
Katherine Frank’s *Crusoe* is somewhat deceptively titled. It is primarily a recitation of Robert Knox’s *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon, in the East Indies* (1681), which was worked on and relentlessly edited by Robert Hooke, author of *Micrographia* (1665), approved by the Royal Society, with a commendatory preface by Sir Christopher Wren. This first book on Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in the English language is in four parts. The first three deal with the island’s products, government, history, court life, and the religious and social customs of the inhabitants. Part four is Knox’s story of his nineteen-year captivity in the interior, and his dramatic escape in 1679, recollected, as his autobiographical notes tell us, on his voyage home, for he had no writing materials during his period of imprisonment.

Frank relates the romantic navigations of *Ceylon*, the book. The original account has not survived. The manuscript of what Knox hoped to be a revised “second edition,” “the thick, interleaved copy of *An Historical Relation*, with all of Knox’s handwritten additions and revisions” (212) which he steadily worked on during his later career at sea, was lost but miraculously recovered. Another interleaved copy containing his autobiography was discovered in the Bodleian Library in 1901. Frank advises that “[i]n 1817, the 1681 first edition of Knox’s book was republished” (292). *An Historical Relation* was again published in 1911 and reprinted in Ceylon (1958). The definitive edition, with expansive annotations and footnotes, and a mammoth 500-page introduction by J. H. O. Paulusz, an erudite, former government archivist in Ceylon, was published in 1989. Paulusz’s edition is the bedrock of Frank’s recitation.

Frank’s study of “the man who was Crusoe and the man who wrote Crusoe” (297) contains twelve chapters and an epilogue. Chapter One introduces her two subjects living in London in 1719, and her chapter shares the opening of Arthur Secord’s earlier but thorough study of Knox as a source for *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).
(Secord 32). Chapter Two is a reprise of the writing and adventures of Defoe’s narrative, with its continuations, all of which Knox might have read, only to discover that his life and adventures “had been salvaged, resurrected, and published by Defoe” (31). Chapter Three begins Frank’s riff on “captivated” Knox’s narration of his first voyage, the capture on Ceylon of his captain father and his crew, and their incarceration on the island by the dissembling and unscrupulous King of Kandy (see Secord 34). In Chapter Four, “Shipwrecked by Land,” Frank imaginatively balances Knox’s incarceration with Defoe’s business adventures, his bankruptcy and imprisonment in London, from 1692 to 1697. She firmly relies on the published discoveries of Pat Rogers, James Sutherland, Maximillian Novak, Paula Backscheider, and George Healey’s edition of Defoe’s letters. Here and throughout Frank makes direct and also glancing comments equating the lives of Knox and Defoe and the language of their texts—or their differences. This is a pattern that sustains her elevation and assessment of the originality of the former in all of her chapters (compare Secord 32–49). One can question her surmise that Defoe, a hustling young entrepreneur busy with business, newly married, confronting bankruptcy, lately pardoned because of his participation in Monmouth’s Rebellion (1685), would then have had the time or the interest, or even the funds, to buy and read Knox’s ten-shilling folio. (Robinson Crusoe was a five-shilling volume. I recall that Defoe noted that his workmen at his tile factory were paid seven shillings a week. At the time of writing a skilled artisan could expect to make 2 shillings 6 pence a day for his labor [see Gilboy 256]).

Chapters Five, Six, Eight, Nine, and Ten continue with Knox’s captivity, his father’s death, and the protection of the King, who ordered that the natives feed him and his companions. They “were well-entertained” (43). Knox read, fished, and meditated. Their basic needs provided for, Knox and his fellow English captives turned to industry, “knitting caps at nine pence a piece, the thread standing us about three pence” (99). He invested in real estate, planted fruit trees, and prospered, yet, Frank writes, “remained in some ways as lonely and solitary as Crusoe was on his island” (91). With a bachelor companion he meticulously planned their escape. In his narrative fraught with tension and told with dramatic effect, they evaded wild elephants and natives and arrived at the island’s Dutch settlement on the coast in October 1679: “after a Dctainement of 19 yeares 6 months & 14 dayes [when] … [God’s] providence so disposed of & directed me to escape thence … & conducted me safe whome (sic) to my Native Country” (132). Frank’s most glaring error occurs here, when she writes that he “sailed east” (131) to India and St. Helena. The date on p. 58 should be “mid-1690s” (not “mid-1890s”). Also, “April 1864” should be “April 1684” (199).

Frank concludes with Knox’s later voyages as captain of an East India Company ship (187), another slaving voyage to Madagascar (199), and the delivery of slaves to St. Helena. There his men mutinied for cause; “[he] was accused of giving
his men ‘Scant allowance of provisions,’” according to the East India Company records (231). His last two voyages were a privateering one in 1689 and another slave-trading one in 1690 (237).

Chapter Eleven echoes much of Secord’s chapter on Knox’s Historical Relation as a source for Defoe’s Captain Singleton (1720) (112—64). Frank emphatically repeats Secord’s earlier surmise that, “in fact, Defoe was familiar with all the major events Knox recorded in his unpublished autobiography” (234, my emphasis). But Frank supports her argument not with data from the autobiography but with the complicated records detailed in East India Company files. Again, as she had done with the lives and works of Knox and Defoe, Frank notices similarities and omissions, echoes and contrasts (246). It should surprise no one that Defoe had read his fellow Londoner’s Historical Relation, for Quaker William alludes to Knox’s story and Singleton himself summarizes in a dozen pages the earlier writer’s captivity and deliverance “from a long Captivity of Nineteen Years and six Months” (Defoe 301). Why then Frank should insist that this is “plagiarism” (21, 234, 248) I do not understand, for it does not square with what we usually define as plagiarism. (“But the use of sources by Defoe in Captain Singleton is not that of a plagiarist” [Secord 161]).

Chapter Seven, titled “Another Escape, London, 1703—4,” recapitulates Defoe’s standing in the pillory, the consequence of his writing and publication of The Shortest Way (1702), and concludes with Frank’s commentary on The Storm (1704), of great significance because it “unlocked for Defoe the secret of survival … [and] brought Defoe back to life” (166). Knox died in 1720, his last words the ejaculations of a devout, redeemed Christian. Defoe thrived for another decade, his astonishing literary production suggesting “a retroactive psychiatric diagnosis of manic depression or bipolar disorder as it is now called” (271).

Captivated by Knox, and seemingly upset at the unfair distribution of literary merit and fame doled out inequitably to him for three hundred years, Frank attempts to correct the historical record with this readable redaction of his life and work. Her sources are voluminous and she has mined them well. The one noticeable omission in her bibliography is J. Paul Hunter’s The Reluctant Pilgrim (1966), his concentrated study of Robinson Crusoe. Knox shared a little of Defoe’s Puritan ways of thinking, and more could have been said about his reading in The Practice of Piety (45), his bibliomancy (50), his knitting of caps, even his “lending corn to his neighbours at a rate of 50 per cent per annum” (99). Come harvest time, they were expected to pay Knox back “the same quantity … [he] lent them, and half as much more” (100). Frank has visited Sri Lanka and has read the contributions about Knox and his island experiences recently published in Sri Lankan journals.

I have two complaints. As a result of Frank’s need to quote profusely from Paulusz’s essential edition and give full and necessary credit to his pages, the notes include an inordinate, excessive, and bothersome quantity of “Ibids” (see e.g. 317). Careful readers who habitually check the sources of quoted work cannot help but feel
the disruption. Second, in her desire to fully contextualize Knox’s seafaring life, his ports of call, and his, and even Defoe’s, London living, Frank resorts to an overwhelming quantity of data that is simply clutter: the Georgian calendar (312), St Helena (219–27), coffee houses (178–79, 322), cannabis (103–4, 236–37). A less expensive and more readable reprint of An Historical Relation for popular consumption could have resembled that fascinating edition of Robinson Crusoe, Revised and Corrected for the Advancement of Nautical Education By The Hydrographer of the Naval Chronical (1815).

Who then benefits from Frank’s book? Who will need to read it? Surely not the readers of Digital Defoe, who already have been given the monumental biographies of Novak and Backscheider, and the necessary contributions to Defoe study of Richetti, Rogers, Furbank, Owens, Bastian, and Sutherland. And of course Secord. Perhaps then the reader who will most profit is a younger one, of the generation of sexuality, commerce, gender, xenophobia, colonialism, slavery, and narrativity, who, discovering Secord and the indisputably satisfying study of the sources of a literary work, will discover one of the enduring foundations of literary scholarship.

Manuel Schonhorn
Dingmans Ferry, PA

WORKS CITED


