



# Classics in Short No.125 Children of the New Forest

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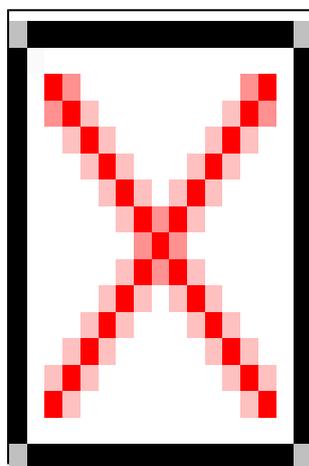
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Is **Children of the New Forest** the earliest English fiction for children never to have gone out of print?



## Captain Marryat

or, sequentially, Midshipman... Lieutenant... Commander... Marryat came somewhat late to writing novels and later still to writing novels for children. His run of rollicking sea- and adventure-stories for a mainly adult readership had almost run its course by 1840 when his children who, it seems, were fans of **The Swiss Family Robinson** requested papa to write them a sequel to that unexhausted kaleidoscope of desert-island life.

## Papa was appalled.

Consulting one of the many varied translations that were coming on the market at that time he saw no good in it: 'Amusing' it may have been but 'it does not adhere to the probable, or even the possible, which should ever be the case in a book, even if fictitious, when written for children'. The want of seamanship was predictable since that occurred regularly in naval writings, but it was 'the ignorance, or carelessness' in matters concerning animal, vegetable, and topographic affairs that forbade any attempt at continuation. So he decided to write a fresh account 'in the same style'.

## That turned out to be *Masterman Ready; or the wreck of the Pacific,*

the first volume of which was published by Longman in 1841. Marryat saw it as a bow at a venture, promising more if it was successful, and in 1842 two further volumes showed that that had been the case. For all its accuracy though, it shares with its forerunner unappealing moments of piety and didacticism whose continuance in print down to the twentieth century tells more of the moribund nature of 'reward-book' publishing than of a genuine affection on the part of the readers.

## Contemporary success however,

pointed a way forward for Marryat as writer and with the publication of **The Children of the New Forest**

in two volumes in 1847 he aimed for a less formulaic children's book. It opens in 1647 at the time of the escape of Charles I from detention in Hampton Court and his presumed flight southwards to the coast. Ruthless Levellers are after him, burning down, in the course of their hunt the mansion of the Royalist Beverley family at Arnywood, near Lymington, on the off chance that

the King is hiding there. That might have been the end of the story since no quarter was offered and it was assumed that the four Beverley children, all orphans, died in the immolation. But, thanks to that vital ingredient in adventure stories, an overheard conversation, the children are rescued just before the Levellers arrive and are taken into the forest to live with the Beverleys' faithful retainer, Jacob Armitage.

## The four children,

two boys, aged thirteen and twelve, and two girls, eleven and eight, are biddable learners, despite their rank, and, taking their harbouring in a forest cottage as a bit of a game, adapt themselves to their suddenly restricted fortune. Jacob Armitage, on whose wits they are entirely dependent, is a bit of a Masterman Ready in his bluff practicality, but he is not given so regularly to homespun theology and his forest skills are the more easily passed on to his pupils than would be those of the old mariner. As time goes on, through the development of the children's native abilities, the cottage retreat becomes something of a successful smallholding. Edward, the eldest, becoming a great deer-stalker and thus producer of saleable venison, his brother, Humphrey, a natural property developer and creator of a little working farm.

## The tension

between the need for secrecy and some necessary contacts with the world beyond the cottage eventuates in Edward's accidental encounter, in the role of Armitage's grandson, with a newly appointed Parliamentary Intendant of the Forest and his daughter. Through this the plot opens out to some side-adventures, with villainy and bloodshed, rather in the style of those experienced by Midshipman Easy in Marryat's best-known novel. While not quite a *deus ex machina*, the Intendant, who had been a friend to Cromwell, proves more sympathetic than the latter's more fanatical followers, and will ultimately become a saviour of the Arnwood estate and Edward's father-in-law to boot.

## The problem

that confronted Marryat in the planning of the story was the dozen years that passed between the burning of Arnwood and the Restoration during which the children of the New Forest all grow into twenty-year-olds, while the political tensions more or less disappear. There is some sleight of hand in the galloping history of those years, but the fiction is saved at its final, Hollywood-style denouement, by what has sustained it throughout: Marryat's success in the portrayal of his maturing characters.

## In hopes

of establishing his author as a distinctive writer for children, the publisher announced this work as the first of a 'Juvenile Library' of Marryat's work and gave the two volumes coloured title pages. They were also illustrated with twelve handsome etchings by Marryat's son, Frank. The project was short-lived however because Marryat died before he could finish the next volume in the series: **The Little Savage**, which Frank had to complete. It had less success, probably for that reason, but The Children established a secure niche for themselves and have never been out of print since their first sojourn in the New Forest.

**Children of the New Forest** is published by CreateSpace Publishing 978-1- 4848-7348-9.

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

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