

# THE LIFE AND STRANGE SURPRISING ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN ROBERT KNOX<sup>1</sup>

Three recent books have revived the “Selkirk conjecture,” the popular misconception that the marooned seaman Alexander Selkirk was the ‘real’ Robinson Crusoe. Selkirk, however, was unlike Crusoe in many ways. Robert Knox, on the other hand, had a career that was remarkably similar to Crusoe’s, and the two men shared many personality traits. This paper is an attempt to consider the evidence, from the view of a social historian, that Robert Knox was the prototype of Crusoe. This article draws on extensive research on Knox’s writings for a study of his career as a sea captain after his return to England. The publication of new material in J. H. O. Paulusz’ edition of the *Historical Relation of Ceylon*,<sup>2</sup> which prints for the first time notes Knox made for a second edition, provides an occasion to review what is known about Robert Knox’s role in the conception of the famous novel. In particular, I emphasize that the *Historical Relation* was edited by other hands, and a direct comparison of the two texts tells us little about the relationship between Defoe and Knox.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Dr. Walter Perera and two anonymous readers for *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* for suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>*An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon. Revised, Enlarged & Brought to the verge of Publication as The Second Edition By Robert Knox. Together with his Autobiography and All the New Chapters, Paragraphs, Marginal Notes added by the Author in the Two Interleaved Copies of the Original Text of 1681.* (Edited with Introduction & Notes By J. H. O. Paulusz. 2 Vols. Colombo: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1989). I have cited this edition for convenience, but my references to Knox’s manuscript notes are taken from the originals in the Christie Library of the Museum of Mankind and the Bodleian Library. Page references in the text refer to the 1681 edition. These can be found in Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies. With an Introduction by H.A.I. Goonetilleke Former Librarian, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka* (Facsimile Reprint of Original Edition. ed. New Delhi: Navrang, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>Since completing this paper, I have seen the dissertation by Sarojini Jayawickrama, “‘An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon’: Knox and the ‘Writing that Conquers’” (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Hong Kong, October 1998), which covers some of the same topics as this article from a “New Historicist” perspective. This approach places the *Historical Relation* and Knox’s subsequent writings in the context of post-colonial theories of contact between Europeans and non-Europeans, relying primarily on Peter Hulme’s analysis of European relations with the Carib people. I have footnoted some

The three new books are primarily travel books, and all focus on Juan Fernandez Island, 300 miles off the coast of Chile, where Selkirk was marooned for four years.<sup>4</sup> Not coincidentally, the island has become a tourist destination (and is now renamed “Isla Robinson Crusoe”). Diana Souhami presents the most complete biography of Selkirk but emphasizes how unlike Selkirk was from Crusoe. Tim Severin agrees that Selkirk could not have been a ‘prototype’ for Crusoe and settles on Henry Pitman<sup>5</sup> as the prototype. Pitman was a surgeon who was transported to Barbados for his involvement in the Duke of Monmouth’s rebellion, escaped, and wrote an account of his experiences in 1689. Severin’s strongest evidence of a connection between Pitman and Defoe is that *Robinson Crusoe* was published thirty years later at the same publishing house. Daisuke Takahashi’s book, originally published in Japanese, uncritically retraces many of the arguments identifying Selkirk with Crusoe.

*Robinson Crusoe*, of course, is not based on the life of anyone. It is a work of fiction, and many events in the book are unrealistic if not impossible. Defoe knew, for example, that castaways tended to go mad. There was no example in reality of a person in complete isolation for years who triumphed over his environment and underwent a religious transformation. The book was presented as an autobiographical memoir, however, and Defoe used many devices to make it seem realistic to readers who were unfamiliar with the form of a novel. One of these devices appears to be to exploit the publicity that followed Selkirk back to London. In 1924, A. W. Secord wrote that “Selkirk undoubtedly furnished Defoe with the central theme of the story,”<sup>6</sup> To be precise, it was not Selkirk himself, but the

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references to this work. Ed. Note: This thesis was subsequently published as *Writing that Conquers: Re-reading Knox's An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon*. Colombo: SSA, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Tim Severin, *In Search of Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Diana Souhami, *Selkirk's Island. The True and Strange Adventures of the Real Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001. Reprint, Originally published: London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2001); Daisuke Takahashi, *In Search of Robinson Crusoe* (Translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002). In addition, Pierce Brosnan’s silly 1997 movie, which has the temerity to call itself “Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe,” conflates the lives of Selkirk and Crusoe.

popularity of the embellished accounts written by Woodes Rogers<sup>7</sup> and Richard Steele<sup>8</sup> that may have inspired Defoe to write his novel.

It follows that similarities and differences in earlier texts and *Robinson Crusoe* are not by themselves evidence of Defoe's indebtedness or lack of indebtedness to those texts as inspiration for his novel. As Bonner pointed out, when he compared the writings of William Dampier with those of Defoe, "With Defoe the chief business was to tell an interesting tale and a moral one."<sup>9</sup> The obvious differences in the living conditions, in particular, of Knox and Crusoe, have no force in determining whether or not Defoe modelled Crusoe after Knox. Knox was not alone; he lived in a well-populated kingdom in continual interaction with the people and with at least some of his fellow captives. What is more important is that Knox acted as if he were alone. He shows little regard for the people who fed and housed him and with whom he traded. He avoided the English captives who assimilated to the local culture. He lived from time to time with the few English captives who refused to marry and to serve the king, but he tells us little about them. Knox appears to have been mentally as isolated as Crusoe.

The parallels in Crusoe's and Knox's careers are remarkably close, particularly when Knox's later career is compared with Part Two of *Robinson Crusoe*. By the time his *Historical Relation* was published, Knox had set sail on the first of four voyages as a captain in the service of the East India Company (EIC). As a protégé of Sir Josiah Child, the dominant figure in the EIC in this period, Knox undertook tasks that were a part of Child's global strategy for strengthening the EIC: e.g. sailing to Hanoi as part of a plan to expand trade with China; purchasing slaves for company labour; and waging war on the Mughal Empire. He prospered by private trading, sometimes in disobedience of direct orders. He fell out with Child and retired in 1695, only to undertake later one more voyage to India as an 'interloper' in competition with the EIC. Despite losing one fortune when his crew mutinied, he was able to live comfortably until 1721 and still leave a substantial estate. There is a general similarity to Crusoe's career in the second volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, however much the details differ.

Knox continued to write notes on his life in two copies of his *Historical*

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language and literature. Vol. 9, No. 1. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1924), 31.

<sup>7</sup>Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage around the World. With a New Introd. By Percy G. Adams* (Reprint of 1712 edition. New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

<sup>8</sup>*The Englishman*, No. 26 (December 3, 1713).

<sup>9</sup>W. H. Bonner, *Captain William Dampier. Buccaneer-Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934).

*Relation*.<sup>10</sup> The “interleaved” copy passed back and forth between Knox and the publisher, Richard Chiswell. His notes consisted primarily of additions to the original text which were intended to be the basis of a second edition that was never published and now have been appended to the 1989 edition.

Knox’s personal copy contained autobiographical memoirs and subsequent notes, copied into blank pages in a relatively neat handwriting. It consists of nine folios at the beginning of the book in the form of a preface and 129 folios at the end, some of which are dated. The “preface” is dated June 19, 1696 (A coat of arms he was sent with a date of April 29, 1703 is inserted in this text). The first 56 folios at the end of the book is known as the “autobiography” (although he did not call it that) and dated August 8, 1696 (twenty eight and one half years after he left England on his ill-fated voyage). These were written after his resignation from the EIC and retirement in 1695. There follow miscellaneous notes written from 1697 to 1711. The most revealing section for understanding Knox is found in Folios 80-129, which appear to have been copied in 1711 but written earlier. These latter pages are based on what he calls his “Solatory Meditations” and were not intended, as autobiography was, for publication.<sup>11</sup>

These autobiographical notes were published with the 1911 edition<sup>12</sup> and convinced Secord that Knox was likely to have been the prototype for Crusoe.<sup>13</sup> Even before Knox’s additional writings were published, critics associated Knox and Robinson Crusoe, as in the reprint of the *Historical Relation* in 1817: “A very able critic has truly remarked, that – ‘There is no incident in Robinson Crusoe told in language more natural and affecting, than Knox’s discovery of a Bible in the Candian dominions’.”<sup>14</sup> James Ryan also commented on the similarities. He

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<sup>10</sup>In addition to the texts discussed here, Knox wrote letters to his cousin John Strype which are archived at Cambridge University. Most of these have been reprinted in Donald Ferguson, *Captain Robert Knox: The Twenty Years' Captive in Ceylon, and Author of "An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon, in the East Indies"* (London, 1681). (Colombo and Croyden: privately printed, 1896-97). I have also discovered additional fragments of Knox’s writing in the Public Record Office and British Library, London.

<sup>11</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989) 2.635.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon, Together with Somewhat Concerning Severall Remarkable Passages of My Life That Hath Hapned since My Deliverance out of My Captivity* (ed. James Ryan. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1911).

<sup>13</sup>Secord, 32-49 *et passim*.

<sup>14</sup>Philaethes [Rev. Robert Fellowes]. *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Year 1815; . . . to which is Subjoined, Robert Knox's Historical Relation of the island . . .*

concluded that Defoe must have collected additional information directly or indirectly from Knox himself. Those who have studied Knox tend to assume that Knox provided a model not only for Crusoe but other characters in Defoe's novels.

Secord also discussed two other related but separate issues: 1) Defoe's use of the *Historical Relation* and information directly or indirectly from Knox himself as a source of descriptive detail in his fictional writings, and 2) the narrative of Knox's life in Part IV of the *Historical Relation* as a source of narrative devices that Defoe adopted in his own writing. Both may help to show a personal relationship between the two men, but they also can confuse the central question. Secord pointed out that the prefaces are similar; both men's fathers object to their going to sea; both survive serious illnesses, both men describe making planks from logs; both acquire English Bibles; both see footprints in the sand; both became slave traders and so on. His arguments were developed further by John Robert Moore<sup>15</sup> and E.F.C. Ludowyk.<sup>16</sup>

The first of these issues can become trivial, and in Secord's and Moore's essays, it detracts from their main points. There are many details in *Robinson Crusoe* that have parallels in the *Historical Relation*. This is not surprising; Defoe owned a copy of Knox's book and even paraphrased the narrative of his captivity in *Captain Singleton*. Defoe however borrowed details from many works, and the use or abuse of any particular reference tells us little.

A case in point is Secord's mistaken attribution of Crusoe's laborious creation of a shelf from a plank hewn from a single log to Knox's description of Sinhalese methods of splitting logs.<sup>17</sup> Secord calls this "One of the most striking similarities between Knox's manuscript and *Robinson Crusoe*." In fact, there is little similarity, and Secord's insistence that it exists undermines his central argument. According to the *Historical Relation*, the Kandyans made two planks by splitting a single log, whereas Crusoe made a single plank by smoothing both sides, which

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(London, Joseph Mawman, 1817), 177n. [I have been unable to trace Fellowes' source of the quotation].

<sup>15</sup> *Defoe's Sources for Robert Drury's Journal*. (Indiana University publications. Humanities series no. 9. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1943); *Daniel Defoe. Citizen of the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.)

<sup>16</sup> "Robert Knox and Robinson Crusoe." *University of Ceylon Review* 10 (1952), 243-52; "Two Englishmen and Ceylon." *Ceylon Observer Annual* 1949:23-26; "The Eighteenth Century Background of some Early English Writers on Ceylon." *Ceylon Historical Journal* Vol. III, nos 3-4. (1953), 268-74; *Robert Knox in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Bombay, Madras, etc.: Oxford University Press [Indian Branch], 1948.).

<sup>17</sup> Secord, 46.

required much greater effort for a lesser result. Knox rejected the tedious method of splitting and hewing planks to make his furniture in favour of building it from sticks and pieces of easily split but strong bamboo tied with strips of rattan. Later, when prosperous, Knox used planks (which he clearly did not make himself) for his doors in emulation of the “great men” among the Kandyans.<sup>18</sup> Not only the techniques but also the inferences to be drawn from them differ. Defoe could have had Crusoe make his furniture from smaller pieces of more easily worked material (as the indigenous population of the Caribbean also did), but he did not want to. Crusoe did not adapt to his environment but shaped it by rigorous discipline and unrelenting effort. The prisoner Knox adjusted his life to his situation, but Defoe has the colonist Crusoe make his island as much like England as possible. If anything, the references could be used to argue that Defoe *did not* base Crusoe on Knox.<sup>19</sup> All in all, the search for “sources” in this manner is a dead end for understanding the relationship between Crusoe and Knox.

### Knox’s Editors

The published text of Knox’s writing, particularly the narrative of Knox’s life in Part IV of the *Historical Relation*, creates difficulties for understanding Knox because it was edited by others and may not represent his authentic voice. Literary critics have given some attention to the style of Part IV – probably less than it deserves. The narrative is written with genuine literary skill, and includes stylistic elements that one associates with Defoe. An early writer claimed that “in style it is the equal of Defoe’s masterpiece.”<sup>20</sup> Secord is effusive in his praise of the style, although both J. Paul Hunter and Paula Backscheider compare it unfavourably with *Robinson Crusoe*.

Secord points out that Knox’s Part IV is “the only [travel narrative] related in the first person with proper attention to the sequence of events and to the passage of time” in the same manner as Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>21</sup> These transitional phrases are effective devices in Part IV of the *Historical Relation*. Some examples are “For it was some sixteen days after our last remove . . .” (p. 121), “Upwards of three months. . .” (p. 124), “It was a full year after my Father died . . .” (p. 130),

<sup>18</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989) 2.625.

<sup>19</sup>See David Fausett, *The Strange Surprising Sources of Robinson Crusoe* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 90.

<sup>20</sup>H. White, “Notes on Knox’s “Ceylon” in its Literary Aspect.” *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol 13, no. 44 (1893), 23-34.

<sup>21</sup>Secord, *Narrative Method*, 33-34.

“Thus he lay some six months . . .” (p. 135), “In this manner we lived together some two years . . .” (p. 145), and “Some eight or nine years one after another . . .” (p. 155).

Another stylistic feature that stands out in Part IV is the use of redundant noun and adjective doublets (*hendiadys*). It uses doublet formations in much the same way as Defoe: e.g. “intent and purpose,” “love and affection,” “grief and heaviness,” “Captivity and Condition,” “grief and sorrow,” and “intricate and difficult.” Defoe’s doublets are more vivid images than those in Part IV: e.g. “the entreaties and persuasions of my mother,” “My father, a wise and grave man, gave me serious and excellent counsel,” “heard nothing but howlings and roarings of wild beasts,” and “gave me breath and new courage.” There is probably an important connection between the narrative and Defoe’s style, but it cannot be attributed to Knox because in all likelihood Knox was not responsible for the style. This point will require some explanation.

It is obvious to anyone who reads Knox’s autobiography (as Ryan pointed out in 1911) and his interleaved notes for a second edition, that he was not capable of writing the narrative as it stands. The stylistic features mentioned above seldom appear in Knox’s manuscript writings. This is not to deny the importance of the *Historical Relation* as an authoritative source of ethnographic detail and natural history of Sri Lanka – much of what Knox wrote remains true enough today to strike a responsive chord in anyone who has lived in Kandyan Sri Lanka. There is no question of the authenticity of the account, the honesty of the author and the accuracy of most of what he writes. There are exceptions to the reliability of the text, however, as I show below.

Knox wrote notes on his captivity and escape during his voyage home from Bantam to London. His motives were to “record God’s great mercies,” to preserve a record of his father’s death, and “Thirdly to exercise my hand to wright for in all the time of my Captivity, I had neither pen Inke nor paper & now as a man new borne I came into the world, so made it part of my buisnesse to learne to write.”<sup>22</sup> He had no intention of publishing these notes, but he found that there was great interest in what he had written both in the East India Company and in the Royal Society through Robert Hooke, who was a friend of his brother.<sup>23</sup>

Knox admitted only that the notes were revised “by the assistance of my cousen John Strype a Minister who Composed it into heads & Chapters for my papers ware promiscuous & out of form with several enlargements one such heads as

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<sup>22</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989), 2.515.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.516.

I had but touched briefly which then my memory was fit to doe.”<sup>24</sup> Hooke also edited parts of the manuscript, as shown by documents in the British Library, but Knox does not acknowledge Hooke’s contribution. Ian Goonetilleke thought “that Hooke edited the whole work prior to printing, correcting the spelling and polishing the language.”<sup>25</sup> He turned the manuscript over to the East India Company on March 18, 1681, after which he spent his time studying navigation and seeking an opportunity to return to sea. Hooke’s preface is dated August 1, 1681; Sir Christopher Wren, as President of the Royal Society, approved publication on August 8, and on August 10 the East India Company directors approved. Much of the book must have already been printed by this time, for Hooke received his copy on August 12, Wren August 17, and John Locke, August 29, all before the scheduled publication date of September 1.

The most likely scenario is that Knox, Hooke, Strype and probably another cousin, John Bonnell (1653-1699), made whatever corrections and additions (“inlargements”) they did in the period from September 12 to March 18 – Hooke’s diary makes several references to Knox, Bonnell and Knox’s papers in this period.<sup>26</sup> It is unlikely that the text was in its final form at that point. Ecclesiastical historian Strype (1643-1737) was a dreadful writer. He seems to have been capable of the wordy introductions to the sections but not of the elegant prose of the narrative. Hooke was fully occupied with his duties as Secretary of the Royal Society in those months, and it is unlikely that he edited more than the passages on natural history (Part I). It undoubtedly underwent further modifications from March to August.

It has long been clear that many of the generalizations in the *Historical Relation* about Kandyan politics are worth little as historical evidence, and contradict other statements in the text.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that these generalizations reflect not Knox’s conclusions, but those of his editors. Knox was a captive of Raja Singha

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<sup>24</sup>*Historical Relation* (1911), xxx.

<sup>25</sup>*Historical Relation* (1983), ix.

<sup>26</sup>Diary of Robert Hooke, (Guildhall Library, London), *passim*. See also *Historical Relation* (1989) 1.390-91.

<sup>27</sup>K. W. Goonewardena, “Some Comments on Robert Knox and his Writings on - Ceylon,” *University of Ceylon Review* Vol. XVI. No. 1-2 (Jan- April 1958), 39-52. See in particular Goonewardena’s refutation of Paulusz’ attempt to resurrect the Dutch view of Raja Singha in “Robert Knox: the Interleaved Edition.” Review article of Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon. Revised, Enlarged & Brought to the verge of Publication as The Second Edition By Robert Knox. . . . Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Sri Lanka)* XXXVII (n.s.) 1992/93:117-144.

II (r. 1635-1687). The Sinhalese kings never could overcome European superiority in sea power and military technology along the coasts, but Raja Singha was unusual in his ability to resist the Europeans. As his reign spanned the period when the Dutch United East India Company (Vereenigde Ostindische Compagnie or VOC) replaced the Portuguese, he met with some success. The Dutch initially returned to Raja Singha fortresses that the Portuguese had built in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, but after they had expelled the Portuguese, they refused to return conquered territories to the king. Eventually the VOC recaptured most of the territory held by the Portuguese and declared all major imports except rice to be their monopoly, which forced prices in the Kandyan kingdom upward. In Dutch accounts, Raja Singha was demonized as an evil tyrant, and some references in the *Historical Relation* support this notion, although they are contradicted by other statements and qualified by Knox's insistence that he avoided the court and knew little or nothing about Kandyan politics.

Edmund Leach raised the possibility that Knox never wrote those references and was a "political tool" of opponents of Charles II – possibly led by Sir Josiah Child (who could not afford to oppose openly the EIC's sponsor).<sup>28</sup> A statement such as the description of Raja Singha's government as being "Tyrannical and Arbitrary in the highest degree; for he ruleth absolute and after his own Will and Pleasure: his own head being his only Counsellor" (p. 43) is something Knox was in no position to know and is written in a style he did not employ. Beginning with the hypothesis that statements which characterized Raja Singha as an absolute monarch were interpolated, I analysed the vocabulary and syntax of the section (Part II) of the *Historical Relation* that described Kandyan government, and compared them with his autobiography.<sup>29</sup>

Even crude quantitative measures show statistically significant differences between sentences that refer to the Absolutism of King Raja Singha and the remainder of Part II. The former contains words that do not occur in his manuscripts and were not likely to have been part of his vocabulary in Sri Lanka – e.g. vicissitude, proportionable, solemnity, jurisdiction, malefactors, and sequestered – and usually do not contain words that distinctively appear in his manuscripts, such

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<sup>28</sup>Edmund Leach, "What Happened to an Historical Relation . . . On the Way to the Printers?" *Social Analysis* 25 (1989): 18-21.

<sup>29</sup>The following is based on Patrick Peebles, "Text Analysis of Robert Knox, An Historical Relation of Ceylon" (In *Structures and Contingencies in Computerized Historical Research. Proceedings of the IX International Conference of the Association for History and Computing, Nijmegen 1994*, 143-148. Hilversum: Vereniging voor Geschiedenis en Informatica, 1995.)

as “Kings” as a possessive without an apostrophe, or words ending in superfluous “e” s. The most striking quantifiable difference is in the use of “his” in reference to the king; in the manuscript additions to his text Knox refers to “the court” nine times, but only once does he say “his court.” In contrast, in the published text, “his court” appears seven times. There are similar contrasts with “his country,” “his people,” and “his great men.” I take this to be evidence of someone reshaping Knox's statements to place more emphasis on the autocracy of the king.

Thus Part II was edited by someone who constructed an absolute monarchy in the Kandyan Kingdom in order to use it for political purposes in England at a time when fears of absolutism were great. John Locke indeed quoted his pre-publication copy of the *Historical Relation* as an example of the evils of absolutism in his *Second Treatise on Government*.

Parts I and II of the *Historical Relation* also seem to have been edited before publication, and the narrative (Part IV) appears to have been re-written. It is likely that the most-quoted sentences in the *Historical Relation* were not written by Knox at all. To take just one example, it is virtually certain that someone else inserted the sentence “For the *Chingulays* are Naturally, a people given to sloth and laziness: if they can but any ways live, they abhor to work; onely what their necessities force them to, they do, that is, to get Food and Rayment,”(p. 32) and probably the entire paragraph that contains it. The paragraph is at the end of Part I, appended to a chapter that deals otherwise with birds, fish and snakes. The paragraph begins with a list of commodities (some of which Knox crossed out in his interleaved copy) and ends by blaming the Sinhalese character on the Absolutism of King Raja Singha (the printed marginal note says “The People discouraged from Industry by the Tyranny they are under”). The sentence itself is questionable on the basis of syntax (no sentence structures in Knox's handwriting are remotely similar), style (the redundant doublet), content (Knox mentions elsewhere that cultivators who delay planting through sloth have difficulty harvesting crops on time, suggesting that it was exceptional), and context (later he states that the Kandyans did have a flourishing trade until prevented by the Dutch).

What then about Part IV, the narrative of his captivity and escape? To a greater extent than the preceding three parts, this is written in a delightful literary style, and probably was edited by a different hand than the rest of the *Historical Relation*.

One measurable contrast between Part IV of the *Historical Relation* and Knox's autobiography occurs in the use of first person pronouns “I” and “we”. In Part IV, the two words are used only 28 times in each thousand words. Knox uses them more frequently in the autobiography, 35 times per thousand words. (By way of comparison *Robinson Crusoe* uses 'I' (and rarely 'we') about 47 times in each thousand words). Furthermore, Knox used 'I' nearly twice as often as he did 'we' in

his autobiography; in Part IV 'we' is used more than half again as often as 'I'. Part IV of the *Historical Relation* is in this sense much less of a "first person narrative" than his autobiography is.

The narrative devices that critics admire in Knox's Part IV are not found in his manuscripts. Knox used almost no doublets in his autobiography, for example. There are also some puzzling omissions in Part IV—there is little accounting of the nearly two years from the time he first left London to the time of his shipwreck, for instance. There are also occasions in the interleaved edition in which Knox seems to feel compelled to rewrite passages that are already complete, as if he were making notes on another's writing. A clear case is when the printed text creates a transition from the first four years of his captivity to the next phase by saying, "All of us in this manner remained until the year MDCLXIV. . . ." (p. 137), Knox inserts in the marginal notes opposite this a note on the deaths of his father and another member of the crew, beginning "All this while, that is 4 whole yeares . . ." <sup>30</sup> The note is located out of place in the interleaved edition — it refers to the previous period but is placed with the later period. One expects that the author would have placed the note on the previous page, which is blank in the interleaved edition, if he were paying attention to the chronology.

As an example of the contrast between the styles of Knox's manuscripts and the *Historical Relation*, compare the description of the time of his arrival at the Dutch fort in the published texts:

. . . it being about four of the Clock on *Saturday* afternoon. *October* the eighteenth MDCLXXIX. Which day God grant us grace that we may never forget, when he was pleased to give us so great a deliverance from such long Captivity, of nineteen years, and six Months, and odd days, being taken Prisoner when I was nineteen years old, and continued upon the Mountains among the Heathen till I attained to Eight and Thirty." (p. 168)

with that of the marginal notes he wrote for his second edition:

"I was detained prisoner one this Island as p: foll: 118 one the forth day Aprill 1660, and by the great providence of God was sett at Liberty one the eighteenth October 1879, by which it doth appear that I was prisoner one Ceilon nineteene years six months and

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<sup>30</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989), 2.364. Paulusz puts this comment on the following page, even further removed from the appropriate location.

fourteene dayes, which is fower months and seventeene dayes longer than I had lived in the world before I was taken prisoner thare."<sup>31</sup>

Knox shifts the emphasis from the miraculous moment of deliverance to an inane calculation of the number of days of captivity, suggesting that he did not even recognize the power of the original passage, let alone write it. For the purposes of this paper, the significance of these changes is that one must use caution in drawing conclusions about Knox's character from statements in the published text.

J. Paul Hunter and Paula Backscheider have compared Part IV with *Robinson Crusoe*. Hunter dismissed the *Historical Relation* as merely a "travel book."<sup>32</sup> Backscheider has compared the two in more detail. The two have many similarities, she says, but the narrative in the *Historical Relation* does not show the development of Knox's beliefs and the doubts that arose in the course of his captivity. It is in short, much more like a travel narrative than a "modern psychological novel." She states "Knox seems not to have felt ethical or religious conflicts. . . . his own opinion . . . seems completely fixed. In fact, it is the rigidity of his judgments and his religious certainty that separate him most dramatically from Crusoe."<sup>33</sup> She comes to the ironic conclusion that Knox's narrative is "an adventure tale in an exotic setting," whereas Robinson Crusoe is "a suffering human being"<sup>34</sup> — a situation that was only possible because the reality was just the opposite: because *Robinson Crusoe* was "an exciting adventure tale," Defoe had the freedom to describe Crusoe's state of mind as events occurred. Robert Knox in contrast was "a suffering human being," but he wrote after escaping from captivity when his understanding of his experiences was relatively fixed.

Part IV certainly does not demonstrate the record of spiritual growth that is such an important element of *Robinson Crusoe*. There are indeed frequent references in the Part IV of the *Historical Relation* to divine intervention, but many of these seem to be formulaic references. Some examples are "so great was the mercy of our gracious God, that he gave us favour in the sight of this People" (p.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 2.431. Paulusz juxtaposes the two statements, but in the interleaved edition it appears opposite the following page.

<sup>32</sup>J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim. Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkin's Press, 1966).

<sup>33</sup>Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: His Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 430-31.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

120). "God was pleased to visit us both with the Countrey sickness, Ague and Feavour ( p. 123) "At length it pleased God my Ague began to be a little moderate" (p. 126). "I began to keep Hogs and Hens; which by God's Blessing thrived very well with me (p. 131). "And thus by the Blessing of God my little was increased to a great deal." (p. 149). These may have been inspired by the two books he read (in addition to his Bible): Lewis Baley, *The Practice of Pietie* (probably the 1654 edition given him by his mother) and M. Richard Rogers, *The Practice of Christianity* (possibly the fourth edition, 1629), which he says he knew almost by heart.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, they may be the contribution of an editor.

It is not possible to determine the full extent to which a particular statement in the *Historical Relation* represents the milieu of London in 1681 rather than the experiences of a man just escaped from nearly 20 years' captivity, but a more nuanced understanding of the text is possible. As I have shown, some statements are rooted in English politics of the period; others are drawn from "colonial discourse," barely distinguishable from those expressed at the time about other non-Western societies. Those statements that can be attributed with more certainty to Knox reveal complex attitudes towards his captors.<sup>36</sup>

An analysis of the *Historical Relation* as a source for Sri Lankan history is beyond the scope of this paper, but one can draw some generalizations about Knox's character. For example, as K. W. Goonewardena has pointed out, whenever Knox "received 'Pity and Compassion' from the Sinhalese he ascribed such actions to the intervention of God (e.g. pp. 120, 128, 129, 143, 144, and 147) but similar actions on the part of others such as the Dutch are given their just due, without bringing God's intervention in to the account (eg. pp. 169, 171, 173-74)."<sup>37</sup> This behaviour is typical of captivity narratives and adds to the authenticity of the content of the *Historical Relation*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989), 2.336.

<sup>36</sup>Jayawickrama tends to condemn almost everything in the *Historical Relation* as a product of "colonial discourse" by analogy with other post-colonial literary criticism and to attribute it entirely to Knox.

<sup>37</sup>K. W. Goonewardena, "Robert Knox: the Interleaved Edition," 134.

<sup>38</sup>What Gary L. Ebersole says about similar statements in the captivity narrative of Mary White Rowlandson, who was held captive by Indians in Massachusetts for eleven weeks in 1676, applies equally well to Knox: "Rowlandson's assertion that God is the ultimate or final agent behind the events of her captivity frequently functions to deny the humanity of her captors." *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Postmodern Images of Indian Captivity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1995), 25.

**Knox and Defoe**

My purpose in this paper is to examine the relationship between Knox and Defoe, and the preceding shows that a comparison of the *Historical Relation* and *Robinson Crusoe* by itself is of little use. The central theme of the Secord-Moore-Ludowyk tradition is that Defoe probably knew Knox and modelled his character after him. The remainder of this essay examines the extent to which Knox's character resembled Crusoe's. One must depend on Knox's manuscript writings to understand Knox to begin answering the question, to what extent was Knox a prototype for the character of Robinson Crusoe? It concludes by raising the crucial questions that cannot be answered at this time: Did Defoe know Knox well enough to use his example? and Did Defoe actually model Crusoe after Knox?

There is one further consideration regarding the editing of the *Historical Relation* in 1681 that remains to be considered. Although the narrative in Part IV is not written by Knox as it was published, it shows considerable literary skill. Who then wrote the narrative from Knox's notes? A search of the India Office Records for any reference to payment for such employment proved fruitless. It is impossible to determine who edited the manuscript through computer text analysis. It is not known what Knox's original text looked like, what changes Strype and others may have made to the text, and what changes the compositor made after the unknown editor finished. The style is bound to be a mixture of elements. Any attribution of editorship will have to be made by conventional critical methods.

Until specialists study the matter further, the possibility cannot be ruled out that Daniel Defoe may have taken part in the editing. It would account for the stylistic similarities of the two writers, and it might explain an interest in Knox's career. (And Defoe's youth might explain its shortcomings). Defoe is positively located in London in 1681 because he made transcripts of sermons by John Collins from February 20 to sometime in the autumn of 1681.<sup>39</sup> This is the period in which he apparently made the decision not to become a minister, for which had been educated, before he took up a career in trade.<sup>40</sup> Defoe pursued his literary interests in 1681; his writings show that he was very familiar with literature published in 1681-82.<sup>41</sup> Defoe had a connection with the Royal Society through his former headmaster Reverend Charles Morton (1627-98) at the school he founded for

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<sup>39</sup>Bastian, *Defoe's Early Life*, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1981), 86-87; Moore, *Daniel Defoe*, 38.

<sup>40</sup>Bastian, *Defoe's Early Life*, 89.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

dissenters at Newington Green.<sup>42</sup> Morton was interested in mathematics and science and had communicated a paper to the Royal Society. The school also emphasized clear writing. Defoe appears to have made a sea journey from London to Oporto, probably while still a student at Newington Green in 1679, which would have stimulated interest in Knox.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of who was responsible for the literary style of the narrative, it was not Knox, and comparisons of the style with that of Defoe tells us little about the relationship between Knox and Defoe.

Among literary critics, Ludowyk's mastery of both English literature and the career of Robert Knox is exceptional, and his conclusions carry much weight.<sup>44</sup> As Ludowyk pointed out years ago, the *Historical Relation* was for Defoe "more than a happy hunting ground for narrative devices." Knox and Crusoe resemble each other, he writes, in their character and personality. Both are resourceful, both survived against all odds, and both develop a strong religious faith. Ludowyk cautiously writes that

Robinson Crusoe . . . was cast in the mould of Robert Knox. . . . What Defoe is most likely to have learned in his study of Knox was a sound appreciation of a man who by contemporary London standards had made a considerable success of living in a strange land. Knox has a respect for property, an interest in figures and quantities, a capacity to drive a good bargain and a great resourcefulness.<sup>45</sup>

Knox had, Ludowyk says, the traits "of worldly wisdom, of Christian professions, and of determined opposition to all that fate could bring that marked Robinson Crusoe."<sup>46</sup>

Ludowyk was referring to the published text alone. If Defoe knew Knox in later life, Defoe would have found more characteristics on which to base his novel. Specifically, through his later career, Knox won and lost fortunes and questions God's reasons for causing this to happen.<sup>47</sup> It is my contention that Knox

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 48. For Morton's school see Moore, *Daniel Defoe*, 28-37.

<sup>43</sup>Bastian, F. *Defoe's Early Life*, 66-67.

<sup>44</sup>Jayawickrama dismisses Ludowyk as a scholar "with a very colonial view point" (263).

<sup>45</sup>*Robert Knox in the Kandyan Kingdom*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., xv.

<sup>47</sup>Jayawickrama (Chapter 7) emphasizes the "interweaving of the economic and the spiritual"

experienced a religious transformation similar to Crusoe's not during his captivity but during his later life, closer to the time Defoe wrote his novel.

The narrative in Part IV was typical of the seventeenth century for its references to divine intervention. It could be argued that the narrative and *Robinson Crusoe* both follow an established tradition in English autobiography in which the writer describes a pattern of sin followed by repentance.<sup>48</sup> This can be illustrated by Knox's references to Providence – God's intervention in order to protect, punish, or instruct his chosen people. However, there is a clear contrast between Part IV of the *Historical Relation* and Knox's autobiographical notes, which reveal a person much like Crusoe. Although devoid of literary merit, Knox's autobiography contains similarities with *Robinson Crusoe*. The narrative in the *Historical Relation* uses the word "Providence" only seven times. There are in contrast proportionately more references to Providence in Knox's autobiography than there are in *Robinson Crusoe*, a total of 19 occurrences in 23,512 words opposed to 54 occurrences in 121,820 words, occurring nearly twice as frequently than in *Robinson Crusoe* and more than five times as frequently as in Part IV.

The similarities between Crusoe and Knox can be seen in the contrast between the text Knox wrote in 1696 with the text written in 1711. The preface contains numerous biblical quotations as if he intended to make the second edition explicitly a "spiritual autobiography." Some of the references to Providence in the autobiography dated 1696 are conventional: on his discovering his sister on arrival in 1680<sup>49</sup> and on returning safely from his first voyage as a captain in the East India Company service.<sup>50</sup> Thereafter, however, Knox's faith was tested by circumstances. His second voyage turned out badly. His ship was struck by a hurricane off the coast of Madagascar; he fell into the hands of a Madagascar chieftain who Knox thought was going to kill him; and he contracted scurvy at sea. In all three instances "God by his Speciall providence had saved & preserved me from perrishing."<sup>51</sup> At Madagascar he purchased slaves for the Company to be used in the colonization of Tristan da Cuhha. When he returned to St. Helena, however, his seamen mutinied and stole his ship – of which he was part owner. This "Strip me at once of all my

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by both Knox and Crusoe (302).

<sup>48</sup>cf. G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1965), 4-20.

<sup>49</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989), 2.527.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.532.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.551.

worldly riches & Injoyments & exposed me to poverty & Contempt”<sup>52</sup> which reduced him to comparing himself with Job.

In the conclusion to the first section of the autobiography, Knox summarized the role of Providence in his life. This section begins “The sume of this that I have writen of passages of my owne life is a history of Providence . . .” and he proceeds to consider “how many Daingers Almighty God hath led mee through & strangely preserved mee.”<sup>53</sup> He begins with his recovery from a head injury caused by a fall from a horse when he was 14 years old. He is thankful for “the strainge & wonderful Diliverances that God had wrought for mee,” but he proceeds to complain about the bargain he received:

From all Gods Mercifull Dispensations to mee all my life longe I make this observation, that although he sett his Providence over mee for good yet he would not permitt me to increase in worldly riches &c, but continually, & from time to time, fed mee with food Convenient for mee, as he did the Isralites with manna in the wildernesse which they gathered day by day & could not lay up in store, for when by a Dilligent & industerous struggling in the world I had gott a little togeather, 5 times he stript me naked & tooke all away still leaveing me food & raiment with which St. Paull saith we ought to be Content.”<sup>54</sup>

These five times God “stript him naked” were 1) when he was captured in Sri Lanka in 1660; 2) when a rebellion in the Kandyan Kingdom forced him to leave his home and property; 3) when the Dutch invaded near where he lived and he was again removed; 4) when he escaped from the Island with nothing and 5) when his sailors mutinied in 1685. “However God forsooke me not but his providence so ordered & Disposed matters that I went to sea againe, & inside 2 successfull voiajes in which he dealt by me as by Job & gave me more than ever I had before.” He draws the following inferences from his experiences.

I observe how uncerchable are Gods wayes & his workes past finding out, for his providence hath raised me up, & lest I should take to much Contentment in earthly things, the same hand of Providence hath pulled me downe & taken all from mee, & then strangely like Jonahs Gourd he hath

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 2.552.

<sup>53</sup>*Historical Relation* Ibid., 2.584.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 2.585-6.

made them grow againe to my admiration beyound what my reason could Deserve; & thus hath he dealt with mee time after time that I might be senceable that my healp cometh onely from the lord, which I could not so plainely have perceived if he had led me in a plaine & even way, which would have tempted me to sett my heart too much one these transitorie things from which I have seene Causes enough, besides God Commands to weane my mind from them & not to expect for the time that I have got to live any more certainty of the Continuance of these earthly things that now his providence hath intrusted in my hand then of those that he hath taken from mee.”<sup>55</sup>

By 1696, Knox appears to have accepted that God’s Providence included both his prosperity and the loss of that prosperity. It is impossible to know for certain if Knox passed through any such transformation as Crusoe did during his captivity; the vehemence with which he recalled his losses years afterwards later suggests that he was less than philosophical at the time. In a subsequent section,<sup>56</sup> dated February 15, 1697, Knox writes a bitter denunciation of Sir Josiah Child for blocking his return to sea as an EIC captain after four years of retirement. Child criticized, among other things, the wealth Knox acquired illegally and his ingratitude to the EIC for his success. To this Knox angrily wrote that if not for the EIC he would have had more than “the little estate God hath given me,” because of his captivity and because the Company tried to prevent him from acquiring it.

It is only in his “solatory meditations” written out in 1711 that Knox stopped complaining about his losses and accepted the agency of Providence without qualification. In a candid review of his life in captivity, Knox found that the hardships he faced served a purpose. His clothes wore out, but the sarong he wore was comfortable; his shoes wore out, but his feet became calloused and he did not need them; his diet was “poore & mean,” mostly rice and vegetables, but he was “in good health and strength”; he slept on a mat rather than a bed, but he slept well, and so on. He also showed signs of repenting the greed which dominated his life in captivity and afterwards. Of his loss of wealth he says, “Almighty God out of great mercy to me frustrated these vaine & foolish thoughts I had to grow rich”<sup>57</sup> Of the five times he lost his fortune, “I make this inference that God of his infinite mercy onely pruned of my superfluous branches which tended onely to Pride, Ambition &

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 2.587.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 2.589-94.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 2.629.

love of this world.”

The attempts of the captives to acquire wealth in Sri Lanka seemed foolish to him now. He relates an anecdote of one miserly captive who hoarded his money: “he had rather pinch his belly then spend one penny of his mony either for victualls or Racke [arrack] & in cloaths none could goe worse”<sup>58</sup> A Portuguese man who lived across the street began to send his daughter to cook and clean for him. The 42-year-old captive ended by marrying the girl and “he had gott one to helpe spend his mony which he grudged to spend one himselfe.”

Knox’s writings and particularly his later manuscript notes, show him to have been a person very much like Crusoe in his ambitions and religious growth as well as in his resourcefulness in captivity. Knox in his later life could easily have been an inspiration to Defoe. The next question is, did Defoe know Knox in 1719?

Scholars who have studied Knox rather than Defoe tend to assume that the two men knew each other. The circumstantial evidence is so great that it seems impossible to imagine that Defoe did not meet Knox during the 40 years that both of them spent most of their lives in the northeast suburbs of London, in Hackney and Stoke Newington. On the other hand no direct evidence has appeared to connect the two men. Both men appear to have been reclusive in the years prior to the writing of *Robinson Crusoe*, which could suggest either that they did not meet or that they would leave little evidence when they did meet.

All we know about Defoe suggests that he would want to know Knox and that their paths crossed in London several times in the period from 1680 on. Knox’s career in the early period included the kind of adventures that would have attracted Defoe. Defoe was in London, fascinated by the sea, when Knox returned. He had a contact to the Royal Society through Charles Morton, and someone writing in a style that he may have been learned at Morton’s academy edited Knox’s Part IV. In December 1685, Knox completed (for the first time) revisions for the second edition of his book for Richard Chiswell, who also published at least two of Defoe’s pamphlets.<sup>59</sup> Knox’s interleaved copy may have remained with Chiswell at this time, which suggests that Defoe may have seen them there.

Like Robinson Crusoe (and Daniel Defoe) Robert Knox was descended from low country protestant immigrants to England. Knox’s cousins Bonnell and Strype

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 2.631-2.

<sup>59</sup>*Reflections on the Late great Revolution. Written by a Lay-hand in the Country, For the Satisfaction of Some Neighbours* (London: Printed for Ric. Chiswell, at the Rose and Crown in St. Paul’s Church-Yard. 1689) and *The advantages of the Present Settlement*. July 4, 1689. (J. Fraser, London: Printed for Ric. Chiswell, at the Rose and Crown in St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1689).

maintained contact with their Dutch relations. Strype “was lecturer from 1689 to 1724 at Hackney, during which time the Hackney parish register records the baptism of Defoe’s favorite daughter Sophia and the removal of his daughter Martha for burial outside the parish”.<sup>60</sup> Defoe’s sister Mary married a shipwright and during much of Knox’s career as a sea captain in the service of the EIC, Defoe insured ships. Both men invested in overseas trade and both were part-owners of ships. Both ended up disliking Josiah Child.

There is thus much circumstantial evidence that Defoe knew Knox by 1695 if not before. There is unfortunately no direct evidence. Secord’s reference to the method of splitting planks is inconclusive, as is Moore’s emphasis on details in *Robert Drury’s Journal* that are very similar to experiences Knox had in 1684 and 1685, which he describes in his autobiography.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, these now seem to be the actual experiences of the seaman Robert Drury, and Defoe’s role in the publication of the journal is uncertain.<sup>62</sup> Defoe’s retelling in *Captain Singleton* of Knox’s story contains no details that are not in the *Historical Relation*, although it describes a mutiny very similar to the one Knox faced in 1685. Secord and Moore attempted to prove that Defoe had access to Knox’s unpublished manuscripts, but none of the arguments hold up, and in any case for Knox to have been a prototype of Crusoe, Defoe would have to have known Knox.

There are other details which may or may not link Defoe and Crusoe. The initials (Robinson Kreutznaer) are the same. The dates of their adventures are close. Crusoe refers four times to his “captivity.” There is a dedication in the form of a poem pasted in the interleaved edition, dated January 1, 1695, that is signed D. F. M. D.<sup>63</sup> No one has identified “D. F. M. D.” and the handwriting is not Defoe’s, but . . .

The cryptic statements made by Defoe in the *Serious Reflections . . . of Robinson Crusoe* could fit Knox better than anyone else: “the story, though allegorical, is also historical; that it is the beautiful representation of a life of unexampled misfortune.” and “a man alive, and well known too, the actions of whose life are the just subject of these volumes, and to whom all or most part of the story most directly attributes.” The literary critics have had no success when they have tried to prove that what Defoe meant by these remarks was that the books were

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<sup>60</sup>Moore, *Defoe’s Sources*, 35.

<sup>61</sup>John Robert Moore, *Defoe’s Sources for Robert Drury’s Journal* (Indiana University publications. Humanities series no. 9; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1943), 29-36.

<sup>62</sup>see Michael Parker Pearson, “Reassessing *Robert Drury’s Journal* as a Historical Source for Southern Madagascar.” *History in Africa* 23 (1996): 233-256.

<sup>63</sup>*Historical Relation* (1989), 2.xvii.

an allegory of his life.

My purpose has been to enhance our understanding of Robert Knox and the *Historical Relation*. Important segments of his book were written by others, and Knox's later notes clarify some of his behaviour as recorded in the book. Such clarification is essential in order to use his writings as a source for the history of Sri Lanka and to understand his career as an actor in the British Empire in the period 1680-1700. In this paper, I consider only the question of the relationship between Knox and Robinson Crusoe. I have shown that there is little evidence to support some of the conclusions made by scholars, but an argument can still be made that Robert Knox was the prototype for Robinson Crusoe. This would require a personal connection between the men, not just Defoe's reading of Knox's writing. There is circumstantial but not direct evidence that there was. Even if there were conclusive proof of contact between the men, however, the question of Knox's influence on Defoe's writing would need to be answered by a literary critic, not a historian. From a historian's point of view, Knox's career and his ideas have extraordinary parallels with Crusoe's. Defoe may or may not have been inspired to write his novel after knowing Knox, but Knox certainly more than anyone else was the 'real Robinson Crusoe.'

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