

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: Fictional Missionary in Britain's Pre-Missionary Age

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Introduction

For many of us, the *Crusoe* story is something treasured from childhood – a saga from which we remember only the broadest details. There is a prodigal son eventually brought to his senses through a shipwreck of which he is the only survivor; an island wilderness gradually tamed and made to yield agricultural bounty by its sole citizen; a wonderful rescue of an aboriginal from cannibals, with the man subsequently becoming the inseparable companion of Crusoe. This, in sum, is the version of the *Crusoe* story as it has been passed on to us by children's versions of the tale as well as by Hollywood producers.

Among the numerous themes generally passed over in such abbreviated versions is one which I propose to explore here: Crusoe as missionary. It is a sub-theme which is the more striking in that the tale of 1719 seems to anticipate by some decades the English involvement in evangelical missions which we associate with the age of William Carey (1761-1834).

Instances of the Missionary Theme

Authorities on *Crusoe* and its author have previously commented upon the prominence the story gives to the doctrine of Providence.¹ The shipwrecked man is in fact a prodigal – both from his parents and from a devout Christian upbringing. He comes to accept, after the fact, that the shipwreck in the tropics has been the God-ordained means of his being recalled to a sober

¹ Paul J. Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), chap. 3; George Starr, "Robinson Crusoe's Conversion", in Max Byrd, ed. *Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

frame of mind and a renewed Christian faith.² Here, we wish to go further and draw attention to an unmistakable *missionary* thread in the narrative. This exists in two aspects:

a. Crusoe Is Depicted As a Christian Forced to Ask Fundamental Questions about God and Humanity in His Interaction with Aboriginal Peoples.

Because Crusoe's island occasionally has uninvited visitors – sometimes mutinous crews of European vessels,³ but more often cannibals, he is confronted by situations which provoke him to ask questions about wider humanity in its relationship to the Creator. These bear on what we today call the theology of religions. For instance, when he rescues his man Friday from the cannibals, the rescued man's display of gratitude, love and humanity provokes Crusoe to deep reflection about this one whom he considers to be a mere savage. Friday and his civilization seem to Crusoe to be those from whom God has taken:

the best uses to which their faculties and the powers of their souls are adapted (they were after all primitive aboriginals) and yet that He has bestowed on them the same powers, the same reason, the same affections, the same sentiments of kindness and obligation . . . the same sense of gratitude . . . all the capacities of doing and receiving good that He has given to us . . .⁴

Here is the marvel of common grace, by which humans who neither know nor serve God regularly and spontaneously do commendable, constructive, and charitable acts.

But Crusoe is provoked to still further thought by the cannibals themselves. At their subsequent return to his island with prisoners, Crusoe – who has already been given occasion for reflection by the character of Friday⁵ – momentarily hesitates to use his weapons to intervene as he had done on the earlier occasion. Intervention with weapons of death, while it will ensure the survival of the prisoners, will certainly mean the death of those who hold them captive. Perhaps, wonders Crusoe

their barbarous customs were their own disaster, being in them a token of God's having left them, with the other nations of that part of the world, to such stupidity and to such inhumane courses; but

² Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*. The edition of *Crusoe* used for the purpose of this paper is that edited by Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton and Co., 1975).

³ Such a visit by mutineers who propose to jettison their captain on what they believe to be an uninhabited isle will be the means of Crusoe's eventual repatriation.

⁴ *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 163.

⁵ Crusoe has learned to his horror that cannibalism had been as commonplace to Friday as to his captors.

did not call me to take upon me to be a Judge of their actions, much less an executioner of His justice.⁶

But intervene he does – inflicting death, and justifiably too, as events indicate. For Friday, his co-combatant, discovers that the cannibals have his own father lying tied in a canoe, and waiting as their next victim. But there is more than this to consider . . .

b. Crusoe Is Depicted As Missionary-Evangelist in His Role with the Man, Friday.

A considerable time after his rescue of Friday from cannibals, Crusoe narrates:

I asked him who had made the sea, the ground we walked on and the hills and the woods; he (Friday) told me it was the old *Benamuckee*, that lived beyond all; he could describe nothing of this great person but that he was very old; much older – he said – than the sea or the land or the moon or the stars. I asked him then why did not all things worship him; he (Friday) looked very grave and with a look of perfect innocence said, “All things do say *O* to him”. . . From these things I began to instruct him in the knowledge of the true God that lived *up there* – pointing up toward heaven; that he governs the world by the same power and providence by which he made it . . . He listened with great attention and received with pleasure the notion of Jesus Christ being sent to redeem us. . .⁷

As such spiritual conversation advanced, it led to a consideration of the problem of evil's presence and activity in a world which God had originally made good. On hearing it explained to him that it was the work of the devil to advance the course of evil here, Friday demanded to know, “if God much strong, much might as the Devil, why God no kill the devil, so make him no more do wicked?”

This perennial question Crusoe is (as we might expect) unable to answer to Friday's satisfaction. Yet this seeming impasse sets Crusoe a-praying:

to God that he would enable me to instruct savingly this Savage, assisting by His Spirit the heart of the poor ignorant creature to receive the Light of the knowledge of God in Christ . . . and guide me

⁶ p.181. Crusoe had been provoked to ask similar questions earlier, at his first contemplating that he might possibly share the island with cannibals. See p. 134.

⁷ p. 169.

to speak so to him from the Word of God as his conscience might be convinced, his eyes opened and his soul saved.⁸

In time, Crusoe could report that “the savage was now a good Christian”.⁹

And yet . . . all of this fictional missionary thought and action by Crusoe is apparently coming decades in advance of the time when English-speaking evangelical missionaries will engage in any such activity. How are we to explain this phenomenon? Partly, I propose, by reaching an understanding of the author, Defoe, and partly by reaching an understanding of the state of missionary work then in the world.

I. Defoe the Man

The author of this imaginary discourse between a resourceful (but formerly prodigal) Englander now functioning as a proto-missionary *and* the aboriginal whom he has rescued from grisly death, was Daniel Defoe (c. 1659-1731). He was raised Daniel Foe (the stylish change of name coming in his thirty-fifth year, 1695), son of a Nonconformist London tallow merchant.¹⁰ Defoe was well-educated by the standards of his era; like other Nonconformists of that time, he completed studies at an Academy which was intended to replicate the university education from which all religious Dissenters were barred under the Test Act. While his fellow-students at the Newington Green Academy were chiefly trained for the pastoral ministry, there were numerous others who aimed at advancement in the world of business and public affairs. It seems that the latter ambition, for a role in public affairs, would consistently endanger Defoe’s success in the former, the world of business.

His involvement in that precursor of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 – the unsuccessful Monmouth Rebellion of 1686 – could have cost him his life, as it certainly did the lives of three former colleagues from student days at Newington Green Academy.¹¹ As Nonconformists chafing under the discriminatory religious laws of Restoration England, they acted on a widespread desire, common among Nonconformists, to see the Stuart dynasty displaced. Defoe’s similar enthusiastic involvement in the cause of Prince William of Orange at his landing on the Devon coast in November 1688 was in actuality a second extended diversion from his commercial career. Defoe’s commercial life had first to do with the import and export of wines and tobacco and then, increasingly with what we would call the wholesaling of men’s haberdashery. He was neither manufacturer nor storekeeper, but a supplier to merchants. Financial reverses soon came to Defoe – now a married man with children. Eight commercial lawsuits were filed against him and by 1692 he

⁸ p. 171.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Sutherland, *Daniel Defoe*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1950), p. 18.

¹¹ Sutherland, *Defoe*, p. 31. Many of the chronological details here are provided from the excellent chronological table provided in the Norton edition of *Crusoe*, p. 394.

was declared bankrupt to the tune of £17,000.¹² Though he would repay all but £5,000 by 1705, his bankruptcy effectively closed off, for him, the life of a civic official. Yet, this was what he had aspired to rise to through a career in the business world.¹³ Now this very turbulence in his life, which made him first a temporary fugitive from home and waiting creditors and latterly a prisoner, exposed him to some of the wide variety of characters whose likenesses may be glimpsed in his later novels.

While he had been involved in journalistic writing as early as 1690, following this debacle of bankruptcy Defoe found that now he must live chiefly by his pen. Sometimes he was a private pamphleteer determined to demonstrate his grasp of national and international affairs, sometimes a journalist interpreting European events. More often than not he was an anonymous propagandist for one government minister or another. At sixty years of age, he turned from this work to publish his *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Defoe, who had a marked fascination with geographic detail¹⁴ for one whose own foreign travels were modest, wove a tale embracing England, Morocco, Portugal, and Brazil as well as that soon-to-be celebrated island. On paper, at least, it was near what we today would call British Guiana – off the mouth of the Orinoco River and with the larger island of Trinidad not far off.¹⁵ Yet, we may well ask, how had Defoe at his fingertips the ingredients necessary for the describing of a missionary encounter between his English hero and aboriginals? Three distinct possibilities need to be examined.

II. Defoe the Literary Artist

a. Was There a Possible Literary Dependence Upon Earlier Shipwreck Narratives?

Students of Defoe's *Crusoe* have long been aware of the circulation of a body of ocean-going and shipwreck narrative literature in the years preceding the debut of *Crusoe's* tale.¹⁶ That Defoe was conversant with this literature is entirely likely. It is also entirely likely that a literary indebtedness exists between *Crusoe* and the earlier accounts. *Crusoe*, like the earlier accounts, describes a solitary European on an island in the south latitudes who survives

¹² He experienced bankruptcy a second time in 1702, when a brick making enterprise at Tilbury failed.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.

¹⁴ Sutherland, p. 29 describes geography as being one of Defoe's "passionate interests".

¹⁵ The Orinoco and Trinidad references appear in *Crusoe* (Norton edition) at p. 168.

¹⁶ The Norton edition (1976) of *Crusoe* utilized in this study supplies excerpts from four such earlier accounts: Dampier's account, "Rescue of a Moskito Indian Marooned Over Three Years on Juan Fernandez Island" (1703) plus three versions of the story of Alexander Selkirk's four year solitary sojourn on the same island by Cooke (1712), Rogers (1712) and Steele (1713).

by domesticating wild goats, cultivating native and imported fruits and vegetables, and assembling clothes made of animal skins.

Yet when these probable dependencies are acknowledged, they are easily surpassed by a list of features distinct to *Crusoe*. The older accounts all have to do with a south *Pacific* island off Chile while Defoe's tale has to do with an *Atlantic* island in the vicinity of Trinidad. The Pacific island, while occupied in one earlier account by a Mosquito Indian¹⁷, and alternately – in three accounts, by a solitary Scot – is never home to them both simultaneously. Defoe's Atlantic island is first inhabited by Crusoe, who is subsequently joined by an aboriginal, whom he saves from cannibals. The inhabitants of the Pacific island are marooned there by a tyrannical captain in command of an unseaworthy vessel, while Crusoe is the sole survivor of a hurricane-induced shipwreck. The Scot, Selkirk, is rescued from his solitary existence on Juan Fernandez after four years there; Defoe's Crusoe passes twenty-eight years, the last three of which are spent in the congenial company of the aboriginal.¹⁸

The fact-based earlier stories, because they focus upon a Pacific island never simultaneously inhabited by a European *and* an aboriginal provide neither the possibility nor the opportunity for the reflection on the various religions of man and the urgency of the evangelization of aboriginals which we now recognize as an important theme in *Crusoe*. In sum, the earlier works, while likely supplying Defoe with important details of plot, can have done nothing to assist him in depicting his Crusoe as missionary.

b. Was There Perhaps Some Contemporary Account of Missionary Work Upon Which Defoe Could Have Drawn?

So far as the English-speaking world goes, we can supply a rapid negative to this question. Like other western European principalities and nations which had embraced the Protestant Reformation, England had very little to show by way of missionary activity in the seventeenth century. While that century witnessed gradual changes in orientation toward world mission, these came only gradually as England, like Holland, began to challenge the Spanish and Portuguese domination of oceanic navigation. We may not speak of any *rapid* upsurge of missionary activity in either country.

Yet, as the two nations began to “pursue commercial ventures to the ends of the earth”¹⁹ the possibilities for missionary activity increased apace. In the Dutch colonial context, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) had penned a treatise *On the Truth of the Christian Religion* for the particular use of Dutch sailors who ventured to Indonesia and Formosa. It was foreseen that such trading expedi-

¹⁷ Also spelled “Mosquito” and “Miskito”.

¹⁸ Crusoe encounters Friday only in his twenty-fifth year on the island. *Crusoe* (Norton edition), p. 159.

¹⁹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd revised edition (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 188.

tions would bring with them opportunities for explaining the truth of the Christian faith to non-Europeans.²⁰

In this same period, the New England pastor of Roxbury, Massachusetts, John Eliot (1604-90) had begun missionary work among the Indian population in proximity to his community. Joined in this work by others of like sympathy, a mission effort to the Indians of Massachusetts was begun – in time embracing 2500 individuals. Then the immigrant-aboriginal conflict, which came to be known as King Philip's War (1675), dealt Indian evangelization a very severe setback. Yet, all the while, reports of Eliot's missionary work had been publicized in tract form in England from 1643 onward. The recipients of this literature were the Presbyterian and Congregational Independent movements which had come to the fore in England in this period.²¹

Yet while historian of missions, Stephen Neill, noted methodological affinities between older Catholic missions and those which the Dutch and English now undertook,²² no one has ever to date suggested that Defoe was dependent, in his writing of *Crusoe*, upon the meager written accounts of such missionary work.

Because Defoe was capable of French translation²³ and regularly did such translation in pursuit of his journalistic career, it is hypothetically possible that he could have profited by reading the printed records of Jesuit missionary activity known as the *Relations*. But no one has ever suggested that he had access to these, or drew on them. And as for the Moravian missionary movement that was shortly to have so profound an effect on early leaders of the Evangelical Revival such as John and Charles Wesley, it would not even begin its labors until 1731, twelve years after the first publication of *Crusoe*.²⁴ Here, as in the case of potential literary dependency upon those existing shipwreck narratives (above), we find no key to explain or interpret the missionary of theme of *Crusoe*. All of which leads us to consider a third possibility. . .

c. The Missionary Theme of *Crusoe* Is an Expression of the Concern Latent in the Puritan Divinity in Which Defoe Had Both Been Raised and Still Stood.

We now return to the fact that Defoe had been raised in, received an advanced education within, and kept Christian company among notable men of late Puritan Nonconformity. His boyhood minister in London had been the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

²¹ J. A. DeJong, *As The Waters Cover The Sea: Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-American Missions 1640-1810*, (Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1970), pp. 44, 46, 55.

²² Neill, op.cit.

²³ Sutherland, *Defoe*, p. 22.

²⁴ Neill, p. 201.

renowned Dr. Samuel Annesley.²⁵ Annesley, of Presbyterian conviction, had surrendered his position as minister in the London parish of St. Giles Cripplegate in the Great Ejection of 1662 and thereafter ministered to his Nonconforming flock in a clandestine style since the times required this. Minister and supporters were frequently fined for their not attending the services of the Established Church and for instead attending furtive conventicle-style gatherings. In this very setting, Defoe will have heard the learned, fervent, experiential preaching of late Puritanism and an emphasis upon the doctrines of the Shorter Catechism.

Not only had the nurture of his parents and the teaching provided in his Nonconforming congregation served to establish him in the orthodoxy of that late Puritan period, but Defoe had – as we have intimated – been the recipient of an education in a Nonconformist Academy of some standing.²⁶ The tutor at Newington Green Academy, Charles Morton, would go on to become the vice-principal of the young Harvard College by 1690.²⁷ The course of study was demanding, although it suffered from the drawback of its reliance on a single tutor for all major subjects. The curriculum was far from obscurantist. The instruction in sciences, mathematics, and contemporary history in some respects went beyond that available in the three English universities; these still stressed an extensively classical education. The biblical languages were taught in the academies, as were French and Latin. As for theology, which was studied by all that enrolled, there was emphasis on contemporary writers as well as standard authors in the Reformed theological tradition.²⁸

In Defoe's case, there is the persistent suggestion that his education at Newington Green *could* have been intended to prepare him for the Nonconformist ministry.²⁹ The curriculum had certainly prepared him for that calling

²⁵ Defoe memorialized Annesley at his death in 1697 with *The Character of Samuel Annesley*. Annesley's daughter, Susannah, would meet and marry Samuel Wesley when the latter was studying in the same academy, Newington Green, as Defoe. Apparently they were classmates. Wesley, later father to the evangelists, John and Charles, left Nonconformity and rejoined the Anglican establishment.

²⁶ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 368, describes this institution as "the most progressive of the early academies".

²⁷ Sutherland, *Defoe*, p. 21 ff.

²⁸ Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: His Life*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 15, lists John Locke, Richard Baxter, Archbishop John Tillotson, Stephen Charnock, Joseph Hall, Samuel Rutherford and European writers Strangius and Amyraut among the philosophical and theological writers used. Standard authorities on the education available in such academies a

s Newington Green are: Watts, *op. cit.*, Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England 1688-1791* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap. 12, and H. MacLachlan, *English Education Under the Test Acts*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931).

²⁹ This is the suggestion of the Norton edition of *Crusoe*, p. 354. Backscheider, *op. cit.* p. 29, explains that students aiming at public and business careers would custo-

if he had felt drawn towards it. But he was not in any way a solitary exception in his completing the academy style of education with a view to a career in business and public affairs.

Some have supposed that the key to the interpretation of *Crusoe* is a recognition that Crusoe's boyhood flight from family is most of all a flight from the proper stewardship of his gifts in a business career – something at which he ought to have persisted.³⁰ It is an interesting proposal. There is also the much-debated subsidiary question of whether Crusoe's prodigality is not a projection of Defoe's various neglects – of his failed businesses, of his parental duties, and above all of his possibly having turned away from the ministerial calling.

But here, all we propose is the plausibility of understanding that the solicitude which Crusoe shows for the eternal welfare of his Friday, his efforts to point him to the way of salvation in Christ, his prayers for the Holy Spirit's illumination of the man's heart and mind, as well as his reflections on the status of the cannibal in the sight of God – all these have been furnished to Defoe by his being nurtured in Puritan divinity.

This was the movement in which it had been possible for John Winthrop, future governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, to advocate emigration there from England not only as a means of securing refuge from religious persecution but “to help on the coming of the Gentiles and to raise up a bulwark against the kingdom of antichrist which the Jesuits do raise up in those parts”.³¹ Here was a consciousness in 1629 that Protestant missions were in arrears and needed to make up ground already lost to others. It was also the movement that had heard with pleasure of the subsequent progress made in evangelizing American Indians – under the leadership of John Eliot. The eleven tract-reports which the London-based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England circulated on behalf of this evangelization between 1643 and 1671 stirred considerable interest among English Independents and Presbyterians.³² Many of their ministers – some who had been prominent in the Westminster Assembly (1643-47) – were happy to lend their names to the

marily leave Newington after the third year, while those aiming at the pastoral ministry would stay for five. Defoe terminated his studies after the *fourth* year, indicating – at very least – that his mind had still been open to the ministerial calling at the end of year three.

³⁰ See the essay by Maxmillian Novak, “Robinson Crusoe's Original Sin” in Max Byrd, ed. *Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, chap. 5. The passage in *Crusoe* critical to Novak's investigation is found at p. 152 of the Norton edition.

³¹ John Winthrop, “Reasons to be Considered by the Undertakers of the Intended Plantation in New England” (1629), excerpted in L.B. Smith and J.R. Smith, eds., *The Past Speaks: Sources and Problems in English History*, Vol. 1 (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1993), p. 411.

³² De Jong, *As the Waters Cover*, p. 45.

tracts circulated in endorsement of this cause.³³ And it was not only the New England colonies and the needs of their aboriginal populations that became the focus of Puritan missionary concern. There was also a concern to evangelize the Caribbean islands and the region of Guiana – proximate to the fictional island Defoe would describe in 1719.³⁴

In short, the idea of missions to aboriginals in the Americas was widespread in the Nonconformist Protestant community into which Defoe had been born. It was upon the London merchant community – so substantially made up of Nonconformists – that these initiatives had been dependent ever since their inception. This was the community in which Defoe followed in the footsteps of his own father.

Moreover, Defoe had himself demonstrated his personal interest in such a missionary cause closer to home than New England. While posted to Scotland by the English government as journalist and correspondent at the time of the Treaty of Union (1707), he actively aided and abetted in the founding of the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (incorporated in 1709). This society sought to aid in the circulation of Christian literature in Scotland and abroad in New England, to advance evangelization in the still-intensely Catholic Highlands, and, in due course, to assist with finance and personnel the evangelization of Indians in the American colonies.³⁵

It is necessary, therefore, to allow that missionary ideas and themes had a well-warranted part in Nonconformist, English thought three quarters of a century before William Carey's celebrated departure for India in 1792. Defoe's depiction of Crusoe as a proto-missionary can only be adequately understood within this context and in light of his own expressed personal interest in such causes. Yet this suggestion – that Defoe wrote simply from within the context in which he had been raised – is open to objection at several levels. We must now address these in turn.

i. It May Be Suggested That This Was an Era in Which Puritanism and Calvinism Were Disintegrating and Thus, Unlikely to Provide the Influence We Propose.

As long ago as 1950, G. R. Cragg contended that the second half of the seventeenth century saw the “overthrow” and “eclipse” of the Calvinism

³³ De Jong, *op. cit.*, pp. 48, 49.

³⁴ De Jong, *op. cit.* p. 44.

³⁵ These Scottish involvements of Defoe are described in Backscheider, *Defoe*, p. 239 ff. The origin and eventual transatlantic influence of this society is helpfully described in Donald Meek, “Scottish Highlanders, North American Indians and the SSPCK: Some Cultural Perspectives”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* XXIII (1989): 378-396. Further details are provided in Donald MacLean, “Scottish Calvinism and Foreign Missions”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* VI (1938): 5-7, and F. V. Mills, “The Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in British North America”, *Church History* (1994): 15-30.

which had undergirded the Puritan period.³⁶ Could a declining and disintegrating Puritan culture truly provide the undergirdings for a great work of literature? One may grant the substantial accuracy of this idea of decline as regards Puritan influence on political life, inasmuch as the Commonwealth period (1653-60) did mark the zenith of the public influence of Presbyterians, Congregationalists and others who had enjoyed enlarged liberties under Cromwell. One may grant the accuracy of the idea also as regards the teaching of theology in the universities. The Acts of Uniformity of 1660 and 1662 largely removed Puritan teachers of theology who were concerned to uphold Calvinistic teaching in its then-current international form from the English universities.³⁷

But when one has acknowledged the substance of this contention, the whole ground has not been covered. As to its inner vitality, there was no necessary decline or disintegration of this Protestant culture automatically descending after the Restoration of the monarchy. After all, there were those who *did* pledge conformity to the Prayer Book and Episcopal oversight who continued the Puritan emphasis of seventeenth century English Calvinism within the Church of England. William Gurnall of Lavenham, Suffolk whose sermons on Ephesians were not long ago republished, is one example of a Puritan who conformed.³⁸ Of similar outlook was Bishop Morley of Winchester and Dr. John Edwards of Cambridge University.³⁹ Appreciable differences in the pastoral emphasis and theology of a William Gurnall and the Presbyterian, Samuel Annesley, who so influenced young Defoe, would have been almost non-existent. Thus, more recent writers on the history of the period, such as E. G. Rupp, have flatly maintained that Calvinism *was* continued through the Restoration period, both within and beyond the Church of England.⁴⁰ And this Puritan theological outlook was able to draw fresh breath from the example and sympathy of King William at his accession in 1689. His own Reformed Church background in the Netherlands meant that he had

³⁶ G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), p. 13 ff.

³⁷ Important exceptions to this general pattern have recently been highlighted by Stephen Hampton, *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁸ Gurnall's expositions of the sixth chapter of Ephesians were published as *The Christian in Complete Armour* (1669) and were subsequently republished in 1864. The Banner of Truth Trust republished the 1864 edition at London, 1964.

³⁹ Cragg, *From Puritanism*, pp. 19, 30. Note the recent full attention paid to John Edwards of Cambridge in Dewey Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 6.

⁴⁰ Rupp, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 111.

an open ear for the reports of grievance and harassment that the Calvinist Dissenters experienced.⁴¹

Now our concern is not to suggest that our author, Defoe, can be seen to have hewed to a particular theological line in his writings, but only to suggest that he lived and moved in a religious subculture where the Puritan and Calvinist ideology was far from spent. J. Paul Hunter has argued that Defoe's *Crusoe* belongs to a type of still-current Puritan devotional literature which he calls the "guide" tradition. In examples of this genre, readers (especially young adults) were urged and admonished to beware of the enticements of the world and to see in their employments a sphere in which God could be directly served.⁴²

Surely this is the vein in which Defoe has a now-wiser and now-holier Crusoe admit to himself that it is only by the sheer mercy of God that his errant ways have been over-ruled by his shipwreck and sojourn on the island:

My grief set lighter on me, my habitation grew comfortable to me beyond measure; and when I reflected that in this solitary life which I had been confined to, I had not only myself been moved to look up to heaven and to seek the hand that brought me there, but was now to be made an instrument, under Providence to save the life and for ought I knew, the soul of a poor savage.....when I reflected on these things, a secret joy ran through every part of my soul.⁴³

Thus, it is credible not only to maintain that the Puritan tradition, with its missionary sub-theme, was the framework within which Defoe wrote *Crusoe*, but that this tradition – while increasingly marginalized from universities and parliament – was still a living force within England.

⁴¹ King William had, consistent with this Reformed outlook, ended the Stuart attempts to impose Episcopacy upon the Church of Scotland. The Presbyterian form of government was restored to Scotland's national church in 1690.

⁴² J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 23 ff. Among the then-current literary practitioners of this form was Nonconformist minister Daniel Williams (after whom the famous London Nonconformist library takes its name). Williams was memorialized by Defoe at his death in 1718 in *Memoirs of the Life and Eminent Conduct of That Learned and Reverent Divine, Daniel Williams, D.D.*. An older Puritan who had written in the genre was John Flavel (d. 1691).

⁴³ *Crusoe* (Norton edition), p. 172. The reduced appetite for contention in matters theological in this period is helpfully described by Cragg in *From Puritanism*, p. 31 ff.

ii. It Might Be Thought That Defoe and Puritan Nonconformity Would Be Characterized by Concessions to All-Powerful *Reason* by the Time of *Crusoe's* Publication in 1719 and That This Would Work Contrary to Missionary Interest.

Defoe's writing does reflect the currents of change that were gradually wending their way through this Nonconformist subculture as part of the larger English scene. Nonconformity was increasingly less dogmatic in this era in matters theological than it had been previously. The culture was moving to exalt the role of reason in matters of faith and judgement of controversies. Ralph Cudworth of Cambridge University (1617-1688) had led the tendency away from the theological dogmatism attributed to the Puritan age; he with others led a movement we now call *Cambridge Platonism*. In time, the effect of this outlook that eschewed theological controversy was noted even in the Nonconformist academies which groomed Defoe and his contemporaries. We can note that while *Crusoe* and his Friday converse freely, in due course, about matters central to the gospel, there are also Christian topics that they do *not* meddle with:

As to all the disputes, wranglings, strifes and contentions which have happened in the world about religion – whether niceties in doctrines or schemes of church government, they were all perfectly useless to us – as for ought I can yet see, they have been to all the rest of the world. We had the sure guide to heaven, viz. the Word of God, and we had – blessed be God, comfortable views of the Spirit of God teaching and instructing us by His Word, leading us into all the truth . . .⁴⁴

Here we have none other than the voice of the chastened English Dissenter of the early eighteenth century who has experienced the double upheaval of religious discrimination at home and the onset of the Age of Reason. These have combined to make for a reduced or simplified deposit of Christian dogma needing to be maintained. But what *Crusoe* maintains, he maintains with spiritual gusto!

The breezes of the Age of Reason can certainly be detected, but that the central facts of the Christian faith are undergirded by revelation from heaven is never seriously in doubt for *Crusoe*. The pensive castaway ruminates on the uncertain lot of the unenlightened cannibal races of his south Caribbean region before an all-wise God:

I checked my thoughts with this conclusion: (1st) That we did not know by what Light and Law these should be condemn'd; but that as God was necessarily, and by the nature of his being, infinitely

⁴⁴ *Crusoe* (Norton edition), p. 173.

Holy and just, so it could not be, but that if these creatures were all sentenc'd to absence from Himself, it was on account of sinning against that light, which as the Scripture says, was a law to themselves (Rom. 2.14) and by such rules as their consciences would acknowledge to be just, though the foundation was not discover'd to us. And (2nd) that as we are all the clay in the hand of the Potter (Jeremiah 18.6) no vessel could say to him, "why hast thou form'd me thus?"⁴⁵

Here is a mind asking eighteenth century questions – questions proper to the Age of Reason – (what of the nations and peoples who have never heard?), but in a framework provided after all by Puritan divinity. Defoe's *Crusoe* here provides us with a useful window for understanding how the thinking of orthodox Christians about missionary issues unfolded in an age that was unsatisfied to hear old dogmatism trotted out. To be sure, the rising generation of Nonconformists after Defoe would feel the siren-call of reason more powerfully than he and his *Crusoe*. The anonymous author of the circa 1731 treatise, *A View of the Dissenting Interest* (a one-man investigation into Nonconformity's decline in ministerial zeal as well as congregational numbers), remarked that this decline

is very often first manifested in their attacking the divine decrees, by explaining the doctrine of universal redemption as a sentiment that is full of benevolence; from thence they appear fond of pleading the cause of the heathens, and of the possibility of salvation merely by the light of nature.⁴⁶

As such sentiments took hold and became fashionable among Nonconformists, the missionary interest which had characterized the generation of Defoe and his parents would be soon eclipsed.

Yet contrary to what may be our suspicions, the Enlightenment period did *not* uniformly raise obstacles in the path of missionary thinking. As has been made plain in the excellent volume, *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*,⁴⁷ there were at least *two* ways in which this emphasis on reason materially assisted the missionary cause. A *first* was the promotion of a heightened confidence in the fundamental unity of humanity, while a *second* was to render English Christians more confident "about the elevating and illuminating capacity of knowledge and rational argument".⁴⁸ Defoe's *Crusoe*, remember, had been depicted as recognizing the fundamental unity in which he

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.164.

⁴⁶ *A View of the Dissenting Interest* (c.1731) quoted in Watts, *Dissenters*, p. 392.

⁴⁷ Brian Stanley, ed., *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁴⁸ Stanley, "Christian Missions and the Enlightenment: A Reevaluation" in Stanley, ed., *Christian Missions*, pp. 11, 12.

stood with the savage he had rescued, while rational argument was the very approach that the English survivor had utilized when he began the attempt to evangelize his man, Friday, with the question "who made the sea, the ground we walked on, and the hills and the woods?"⁴⁹ In sum, the Age of Reason is present as a backdrop in Defoe's story, but it poses no hindrance to the missionary efforts of his islander.

In Conclusion

We are now entitled to draw together the threads of our exploration into Defoe's ability to compose a narrative containing an imaginary missionary encounter. We contend that the ability to conceive of these encounters seventy years prior to the departure of Carey for India was:

- *Consistent with* a pre-existent missionary concern of the seventeenth century Puritans, both Presbyterian and Independent, which groups had been exposed to periodic briefings about an actual missionary effort underway among American Indians in the second half of the century.
- *Consistent with* Defoe's own personal education, which had brought him to within one year of a full educational preparedness for the Presbyterian ministry, and
- *Consistent with* a personal involvement, while resident in Edinburgh in 1709, in the founding and funding of the Scottish Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, a mission agency to the unevangelized Scottish highlands, and eventually America.

We are, I believe, warranted in asserting that Defoe's missionary Crusoe is a composite figure of three parts. He is one part taken from the factual tale of Alexander Selkirk, marooned four years on an island off Chile's coast. He is one part a composite of Defoe's own upbringing and Nonconformist ethos. Significantly, the very name Crusoe seems derived from the actual name Cruso – Timothy Cruso, who had been Defoe's fellow student at the Newington Green academy – a student who *did* proceed to enter the Presbyterian ministry.⁵⁰ He is also one part a composite of the progress – modest, but real – of English evangelical missions as they existed in the closing decades of the seventeenth century and the dawn of the eighteenth.

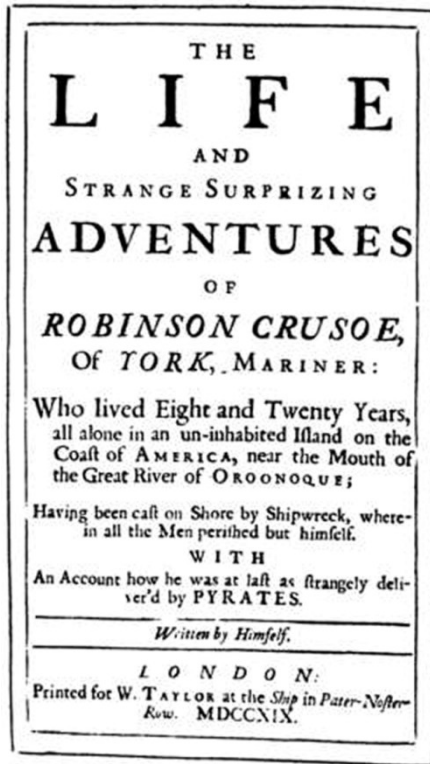
This proposal, if correct, warrants a different understanding of the oft-lamented late launch of English-speaking Protestant missions. The conventional understanding has been that the rise of that late eighteenth century movement is only to be explained in terms of the impetus provided by the Evangelical Revival and the desire to do something to recompense the unde-

⁴⁹ *Crusoe* (Norton edition), p. 181 quoted above at page 3.

⁵⁰ Backscheider, *Defoe*, p. 48.

veloped nations for the horrors of the slave trade.⁵¹ But in the light of this study, a different analysis might be warranted. Inasmuch as *Robinson Crusoe* stands as a witness to a missionary curiosity and zeal in the century *preceding* Carey – might it not be said of eighteenth century missions (i.e. that of Carey and subsequently the London Missionary Society) what historian Michael Watts said of the period of the Evangelical Revival?

“It was an attempt to return, after . . . spiritual lethargy . . . , to the religious fervour of an earlier age.”⁵²



Title page, first edition, 1719

⁵¹ Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History* (London: S.C.M., 1965), chap. 2.

⁵² Watts, *Dissenters*, p. 394.