

# Robinson Crusoe meets Susan Barton

*Foe*, by J.M. Coetzee. published by Stoddart Publishing, Toronto, 1986 (157 pages).

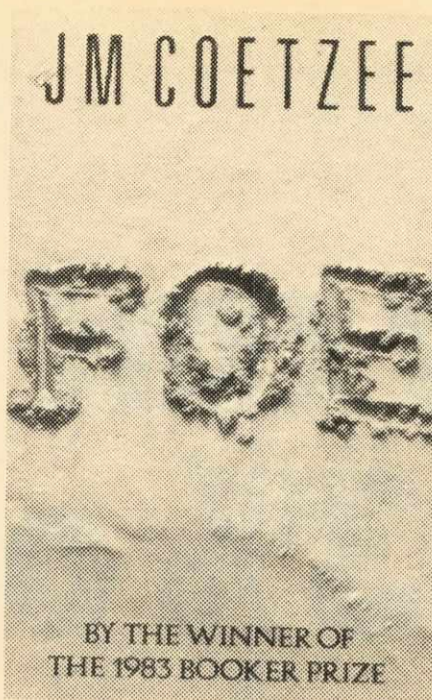
By PAT SAVAGE

In *Foe*, the South African writer J.M. Coetzee blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction, reality and dream, until we are not sure what is true, what has really happened. Through the life of Susan Barton we meet Robinson Crusoe and his creator Daniel Defoe.

Both are interesting men in their own right. Robinson Crusoe, perhaps the most famous castaway ever, builds his own prosperous little civilization on a

desert isle. Defoe (the Foe of Coetzee's book) was a writer enjoyed by his contemporaries Rousseau and Swift whose own life was interrupted by six or seven imprisonments at the hands of his political enemies.

The first part of *Foe* is Barton's account, written plainly and truthfully, of her life as a castaway on an island with Crusoe (not Crusoe) and Friday. She lives a life far from the rugged but satisfying existence the original Cru-



soe lived.

She is bored, lonely and the constant wind irritates her ears. Crusoe and Friday spend their time moving rocks to build terraces on one side of the island. They have no seed to plant there. After

initial conversations about how they have come to be on the island there is nothing left to say. Crusoe lacks the inclination to talk, Friday the tongue (we are told Friday had his tongue ripped out by slavers, though we are given no reason to disbelieve that a Crusoe seeking tidiness in his world, is not just as capable of such an action).

Barton's Crusoe has neither the tools nor the desire to help them escape the island so she falls into despair. "I did not weep: but sometimes I would feel myself sitting on the bare earth with my hands over my eyes, rocking back and forth and moaning to myself, and would not know how I got there."

If Coetzee just wanted to debunk the Crusoe story, the first part of *Foe* would be enough as well as delightful reading for those of us, the faint hearted, who resent the always competent castaway. The story, however, moves on.

Barton and Friday are rescued and returned to England but

Crusoe dies on the voyage home. In England she looks for Foe to write her story. Foe wants to write the story complete with cannibals that never were, building a life that never was. Barton wants Foe to stick to what she knows happened on the island, allowing for his superior writing: "though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth."

It is in seeking the substance of the truth that certainty fades. Artist and subject, chosen silence and the silence of the mute, doubt and certainty: all are confused. Susan Barton grows confused. Is the story of Robinson Crusoe as simple as what she tells us in the beginning?

At one point she asks Foe: "Does it surprise you as much as it does me, this correspondence between things as they are and the pictures we have of them in our minds?" Foe's answer would be no.

By the end of *Foe*, nothing should surprise anybody. Unless it is that you didn't enjoy the book.

# The man who only wanted to be judge

*The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister*, by P.B. Waite, published by the University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1986.

By TOBY SANGER

Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister, was a rather staid and meticulous man, a Haligonian who wanted to be a judge but reluctantly ended up as the Prime Minister instead. His social graces were few (being the only Prime Minister to have the bad manners to die at Windsor Castle) and his claim to fame is just as much a result of his wife, Annie's ambitions for him as of his own powers of mind.

Despite this, Professor Peter B. Waite of Dalhousie's department of history, has written a book that sparkles with intimate ecrits, poignant vignettes and vivid recreations of political and judicial life in the last quarter of the 19th century (though without the cliches).

Waite is at his best describing people and institutions secondary to the main subject — he has picked real gems out of court records, newspapers and personal letters, lucidly and compassionately recreating characters with

all their foibles and quirks. These sketches patch together a sense of the life and circumstances of Sir John in a much more entertaining way than he apparently lived his life.

This technique is less effectively used in providing some analysis of the mind and the social and political life of Sir John.

His public instincts were "conservative, pedestrian, unadventurous"; from his correspondence with his wife it seems as if his private instincts leaned toward a preference for S&M. Whether the reader feels these proclivities betray a character displaying public virtues and private vices or private virtues and public vices, it's a pity Waite didn't do a bit more minor psychoanalysis of so Canadian a character in the context of his time. Waite says he distrusts psychoanalysis because "an author can fabricate a whole personality out of nothing. I tend to distrust teasing elaborate theories out of limited evidence."

Waite reiterates that Thompson's mind was "strong, coherent and untrammelled" enough times that the adjectives become almost Homeric devices. This

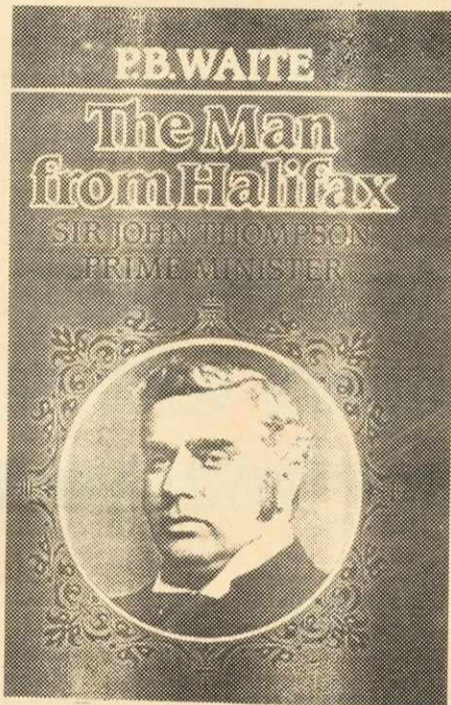
mind contributed greatly to Canada's international stature and the revision of our criminal code. Unfortunately, it also contributed to the establishment of separate schools in Canadian provinces — a pragmatic move perhaps, but not one with much foresight or sense of egalitarian principles.

Waite's interest and enthusiasm wanes somewhat when he moves to Ottawa with Sir John — a symptom of "capital punishment" common enough even in our time.

In the field of historians, Waite is among the expert jewellers. He uncovers and displays the gems of history but in this book provides little information on the currents of social and political thought and on the formation of the bedrock of character.

Waite has already written a book on political and social thought of the period and was told by his publishers to take a lot of the political background out of this work.

Nevertheless, this is one of the best political biographies I have read. Students of legal history will find it particularly interesting.



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