

Book reviews

Ian Kinane (Ed.) (2019). *Didactics and the modern robinsonade*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 207pp. ISBN: 9781789620047. Hardback, £90.

Didactics and the modern robinsonade is a collection that looks at modern stories belonging to the robinsonade genre, and how they have changed the trends set by earlier works. The 'robinsonade' refers to the litany of adventure stories modelled after Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which make use of the desert island trope to narrate the journey of the protagonist(s), and simultaneously drive home implicit or explicit messages to the reader, who is usually a child or young adult.

While it is of course impossible to have read every piece of literature that can be classified as a robinsonade, in order to appreciate this collection it is important to note the common thread across these stories—the protagonist(s) being marooned on an island or islanded location, going through some sort of survival process that involves interaction with their milieu, and emerging as better versions of themselves. The traditional robinsonade integrates these elements with its Eurocentric, imperial-colonial values and advocates a specific kind of masculinity and individualism compatible with these values. The modern, 20th- Century and later robinsonades try to make use of the same plot points but to subvert and redress the ideological tendencies of the earlier narratives.

The key to contextualizing all the chapters is to understand that didactic form of the robinsonade, where the child-reader and their reception of the text is vital. Kinane's Introduction comprehensively explains the evolving views on the child-reader, and the generally-perceived importance of imparting on children the values and ideas at the core of society. As these values and the priorities of a society change, these changes are reflected in the ideas presented to the child-reader through the robinsonade which "embeds its didactic purpose within the subtle folds of narrative." (p. 22)

Each of the seven chapters analyses and critiques pieces from the 20th Century or later, which have clear aims in terms of their didactics, ranging from nationalism and nation-building to postcolonialism and feminism. The stories analysed are widely different from each other, but linked in that their didactic purposes go contrary to those of the traditional robinsonade. Trying to reduce each chapter and the writing it deals with to one didactic aim would be unjust, as each author attempts to address various issues of ideology and narrative.

In *Didactics and the modern robinsonade*, the island, then, is of significance as the space in which this process takes place, providing the required resources, adding crucial elements to the plotline, and an environment for the characters to interact with and within. In the traditional stories, the island is the space being conquered or colonised. Most robinsonades are based on the view of the island being a sort of laboratory for human society and ideology. In this book, Kinane argues that in more recent works, the island "serve[s] as [a] space against which dominant ideologies are contrasted and critiqued" (p. 33). In Chapter One, Sinead Moriarty looks at G. Warren Payne's *Three boys in Antarctica*, which deconstructs the imperialist view of the island location as a space that can be controlled and exploited. Moriarty explains that the Antarctic is shown as a space that cannot be controlled by the Crusoe-figure, and introduces the threat of the Crusoe-figure being controlled by the space, creating a sort of anti-robinsonade, exposing the limitations of colonialism.

Also of interest here is Anya Höing's analysis of Terry Pratchett's *Nation* in Chapter Six, where the island is viewed a space enabling social communitas, which can be understood as a sort of rudimentary community that exists in the absence of normal social structures, tied to a condition of 'liminality' or in-betweenness. Höing argues that the island provides a setting for an egalitarian, intercultural communitas, moving over the colonial idea of the island as part of a Eurocentric hierarchy of the globe.

The other chapters too, to some extent, look at the role played by the island setting in both propagating the plot and creating a space to subvert the dominant ideas perpetuated by older robinsonades. In a way, the island has been the constant across all robinsonades, but has been key to changes in the genre as well. The book, at the most basic level, contends that the desert island trope is just as valuable a didactic tool today as it was before, but literature has evolved to include more progressive lessons for young readers.

Didactics and the modern robinsonade does a good job tracing the evolution of the island adventure novel genre, through the lens of didactics, and in doing so, comments on important matters of ideology, geopolitics and gender. Perhaps the messages from the authors about how the desert island is construed can be applied to our perceptions of islands in the real world—the impacts of colonial and imperialism persist in economy and politics even today, and this too needs to be actively subverted. The book certainly creates an interest to further look into popular literature and culture, even works that are not overtly didactic or instructional, as vehicles of transmitting dominant social values to the children and young adults consuming them.

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Benjamin Kingsbury (2019). *The Dark Island: Leprosy in New Zealand and the Quail Island Colony*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books. 208pp. ISBN: 9781988545981. Paperback, NZ\$39.99.

In brief, 14 men with leprosy were quarantined on a small New Zealand island over 19 years in the early-20th Century. Drawing on scant historical records, the author produces a well-written, elegantly presented study of the island's short history of human inhabitation and breathes drama and insight into a range of historical issues which he calls a "geography of stigma" (p. 82). Through this careful examination of leprosy, it also highlights the role of islands as objects of isolation, of quarantine, of Otherness. A pattern repeated, as will be noted, throughout the island's history.

But first, leprosy. It is a bacterial infection that can lie undetected for many years, yet it can lead to damage to the nerves, respiratory tract, skin and eyes. The nerve damage can result in a loss of ability to feel pain and result in the loss of extremities from repeated injuries or unnoticed wounds. It occurs more commonly in people associated with poverty. Historically it has had a severe stigma attached to it as it was falsely assumed to be highly contagious. Globally, islands became favoured places for the isolation of leprosy sufferers and New Zealand followed this trend and considered various islands for its containment: Molokai (on Hawaii), Morokai (on Rarotonga) and Motutahae (on New Zealand's North Island). However, from 1906 to 1925, it was Ōtamahua/Quail Island in the flooded crater of an extinct volcano on the South Island outside Christchurch that was New Zealand's first (and

only) leprosy colony. Over time it became a controversial and troubled institution. For example, one of its caretakers, J.H.T. Mackenzie, whose initial saintly demeanour eroded to the extent that he was murdered by his assistant following a history of sexual abuse. In turn, there were heightened tensions between the Health Department and the Agriculture Department; difficulties in recruiting staff to manage the colony and racial tensions between patients (European, Maori and Chinese). The resilience of those assigned to the colony and their resourcefulness in how they chose to maintain their mental health is fascinating though not always positive with opportunities to visit dying relatives or children unlikely. Within this, the lack of funding from the Health Department to provide suitable infrastructure led to the situation where “some of the men were deteriorating almost as quickly as if they had been left alone” (p. 116) and that “in public the department continued to insist that the patients were getting the best care possible, but its own records show that the problem of what to do with New Zealand’s leprosy sufferers had not yet been resolved” (p. 117). The end was quick and surprising. In 1925, the Governor of Fiji was going to concentrate leprosy sufferers from Britain’s Western Pacific colonies at Makogai in Fiji, and New Zealand sought for it to include its leprosy sufferers as well.

And the island? Maori, Aotearoa/New Zealand’s Indigenous peoples, never permanently settled there though they harvested seafood and seabird eggs which gave the island its Maori name, Ōtamahua, the gathering place for eggs. It was Captain Mein Smith who named the island ‘Quail’ after seeing native quail in 1842 (though sadly they were extinct by 1875). In 1850 its first European inhabitants arrived and, in 1874, it was sold to the Canterbury Provincial Government as a human quarantine station. Lengthy sailing voyages in cramped, unhygienic conditions, fostered contagious diseases such as cholera, scarlet fever and measles and outbreaks had to be declared before passengers could disembark. If there was a disease, a ship’s crew and passengers could be refused permission until clearance was obtained. However, steam-powered vessels with much shorter passage times and reduced likelihood of onboard epidemics, meant the buildings quickly became redundant. Nonetheless, the quarantine station did manage a diphtheria outbreak at the Lyttleton Orphanage in 1879 and two waves of the 1918 Spanish influenza epidemic.

Though the book only makes passing reference to them, other forms of quarantine were occurring. Like those with leprosy, 13 unwanted ships were, from 1902 to 1953, abandoned at the western end of the island, rather than becoming navigational hazards in the shallow waters of the inner harbour. The gaunt ribs of at least three can still be seen today on a low tide.

With the lepers confined to their bay, another part of the island was playing its modest part in global exploration. During the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration, four expeditions based themselves in Christchurch and used Quail Island’s animal quarantine station. The first was Robert Falcon Scott’s 1901-04 British Antarctic Expedition on the *Discovery*, which kept its Siberian huskies quarantined on Quail before voyaging south. The second was Ernest Shackleton, who had Manchurian ponies broken in on Quail Island for his 1907-08 venture. Scott again used Quail Island to train ponies and huskies for his fateful 1910-13 *Terra Nova* expedition. The ponies, from Siberia, were managed by Lawrence Oates, famous for his selfless “I am just going outside and I may be some time.” Long after Scott and Shackleton, 15 Yukon huskies were interned on Quail Island for Commander Byrd’s US Antarctic Expedition of 1928-30.

Today the island is a site for ecological restoration, with volunteers eradicating the island of those predators introduced in colonial times that suppress native flora and fauna and replanting with native species. In this sense, the island reverses its previous role as it tries to exclude the pests and general Otherness of the deteriorating mainland ecosystems.

While Kingsbury, with his clear focus on the geography of stigma, does not dwell on these latter aspects, they are all layers of that islandness. His study of leprosy provides a rich picture of how islands provide the site for not just the geography of stigma but of exclusion, of isolation and, potentially, of restoration. While its main audience is New Zealand historians, public health specialists and social scientists with an interest in minority disadvantaged groups, it is, I suggest, an important addition to the broader topic of island studies and the role which they play in providing multiple forms of Otherness, this geography of stigma, of isolation and abandonment—all equally Dark. As such, it is recommended to anyone interested in the interdisciplinarity of island studies from a post-modernist perspective.

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Elizabeth Hennessy (2019). *On the backs of tortoises: Darwin, the Galápagos, and the fate of an evolutionary Eden*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 310 pp. ISBN: 9780300232745. Hardcover, US\$30.00.

The Galápagos Islands, a collection of arid volcanic islands 700 miles off the coast of Ecuador, have fascinated the Western imagination for nearly five centuries for their unique flora and fauna. Today, the islands are a UNESCO World Heritage site, 97% of the land area (and marine ecosystems) of which is protected as a national park. This conservation effort has managed to retain an estimated 95% of endemic biodiversity, a remarkable feat for any island ecosystem. Yet this ecological success story and ongoing governance project, which aims to restore the islands to their 'Edenic,' pre-discovery state of nature, obscures the reality that 30,000 people live, farm, and labor there, pre-dating the founding of the national park by decades. Elizabeth Hennessy's insightful and moving book, *On the backs of tortoises: Darwin, the Galápagos, and the fate of an evolutionary Eden*, explores the feasibility of the Galápagos conservation agenda, which conceives of the islands as a 'natural laboratory of evolution' which must be sheltered from human influence. Her work reveals that this conception of Galápagos is just one among many 'geographical imaginations,' yet one which has gained credibility and power through its scientific production.

Hennessy's work is both a compelling history of five centuries of Galápagos development and an analysis, building on science and technology studies, of the production of Galápagos as a conservation and tourist icon through discourse, knowledge claims, and material relations.

Hennessy centers her social history of the islands on their most iconic inhabitants: the giant tortoises for which they are named. Her analysis takes tortoises seriously as agents in the shaping and reshaping of the islands through interrelationships with human and non-human others.

Presented as largely static ‘living fossils’ that reveal natural history, Galápagos tortoises have been deeply integrated into the modern world since their discovery. As social actors, they have been seen by Westerners as a natural resource to be exploited for food, water, and oil; as exemplars of the theory of evolution; as endangered species and conservation icons; and finally, as a tourist attraction.

After framing her argument in the first chapter, Hennessy turns to the islands’ most prominent non-tortoise icon, Charles Darwin, who apocryphally was inspired to develop his theory of evolution by natural selection after observation of Galápagos finches. Literally and figuratively tracing Darwin’s footsteps, Hennessy reshapes the popular conception of Darwin as an environmental icon. His voyage on the *Beagle* was imbricated with Britain’s imperialistic quest for new natural resources, and Darwin himself viewed the islands’ namesake tortoises not as evidence of evolution but as vital sources of food, fuel oil, and water on these desert islands.

Hennessy explores how throughout its history, economic activity on the Galápagos — from early piracy and colonization efforts, to the modern tourism-conservation complex — has rested on the backs of its tortoises.

Next, Hennessy addresses shifting conceptions of tortoises and the islands themselves through the naming of tortoise species. Scientific names reveal the process through which the islands were produced as key evidence for the theory of evolution. Tortoise names do not merely reflect scientific discoveries; rather, species were produced through laboratory work, which took place in museums at the centers of imperial power and operated on tortoises that had been killed to be preserved for study. Decontextualized from their ecological and social foundations on the islands, the taxonomical classification of Galápagos tortoise species enacted these megafauna as endemic and endangered, and thus shifted understanding of the islands’ place in natural history to justify conservation.

In the remaining chapters, Hennessy analyzes how the vision of Galápagos as a ‘natural laboratory of evolution,’ which must be preserved so it could be studied, clashed with other understandings of humans’ relationship to the islands. Produced through scientific fields like conservation biology and pushed by imperialist powers like the United States, the ‘natural laboratory’ view demarcated separate natural and social worlds: the natural world of charismatic megafauna and endemic ecosystems, and the social world of residents, conservationists, governments, and tourists. Hennessy shows how conservation thinking produces human presence on the islands as ‘unnatural’ and therefore inimical to preservation goals, a conception which has enacted material effects for human and non-human inhabitants. This is most evident today in conflicts between technocratic park administrators and scientists who emphasis restoring the ‘natural laboratory,’ and long-time residents who emphasis livelihood needs. Even recent development discourses which stress harmonic coexistence of people and ecosystems reproduce the bifurcation of nature and society that has marked the entire history of Galápagos development. These visions mask the underlying interrelationship between nature and society, through which both were historically constituted and continue to remake one another. As

Hennessy ably illustrates with vivid illustrations—such as invasive species eradication efforts that include widespread slaughter of goats from helicopter—the production of the Galápagos as a ‘natural laboratory of evolution’ has always required human labor. Conservation, protection, and restoration are not apolitical terms, yet their deployment on the islands serves to obscure the political construction of the islands’ past and visions for their

future. Hennessy's work calls into question projects that would return the islands to 'Eden' or which suggest that people do not belong there, and she is critical of conservation efforts which seek to know and govern the social and natural worlds of Galápagos separately. As her powerful social history of the islands shows, there is no scientific, objective way to decide which lives matter on the islands.

Hennessy's writing is engaging and her analysis marshals an impressive array of evidentiary sources for support. Her ethnographic accounts put flesh on the bones of her deeply researched history of the islands and the scientific and economic networks in which they have been entwined since their discovery. For island studies scholars, this book engages with important recent themes in the field, including environmental sustainability, mainstream and alternative development, the Anthropocene, and others, setting these within the context of one of the world's most iconic island ecosystems. Likewise, Hennessy's book would be a welcome addition for students of conservation biology, the history of science, science and technology studies, and geography. Yet it is regretful that for researchers wishing to engage with her work and build on her findings, a methodological and theoretical appendix was not included to illustrate how she approached her work and data. Hennessy's book should inspire researchers from social sciences to expand explorations of social life in the Galápagos, islands which for too long have drawn interest mainly from ecologists and conservationists.

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Dirk Liesemer (2019). *Phantom islands: In search of mythical lands*. Peter Lewis (Trans.). London: Haus. 155pp. ISBN: 9781912208326. Hardback, £14.99

Phantom Islands by Dirk Liesemer is a perfect gift for readers who love history and geography, but also have a special fascination or curiosity about islands. The book explores the stories behind 30 islands that are prevalent on maps, some even on Google Earth. However, in reality they do not exist or were not islands, California and Korea, being good examples. The stories revolve around explorers from different parts of the world, mostly European or American and their journeys in search of these islands, or in certain cases their false claims to having found these islands. All the stories are brief, but Liesemer's narrative style is powerful, in its ability to pull the reader into visualising the trials and tribulations of the explorers. He has achieved this by delving deep into maps, as well as the writings and historical accounts of explorers, philosophers and cartographers, from the 14th Century to the 2000s.

Each story is accompanied with beautiful illustrations of these islands. The stories include the famous Atlantis and the lesser known Antilia, that was discovered in the 14th Century. There are certain human elements, such as the importance of religion that is depicted in those times, that would also be considered relevant in today's times. This is perfectly seen in the story of Antilia, "Christians dreamt of an island of Catholics – a 'Christian' utopia – where the old observances could be preserved. They even told themselves that a Portuguese ship had reached the island of Antilia in 1447. It was said that the sailors had encountered people there who spoke Portuguese and that the first thing they wanted to know was whether Muslims were still ruling over their homeland of Portugal."

There are several other such human elements, ranging from man's ambition to discover and attribute his name to those of the islands to man's ability to weather the conditions of nature during voyages. The stories also give us a brief but intimate view into the lives of certain explorers. For instance, take into consideration the description of American explorer Benjamin Morrell: "The American sea captain Benjamin Morrell was an ardent devotee of adventure stories and travel writing. His cabin was piled high with the works of James Cook, George Vancouver and other great navigators." His sightings of Byers and Morrell islands, which in reality did not exist, took place in 1825. Liesemer's descriptions of certain explorers, enables you to travel back in time and get some insight into their mindset.

However, it is not just medieval times but also more recently, during the 2000s. In the east of Australia, Sandy island was mapped on Google Earth. It was only in 2012, when a captain went to the spot that was mentioned on satellite maps, that he found nothing but the vast ocean. He wondered if rising sea levels had caused it to submerge, but there was no way of knowing. Liesemer takes us through moments of anxiety, impatience, disappointment and excitement that the explorers must have experienced, coupled with geographical details and historical facts. Through his stories in *Phantom Islands*, he unravels the mystery behind their existence and the human thirst for discovery.

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