Natural History in R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*: Shaping Masculinity at the Margin of the World

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Abstract
R.M. Ballantyne's importance in the formation of a muscular boy-culture is generally acknowledged, but his full ideal of manliness is often obscured by the mere physical prowess which has come to be seen as synonymous with the term Muscular Christianity. However, just as Charles Kingsley – who in the 1850s inspired this model of masculinity – held that knowledge of natural history stood central in a man's education, Ballantyne's adventure stories work on perfecting such knowledge too. The fact that Ballantyne's wider agenda to educate British boys was not merely based on male physical action is therefore helpful in explaining the seemingly odd, and often tedious, presence of elements of natural history in *The Coral Island*. This article looks at the way Ballantyne used (or even copied) descriptions of nature by other authors, and how an uninhabited island, an extreme place in the South Pacific, far from British civilization, assumes an ideological role in his trying to depict a full Christian ideal of masculinity in an England in miniature.

Key-words: R.M. Ballantyne, island, masculinity.

1. Ballantyne's muff

Robert Michael Ballantyne's novels are dismissed in *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* as "books [which] seem over-concerned with details of local flora and fauna" (Head 2006: 66). Admittedly, Ballantyne often pauses in his narratives and loses himself in digressions on scientific questions which are not immediately important to the furtherance of the plot, but his minute observations of natural phenomena do lend themselves to a persuasive sense of veracity. As Nicholas Tucker has recognized, "this meticulous attention to detail may have pleased members of his audience in search of authenticity, but it also helped lend credence

to the wilder, more immature fantasies contained in Ballantyne's stories" (Tucker 1981: 168).

Ballantyne's best-seller *The Coral Island* (1858) is a swiftly narrated novel which tells the story of three teenage boys, aged thirteen to eighteen, shipwrecked on an uninhabited island in the South Pacific where they have to measure themselves with nature, cannibal tribes, and ruthless pirates. Their healthy curiosity, steadfast determination, and their 'manly' courage save them in the end. The novel has received critical attention both for its colonial vision and for its desert island theme, but remarkably little in terms of analysis of its construction of nature has appeared. Although Ballantyne's importance in the formation of a muscular boy-culture is generally acknowledged, he is but briefly mentioned in works dealing with the subject. Rather surprisingly he is not mentioned at all in Donald Hall's *Muscular Christianity* or Norman Vance's *Sinews of the Spirit*. On the other hand, both John Springfield and Bruce Haley discuss Ballantyne's disdain for the 'muff', an early-Victorian term for a person who is deficient in practical skills:

> a boy who from natural disposition, or early training, or both, is mild, diffident, and gentle. So far he is an estimable character. Were this all, he were not a muff. In order to deserve that title he must be timid and unenthusiastic. He must refuse to venture anything that will subject him to danger, however slight. He must be afraid of a shower of rain; afraid of dogs in general, good and bad alike; disinclined to try bold things; indifferent about learning to swim. […]. So feeling and acting, he will, when he becomes a man, find himself unable to act in the common emergencies of life. (Ballantyne 1861: 40)

This passage occurs in a long reflection on manly behaviour in *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861), a novel which features the same boys as *The Coral Island*. Ballantyne's mouthpiece in the novel specifies that

> I firmly believe that boys were intended to encounter all kinds of risks, in order to prepare them to meet and grapple with the risks and dangers incident to man's career with cool, cautious self-possession – a self-possession founded on experimental knowledge of the character and powers of their own spirits and muscles. (Ballantyne 1861: 37)

He even encourages boys to "put on 'the gloves,' and become regardless of a swelled nose, in order that they may be able to defend themselves" (p. 41).

Springhall comments that Ballantyne in "[t]his slaughter-house of a boy's book" held "to a mid-Victorian concept of manly behaviour" (Springfield 1987: 62), while Haley sees Ballantyne's hero as "the strapping pagan who learns the lessons of life by himself, who is gifted by nature to be at home in nature" and who lives a "life [that] is largely made up of physical challenges" (Haley 1978: 160). As both critics read Ballantyne's ideal masculinity through his reflections on the muff in *The Gorilla Hunters*, it is perhaps understandable that they ultimately conclude that Ballantyne's ideal kind of man only finds expression in the world of action.

However, that Ballantyne had a much wider agenda to educate British boys is clear from his proposal in 1859 to found a magazine "for young people", all written by himself, which was to include articles on adventures, natural history, and chemistry. This indicates that Ballantyne's ideal was not merely based on male physical prowess. Moreover, he specifies in his autobiography that for *The Coral Island* he *mentally* and *spiritually* plunged into the waters of the South Pacific. Just as knowledge of natural history stood central in a man's education for Charles Kingsley, the larger educational agenda of Ballantyne's adventure stories contributes to explaining that the presence of facts of natural history in *The Coral Island* is part and parcel of Ballantyne's model of masculinity.

In his representation of the essence of true masculinity, Ballantyne needs an extreme place of the imagination in which he can explore basic British values in a pristine and uncontaminated world, and in which the boys can meet the conditions for a spiritual and physical rebirth. Ballantyne's choice of an uninhabited island in the South Pacific, far from British civilization, thus assumes an ideological role in his trying to depict a full Christian ideal of masculinity in an England in miniature.

2. Oh reader, this is no fiction

Being asked by the publisher William Nelson how he "should like the idea of taking to literature as a profession", Ballantyne set to work on a novel, to which he gave the title *Snowflakes and Sunbeams; or, The Young Fur-traders* (1855). For its readership he aimed at "young folk", and it was the first of the approximately forty adventure novels he wrote for boys. It is hardly surprising that for his first novel he mined

his own Canadian experiences, and when a second novel was asked for he still "stuck to the same regions" and filled in his story with what a retired "Nor'wester" told him about his time in Rupert's Land. This formed the setting of *Ungava, a Tale of Eskimo-Land* (1857). But with this, he admitted, "I had reached the end of my tether, and when a third story was wanted I was compelled to seek new fields of adventure in the books of travellers. Regarding the Southern seas as the most romantic part of the world – after the backwoods! – I mentally and spiritually plunged into those warm waters, and the dive resulted in *The Coral Island*" (Ballantyne 1893: 12). For his third novel Ballantyne thus had to procure his material second-hand from books. It meant that "it was needful to be always carefully on the watch to avoid falling into mistakes geographical, topographical, natural-historical, and otherwise" (Ballantyne 1893: 12).

In *The Coral Island* Ballantyne is painfully aware that he had no direct knowledge of the Pacific, and at the outset of the story his narrator Ralph feels he has to reassure his readers that "with regard to all the things I saw during my eventful career in the South Seas, I have been exceedingly careful not to exaggerate, or in any way to mislead or deceive my readers" (Ballantyne 1990: 68). His claim to veracity is even more emphatic in introducing some of the shocking scenes in the novel:

> Oh, reader, this is no fiction. I would not, for the sake of thrilling you with horror, invent so terrible a scene. It was witnessed. It is true. (p. 248)

But, notwithstanding his care for realistic detail, an anonymous reviewer in *The Economist* condemned *The Coral Island* as "strained to the very verge of probability" (Anon. 1858: 88). Ballantyne felt annoyed by such accusations, which, he believed, stemmed from one single mistake in the novel:

> I admit that this was a slip, but such, and other slips, hardly justify the remark that some people have not hesitated to make, namely, that I have a tendency to draw the long bow. I feel almost sensitive on this point, for I have always laboured to be true to fact, and to nature, even in my wildest flights of fancy. (Ballantyne 1893: 13)

Ballantyne here refers to the fact that he had described coconuts growing on trees the way he had seen them for sale on the markets

in Edinburgh, i.e. devoid of their fibrous outer hulk. Part of Ballantyne's chagrin undoubtedly also stemmed from having to admit that he had made a mistake about coconuts while he himself had poked fun at Peterkin's ignorance about how these fruits grew:

> 'If you begin to lay everything to the credit of books, I'll quite lose my opinion of you", cried Peterkin, with a look of contempt. "I've seen a lot o' fellows that were *always* poring over books, and when they came to try to *do* anything, they were no better than baboons!'
> 'You are quite right,' retorted Jack; 'and I have seen a lot of fellows who never looked into books at all, who knew nothing about anything except the things they had actually seen, and very little they knew even about these. Indeed, some were so ignorant that they did not know that cocoa-nuts grew on cocoa-nut trees!'
> I could not refrain from laughing at this rebuke, for there was much truth in it, as to Peterkin's ignorance. (Ballantyne 1990: 25)

Ballantyne could make statements on the veracity of his tales because he knew – but did not say – how much he had borrowed, or even directly transferred, from the texts of other writers. When Jack says that "I've read a great deal about these South Sea Islands […] I have been a great reader of books of travel and adventure all my life" (p. 15, p. 25), Ballantyne is talking about himself.

3. Ballantyne's sources for the Pacific

Ballantyne's biographer Eric Quayle was the first to draw attention to Ballantyne's use of *The Island Home; or, The Young Castaways* – an American juvenile novel about seven boys stranded on a desert island in the Pacific, published in 1851 by Christopher Romaunt, pseudonym of the Californian journalist James Bowman. Quayle notes that "a number of dramatic situations which appear in *The Island Home* seem to have been rewritten by Bob to change their form somewhat, and then woven into the story of the adventures of Ralph Rover" (Quayle 1967: 115). In a more recent assessment Martine Hennard Dutheil explores these parallels in more detail (Dutheil 2001).

J.S. Bratton, on the other hand, points to *Recent Exploring Expeditions In the Pacific, and the South Seas* (1853) by John Stilwell Jenkins as a major source for Ballantyne's knowledge about the

Pacific. (Bratton 1990: xiv). Verbal parallels, however, between Jenkins's work and Ballantyne's novel are hard to find. Singling out Ballantyne's sources the way Bratton does is a hazardous enterprise, as much basic information about the Pacific is to be found in a spate of works on a topic that had started to intrigue the Victorians.

Rod Edmund has explored some of the parallels with passages in John Williams's *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (1837). In fact, Ballantyne never hid his unqualified admiration for Williams's achievements, and introduces him as a character in *Jarwin and Cuffy*, where he writes that "[t]he success of the labours of that devoted man and his native teachers, is one of the most marvellous chapters in the history of the isles of the Pacific". (Ballantyne 1878: 116). Edmund argues that Ballantyne borrowed extensively from Williams's book in the description of the native village that had been converted to Christianity, as well as in numerous minor details throughout the novel (Edmund 1997: 145-152).

Stuart Hannabus has mentioned the influence of the work of yet another missionary: he points out the importance of William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches During a residence of Nearly Eight Years in the Society and Sandwich Islands* (1829) for Ballantyne's books *Man on the Ocean* (1863) and *The Ocean and its Wonders* (1874), but missed the importance of this text for many of the descriptive passages in *The Coral Island* (Hannabus 1989: 60-61).

Although modern criticism has thus unearthed some of the more obvious sources for *The Coral Island*, it is, nonetheless, instructive to realize to what *extent* and in what *way* the author relied on his sources for the basic facts of natural history.

Ballantyne clearly had his source books open before him while writing *The Coral Island*, and tracing the borrowings back to their original sources can give us some insight into the way he worked. If the first three chapters of *The Coral Island* are mainly original in conception, in the following chapters the author closely followed Bowman, Williams and Ellis. But, whereas Ballantyne used Bowman's *The Island Home* as a general source of inspiration – for example for the oysters in chapter five and the encounter with the shark in chapter seven – he did not absorb the information he found in Williams and Ellis in the same way. These are works from which he derived most of the technical details of local natural history.

A further pattern that emerges is that Ballantyne at times copied almost *ad litteram* from *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises*, at times from *Polynesian Researches*, but never from both sources in the same chapter. For example, in chapter six he exclusively copied from Ellis for his descriptions of fern, the breadfruit tree, and the openings in the reef, while in chapter eight the description of the candlenut and the shelter derive directly from Williams's text. The description of aoa, buttressed chestnut, taro and potatoes in chapter ten are lifted straight out of Ellis again, as are the plum eating hogs, which are the originals of the pigs William Golding described in *Lord of the Flies*. But the description of the cavern in chapter thirteen is again based on Williams.

Quayle's assessment of Ballantyne's borrowing was that "[t]here is no question of plagiarism in its worst form – the lifting of whole paragraphs from Bowman's work for insertion into his own – this certainly does not occur and is something Ballantyne would not even have contemplated" (Quayle 1967: 114-115). Quayle clearly did not realize the extent of Ballantyne's borrowings from Williams's *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises* or Ellis's *Polynesian Researches*, which comes dangerously close to wholesale copying. Moreover, it has escaped commentators and editors that Williams, in his descriptions, borrowed extensively from Ellis. Edmund concludes about *The Coral Island* that "[i]n places it is virtually Williams' book adapted for boys" (Edmund 1997: 147). The same holds true for Ellis's book.

Some critics have argued that the mere replication in Ballantyne's novel of facts taken from missionary works on the Pacific points to the author's unquestioning acceptance of the colonial enterprise. Richard Philips writes in *Mapping Men & Empire* that "[f]ew adventure stories have been gaudier, more muscular, more arrogant than *The Coral Island*, in which Ballantyne simplified and exaggerated the certainties of Victorian Britain" (Philips 1997: 36). This is to ignore, though, the novel's textual instability which Fiona McCulloch has shown to exist and which brings to the surface a more ambiguous and nuanced colonial discourse: "*The Coral Island* is not so much concerned with mirroring *factual colonial discourse* as with questioning the very *validity of such truths* by staging itself as a colonial story or sea yarn to excite its own boy reader" (McCulloch 2000: 142; my italics). In trying to discover what Ballantyne achieves with his extensive borrowing within the

framework of the ideals embodied in the novel, Edmund sees this not as merely "packaging" existing knowledge about the Pacific for young readers, and argues that "Ballantyne's text was also one of the means by which a new ideology of boyhood, the prototype of a masculinity suited for an imperial age, was disseminated" (Edmund 1997: 149). Diana Loxley too underlines that *The Coral Island* is "a laboratory for the propagation and nurturing of a perfect masculinity" (Loxley 1990: 117). These perspectives are helpful in an analysis of Ballantyne's use of the "wonders of the deep". In describing the coral reef, Ballantyne turns Williams's "enchanting picture" into an "enchanted garden", a change of terms which can be explained by the craze for marine zoology and the aquarium of the mid eighteen fifties, which Charles Kingsley had linked to his ideal of masculinity in 1857.

4. Paradise

Nineteenth-century Robinsonades are often testing grounds for a Britishness which originates in the awareness of a larger imperial vision, and which is grounded in a Carlylean context of work and duty. The island is also a reflection "on origins, the site of that contemplation being the uninhabited territory upon which the conditions for a *rebirth* or *genesis* are made possible" (Loxley 1990: 3; my emphasis), a scene in which the colonial enterprise, and its British cultural supremacy, is re-enacted (and rewritten) from scratch over and over again. The initial pristine and uncontaminated natural state of the island is purposely likened to a state of Eden, a complete and perfect expression of God's creation, a conscious starting point of the success-story of a God-given British imperialism, which, however, because of man's fallen state, cannot be based on a mere passive gratification of the senses. Charles Kingsley gave voice to such ideas in *Westward Ho!* (1855). In this novel English adventurers penetrate the Amazon rain forest and are tempted to travel no further and settle down to live a life of drugged felicity. The main character reflects that "[s]uch [...] was Paradise of old; such our parents' bridal bower! Ah! If man had not fallen, he too might have dwelt for ever in such a home", until the moment of bliss is interrupted by a black jaguar killing one of the men, and he exclaims: "O Lord Jesus [...] And this is the selfish rest for which I would have bartered the rest

which comes by working where Thou has put me!" (cf. Klaver 1996: 387).

There is an obvious analogy in *The Coral Island* when one of the boys cries out: "washing in the sea, lodging on the ground, – and all for nothing! My dear boys, we're set up for life; it must be the ancient Paradise, – hurrah!" (Ballantyne 1990: 27-28). They also "often wondered whether Adam and Eve had found Eden more sweet" (p. 187). However, "[t]hese lovely islands were very unlike Paradise in many things" (p. 28), and, instead of Kingsley's black jaguar, Ballantyne first gives the reader a gripping encounter with a shark in the paradisiacal waters, and then has "the quiet solitudes of our paradise suddenly broke in upon by ferocious savages" (p. 187). Although Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* is an infinitely more complex novel than Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, with their emphasis on activity both authors seem to have been intent on propagating a similar Christian message.

5. The water tank

During the late 1840s the English became engrossed in studying the animals in the rock pools around the English coast, especially as the new railroads made it possible to reach the seaside resorts fast and cheaply. In 1855 Philip Henry Gosse 'invented' the aquarium so that people could observe marine creatures at home. Soon many Victorian homes had glass rock-pools adorning their living rooms, and collecting sea anemones for the London markets became a lucrative activity. Jonathan Smith has argued that an important impetus for this activity was that "seaside studies offered reassurance by providing evidence of God's care for even the tiniest and most unlikely creatures" (Smith 2006: 76-77), whereas the new discoveries in astronomy and geology had rendered the place of human life in creation insignificant.

Numerous popular books catered for this interest in the seaside. These, often lavishly illustrated, volumes were meant to exalt "our sense of the omnipotence and benignity of Him who created it" (Hibberd 1856: 4) and to convince the reader that "[t]he more we pursue this delightful study, the more we recognize, if we work in a proper spirit, proofs of the *personality* of God" (Harvey 1854: 20). They generally aimed at a middle-class readership, expressing

their "bourgeois religious and social views", Smith remarks: "The study of marine creatures put idle hands to work in reverential contemplation of the Creation". (Smith 2006: 45).

Riding on the wave of the success of *Westward Ho!*, Kingsley's publisher Macmillan decided to follow it up only a few months later with Kingsley's *Glaucus; or, The Wonders of the Shore*, a book of sea-side studies that also paid ample attention to how to build and stock an aquarium. The book also deals at length with the question of the purity of the water for the aquarium, a concept which strongly appealed to his general idea of cleanliness (a central quality in Kingsley's notion of manliness).

Like so many similar publications in the field, Kingsley wanted to show God's goodness, wisdom and omnipotence. But *Glaucus* stood apart from other pious works on the subject in that it emphasized the necessary physical prowess of the naturalist, thus turning natural theology into a manly pursuit. Kingsley exerted himself in removing the contempt that had long been felt for the 'unmanly' effeminacy of the natural historian, which he replaced with a strong enthusiasm for the adventurous spirit of the naturalist and which he likened to that of the soldier. George Henry Lewes, who had spent the summer of 1856 with Marian Evans (George Eliot) working on his *Sea-Side Studies*, ridiculed such "manly haughtiness" (Lewes 1858: 166), but notwithstanding Lewes's disdain, *Glaucus* proved very successful as boys' literature, and remained somewhat of a classic till the beginning of the twentieth century (Johnson, Sickels, Sayers 1959: 1099).

The naturalist's masculinity is picked up in Ballantyne's novel too. As the notion of the island as paradise in *The Coral Island* needed to make place for a more dynamic setting in which the boys could exert their cultural (and religious) supremacy, the perfection of Eden is relocated in the study of sea anemones with the seemingly absurd introduction of an aquarium:

> I also became much taken up with the manners and appearance of the anemones, and star-fish, and crabs, and sea-urchins, and such-like creatures; and was not content with watching those I saw during my dives in the Water Garden, but I must needs scoop out a hole in the coral rock close to it, which I filled with salt water, and stocked with sundry specimens of anemones and shell-fish, in order to watch more closely how they were in the habit of passing their time. (Ballantyne 1990: 50-51)

Although Ballantyne first realistically describes this aquarium as a mere "hole in the coral rock […] filled with salt water, and stocked with sundry specimens of anemones and shell-fish", in later references to it he explicitly calls it a 'tank'. As both the words tank and aquarium made it into the English language in 1854 to refer to "a water receptacle (with transparent sides) in which to keep fish" (OED), Ballantyne is clearly trying to frame Ralph's curiosity for marine creatures in the context of the Victorian interest in seaside studies. This is also clear from a later passage in which Ballantyne's narrator discusses the purity of the water in his tank:

> I found that after a little experience had taught me the proper proportion of seaweed and animals to put into a certain amount of water, the tank needed no further attendance; and, moreover, I did not require ever afterwards to renew or change the sea-water, but only to add a very little fresh water from the brook, now and then, as the other evaporated. I therefore concluded that if I had been suddenly conveyed, along with my tank, into some region where there was no salt sea at all, my little sea and sea-fish would have continued to thrive and to prosper notwithstanding. This made me greatly to desire that those people in the world who live far inland might know of my wonderful tank, and, by having materials like to those of which it was made conveyed to them, thus be enabled to watch the habits of those most mysterious animals that reside in the sea, and examine with their own eyes the wonders of the great deep. (p. 109)

In 1857 the critic Thomas Collett Sanders coined the term Muscular Christianity to describe Charles Kingsley's ideal of manliness, which he defined as that of a man who "fears God and can walk a thousand miles in a thousand hours – who [...] breathes God's free air on God's rich earth". There was no derision in Sanders's statement. He added that he "should be sorry to say that this ideal is not a very good ideal [...] let Mr. Kingsley encourage us all to pursue the path that leads to so blessed a possibility" (Sanders 1857: 176). Muscular Christianity thus defined neatly fits Ballantyne's heroes too. The references to indefatigable physical exertion and the conclusion that a religious naturalist is not necessarily effeminate, and that the bold may be good, are suitable descriptions of the ethics of *The Coral Island*. Arguably, what Kingsley did for adult readers, Ballantyne did for boys.

The masculinity which many critics have underlined in Ballantyne's characters thus owes much to the notion of Muscular Christianity as it was defined in 1857, the very year that Ballantyne started writing *The Coral Island*. Although Muscular Christianity later in the century came to be more associated with the military than with the religious, more with the physical than with the spiritual, in the late 1850s it was still entirely based on Kingsley's manly ideals, which included a central role for natural history in a man's life. In his educational agenda Ballantyne too wanted to give a full picture of the British boy who finds his physical prowess and spiritual guidance in the type laid out by Kingsley. That explains why Ballantyne was at such great pains trying to get the details of natural history right in his novel, and why in a seemingly ridiculous fashion he introduced a marine aquarium on a desert island. In this sense the novel is part of an attempt to realign the ideal of English boyhood, introducing the spiritually important qualities of natural theology that were formerly only associated with the muff. The natural history of an extreme landscape at the margin of the world thus becomes a major principle in the political and sociological message of Ballantyne's plot, the colonial training-ground for England's future leaders. It propagates a model of manliness that was rooted in the ethics of mid-Victorian Kingsleyan Muscular Christianity, a model that Ballantyne elaborates with remarkable consistency in *The Coral Island*.

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