Boys will be boys: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and the never-ending adventure of colonialism

How often do you think about colonialism when you read an old book or watch an old film? From the literature we study at school to the statues of the men we celebrate, it's important that we're aware of how the attitudes and actions of the past were enabled. Empire, after all, involved more than just force. So what can we learn about it from a seemingly innocent children's book like Treasure Island?

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* was published in 1883, at the height of the British Empire. Some writers argue that Stevenson was anti-colonialist, especially during the later years of his life when he witnessed colonial rule while living in Samoa.[1] His South Sea stories, especially *The Beach of Falesa*, seem to question the idea of British superiority. Others have argued that Stevenson's novels have Orientalist features and exhibit ideas that are consistent with imperialism.[2]

Figure 1 – Stevenson and his family and household at his home in Samoa. Visit the Writers' Museum to see more images from Stevenson's South Sea days.

What is Orientalism?

Orientalism is a concept by Edward Saïd, arguing that there are continuities in the way the West has represented the non-Western world.[3] The latter is superstitious, unintelligent, barbarous, lacking self-awareness, weak, and deceitful, while the West is strong, masculine, rational, progressive, and civilised.[4]

This idea justified domination. Prime Minister Arthur Balfour told Parliament in 1910 that ruling Egypt was necessary because:

> "*You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government… We are in Egypt not merely for the*

[1] Harris, J.M., 2003. Robert Louis Stevenson: Folklore and Imperialism. *English literature in transition, 1880-1920*, 46(4)., p.382.
[2] Colley, A.C., 2004. *Robert Louis Stevenson and the colonial imagination*, Aldershot: Routledge., p.6.
[3] Said, E.W., 2004. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
[4] Ibid., p.12.

> *sake of the Egyptians, though we are there for their sake; we are there also for the sake of Europe at large*"[5]

Western colonialism has been built on this central characterisation of Eastern inferiority. We can still see traces of it today like in the *Indiana Jones* series, where Indians are depicted as strange cultists performing human sacrifices and Arabs as terrorists. Once we start to look, we can see this imbalance of power in all sorts of places.

So what can we see in *Treasure Island*?

It's a pirate's life

An empire of pirates:

Many of the heroes of early empire-building were not much more than aggrandized pirates. Men like Francis Drake spent much time raiding Spanish ships, attacking the port of Cadiz in 1587 for instance.[6] But pirates in literature were mostly villainous in early literature. Their immoral acts did not fit the Empire's manifesto of bringing civilisation to the barbarous nations of the East.

Towards the end of the 19th century, however, a New Imperialism came about, which was less about moral mission and was more interested in economy, expansionism, and political power. As a result although pirates didn't exactly become 'good', their moral ambiguity and cynicism became admirable in a way. The bloodthirsty Captain Flint, for instance, has a magnetism that makes Squire Trelawny proud he "was an Englishman".[7]

Even as Jim picks up some of their cutthroat qualities, we are not prompted to look at him critically, but to admire his quick-wittedness. When confronting Israel Hands, it is his mimicking of the pirates that not only saves his life, but makes him a rather enigmatic hero too. He threatens coolly, "'One more step, Mr. Hands . . . and I'll blow your brains out! Dead men don't bite, you know,' I added, with a chuckle."[8]

Pirates and imperial officials – just boys at heart?

Although we might associate these qualities – cynicism, cruelty, amorality – with adulthood, for Stevenson and many other late Victorians, they are closer to boyishness. Boys were thought to possess a natural predatory instinct that was controlled as they matured into adulthood. This adventurous spirit fit well with the competitiveness of New Imperialism. Many imperial figures like Cecil Rhodes declared themselves boys at heart with pride: "I am a boy! I am a boy! Of course I shall never get old!"[9]

Stevenson depicts this kind of personality positively. Jim's personal journey over the course of the novel does not, like most others, involve him becoming more sensible; instead his behaviour becomes more boyish and unrestrained. He and the pirates live in a grey area of morality, but their lives are filled with excitement because they follow different rules.

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[5] Ibid., pp.39-41.
[6] Fuchs, B., 2000. Faithless Empires: Pirates, Renegadoes, and the English Nation. *ELH*, 67(1), p.47.
[7] Deane, B., 2011. Imperial Boyhood: Piracy and the Play Ethic. *Victorian studies*, 53(4), p.696. ; Stevenson, R.L. & Rhead, L., 2015. *Treasure Island*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, p.41.
[8] Stevenson, p.184.
[9] Deane, p.689.

We know that Stevenson was rather fascinated by this life of excitement. He wrote,

> "When a man, seemingly sane, tells me he has "fallen in love with stagnation," I can only say to him, "You will never be a Pirate!"… After all boyhood's aspirations and youth's immoral day-dreams . . . is there not some escape…?"[10]

This side of Stevenson suggests he probably did find some aspects of empire appealing. The land was exotic and exciting, and the people were strange and curious, but for the Englishman who took his English superiority with him everywhere, it like a never-ending adventure.

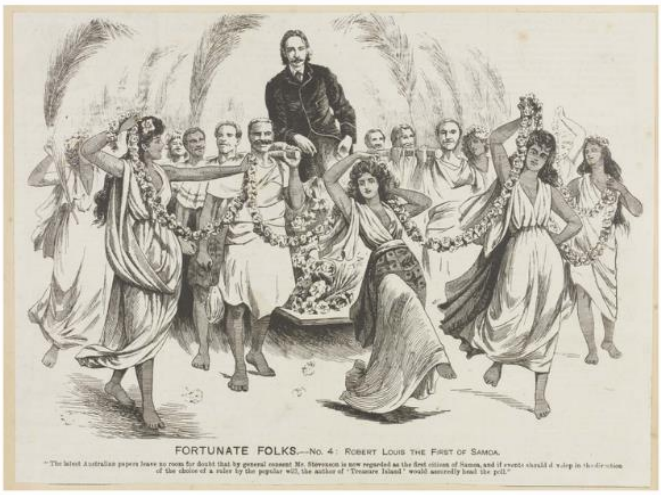

Figure 2 – an imagined scenario of Stevenson being held aloft by dancing Samoans, all happy to have him there and more than ready to make him their ruler.

Masculinity

Boyishness, however, didn't take away from the masculinity of the British Empire, as it continued to label its colonial subjects as weak and effeminate.[11] Even the landscape was feminised, adding another layer of meaning whenever the land was conquered by British men. Another popular adventure novel, *King Solomon's Mines*, directly compares the shape of the mountains to a woman's body.[12] In 1492 Christopher Columbus made very similar comments, and we can also see the to-be-colonised land embodied as a woman in Jan van der Straet's engraving of Amerigo Vespucci

[10] Ibid., p.697.
[11] Sinha, M., 1995. *Colonial masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
[12] Stott, R., 1989. The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard's Adventure Fiction. *Feminist review*, 32(1), pp.69–89.

discovering America.[13] From the beginning of the West's rise to domination, countries, peoples and spaces were gendered as masculine and feminine.

Figure 3 – Amerigo Vespucci discovering America. In the distance, native Americans are depicted engaging in cannibalism, an example of an Orientalist stereotype.

Combining all of these attitudes, it is not surprising, then, to see that the late Victorians became more comfortable with their own historical pirates. Pirates had the competitive spirit of the age; their confidence and assertiveness were desirable. Thus, Francis Drake was recuperated, and his pirating days were recounted with pride rather than embarrassment. One biographer wrote in 1935 that Drake set the British free, "he terrified and broke their enemies; and when he died there was no man on earth who dare flout a British ship at sea."[14] He was rather like Captain Flint, whom Squire Trelawny tells us "[t]he Spaniards were so prodigiously afraid of".[15]

So Stevenson's pirates had the right qualities for empire, and as we'll see, they also had the right tools.

Knowledge as power – the use of maps and numbers:

Maps have been symbols of empire for centuries. It was partly due to developments in map-making that Europeans "discovered" and conquered the Americas. Similarly, in *Treasure Island* the map drives the story, prompting young Jim to set out on his adventure.

What do maps symbolise?

[13] McClintock, A., 2013. *Imperial Leather*, Taylor and Francis., pp.21-25. ; van der Straet, J. (ca.1600) . *Allegory of America, from New Inventions of Modern Times (Nova Reperta), plate 1 of 19.* [Engraving - online] Available at: The Metropolitan Museum of Art https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/666286 [Accessed 20 April 2022] (Stradanus) III, 323, ii, p. 6.

[14] Wathen, B., 2009. *Sir Francis Drake : the construction of a hero*, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, p.166.

[15] Stevenson, p.41.

The value of knowledge is what gives maps their symbolic potency. This print from the late 16th century shows the frontispiece of the *Nova Reperta*, or *New Inventions of Modern Times*, a series of illustrations of the most world-changing achievements, inventions and discoveries by Europeans. The canon and compass depict themes of navigation and conquest; on the left a figure representing the future is pointing to the map of America, whilst on the right a figure symbolising the past is leaving the frame.[16] The map is depicted as the key to future greatness for European nations. For Jim and the pirates, the map promises them a fortune.

Figure 4 – also by Jan van der Straet, the Nova Reperta celebrates recent European developments, ranging from the printing press all the way to gunpowder.

Who makes the map and why?

The information on the map is directly useful to the user's needs, so by looking at what it includes (and what it doesn't) we can see what the map-maker's and the map-user's priorities are. For example, harbours: on a basic level, this is essential information for anyone hoping to access an area. In the context of the British Empire, harbours and port cities are extremely important. British rule in India began with the trading activities of the East India Company, which established itself in coastal areas like Surat.

When Captain Smollett hands Long John Silver a map that looks identical but is missing Flint's notes, we see how crucial Flint, as the author, is. It is Flint's notes that mark out the treasure, so a large part of the map's value comes from its association with him – hence Jim calls it "Flint's fist".[17] Likewise, maps of the colonies made by Europeans were powerful precisely because it was a European mind organising the world.

X marks the spot:

[16] van der Straet, J. (ca.1600) *New Inventions of Modern Times [Nova Reperta], Title Plate.* [Engraving - online] Available at: The Metropolitan Museum of Art https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/659646 [Accessed 20 April 2022] (Stradanus), III, 322, i, p.5-6.

[17] Bushell, S., 2015. Mapping Victorian Adventure Fiction: Silences, Doublings, and the Ur-Map in Treasure Island and King Solomon's Mines. *Victorian studies*, 57(4), pp.617-618.

Treasure: the most important aspect of the map, and the engine of the story. The characters use the map and venture this unknown land solely to look for treasure. Colonialists navigated lands in search of similar prizes to add to their wealth. From the 19th century, Britain owed a significant part of its wealth to the labour and resources extracted from its territories. By 1830, the amount of raw cotton, sugar, wool, and timber imported from colonies like India and Australia was equivalent to about 25 to 30 million acres of land, an extra 47-76% of Britain's own land.[18]

Despite being mentioned so much in the novel, we know very little about the treasure itself. Most likely, Captain Flint got it through his pirate activities, but the map says nothing about it. Nor does the map indicate the blood and violence that accompanies treasure-hunting. The first owner of the map killed 6 of his men for it, and over the course of the novel 17 more are killed. Scholars call this a "cartographic silence".[19]

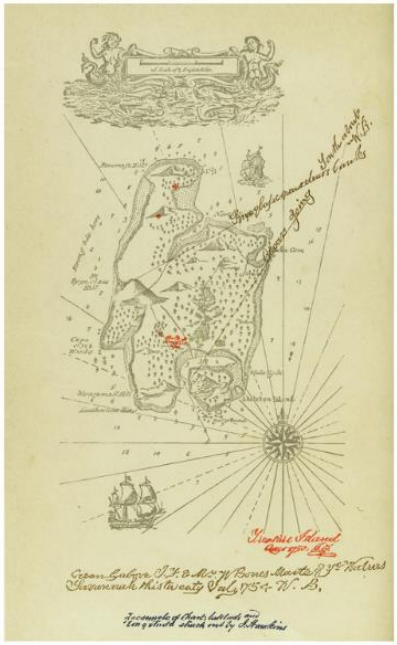

Figure 5 – map from Treasure Island

The emission of this information mirrors the real world. The maps used by colonizers simply reflected the landscape and its significant points – a woodland to be cut down for timber, perhaps, or a shaft of diamonds to be mined – without directly representing the violence involved. Perhaps Stevenson is criticising empire here, by demonstrating the blood price of such pursuits of treasure, as Jim ends the novel reflecting wearily on his adventures: "Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back again to that accursed island".[20]

Conquering man and nature:

In one sense maps allow people to conquer nature. The natural environment is a challenge to the explorers, much like the harsh environments of the colonies. For example, British officials ordered the extermination of tigers and the capture of elephants to make it easier to venture into the Indian

[18] Daunton, M.J., 2007. *Wealth and welfare : an economic and social history of Britain, 1851-1951*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.1–29.
[19] Harley, J. B, 1988. Silences and secrecy: The hidden agenda of cartography in early modern Europe. *Imago mundi (Lympne)*, 40(1), pp.57–76.
[20] Stevenson, p.248.

jungles.[21] In the novel, the sea and the coast pose no threat because Jim tells us the map includes "latitude and longitude, soundings, names of hills and bays and inlets, and every particular that would be needed to bring a ship to a safe anchorage upon its shores".[22]

And not just the landscape – people too. Colin Mackenzie, the first Surveyor General of India, collected data about the population for his 1800 survey of Mysore, including any "peculiar" customs they had.[23] This information might seem excessive to us today, but it was a tool of government. Maps, therefore, were a kind of weapon of knowledge.

Counting bodies:

Treasure Island displays a peculiar obsession with numbers, and it reflects two things: the Victorian preoccupation with counting and categorising, and that this habit was a method of gaining a position of dominance. The pirates use numbers to rationalise and keep the upper hand in situations where they were disadvantaged against their enemies: "Five against three leaves us four to nine. That's better odds than we had at starting". So too did the handful of colonial administrators ruling over millions of natives. [24]

Like the characters of *Treasure Island*, British colonialists saw statistics as a useful way of imposing control and order over the world. The All-India censuses were used for revenue assessment, discipline, and surveillance, and also to justify the British presence in India in general.[25] Numbers were tied to labels in ways that helped them make sense of society, even if the reality was different. For example, in an 1872 census report in North-West India, British officials looked at numbers of infanticide and concluded that it was a strange custom belonging to a specific caste.[26] This takes us back to Orientalism – the representation of colonial subjects as exotic, superstitious and irrational.

Weaponizing knowledge in this way has had long-lasting effects. One general effect is Orientalism. In India specifically, the British created an explosive politics of representation by linking ideas of majority/minority to religious identities.[27] The bloody events of Partition in 1947 were partly due to this, as Muslim minorities began to fear being dominated by the Hindu majority.[28]

Conclusion: what does *Treasure Island* tell us about empire and imperialism?

There's much for us to take away from *Treasure Island*. The activities of the pirates - navigating the sea, fighting their enemies, and searching for gold - are analogous to the activities of imperialists. Masculinity is tied to exploration, conquest, and adventure; it is both a boyish daydream and an

[21] Mandala, V.R., 2015. The Raj and the Paradoxes of Wildlife Conservation: British Attitudes and Expediencies. *The Historical journal*, 58(1), pp.75–110.
[22] Stevenson, p.48.
[23] Edney, M.H. 1997. *Mapping an empire : the geographical construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.45-46.
[24] Phillips, M.J. 2017. Navigating Chance: Statistics, Empire, and Agency in R. L. Stevenson's Treasure Island. *Nineteenth-century contexts*, 39(5), p.401.
[25] Appadurai, A., 1993. Number in the colonial imagination. In: C. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer, ed., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.320-326.
[26] Ibid., p.328
[27] Ibid., pp.331-332.
[28] Frykenberg, R.E., 1987. The concept of 'majority' as a devilish force in the politics of modern India. *Journal of commonwealth & comparative politics*, 25(3), pp.267–274.

imperial reality. We've also seen how ideas about people, the body, and the landscape were represented in number, image, or textual form, and how this was weaponized.

Visit our collection at the Writers' Museum to find out more about Stevenson's South Sea days. You'll be able to engage the other side of the argument – was he anti-imperialism, or did he still support empire in some ways? Although it's an ongoing debate, the point is that empire affected Stevenson in ways that perhaps even he might not have realised. Much of what we see and hear in the world is linked to invisible power balances that we don't perceive; we too are affected by the traces of empire.

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