Introduction

By general consensus, Daniel Defoe's *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* is one of the most important books written about the nation in the eighteenth century. Few historians surveying the landscape of the age manage to get by without its aid. It is one of the small number of works from the period with enough continuing appeal to have served as a Book at Bedtime on BBC Radio 4, and its opening section formed the basis for a programme in a television series on *Great British Journeys.* In 2018 a *Guardian* article by Robert McCrum placed it no. 89 among the 100 best non-fiction books of all time (the numbering was in reverse chronological order). For several decades after its first appearance, the work was periodically refurbished in new editions, while modern times have seen it emerge in a variety of guises – as a deluxe coffee-table book, as a staple of the Everyman series, as a student text for Penguin and finally as the first scholarly version. Almost all of Defoe's many biographers treat it as one of his key productions. Yet until now there has been no comprehensive account of its aims and methods, historical significance, form and rhetorical design, or place in the development of travel writing, among other defining attributes.

An earlier book I published on this work, *The Text of Great Britain: Theme and Design in Defoe's Tour* (1998), was very different in its aims, content and scope. That work sought to analyse the history of composition, along with particular sections and contents, for example the georgic element, the borrowings in the text from Camden and the portion on the Wonders of the Peak, plus analogies with Defoe's *Captain Singleton*. It took up the historical significance of the book only in the final chapter of fourteen pages.[1] While it touched on the intellectual design of the *Tour* in the Introduction, there was no attempt to offer any full account of its form. My hope is that the present volume treats matters of more general interest to students of the period. The passage of time has enabled me to consult much new scholarship, not just on Defoe (many articles, plus sections of

biographies and other monographs published since 2000), but also a wealth of writings on early modern Britain by social, economic and political historians.[2] No previous study has drawn on such materials to locate the work in its time, as the most capacious panorama of the age.

We are now approaching the tercentenary of the *Tour*, as the first of the three volumes came out in 1724, followed by the second and third in 1725 and 1726. Eight further editions came out by 1779, having expanded in the process to four volumes. The earlier ones underwent revision by the novelist and printer Samuel Richardson. However, it was not until the twentieth century that full recognition arrived of the work's extraordinary qualities. Eminent historians as distinct in outlook and interests as G. M. Trevelyan and G. D. H. Cole proclaimed the merits of the *Tour*, as it furnishes the most comprehensive first-hand survey of the nation at a crucial stage in its evolution. In the late 1920s Cole also oversaw two editions of the *Tour*, one of them included in the Everyman series and providing access to the text for a wide range of readers. At the same juncture a luxury version of the London segments (Letter 5, mostly) was published, with a strong emphasis on topographic detail. A new phase of interest in the 1970s and 1980s saw two abridged editions and a reprint by the Folio Society. This coincided with a growth of scholarly activity in books and articles, which reached most valuable expression in the appearance of the first complete annotated text, edited by John McVeagh in 2001. Since then the work has continued to attract scholarly attention in biographic and critical studies.

Capital Matters

Defoe's lifetime, from 1660 to 1731, witnessed many of the developments that would usher in the culminating phase of early modern Britain. In Letter 5, as part of a comprehensive overview of his native London, he locates in turn some of the public institutions that met the needs of a post-medieval state. Many of these, marked with an asterisk here, had come into full existence in the previous thirty-five years since the Revolution of 1688–9, while others marked with a dagger had undergone major changes in that period, including the erection of new premises. They include the Royal Exchange†, the Custom House†, the Bank of England*, the South Sea Company*, the East India Company†, the Royal African Company*, the Admiralty†, the Exchequer, the offices of the secretary of state† and master of the ordnance, the Privy Council, Parliament, Westminster Hall, insurance companies*, the Excise Office†, the numerous markets (with a facetious augmentation, the 'Bubble Market' kept at Exchange Alley),

the Port of London†, fire services*, water provision†, gaols, schools, the royal palaces, theatres†, hospitals†, almshouses and much else. The infrastructure of the city is reviewed, for example the Fleet Canal, together with docks and wharves that were essential to the growth of an economy increasingly reliant on international trade. Some ancient foundations are mentioned, such as the historic gates of the city, along with Westminster Abbey – but the writer is obviously more excited by the recent completion of St Paul's Cathedral. He devotes almost 1,500 words to Wren's masterpiece, as against 660 on the Abbey, which he introduces with the words, 'a venerable old Pile of Building, it is indeed, but so old and weak, that had it not been taken in Hand some Years ago, and great Cost bestowed in upholding and repairing it, we might, by this Time, have called it a Heap, not a Pile, and not a Church, but the Ruins of a Church'. Equally uncomplimentary things are said about Westminster Hall, ending with the assertion that it 'really looks like a Barn at a Distance' (2: 110).

At the conclusion of his account, the author pauses briefly to update information he has supplied. He enumerates various works in progress, including 'the fine new Church of St. *Martin*'s in the *Fields*', still unconsecrated, together with a sprinkling of Hawksmoor's masterpieces among the Queen Anne churches (some recently completed, others still under construction). Other unfinished projects are the new Treasury buildings in Whitehall by Thomas Ripley; Guy's Hospital; two large wings for Bedlam Hospital; a large Baptist meeting-house in Spitalfields; the new South Sea House in Threadneedle Street; a street being built on the Artillery Ground, that is on the north side of Chiswell Street, along with an extension to Tindal's burial ground nearby; an iron balustrade on the dome of St Paul's; and 'A new *Bear-Garden.,* called *Figg*'s *Theater*, being a Stage for the Gladiators or Prize-Fighters' (2: 121–2). No contemporary source gives us such an urgent sense of the building mania that was enveloping London. But this is just to skim the surface of Defoe's enthusiastic overview of the dynamo that the capital had become.

Near the start of this letter, Defoe sets out what he calls 'A Brief Description of the New Buildings erected in and around the Cities of *London* and *Westminster* and the Borough of *Southwark*, since the Year 1666' (2: 74). It is not all that brief, since the detailed itemisation he makes of these changes in the landscape, great and small, occupies no less than 2,600 words. It is not any cause for astonishment that the Great Fire marks the datum line of this exercise. What we might forget is that the author was one among a diminishing number of Londoners, still active in 1725, who retained a memory of the city as it appeared before the Fire, even if it was

a childhood recollection, and who had witnessed the rebuilding process. A noteworthy passage concerns the removal of some great 'Palaces of the Nobility' that have disappeared to be replaced by new developments, including the Savoy, which 'may be said to be, not a House, but a little Town' (2: 76). But the account descends from the princely heights to small streets, forgotten alleys and suburban meadows, now turned into impressive thoroughfares. Defoe finds room to mention future developments, including 'Three Projects' on the drawing board – most significantly, the scheme for 'making another bridge over the *Thames*' (2: 79), a vision that the author would never see realised. As well as this, a lengthy section is allocated to a proposal from an unknown hand which never came to fruition, that is 'A Scheme for a *Royal Palace* in the Place of *White-Hall*,' involving such long needed change such as the creation of new purpose-built accommodation for the courts of justice and various government departments (2: 103–8). For Defoe, London is the epicentre of an expanding world, in terms both of physical space and of social, political and financial affairs.

The *Tour* is not touristy in a modern way. For example, it hardly mentions the Tower of London except as a prison, the home of a menagerie and the place where the Ordnance Office is located. There is no guide to places of hospitality, and no recommendations for delighting in water sports on the busy, but insalubrious, river. Nevertheless, Defoe greets us with a 'Line of Measurement', beating the bounds over an extent of nineteen miles, four furlongs and twenty-one rods, to which he adds south of the Thames a further seventeen miles, six furlongs and eighteen rods (2: 67–73). He makes it a kind of introductory glimpse of the scale of the city, merging into a voyage of discovery, even a mystery quest:

> Here the Line turns *South*, and indents to the Corner of *Bedford Row*, and leaving some few Houses, with the Cock-Pit, and Bowling Green, goes on the Back of *Gray's Inn Wall*, to *Gray's Inn Lane*, then turns on the Outside of the Buildings, which are on the *West* Side of *Gray's Inn Lane*, going *North* to the Stones End, when turning *East*, it passes to the New River Bridge without *Liquor-pond Street*, so taking in the *Cold Bath* and the *Bear Garden*; but leaving out Sir *John Old-Castle*'s and the *Spaw*, goes on *East* by the *Ducking-Pond* to the end of *New Bridewell*, and crossing the *Fairfield*, comes into the *Islington* Road by the Distiller's House, formerly Justice *Fuller*'s. (2: 68)

The reader feels impelled to follow this seductive trail, almost as though listening to the guidance of a ghostly satellite navigation system. We are anxious not to get lost around Liquorpond Street, in case after passing the

Cold Bath we should miss the turn to the Ducking Pond and accidentally find ourselves heading out into an uncharted district on the edge of town where an isolated tavern stood, named after the former home of Sir John Oldcastle (the executed rebel who supplied some features for the character of Falstaff). Without this help, we should struggle to escape the maze.

A Changing Landscape

One of the pioneers of the Industrial Revolution, Abraham Darby I, may even have been known to Defoe in Bristol (see Chapter 11). The author was certainly acquainted with some of the individuals who took part in the launch of new corporations such as the Bank of England during the 1690s, and also in ventures at the end of the century including the ill-fated Darien project. For that matter, his own *Essay upon Projects* (1697) had launched his own career as a writer. Three decades later, *Augusta Triumphans* (1728) would come almost at the culmination of his varied canon. These two books would offer proposals for all sorts of innovations – spread across fields such as highway engineering, insurance, pensions, lotteries, banks, the pay of seamen and an academy for women, all from the *Essay*, with a foundling hospital, a university of London, a suppression of madhouses used by husbands to lock up their wives, a conservatoire for English musicians, a plan to curtail gin-drinking and a scheme to prevent street robberies, all from the later pamphlet. (We shall see in Chapter 10 that Defoe had given considerable thought to the suppression of roadside crime.) Together, this collection of forward-looking ideas might survive as a blueprint for the Enlightenment. In the *Tour* he would argue the case for a Forth–Clyde canal, sixty-five years before this came to fruition (3: 198, 209–10).

Nicholas Rogers has linked Defoe with Joseph Addison in a pair of 'cultural pacemakers', and the description is apt.[3] His role as a commentator on the era in which he lived and wrote becomes clear if we think of some of the common phrases applied to it. To confine ourselves to those used in book titles, terms abound such as 'the Financial Revolution in England', 'England in Transition', 'Britain Transformed', 'Preindustrial England', 'the Agricultural Revolution', 'the English Urban Renaissance', 'the Transformation of the Public Sphere', 'the Discovery of Britain', 'the Augustan World', 'Forging the Nation', 'the Making of the English Middle Class', 'the Impact of English Towns', 'England's Apprenticeship', 'the Monster City' and more. Defoe has something pertinent to say on each of these, usually based on first-hand

experience – his first forty years, after all, passed in 'the Century of Revolution'. The developments that he witnessed, along with the nation, brought into being what E. A. Wrigley calls 'The Transformation of Traditional Society'. To a degree, he even participated in this process, during his eventful career. He started out life in the guise of Daniel Foe, born into a modest commercial family in the City, potential candidate for the ministry and unsuccessful businessman. By the time that he wrote the *Tour* he had turned himself into the famous Daniel Defoe, author of one of the great classics in world literature, client of the rich and powerful, landowner, respected citizen of a prosperous parish on the edge of the capital and tireless apologist for the ascendant mercantile classes.

From the point of view of his religious background and support of the Protestant monarchy, not to mention his periodic expression of little Englander attitudes, he may seem an unlikely figure to serve as a luminary of the tolerant age of enlightenment, along with the cosmopolitan intellectuals who stood at the head of the movement. Yet the *Tour* celebrates secular change; displays scepticism with regard to traditional myths and superstitions; commends improvements in public investments such as roads and hospitals; identifies progress in technology and manufacturing; and exalts better material conditions, while it embodies close observation of the real facts of life. In one way it resembles a potted version of the *Encyclopédie*, brought down within a domestic frame. Later on, in Chapter 5, we shall see that an expression such as 'Defoe's England' no longer functions as a toponym: instead it has become a historical marker, defining an entire cultural landscape.

Hardly a topic arises, essential to our understanding of the period, that does not show up in the *Tour*. A single example will illustrate the point. In her seminal discussion of 'Horses in Early Modern England: for Service, for Pleasure, for Power', Joan Thirsk has occasion to adduce Northern grooms and breeders on account of the care they devoted to upkeep and training.[4] The passage she cites in support of this observation runs as follows:

> [Those Fellows] take such indefatigable Pains with them, that they bring them out like Pictures of Horses, not a Hair amiss in them; they lye constantly in the Stables with them, and feed them by Weight and Measure; keep them so clean, and so fine, I mean in their Bodies, as well as their Outside, that, in short, nothing can be more nice. Here were several Horses sold for 150 Guineas a Horse; but then they were such as were famous for the Breed, and known by their Race, almost as well as the *Arabians* know the Genealogy of their Horses. (2: 197)

These thoughts are greatly amplified when the narrative reaches the heart of the horse-breeding district near Bedale in North Yorkshire (3: 89–90). We should not be surprised at the level of knowledge displayed here, since Defoe had actually been in business as a horse-trader.

If there had been travel expenses in the eighteenth century, what allowances could Defoe have claimed? (It was apt that he eventually became a surveyor of the roads for his parish.) Over the course of five decades and more, he jogged up and down the highways and byways of the land, observing almost everything that was going on in a changing landscape. This at a time when the most comfortable way of getting round the country was by coach. In the early 1700s it took almost twenty-four hours to go from London to Cambridge, thirty-six hours to reach Birmingham, fully half a week for Manchester, six days for Newcastle and ten days for Edinburgh. But more often Defoe traversed the rutted carriageways of the nation on horseback. Usually he was unaccompanied, a stranger who raised eyebrows when he mysteriously showed up, along with puzzled glances when he left just as abruptly. Sometimes the locals were far from welcoming when news had come of his impending arrival. Once a judge warned the local grand jury that seditious persons were in the neighbourhood, and advised the justices of the peace to take them into custody. A magistrate issued a warrant for Defoe's arrest, and he had to make a hasty departure.[5] His offence was to collect information on the political and commercial situation of the towns that he passed through on his journeys for Robert Harley. If the authorities had managed to close down his peregrinations, years later the *Tour* would have been a poorer thing.

Unmistakably, Defoe had a closer knowledge of Britain in its depth and breadth than most other commentators, even allowing for some inevitable gaps.[6] On his circuit of the country for Harley in 1705, he established a network of more than sixty individuals to distribute government propaganda.[7] Later he developed an even more extensive intelligence operation during his time in Edinburgh. The claim he made in 1710 appears to stand up: 'I have Sir Since I have Serv'd (as you kno') Established a Generall Correspondence, and at Some Charge Maintain'd it, by which I have a Fixt Intelligence (I May Say) all Over Brittain, But Especially in the North.'[8] In letters back to his patron, he mentions other contacts, and over the course of time he made further acquaintances in different localities.

Links with some of his informants may date back as far as the 1680s. Thus, we find him meeting with a linen draper in Norwich; visiting a leading citizen of Liverpool; conferring with an attorney in Shrewsbury; setting up

a link with Timothy Wesley (brother of his schoolfellow Samuel and uncle of John Wesley); contacting several dissenting ministers in towns such as Lutterworth; getting in touch with merchants in places like Gainsborough; lodging with a JP in Brentford, who had recently been dismissed for his Whig sympathies; and seeking out an obscure Quaker working as a glover on the Welsh borders, named Icabod Bowen. On journeys north, he stayed with the postmaster at Newcastle. When he was in trouble over *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, he went into hiding with a poor weaver in Spitalfields. When he traversed the Lowlands of Scotland, he employed an agent name Pierce, who knew the area well. His point man in Sudbury was the butcher, later broker and land agent John Morley. It happens that Morley, through his connections with the Harley family, became well known to Alexander Pope and Matthew Prior. But in the overwhelming number of cases, such individuals were invisible to the metropolitan elite. The picture we get from most of those who comment on the state of the nation – whether politicians, pamphleteers or poets – is inscribed in a narrow frame, socially and geographically. With other travel writers, including such able practitioners as Celia Fiennes, we scarcely ever have any sustained contact with the lower orders. Defoe was the only major English writer of the age who regularly got about, to hobnob with all and sundry.

One other factor gave him an exceptional, if not unique, set of qualifications. For years he was the trusted agent of Sidney Godolphin and Robert Harley, the last two lord treasurers of Britain (if we except Lord Poulet and the Duke of Shrewsbury, who held the post in a very brief interim role). They were followed by three earls who served as first lord of the treasury, Halifax, Stanhope and Sunderland: Defoe carried out confidential work for each of them. As we shall see in Chapter 6, he was closely involved with some principal figures in Scottish politics while employed on behalf of his patrons in Edinburgh. He knew leading entrepreneurs and moneyed men, some of this while occupying positions in government service during the 1690s. His varied business career brought him contacts and contracts in various parts of the kingdom. His training at a leading dissenters academy under the distinguished teacher Charles Morton gave him a background in matters concerning religion and education that he would put to good use. Equally, his paper, the *Review*, clearly reached a wide audience around the nation. It is hard to think of anyone whose life touched so many corners of society.

The conclusion is irresistible. If we want a single guide to Britain at the start of the eighteenth century, this is the place to start. Well informed, mostly up to the minute in its coverage and ranging into so many crevices of

life as it was lived up and down the country, the *Tour* has no serious rivals. It comes from an observer who had lived through the Plague and the Great Fire; taken part in the Monmouth Rebellion and joined William III's victorious army on its way to London (3: 43–9). He had witnessed events surrounding the Union with Scotland, the first Jacobite rising (as described in Chapter 6) and the South Sea Bubble (Chapter 7). He had been one of the main contributors to a growing debate on the touchy subject of the succession in pamphlets such as *An Answer to a Question that Nobody Thinks of, viz., But what if the Queen should Die?* (1713). How many other items would he need to have added to his CV before he is seen to match the job description? He did not get everything right, but none of us do.

The Contexts of the *Tour*

It is a pity in some ways that Defoe's fame has rested so heavily on *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, along with his incarceration in the pillory as a result of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. These, of course, hold momentous weight in any assessment of the state of literature in this period, but they tend to divert attention from the author's other achievements. He has been well described by Maxine Berg as 'prolific pamphleteer, social and economic commentator, novelist, indeed veritable pundit of his age.'[9] As Peter Earle, himself a learned scholar in social and economic history, has observed, 'The reader of Defoe is constantly amazed at the breadth and depth of his knowledge.'[10] In particular, Defoe's writings on these themes in the 1720s have often been sidelined, to the detriment of a just appraisal of his output as a whole. These contain some of his most representative and lasting work, powered by his close knowledge of trade and his passionate advocacy of 'improvement'. This is a concept central to the ideology of an age undergoing large structural changes in some of the very areas where Defoe was best equipped to comment – among them the textile trade, the location of industry, channels of distribution, transport and communications. He was far more alive to agricultural issues than used to be thought, pointing out disparate patterns of husbandry and the varied soils found in separate corners of the country.

We need only consider a selection of these books, all written around or just after the time that Defoe composed the *Tour*. They comprise *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725–7); *A General History of Discoveries and Improvements* (1725–6); *A Brief Deduction of the Original, Progress, and Immense Greatness of the British Woollen Manufacture* (1727); *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728); *An Humble Proposal to the People of England, for the*

Encrease of their Trade, and Encouragement of their Manufactures (1729); and *A Brief State of the Inland or Home Trade of England* (1730). If mounting evidence makes it more and more probable that we should allot to Defoe a large share in *Atlas Maritimus* (1728), this attribution further strengthens the case (see Chapter 12). To gain concrete evidence in a short space that demonstrates the range of his information, it is enough to look at the list of 'The Several Manufactures of *Great-Britain*, as they are settled for the making in the several Counties, Towns, and Villages of *England*', found in the second volume of the *Tradesman*. There follows a table of the manufacturing centres of the nation, descending to places as small as Coggeshall and Rochdale. The table occupies ten pages of small print out of which four are devoted to Britain's trading partners, covering most countries in Europe as far east as Muscovy, and supplying information on the specialities of each town as well as its geographic situation. Should we wish to know it, we can find out where seamen's high-crowned caps are made (Bewdley, as the *Tour* also tells us), or the source of the zinc ore named lapis caliminaris (the Mendip Hills); or the place to get linseywoolsey goods (Kidderminster, similarly listed in the *Tour*); or the produce of the estate of the Duke of Queensberry in Nithsdale (lead, as the *Tour* confirms). Whenever possible, Defoe quotes hard figures on matters like imports and exports, citing customs records down to a hogshead, a gallon, or a ton.[11]

Detailed examination of the text of the *Tour* in successive chapters will show how often it provided a basis for this group of books. We might even say that Defoe worked out his ideas on the subjects under review when he put his considered view on Britain into the form of fictional journeys, starting in 1724. Inevitably, the seven books listed contain a good deal of repetition – the first part of the *Atlas* is little more than a rearrangement of coastal sections in the *Tour*. But collectively they provide a masterful outline of historical, geographic, financial and social factors that conditioned Britain's rise to the status of a great power and the origins of its incipient empire. Obviously the author did not have to face many of the contentious issues raised today by the imperial project.

A major theme of all these books from the 1720s is the rise of the mercantile community to a new elite status within society. In the *Tour*, a key passage announcing this topic comes in the opening Letter, where the author describes a number of seats near Chelmsford and Colchester owned by London merchants:

> I mention this, to observe how the present encrease of Wealth in the City of *London,* spreads it self into the Country, and plants Families and Fortunes,