

Robert Knox and Robinson Crusoe

IN his well documented analysis of the narrative methods of Daniel Defoe, Secord¹ comes to the conclusion that, despite the great differences between Defoe's moral treatises (like *The Family Instructor* and *The Continuation of the Letters of the Turkish Spy*) and his fiction, it is with his earlier work that stories like *Robinson Crusoe* must be linked. If Defoe's particular mode of composition could be accounted for, then one could not do better than regard his wide and miscellaneous reading in the literature of travel and adventure as providing reality and diversion to material to which his aptitude as a writer of moral treatises already inclined him. Defoe wrote as he did because he had always been accustomed to giving a lively air of verisimilitude to his moral discourses: 'Defoe's narratives impress us as being authentic matter of fact records because they are to a large extent made up of actual occurrences, though these are transformed for the purposes of fiction. Defoe's invention begins where history leaves off, embroidering fiction round the facts.'²

Secord makes out a case for the dependence, in this way, of *Robinson Crusoe* on *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* written by Robert Knox and published in London in 1681. Defoe's indebtedness to Knox had been cursorily stated by James Ryan in 1911.³ He added to his edition of Knox the recently discovered autograph MS in the Bodleian containing Knox's reflections and some account of his later career. John Masefield in *A Mainsail Haul*⁴ took it for granted that Defoe and Knox were acquaintances. Secord concluded that not only do certain things occur in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* because Defoe had read Knox's book, but that Defoe is likely to have had access to Knox's MS notes. He must have known the old sea captain therefore, who, in his turn, must have been glad to secure the services of such a popular writer as Defoe to give wider publicity to some of his experiences. In Secord's own words 'This relation of Knox's with which we know Defoe was familiar has narrative devices and situations identical with those of *Robinson Crusoe*. So similar in tone are the two works that many such passages could be transferred bodily from one to the other without noticeable effect upon them.'⁵

1. A. W. Secord, *Studies in the Narrative Method of Defoe* (Urbana, 1924), University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, Vol. IX, No. 1.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

3. Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, (Glasgow, 1911), Ed. James Ryan.

4. J. Masefield, *A Mainsail Haul*, (London, 1913).

5. Secord, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

All this might be granted, but there is more in the relationship of Knox to *Robinson Crusoe* than Secord's account of it demonstrates. It is the purpose of this paper to show that Knox's book was more to Defoe than a happy hunting ground for narrative devices and situations later repeated in *Robinson Crusoe*. Obviously Defoe was impressed by Knox's story, or he would not have gone to the length of inserting a brief abstract of it in *Captain Singleton*. But the stock of narrative devices and situations found in *Robinson Crusoe* may, as Secord himself is ready to admit, have suggested themselves to Defoe through his general reading of the literature of voyages, travels and adventures. More than once in *Robinson Crusoe* he excuses himself for inserting descriptions and details which must have been banal to the reader of that time:

'There are so many Travellers, who have wrote the History of their Voyages and Travels this Way, that it will be very little Diversion to any Body, to give a long Account of the Places we went to, and the People who inhabit there; these Things I leave to others, and refer the Reader to those Journals and Travels of *English Men*, of which, many I find are publish'd, and more promis'd every Day.'⁶

'I shall not pester my Account, or the Reader, with the Description of Places, Journals of our Voyages, Variations of Compass, Latitudes, Meridian-Distances, Trade-Winds, Situation of Ports, and the Like; such as almost all the histories of long Navigation are full of, and makes the reading tiresome enough, and are perfectly unprofitable to all that read it, except only to those who are to go to those places themselves.'⁷

Defoe had no need to borrow such things from Knox. It can be shown that some of the similarities between *An Historical Relation* and *Robinson Crusoe* listed by Secord, are, in the jargon of our day, 'purely coincidental', others unimportant, while others again are scarcely similarities at all.

A number are such general matters as could be assigned to the 'folklore of travellers' tales'. They belong to the stock repertory of seventeenth century records of voyages and shipwreck. Such would be the problems of clothing, the fits of ague, the difficulties of fuel for lighting, of the making of pottery, and reflections on the onset of age. How far from each other even such details can be, will be illustrated by Secord's description of the 'similar' way in which Knox and Crusoe dealt with their lighting problems: 'He (Knox) furnishes oil for his lamp from the cocoanuts; Crusoe, it will be recalled, uses goat's tallow in a lamp of his own contrivance.'⁸

6. *Robinson Crusoe*, iii, 109.

7. *Ibid.*, 83.

8. Secord, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Then there is that class of trivial 'similarity' which contributes nothing to an understanding of Knox's attraction for Defoe. If the first group of similarities is composed of accidental commonplaces, the second is full of the unessential. Here belong such things as that the experiences of both Knox and Crusoe begin about the same time (Knox's in November 1659, Crusoe's on September 30, 1659); that, like Knox, Crusoe builds two or three houses, one of which he surrounds with a hedge to keep out prying eyes; that both grew long beards; that both long to get away from their place of exile; that the subject of marriage with native women is discussed by both; that when Knox escaped there were eighteen children of the marriages of the English captives and native women, while Crusoe found at his second departure that there were 'near 20 in all'; and that both bred goats. In this group too the great differences between Knox and Defoe, as Secord sometimes notes, are more to be remarked than the casual likeness. For instance, with regard to marriage with native women Knox has understandable puritanical religious and legal scruples, whereas the old Spaniard in *Robinson Crusoe* objects only because he feels that 'the having of women . . . would presently be attended with inconvenience and might occasion some strife, and perhaps blood.'⁹

Finally there is a group where there are hardly similarities at all. One example from Secord will show how remote the incident cited in *Robinson Crusoe* is from its prototype in Knox. Undoubtedly Defoe transforms what he derives from Knox; it would be both profitless and ridiculous to try to discover exact counterparts in *Robinson Crusoe* for certain things which may have come to Defoe by way of his reading of Knox. But the reader has a right to expect the transformation to belong to the accountable processes of probability and of creative borrowing. What remains, in the absence of this, is more the ingenuity of the critic listing parallels than the possibility of one writer's indebtedness to another. There is in Knox's account of his escape from the Kandyan kingdom the following incident: Rutland, with whom he escapes, and himself, in order to mislead any would-be pursuers walk backwards on the sandy river-bed which has to be crossed by them in their flight. Here are Knox's words:

'We were exceeding careful not to tread on the Sand or soft Ground, lest our footsteps should be seen; and where it could not be avoided, we went backwards, so that by the print of our feet, it seemed as if we had gone the contrary way.'¹⁰

Defoe in his summary of Knox's story of his captivity and escape in *Captain Singleton* notices this incident. But could this be made out to be the source of the episode of the footprint in the sand in *Robinson Crusoe*?

9. *Robinson Crusoe*, ii, 209.

10. Knox, Ed. Ryan, p. 261.

Not the chance correlates of any seventeenth century travel book, but the special significance of yet another human being's triumph over circumstances is likely to have impressed Defoe. What this special significance was could be shown by reference to yet another incident listed by Secord. Here an experience noteworthy in its unusualness and an essential part of Knox's story lent itself readily to Defoe's transformation. Knox made much of the 'miraculous' way in which he came by his English Bible:

'It chanced as I was fishing, an old Man passed by, and seeing me, asked of my Boy, If I could read in a Book. He answered, Yes. The reason I ask, said the old Man, is because I have one I got when the Portuguese lost Columbo, and if your Master please to buy it, I will sell it him. Which when I heard of, I had my Boy go to his House with him, which was not far off, and bring it to me to see it, making no great account of the matter, supposing it might be some Portuguese Book.

The Boy having formerly served the English, knew the Book, and as soon as he had got it in his hand came running with it, calling out to me It is a Bible. It startled me to hear him mention the name of a Bible. For I neither had one, nor scarcely could ever think to see one. Upon which I flung down my Angle, and went to meet him. The first place the Book opened in after I took it in my hand, was the Sixteenth Chapter of the Acts, the first place my eye pitched on, was the Thirtieth and one and Thirtieth Verses, where the Jailor asked S. Paul, what must I do to be saved? And he answered saying, Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thine house . . . The sight indeed of this Bible so overjoyed me, as if an Angel had spoke to me from Heaven. To see that my most gracious God had prepared such an extraordinary Blessing for me; which I did, and ever shall look upon as miraculous, to bring unto me a Bible in my own Native Language, and that in such a remote part of the World, where his Name was not so much as known, and where any English Man was never known to have been before.¹¹

Defoe in his account of Crusoe's systematic stripping of his treasure trove, the wrecked ship, has the following:

'also I found three very good Bibles which came to me in my Cargo from England, and which I had pack'd up among my things; some Portuguese Books also, and among them two or three Popish Prayer-Books, and several other Books, all which I carefully secur'd.'¹²

11. Knox, op. cit., pp. 203 ff.

12. *Robinson Crusoe*, i, 73.

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In Defoe's own lifetime Gilden pointed rather scornfully to the miraculous and unconvincing manner in which three English Bibles came to be part of the cargo of a Portuguese ship:

'Tho' I should have wonder'd how three *English* Bibles came on Board a *Portuguese* ship, had he not told us, that they had come to him in a cargo from England.'¹³

When one remembers Knox there is no real cause for wonder. But what is interesting here is not a similarity of narrative device—Knox's purchase of his Bible is as far again from Crusoe's discovery of three Bibles as is the crossing of the riverbed from the footprint on the sand—it concerns an integral part of both Knox's and Defoe's stories. From Knox's story—if one separates this section of his book from the others which deal with the Kandyan country, its people and institutions—the reader continually receives the impression of a Christian, an ordinary middle-class Englishman, faced by an unusual set of circumstances, accommodating himself to them and even overcoming them by the fortitude of his character. It is possible that *Robinson Crusoe* would have been written had neither Selkirk nor Knox lived; certainly neither Selkirk nor Knox was Robinson Crusoe. Nor yet was Crusoe an actual living man. If a prototype in real life has to be discovered for the successful castaway, then it would be profitable to turn to Robert Knox. For in his record will be found not so much the colouring matter of reality which was a valuable ingredient to Defoe, as the impress of a character near to his heart.

One has to concentrate then, not on resemblances in detail, but on the portrait of a character—the middle-class Christian in solitude, succeeding against the odds opposed to him. This is the effect of Knox's story, and it is precisely in its evocation of the idea of man triumphant over his environment that *Robinson Crusoe* achieved greatness. The total effect without doubt owed a great deal to the infinite care with which the details were set out, but it is necessary to see which details are of value in the whole picture, and which lose themselves in the general background.

Robert Knox came of good middle-class family, his father was a captain in the East India Company's service. The father planned for the son a career different from his own, but since the boy, like Robinson Crusoe, had a 'wandering Disposition', it was not for him to enjoy, any more than Crusoe could, the pleasures of 'the middle State of Life' so often eulogised by Defoe. These reflections are in fact the corollary of the conclusion of both Defoe and Crusoe that the best content comes from the state which exempts you from the envy

13. Charles Gildon, *Robinson Crusoe Examin'd and Criticis'd*, (London, 1923), Ed. Paul Dottin, p. 15.

of the highest as well as from the misery of the lowest. Back at home Crusoe concluded:

'I farm'd upon my own Land, I had no Rent to pay, was limited by no Articles; I could pull up, or cut down as I pleased; What I planted, was for my self, and what I improved was for my Family; and having thus left off the Thoughts of Wandering I had not the least Discomfort in any Part of Life, as to this World. Now I thought indeed that I enjoy'd the middle State of Life, that my Father so earnestly recommended to me.'¹⁴

By upbringing, interests, and ambition, Knox was a good representative of the God-fearing class which made money in trade, and settled down seriously and strenuously to the life of 'a meer Country gentleman'. He had the two well known instincts of his class—an interest in property and possessions, and capacity for hard work in acquiring them—just at the time when the increasing wealth of England and her rapidly growing sea power developed such instincts into the greatest virtues. So that although Knox on account of his long imprisonment had a somewhat different career from most of his class, yet the life he led in Ceylon during his years of captivity was, in the circumstances, as good a substitute for the desirable middle state as any he might have reached in England. After some years of hard and prosperous work he had reached a station he described later as follows:

'We had now brought our House and Ground to such a perfection that few Noble mens Seats in the Land did excel us. On each side was a great Thorn-Gate for entrance, which is the manner in that Country: the Gates of the City are of the same. We built another House in the Yard all open for Air, for ourselves to sit in, or any Neighbours that came to talk with us.'¹⁵

He had been educated in the Bible and in a very notable seventeenth century manual of Christian discipline, *The Practice of Piety*, a copy of which was with him when he was taken prisoner.¹⁶ This was the book which Mrs. Bunyan had received from her father on his deathbed, and in which she made her husband read. It had gone into several editions and only a 'best seller' like *Robinson Crusoe* could rival its popularity with the reading public. Like other seventeenth century devotional books it chastened the believer with constant reminders of the eternity of suffering reserved for the damned, and the frequent hindrances to the practice of true piety. Knox read continually in this manual. It coloured his style of writing to some extent, and it gave his mind, not gloom,

but a severity of temper. To such a man not the place where he found himself mattered, whether it was London or the 'horrid Accreagull', but the task enjoined on him to secure God's providence as his guide. How real its meditations must have been to Knox in the unknown wilderness of Ceylon, a passage like the following will show:

'... That in going abroad into the world, thou goest unto a *forrest* full of unknown dangers, where thou shalt meet many *bryars* to teare thy *good name*: many *snares* to trap thy *life*, and many *hunters* to devour thy soule. It is a field full of pleasant *grasse*, but full of poysonous *serpents*. Adventure not therefore to go *naked* amongst those briars, till thou hast prayed Christ to *clothe* thee with his righteousness: not to passe through these *snares* and *ambushments*, till thou hast praied for God's *providence* to be thy *guide*; nor to walke barefoote through this snakie field...'¹⁷

When he miraculously came by his English Bible Knox could carry out a programme of daily reading in it as he would have been able to in his native England.

Through his long years of detention in the Kandyan kingdom Knox's spirits were maintained, and his resolution to escape never faltered, because he could quite sincerely regard himself as chosen by God for a better fate than ending his days among the heathen. The grounds of this conviction did not arise from any comparison of his lot with that of his fellows, or from special marks of grace designed for him alone. It was with no sense of his superiority over his fellows, English or Sinhalese, that he believed in the Divine interest in himself. There was much of the Scots Presbyterian in Knox. It may be that in his proneness to look upon the events of his life as a kind of allegory of God's workings among mankind, there is something in him to which Defoe responded. To the reading public of *Robinson Crusoe* certainly Knox would have been the ideal of the true Christian. He had exhibited the major Christian virtues in a measure possible only to the heroic. In his *Historical Relation*, which was a popular scientific treatise and travel book and had been translated into two languages, there was the portrait of a man whom any Christian would have been glad to imitate. The writer of a moral tract could not do better than use an example so perfectly detailed; as for the writer of fiction with an improving purpose, he would have had only to mould the stubborn material of fact and give his reading public something sympathetically nearer to their waywardness, and dyed a little with their imperfections.

An Historical Relation would offer not only the picture of a true Christian, but the example of a practical man notably successful in making the best of circumstances, and triumphing over them in a way which must have seemed to a good middle-class man proof positive of the duty laid upon man to work

14. *Robinson Crusoe*, ii, 116.

15. Knox, op. cit., p. 239.

16. Lewis Bayly, *The Practise of Pietie*, (London, 1612).

17. Bayly, *The Practise of Pietie*, 3rd Ed., (London, 1613), pp. 350-351.

profitably in his situation and to make a success of living. Knox was cut off from home and family, a captive in a strange tropical land, a Christian among the heathen, with little hope of ever being able to return to his native country. Although everything seemed against him there was one palliative. He was not imprisoned. His lodging and maintenance were by the king's orders a charge to the village where he was detained. In a feudal society held together by the rights and obligations of land tenure, Knox's status would have been nearer to that of the 'meer Country Gentleman' than to that of the yeoman or nobleman. As long as the villagers performed their obligations and brought the English detenus the food which they were obliged to provide by royal command, Knox and his fellows could have been regarded as enjoying some of the privileges of their class without having to perform any of the services prescribed. During this time Knox had to accustom to the accidents of living in a tropical climate, to strange food and clothing, and to the bodily distresses of malaria. What is more he had to endure the death of his father. On their way from the coast where they had been captured to the recesses of the mountainous Kandyan country the band of Englishmen had been a nine days wonder to the Kandyan villagers:

'Yet I think we gave them good content for all the Charge we put them to which was to have the satisfaction of seeing us eat, sitting on Mats upon the Ground in their yards to the Publick view of all Beholders. Who greatly admired us, having never seen, nor scarce heard of, Englishmen before.'¹⁸

They were strangers in an environment which pitted against them all the terrors of the unknown. Knox took up the struggle against this environment with such fortitude, that when the villagers ceased to supply him with food, he worked successfully as a trader. On three several occasions when he had been forced to give up the land he had bought and worked, he was reduced from comparative affluence to complete destitution. He had then at least the satisfaction of reflecting, like a celebrated character in Shakespeare, that he had had his 'losses' too. His later career afforded further proof of the conclusion he drew therefrom:

'From all Gods Mercifull Dispensations to mee all my life longe I make this observation, that although he sett his Providence to watch over mee for good yet he would not permitt me to increase in worldly riches, &c., but continually, and from time to time, fed mee with foode convenient for mee, as he did the Israilites with manna in the wilderness which they gathered day by day and could not lay up in store, for when by a Diligent and industrious struggling in the world I had gott a little together,

18. Knox, op. cit., p. 196.

5 times he stript me naked and tooke all away, but still leaving me food and raiment with which St. Paull saith we ought to be content.'¹⁹

He had turned his hand to many things in his time, to working in the fields, to lending money against the harvest, to peddling, and to knitting caps. In all these ventures he showed caution, shrewdness and an ability to adapt himself to a changing situation which would have been the envy of any tradesman in London. Knox was a successful middle-class trader in Ceylon, quick to seize his opportunity, and at all times a believer in the maxim that the best opportunities were provided by hard work. He was not seduced, as his companions were, by the prospect of lotus eating in an island paradise, nor did he set up a household with any of the Kandyan women. However well he fitted in with the Kandyan scene, wearing the habit of the country, walking about barefooted, chewing betel and speaking the language perfectly, he always felt himself to be a Christian and a good Englishman whose proper sphere was England. He built himself, or rather he had built for himself, a house according to his own design. He felt it was his duty to keep in touch with his countrymen though his way of life was different from theirs. When eventually he escaped, being among the first who broke through the fastnesses of the Kandyan kingdom and the jungle which surrounded it, he was able to carry out his carefully worked out plan only because he was by that time so well known a figure in the parts he had for years been traversing as a pedlar:

'We travailed to and fro where the ways led us, according to their own Proverb, The Beggar and the Merchant is never out of his way; because the one begs and the other trades wherever they go. Thus we used to ramble until we had sold our ware, and then went home for more. And by these means we grew acquainted both with the People and the Paths.'²⁰

Quite apart from all this, the value of his record of the Kandyan kingdom, its people and institutions, must have proved to the discerning reader the kind of man Knox was. Both at Colombo and at Batavia Knox was closely questioned by the Dutch who were interested in having first hand information of the state of affairs in an enemy country of which they knew little. The records at Batavia show how important Knox's testimony was to the Dutch.²¹ In England he found such interest in his story that the book he published with the imprimatur of the East India Company was much more than a traveller's tale. Had it been only the strange adventures of Robert Knox, it would never have claimed the dignity of its title: *An Historical Relation*; nor would Knox have put his own story into the fourth part of his book. He offered the

19. Knox, op. cit., p. 364.

20. Ibid., p. 248.

21. F. H. de Vos, 'Translation of the Dag Register, A.D. 1678-80', *J.R.A.S. (Ceylon Branch)*, XXVI No. 71 (1918), pp. 184-192.

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reading public of his time a scientific document. This is quite clear from the Preface written by Robert Hooke who was Secretary to the Royal Society :

'... and had he found leisure to Compose it he could have filled a much greater Volume with useful and pertinent, as well as unusual and strange Observations. He could have enrich't it with a more particular Description of many of their curious Plants, Fruits, Birds, Fishes, Insects, Minerals, Stones ; and told you many more of their Medicinal and other uses of them in Trades and Manufactures. He could have given you a compleat Dictionary of their Language, understanding and speaking it as well as his Mother Tongue . . . ' ²²

Knox's purpose in publishing his book was threefold. He had set out as a merchant trader in his father's ship more than twenty years previously ; he had a duty therefore to perform to the trading interest of his country in describing one of the fabled spice islands of the Orient. In the second place his was the first serious account of the island in English written by a man who had unexampled opportunities of studying it. Finally it was the story of a remarkable experience and a miraculous escape.

In what Knox states about the island and its people, as well as in the accuracy of his observations, biassed though some of his judgements were, could be seen the attitude of a good middle-class Englishman of his time, proud that he was not given to heathen superstitions and glad that he was not subject of a lawless tyrant. He had his prejudices, prejudices natural to the Englishmen of his age, and he came to wrong conclusions. But he rarely misstates anything. So much so that his, the work of an ordinary Englishman with no special education or training, remains the most valuable source of information on seventeenth century Ceylon. To describe him then as an 'ordinary Englishman' of his time would seem an understatement ; he had the unusual powers that sometimes accompany ordinariness. This is the strongest impression left on the reader of his book today. As far as he is from Defoe's hero in fiction, are there not in him the essential traits of the character Crusoe symbolised—'all Mankind in difficulties, but . . . first of all an Englishman of the lower middle-classes making the best of things' ? ²³

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22. Ibid., p. XLVI. Knox was engaged in compiling a glossary of Sinhalese terms for Hooke—see Donald Ferguson, *Robert Knox's Sinhalese Vocabulary*, J.R.A.S. (Ceylon Branch) XIV, No. 17 (1896), pp. 155-198.

23. J. R. Sutherland, *Defoe*, (London, 1937), pp. 230-231. For the transformation of the Crusoe character into culture-hero, see Ian Watt, *Robinson Crusoe as Myth*, Essays in Criticism, Vol. I, No. 2 (Oxford, 1951), pp. 95-119.