

# Robinson Crusoe & sein geistliches Leben

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0013.html>

As Defoe's book begins, Robinson Crusoe of York commits what he calls his "Original Sin" — he spurns his father's advice to join the family business and instead heads out to sea. Robinson is self-willed, arrogant, and hungry for exploits. Catastrophes ensue — storms, shipwrecks, and slavery — but the lad continues in his follies. "I was," he confesses, "to be the willful Agent of all my own Miseries."

Then providence gives him a second chance, shipwrecking him on an Atlantic island, whose features roughly match those of the Juan Fernandez group in the Pacific Ocean where Robinson's real-life prototype, Alexander Selkirk, passed seven years in solitude. Robinson's island is a pristine land of surpassing beauty. To its forlorn first inhabitant, it seems nothing short of Eden: "the Country appear'd so fresh, so green, so flourishing, every thing being in a constant Verdure, or Flourish of Spring, that it looked like a planted Garden."

In this paradise Robinson builds a new home — without Eve, alas; such is his penance. He also builds a new self, in the Pauline sense: "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Robinson no longer follows his own will, but bows before the will of God. He learns to see in his calamities "the Work of Providence," and to discern the hand of God at every moment of his life. He opens his Bible and repents, calling out, "Lord, be my help!"

This conversion does not go unrequited; as Robinson surrenders to God, the island surrenders to him. Step by step, he recapitulates in miniature the rise of civilization. He handles a tool for the first time and builds himself a chair and table. He needs a shovel, so he makes one, although "never was a shovel . . . so long a-making." He hammers a wall, plants a field, keeps a herd of goats. As his conversion deepens, so does his fortune. He builds a second establishment deep inland, and admits that "I fancy'd now I had my Country-House, and my Sea-Coast House." He declares himself "Lord of all this country . . . as compleatly as any Lord of a Manor in England."

All this can be shrugged off as a crude example of Protestant work ethic: sweat enough and your lot will increase. But this flip analysis ignores the crucial issue and the book's great gift: Defoe's account of how a civilization is born. What transforms chaos into cosmos, survivalism into society, is obedience to God. "I acquiesced in the Dispositions of Providence, which I began now to own, and to believe, ord'd every Thing for the best," Robinson says. So profound is his transformation that he comes to thank God for his dolorous shipwreck: "I began sensibly to feel how much more happy this life was, with all its miserable Circumstances, than the wicked, cursed, abominable Life I led all the past Part of my Days." Through God's mercy, Robinson's life is spared, his soul cleansed, and civilization born.

When Friday appears, the process repeats itself. Robinson names Friday, clothes him, arms him, teaches him to make fire and bake bread, gives him the keys to the treasury of Western history, science, and religion. Those who read this as imperialist fantasy miss

the point: through his newfound wisdom, Robinson is able to share with others the good harvest he has reaped. He saves Friday's father and a Spaniard from cannibals, and becomes a king: "I thought myself very rich in subjects. . . . I was absolute Lord and lawgiver; they all owed their Lives to me." Robinson's life comes full circle when he rescues a boatload of Englishmen; the grateful mariners see in their deliverer not a Job afflicted by God's cruel whims, but a divine messenger: "He must be sent directly from heaven," says one, echoing what the Maltese said about St. Paul, another victim of shipwreck, to which Robinson replies with the humility of the truly converted, "All Help is from Heaven." Defoe's story achieves its ironic end as Robinson, now an agent of God's providence, maroons a shipload of pirates and returns to Europe a wealthy man, respected for his kindness and generosity.

Robinson Crusoe is, then, nothing less than a textbook in the appropriate relationships amongst human being, culture, and God. It might fairly be retitled, *Civilization and Its Contents*. The lessons couldn't be more clear: Welfare and worship are inseparable; both the well-ordered state and the well-ordered individual rest squarely upon the divine. Every component of civilization — shelter, handicraft, agriculture, and animal husbandry no less than law, art, and worship — ultimately depends upon a vigorous relationship with God; "In God We Trust" would sit well on Robinson's coins.

This is not an eccentric reading of the text: Robinson Crusoe's spiritual depths are evident to all who read it unabridged. Whenever I include it on a syllabus, my students are thunderstruck by the power of Robinson's conversion; I suspect it leads one or two readers to their own fruitful self-examination. In just this way — as manual of conversion and guide to the good life — was Robinson understood for centuries. A typical assessment comes from George Chalmers, author of a 1790 biography of Defoe: "Few books have ever so naturally mingled amusement with instruction. The attention is fixed, either by the simplicity of the narration, or by the variety of the incidents; the heart is amended by a vindication of the ways of God to man." In Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, the kindly butler Mr. Betteridge delivers an even more enthusiastic appraisal:

Such a book as Robinson Crusoe never was written, and never will be written again. I have tried that book for years — generally in combination with a pipe of tobacco — and I have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life. When my spirits are bad — Robinson Crusoe. When I want advice — Robinson Crusoe. In past times, when my wife plagued me; in present times, when I have had a drop too much — Robinson Crusoe. I have worn out six stout Robinson Crusoes with hard work in my service. On my lady's last birthday she gave me a seventh. I took a drop too much on the strength of it; and Robinson Crusoe set me right again.

It's a good thing, I thought, that Mr. Betteridge did not rely for counsel on the version I read as a child. He would have searched in vain for the favorite passages that uplifted his soul. My childhood version was a most curious case of bowdlerization, in which the scissors snipped away at something other than scatological language or gore or sizzling sex. The truth was much more startling: all the religion had been excised. Again and again, one particular word had been removed, along with every scene inspired by that word.

What was this three-letter obscenity too dangerous for the eyes of children? The word was "God."

But surely, I thought, this cannot be. Perhaps in my youth I had read an outlaw edition, the joke of some madcap Nietzschean who took it literally that God was dead. I rushed to my local library — a well-stocked collection in a college town — and scooped up every copy of Robinson Crusoe on the shelves. Almost all of them proved to be abridgments. Every single one showed the same bleak pattern, the evisceration from the text of almost every scrap or shred of religion.

Let us consider a typical example, a "Doubleday Classics" edition called simply Robinson Crusoe. The book bears no date, but the illustrations are copyrighted 1945; perhaps this is the same version I read as a boy. The frontispiece offers a delightful drawing of Robinson, umbrella in hand as if out for a stroll on Brighton Beach, discovering the footprint in the sand. Anyone picking up this edition would assume it to be the genuine article, especially as there is no mention of abridgment on the title page or anywhere else. However, this is Robinson Crusoe after a visit from the thought police. Witness, for example, our hero's journal, kept at the beginning of his exile when he still had ink. The entries for June 27 through July 4, 1660 — stretching for over three thousand words by my rough count — contain some of Robinson's most exalted religious writing, as he nearly succumbs to a terrible fever and utters "the first Prayer, if I may call it so, that I had made for many Years." As the illness abates Robinson reads the Bible:

I threw down the Book, and with my Heart as well as my Hands lifted up to Heaven, in a kind of Exstasy of Joy, I cry'd out aloud, Jesus, thou Son of David, Jesus, thou exalted Prince and Saviour, give me Repentance!

This was the first time that I could say, in the true Sense of the words, that I pray'd in all my Life; for now I pray'd with a Sense of my condition, and with a true Scripture View of Hope founded on the encouragement of Word of God; and from this Time, I may say, I began to have Hope that God would hear me.

God did hear Robinson, but readers of this Doubleday edition certainly won't, for the passage quoted above — in many ways the core of the book — has been completely removed. Moreover, Defoe's three-thousand-word account of Robinson's soul-wrestlings has been sliced in half, and — as you might expect by now — all references to Christ have been erased.

Yet this example is far from the worst of the lot. Let us turn now to the truly mind-boggling *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1977), a version that at least admits what it is about, declaring itself as "adapted." Here any hint of divine providence is simply chopped away wholesale, as if removing a cancer. That pesky word "God," which appears hundreds of times in Defoe's original text, remains in only ten places, usually in conventional phrases ("For God's sake, Smith, throw down your arms"). Not a hint of Robinson's conversion remains.

Well, I assured myself, as inexcusable as these cuts may be, at least they haven't been inflicted upon adults. Then it dawned upon me that most adults draw their knowledge of Robinson from abridged versions scanned in childhood. Moreover, for a refresher course, most adults would turn not to Defoe's unabridged original, but rather to the movies. Perhaps here there was hope. I rushed down to the local video store, where I discovered that only one version is readily obtainable: *Crusoe* (1989), starring Aidan Quinn. Surely in an R-rated film, I thought, there might be a little room for God. But I had forgotten Hollywood's knack for rewriting history. Sure enough, every sign of Robinson's

conversion had been removed. Crusoe, in fact, manages the neat feat of completely reversing Defoe's intent, transforming Robinson into an antireligious tract in which our hero utters but one prayer, a desperate plea to God to spare the life of his dog. The prayer goes unanswered (unspoken premise: no God exists to answer the prayer). The film also inverts Robinson's tutelage of Friday: the native learns no English but the Englishman goes native, dropping his table manners if not his aitches, and learning to worship sun and sand.

But at least in Crusoe our hapless Englishman does not apply for membership in Friday's cannibal tribe. This weird turn of events is reserved for the mercifully hard-to-obtain 1975 *Man Friday*, starring Peter O'Toole as Robinson, with Richard Roundtree in the title role. Here orthodox religion is not ignored as in Crusoe, but rather mocked without mercy. Robinson proves to be a fool, God a prude, Christian faith a sign of mental illness. The voice of reason, warmth, and love belongs to Friday. At least in this respect *Man Friday* conforms to Defoe's intent, for in the original, Friday is indeed a kind and perceptive man. But just when writer Adrian Mitchell seems to have gotten something right, it blows up in his face; for *Man Friday* presents a Friday who has hung out too long at Woodstock. His tribe has more in common with the Hog Farm or Summerhill than with any real preindustrial society. It is a blissful communal family, free of such Western hangups as ambition or competition, and practices free love — polymorphously perverse, of course. The tribe's religion, too, has burst free of the chains of orthodoxy, offering instead, as Friday explains, the apotheosis of be-your-own-best-friend:

Worship any way you like as long as you mean it. God won't mind. To yourself you are not yet God. I do not think you worship yourself as you should. But still you are God, whether you know it or not.

In the end, Robinson is summarily dispatched back to his lonely island, to brood in solitude over his Bible and its joyless legacy.

Hollywood's fascination with Robinson Crusoe continues apace: a big-budget version, starring Pierce Brosnan — the new James Bond — is now in production. Will 007 kneel in the muck, begging God for deliverance? Maybe so; Hollywood likes on occasion to throw a sop to special interest groups. But it's a sure bet that the full story of Robinson's conversion will be left on the cutting-room floor.

[http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel\\_18c/defoe/religion.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_18c/defoe/religion.html)

Nicht kopiert – selbst nachschauen ☺

<http://edithosb.blogspot.com/2007/06/spiritual-castaway-robinson-crusoe.html>

Spiritual Castaway: Robinson Crusoe

Most of us read (what we thought was) the story of Robinson Crusoe as a children's book. I was surprised to find Robinson Crusoe shelved with adult fiction in books on CD - the unabridged Classics Library edition. Intrigued, I checked it out for this journey, expecting to read the familiar story of shipwreck on a desert island, survival by his own wits, and eventual rescue.

I've discovered that the book Daniel Defoe wrote in 1719 is utterly different. The children's story is not just a mangled abridgment; it has omitted the heart of the story. Robinson Crusoe is a tale of moral rebellion and redemption, told in terms that speak to people of the 21st century.

Young Robinson rejected his father's efforts to settle him in a career. Instead, he is gripped by a romantic and irrational desire to go to sea - a treacherous occupation. His first shipwreck - yes, he suffers several disasters - almost brings him to his senses, but the obsession overtakes him and he returns to sea. He comes to call this first rejection of his father's wishes his Original Sin. He recognizes himself as the prodigal son - and even so, cannot overcome the dreams and fancies that draw him into further adventures.

The book is well-suited to the audiobook format. Defoe wrote it as though Crusoe were telling his story; Ron Keith's narration of 18th Century English heightens this effect. When Robinson describes his inner battles - drawn both to the tasks that make his livelihood and to risky adventures - the inner dialogue is familiar. Like Robinson Crusoe, many of us know which actions are said to be good, we may even believe in their goodness - but we lack some deep connection that makes us WANT to choose the good. What Robinson Crusoe called an adventure, we might term "edgy" but the effect is the same.

In Defoe's novel, Crusoe spends more than 20 years in solitude. His island is not a desert, but rather an Eden, once he sets himself to learning the inner law of its nature. He survives not by quick wit but by the application of reason and effort. He learns to become tailor, carpenter, potter, cook, farmer - and so reveals how our everyday lives depend on the work of so many people. Very gradually, he learns to tame his thoughts and his heart, at first by observing their natural workings, and then with the aid of scripture.

The book certainly contains the details of Robinson's struggles with the sea, to grow food, raise goats, bake bread and stay clothed - and his encounters with those he calls "savage natives." A Christian reader, though, will find that this is half of the story. Crusoe falls into predicaments because he is spiritually asleep. His survival raises the basic questions of theology - why am I here (and not dead like my shipmates)? What is God doing in my life?

Robinson Crusoe's many adventures are both the result of and the source for his spiritual awakening. His physical trials and adventures are the counterpoint to the state of his inner life. I will be chewing over this interplay for weeks to come.

(If you decide to read Robinson Crusoe, be sure to get the unabridged book; many audio and print versions are the mangled children's abridgment. Robinson Crusoe (Norton Critical Editions) is a reliable edition.)

Posted by Edith OSB on Tuesday, June 26, 2007

Labels: Literature

<http://www.robinsoncrusoe.ca/home.html>