ditto when Ready introduces the term *blaze*: ‘Blaze them! what, set fire to them?’ And when it comes to William himself taking the lead, it is question after question after question: – where are we going, why is it called the leeward side, how can I get my finger to feel the wind, etc. Pursue their conversation throughout this and the following chapter and many if not most of their exchanges are like this. Indeed Marryat actually moves the action along in the very process of these question and answer conversations.

By contrast the teacher learner relationship between William and his father is much more theoretical, to use Marryat’s term. It does not arise out of the need to understand the immediate circumstances that the characters find themselves in. Instead Mr Seagrave takes advantage of lulls in the action to teach William about various subjects, though the subjects he chooses are themselves never totally divorced from the action of the book, as for instance in the above example when Mr Seagrave takes the opportunity to explain colonialism to William. The occasion for this has been the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, with William first of all wanting to know why it was so called. In the following example (pp. 85 – 87), which I cannot resist exploring at some length, Mr Seagrave explains to William how coral islands are formed.<sup>7</sup> The explanation occurs at a point in the narrative where Mr Seagrave himself has for the first time been brought across the island by William. Note that it is William on his own – they have left Ready behind. William, taking the lead, wants to show him what he and Ready have already achieved. Once they arrive William exclaims, as he has done once before already, about how beautiful the island is.

“Is not this beautiful, father?” said William.

“Yes, indeed it is, my dear boy,” replied Mr. Seagrave.

Taking the lead again William shows his father where he and Ready have made a spring, and then they take a rest and sit down on a coral rock looking out to sea. Mr Seagrave now makes the most of his opportunity and *he* takes the lead to explain to William how coral islands are formed. (I shall only quote highlights from Mr Seagrave's explanation, but it is well worth looking up and reading in full, since the admirable clarity of these extracts is sustained throughout the whole of his account.)

“Who would have ever imagined, William,” said Mr. Seagrave, “that this island, and so many more which abound in the Pacific Ocean, could have been raised by the work of little insects not bigger than a pin's head.”

“Insects, father!” replied William.

Having piqued his curiosity Mr Seagrave picks up a piece of coral, and shows William the hundreds of little holes that once held the insects that were responsible for producing it. William understands and wants the next bit.

“Yes I understand that; but how do you make out that this island was made by them? that's what I want to know.”

And so, prompted by William, Mr Seagrave explains further.

“The coral grows at first at the bottom of the sea, where it is not disturbed by the winds or waves: by degrees, as it increases, it advances higher and higher to the surface, till at last it comes near to the top of the water....”

And he explains how, once it has reached the top of the water it becomes a reef. William prompts again:

“Then how does it become an island?”

“By very slow degrees; the time, perhaps, much depending upon chance: for instance a log of wood floating about, and covered with barnacles, may ground upon the coral reefs; that would be a sufficient commencement, for it would remain above water, and then shelter the coral to the leeward of it, until a flat rock had formed, level with the edge of the water. The seabirds are always looking for a place to rest upon, and they would soon find it, and then their droppings would, in the course of time, form a little patch above water, and other floating substances would be thrown upon it; and land birds, which are blown out to sea, might rest themselves on it, and the seeds from their stomachs, when dropped, would grow into trees and bushes.”

“I understand that.”

“Well then, William, you observe there is an island commenced as it were, and, once commenced, it soon increases, for the coral would then be protected to leeward, and grow up fast....”

And so on and so forth, as Mr Seagrave adds leaf mould and a passing coconut or two until you have an island. I myself have a sense that I have ‘always known’, as the saying is, how coral

islands were formed, and I rather suspect I got the knowledge from this book. It is certainly an account, as I have suggested, of admirable clarity, and I think I would have been as fascinated by it as a child as I am now as an adult. My point here, however, is to suggest the account is driven as much by William's curiosity as it is by Mr Seagrave's desire to explain. Mr Seagrave has the knowledge, and William wants to access it, he wants to learn. And so far as readers are concerned, William asks the questions that perhaps an intelligent and interested reader would also want to ask. And at another level entirely, it is part of Marryat's skill as a writer that he uses William's questions at pertinent points to break up the explanation into digestible chunks. I am also not suggesting for a moment that there was not a conscious didactic purpose in Marryat's head too, that he wanted to explain to readers, to take the opportunity to *teach* them if you will, about how coral islands are formed; or indeed, in the passage I have analysed in the previous section, to teach them about colonialism. I'm quite sure that there was such a purpose, as his own introduction, already quoted, to the novel makes clear. But that doesn't stop the passage being a fascinating account in its own right.

A couple of final observations. Marryat calls Mr Seagrave's knowledge theoretical. I take that to mean book learning, and as he concludes his account of colonialism analysed above when he's talking about the Moors, Mr Seagrave confirms my assumption when he asks William:

"You have never read the history of the Moors in Spain."  
 "No father: I should like to read it very much."(p.117)

And Mr Seagrave goes on to tell William that he has such a book in his own library that is waiting for them in Sydney.<sup>8</sup> So far as coral islands are concerned, however, theoretical is an entirely apposite word, for, as I discovered, Marryat himself was living in a time when there was much speculation about how they came to be formed, and I found to my delight that in 1837, only a couple of years before Marryat wrote *Masterman Ready*, Charles Darwin had delivered a paper about the subject to the Geological Society of London, and indeed embarked on a lecture tour at the same time in which, presumably, the subject was discussed. It was, in other words a subject that was very much under theoretical debate at the time.<sup>9</sup>

And the other observation? I have argued that in both the teacher learner scenarios that I have outlined, William is a very active participant. This situation largely changes, however, when the teacher learner discourse hits the religious discourse. It is the only discourse which William does not lead or enable by his questioning and it is thus it is at this point that the learner teacher dyad disappears, and the discourse becomes one of power pure and simple. So, in the example already quoted above, Ready tells William, 'you cannot think too early of your Maker,' and Mr Seagrave weighs in with 'Thank you, Ready, thank you for the lesson you have given my son.' The term 'lesson' is a telling one, lessons happen in schools. And as I have suggested, in schools the adults say what is the case, and the young have to accept it without question. One might also interject here that it most certainly wouldn't do to have William questioning religion!

## 6. The Discourse of Gender

As Marryat introduces the characters at the beginning of the novel, the discourses of gender are already beginning to emerge. We start with Ready, who despite his age, is 'a hale and active



man'. He is capable in practical matters, able to navigate a vessel, and his long experience at sea meant that... 'he was seldom at a loss, and in cases of difficulty and danger, the captain would not hesitate to ask his opinion, and frequently take his advice'(p.3). Mr Seagrave himself is intelligent and knowledgeable, 'a very well informed clever man'(p.4) and, as we have already discovered, he has held government office and has the authority of material success.

By contrast Mrs Seagrave is introduced as 'an amiable woman, but not in very strong health (p.4)' suggesting already that that her role in the novel is to be, as a female, a character who is in need of help and support. Indeed she herself confesses as much to her husband at one point...

"...sickness and suffering have made me, I fear, not only nervous and frightened, but selfish: I must and will shake it off. Hitherto I have only been a clog and an encumbrance to you; but I trust I shall soon behave better, and make myself useful."  
(p.60)

... and by the end of the novel it is true that she has recovered enough to assist Juno in loading the muskets in the final fight against the savages. Of the younger generation William himself is 'a clever and steady boy, but, at the same time, full of mirth and humour'(pp.4-5), and the six year old Tommy is 'a very thoughtless but good-tempered boy, full of mischief, and always in a scrape'(p.5). Even baby Albert is 'a fine strong little fellow'(p.5). The characterisation of Caroline couldn't be more different, Marryat summing her up in just six words: 'a little girl of seven years'(p.5). Later in the book, p.184, she will even become 'the quiet, meek little Caroline'. It is striking Marryat uses the diminutive 'little' only with her – she is a *little* girl. Tommy, who although he is younger than her, is not a *little* boy, he's just a boy. Otherwise we are told little about her and see little of her. She helps out with the domestic chores and takes responsibility for the chickens and the eggs and not a lot else, though as the novel progresses her good behaviour contrasts by default with Tommy's naughtiness.

Between them, then, the two adult male characters in the book combine the attributes of, in Ready's case, a hale and hearty health, and capability and experience in practical matters, and, in Mr. Seagrave's case, knowledge, intelligence, and considerable material success. Throw in the male children and similar characteristics emerge: intelligence, good health, strength, perseverance, to which are added humour and mischievousness, and in Tommy's case, a tendency to get into scrapes. Mrs. Seagrave by contrast, though she has the dubious virtue of amiability, is not strong, is not in good health, is nervous and frightened, a clog and encumbrance, and by implication has neither the practical experience of Ready, nor the authoritative knowledge of her husband. Her role in the book to be always in need of male care and protection. Caroline is characterised in less detail, she is merely little, quiet, meek, well behaved etc, and by implication also always in need of male care and protection. The males in the book are active, they make things happen, and they are the centre of attention in the narrative.

Things change, however, when the discourse of gender meets the discourse of race, which they do in the character of Juno, 'a black girl who had come from the Cape of Good Hope' employed to look after Albert (p.5). She, it turns out, is to be a good deal more active – the first thing we find out about her is that she has saved the baby in the midst of the storm while Mrs Seagrave sat helplessly by. Tommy tells the story:

“ ..Juno tumbled off her chair, and rolled away with the baby, till papa picked them both up.”

“It was a mercy that that poor Albert was not killed,” observed Mrs. Seagrave.

“And so he might have been, if Juno had thought only of him and nothing at all about herself,” replied Mr. Seagrave. (p.5)

Juno even becomes an honorary man in Ch. LIX when she works alongside Mr. Seagrave and William felling trees to build the house. For the rest the stereotypes hold. A more extended example here for instance from Ch. XXII when the family are crossing the island.

William led the way, with the three dogs close to his heels, Mr. Seagrave with the baby in his arms, Juno with little Caroline, and Mrs. Seagrave with Master Tommy holding her hand, and as he said, taking care of his mamma. (p.95)

A bit later:

It appeared that poor little Caroline had been tired out, and Juno had to carry her; then Mrs Seagrave complained of fatigue, and they had to rest a quarter of an hour; then Master Tommy, who had refused to remain with his mamma, and was running backwards and forwards from one to the other, had declared he was tired, and that somebody must carry him, but there was no one to carry him, so he began to cry and roar until they stopped for another quarter of an hour till he was rested; but as soon as they went on again he again complained of being tired, and William very good naturedly carried him pickaback for some time, and in so doing he had missed the *blaze* cut on the trees, and it was a long while before he could find it again ... (pp.96-97)

In the first extract we see that Tommy is already learning that to be male you have to take care of females. And once he's tired of doing that he rushes around until he tires himself out and then first of all effectively demands that the party stop for a rest, then demands that he be carried. Caroline, who remember is a year older than Tommy, seems to have less energy than him and has to be carried from the start. Girls are tired out, boys have surplus energy. As we have noted she is passive and compliant, and is again referred to in diminutives – ‘little Caroline’ and ‘poor little Caroline’, while Tommy is the much more mannish Master Tommy. Mrs. Seagrave lives up to her reputation and also has to rest, not because she has been rushing around or actually doing anything, but to the very contrary, because she is inherently weak. In the process she effectively becomes infantilised, requiring rest just like the children do. Once again however, things change when the discourse of gender meets the discourse of race, and Juno manages quite well to carry Caroline. As for William, he's the man, and it is his show. He is the leader, responsible for the family's safe passage. He shows them where to go, and when they lose their way he finds it again. And he carries Tommy into the bargain. He has become the alpha male and is the most capable of the whole group.

Before I leave this section I just want to pick up on the characterisation of the mischievous Tommy. At the beginning of the novel, as we have seen, he is described as ‘a very thoughtless

but good-tempered boy, full of mischief, and always in a scrape'. These 'scrapes' as Marryat calls them, are on a number of occasions a good deal more serious than such a word might imply. He is for instance given to teasing animals, starting as he means to go on when early in the novel as the ship stops over at Cape Town (pp.10,11). Mrs. Seagrave stays on the ship 'with the two younger children', i.e. with Caroline and the baby, for all that Caroline, as I say, is a year older than Tommy. Tommy, however, gets to go on shore, presumably because he's a boy. There can be no other reason. Once there he throws stones at the lions in the lions' den in the company gardens, this despite being twice told not to go too near them because they could get their paws out through the bars. Inevitably they become enraged and he narrowly escapes being mauled. On other occasions he not only puts himself at risk but others too, as for instance when he plays with loaded muskets causing one of them to go off (p.46). Many examples follow, some minor, some major, and on several occasions he is told that he is naughty, and even on one occasion referred to in the text as a little urchin (p.89). On one occasion he is just plain nasty:

Master Tommy had been very troublesome during the whole morning: he had not learnt his lesson, and had put a cinder into Caroline's hand and burnt her. (p106)

The occasions when he is actually helpful, for instance when he helps in the untangling of rope (p.131), are by contrast very few and far between. While his parents and Juno scold him and punish him in one way or another for his misdemeanours, Ready is always inclined to excuse him, continuing to dismiss his behaviour as mere thoughtlessness, this even when he puts his, Ready's, own life at risk, as the following example from Ch. LVIII demonstrates. Tommy is missing and is discovered in the boat that they had repaired earlier in the novel and that they had initially used to get on shore from the wreck. The boat, with him in it, has drifted away from the shore, and though caught on the reef is clearly in danger of being swept out to sea. Ready has to swim out to rescue him, braving sharks, and the danger that he himself will be swept out to sea. The boat is then holed on the coral, and it is with greatest difficulty that Ready gets it, and Tommy, back to safety. Just for once Juno tells it like it is:

Juno... took Tommy by the hand and led him away, saying: "Come along, you nasty naughty boy. You get fine whipping tonight soon as all the work is over." Whereupon Tommy set up a miserable howling, which he never left off until long after he was in the house.

"It was touch and go, Master William," observed Ready, as they walked to the house, preceded by Mr. and Mrs. Seagrave. "How much mischief may be created by a thoughtless boy." (p.293)

Yes indeed, a prophetic comment if ever there was one, as Ready will discover to his cost. My point here, though, is that throughout the book Tommy's behaviour is gendered behaviour. He is excused on the basis that he is a thoughtless little boy, or that he is a mischievous little boy, or even a naughty little boy, but with the emphasis always on the word boy. It is inconceivable that Caroline should have behaved like this.

As for Ready discovering the effects of Tommy's behaviour to his cost, Marryat saves the worst to last and, in a move almost unique in children's literature, kills off his central character, and it is Tommy's fault. We are at the climax of the novel, the savages are attacking and the family are

defending themselves from behind the stockade that they have built. But, despite the fact that Ready has laid in a supply of water, they have run out. For the reason for this you have to go back several pages to before the arrival of the savages. Mrs. Seagrave and Juno, aided by Caroline, have been washing the linen, and..

Master Tommy was more useful than ever he had been, going for the water as they required it, and watching little Albert.. Indeed he was so active, that Mrs. Seagrave praised him before his papa, and master Tommy was quite proud.(p.229)

Telling it like this, of course, it is obvious what has happened, that Tommy has taken the water from the water barrel rather than going outside the stockade to the spring, but in the novel the two activities are not put side by side in this sort of way so you don't see it coming: you don't discover what he was done until we are in the midst of the battle with the savages when William asks Juno to get him some water. She goes off to do so and returns with the news that the barrel is empty, drained to the last drop.

"I filled it to the top!" exclaimed Ready very gravely; "the tub did not leak, that I am sure of.; how can this have happened?"

"Missy, I tink I know," said Juno; "you remember you send Massa Tommy, the two or three days we wash, to fetch water from well in little bucket. You know how soon he come back, and how you say what good boy he was, and how you tell Massa Seagrave when he come to dinner. Now missy, I quite certain Massa Tommy not take trouble go to well, but fetch water from the tub all the while, and so he empty it." (p.309)

So now, without water, the battle has to continue. By the second day things are getting desperate. Here's Mr. Seagrave spelling it out:

"Ready, I had rather a hundred times be attacked by these savages, and have to defend this place, than be in that house for even five minutes and witness the sufferings of my wife and children." (p.314)

Ready decides that at all costs he must get out and get some water, which he does, disguising himself in the head-dress and war cloak of the enemy and confiding only in William. He gets the water and makes it back to the stockade, but before he can get safely inside is attacked by one of the savages. William hears the struggle, goes out, shoots the savage dead, and gets both the water and Ready safely inside. But Ready has been fatally wounded and as the novel comes to its conclusion proceeds to die, pausing only to forgive Tommy yet again for what he has done:

"Poor little Tommy; don't let him know that he was the cause of my death."

Yet the Tommy we have seen throughout the novel has been about as far away from 'poor little Tommy' as you can get. Instead we have seen a self-willed, self-centred, thoughtless little boy, with the emphasis, it is clear, on the 'boy'. And it is his gendered behaviour that has brought about Ready's demise.

## 6. The Discourse of Race

To discuss the discourse of race is to enter what has become in recent times a conceptual minefield, and in many ways it is perhaps more helpful here to think of the discourse as being a discourse of the 'other'. It is also obvious enough that the discourse of race must overlap with my discussion of colonialism above, and I shall draw attention to any such connections as I come to them. As for terminology, for the sake of clarity if for no other reason, I shall stick to Marryat's usage. The issue emerges at its sharpest because of the role of the savages at the end, and it is interesting, as the book proceeds, to note the evolution of that term to describe the people who attack them. The first mention I can find in the book of possible inhabitants of nearby islands occurs on p.145, when Ready speculates upon the possibility of their existence. At this point he refers to them as natives. He is talking to Mr. Seagrave.

"You see, sir, between ourselves, it is often the custom for the natives, in this part of the world, to come in their canoes from one island to another, merely to get coconuts. I can't say that other islands near us are inhabited, but it is still probable, and we cannot tell what the character of the people may be."

The term 'native' inevitably brings with it connotations of colonialism, the very term itself serving to distinguish between the existing inhabitants and visiting / invading / colonising outsiders. Perhaps the most telling term here, however is 'character'. At this point we don't know how the islanders might be characterised, but by the time we get to the end we have discovered that they are savage in character. The first time we actually meet the inhabitants of what we presume to be the nearest island is when the two women are washed up by the storm, (p.235 et seq.) It is William who first spots the canoe with the women in it. Ready initially refers to them as 'islanders', and he is more than sympathetic to their plight:

"... there are two people in it (the canoe), and they are islanders. Poor things, they struggle hard for their lives, and seem much exhausted;"

and he notes that 'they manage the canoe beautifully', another positive characterisation. He and William rescue the two women and help them drag their canoe out of the water. We have a description of the women:

'...their faces were tattooed all over which disfigured them very much; otherwise they were young, and might have been good-looking.'

Now we do have what is essentially a characterisation of the women as 'other', a discourse of difference if you like. Their tattoos make them different. Without their tattoos they would have fallen into the category that Marryat's anonymous narrator calls good-looking, a term that he could have just as easily applied to Mrs. Seagrave for instance. So far, however, we have still only had the terms 'natives', and 'islanders'. Mr Seagrave is uneasy, and fears the women's involuntary visit may bring other more planned visits in its wake:

"It proves what we were not sure of before, that we have very near neighbours, who may pay us a very unwelcome visit.(p.236)

The natives are now ‘neighbours’, a neutral enough term, but they may be ‘unwelcome’ neighbours, which paints them in a less positive light. Ready, however, wonders if the women might not, on the contrary, be used to advantage, particularly if they can learn a little English, in which case they may be able to act as interpreters to any invaders and intercede to prevent violence from occurring:

“...and be the means, perhaps, of saving our lives.”

“Would their visit be so dangerous, then, Ready?”

“Why sir, a savage is a savage, and, like a child, wishes to obtain whatever he sees; especially he covets what may be turned to use, such as iron, etc.

...and later in the same speech.

“... there is no trusting to them, and I would infinitely prefer defending ourselves against numbers to trusting to their mercy.” (p.236/237)

The unwelcome neighbours are no longer ‘natives’, they are now ‘savages’, and in character they are dangerous, merciless, (‘a fierce, cruel set of wretches’ as William calls them later – p.306) and interestingly, child-like, wanting instant gratification for their desires. Furthermore Ready’s account has now become essentialist. Savages are savages by their very nature. And savages they remain for the rest of the book, as indeed the adventure genre would dictate since the climax is inevitably going to be the family in their compound defending themselves against the marauding savages outside, until of course we get to that other genre staple, the ‘rescued in the nick of time’ trope.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that Ready’s characterisation of the savages as taking whatever is useful to them without a by your leave, coincides almost exactly with Mr. Seagrave’s account of the operation of colonialism itself, analysed above, an association that was not perhaps part of Marryat’s intention when he wrote the book!

When it comes to Juno, however, the situation is quite different. Marryat has informed us at the beginning of the book that she is black and that she joined the family on their first trip to Sydney. We also have a passing reference to her hair, a racial characteristic, when Captain Osborn – at this point we are still on the ship – praises her for rescuing the child.

“I thumped my head very hard,” said Juno, smiling.

“Yes, and it’s lucky you have a good thick woolly coat over it,” replied Captain Osborn, laughing. “Never mind, Juno, you are a good girl.” (p.6)

True, his tone is nothing if not patronising, whether because of her gender or because of her race is not clear, probably both, and there is also a hint, perhaps, that she is a good girl despite her race, a point made explicitly by Ready later on when he has observed her praying (p.161) and says to himself, ‘There’s more good under that dark skin than under many a white one.’ For the rest, the only times that Marryat draws attention to the fact that she is black is in his reproduction

of her speech – see for example the quote I have above from p.309 when she is explaining about Tommy and the water, the quote beginning, ‘Missy, I tink I know’.... etc.

Otherwise her race does not seem to be an issue at all. Neither, as I noted above, does she fit into the passive gender role ascribed to the other two female characters, Mrs. Seagrave and Caroline; instead she is active and capable – in the final battle, for instance she is ‘very active and courageous’ (p.306). I noted above how she rescued the baby during the storm at the beginning of the book, and such is her behaviour throughout. Indeed in many ways she has the same role in relationship to Mrs. Seagrave and the three younger children as Ready does in relationship to William and Mr. Seagrave. She can tell the children off, as we noted above, and indeed at a couple of points she is completely in charge, for example on p.162 when Marryat describes Ready assisting her in cutting up the turtle rather than the other way round. She could basically be characterised as a faithful family servant. The fact that she is black is virtually irrelevant.

I am already suggesting here that the discourse of race in the book is far from simplistic, as I suggested in my discussion of colonialism above when Mr. Seagrave modifies William’s view of negroes by pointing out that one of the great civilisations of the past was that of the Moors. Ready too in the course of his account of his own history which is interspersed with the main action, offers much more nuanced descriptions. A central episode in that story is an account of how, when he was still young, he and a couple of mates, having escaped from imprisonment by the Dutch at the Cape, make their way up country in what is now South Africa. In the course of their journeyings they encounter a number of tribes, tribes which are far from all the same, some are unfriendly, some are friendly, and some are plain indifferent. Far from being united by their colour they are instead differentiated by their character. Even as they are planning their escape the three boys have a far from simplistic view. Here they are, discussing where they might go:

“Yes,” replied Hastings, “but where are we to go if not to the Hottentots and the wild savages? and when we get there what can we do? – we can’t get any farther.”

“Well,” said I, “I would rather be living free among savages, than be shut up in a prison.” (pp.156 – 157)

Savages are preferable to the Dutch. As for the individual tribes, we learn that the Hottentots are pastoralists, although we also come across them working (as slaves? – it is not entirely clear) for a Dutch farmer – who beats his wife, incidentally, far more savage than the ‘savages’. Later the boys fall in with...

“... a party of natives. We could not speak to them, but they appeared very peaceable and well-disposed. They were of the Karroo tribe. (p.182)

Another friendly tribe are the Gorraguas<sup>10</sup> –

... a very mild, inoffensive people, who supplied us with milk, and treated us very kindly.(p.190)

The Gorraguas themselves warn them off another native tribe, the Kaffirs, who are by contrast a very fierce tribe who would most certainly kill the boys should they met up with them.(p.190)

Finally there is a discussion between Mr. Seagrave and Ready (pp.193/4) about the natives of Australia and New Zealand, whom Mr Seagrave calls ‘very degraded’, ‘little better than beasts’, and Ready caps that with an account of the natives of the Andaman Isles<sup>11</sup>,

“I saw them once; and, at first, thought they were animals, and not human beings  
..... they were not more than four feet high, excessively stupid and shy ... they  
had no clothes of any description; they had no houses or huts to live in ...”

And so on and so forth. That such an account might be seen as ‘racist’ from today’s perspective, Marryat will have been doing no more than reproducing the accounts of explorers of the time, or indeed drawing upon his own experience. But back to my main point in this section, the discourse of race in the book is a good deal more complex and varied than one might expect, ranging all the way from the savages of the nearby islands, via the friendly tribes of South Africa, to Juno, the autonomous capable faithful family servant, and back to the ‘animalistic’ inhabitants of the Andaman Isles. All are distinguished from the white man, as Marryat would call him, all are ‘other’, but some are a good deal more ‘other’ than others. Juno is hardly ‘other’ at all, while the Andaman Islanders are about as ‘other’ as it gets.

## 8. The Discourse of Class

The discourse of class is interestingly articulated in the book. In one sense it depends what you mean by class. If you mean class position, then it is simple. The family are colonial landowners, and from that perspective Ready occupies the role of trusted old family retainer. Juno too, as I noted above, comes into the category of trusted family servant, again a relationship that has at least as much to do with class as it has with race per se, though she acts of course almost exclusively in the female sphere. Ready himself acts predominantly in the male sphere but his remit crosses the gender boundary in the way that Juno’s does not. As I have noted, the class relationship is evident in the very naming of characters. For Ready Mr. Seagrave is always ‘sir’, Mrs. Seagrave is ‘ma’am’ and William is mostly ‘master William’ though occasionally he too is ‘sir’. By contrast Ready is always ‘Ready’ when he is being spoken to, even by William. This difference is reinforced in the narration itself. Ready is always referred to as Ready and Juno as Juno, while Mr. Seagrave is always Mr. Seagrave, ditto with Mrs. Seagrave.

If, however, we look at the relationship between the classes in term of power, the situation is very different. It is, above all, Ready who has the power in the book. His opinion is always sought, and his knowledge and experience are always deferred to, never more explicitly than just after they have landed when Mr. Seagrave tells him,

“I must put myself under your orders: for, in our present position, you are my superior – knowledge is power. Can we do anything tonight?” (p.39)

There are many such examples throughout the book. Ready effectively has the power, no matter how much he may defer to Mr. Seagrave for form’s sake. The ostensible class relationship is



completely reversed. He even pulls rank on occasion to reprove Mr Seagrave in religious and moral terms. Immediately preceding the passage just quoted, for instance, Mr. Seagrave is bemoaning the lot of his family and children:

“All their prospects in life, all mine – all blasted – all my hopes overthrown – it is a melancholy and cruel fate, Ready, and that you must acknowledge.”

“Mr. Seagrave, as an old man compared to you, I may venture to say that you are ungrateful to Heaven to give way to these repinings.” (pp. 38,39)

... and Ready continues in like vein for a paragraph or two. We learn a good deal less about Juno. Her role is almost entirely restricted to the domestic sphere, and while it is clear enough that she has power over the children, and it's fairly clear that she organises the domestic chores, we never see her offering advice to Mrs. Seagrave, let alone to Mr. Seagrave or Ready himself.

## 9. The Discourse(s) of Religion

When it comes to religion there is no denying that Marryat lays it on thick. At every twist and turn William is encouraged to thank his maker for his survival – the discourse of fate, or for the gifts of the plentifulness that the island, and the wreck, has offered them – the discourse of God the Creator. The examples are legion. Here's an example, picked almost at random from Ch. XXXIV, of what I have called the discourse of fate. In the chapter there is a thunder storm. They all survive, though Juno has been struck by lightning and knocked unconscious. They recognise the need to get a lightning conductor up, but before they do, have to interrupt the action to give thanks to God for their survival. Here's Ready:

“Yes, sir, I was just thinking of it myself; we will have a lightning conductor up first thing.”

“No, Ready; we will return our thanks to God for our preservation first, and use our human precautions afterwards.”

“True, sir, we are bound to do so; and with grateful hearts.” (p.154)

And within a couple of lines they are offering up ‘a prayer of thankfulness and humility’. Overt invocations of God apart, the discourse of fate obviously has a strong underlying relevance to the novel as a whole, indeed one might suggest that it structures the whole story.<sup>12</sup> It is fate that brought the storm in the first place. It was fate that the ship did not sink under them. It was fate that put an island in their way. It was fate that, at that point in the story at least, it was not inhabited by hostile natives. It was fate that the island provided for many of their needs. It was fate that eventually brought the hostile natives to the island, and it was fate that they were rescued in the nick of time, except of course for Ready, who was fated to die. Here's his final exchange with Mrs. Seagrave:

“Don't weep for me, dear madam,” said Ready; “my days are numbered; I'm only sorry that I cannot any more be of use to you.”

“Dear, good old man,” said Mrs Seagrave, after a pause, “whatever may be our fates, and that is for the Almighty to decide for us...” (pp.321,322)

When it comes to the discourse of God the Creator, it is relevant to note that one of the defining features of the Robinsonade is the discourse of the Thoreau-esque<sup>13</sup> escape from the complexities of life to get closer to nature itself and to live off the land: a dream of self-sufficiency, of returning to a prelapsarian past where life was simpler and more 'real'. And it is here that the discourse of God the Creator most aptly arises. Ready launches the discourse, so to speak, quite early on. He and Mr. Seagrave are preparing to go on shore for the first time. Mr. Seagrave bemoans their lot and wonders what will happen to them. Here's Ready's response:

“Why, Mr. Seagrave, where there are coco-nut trees in such plenty as there are on that island, there is no fear of starvation, even if even if we had not the ship's provisions. I expect a little difficulty with regard to water....”(p.38)

There is no doubt that their survival on the island is greatly aided by what they have brought to it from the outside world. Sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, seeds, potatoes, all are rescued from the wreck. But once on the island, it then has to provide for all their wants. And so it does. Endless uses are found for the coconut tree, all the way from providing them with the sustenance that coconuts themselves offer, to providing them with the timber to build their house and the stockade. There is food enough to ensure that the animals are well fed and to allow them to breed, there is good tilth to plant the seeds in, and the sea provides turtles and fish. And when they find water Ready says 'Now we have everything we can wish for on this island.' (p.74). The island supplies everything they need to sustain life and then some. They have indeed achieved the Thoreau-esque dream, as Mr. Seagrave confirms at the end of the book when, echoing Ready, he observes,

“We have been happy on this island; our wants have been supplied; even our comforts have been great. We have been under no temptations, for we have been isolated from the world.”(p.334)

Along with the Thoreau-esque dream is the sense of the idyll.<sup>14</sup> It is all pervasive. Here for instance is the description of their first view of the leeward side of the island, which is where they are going to settle. The description is too long to quote in full here so I will merely pick out some telling phrases:

Perhaps a more lovely scene could scarcely be imagined .... dazzling white sand ... the water was a deep blue .... the reefs, which extended for miles from the beach ... crowds of gannets and man-of-war birds ... which rippled the water or bounded clear of it in their gambols ... The line of the horizon, far out at sea, was clear and unbroken. (pp. 68/69)

Extracts like this remind one too much of a modern travel brochure perhaps, but the whole description conveys a strong sense of the sheer beauty and wonder of the place. And while a modern atheist like myself might have left it there, Marryat's invocation of God the Creator is certainly, from a religious point of view, germane. The one arises naturally out of the other. So, for example, when, immediately after the picture postcard description of the leeward side of the island, they find some sea anemones and William, exclaiming in surprise, asks Ready about them, Ready immediately invokes the Creator:

“.. I don’t know whether they are shellfish or not. Creation is very wonderful.”(p.70)

To take another example, at the end of his account of how coral islands are formed, discussed above, Mr. Seagrave makes the same point at somewhat greater length.

“Is not He a great and good God who can make such minute animals as these work His pleasure, and at the time He thinks fit produce such a beautiful island as this?”

“Indeed He is,” exclaimed William. (p.87)

And he continues in the same vein for a couple of paragraphs or so. In Ch. XXV Mr. Seagrave launches into a much more substantial and extended discussion of the question. (pp.163-168) The occasion for this is Tommy’s killing of beetles. Mr. Seagrave catches him at it:

“Who made those beetles, Tommy?” Who made everything?”

“God,” replied Tommy after a little while.(p.163)

The passage continues for several pages as Mr. Seagrave turns his attention to William and effectively lectures him about the wonders of God’s creation. Here he is talking about the infinite variety of the natural world:

“Let me also point out to you, William,” continued Mr. Seagrave, “the infinite variety of His creative power, displayed in endless variety, perceptible even in objects of the same nature, and to careless eyes of the same form and mould.”(p.164)

.. and he goes on to quote the fact that no two human beings are ever exactly alike, and that the same even applies to the millions of the leaves in a forest. There are many such examples to be found in the book.<sup>15</sup> I am arguing, then, that the discourses of God as fate and of God as creator, provider of all they need to sustain life, are each related to central themes in the book. Neither the discourse of fate nor the discourse of the Thoreau-esque dream of self-sufficiency, of living off the land, with its associated discourse of the idyll, *need* religion, but the inclusion of the discourse of religion in them does not in fact change their meaning or role within the book.

A third discourse of religion, the discourse of faith itself, is only rarely addressed directly. One such occasion is at the end of Mr. Seagrave’s lecture about the infinite variety of the God’s world (p.167). It is all very well to believe in a god that has created the world, he argues, when we can see the world for ourselves, but the Christian faith requires us ‘as the apostle saith, to have faith in things not seen’, ‘faith in a sublime’, specifically ‘the incarnation of the Son of God, (who) took the form of man, and actually suffered for our redemption.’ The discourse of faith does not, I would argue, relate to any of the central discourses of the book, it relates only to itself, and given that, and not wishing to enter into theological debate here I shall rapidly move on!

As a footnote to this section, I have suggested above that it is only in the discourses of religion that William doesn't act as the enabler, asking the questions to which either Mr. Seagrave or Ready then respond. Here William's interjections are merely confirmative. Even when he raises the question of atheism, he does so only to answer it himself:

"They say there are people who are atheists, papa. How can they be so if they only look around them? I'm sure a mere examination of the works of God ought to make them good Christians." (p.167)

When it comes to the discourse of morality I have already suggested that it is one of the discourses of religion. Well so it may be, but any specific link is made only very rarely. And indeed morality itself is only *overtly* discussed on very few occasions. A couple of examples from Ready's account of his own history will suffice to make my point. The first occurs in the passage I analysed above when I was talking about race, where Ready is giving his account of how he and two other boys escaped from the Dutch at the Cape. In the process they come upon a Hottentot who is minding his cattle. When the Hottentot falls asleep they steal his musket and his powder-horn and ammunition. William asks the moral question:

"But, Ready, did you not do wrong to steal the Hottentot's musket?"

"No, Master William; in that instance it could not be considered as theft. We were in an enemy's country, trying to escape; we were therefore just as much at war with the country as we were when they took us prisoners..."(p.171/172)

The fact that it was the Dutch, not the Hottentots that took them prisoners is conveniently forgotten here of course: the Hottentots have become part of the enemy by association. Ready appeals to Mr. Seagrave for confirmation.

"Am I not right, Mr. Seagrave?"

"I think so: when two nations are at war, the property of either, when taken, is confiscated. In your position, you were justified in appropriating any property you might get hold of, which would further your attempts to escape; although I do not think you would have been morally justified if you had murdered and robbed, or even robbed wantonly."

"Exactly so; but in attempting our escape, had it been necessary to have either surrendered ourselves as prisoners again, or have taken the life of those who would have made us captives, we should have been justified in killing the parties." (p.172)

Morality, then, is dependent upon motive and circumstance. Stealing the musket is only right if the motive is to aid their escape, and stealing itself is now termed 'appropriation'. But gratuitous stealing is theft. The same applies to killing. The killing of an ostensibly innocent bystander who is offering you no direct threat is murder – these days known as collateral damage – while the killing of a declared enemy who is threatening your life or to take you prisoner is morally justified. Even here no specific link with Christianity has been made, though it does occur when Ready tells how he saved from drowning his godfather, a much hated character. Ready, and by implication Marryat, shows a perhaps surprisingly subtle psychological insight as he, Ready, tells the assembled company that he was mostly pleased with having by his action put his

godfather under an obligation to him, though such feelings, he suggests, should not be the feelings of a good Christian.

“If I had felt it in a true Christian spirit, Master William, it would have been different. Returning good for evil is the great duty of a Christian, and had I saved Mr. Masterman, knowing that I was saving him with that feeling in my heart, it had been praiseworthy;”(p.137)

Once again the motive is at least as important as the act, but so far as the rest of the novel is concerned, the crucial word here is ‘duty’, duty, not in the coerced sense of submitting dutifully to authority, but duty as defined in terms of the characters’ responsibilities to each other. The morality of the book is a practical morality, expressed in narrative action rather than in more theoretical debate. Its defining overlapping characteristics are unselfishness, thinking of others, consideration for others, duty to others, summed up in the all-inclusive idea of collaboration with others for the common good. And, so far as the men are concerned, looking after the ladies, i.e. Mrs. Seagrave and Caroline. Juno, as we have discovered, can well look after herself. This practical morality is also only very occasionally overtly commented upon. One such occasion is in the passage I have already quoted above in which Juno is praised because of her unselfishness in saving the baby in the storm and which I here quote again to save the reader from the labour of going back and finding it.

“It was a mercy that that poor Albert was not killed,” observed Mrs. Seagrave.

“And so he might have been, if Juno had thought only of him and nothing at all about herself,” replied Mr. Seagrave. (p.5)

Another example of overt comment can also be found in an early exchange in the novel. At this point they are still on the ship and it is the height of the storm and William wants Ready to help him back to the cabin:

“... I wish you would help me down below, for I promised mamma not to stay up long.”

“Then always keep your promises like a good lad,” replied the old man. (p.2)

... morality again expressed in terms of the relationships between the characters, in this case keeping the promises you have made to another character, and also in this case incorporating the additional element of gender role. You do not have to look very far, however, to find the underlying values exemplified in the action, whether it is building shelters, exploring the island, digging wells, constructing huts, creating a seawater pond to keep the turtles in, putting up lightning conductors, looking after the chickens, minding the baby, or building a stockade to protect them from the marauding savages at the end. The only exception to this is Tommy. In his behaviour he does not think of others, is not unselfish, nor does he work towards the common good, and it is his very transgression of those moral values that brings about Ready’s death. Excuses are effectively made for him all the way through on account of his age – though it is never explicitly spelt out – but the fact remains that he is the wild card in the book, teasing animals, stealing eggs, burning his sister with cinders, throwing what are effectively temper tantrums, putting the family at risk by taking off in the boat by himself, and at the end taking the

water from the water barrel, the action which is to have the most fatal consequence of all. I have suggested above that his behaviour is also gendered behaviour, but that doesn't change the fact that his behaviour continuously disrupts the moral / social order to the extent that he threatens the very survival of the group.

## 10. Bringing the Natural to Order: the Discourse of the Robinsonade

In common discourse the natural world and the human world are seen as being in opposition to each other. It is of course an arbitrary opposition, for we humans are part of the animal kingdom ourselves, but we tend to emphasise the differences rather than the similarities, defining ourselves as apart from, and indeed superior to, the rest of the natural world. Then, so the argument goes, one of the reasons for the evolutionary success of us humans lies in our ability to bring control and order to nature itself. This is not to say that the natural world doesn't have its own order, but it is our ability to tame and re-order it, to contain and control it for our own purposes that gives us the edge. While we are doing this problems inevitably arise and we have to solve them. How do we go about doing this? It is at this point, I would suggest, that an underlying paradigmatic process comes into operation. In the first place the problem itself exists within a context, a context that arises from a basic human activity, that of exploring and investigating the world around us, starting with the most immediate environment, to see what it has to offer. This we have to do before we can even eat. And in that process the problems will be encountered that have to be solved, which leads in its turn to a more focussed investigation of the problems themselves. This then leads to theorisation about how the world, or the little bit of it with which we are concerned, is working, and once you have the theory you can then proceed to the invention of processes and procedures to test it, generally by process of trial and error, i.e. experimentation, and once those processes and procedures have been found to work we are then enabled to take action to change the world to our own advantage.<sup>16</sup> What I am describing is, I would suggest, a, if not *the* primary human activity, and it is that primary human activity, the paradigmatic process of the identification of problems and the invention of processes and procedures to solve them, that is the very subject matter of the Robinsonade.

In Marryat's time the exploration of the world itself was still very much an on-going project, and the discovery and mapping of islands, whether deserted or not, was still of salient interest. Captain Cook's voyages of discovery<sup>17</sup> had happened 70 years previously; and the voyage of the Beagle, during which Darwin collected the evidence that would later form the basis of his theory of evolution, had happened only five years before.<sup>18</sup> What is of interest, of course, is what Darwin did while he was exploring the world, to which the simple answer is that he kept a journal, but a journal which Wikipedia conveniently calls 'a detailed scientific field journal covering biology, geology, and anthropology that demonstrates Darwin's keen powers of observation..'

To focus, then, on *Masterman Ready* itself. I have suggested that the domination of the human over the natural constitutes a, perhaps *the* primary human endeavour, and it this primary human endeavour that in its turn constitutes the essential content, the defining theme if you like, of the Robinsonade. And if the domination of the human over the natural is the central theme of the Robinsonade, then the central narrative trope of the Robinsonade describes the specific processes by which that domination occurs. It answers by far the most fascinating question of all: 'How do

we do that?’ I would add that, thought of in this way, and certainly so far as *Masterman Ready* is concerned, the discourse of the Robinsonade is a superordinate discourse, containing within it most, if not all of the discourses I have analysed above: the discourses of teaching and learning; the discourse of working together for the common good – i.e. the discourse of morality; the discourses of gender, particularly those which are about the division of labour; the discourses of colonialism and race that are encompassed in the process of geographical exploration; even the discourse of God the Creator, responsible for the creation the island itself, just sitting there ready for the family to exploit its resources.<sup>19</sup>

The major narrative tropes of the Robinsonade involve being wrecked on a desert island and having to struggle for survival,<sup>20</sup> and lest we should be unaware of the connection between *Robinson Crusoe* itself and *Masterman Ready*, Marryat has William draw our attention to it at the very beginning of the novel.

“Were you ever shipwrecked on a desert island, like Robinson Crusoe?”

“Yes, Master William, I have been shipwrecked; but I never heard of Robinson Crusoe.”(p.3)

Interestingly one parallel between the two books is that the wrecks very conveniently hang around for a long enough time to provide a good supply of useful tools, provisions enough to keep them going, and fire-arms.<sup>21</sup> In *Masterman Ready* the family have the additional benefit of a good deal of livestock, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and a couple of dogs, all of which were conveniently being transported to Sydney by Mr. Seagrave to stock up his farm. (And in both books, of course, we have attacks by the savages, and a final rescue.) These plot features apart, and as I have argued above, I am suggesting that the defining feature of the Robinsonade is the account of the very processes by which domination over the natural and physical world is achieved. First of all you require planning and in Ch. XXI Ready lays out the agenda (I have cut out all Mr Seagrave’s and William’s interjections.)

“We have a great deal of work to do, more than we can get through before the rainy season ..... In the first place we must build a house ..... Then we ought to make a little garden and sow the seeds your father brought from England ..... we must put a fence across that point of land, and dig up all the brushwood; the mould is very good ..... Then we shall want a storehouse for all the things we have got ..... then consider how many trips we shall have to make with the little boat to bring them all round ..... We have to build a turtle pond and a fish pond, and a bathing place for Juno to wash the children in ..... But first, Master William, we must make a proper well ...” (pp. 91,92)

And effectively Ready has laid out the plot of the novel so far as the Robinsonade strand is concerned, because that is exactly what they proceed to do. If that is the plan, here is one example of detailed process, the construction of that same said well. The process starts in Ch. XV. Ready and William have crossed the island for the first time, effectively beginning to construct a map of it, and have found what looks like an ideal place for them to settle more permanently, but Ready is concerned about the supply of fresh water. This is a major problem that has to be solved. (So far their only supply of drinking water has been from barrels rescued

from the wreck.) The first thing they do is observe the landscape around them, looking at its topographical features and speculating, theorising if you will, about possible sources of water. They walk down to the edge of the sea to get a better view and...

.. Ready turned his eyes inland to see if he could discover any little ravine or hollow which might be likely to contain fresh water. "There are one or two places there," observed Ready, pointing to them with his finger, where the water has run down in the rainy season: we must examine them carefully..."(pp.69-70)

As Ready suggests, the next thing that is required is closer investigation 'we must examine them carefully' Next Marryat has several passages describing how they withhold water from the dogs, to William's increasing distress...

"Ready, I cannot really drink a drop of water myself, and I am thirsty, unless you give a little to these poor dogs."(p.72)

.. but Ready needs the dogs to go thirsty, for in that way they will be more useful in sniffing out any natural sources of fresh water. Again observation, in this case previous observation amounting to prior knowledge about the behaviour of thirsty dogs is brought to bear upon the situation:

"You see, Master William, these poor dogs are now so eager for water, that if there is any, they will find it out before ever we could."(p.73)

That at least is Ready's theory, and in the event he is proved right. They set off along the shore, Marryat again describing in detail what they are doing.

"Let us first go to the little dell to the right, and if we do not succeed, we will try farther on where the water has run down during the rainy season."(p.73)

A process of trial and error, no less – theory followed by experiment. And Marryat gives an account of every little detail of the process: he tells that they reach the dell and that the dogs start sniffing around, which Ready takes as a positive sign. They move on, and the dogs start sniffing around more eagerly. Ready's theory proved right, the dogs have found the water. Next Ready suggests digging in the sand, more investigation, but far enough up from the water's edge for the water to no longer be salt, more theory. Marryat builds the account of the search up bit by bit, detail by detail, until finally, led by the dogs and digging down, sure enough they do find a flow of water, and a good one at that, and they dig out a hole for it to fill. The account of the process, which constitutes the actual content of the narrative at this point, has taken several pages. We are not done, however, because Ready wants a more solid and permanent structure. This has to wait for several chapters, until, indeed, the whole family has come across the island in Ch.XXIII. But then Ready makes it a priority, and gets Mr Seagrave and William on the job. He explains what is to be done, again detail by detail:

"You observe Mr. Seagrave, we must follow up the spring until we get among the coco-nut trees, where it will be shaded from the sun; that is easily done by digging



towards them, and watching how the water flows. Then if you will dig out a hole large enough to sink down in the earth one of the water casks which lie on the beach, I will bring it down with me this afternoon; and then when it is fixed in the earth in that way, we shall always have a cask full of water for use, and the spring filling it as fast as we can empty it.”(p.100)

Again a process of trial and error, followed by a detailed account of the process of creating the well itself. He could be writing a textbook. Would that the instructions for operating a modern day washing machine were as clear! They duly dig the hole, but by the time Ready has returned with the barrel the hole is full of water, and they are again nonplussed about what to do. The barrel will merely float on top of the water. Then, in an interesting exchange, William is encouraged by his father to theorise for himself.

“Oh dear,” said William, “we shall have to throw all the water out to get the cask down.”

“Think a little, William,” said Mr Seagrave, “for the spring runs so fast that it will not be an easy task. Cannot we do something else?”

“Why father the cask will float, you know,” replied William.

“To be sure it will as it is; but is there no way of making it sink?”

“Oh, yes. I know – we must bore some holes in the bottom, and then it will fill and sink down of itself.”

Ready promptly produces a gimlet (clearly included in the packaging!)

Ready bored three or four holes in the bottom of the cask, and as it floated the water ran into it, and by degrees it gradually sunk down. As soon as the top of the cask was level with the surface, they filled in all round with the spade and shovel, and the well was completed.

“Tomorrow, when the water is settled, it will be as pure and clear as crystal, and remain so if not disturbed,” observed Ready.(p.102)

And by the following day that is precisely what has happened. As I suggest, you could write a handbook about how to find water on a desert island from this account.

In the above analysis I have used the word ‘theory’ to mean something wider than what one might think of as grand theory – the theory of evolution, for instance, or relativity. Here theorising is a much more local process, and it is by and large theorising about the possible results of a specific action. As we say in common speech, ‘this ought to work in theory’. One might otherwise just simply call it ‘thinking’, as in ‘let me just think about it for a moment’, which is of course exactly what it is. But once having thought, theory is immediately put into practice, so immediately that one might think of it as theory *in* practice. One has no sooner thought of a possible solution than one has gone about implementing it. So theory in practice it may well be, but it is still theory. I will also add that we have another way of describing what is happening when Mr. Seagrave is leading William to come up with the suggestion about boring the holes. It is that he, in the common parlance, is encouraging William to think for himself.

And thinking for oneself is a profoundly educative process and, as such, an analysis of this little exchange would fit just as well in the teaching and learning section above as it does here.

So far as Robinsonades are concerned, Marryat's account of the process of building of the well is but one of many such examples. Virtually all their activities on the island are described in the same way, with the same detailed attention to the very processes of that activity itself. My list, above, of activities done for the common good all serve as good examples. In addition you will, by the time you have finished the book, know what strategies you have to use to capture goats and how to build fences to keep them in. You will know how to construct a chicken coop, or build a stockade, or even to construct a whole cottage to live in. Again the examples are legion.

In the account that I have given I hope that I have shown that the discourse of the Robinsonade is indeed the discourse of the process by which we humans establish the ability to control and order our environment. At the heart of it sits what might be thought of as the scientific paradigm, in the loosest sense of the word science – observe, theorise, apply – the very process by which human beings acquire and apply knowledge itself. No wonder it has appeal.

## 11. The Discourse of Power

What is a children's book? Definitions are a bit hard to come by. They are books that are read by children? They are books that are marketed and otherwise disseminated for the child market? They are books that have a child as the implied reader? All of the above? Very probably. For my purposes here I should like to add the fairly obvious observation that the majority<sup>22</sup> of children's books have child protagonists, but to modify that observation by suggesting that what distinguishes child protagonists in a *children's* book is that they are always seen in a positive light and also that they either have power at the beginning of the book or will gain it in the course of the story. From that perspective the discourse of power is not specific to *Masterman Ready*, it applies to all children's books, and as such it is also a superordinate discourse, containing within it all other discourses that might otherwise be found in any particular book. Having said that however, an analysis of how that power operates within this specific example is, I hope, of interest.

*Masterman Ready* has two protagonists, William, and Ready himself. We never leave their side. Whether they are joint protagonists, or whether William is the protagonist and Ready the co-protagonist could be a matter for debate, though I lean towards William as the primary protagonist, despite the title of the book. To concentrate, then, on William, my definitions apply. William is seen in a positive<sup>23</sup> light throughout. He has power at the beginning of the story and gains more in the course of it. Some of his power, it needs to be said, is purely adventitious, structural if you like, depending on the fact that he is a white male member of the colonial class. Such power is the 'given' of the book. In the discourses of colonialism and race, and to a slightly lesser extent, gender, he has no more nor less power than Mr. Seagrave himself. It is in two of the central discourses of the book, the discourse of teaching and learning and the discourse of the Robinsonade that William gets to exercise his power.

In many ways the examples I have discussed above have already illustrated my point, and I do not intend here to do very much more than to simply re-contextualise them. I will start with the

most obvious discourse of all, that of the Robinsonade. The discourse of the Robinsonade is a discourse of power in and of itself – the exercise of the power of the human over the natural. This discourse is focused first and foremost through the character of Ready, but William gains it in the course of the story by working with Ready and learning from him. No better example could be found than in a passage that I have analysed above from a couple of perspectives, the original exploration of the island undertaken by Ready and William to see if there is a more suitable place on the leeward side of the island for them to build a more permanent residence, and in the course of which Ready has explained to William about the blazing of the trees. Having learned all he needs to know, William is then in a position of power with regard to the rest of the family and in Ch.XXII when it is time for the rest of the family to come across, the task is entrusted to William. Here Ready has arrived at the cove where they first landed, whereupon he:

... proceeded to the tents, where he found the whole party anxiously listening to William, detailing what had been done.(p.95)

And, after a night's sleep, off they go with William in charge, Ready having already gone on on his own. Even his father is dependent upon William rather than the other way around.

In fact you may recall that I discussed the whole bit about the blazing of the trees in my section on the discourse of teaching and learning rather than in the discourse of the Robinsonade, which only goes to show how these discourses overlap and interweave. This interconnectedness is very nicely demonstrated in this little exchange,

“And now to finish the well,” said William, as soon as dinner was over.

“How hard do you work, William,” said his mother.

“So I ought, mother. I must learn to do everything now.”(p.101)

William dictates what is to be done next – he has control over the rest of the characters. He works hard – to control and order the natural world for their benefit. And, by wanting to learn, demonstrates an implicit understanding that, as Mr. Seagrave actually points out explicitly in a bit I have already quoted, ‘knowledge is power.’(p.39)

So far as the operation of power in the discourse of teaching and learning itself is concerned I have again covered the ground pretty substantially above, so I will only re-iterate what I said there, i.e. that it is almost always William who asks questions of Ready, wanting to know what this is and how that works, and it is Ready who then responds; and the same is true in the exchanges with his father, even when his father is in more teacherly mode, explaining colonialism to him, or how coral islands are made. William leads by asking the questions, and his father follows by responding to them. The discourses of religion, as I have suggested, are something of an exception, particularly in explicit discussion. The only point that I could discover where William actually gets his toe in the door is in the middle of Mr. Seagrave's lecture in Ch. XXXV.

“Tell me some other prominent feature in creation.”

“One of the most remarkable in creation, William, is order.”

“Point out to me, Papa, where and in what quality it is most observable.” (p.165)

And even here it feels like a somewhat token toe. It is true that William’s real appreciation of the wonder and beauty of the island does open up the door for Mr. Seagrave to talk about the wonderful work of the Creator, but that’s about it. Where practical morality is concerned, though, it is an entirely different story. As I suggest above, all William’s and Ready’s actions are predicated upon a sense of duty and a desire to work for the benefit of all. In the tiny bit I have just quoted about the building of the well, for instance, it is William who decides that they must get on with the well, and the well is being constructed for nothing if not for the benefit of all.

When it comes to gender, William’s power is of course doubled by the fact that he is a boy, and in this case it is not power that he gains in the course of the narrative but power that he already has. Again it is only very occasionally spelt out explicitly. Here’s one example from the beginning of the story during the storm. Ready has proposed to Mr. Seagrave that his wife should be allowed to sleep,

Mr. Seagrave agreed to the good sense of this proposal, and went on deck with Juno and the children, leaving William in the cabin to watch his mother.(p.32,33)

A bit later, after they have landed, they discuss exploring the island. But who is to be left behind to look after Mrs. Seagrave and Juno and the kids, and who is to go with Ready? Mrs. Seagrave wants her husband to stay. It’s got to be her husband or William. Here’s Ready:

“... I have thought upon it, and do not think that Master William would be quite sufficient protection for you; or you would not feel that he was, which is much the same thing;” (p.59)

William can be considered for the job because by definition he has male power, but at this stage not quite enough of it.

Finally William achieves power pure and simple, and it is the power that grows out of the barrel of a gun, the power over life and death. Occasioned of course by the attack of the savages at the end of the book, a point at which, one might say, the discourses of race, of colonialism, of gender – insofar as it is the men who shoot the guns, the women only load them – even of moral responsibility in the form of the duty to protect the rest of the family, all come together in the act of killing the enemy: succinctly demonstrated in the following passage at the point at which Ready has gone outside the stockade to get water but has been prevented from getting back in.

William seized his musket, and sprang out; he found Ready struggling with a savage who was uppermost, and with his spear at Ready’s breast. In a second William levelled and fired, and the savage fell dead by the side of Ready. (pp. 319/320)

As a footnote to this section it is perhaps pertinent to note very briefly that there are also discourses of power with regard to the other two children in the novel. Tommy’s power in

shaping the narrative is indeed of considerable importance, though in a negative and destructive way. Give him half an inch and he would be well at home in *Lord of the Flies*. But he is not the protagonist, and it is far from unusual to have nasty children in children's books, not least because it gives the protagonist a convenient enemy to battle against. Here William is not battling against Tommy per se. But William's attempt to impose order is continuously under threat from Tommy's power to create disorder. And Caroline? Even she has her modicum of power within the discourse of the Robinsonade when she gets given the responsibility of looking after the chickens and collecting the eggs.

Finally it is interesting to note the operation of power is at one point explicitly discussed in the novel, and it is in a general debate about the amount of power adults should exercise over the young. You will perhaps recall that in the extract I discussed in detail at the beginning of this little essay there is a whole debate about whether a parent should prevent his (sic) child from going to sea. Arguments are adduced on both sides: the pro argument being essentially that adults know best, and should dictate to children what they are to do and what they are not to do, and the anti argument, that the young run away to sea precisely in order to get away from that adult control. As I hope I have shown, in the course of this story William, the ostensible 'child' at the centre of the narrative, gets to exercise more and more power, both in his own right, and in terms of being able to tell the adults what they have to do (well his parents at least, I don't think he is ever in a position to tell Ready what to do). And as we have noted, at the end he gets to exercise that most radical power of the adult, the power over life and death.

## 12. Conclusions

I haven't any really. I started writing this with no idea that I might have any purposes beyond those of exploring the content of the novel and how it works. I had nothing in my head that I wanted to 'prove'. It was only when I started writing that the tool of the discourse that I have used in my analysis came to me as a possible way of proceeding. One thing that did then occur to me is that it could very well be possible to discuss the appeal of a novel in terms of the discourses contained within it that are shared by the reader. In my case there were two discourses that drew me a priori to the novel, the discourse of teaching and learning and the discourse of the Robinsonade, and in both cases the novel offered me lots to get my teeth into. At first glance, by contrast, the novel did not seem to me to offer anything interesting in the discourse of gender, which appeared to conform to the stereotypes of wilting female and sweet little girl, both in need of manly support. I also presumed that the discourse of race, and by implication colonialism, was going to be pretty basic: white man versus savage. And as for the discourse of religion, at first glance it positively put me off. I did, however, have an inkling that the discourse of class might be interesting to explore. And, as I have suggested, I am always interested in how the discourse of the power of the child might be articulated in any particular text.

So what surprised me? A number of things. In the first place I was surprised to discover that the discourses of religion were not spread over the novel indiscriminately like some sort of suffocating blanket, that instead they were related to the content of the novel in specific and appropriate ways. The fate of the characters is an important concern – as it is I presume in all but the most impenetrably modernist of texts. And discourse of the Robinsonade itself – the

wealth of the natural resources, the achievement of the Thoreau-esque dream of self-sufficiency, and living off the land, the sheer beauty of the island – are all important elements in the appeal of the novel. As I said above, none of these discourses *need* God, but when he is invoked he is at least invoked appropriately, either as the god who holds our fates in his hands or the god who has created all those wonderful natural resources. The religious discourses are rooted in the material reality of the characters' lives on the island. The much more abstract discourse of faith, by contrast, explicitly divorced as it is from the material realities of their existence, is barely touched upon.

If I was surprised by the ways in which the discourses of religion were much more rooted in material reality than I might have expected, then I was frankly amazed at how the discourse of colonialism was shown to be rooted in material economic realities rather than in the ideological project of bringing Christian civilisation to the heathen savage. Economic factors are also adduced in the debate at the beginning of the novel about whether a boy should go to sea or not, but they are not a theme, a discourse if you like, that otherwise plays a noticeable role in the novel, except by implication, and I have ended up not pursuing it.

Otherwise I found it interesting to discover the relationship of the characterisation of the black maid Juno to the discourse of gender, i.e. that she was very much the exception to the wilting flower rule; and it never occurred to me how much Tommy's behaviour was gendered behaviour until I came to think about it. Representations of race itself proved to be much more interesting and complex than I had expected. The fact that Juno is black is hardly an issue in the book at all, and of course the savages at the end are savages, but in between those two extremes we have the various tribes that Ready meets in his journeys around South Africa, with some of them being a good deal more friendly than the Dutch from whom Ready and his two companions are escaping.

The class reversal, or more specifically the ways in which differences in experience and knowledge are more important than the distinctions of class was not quite so surprising to me. As I have said, the novel retains class distinction verbally, in the forms of address between the characters, but in practice experience and knowledge win out, and this reversal is perhaps a more familiar trope.<sup>24</sup> Indeed from the very beginning of the novel it is clear that this is what is going to happen:

The name of Ready was very well suited to him, for he was seldom at a loss; and in cases of difficulty and danger the captain would not hesitate to ask his opinion, and frequently take his advice.(p3)

And as for the discourse of power, really I have nothing to add to what I said above. It always interests me to see how child power is articulated in any specific text, and I suppose if I wanted to 'prove' anything, it would be that the assumption or development of power for the child protagonist that is a feature of all children's books can be found as much in *Masterman Ready* as it can anywhere else. Which may go some way to explain why it is still regarded as a 'children's classic', despite all the religious proselytising with which it is suffused.<sup>25</sup>

Discourses aside, it is important to say that the appeal of a book will depend on a good many other things, the way it is written, the language that is used, the way it is structured, the way that

the narrative is articulated etc., all things to do with the skill of a writer as a writer. But that discussion will have to wait for another time and another place.

### Finally

There is a, doubtlessly apocryphal, story of a child who, when asked to review a history text book she had just read, wrote, 'This book told me more about the Vikings than I wish to know.' I fear that this little essay may have told you more about *Masterman Ready* than you wish to know. But I have enjoyed writing it and hope that some of you, at least, will have enjoyed reading it. And if you have any comments I should be delighted to hear from you.

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<sup>1</sup> Marryat, Captain 1841 *Masterman Ready* London Everyman

<sup>2</sup> Stories about being wrecked and surviving on a desert island are known as Robinsonades, so called after *Robinson Crusoe*, the archetypal example of the genre.

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps interesting to note that in *The Children of the New Forest*, which was published some 6 years later in 1847 (it was the last of Marryat's books to be published in his lifetime) the religious discourse is still there, but it is much better embedded in the narrative than it is here.

<sup>4</sup> As serendipity would have it, after I started working on the passage and discovered stuff that interested me I thought I'd better have a look through the web to see if there was anything out there that might be relevant, and I came across a piece from 2008 from Siobhan Lam of Brown University who had chosen to look in some detail at some of the very same passage that had already caught my eye. So due acknowledgment to her for having got there first, though she and I do not otherwise have the same take on it.

See: <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/marryat/mastermanready.html> for her piece.

<sup>5</sup> Capitalism, another discourse I have deliberately not chosen to explore, since it too leads us inevitably into political and ideological areas that, for reasons I have already outlined, I did not wish to pursue.

<sup>6</sup> Would that that were still the case in these days of national literacy strategies, government controlled curricula, rote learning, and tick-box criteria. Teaching children to think! Stimulating their curiosity! Perish the thought!

<sup>7</sup> This too turned out to be another passage quoted in detail by Siobhan Lam, see note 4 above, and again it was a passage that had particularly struck me when I was reading the book and that I knew I wanted to examine in some detail, so once again due acknowledgement to her for having got there first.

<sup>8</sup> There is indeed such a book, Marryat wasn't making it up. It seems to have been variously called *The History of the Moors of Spain* or *The History of the Moors in Spain*. It was written, in French, by one M Florian – the nearest I can get to a date is the 1790s, but it was translated into English and published by Harper in 1840, just a year before *Masterman Ready* itself.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to my partner Garth Green, who is more adept than I am at searching the web for such information, for the actual discovery of the existence of Darwin's paper. Additionally both Marryat and Darwin were members of the Royal Society at the time, so it seems very likely that they would have met each other.

<sup>10</sup> I can find no independent references to the Gorragua. There was, however, a well-documented tribe known as the Gonaqua (see for example *Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa by Way of the Cape of Good Hope* by François Le Vaillant, published in 1790) so it seems likely that



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‘Gorragua’ may well be a corruption of that name – or indeed the result of a couple of misprints here and a couple of misspellings there.

<sup>11</sup> Yes, I had to look them up too! They’re between India and South East Asia, closer to the latter than the former.

<sup>12</sup> A more rigorous theoretical analysis would want to suggest that the very act of narration, particularly fictional narration, puts the characters in a position where they are fated to act according to the dictates of the narrative itself, and thus, by implication, according to the dictates of their author. So with *Masterman Ready*, if they hadn’t been wrecked on a desert island there wouldn’t have been a story in the first place. (Mind you, as a footnote to a footnote, if you can have such a thing, many authors complain that their characters tend to take on lives of their own, and start to behave in ways that even the author cannot control!)

<sup>13</sup> In his book *Walden* (1854) American author Henry David Thoreau describes his aspiration to live a life closer to nature: a life of self-sufficiency, cut off from the world. The book is an account of an experiment in which he actually did that for a couple of years, living in a cabin he had built for himself in the woods around Walden Pond, near Concord in Massachusetts, and where he grew his own food, and in other ways lived off the land.

<sup>14</sup> It is the very denial of the idyll, I would suggest, that gives Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* its particular force. God does not lurk at the heart of Golding’s idyll, it is instead the very Devil himself.

<sup>15</sup> I have suggested earlier that Marryat was well up to date with the then current theories regarding the creation of desert islands, which Mr. Seagrave does not attribute to God but to the actions of the little sea creatures that create the coral, so it may be surprising to a modern reader that Marryat retreats to a ‘God created them all’ explanation at this point, but it does need to be remembered that Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was only published in 1859, some 11 years after Marryat’s death. Not that Marryat would necessarily have retreated from his position. One suspects that he would have simply embraced Darwin’s theories as yet another example of the wonderful achievements of the Creator. But I speculate.

<sup>16</sup> In the terms that I have used there is more than a suggestion of the modern scientific paradigm, but even the simplest societies will have existed along the same principles. The 1<sup>st</sup> century Chinese must have investigated and theorised about the flow of water and the behaviour of the wheel in ways that enabled them to develop the water wheel, and in just the same way the scientists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must have investigated and theorised about the behaviour of electronic circuits and the properties of silicon in ways that enabled them to invent the computer chip.

<sup>17</sup> It is not possible, of course, to separate such voyages of European discovery from the colonial project more generally, but I don’t intend to pursue that any further here, though I cannot resist adding that from the perspective of the original inhabitants of the globe it must have been disconcerting to discover that they didn’t exist before they had been ‘discovered’ by the

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Europeans, and even more disconcerting, to say the least, to further discover, once the Europeans had added their three W's\*, that they had been colonised.

\* Weapons: for the purposes of overcoming by force the initial reluctance of the original inhabitants to hand over their lands;

Wealth: for the generation and accumulation of: by means of the exploitation of the natural resources of those same said lands, to say nothing of the cheap labour now available from the now captive original inhabitants;

And the Word. That of God of course, used for the ideological purposes of persuading those same said local inhabitants that everyone was doing the right thing.

<sup>18</sup> Voyages of discovery were nothing new of course, the earliest recorded example being found in Herodotus's *Histories*, being the first circumnavigation of Africa by the Phoenicians in 600 BC – thank you Wikipedia. As for Darwin, the second voyage of The Beagle, which is the relevant one, took 5 years, from 1831 – 1836, and Darwin's account of it and of his discoveries, published under the somewhat uninspiring title *Journal & Remarks* but more generally simply known as *The Voyage of the Beagle*, was published in 1839, just two years before the publication of *Masterman Ready*.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that within the context of *Masterman Ready* itself, somewhere between the natural and the human there sits the savage. As I have already noted above in my discussion of race, Ready at one point describes the inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land as 'little better than beasts' (p.193). Describing them thus places them closer to 'the natural' than to the human, which in its turn implies that they, like the rest of the natural world, are also in need of being controlled and tamed. By the same token, of course, the term 'human' itself becomes compromised, turning out to refer only to the white European human. A full account of the novel would require a discussion of the implications of such an observation but I do not intend to pursue it here.

<sup>20</sup> Though I would argue that thematically you can have Robinsonades without desert islands, Arthur Ransome's *Swallowdale* being one such for instance, that, as they say, is another story.

<sup>21</sup> By the time we get to Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), interestingly enough, the convenient wreck has disappeared.

<sup>22</sup> I say majority only because not all children's books have children as their protagonists, animal stories for instance, or stories about toys, to take just two examples.

<sup>23</sup> We are of course, and not for the first time, getting into areas of interpretation here, in which the interests and biases of the reader have at least as much to do with it as the words on the page. So while I may view William in a positive light others may find him to be an unbearable prig, and might even side with Tommy in his role as disrupter and upsetter of apple carts. In which case they are obviously going to have problems with my analysis. Which also means that as a card carrying post-modernist I cannot in any way suggest that I am right and that they are wrong. Their analyses will be just as valid as mine.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Admirable Crichton* anyone? Now there's a throwback! In Lewis Gilbert's 1957 film of J.M. Barrie's 1902 play of the same name, an upper class family and their servants are also wrecked on a desert island, and the butler, Crichton, and below stairs generally, prove much more competent at running things than do their wah-wah superiors. I guess I must have seen it when it first came out, when I was 13 or so, and I remember very much enjoying it. (Though mind you, thinking about it, perhaps *Masterman Ready* was where Barrie got the idea from in the first place. Now there's a thought!)

<sup>25</sup> I had no sooner written that sentence than I discovered that there it was on Amazon, still in print and published by Penguin in their 'Children's Classics' series.

About the author:

Charles Sarland has written variously about children's literature, publishing one book in the area – ***Young People Reading: Culture & Response***.

He is also the author of two children's books:

***Art & Crew***

***Alchester Vampire***