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Title: The Ebb-Tide and The Coral Island

Author(s): Roslyn Jolly .

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Document Type: Critical essay

Article Preview :

'We're their heirs, I guess.' 'It is a great inheritance,' said Herrick. (1) Critics have placed R.L. Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide* within a rich literary genealogy, stretching back to *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tempest* and 'The Pardoner's Tale', and forward to *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *Victory*, and 'The Hollow Men'. (2) I suggest that a close, and overlooked, literary ancestor for *The Ebb-Tide* is R.M. Ballantyne's Pacific adventure story, *The Coral Island* (1858). Sixty years before William Golding's famous rewriting of the same work as *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Stevenson reworked Ballantyne's classic boys' book in his narrative of failed adventure and existential unease. The transformation of *The Coral Island* into *The Ebb-Tide* is a postcolonial 'writing back', which marks Stevenson's rejection of the colonialist fantasies of his childhood reading and the apogee of his fictional critique of imperialism. (3) It is also a stylistic experiment in combining the thematics of adventure with realist and symbolist modes of writing, which represents an important development in the emergence of British modernist literature. The structural correspondences between the Stevenson and Ballantyne texts are precise. Each features a trio of Anglo-Saxon adventurers trying to survive in a

hostile Pacific world: there is a leader, a man (or boy) of action, who makes plans and takes initiatives; there is a kind of second-in-command figure, with a much more cerebral and reflective personality; and there is a third member of the group, smaller than the others, a joker with the potential to disrupt and subvert the authority of the other two. Jack, in *The Coral Island*, is described as a natural leader for a 'bold enterprise'. (4) He devises schemes, provides information, and takes all the important decisions, to such an extent that his companions 'were so much in the habit of trusting everything to Jack that [they] had fallen into the way of not considering things, especially such things as were under Jack's care' (CI, p.162). In *The Ebb-Tide*, Captain Davis plays the same role, initiating and taking charge of all the trio's schemes for survival, escape and profit, whether dancing for their breakfast on the beach at Papeete and asking for paper from the consul so they can write home, or obtaining the commission for the *Farallone* and devising, successively, the plots to sell the cargo of champagne in Peru, to blackmail the ship's owner in San Francisco, and to steal Attwater's pearls. In *The Coral Island*, Jack leads from the front, and the top; he 'insisted that since we had made him captain, we should obey him', the narrator Ralph explains (CI, p.73). In *The Ebb-Tide* Davis also insists on his authority as captain, and on the obedience of the other two to his commands (ET, p.154). When the boys in *The Coral Island* are threatened by a shark, Jack tells his companions: 'Now, obey my orders quickly. Our lives may depend on it' (CI, p.56). When Davis's orders are not obeyed quickly, and safety is risked, he sends his recalcitrant associate...

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