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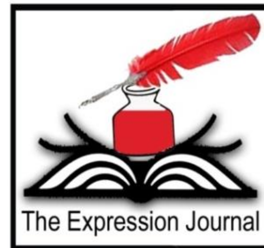

Robinsonades and Nationalism: Understanding the Curious Case of Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson*

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Abstract

The Robinsonades, a trail of novels that appeared following the phenomenal success of Defoe's *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, have consistently been read in terms of imperialism and colonialism due to their spatial-temporal location. Occupied with the "margins" of the world and reaching their peak in the nineteenth century they lend themselves as complex and rich readings in the growing, ever-evolving theoretical field that the nation is. *Swiss Family Robinson*, steeped in related discourses of Christianity, Eurocentrism, masculinity and civilization poses itself as an interesting example in the tradition of the Robinsonade. The Swiss-ness, the European-ness, and the Englishness inherent in the contents of this novel intertwine to provide a complex picture of what the adolescent reader was supposed to like, read and imbibe in eighteenth century Europe. Furthermore, this paper explores how *Swiss Family Robinson* not only reinforces but also challenges dominant nationalist ideologies through its portrayal of survival, morality, and cultural supremacy. By examining the intersection of nationalism and the Robinsonade tradition, it seeks to uncover how narratives of adventure and self-sufficiency function as vehicles of ideological conditioning. Additionally, the paper will analyse the pedagogical function of *Swiss Family Robinson* in shaping young readers' perceptions of civilisation, authority, and racial hierarchies. Finally, this study aims to highlight the complexities and contradictions within *Swiss Family Robinson* that make it a compelling site for nationalist and postcolonial critique..

Keywords

Robinsonade, *Swiss Family Robinson*, Colonialism, Imperialism, Nationalism, Print Culture, Musculinity.

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In 1719, Daniel Defoe created his enduring character Robinson Crusoe, a typical Enlightenment hero: Protestant, middle class and a persistent, empiricist Briton. Little would Defoe have known that in creating Crusoe, he was laying the very foundation of a sub-genre in popular literature. Robinson Crusoe who has his roots in the early European colonial and nationalist history, became the cultural symbol of rationality-deft in problem-solving, learning-by-doing, surviving-with-élan and subjugating nature and savagery (personified by Man Friday) with perfection. This character spawned an entire breed of survivor protagonists cast away, often for years, on tropical desert islands and an entire sub-genre popularly known as Robinsonades. This sub-genre, during its development over three centuries lends itself to a critical reading of the concept of nationalism as it developed and flourished in Euro-American context through a politico-cultural and historical contextualization of some of these novels. This exploration, criss-crossed with many other related themes such as religion, morality (especially related to nudity and cannibalism), science and rationality, the protagonists' preoccupation with their bodies and bodily functions, etc. can shed light on the way the idea of the nation shaped up before it got exported to the colonies. In the long list of Robinsonades can be found many narratives which explicitly focus on fashioning European boys as potential personnel in the large and extensive machine of colonialism. This paper focuses on one such narrative as a case study: *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by the Swiss author Johann David Wyss. An investigation is attempted here into the three defining qualities of the Swiss family: their religion, their colonialist ambition and their complicated relationship with their own nationality. Such an investigation is expected to lead one to certain useful generalizations about the Robinsonades of nineteenth century which played a significant role in consolidating the supremacy of European colonial powers in general and Britain, "the seabourne empire" in particular.

Till the end of the nineteenth century the sub-genre of Robinsonades had the politico-historical subtext of colonialism colouring the entire narrative. The Swiss family in *The Swiss Family Robinson* follows a chequered history of citizenship. The clergyman-

father-narrator was involved in the Swiss revolution of 1798 in which the canton of Bern lost to its own territory Vaud which was annexed to it till then. The family is led into penury due to his political entanglement and they move from Bern to England where the narrator registers himself as a missionary to Otaheite (i.e. Tahiti in French Polynesia) He has no intention of staying in that "uncivilized island" though (Wyss vi). His design is to gain a passage from there to Port Jackson (Australia) as a free colonist. But this grand colonist plan is twisted peculiarly when he and his family (wife and four sons) get shipwrecked and land on an island near New Guinea which he names first as New Switzerland and later as Happy Island. The family comes to adore the island which represents an extra-ordinary wish-fulfillment: they have a free colony without having to travel to Port Jackson! Except for the vehemence with which the title lays down their national identity, there seems to be little reiteration of the details of their nationality elsewhere. With their Protestant ethics of unity, hard work, planning and progress they transform the face of the Happy Island. The clergyman father delivers several sermons during the course of the novel, the most significant one being a Sunday sermon in which he portrays God as the master colonist who populated the colony of Earth with humans for some specific reasons.

The family is deeply devoted to the idea of divine providence and the limits of human agency. Since the father's sermons were meant for his children, the metaphor of the colony seems to have been used to help his sons relate to it through their own experiences. But Wyss's insistence on the metaphor is also related to the larger context in which the novel was published in 1812. As a pastor and a participant in the Swiss revolution, Wyss entertained very Rousseauist ideas on education. One could say that his novel is a good mix of *Robinson Crusoe* and Rousseau's *Emile*(1762). The adventures of the family are interspersed with entertaining lessons in natural history and physical sciences. The period in which Wyss wrote his novel was marked anyway with publication of numerous books instructing children and adolescents about the processes in natural history. Some examples could be Charlotte Smith's *Rural Walks: in Dialogues intended for the use of Young Persons* (1795), *Rambles Further: A continuation of Rural Walks* (1796) and *A Natural History of Birds, intended chiefly for young persons* (1807). In other words, Wyss's book belongs to the subgenre of children's literature which was developing at the time. Some names one would immediately associate with this kind of writing are MariaEdgeworth who wrote *The Parent's Assistant* in 1796,Thomas Day, the writer of *The History of Sandford and Merton in 1785* and Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, one of the earliest of the French writers who wrote *Les Veillées du Château* or *Tales of the Castle: Or, Stories of Instruction and Delight* in 1785. Several such texts that appeared for children at that time carried a strong influence of Christianity. 'Instruction' was deeply intertwined with religion and more so in case of Wyss who was a pastor. Many of the episodes in his novel have to do with Christian-oriented moral lessons such as frugality, husbandry, acceptance, cooperation and hard work. The adventures are presented as a series of lessons in natural history and the physical sciences. Unlike the juvenile English literature of early nineteenth century, his novel is a long and rambling narrative modeled on German principles of piety and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe's novel provides a good starting point for Wyss as Crusoe himself is entrenched in the Protestant work ethic. The strongest influence on the Robinson family is of this work ethic which instructs them not to sit idle. Their

Protestantism eclipses their 'Swiss-ness'. When faced by 'savages', they describe themselves as Europeans. But when given a choice to go back to this same beloved Europe, they decline the offer and decide to stay back.

The three defining qualities of the Swiss family therefore, could be recounted as their religion, their colonialist ambition and complicated relationship with their nationality. There are several points of convergence of these themes in the novel. One of them could be the survivors' impulse to build residential complexes and to change the terrain of the island. Amongst the early island novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* are the two narratives that present maximum human intervention in the topography of the island. Crusoe builds and maintains two abodes fortified by thick foliage and a strong fence of live wood. In addition, he maintains farms, pens and streams of fresh water on his island. He domesticates animals and birds to maintain a steady supply of dairy and meat instead of hunting daily. He builds European style furniture- tables, chairs, even an oven. He creates pots, pans, baskets, shoes, clothes, candles and even tools. In a nutshell, on an average, he leads a life parallel to an ordinary European's life back home, except that he is utterly alone on the island with no one around to admire his efficiently *civilized* survival. Even the Swiss family builds huts, tree houses, pens, bowers, bridges, gardens and lakes on their island, spending laborious hours in giving everything a European resemblance. They wear full clothes after the European style (even in the hot and humid climate of the island) and their diet is equivalent in recipe and variety to a European diet. The question one needs to ask here is why do these survivors go to such ridiculous lengths trying to conform to the codes of a society absolutely absent from their new surroundings? One could argue that these seemingly mundane exercises fill up the innumerable lonely hours. Also, the sense of purpose generated by the resolution to fashion say, a table, keeps madness at bay. Yet it is an enigmatic proposition. Why do the survivors always hark back to the Europe they have left far behind despite the fact that their islands are tremendously and wonderfully bountiful, gifted with impossibly benevolent flora and fauna? Why do they spend countless hours contriving a lifestyle ideally modeled on its European counterpart but actually, only remotely resembling its model? This inauthentic, makeshift and shifty copy of Europe cannot be explained simply as a device to escape loneliness and madness. Unlike these survivors, those in twentieth century island novels, do remarkably well by depending on the bounty of the island, eating fruits and berries, fishing and bathing in the open sea and sleeping naked in natural bowers. The obsession with civilization is mostly a characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century narratives. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, in her book *Empire Islands* emphasizes that the conviction of the survivor to change the natural course of the island to tame it stems out of their conviction to avoid "going native". These techniques are definitely helpful in marking their territories and in allaying their fears regarding their proxemics. But they serve a larger purpose as they allay some greater fears too-- the fear of the 'other', the natural inhabitant of the tropical belt- the savage, the heathen, non-Christian, often cannibalistic human who flourishes through his sole dependence on the natural bounty of his environment; who, in other words, is in sync with his surroundings, is an anti-role model for the European castaway. The island in this case becomes the site on which the survivor projects his own image. The three strings of

religion, nationality and imperialist ambition come together in this projection of their history, culture, desires and anxieties onto the space available to them.

Living on the island as it is on the day of their arrival, would expose the castaways to the possibility of *being consumed* by the island instead of *consuming* it. Eating raw vegetables, sleeping in a natural bower and hunting daily for fish and animals would mean that the survivor is at the mercy of the island. Coming from a Protestant, European imperialist background, this would have been highly unacceptable for Crusoe and his progeny. It would also not pass the test of the eighteenth and nineteenth century reader's taste buds. It is not hard to imagine the popular response to a berry-eating, spear-hunting, fish-loving naked Crusoe who slept either in a tree or under one. In an age besotted with Reason and Anglican supremacy, the alternate, native-like Crusoe would not have survived beyond some weeks, the life period of a common journal article. Extending Gellner's argument that the nation requires a common cultural imagination, one could go on to say that the novel became the instrument of this commonality because of the subjects it chose to highlight. The alternate Crusoe could never have become an allegory for the nation. Similarly, an alternate Swiss family could never have been a role model worthy to be presented to adolescent readers. In the age they lived and learnt, a European family with native lifestyle would have been a matter of ridicule and not respect. Therefore, when one reexamines Crusoe's table which took him weeks to make, one finds that the table symbolizes not just the religious rigour of Crusoe; it also stands for his link with Englishness- he has not known any other way to sit while eating (though it is hard to believe as Crusoe has been a sailor all his life); a table is as crucial for him as food for survival. It is also a symbol of Crusoe's control over the island. He tames the wood, the body and the expanse of the island to suit *his* purpose. He is, for once and for all, the king of the island, the monarch of all he surveys.

This coming together of religious, imperialist and nationalist themes is best witnessed in *Swiss Family Robinson* in the naming process adopted by the family. They call their first abode as 'Tent House', the place where they landed as 'Safety Bay', the bridge they build between the Tent House and their permanent abode, 'Land of Promise' as 'Nonpareil' first and 'Family Bridge' later, the height from where they look for other survivors as 'Cape Disappointment', their tree house as 'Falcon-hoist' or Falcon's Nest and the grotto built by Ernest as 'Grotto Ernestine'. After bestowing names on all the important parts of their settlement, the father declares, "we thus laid the foundation of the geography of our new country, promising to forward it to Europe by the first post." (Wyss 81) This is a curious statement especially in the light of the fact that there is no post and it would be years before they would see another human face. Also, the family never really leaves the island. The sense of finality in the words "our new country" conveys this choice they make in future. The father's resolution of informing Europe later and not Switzerland or England is also very peculiar. Which country in Europe does he want to inform? This allegiance to Europe rather than Switzerland recurs constantly in the novel and it undercuts again and again the vehemence with which the title ties the family down to that country. Where does the 'Swiss Family' belong then? Which nation do they associate themselves with? At one level, the family seems to be at ease with shifting nationalities and loyalties. They speak German, they know English too; they escape from the war-torn Switzerland to England and start for Australia from

there. En route to Australia, they intend to stay a while in O'Taheite, a French colony then; and of course they are discovered by the British vessel Adventurer. One could digress a little here and point out that the English ship is the chief carrier of hope in most island narratives. Crusoe, Gulliver, the Swiss Family, the young boys in *The Coral Island* and the Americans in *The Mysterious Island* are all rescued/ discovered by English ships. This is not a mere coincidence as in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries the English Navy was the most formidable force to reckon with in the world. Not just in the navy, but the control and expertise at sea seen in the English seafarers generally was unparalleled. These sailors and seafarers mostly served at least one term with the Royal Navy. The ships which rescued most of the castaways in the Robinsonades, were either manned by ex-naval officers or by seasoned British sailors. In fact, the empire of Britain in the nineteenth century has often been addressed as a sea-borne empire. The steady rise in the powers of the navy after the defeat of Spanish Armada in 1588 was indeed accompanied by the expansion of the British territories. In fact, *Swiss Family Robinson* was published towards the end of the Napoleonic wars in Europe and the appearance of the English ship first at the island significantly marks the impressive role English vessels played in 'discovering' new terrains and providing benevolent services. The English vessel was hence, a sign of hope and the Navy, a gigantic force in the European and world politics: "At the height of the struggle with Napoleon, the Royal Navy reached its peak at around 140,000 men. To appreciate the scale of that mobilization, in this same time period a town of just 10,000 people was considered a substantial urban conglomeration. Although London—the great exception—was passing the one million mark, just a few other cities in the British Isles had more than 50,000 inhabitants." (Land 1) Land thus aptly describes Britain in his as "the seaborne empire". The numbers are startling and stand testimony to the fact that England was indeed a sea borne empire! This added to the value of British citizenship or an association with Britain for people related to jobs at the sea. The appearance of the British vessel is therefore not coincidental. It is rather indicative of the preferred connections in the world of seafaring. It is indicative of another thing too- the sheer number of vessels and people involved in seafaring ensured that the English vessel had the highest probability of appearing on a desert island just as it was most profitable to disclose the location of a new desert island to England, the master of the seas, than to any other European nation.

But coming back to our previous question as to where the Swiss family belongs really, one could say that with a complex web of 'national' allegiances, it is probably best to assign the family wholly to the island itself. The fact is that they are at home only in this place. They belong to it as much it belongs to them. The island is their new nation. In fact, one must point here that the name of the island changes very swiftly from 'New Switzerland' to 'Happy Island'. Through most of the narrative, the island is addressed as Happy Island and the name mentioned first seems to have been forgotten completely by the time we reach the middle of the novel. Switzerland finds fewer references in the novel even than England and Russia. It is notable that Ernest, the eldest son, travels back to England and returns with his cousin as his wife; the Swiss-ness of this girl, Henreitta Bodmer, is emphasized by the father/narrator. Hence, it is essential for the son to take on a Swiss wife but not to name the island as New Switzerland and to hark back to the Swiss way of life at all. The Swiss Family's nationalism is neither political nor cultural. It exists only in a residual, social form which induces happiness and

contentment when certain unsaid rules are followed (e.g the marriage of Ernest with a Swiss girl) and practiced. Gellner would term this nationalism as potential nationalism. While explaining the feebleness of many possible nationalisms *within* the age of nationalism (i.e the industrial modern age) he examines, through the example of languages, how many potential nations there could be in the world we inhabit and how few of them really reach fruition in the form of well-defined actual "effective" nations. The Swiss family's Swiss-ness is contained by their need to conform to the more powerful British nationalism because of their status as amateur colonists. These concentric nationalisms are contained within their immediate and intense interactions with their island 'nation'.

The problematique gets complicated further when one considers that the island nation, despite being treated as a nation, assumes its significance as a nation only from the fact that the family makes it inhabitable by refashioning it in the image of their parent nation(s). Keeping this in mind, how does one decide which nationalism is 'potential' and which one 'effective' on the island? Neither is this a typical diasporic situation where the immigrant carries her/his 'homeland' within herself when s/he moves to a new nation. In the diasporic discourse, the new nation is as complete with its set of norms, regulations, culture, language and polity as the home country. One even defines diaspora in terms of the tiff between the two cultures in which the immigrant's psyche is the battlefield. But in the case of island novels, the predicament of the nation and its culture gets further complicated because of a complete absence of civilization on the island. In fact, the castaway is afraid of being in the diasporic fix. Novel after novel, one gathers that the castaway is mortally scared of joint ownership over the island. Any hint of another human being sharing the island baffles the castaway. But having made this observation about the solitary non-diasporic castaway, one must also admit that most nineteenth century island novels did involve an atypical diasporic experience though in these cases the common diasporic predicament was stood on its head. In other words, one could read the imperialistic endeavours of the Europeans and Americans in these novels as immigrant experiences sans the diasporic angst. One generally considers the immigrant as one occupying the position of the supplicant- one who needs succor and refuge, one who has been uprooted and rendered homeless due to one reason or the other. Gellner describes the immigrant aptly thus: "Often, these alienated, uprooted, wandering populations may vacillate between diverse options, and they may often come to a provisional rest at one or another temporary and transitional cultural resting place. But there are some options which they will refrain from trying to take up. They will hesitate about trying to enter cultural poolswithin which they know themselves to be spurned; or rather, within which they expect to continueto be spurned." (Gellner 46) The castaways are phenomenally different from these immigrants who seem to be in a constant need for approval in the new nation and who have to modify and even reinvent themselves in order to fit in and lead normal lives. They keep the memories of the homeland alive in the form of a potential nationalism even while trying hard for acceptance in the new land.

The imperialist diaspora works in a manner opposite to this. One aspect of their migration is that though they are also in search of better life opportunities, they approach migration and resettlement from the perspective of controllers and not underdogs. The Swiss family is a good example- they set out from England *with* the

intention of becoming colonists. And eventually, they do become so. As discussed earlier, they manage this by not letting the new nation, i.e. the island, consume them. They better the island by consuming and controlling it. The father of the boys, with his unrealistically immense pool of knowledge creates all the luxuries equivalent to those found in Europe, as if out of nothing. It is curious that the island novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focus generally on a father figure who knows all and who can solve all the problems- Robinson Crusoe (who acts as the spiritual and cultural mentor to Friday and he even names him as if he were his own 'child'), Ralph (in *The Coral Island*), and Captain Nemo and Cyrus Harding (in *The Mysterious Island*). So is the case with the father in *Swiss Family Robinson.* Their abilities and priorities vary from novel to novel. But these father figures drive the process of colonization and transformation of the island. The roles of 'potential' and 'effective' nationalisms keep shifting when perused in this context. At such times when the island is being transformed in the image of Europe, nations such as England, Switzerland and United States of America provide the image of effective nationalism and the island occupies the space of the potential. But when the castaways refuse to return to their erstwhile national spaces, the island becomes the centre of their loyalty and therefore occupies the realm of the effective. Even when the castaways consume the island, in the form of the nutritional and recreational opportunities it offers, they are actually consuming and relishing it as if it were their effective nation. Their vocabulary describing their relationship with the island involves words such as 'lords', 'kings', and 'kingdom' and is steeped in the imperialist-colonialist discourse. Jack's declaration that the island is 'ours' harks not only the family's attachment to the island but also the innate human desire to own and possess anything that does not belong to another or that which lies unclaimed. In other words, it signifies the family's assumption that what they have 'discovered' rightfully belongs to them. A further confirmation of this assumption is presented to the reader at the end when the father decides against sending a proclamation to Europe asking for dominion status for the island. The second notable point here is the family's conviction that the course taken by them in 'settling' the island is the same as that taken by all *civilized nations* since times immemorial. Two interesting things happen here. Firstly, the Swiss family, completely enmeshed in the traps of (Christian) civilization, presumes that it is their duty to civilize their island. But the absence of any subjects to civilize necessitates a reassessment of the process of civilization. What one witnesses in the island novels up to nineteenth century can best be described as civilization of the landscape. The island itself bears the brunt of civilization as if it is imperative to marry the process of civilization to the process of colonization and the twain cannot exist sans each other. This obsession with landscaping may have a lot to do with the general growth of landscaping as a hobby amongst the elite in Europe since the middle of the eighteenth century when the estates of the gentry defined the personalities, resourcefulness and idiosyncrasies of the owners. Secondly, this statement about the civilized nations iterates the family's commitment towards developing the island into a nation and their foreknowledge of the fact that what they are building here is their new country, their own civilized nation. The island therefore ceases to be just a potential nation and starts transforming in to their country, to which they can relate completely and which defines their identity as the Robinsons- those following in the footsteps of Robinson Crusoe who set up an entire English colony on *his* island.

The island as the new nation however remains a good point only until read in complete isolation from the immediate milieu of these novels. A cursory glance at the background of each novel may explain why these 'adventures' did good business in the publishing market even as they propounded theories of new civilizations and nations. Was the average nineteenth century reader reading different meanings into these novels? More significantly, was the market more receptive to the adventure element than to the problematic relation these novels shred with the newly- emergent idea of the nation? A quick look at the reading habits of the eighteenth and nineteenth century public may help us form an opinion on these questions. A research focusing on ledgers of book trade in late eighteenth century concludes that almanacs and chapbooks generated a huge number of transactions. Trial and Execution accounts, homespun tracts, jest-books, moral tales, ballads, hymnbooks and works of divinity were biggest items in the catalogues of average publishers. (Raven 276)This indicative list suggests that novels and adventures formed a small proportion of the reading material consumed by the average mass reader in the period under consideration here. Going by Ian Watts's estimate of the income and expenditures of the newly-literate lower middle class reader, and the evidence presented by Raven here, one could say that the success of the novel was not unrivalled and long narratives were still out of reach of the average middle class reader. The inventory of the reading material includes shorter genres such as ballads, tracts and hymn books. Moreover, the nature of this material is much more religious and in some instances more political than a novel enthusiast may expect. It is not intriguing therefore to find that the 1816 detailed translation of *Swiss Family Robinson* by William Godwin did not really pick up in the market. This version stayed obscure for a long time and came to light only in the twentieth century. In contrast the 1879 translation by William H.G. Kingston met greater success and Wyss's novel became well known through this translation. Though there were other versions also which came out around that time (W.H. Davenport Adams and Mrs. H.B. Paull published their versions around the same time), Kingston's version was applauded by public because of his own reputation as an adventure writer and his general success as a translator.

However, the most remarkable point in the history of the novel's publication in England is hidden in the dates. Written originally in 1812, the novel came to be noticed in public only in 1879 with Kingston's translation. One feels this has little to do with the nature of the translation or the reputation of the translator and more with the timing of publication. By 1879, adventure writing had reached a veritable peak in England. *The Coral Island*, one of the most successful island novels, was published in 1857 marking the beginning of Ballantyne's long career (spanning over 80 books) as a writer of sailor tales. *Treasure Island,* an adventure novel by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, narrating a tale of "pirates and buried gold", was first published as a book in 1883. But it was originally serialized in the children's magazine *Young Folks* between 1881–82 under the title *Treasure Island; or, the mutiny of the Hispaniola* with Stevenson adopting the pseudonym *Captain George North*. These two novels, written by two Scottish writers, were trendsetters in the field of adventure literature. The idea of the self and the nation got firmly entangled in the popular literature of late nineteenth century. The time was ripe for adventure narratives because of the readiness and availability of a market. The big literary players like Ballantyne, Stevenson, Verne,

Kingston, Conrad and Stacepool were accompanied by numerous minor writers and hacks and sailor-(auto)biographers in this flourishing marketplace. The roots of this splurge of adventure stories in the publishing market may be traced to two reasons. Firstly, the arrival of the *Boy's Own* magazines on the literary scene acted as a catalyst for adventure writing. Secondly, the cult of masculinity perpetrated by the colonial and industrial movement in England provided themes as well as the raison d'être for this kind of literature. Steeped in the false philosophy of white supremacy and the right of the British over the riches of the world, these writings had a great impact on the young Christian inheritors of the Empire.

Bourne by this surge in demand of narratives establishing the supremacy of Western Europeans, particularly British, the English version of *Swiss Family Robinson* met success in Britain. As a novel of non-British origin, it has managed to remain in print and in demand over one and a half centuries perhaps because it provides the contemporary reader a window into the complex relationship between missionary activity, colonialism and nationalism in Europe during the early nineteenth century.

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