

# Boys' Adventure Magazines and the Discourse of Adventure, 1860-1885

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The 500-odd Victorian boys' adventure magazines published in the latter half of the nineteenth century have stoked controversy since they first started appearing in large numbers in the 1860s. Many mid-century moral guardians, ever alert to the springs of moral pollution set to ensnare innocent youth, considered them to be no different from the penny bloods, an easy stretch since the adventure magazines often included crime stories and they cost a penny (six pence for the collected monthly). The journalist James Greenwood spoke for many of his contemporaries when he claimed the bloods and "gallows magazines" sold at trashy newsdealers in trashy alleys in Clerkenwell seduced boys into a life of crime. Greenwood warned his readers of the Fagins of the periodical world, "low-minded, nasty fellows, the proprietors and promoters of what may be truthfully described as 'gallows literature,'" who would inevitably lead poor half-literate street lads to ruin.<sup>1</sup> The lads themselves saw things differently, of course: Jonathon Rose quotes "a workhouse veteran" who recalled that "there was more mental stimulus in a boys' weekly than in the typical Victorian schoolbook" (367). No surprise the publishers of those magazines—Edward J. Brett, the Emmet brothers, Charles Fox, Samuel Beeton, and others—claimed to have the best interest of boys at heart, to be teachers as well as entertainers, to be...chums. In Vol. I, number 1, of *Boys of England*, for example, Brett assured his readers that "Our aim is to enthrall you by wild and wonderful, but healthy fiction; to amuse and instruct you by interesting papers on History and Science; to inform you on all matters belonging to your manly out-door sports and games, and your home pastimes; to enter into a hearty, free, and trusty companionship with you through the medium of the Correspondence Page; to afford you a merry laugh by a droll story or jest; to charm you with a pretty verse. In short, our aim is mainly to delight you."<sup>2</sup> Later the *Boy's World* (motto: "Overcome Evil with Good") claimed to have "steadily fought its way, inspiring boys with a wish for that superior fiction, amusement, and instruction which had for so long been out of their reach." ("History of Boys [sic] Literature" 293). Such rhetoric was patently aimed at the Greenwoods and other Jeremiahs of the moral right; I think it is safe to say that few of the boys who bought the magazines ever conversed much, pro or con, about unhealthy fiction or mediocre instruction. Although none of them would verbalize it in these terms, readers were looking for a particular discourse to join in on, a discourse that made them part of a wider community that shared a common set of perceptions, values, rhetoric etc. concerning entertainment.

Recent cultural critics have cited adventure magazines as tools—of a ruling class frightened of the increasingly powerful underclasses; or of the Imperial establishment; or of a middle class dead set on imposing its narrow racist, patriotic, Evangelical, superior, manly, anti-virtually-everything-not-it attitude on impressionable working- and lower middle-class boys.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly the magazines did purvey a certain set of political and social concepts, overtly and covertly, some more patriotic, nationalistic, imperialistic, Evangelical, racist, or xenophobic than others. My concern in this paper is not with the magazines' social, political, or cultural positions or who may have used the magazines to

try to advance those positions; I will focus only on the magazines' peculiar discourse, what for lack of a more descriptive term I will call the Discourse of Adventure.

My objective is to describe adventure discourse and examine a variety of adventure magazines to exhibit how thoroughly the magazines participated in the discourse: not just in the texts, but also in the graphics, in the quality of the paper and the illustrations, in what we know about the readers and their reception of the magazines, even in the price and circulation of the various periodicals. Underlying the pervasiveness of this discourse is a range of values, capacities and skills that in and of themselves were not necessarily imperialistic, but into which imperialism and patriotism were to tap. I will conclude by suggesting that these participants in adventure discourse contributed directly to the development of the New Journalism—but that will be the topic of a later essay.

### **The Participants**

The classic definition of *discourse* sets up an interaction between text and context, and argues that it is impossible to understand one without the other, or to prioritize one over the other.<sup>4</sup> In the sense I use the term in this study, discourse implies a community of people who share a rhetoric with which to communicate (text), and a common set of values and virtues (participants plus values equals context). In this view, discourse does not, as Michel Foucault would have it, “seek to act upon the culture in which it operates as a mirror or a catalyst” (Conboy 4). The magazines created romantic worlds for participants, worlds that quickly became familiar because no matter where the readers were led, be it India, an iceberg, or the slums of London, shared values and virtues remained constant.

The Discourse of Adventure, the discourse of boys' adventure magazines during this period, is by agreement between magazine and reader contained within the covers of the magazines. Readers participated in the discourse while engaged with the magazines. They brought with them a shared set of values, many of which were bed rock life values (see The Discourse of Adventure below). It would be a mistake to assume that the plots and settings of the pieces in the magazines necessarily represented in any way the values of the readers; plots and settings are not values. Where Greenwood saw sinister moral snares in stories about crime and resistance to authority, readers merely saw an escape from a dreadfully oppressive existence. Basket weaver Thomas Okey (born in 1852) reminisced that, while he and his friends enjoyed penny periodicals immensely, none of them ever embarked on a life of crime (Rose 367-8). Adventure discourse does not celebrate crime as a value; it employs crime, physical conflict, exploration, and overcoming odds as contexts to showcase the participants' essential values. When F. W. Boreham recalled daydreaming his way through the lessons in his late-Victorian National School—“My unimaginative teachers obstinately insisted on asking their most ridiculous questions...just when I was engaged in snatching a beautiful girl from the horns of an angry bull, or pursuing, single-handed, a powerful tribe of Iroquois Indians, or delivering a charming princess from a blazing palace, or winning the Victoria Cross under circumstances of unprecedented gallantry...” (34)—he wasn't so much planning to go off to be a cowboy as he was finding the discourse of adventure to be infinitely preferable to the drab discourse of the village National School.

The community of British participants in adventure discourse numbered in the millions; in the late '60s Brett's *Boys of England* had reached a circulation of 250,000, and his *Young Men of Great Britain* 150,000. Assuming the usual multiplier of three readers per issue thanks to second hand sales, swapping, and library lending, perhaps well over a million readers sampled those two periodicals annually.<sup>5</sup> By the '80s, resale of adventure magazines became a significant business unto itself. *British Boys* (29 November 1884, 15) carried ads from a variety of dealers buying and selling *Young Britain*, *Sons of Britannia*, *Young Englishman*, *Boys' World*, *Our Boys' Paper*, *Boys' Comic Journal*, *Boys' Own Paper*, *Boys' Own Journal*, *Sons of Old England*, *Boys of the British Empire*, *Young Folks*, *Boys Standard*, *Young Men of Great Britain*, and *Every Boys Journal* (plus a variety of bloods of the *Spring Heeled Jack* variety.). *Our Boys' Paper* carried similar ads in 1882. Given the competition between Brett and the Emmet boys, (*British Boys* and *Our Boys Paper* were Emmet publications) it is tempting to think that the Emmets used the ads to puff their own periodicals, much like *Blackwoods* did in the Grown-up World. However, since many of the magazines offered for sale in *BB* and *OBP* were from the Brett stable it is safe to say that the ads were from legitimate dealers.

The combination of population increases (from about 4 million boys under the age of 20 in 1851 to 5.2 million in 1871), increases in opportunities for reading (Jonathon Rose has reported that by 1870 England contained more cooperative libraries and reading rooms than public houses), and rising literacy thanks to education reforms in 1860 and 1870 created a significant market for adventure magazines. Early attempts to tap that market by Samuel Beeton (*Boys' Own Magazine*) and Edmund Routledge (*Every Boy's Magazine*) through publication of sixpenny monthlies (Beeton started at two pennies but went to six in 1863) were relatively successful, but the arrival of the penny weeklies, complete with illustrations, free prizes, and easy to follow serials virtually finished the monthlies by 1870. Why were the penny weeklies so wildly popular? While publishers and editors regularly cited the wholesomeness of their literature as reason for their success, and critics both then and now cite their appeal to some moral lowest common denominator focused on youthful violence and aggression, the nineteenth century readers regularly discussed their availability, their novelty, and their price—especially their second-hand price. Autobiographers report finding them in working men's reading rooms, school and church libraries, and small town newsagents, where they could be read for free or purchased in bulk second hand for pennies. The sturdy wrappers on the monthly editions helped them survive multiple readings. And as for their novelty, Jonathon Rose reminds us that “for a boy in a Lancashire mining village around 1880, where there were few books to read (other than twenty volumes of Methodist Conference minutes), W. H. G. Kingston's *Dick Onslow among the Red Indians* could be hypnotic” (384). Adventure periodicals specialized in the serialized adventures of the Dick Onslows of the fiction world.

By 1864 periodicals, especially adventure periodicals, had become such a staple of English reading habits that in that year the total actual readership was estimated to be just above 6 million (Davis, 205).<sup>6</sup> While Kirsten Drotner and others claim that most of these magazines catered “mainly to a less well-off audience of apprentices and junior clerks”

(Drotner, 104), the addresses of the winners of prizes in Brett's publications in the '60s and other evidence indicates that the readership, and thus the community, embraced all classes. Indeed, Rose notes that "in 1879, the *Boy's Own Paper* had a print run of 200,000 and an audience that cut across class lines. Correspondents reported that it was read by students at Wellington College, half the pupils at a Birmingham grammar school, and sixty-eight out of eighty-four boys working at a Scottish branch of the Technical Department of the Post Office" (322).

Girls comprised a significant proportion of the community as well, mainly because, according to Sally Mitchell, the foremost scholar on girls' culture of the period, girls' magazines were so dreadfully dull. While we do not know how proportionately large the female readership was, we have evidence of its existence. Several of the Brett publications' prize lists cited above include a number of girls among their winners. In addition many of the magazines that carried answers to correspondents often replied to girl readers: *Boys of England*, for example, responded to "a Poor Working Girl" (in III, 53, 16) who thanked them for running the serial "Cottage Girl."

### **The Discourse of Adventure**

The discourse of adventure, the discourse of the magazines in question, included the community of boys and young men—and girls and young women—described above. Its rhetoric emphasized sensational actions and simple good/evil characters and situations described in simple language, colorful slang, jargon, and recurring metaphors (especially sporting and military metaphors) that emphasized action and excitement. Stories and illustrations reeked of sensationalism, as did the language, all tasteless descriptions (according to the middle class mores promoted by the "quality" press of the time), blood and body parts, pain and pleasure, slang and jargon. Short declarative sentences and fragments; action verbs, and cart-loads of adjectives; back and forth, fragmented conversations: anything to move the action along, whether the action be fighting Indians or building a Swiss cottage. Illustrations emphasized the action in the text. Every issue led off with a bloody or sinister illustration of a struggle in progress, incipient, or just past. Monthly numbers came bound in bright yellow or blue wrappers, usually complete with action illustration. Each 12-page issue offered three columns of text per page, often complete with even more illustrations, easy to read and inviting to the reader. Mastheads evoked the joy of adventure, featuring Britannia and lions and cricketers and middies. And all that for a penny, or sixpence for the monthly, or ha'pence or threepence second-hand. No matter that the magazines, printed on good enough paper to last over 100 years, "were noteworthy for their shoddy appearance, their shallow and sensational fiction, and their transience" (Dixon, 133). The covers invited the readers in, and the rhetoric and discourse of the new periodicals struck a chord with them, both creating and reflecting the rapidly burgeoning discourse of adventure.

The ideal context for the young adventure hero was unfettered independence—even those protagonists pinballed from one crisis to another were *moving*, not confined now and forever in a single time, place, and circumstance. Many of the common values of adventure discourse—invariably gendered male, and always in the context of sensationalism—were rooted in lower middle class and working class life. Values

included respect for bravery and cleverness, personal honor, strength, and generosity. Life was a struggle, and violence was inevitable: thus, adventure discourse featured fights, beatings, battles, torture, and struggles against nature, and singled out winners. The discourse shared a respect for skills useful in a world of sensational adventure, like shooting a rifle or building a tiger trap. Adventure discourse honored physical achievement, whether in handling a cricket bat or a half-wild horse. Adventure discourse may have given lip service to justice, but celebrated the satisfaction of revenge. Adventure discourse allowed anyone who deserved respect—that is anyone who wasn't impudent or a coward or perhaps an Other of some kind—to demand that respect, often via a good thrashing; thus, the hero of adventure discourse paradoxically “fit in” and was universally respected as a leader. The adventure community could understand criminal argot as well as terms of military drill. The community formed by adventure discourse knew the technical terms associated with sensational pursuits like hunting, warfare, and life on the streets.

Unsurprisingly, participants in adventure discourse marginalized females; girls most often appeared as objects to be pitied or defended, or as problems to be overcome. And clearly as a reflection of the sexual maturity of the male participants, no matter the role of females in the texts, their role in the discourse was more often than not not-so-subtly eroticized. Toward the end of the '70s the magazines also added a strong dose of Britishness, patriotism, and British racial superiority to their texts. Because those qualities were used to enhance the fundamental values shared by the participants in adventure discourse they were not rejected by the readers. However the texts that touched on those three qualities would easily have stood alone without them; the focus was always on the hero/protagonists and his group, on their overcoming a series of challenges posed by nature, Others, or life itself, and on their doing so while living a set of values as described above.

By the late 1860s, adventure magazine publishers had hit upon a wildly successful format: Lead off with an adventure serial, dramatically illustrated on the cover. Follow that with one or two short items posing as history or natural science, but emphasizing the adventure—say “The Boy Heroes of Derry,” for example, or “Wild Turkeys and Coyotes.” Then another adventure serial, different in setting from the first but still well (or at least copiously) illustrated. Then a bit of instruction, like “How to Play Saddle My Nag,” or “How to Build a Swiss Cottage.” Some short fiction, as often as not focused on the supernatural, followed by yet another serial adventure, different in setting from the first two. Finally, one or two non-fiction essays—again focused on something adventurous, like “Christmas on a Whale”—and some advertising. Some magazines carried answers to correspondents, and others may have included some news clips from around the world or a humor column, but the basic formula of serial fiction, natural history, biographical history, short fiction, instruction, and advertising, supplemented by illustrations, never changed. And every part of the magazine from masthead to advertisement, from serial fiction to natural history essay, participated in the essential adventure discourse. The rest of this paper illustrates that argument with selected examples, and while the number necessarily is limited, I can assure the reader that I am not participating in what W. L. Burn called “selective Victorianism” (36) by finding only

those rare examples that illustrate my thesis. In point of fact, a casual reader will notice that little or nothing in the boys' magazines does not participate in the adventure discourse in the broad categories I have described.

### Adventure Fiction

The fortunes of all of the magazines rose and fell on the adventure qualities of the serial fiction. It should be noted from the outset that these were almost exclusively picaresque tales that depended entirely on a series of boys' adventures and hair's-breadth escapes to move the action. They might include some broadbrush humor often focused on stereotypical speech and language, but for the most part they were grim tales that emphasized the basic unfairness of the world, the dangers caused by evil men, and the possibility of triumph (and revenge) through skill, strength, luck, and a little help from ones friends. Thus, these texts were in a sense a looking glass of the boys' lives, but a looking glass that transformed neighborhood bullies into pirates, and overseers at "the works" into cruel Others who would enslave the protagonists. By the 1870s, most of the boys' magazines included 2-3 serials which fell into four rough categories based on plot and locale: romantic contemporary adventures, set in the Wild West, Pacific islands, Canada, India etc.; historical adventures, set any time from ancient Rome through Merrie England—young readers clearly loved knights and archers; crime and poverty stories; and at least one so-called school serial. *Young Men of Great Britain* debuted with two typical serials: "Alan Lyndoch; or, the story of a runaway," and "The Night Guard" (accompanied by a cover illustration portraying armed men of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century wearing doublets and packing pistols). Vol I (1870) of *The Young Briton* contained "The Three Gladiators. A Tale of the Roman Arena" and later, "Ralph Rattler, or Our Boys at School." *Boys of the World* countered with "Tom Daring, or far from home," which established its school story credentials in the first sentence: "Tom Daring's holidays, that happy crisis in a boy's life, had commenced," and then turned into a tale of "daring" escapades at home and across the seas. *Boys of England* debuted with two serials that would later be reprinted in book form and recycled through other periodicals: "Alone in the Pirates' Lair" and "Who Shall be Leader," which like "Tom Daring" opened as a school story and ended with Wellington on the continent.

Even a cursory reading of typical serial adventure fiction establishes the rhetoric and discourse of adventure. For example in "Mark Grayham; or the Boy Wanderers over Sea & Desert," a serial appearing in *The Champion Journal for Boys* in 1878, our eponymous hero and his chums get kidnapped, accused of villainy, threatened with hanging by crooked officials and uncivilized Others, saved by unlikely Others, shipwrecked, and eventually enriched beyond their wildest dreams. In this typical passage, the shipwrecked boys are attacked by savages somewhere in the east of Africa. The discourse focuses on the skill, coolness, and organization of the British boys, their brilliant tactic in making use of their limited weapons, their patriotism (or at least, their Britishness)—all told in short, colorful one-sentence, sensational paragraphs:

At the first volley the bushmen rose like a black cloud, yelling and capering, while others uttered cries and groans which were very satisfactory to the

ears of the besieged, as it showed the effect of their fire. ...They went coolly forward and fired, and then there were more yells.

All in an instant there arose a furious uproar—fearful yells, and the whole mass were charging in a body. “Take it coolly,” said Ben, and so they did.

A deadly volley was poured into the savages from the guns, which were immediately thrown in the rear for Phil and Archie to reload.

Another volley from the naval pistols following in quick succession did fearful execution, and the black fiends were thrown into confusion.

The swarm of black devils were already over the mimic rampart and the devoted little band were entirely surrounded.

[After a desperate hand to hand struggle, they] were elated to hear three more reports behind them; and not another foeman stood before them.

“Hail—hail Britannia,” yelled the castaways, and then gave three times three in such a style that all would have given much to have heard (Vol 1, 23 Feb 1878, 372; 2 Mar, 386).

Briefly, the passage clearly contrasts the coolness of the British boys with the “capering” and “yelling” of the “black devils.” The volleys of fire from the boys—a calculated military maneuver designed to pour a deadly volume of fire into an enemy to break his will—works exactly as any reader would have known it would: “the black fiends were thrown into confusion.” The enemy were clearly an Other—capering bushmen, in point of fact. The fight, such as it was, ended with the British boys winning, of course, and they won not just with their skill with guns, but also with their skill with their fists in hand to hand combat. The same “Others” had attacked the little party of British before, so this brief victory works as revenge for the boys. Certainly the “capering” of the bushmen showed a distinct lack of respect for the boys; it is an impudent action, after all, and thus the victory and revenge are all the sweeter. Ben, Phil, and Archie work as a team, firing and reloading, and they trust each other to do their jobs well to protect the group. They *do* their jobs well because they desire the respect and admiration of the group. And at the end of the day, the victorious boys celebrate as if they were on a football ground, with three cheers and a “hail Britannia.” And I repeat, I didn’t cherry-pick this passage: virtually every piece of serial fiction in each of the titles referenced above was couched in the same discourse.

The school story bears a brief examination apart from the typical adventure stories. While some working class/lower middle class boys were not particularly fond of the strange world of the boarding school and thus skipped over these stories—autobiographer J. E. Patterson remembered that *Boys of England* comprised almost exclusively his reading matter at the age of 10, although “I found but little interest” (61) in the school stories—many found them compelling and read them as straight adventures. Thus it is fair to conclude that the discourse of these stories rather than their specific setting spoke to the readers, and while the plots rarely focused on life and death situations, and the action rarely featured boys fighting for their lives against the rotters of Crawley Hall, the discourse of the school stories did not vary from the discourse of the stories set aboard the *Mosca*, in the thieves dens of Seven Dials, the country homes of the landed gentry, medieval castles, or the battlefields of the Crimean War. Unlucky Bob the eponymous

protagonist of “Unlucky Bob; or Our Boys at School” demands the same level of respect, enacts revenge on baddies through practical jokes or fisticuffs, suffers from unfair accusations, and ultimately triumphs in the same way that Tom Oakland of “Tom Oakland; or British Courage and Italian Revenge” does.<sup>7</sup> Both start out as school stories; Tom, however, leaves with some chums to go on adventures, while Bob stays at school with his chums to have adventures.

The shorter fiction, too, continued the sensational rhetoric and adventure discourse. All of the successful adventure magazines included regular columns of short stories and sketches to add spice to the contents and break up the long feature serials. For example, in the early 1870s *Young Men of Great Britain* ran a regular column entitled “Stories Told at the Old Toll Gate Inn” that featured a variety of ghost stories, murder mysteries, and strange tales, all employing the sensational rhetoric and adventure discourse of the longer serial fiction. In 1878 *Our Boys’ Journal* ran “Legends of Many Lands,” a similar collection of violent stories, murder mysteries and the supernatural: “The Haunted Chamber,” (Vol. IV, 324), for example, collected sensational themes of murder, suicide, an innocent wife, a beautiful child, an evil and cunning cousin, theft of an estate, a weak-willed protagonist, and gambling all in one short sketch covering less than two columns. One of the characters is known only as The Tempter, “a dark-browed man, a foreigner, apparently”; the Tempter, who describes the evil cousin as “that gay libertine who holds the mortgages [to the protagonist’s estates] and who loves [his] wife,” incites the protagonist first to gamble, then to attempt to murder the cousin—clearly, the Tempter is the Other as demon. The cousin seizes the protagonist’s arm and forces him to shoot himself. Of course, the ghost of the protagonist subsequently haunts the chamber forever. Thus overheated, sensational rhetoric (“But, oh, the demoniac look his features wore! Blotting out their beauty, likening him to the arch fiend”), sensational plot, a cruel unfair world, revenge from beyond the grave, the Other thwarted, all signify the adventure discourse binding reader to text.

The very first issue of *Boys of the World* (21 Sept. 1869) included “The Shadow on the Glass; or the reflected murder,” a stock short story of a faithful wife cast off by a ruthless, dissolute husband. The castoff wife finds work as nurse for a wonderful old lady, who, as the story opens, reveals that she is the wealthy aunt of the dissolute husband. The dissolute husband shows up that very night with two thugs and murders his aunt while the wife looks on—he then forces her to swear that she will never reveal who the murderer was. Of course, the faithful wife is wrongly accused of the murder, but because of her vow, she cannot reveal who the real murderer was. The wife dies during her trial, but the accomplices, overcome by her innate goodness, finally rat out the husband who is then convicted of his aunt’s murder. Now, besides the device of justified revenge from beyond the grave, this story also contains lashings of criminal argot, a version of the important insider language typical of adventure discourse. For example, as Ned the dissolute husband and his cronies break into the Aunt’s bedroom, one of the thugs says to him:

“Where does the old faggot keep her rhino, Ned?”  
 “...she has no gold, and only got her dividends yesterday.” [Note that the dissolute husband speaks appropriately standard English.]

“Then the blunt’s all in flimsy?”

This is the element of the discourse that caused such panic among social reformers; that is, that readers should participate, or at least be invited to participate, in criminal acts by speaking, or at least, by understanding, criminal slang. To an outsider who cannot or will not participate in the discourse, the whole package of the story—plot, characters, diction, rhetoric, theme, and the wink and nod understanding of the participants in the discourse—had to have spelled out nothing less than cultural subversion, because essential to the discourse was the implied agreement among readers and story-tellers that we are all boys and men of understanding, that we know what all this means and thus can fully participate in the adventure.

### **Nonfiction**

The same discourse prevails throughout the non-fiction pieces—sporting columns, how-to pieces, history and natural history essays, educational pieces—and in illustrations and advertising. The sporting columns primarily emphasized competition, physical accomplishment, and insider knowledge—even “Angling,” for example, focused on the competition between boy and fish and the necessity of knowing what kind of tackle to use for what fish, and to know the names of particular articles of tackle and species of fish. Behind those elements of the discourse stands a larger one: it is simply important for a participant in this discourse to want to be known as a proficient fisherman; those who have no such interest need not participate—they can go read *The Missionary Voice* or whatever.

“Up a Tree: A Sporting Adventure in Cashmere,” by Captain Dyce (*Boy’s Own Paper*, I, 439) presents the adventure hero, a young army captain inserted into a colorful, romantic place, and throughout engages the reader in a narration of courage, skills, insider knowledge, competition, and cleverness. Captain Dyce began his narrative: “I was on the rampage, as Artemus Ward has it, thoroughly enjoying myself in Cashmere; exploring, shooting, and wandering whithersoever the fancy seized me.” The Captain could really hunt dangerous animals, too, like tigers and bears. And in his narrative he could pass along some great insider Cashmere slang, like “Shikaree” (hunter) and “reech” (bear), and some inside information about Cashmere, like the region of Srinuggur, means “happy valley,” and “Moslems are required by their religion to let their beards grow.” His editor, probably George A. Hutchinson, endorsed Captain Dyce’s success in killing a “reech” with the note: “Hill bears are not only very destructive animals, but they are also dangerous. During different seasons of the year in Cashmere they come at night and lay waste to ‘bhuta’ (Indian corn) fields, walnut-trees, mulberry-trees, and even fruit-trees, and almost invariably attack any one interfering with them.”<sup>8</sup> The editor, then, makes himself complicit in the adventure discourse, offering yet more insider jargon and an important piece of adventure knowledge about those Kashmiri hill bears—that they’re invariably dangerous and hard to kill.

“How To” columns provided what has to be conceded is practically useless knowledge, that is, knowledge that has little practical use. Imagine, for example, any of the winners of the *Young Men of Great Britain’s* prizes for 1868, which included Henry LeBouef of

St. James's School, Jersey, H. W. Fowler of C Company, 37<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Aldershot, and Mrs. G. Rowley of 9 Thames St, Greenwich, imagine any of them tackling the project in the October 1868 *Young Englishmen's Journal*, the Indian Canoe: "First take a log say about six feet in length—a tree whose trunk is about two feet in diameter; saw this through down the middle lengthways...". It gets harder when the writer instructs his lads to shape both halves, hollow them out, then nail them together, but the real message is clear. Not one in 250,000 readers will build that canoe. But now all 250,000 readers know *how* to build that canoe, and can talk confidently about the technical details of such a project and what might be the best way (theoretically of course) to make that canoe faster or stronger or better able to handle the whitewater of the Mighty Columbia River just south of Fort Walla Walla. And they can be confident that, in a pinch, why they could certainly build that canoe. The periodicals' adventure discourse consistently emphasizes that knowing how to manage certain adventurous activities is of value, whether or not one ever engages in such activities.

Natural history articles, usually adventure articles posing as natural history, employed the same discourse. "Wild Turkeys and Coyotes," (*Boy's Own Magazine*, VIII, 43, 1866, 19-27), ostensibly a bit of natural history about indigenous American fauna, provides an almost iconic example of the discourse of adventure embedded in a supposed natural history essay. The *BOM's* focus was not on habitat or range, or raising of the young, or life-span; no diet or gestation period here; no seasonal markings. The *BOM's* coyote was an almost unrecognizable, anthropomorphized nexus of violence and horror lurking in the shadows of Adventureland America. "Among the most rapacious and dangerous animals of North America," says the self-proclaimed natural historian for boys, "the wolf (commonly called the coyote in some of the Southern States) is the one that sportsmen fear to meet as much as a panther or a grizzly bear." Thus was the coyote—not truly a wolf, by the way, but certain unadventurous facts have a way of attaining insubstantiality in adventure discourse—thus was the coyote set up as a worthy foe of the sportsman, which of course would make the ultimate victory of discourse-participant hunter even sweeter: "These wolves—far more numerous in the United States than in Europe—are, perhaps, more horrible in aspect than those of the Old World"—thus, deadly *and* frighteningly ugly—"Everywhere, along desert paths as well as at inhabited spots, in the neighbourhood of farms and villages, on the prairies or in the woods, the wolf, the ghoul of the animal race, presents itself to the traveler [sic], with its slaving jaws and flashing eyes, uttering a growl, which is the usual sign of cowardice blended with impudence." So the coyote is granted two human qualities which, in the discourse of adventure, automatically identify it as an unredeemable villain: cowardice and impudence. Like the pirates that the Tom Darings of serial fiction hunt down, coyotes are robbers and thus must be run to earth "till they [the settlers] have rubbed out the mess-number of many" (note also the bit of military jargon in the text). Also like the villains of so many adventure fictions, "The coyote is ignorant of any feeling of sympathy," although it is occasionally "capable of feeling a certain degree of sensibility of the nerves, at any rate, if not of the heart." How would the author know that? Simple—in the discourse of adventure impudent, cowardly ghouls would naturally be ignorant of any feeling of sympathy. Thus, adventure natural history presented its subject not in simple scientific terms but in adventure terms as yet another enemy out there that must be, and often is,

overcome by one of our band of adventurous young men. In effect, adventure discourse could be said to “enable” the actions of Empire.

Descriptive articles pretending to non-fiction status and extolling the joy and adventure of a life at sea or in one of the brave old regiments began appearing with increasing frequency in the ‘70s. In 1870 *The Young Briton* (one of the more military-minded of the boys’ papers) ran an article on the Franco-Prussian War, and followed it up with a piece on “The Needle-gun and the Enfield” which delved into the technical aspects of modern infantry weapons and concluded:

“[We] shall be only too glad to see our gallant young fellows armed with efficient weapons in lieu of those which they bear now.

These are all very well for prize shooting and other slow work; but should they ever have to compete in battlefield with the chassepot, Needlegun, or Snider, but one result would ensue—the destruction of those who bear arms so far behind the time!”

The discourse in this piece touches on a number of adventure values: the insider’s technical terms, a hint of patriotism and militarism (in the general description of infantrymen as “our gallant young fellows”—in many middle class periodicals the army were assumed to be the scum of the earth, and certainly that attitude obtained in many lower middle class and working class families, but not, as we see, in adventure discourse), and of course, the element of competition, even life and death competition.

### **Non-Textual Discourse**

As noted above, illustrations, advertisements, even the wrappers of the weekly and monthly issues of the adventure magazines participated fully in adventure discourse. Adventure discourse sold the magazines, as the Religious Tract Society discovered when floating the idea of a competitor to the questionable products of the Emmets and Brett. Adventure discourse required a cover that would induce a boy to hand over his penny, and illustrations that would keep him reading to the back wrapper.<sup>9</sup> And adventure discourse required that the commodities for sale be exciting, boy kinds of commodities like fireworks and rifles, not soaps and foodstuffs. Adventure magazines gendered their commodities, like their fiction, thoroughly male.

Certainly the illustrations included in the various magazines participated fully in the discourse of adventure. The front cover of virtually every magazine featured a drawing illustrating the lead serial. On the inside, action drawings further illustrated serials or articles.<sup>10</sup> Occasionally a magazine might even give away a free color lithograph illustrating some great adventure—the Siege at Lucknow, perhaps, or uniforms of historic army regiments—suitable for framing as a purchase bonus

Generally, illustrations usually showed a boy in the midst of a life or death conflict. The boys in the illustrations resonated courage, determination, resistance; because of their situation—on a ship, a desert island, a jungle, in a cave—they clearly had some special skills that landed them where they were in the first place. “Sign, Boy, Sign!” (Illustration

1) for example, communicates key features of adventure discourse: the heroic boy (well dressed) being forced by the evil Other (lounging about indolently if not insolently, dressed as a pirate, and drinking besides) being forced to sign something against his will. His attitude communicates that though he may lose this battle, he will continue to resist whatever it is that he must resist and eventually win out. He is in a place (apparently a ship's cabin) which will require him to have special skills and knowledge. He does not hang back, but leans forward aggressively.

“Black Bill Administers the Cat,” (Illustration 2) too, participates in adventure discourse. Here, a double Other (both a pirate and an African) attacks a young, white girl (helpless, half-naked, eroticized). The girl slumps against the mast of a ship, her hands tethered together above her head, her breasts exposed. Black Bill's arm is up, his mouth is open, and he is leaning into his blow—he obviously is enjoying his work. The rest of the crew look on with interest. The discourse is clear. Pirates and Africans are evil; an act of daring bravery by someone adept at such acts will be required to deliver the girl; and girls are, by their nature, both helpless and erotic.

And finally, I am particularly struck by the eroticism of this plate given away with copies of *The Young Men of Great Britain* (Illustration 3). Clearly, the medieval subject matter was merely a ruse to show a nearly nude woman's breasts to a nearly nude man holding his sword level and groin high, all pretty sexually explicit for young men in the '70s, never mind the sexuality of the pawing horse and the dogs. In fact, this was so clearly what we called in my youth a dirty picture that I asked the subscribers of *Victoria* how in the world *YMGB* got away with it, and the consensus seemed to be that quasi-classical subjects got something of a free pass from the censors in the latter nineteenth century.

The mastheads of the various magazines, too, participated in the discourse. Here, elements of patriotism and militarism were injected into the adventure, although I would contend that both patriotism and militarism were subsumed by graphic references to the adventure contained in the magazine. Most included Britannia and/or a Lion. *Our Boys' Journal* (Illustration 4) further included a cricket player and scholar (a reference to the emerging school story), soldier, sailor, medieval knight, and archer. The cover of the monthly collected *Young Men of Great Britain* (Illustration 5) placed Britannia and her lion at the top center and surrounded the page with illustrations of Peace (young men and women at a dance), War (a swordsman attacking a cannon), Art (a young man gazing at a painting), and Commerce (two men rolling barrels on a dock). Included also are the ever-present cricket player, scholar, soldier, and sailor. Like the collected images of knights, cricket players etc., Britannia and the lion are less patriotic emblems than they are references to the ongoing adventure tale that is British history.

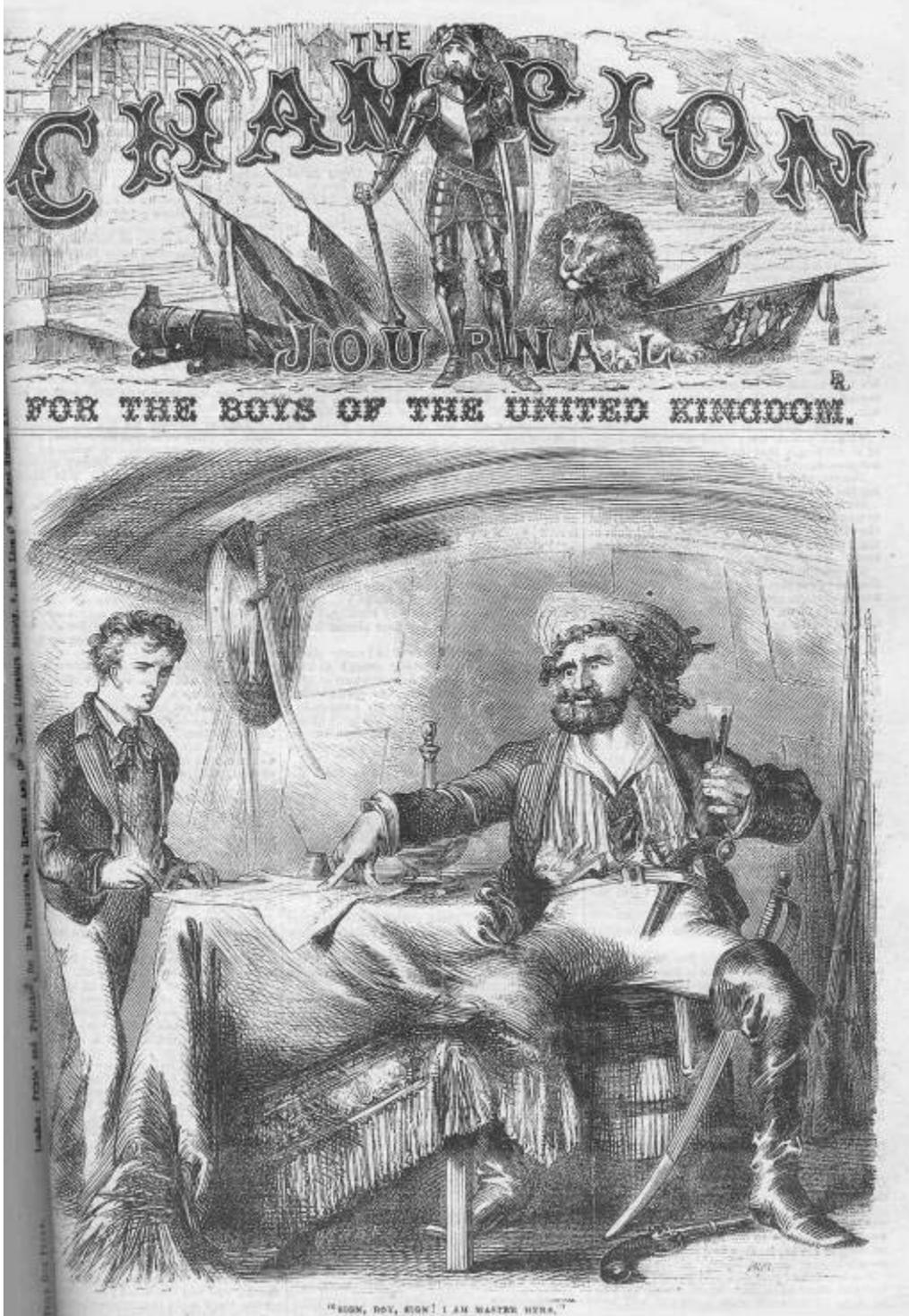


Illustration 1

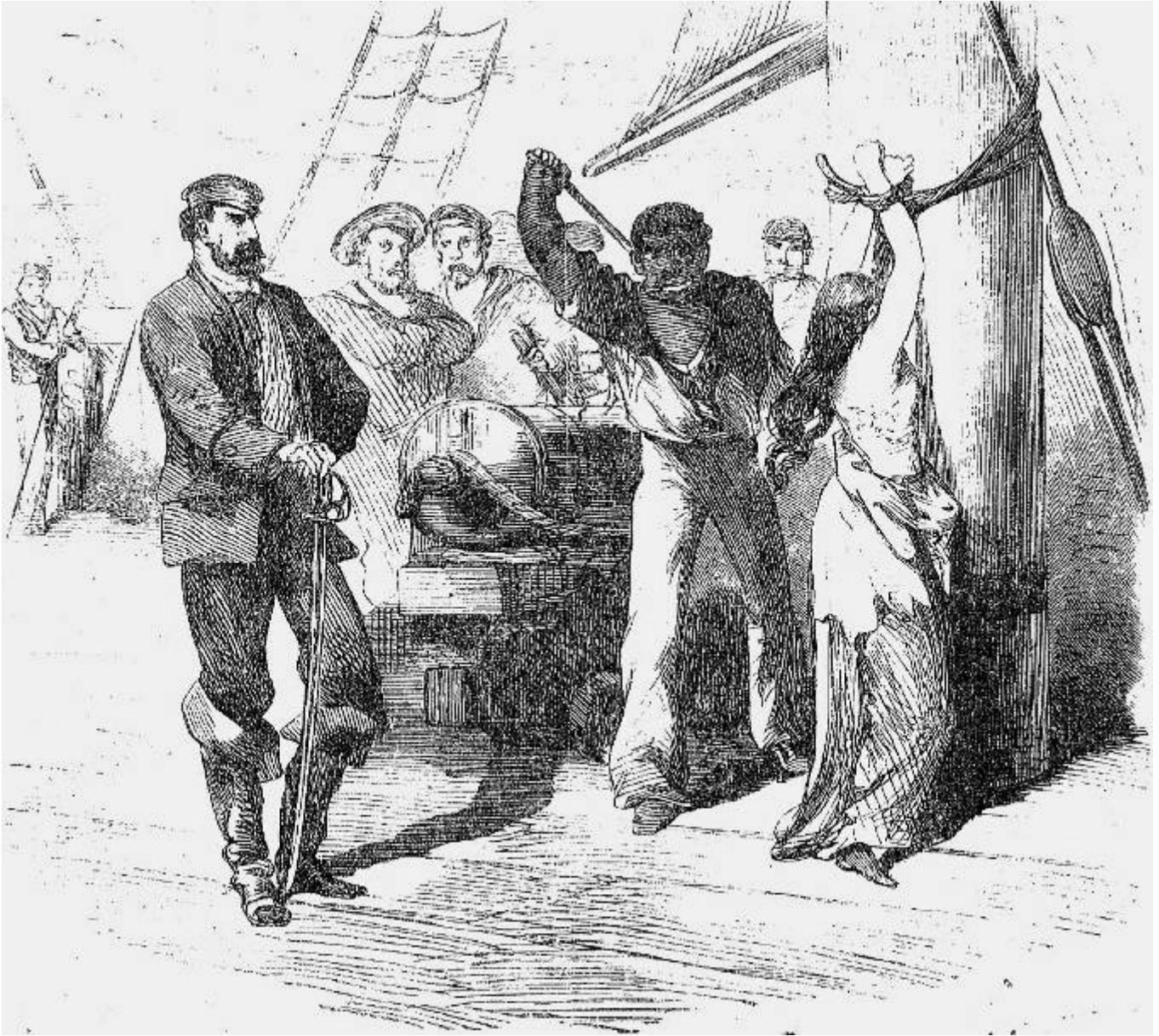


Illustration 2



Illustration 3



**OUR BOYS' JOURNAL**  
 A WEEKLY MAGAZINE FOR EVERY HOME.  
 No. 242.—Vol. X.] APRIL 13, 1881. [PRICE ONE PENNY.



"HUSH! KEEP CLOSE," WHISPERED THE TAR. "WE ARE WATCHED!"

**HE WOULD BE A SAILOR!  
 OR, BREAKERS AHEAD.**

CHAPTER VI.

YLESS was Paul's heart when with the rising of the sun next morning came an overwhelming craving for food; and lonely, deserted feeling as he was, he was roused to a consciousness of his position—simply, as it were by hunger.

Wandering about, he at length found a portion of the rocks covered with oysters, which he opened with his pocket knife, and which, as may be imagined, afforded him a delicious meal.

Poor Nep looked almost as woe-begone as his master; he looked food and shivered with cold.

The faithful dog had never been properly dry for some time. The cold dews of night had thoroughly soaked his coat.

He continued this—not only from instincts of hunger, but from the mere desire of occupation—until the quantity of the delicate bivalves had imparted to him an additional degree of courage.

Then, rising, he proceeded to the point where he had left his boat, in order to see if anything could be done towards repairing it.

But all attempts at doing so were quite in vain.

It had been so battered and crushed by the action of the rough waves that no one but a man skilled in the trade could have made any attempt at mending it.

Besides, tools were necessary, and he had but a clasp knife.

With a sigh, Paul turned away, not without experiencing a choking sensation in his throat, and a difficulty in controlling himself, which drove him almost to madness.

However, to divert his thoughts, as well as to ascertain the nature of his position, he resolved to make a reconnoitring expedition.

He found that the small bay was surrounded by a rocky rampart of great height, and surmounted by a dense forest.

Below this was a sloping rock, where the oysters clustered, and which was bare at low water.

Inland was a small piece of level ground, in the middle of which was a basin, into which a spring of fresh water flowed.

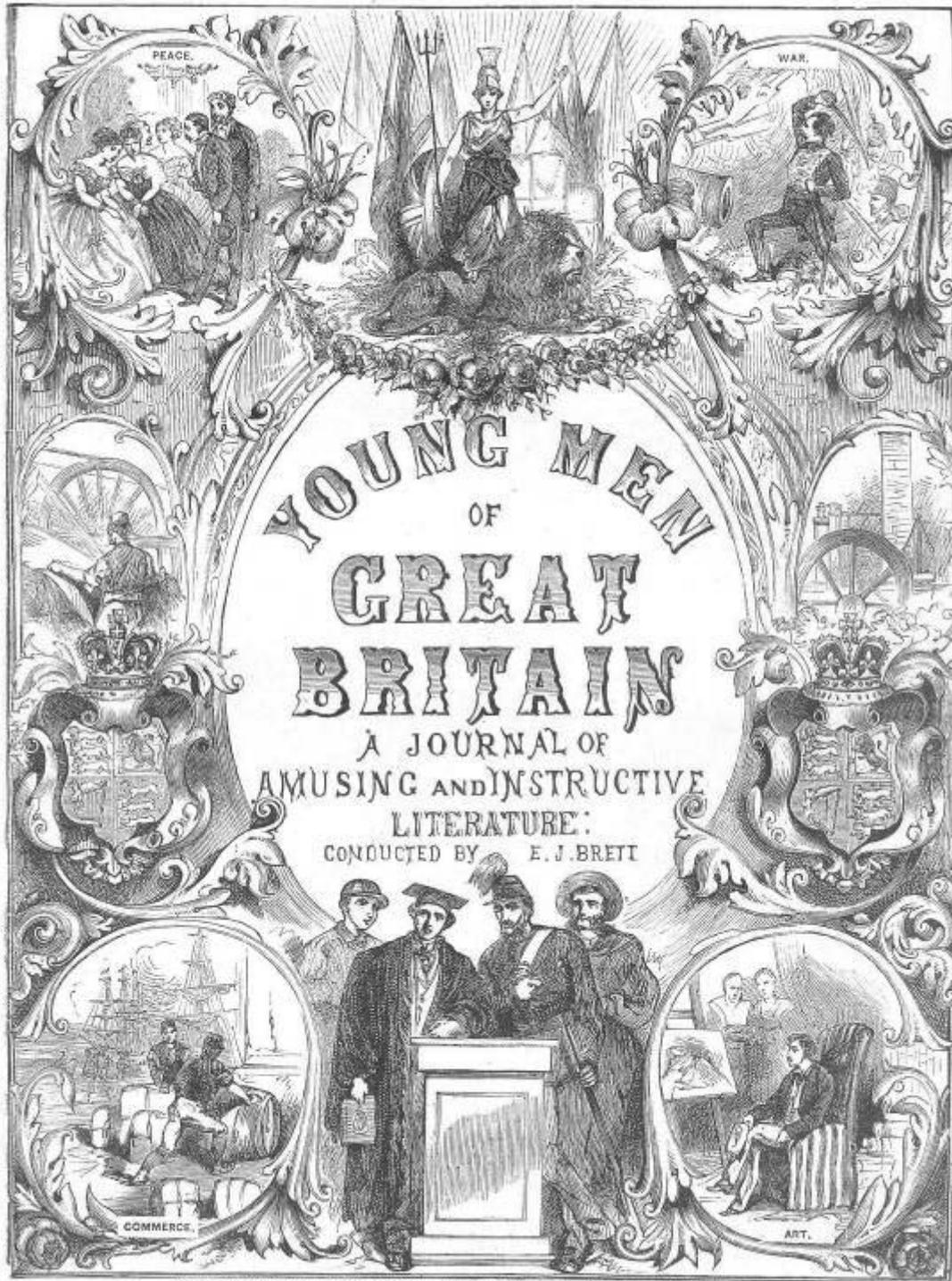
Around this basin grew tall and wild grass and

Illustration 4

PART 5.]

JULY, 1866.

[PRICE 6s.]



NEWSAGENTS' PUBLISHING COMPANY, 147, FLEET STREET, E.C.

Illustration 5

In its own small way, the advertising in the magazines also contributed to the discourse of adventure. Advertising in the *Boy's Own Magazine* included commodities and language aimed at boys, of course: cricket supplies, watches, tool chests (the discourse, of course, assumed an ability to use tools effectively), steam boats, and "Guns at one shilling each" (carriage provided free) which "will propel shots 120 feet." They also included items that would help a boy learn valuable, if pretty sensational, skills: scientific experiments in "Galvanism, Chemistry, Necromancy, Pyrotechnics etc. including the dazzling SOLAR LIGHT, and endless JAPANESE TINTED FIRES, the mysterious MERLIN GLEAMS, and other startling novelties" from Manning and Co. A boy seeking true inside knowledge of a useful skill might order "a box containing complete apparatus for performing six marvellous conjuring tricks," which might fit in well with the Manning and Company experiments in Necromancy.

### **Conclusion**

The successful boys' adventure magazines, then, were totally integrated sites of adventure discourse, communities of their own with their own rules, values, assumptions and culture. They provide an insight into an artificial world built by writers, publishers, and readers that shared a set of common, romantic, sensational values. As noted in the introduction to this paper, editors and publishers may have attempted (usually halfheartedly) to try to impart alien values to the readers, but there is little evidence to suggest that their attempts were in any way successful. When J. S. Bratton contends that one of the hallmarks of adventure magazines is the emphasis on a "glorification of boyish physical force" (83) she is absolutely correct, since physical force is certainly a core quality in adventure discourse and a core value for the readers. But when she goes on to argue that

The social objective of these stories is to set forth a model for behaviour which offers the middle- or lower middle-class youth a path to the highest distinction, a way in which he can prove himself a gentleman equal to the highest in the land. It is suggested that he can achieve this elevation of caste by means which are available to him in practice—by exercising his energy, intelligence and drive, and indulging in his boyish taste for adventure, in the interests not of personal gain, but of an ideal of service to the nation (85)

I think she misreads the bulk of the discourse. While the objective of "Wild Turkeys and Coyotes" or "Mark Rushton" might remain unknown, it's hard to find any evidence of elevation of caste. I would argue that Bratton has mistaken the discourse of these stories for a kind of unified discourse of young peoples' lives. In real life, participants in adventure discourse knew that they were not about to head out to Cashmere to hunt the much feared reech, but adventure story or no, they knew that they would face constant conflict: when they moved into a new neighborhood, or took a new job, or moved to a new school, they knew they would find themselves to be outsiders and be forced to fight to establish themselves. The glorification of physical force was not just a staple of adventure discourse, it was a daily reality for the participants, albeit in a much more prosaic world.

Adventure magazines and adventure discourse played a significant role in later Victorian culture, not just because they formed the staple diet of a generation of young people who participated in adventure discourse through boys' adventure magazines, but because that generation grew up seeking something comparable to read. What they found were sensational newspapers—*Reynolds's*, *Star*, *Pearson's Weekly*, *Answers*, *Tit-Bits*—that looked much like their old stand-bys. These were weeklies, they were illustrated, they focused on sensational stories of adventure, war, crime, sports, sex, and so on. They created heroes like Gordon, Stanley, and Kitchener, and a host of young heroes whose names have been lost to history: strangers who rescue infants from wrecked trains, bagpipers in the Sudan, young cavalymen who “want another go at them.” Many of the stories even looked like serials, especially the dispatches from battle fronts in Cuba, Greece, India or the Sudan.<sup>11</sup> The peculiar rhetoric of the adventure serial migrated most clearly to the rhetoric of the war reporter: compare the excerpt from “Mark Grayham” cited earlier to this excerpt from Bennett Burleigh's dispatch from the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, printed in a sizeable number of newspapers (including the *Pall Mall Gazette* of Sept. 6, 1898, from which this is taken):

The clamour they raised was simply terrific; the air was filled with shouts of “Allah” as they advanced against the Sirdar's troops.

The spectacle they presented as they came towards us was most impressive. A sea of banners seemed to have been suddenly set rolling, and against each flag flashed the gleaming steel of their arms.

Brave as they were not even the Dervishes could stand against the hail of rifle and maxim bullets which swept across that belt of ground, and, recoiling before it, they swerved to the left. On our right face the same success was achieved by the Soudanese troops, although the foe pushed their onslaught further home before they were stopped by the dark battalion's Martinis.

It was a desperate fight...but eventually discipline triumphed in brilliant fashion and the Egyptian brigades may fairly be said to have won the honours of the day by their magnificent pluck.

The enemy at last ran before the hurricane of shells and bullets which was hurled at them, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battery of Royal Artillery, under Major Williams, causing fearful execution.

Both excerpts feature wild charges by savages, in both the heroes show coolness, discipline, and pluck, and they even use the identical phrase “did fearful execution.” Both use the same short, breathless adjective and active verb-charged sentences. Burleigh's would certainly have fit comfortably into the discourse of an adventure magazine from 20 years earlier.

Thus, adventure discourse contributed to the new journalism, migrating out of its special place where all parties recognized it for what it was and into a “news” environment in which its power could be used to manipulate generally assumed truths. The implications of that move will have to be examined in a much larger study than this one; suffice it to say that to its participants in the '70s and '80s, the discourse of adventure that I have

examined in this paper constituted an important, if often misinterpreted, element in their peculiar culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Lee Jackson's remarkable web site [www.Victorianlondon.org](http://www.Victorianlondon.org), click on childhood, then children, then boy thieves (1). The citation is from Chapter 8, "Juvenile Thieves," of the *Seven Curses*.

<sup>2</sup> Page 16 of the June, 1874 reissue of *Boys of England*.

<sup>3</sup> See especially John M. MacKenzie on empire, Bernard Porter on empire and masculinity, J.S. Bratton and Steve Attredge on patriotism, imperialism and nationalism, Patrick Dunne on imperialism, Joseph Bristow on religion, racism, and social Darwinism, Jeffrey Richards on church militarism and racism, and a host of others.

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Conboy, *Journalism: a Critical History* (London: Sage, 2004), 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> See Diana Dixon, "Children and the Press," in Michael Harris and Alan J. Lee, ed., *The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U. Press, 1986), 133; and Rose, *Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 322.

<sup>6</sup> Given the census numbers, Davis's estimate seems to be more than a little high. It's a stretch to believe that over half of the boys and girls under the age of 20 were even literate enough to read adventure magazines, and we know from autobiographies that many child readers never saw adventure magazines.

<sup>7</sup> See *Boys of England*, 4 (1868) for both of these serials.

<sup>8</sup> See the online index Sciper.org (click on periodicals indexed, then on *Boys' Own Paper*) for information on early editors of *BOP*.

<sup>9</sup> The *Boys' Own Paper* was something of a subversive publication, an Evangelical paper masquerading as a boy's adventure magazine. The adventure discourse was real enough, but the Religious Tract Society, the paper's publishers, ensured through their Evangelical editorial team (plus regular review of the contents) that a certain level of Christian respectability infused each issue. Some boys saw through the ruse and didn't read the magazine, but most read it for the adventure and managed to slip right past the preaching. For more on the peculiar nature of this long-running magazine, see Kelly Boyd, *Manliness and the boys' story paper in Britain: a cultural history, 1855-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jack Cox, *Take a Cold Tub, Sir!: the story of the Boy's Own Paper* (Guildford: Lutterworth P, 1982); and Karl Sabbagh, *Your Case is Hopeless: bracing advice from The Boy's Own Paper* (London: John Murray, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Occasionally, a drawing may have been included simply because it showed action: an engraving of "Horse Artillery Going into Action" in *Young Men of Great Britain* (Vol VI reissue, 5 June 1877, 69) is interesting and colorful, but bears no relation to any of the text in that issue.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the components of New Journalism, see Joel H. Wiener, "How New is the New Journalism," in Joel H. Wiener, ed., *Papers for the Millions, The New Journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914* (New York: Greenwood P, 1988), 47-73, 53-4. Hugh Cecil also comments on the relationship between adventure fiction and war

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reporting in “British Correspondents and the Sudan Campaign of 1896-8,” in Edward M. Spiers, ed., *Sudan, the Reconquest Reappraised* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 102-128.

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