



# Picturing Treasure Island

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[Shirley Hughes](#) [1]

[71](#) [2]

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Other Articles

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**Shirley Hughes** looks at illustrative versions of **Treasure Island**.

Robert Louis Stevenson's **Treasure Island** has never had the 'Alice' treatment. This is to say that in triumphantly surviving for nearly a century as one of the best adventure stories ever written it has never been associated with any particular set of visual images. Long John Silver's strength as a character is in the words. He has the advantage of entering the reader's imagination unfettered by the kind of indelible first interpretation which Tenniel gave to Lewis Carroll's Alice.

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Yet it's a story which cries out for pictures. The stunning prose, bowling along as it does, so beautifully crafted, so intensely *readable* - how did Stevenson keep it up, page after page, with such brilliance? Genius, I suppose - conjuring up one memorable character after another. But it is Silver, that most charming of villains, the man with 'a face as big as a ham - plain and pale but intelligent and smiling' who must surely represent the central challenge to any illustrator.

N C Wyeth, Big Daddy of American illustration during the golden years and father of the painter Andrew Wyeth, made his **Treasure Island** illustrations for Scribners in 1911. Those of us who saw the originals when they were on show here in Britain a few years ago were astonished by their size-large bravura oil paintings executed in strong, confidently handled brushwork. But their reduction to colour-plates has not decreased their impact, rather intensified it. He is a superb figure artist (an illustrator's training in his time included rigorous life-drawing discipline as a matter of course). His great strengths are the exactness with which he places his figures within the frame to give maximum excitement to the action and above all his command of light and dark.

Often he floods his pictures with light, but always dramatic shadows are cast. In one place the watching Ben Gunn emerges from the gloom of the forest with only his face and upper arm brilliantly lit by a single shaft beam. In another the buccaneers swarm over the stockade towards us framed against a hot pink and blue sky, and drop down into shadow. In a third a sinister group of men bend over a book and a knife by the lurid glow of a lantern. But a looming dark figure, bending eagerly forward, dominates the foreground and hides the light-source-a device which since Caravaggio and Rembrandt has been used successfully to create dramatic intensity. Wyeth's Silver is best shown when with burly brutality, all pretence at geniality gone, he drags Jim on a rope 'for all the world ... like a dancing bear'.

Wyeth's painterliness and his great sense of theatre make him a difficult act to follow. Rowland Hilder, widely known in the 1930s as an accomplished landscape painter as well as an illustrator, brought some of the same qualities to the OUP 1944 edition. His effects are created by bold black line combined with colour wash. A capacity to get inside the characters is not his strongest point. His Silver is more predictable than Wyeth's and he has not attempted a close-up of the horrible blind Pew. But his line drawings - half titles, chapter headings and endpieces, beautifully placed boxes, very dark with lots of solid black - are executed with powerful elegance and are very memorable.

Even more memorable, to some children scarifyingly so, are Mervyn Peake's black and white illustrations for the Eyre

and Spottiswoode 1949 edition. Colour in this case would be a complete irrelevance. Peake's meticulously hatched style is full of shadowy subtleties of tone. He gets right to the heart of Silver, has his devious charm, his viciousness, to the life. (Peake, it is worth remembering, had as a war artist witnessed some grim sights only a few years before.) He often uses uncluttered areas of shadow to enhance a single telling figure, as with the gorilla-like old sea dog, his eyes glazed with rum, or Jim Hawkins, alert inside the stockade, or Israel Hands' body in terrifying free fall from the mizzen-shrouds into the sea. Jim, so often characterised simply as a sturdy lad among a vivid cast of adults, is here shown as a very eighteenth-century figure, slender and full of resolution.

Peake has an eye for the grotesque. He draws foliage as though it were seaweed or fungus. He is strongly aware of the lurking violence in the story. Unforgettable details such as the horror of the almost finicky gesture with which the man with two missing fingers displays his maimed hand, and the macabre profile of Pew, peering sightlessly from under his eye-shade, are what make this a unique and outstanding interpretation. Anyone lucky enough to own a copy, now regrettably out of print, should treasure it.

Looking at contemporary editions it is surprising how few are enhanced by distinguished illustrations. John Lawrence has brought a lavish generosity to the handsome Heinemann 1990 volume, with a colour or line illustration on most spreads. He draws with robust freedom. The pale washes of his colour work are given strength by vigorous pen hatching. He has not involved himself too deeply in the darker side of the story. Challenging dramatic highpoints such as Pew's death under the horses hoofs are a touch too perfunctory and polite. Silver, though characterised piratically enough, is a round-faced Ardizzone-like fellow. But the island itself is dreamily, magically evoked with some fine vistas of the ship lying at anchor and the shadowy lagoon.

Ralph Steadman has the advantage of a boldly recognisable style. Sometimes he almost verges on a parody of himself, though he can hardly be held responsible for his many imitators. He is a fine illustrator, brushing all conventions aside, attacking the page with the spluttery point of his pen with enormous gusto.

His illustrations for the Harrap **Treasure Island** (1985) do not spare the gore. Silver is represented as a splendidly venomous grotesque, Jim Hawkins a shock-headed figure from a fairy-tale. His blind Pew is an effectively frightening double-visaged creature shrouded in diaphanous shadowy washes. In some cases, such as the picture of the buccaneers storming the stockade, Steadman has simply let go in a welter of blood, an element with which he is very much at home. But he contrasts this with some marvellous moments of restraint - the double-page spread of the 'Admiral Benbow' Inn under a misty Kentish moon with Jim and his mother seen as two tiny figures fleeing into the marshy landscape, or the brooding calm of the island, dark against the sky, done in finely-graduated tones of sepia, lavender and grey.

**Treasure Island** is one of the few classics written in the last century which never has to be skipped or edited when read aloud to a group of modern children. There are no long descriptions, no authorly interventions to hold up the narrative. Every phrase is necessary and gripping. But, much as we admirers of the novel may regret it, the fact has to be faced that many children's experience of the book will be in a shortened popular edition. Will it lead them to the real thing? If only we knew for sure. The publishers of these editions have a huge responsibility to their audience and the quality of the illustrations is crucial.

The current Ladybird edition with illustrations by Dennis Manton falls down sadly both in the re-telling - we all know about the necessity for a limited vocabulary but does it have to plod along so woodenly? - and in the pictures which are wooden too. One has the impression of a lot of bright local colour reminiscent of a DIY catalogue. Peter Dennis's illustrations for the Usborne Picture Classics paperback have a bit more life to them. The story is treated almost as a strip cartoon without the formal boxes or speech balloons, and there is a more considered attempt at atmospheric colour.

Perhaps it is too testing to consider these efforts alongside illustrations of the calibre of Wyeth's or Peake's. Dennis, after all, has been required to do around 128 pictures all in full colour for the Usborne book. But a mass market production, even allowing for the struggle to keep down costs, can have a little gusto, a touch of panache to feed the child's interest. These have neither, only the dreary, listless air of something churned out to feed a market.

It is fascinating to speculate about possible **Treasure Island** illustrators to come, though sad to ponder what Charles Keeping, an obvious candidate for this book, would have made of it had he lived.

Will someone persuade Patrick Benson to attempt the challenge? Or Patrick Lynch? I hope so. One wonders if the success of Gary Blythe's illustrations for **The Whales' Song** will tempt some young artists away from water-colours and inks and back to full bodied oil paint-a medium less often used now than in the first half of this century.

One thing is sure, that **Treasure Island** has the power and attraction to survive and will yet inspire illustrations we have not even dreamed of.

Editions of **Treasure Island** mentioned in this piece:

The Hilder, Peake and Steadman editions are sadly now out of print.

III. N C Wyeth, Gollancz, 0 575 03149 2, f8.95

III. John Lawrence, Heinemann, 0 434 96508 1, f 10.95

III. Dennis Manton, Ladybird, 0 7214 0597 5, f 1.30

III. Peter Dennis, Usborne, 0 86020 574 6, £2.50

Shirley Hughes is one of Britain's best known illustrators. Her next book is **The Big Alfie Out-of-Doors Storybook**, due from The Bodley Head in Spring 1992. Her version of **The Secret Garden** (see Margaret Fisher's article on page 28) is published by Gollancz, 0 575 04168 4, at £ 10.95.

Page Number:

24

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