

William Henry Giles Kingston: a borrower afloat

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Robert Louis Stevenson, in his verse prologue to *Treasure Island*, paid tribute to the literary idols of his youth:

*Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,
Or Cooper of the wind and wave.*

The last two names are still familiar; the first is not. Unlike R. M. Ballantyne, unlike James Fenimore Cooper, W. H. G. Kingston is largely a forgotten writer except to bibliophiles and antiquarian booksellers and an older generation with fond memories of Sunday School prizes. Most of his books have gone out of print. One or two only are read today: boys' tales of adventure at sea, such as *Peter the Whaler*, which has been translated recently into Niuean.¹ Yet, in his time, Kingston was a prolific, respected and immensely popular author. He was also a persistent plagiarist.

William Henry Giles Kingston was born in 1814, the son of a merchant with interests in Portugal. He was expected to enter the family business, but soon showed he preferred writing to trade. His first published work was in newspapers, but his literary career proper began with the publication in 1844 of an adventure novel, *The Circassian Chief*. 'It is a readable story,' his biographer has said, 'but not qualified to survive in a competition for the world's interest'.² Kingston's first great success was *Peter the Whaler* in 1851. From then until his death in 1880 he scribbled unceasingly: he founded or edited five periodicals,³ wrote innumerable magazine articles, and published more than 150 books, both fiction and non-fiction. Several of them were about, or set in, New Zealand, although he never visited the place.

Kingston's industry is amazing: 150 books in 36 years is an average of more than four books a year. Yet writing was only one of his activities. He was a devoted husband and father. While still a young man, he received an order of Portuguese knighthood and a pension for services to that country. He had a passion for the sea. One of his obituarists assures us that for several years of his life Kingston was 'constantly afloat, either in his own yacht, merchant vessels, or men o' war'.⁴ He was one of the founders of the Missions to Seamen. He was an active propagandist for emigration before imperialism became fashionable. He served as the honorary