ROBINSON CRUSOE IN INDONESIA

Ian Proudfoot traces the evolution of a sub-genre of literature that Daniel Defoe’s adventure story set in motion.
In 1875 the Government Press in Batavia, capital of the Dutch East Indies, published a book in Malay bearing the title *Hikayat Robinson Crusoe*. This was the second coming of Robinson Crusoe to the Indonesian archipelago. Defoe's original account of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was published in two volumes in 1719 and 1720. In the latter part of this long travelogue Robinson relates that he picked up substantial profits in Southeast Asia during six years of trading opium and cloves from 1698 to 1703. During this time he touched at ports around the coasts of 'Borneo and several islands whose names I do not remember', and bought a Dutch ship, unknowingly, from pirates who had seized it in the straits of Malacca.

Defoe was an immensely gifted journalist, and his book was at first widely credited as an authentic adventure-travelogue, for which there was a great vogue in this European age of discovery. Within a year of its publication in England it had been translated into French and German, shortly after into Dutch and Italian, with other European languages to follow. As *Robinson Crusoe* was translated, adapted and rewritten it gradually became clear that what Defoe had set in motion was a sub-genre of literature which the Germans, who were among its most enthusiastic participants, called the Robinsonades. In the 19th century the momentum of the sub-genre seemed unstoppable. There was the Swiss Family Robinson, and a Robinson of almost every European nationality, *Robinson in Australien*, the Dog Robinson, Masterman Ready, and the list goes on.

In retrospect we can see that *Robinson Crusoe* was one of those works of literature which marks the turning of an epoch. Rather as *Don Quixote* had signalled the end of an age of feudal chivalry, *Robinson Crusoe* now provided a ramp for expansiory capitalism. The ways in which it did so are obvious and subtle. Its themes of exploration and the European dominance of uncivilised natives resonated with the world-view of European imperialists. This it had in common with other popular travellers' accounts, such as those compiled by Robert Hakluyt.

What distinguished *Robinson Crusoe* as a work of literature was its revolutionary redefinition of the hero. Robinson was 'a rather ignorant adventurer of no very high moral character or exceptional endowment. An ordinary man ...', no more and no less than the bourgeois man in the street. In his masterly study of *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt has demonstrated that this change signalled the end of an age of feudal chivalry, *Robinson Crusoe* now provided a ramp for expansiory capitalism. The ways in which it did so are obvious and subtle. Its themes of exploration and the European dominance of uncivilised natives resonated with the world-view of European imperialists.

The novel's actors are no longer the shadows of archetypes, but individuals uniquely located in time and space. Thus the story of Robinson Crusoe opens with wholly circumstantial details:

"I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who first settled at Hull."

The egotism implied here is reinforced at the narrative level by Robinson's shipwreck on an uninhabited island. The island, as Watt notes, offers the fullest opportunity for him to realise three associated tendencies of capitalist civilisation - absolute economic, social and intellectual freedom for the individual.

**A Book for Children**

As the 18th century progressed, Defoe's book began to be appreciated as more than a travelogue. The radical social thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau made Robinson on his island the prototype of the solitary 'natural' man, who could judge matters clearly, according to their utility, unclouded by the conventions of society. In his very influential treatise on education, *Emile* (1762), he recommends *Robinson Crusoe* as the perfect vehicle for exploring truths about man and nature, and about the individual and society.

"Since we must have books, there is one book which, to my thinking, supplies the best treatise on natural education. This is the first book Emile will read; for a long time it will form his whole library, and it will always retain an honoured place. ... What is this wonderful book? ... it is Robinson Crusoe."

Rousseau popularised the idea of a program of education which was tailored to the stages of a child's natural development. A corollary was the notion of literature specifically directed...
to children, and Rousseau placed Robinson Crusoe's island adventure at the centre of this new category. The free-thinking Rousseau's project was, fatefuly, taken up by a heavy-handed Hamburg moralist. In 1779 Joachim Campe published a completely rewritten story of Robinson's island experiences under the title Robinson der Juengere, or in English The New Robinson Crusoe. The changes are substantial, as Campe explains in his foreword:

The Old Robinson Crusoe, independent of its other defects, is erroneous in one particular sufficient to destroy every advantage that his History might produce, which is, that Robinson Crusoe is provided with all sorts of European tools and instruments necessary to procure him many of those conveniences that belong to society. Thus the opportunity is lost of affording the young reader a lively sense both of the wants of a man in a state of solitude, and the multiplied happiness of a social life: another important reason why I thought proper to depart from the old History of Robinson Crusoe.

I have, therefore, divided the time of my New Robinson Crusoe's remaining upon the island into three periods. In the first he is all alone and destitute of any European tool or instrument whatsoever, assisting himself merely by his hands and invention; in order to shew, on the one hand, how helpless man is in the state of solitude, and, on the other, how much reflection and persevering efforts can contribute to the improvement of our condition. In the second period, I give him a companion, on purpose to shew how much a man's situation may be bettered by taking even this simple step towards society. Lastly, in the third period, a vessel from Europe is shipwrecked in his island, and gives him an opportunity thereby of providing himself with tools and other articles necessary in common life, in order that the young reader may see how valuable many things are of which we are accustomed to make very little account, because we have never experienced the want of them.

Campe's version is related over the thirty-one evenings of one month by a father to his children. The children make many interjections inviting moral judgements and asking about natural phenomena and technical details. They break off to look up the ship's course in an atlas, or debate whether Robinson is justified in killing the invading cannibals, or whether he should tolerate non-Protestants on his island. Whatever the issue raised, Papa closes the discussion with an authoritative ruling, praising the child who got the answer right, and explaining where the others went astray. As they return from the island each night for supper in their cosy sitting room, Papa invites them to give thanks that they live 'amongst men who are civilised ...without having anything to fear from the barbarity of inhuman savages.'

In this travesty of Defoe's work, Campe has domesticated the story while making it more exotic. Campe's Robinson was born in Hamburg, naturally, but raises llamas on his island instead of goats. Reassuringly, the provident hand of the Almighty is never far away. When Friday doubts that the fatal shipwreck can be the work of a merciful God, Robinson explains that it must be so, because it provided them with much useful equipment, because the slaves it was transporting may have escaped to freedom, and because God's wisdom is unfathomable.

This mix of pedestrian thinking and unctuous sermonising clearly appealed to parents and teachers, who bought out over two hundred editions of the German edition of Campe's book over the next century. It was quickly put into French and English with similar success. The version I have to hand, from which I quoted Campe's foreword, is an English translation, published in Dublin in 1789, of the French translation of Campe's original German. This 'Instructive and Entertaining History, for the Use of Children of both Sexes' was given as a school prize. In this version Robinson was born in Exeter!

The Indies Robinson
Several Dutch versions of Campe's New Robinson Crusoe circulated during the 19th century, and we may suppose that one of them was read by the young Adolf von de Wall in the Dutch school in Sukadana, West Borneo. (But he could not have guessed that Defoe's Robinson Crusoe had sailed those very coasts a century and a half before.)

Adolf von de Wall belonged to a class of Europeans of mixed blood who were thoroughly assimilated to life in the Indies. His father, a German, had been put in command of the Native Cavalry Corps at Ceribon, in north Java, where he took an Indonesian wife before being sent to the sleepy outpost of Sukadana as Civil Magistrate. There his son, born in 1834, enjoyed a native-style upbringing among the Malay-speakers of Sukadana stiffened with the advantages of European status and Dutch-language schooling.

Adolf's adulthood was a time of rapid and profound change in Dutch-controlled territories. In the latter half of the 19th century, Malay-language commercial newspapers appeared in the major trading ports of northern Java as early signs of a new popular literacy. Capitalist enterprises, under European and Chinese control, were making deep inroads into the Javanese agricultural economy, and bringing with them an infrastructure of roads, railways, steamships, the telegraph, and closer government administration.
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The world was knocking on Java's door, and Adolf von de Wall found himself, like some other bi-lingual Eurasians, drawn to the doorkeeper's role, interpreting European civilisation for the native subjects of Dutch rule. This he did by translating Dutch books into Malay. The books he chose to translate were tales of travel adventure; and the first was the new Robinson Crusoe.

Defoe had fed the hunger of a new English reading public for vicarious adventure in newly opened lands which offered novelty and wealth. Now von de Wall conveyed some of the same excitement to a new Malay-reading Javanese public whose own rapidly expanding horizons seemed no less challenging and rewarding. The first English novel thus became the first in Malay. And it will come as no surprise to learn that the Malay Robinson Crusoe was the most successful of von de Wall's books. By the turn of the century it had been reprinted six times, and was widely distributed to schools and sold to the public with government support. It was the most read modern Malay book in this period.

In deference to the Indies school-room and a newly literate reading public, von de Wall kept to a simple narrative style. He cut Campe's version to about one-third its length, mainly by eliminating his intrusive Protestant sermonising – which in any case had no place in the colonial government's cautiously non-sectarian schools.

Von de Wall's opening paragraph heralds a story like no other known to his readers.

"Once upon a time there was a man in the city of Hamburg called Crusoe, who had three sons. The eldest became a soldier and died in a battle. The second was a studious young man. Then one day, when he was feeling tired and hot, coming in from walking, he drank cold water and because of that was struck down with a chill and died. That left the youngest, called Robinson, who was very dearly loved by his parents."

This book was new in so many ways. It was printed (not manuscript); it was in Dutch script (not in Arabic or Javanese script); it was in punctuated prose (not rhythmic verse). The literary historian, William Trent, once commented, 'When a new language is invented, Robinson Crusoe is one of the first books published in it'. That is pretty nearly the case here. In the late 20th century we are so accustomed to a modern form of Malay as the national language of Indonesia that it is hard to appreciate what a great step in this direction von de Wall's Robinson Crusoe represented, and how different it was to all previous Malay literature.

The powerful immediacy of Defoe's detailed first-person narrative has been dissipated, but von de Wall's book is still revolutionary in presenting the story of an ordinary young man – not a prince, a courtier, a hero or a saint. Those were the protagonists of Malay and Javanese feudal romances. Although this Robinson was a European, in all else he seemed very much like the members of his teen-aged school-room audience.

But how would Javanese readers relate to this European figure? The surge of the narrative invites readers to identify with Robinson; but at the same time it unfolds the story of a European, king of his island, and his native servant. In this context the treatment of Robinson's relationship with Friday gains a certain poignancy.

Friday

Campe's radical recasting of Robinson Crusoe had already changed Friday's role. In Campe's scheme, Friday's arrival on the island was to illustrate the 'multiplied happiness of a social life', and this makes him to some degree Robinson's collaborator. Campe's Friday provides Robinson with fire by rubbing two sticks together, and he is allowed to smile at Robinson's feeble attempts to make a dug-out. There was mutual benefit in the relationship, but it remained fundamentally unequal. Von de Wall is careful to express the relative degrees of civilisation in his translation:

"And Robinson learned from Friday some items of knowledge (pengetahuan) which could produce benefit, and he too taught Friday the sciences (ilmoe) which he knew. For indeed Friday and his people had never heard of these sciences."

Although Robinson occasionally treats Friday intimately, allowing him to sleep in his cave, hugging and kissing him in moments of elation, and finally taking him back to Hamburg, Friday is equally the butt of slapstick humour as he swims for dear life when pursued by a pet dog, or clumsily struggles to eat with a fork.

Defoe's Friday was not humiliated in these ways. While Defoe had little respect for Friday's cannibal tribe and their brutish civilisation, he allowed Friday scope for personal development, and in Defoe's book Friday became Robinson's comrade-in-arms. Half a century later Campe could not trust any native with a gun, and his Friday never wields a fire-arm.

What he was now witness to [the gunpowder], and what he had seen in the ship, inspired him with so profound a veneration for Europeans in general, and for Robinson in particular, that for some days he could not recover that air of familiarity which he had usually kept up with his friend.

Von de Wall's Friday also knows his place, and despite encouragement from Robinson, is not bold enough (tjada djoega berani) to take up a gun.

At the same time Friday's abject submission to Robinson loses some of its force when expressed in an
Indonesian medium. When Friday prostrates himself before Robinson and kisses the ground he stands upon, he is offering obeisance no 19th-century European king could expect, but only a little more than a well-born Javanese father might receive from his son.

Some of the adjustments to Campe's text that von de Wall did make for his Indonesian readers are amusing. He omitted Campe's praise of Robinson's achievement in making cheese and butter — no recommendation of European civilisation by Indonesian tastes! On another occasion, after Robinson has received European clothes from the shipwreck, he dresses Friday in a sailor's clothes.

When Friday had put them on, he was very pleased, and pranced about like a little child who has just got some new clothes. And his joy increased when it became clear to him that the clothes allowed him to move freely and that he would not have to worry about mosquitoes.

European clothes make as much sense in the tropics as cheese and butter — but many of von de Wall's readers were not to wear them. Therefore von de Wall does not add, as Campe does, that Friday sought and was given permission not to wear shoes. That would not be a good example for Javanese school children.

**A Son's Disobedience**

One other adjustment made by von de Wall has larger consequences. It is one of emphasis. While radically abbreviating Campe's version, von de Wall took care to preserve the theme of Robinson's disobedience to his parents in running away from home. Defoe's original Robinson was rather careless of his family, who are all dead before his return from his island. But 19th-century moralists could not stomach Robinson's flouting of his father's advice. Perhaps this is why von de Wall, too, emphasised this aspect of the story. Alternatively, he may have had in mind his imagined readers' sensibilities (or those of their parents). Compare the conclusion in the European book with von de Wall's. Campe concludes with a highly emotional scene in which Robinson and his elderly father are reunited.

As soon as he arrived there, in a transport of inexpressible exaltation, he throws himself into his father's arms, who trembled all over. 'Oh, my father!' — 'My dear son!' — was all that they could say. Throbbing and speechless, they remained sometime locked in each other's arms; at length a seasonable flood of tears relieved both their breasts, which almost suffocated with joy.

Von de Wall, using simpler and less emotional language, underlines the moral, and shows us not the mutual joy of father and son reunited, but a father's joy at his son's apology and deference.

Then Robinson went to meet his father. When they met, Robinson fell on his knees and prostrated himself, while begging forgiveness, saying: 'Your son has sinned greatly, but he has incurred severe punishment by suffering misery unfathomable in this world.' And his father answered, 'Ah, my son!' And the old man said not another word in reply, so joyful was he.

Here is an Indonesian son addressing his father.

There is an irony here. Readers are invited to identify with this disobedient Robinson, and the narrative is all about the success of a young man in breaking away from parental authority. Von de Wall uses very strong language to convey the enormity of Robinson's transgression, as when Robinson is admonished by the captain of the ship he first embarks upon:

If you don't mend your ways, and you don't go home to beg your parents' forgiveness, you will inevitably suffer the consequences of your treason (ditimpadaulatnya), and you will be ruined for life.

But Robinson does not turn back, and although he suffers great hardship and bouts of despondency, he has a magnificent adventure. By playing up Robinson's disobedience, von de Wall has unwittingly made his example even more threatening to the established social order. The narrative in fact supports quite another moral:

So, if we want to carry out some task, we should not worry that our skill (kepinteran) and intelligence (akal) will not be a match for the magnitude of the task. ...The greater the effort required, the greater will be our joy in realising our desire.

Through individual effort, Robinson rebuilt a society on his own terms. This is the example to be emulated. As Campe concludes:

[T]he children continued sitting some little time longer, in deep reflection, until this thought, I will endeavour to do the same, took root in the breast of each, and acquired the force of an immovable resolution.

Von de Wall's *Hikayat Robinson Crusoe* sounded the same call for its Javanese readers. Go and do thou likewise. Break free, by individual effort, of the suffocating confines of family, community and convention. (And indeed, by the very act of reading this book, in the Dutch script, and in the language of commercial modernity, Javanese readers were doing all these things.) These were heady notions for young readers.

Thus, a corrosive ideal, which had underpinned the rise of the West, was promoted among Javanese youth by the colonial government. *Robinson Crusoe*, in a new context, again marked the turning of an epoch.

**Further reading:**


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