

PART I

*Life and Works*

## CHAPTER I

*Defoe the Writer**John Richetti*

Defoe died on 24 April 1731 in London. The year of his birth is uncertain, either 1660 or 1661, so that at his death he was either seventy-one or seventy. By any measure, Defoe led a long, productive life of writing. His literary fame was accompanied, however, by scorn from his opponents. At one low point in his life, he suffered penal punishment for writing a pamphlet, *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* (1702), which he meant to be read ironically but was regarded as dangerously incendiary by the government.

For readers in the early twenty-first century, Defoe is primarily a writer of novels, mainly *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but in his day he was an indefatigable journalist on a wide range of topics, the author of many substantial book-length works on a host of subjects. He was also a prolific poet in several genres, with works including *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), a long (1,216 lines) poem in defence of the new Dutch king of England, William III. Defoe's poem was incredibly popular, with over fifty editions appearing before 1750, making it the single most successful poem of that half-century. The (projected) sixty-three-volume 'Pickering Masters' edition of Defoe's works (2000–11), edited by W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, is uniquely extensive among English writers.

By 1683, Defoe was a London businessman, a wholesale dealer in hosiery, tobacco, wine, and other goods. The first of his several bankruptcies occurred in 1692. He owed his creditors the enormous sum of £17,000 (about £2,000,000 or \$3,750,000 in current value). Despite this disaster, he quickly paid back most of his debts, and five years later launched his career as a writer. Defoe's resilience, his capacity for reinvention and rejuvenation, was to prove a recurring feature of his life.

His first book, *An Essay upon Projects* (1697), is a boldly ambitious work, advocating radical social and economic reforms for English society. The treatise dramatizes the wide-ranging scope of his mind; his intellectual energy; his talent for writing energetic, at times aggressively pugnacious

prose – qualities that would define his style. Among the book's proposals were building a new road system, constructing insurance and pension schemes for the poor, endowing a hospital for treatment of the insane, rationalizing credit by instituting an efficient banking system, creating a military academy for training officers, founding a college for women, and many other detailed plans, including one close to his experience: a proposal to reform the bankruptcy laws. Defoe was what we might now label a bureaucratic intellectual, a one-man think tank bursting with new ideas buttressed by a barrage of specific details.

From this beginning, Defoe displayed a polemical energy that would mark his distinctive style in the coming years. He sets his proposals apart from most other 'projectors', dismissing them with striking assurance. As he puts it, '[T]his Age swarms with such a multitude of Projectors more than usual; who besides the Innumerable Conceptions which dye in the bringing forth, and (like Abortions of the Brain) only come into the Air, and dissolve.'<sup>1</sup> His essay offers a history of 'projects' and 'projectors' and is a satire on those of his contemporaries who offer what he defines as visionary but unrealistic proposals for reforming society:

A meer Projector then is a Contemptible thing, driven by his own desperate Fortune to such a Streight, that he must be deliver'd by a Miracle, or Starve; and when he has beat his Brains for some such Miracle in vain, he finds no remedy but to paint up some Bauble or other, as Players make Puppets talk big, to show like a strange thing, and then cry it up for a New Invention. (44)

Unpretentious and vigorously colloquial, exploiting homely idioms ('beat his Brains', 'make Puppets talk big', 'paint up', and 'cry it up'), this essay boasts features that will be part of Defoe's style throughout his career. Each of his proposals, moreover, is presented in detail. Defoe aims to provoke by his attention to the deficiencies of English life that call out for improvement or replacement. For example, here is the first paragraph of his proposal for improving English roads, 'Of the High-Ways': 'It is a prodigious Charge the whole Nation groans under for the Repair of High-Ways, which, after all, lie in a very ill Posture too ... which now lie in a most shameful manner in most parts of the Kingdom, and in many places wholly impassable' (55–6). This is a typical moment; he is sure of himself, an imperious know-it-all who would annoy some readers, especially his rival authors. For one memorable example, consider Swift's jaundiced view of him as a 'stupid illiterate scribbler', and his comment that '(the Fellow that was pilloried, I have forgot his Name) is indeed so grave, sententious, dogmatical a Rogue that there is no enduring him'.<sup>2</sup>

Defoe's pamphlet was in response to the High Church zealot the Rev. Henry Sacheverell, who had preached a sermon at Oxford that included remarks such as this: '[W]hoever was a True Son of the Church ... Was Oblig'd to hang Out the Bloody Flag of Defiance Against the Dissenters.' Sacheverell's sermon was one of many attacks on the Dissenters that urged violence. Defoe intensified their intemperance in what became his most scandalous passage: 'Now let us Crucifie the Thieves. Let her Foundations be establish'd upon the Destruction of her Enemies ... Let the Obstinate be rul'd with the Rod of Iron.'<sup>3</sup>

In Book II of *The Dunciad* (1728–9), Alexander Pope evoked Defoe this way: 'Earless on high stood unabash'd Defoe' (II, 147). Despite the mockery, 'unabashed' is a shrewd appraisal of Defoe's personality as a writer. He was obviously 'unabashed', never averse to self-promotion. In the immediate aftermath of the publication of *The Shortest-Way*, Defoe in 1703 published three pamphlets featuring its title: *A Brief Explanation of a Late Pamphlet; A Dialogue Between a Dissenter and the Observer, Concerning The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*; and *The Shortest Way to Peace and Union. By the Author of the Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. Defoe would employ the phrase 'the shortest way' in his writing to maintain the profitable publicity he had earned with his pamphlet and to present his characteristically aggrieved defensiveness. In 1703, he published with the same self-advertising intent a volume titled *A True Collection of the Writings of the Author of The True-Born Englishman*, following it in 1705 with a second volume under that title.

In 1703, Defoe was arrested for *The Shortest-Way*, quickly convicted of seditious libel, forced to pay a substantial fine of £135, and sentenced to stand three times in the pillory, a wooden framework constructed so that the head and arms of a person could be inserted and then locked in place. Such public humiliation was not only uncomfortable; it was often very dangerous, since unruly crowds sometimes hurled rocks and rubbish at the criminal. Defoe not only survived the pillory but transformed his experience into an opportunity for self-promotion. He managed before serving his sentence to write a poem, *A Hymn to the Pillory*, dramatizing himself as a free-speech martyr. The pillory in the poem is urged to speak about Defoe's courage, his refusal to reveal the names of his accomplices:

Thou bug-bear of the Law stand up and speak,  
 Thy long misconstru'd silence break,  
 .....  
 Tell them he stands exalted there  
 For speaking what we would not hear;

And yet he might ha' been secure,  
 Had he said less, or would he ha' said more.

Tradition has it that the poem was for sale to those gathered as Defoe stood in the pillory. But Defoe languished in jail for four months after his three exposures in the pillory, and in that time the brick and tile factory that was his chief source of income failed. He was again a bankrupt. However, these punishments were to lead to Defoe's transformation from a merchant-author to a government operative. Defoe had appealed to the powerful politician Robert Harley, Speaker of the House of Commons, who saw in Defoe the kind of writer the government could use. The government paid his fine, and from 1703 to 1714, Defoe worked for Harley as a secret agent and political writer. On 19 February 1704, with employment from his patron, he began an ambitious news-sheet, *A Weekly Review of the Affairs of France*, in which he proposed to alert Britons to the dangers posed by Louis XIV's France, then the dominant European power. In this early version of the periodical, Defoe warned his countrymen that Louis as absolute ruler was especially dangerous, since he did not have the parliamentary restraints that English kings faced. The title was soon changed to *A Review of the State of the British Nation*, which of course meant that Defoe also turned to domestic issues, including moral, social, and economic problems. For most of its existence (the last number was published on 11 June 1713), the *Review* appeared tri-weekly, although at first it appeared only weekly and then twice a week. Although it was not particularly popular, the *Review* testifies to its author's astonishing fluency. In its magnitude the *Review* is Defoe's greatest accomplishment. From the first number, he adopts a uniquely serious persona for his explanatory mission: '[T]his Paper is not design'd for so Trivial an occasion, as only Bantering the Nonsense of a few News-Writers ... But the matter of our account will be Real History, and just Observation.' He explains with exemplary clarity for an audience innocent of the facts of international politics why France is a danger to England and to Europe: '[W]e do not fight against France as a Kingdom, or against the King of France as a King, no nor as a Tyrant insulting the Liberties of his own subjects; but we fight against France as a Kingdom grown too great for her Neighbours, and against the King of France as an invader of other nations' rights ... [W]e fight to reduce his *Exorbitant Power*, and this consists in that little understood, but very popular and extensive word, *a Balance of Power*' (19 April 1709). The clarity of Defoe's prose demonstrates that he could be more than polemical or harshly argumentative. Most of the time, Defoe

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is defensively fractious, chiding his rivals and indeed some of his readers for their ignorance, boasting of his own singularity, his lonely integrity. Near the end of the run of the journal, in July 1712, he made a show of offering a hundred guineas to a journalist who had accused him of writing to order, 'if he will prove by any fair, just, and but tollerable Evidence, either who is the Person that ever Dictated to the Author of the *Review*, what he should or should not write'.

Even Defoe was staggered by the amount of prose he produced over the years in the *Review*. When it had grown to six volumes, he joked in the preface to that volume that it was like 'a teeming Woman', and went on to wonder 'Where it will end now and when, God only knows ... [A]s for me, I know nothing of it.' Defoe is indirectly reflecting on the ever-expanding print marketplace of the early eighteenth century. Authors needed to keep finding something to say, to keep publication rolling. Defoe's prodigious rate of production was in part a reaction to the burgeoning market for print. The strain of incessant literary production shows at times. Here in the 1 January 1706 issue, as he begins the New Year, he describes his difficulties: 'Innumerable new Occasions draw me off from my first Design, and sometimes I change my Title, sometimes my Design; but all attend the Change of Scenes on the Stage of things, which I think may be a just Apology for the various Turnings of my Penn from or to this or that Subject, which I promise my self will pass for a sufficient Apology.' Defoe the writer, the weekly journalist especially, works in the swirl of modern experience, struggling to make his prose respond to the 'Change of Scenes on the Stage of things' – a frank description of the challenges his journalism faces.

And yet he published in July 1706 a work he had been advertising in the paper for months: the enormous poem *Jure Divino: A Satyr in Twelve Books. By the Author of The True-Born Englishman*, an ambitious work, modelled on Milton and Dryden, in rhyming couplets, and featuring a solemn portrait of its author in the frontispiece, in a full-bottomed wig and flowing cloak and cravat. Unlike most of his poems, *Jure Divino* aspires to intellectual gravity in its themes. Despite its purpose to deny the divine right of kings and to expatiate in verse on human nature and current English history, the poem's preface continues Defoe's aggrieved pugnacity. He goes out of his way to stress in his long preface that the poem has been written 'under the heaviest Weight of intolerable Pressures'.<sup>4</sup> He also complains that unauthorized editions will be sold by unscrupulous printers, and he defends himself at self-dramatizing length: '[N]either am I looking either at Praise or Reward, and therefore am entirely

unconcerned at the Success of it. I shall quit therefore any further Defence of it, and leave to its Fate, and the Universal Censure of *Criticks, Rehearsers, Jacobites, Non-Jurors*, and the Crowd of *Party-Furies*, that wait to worry it' (64–5).

Although *Jure Divino* has not outlived its historical moment and endures merely as a curiosity for specialists, it possesses memorable poetic verve. Defoe's energy as a poet is like his vigour as a prose writer, direct and forceful, and of course the poem is very much an aggressive satire. The opening lines of 'The Introduction' echo one of his favourite poetic models, Rochester, and also the opening of *The True-Born Englishman*:

Nature has left *this Tincture in the Blood*,  
 That all Men *would be Tyrants* if they cou'd:  
 If they forbear their Neighbours to devour,  
 'Tis not for want of *Will*, but want of *Power*;  
 The General Plague Infects the very Race,  
*Pride* in his Heart, and *Tyrant* in his Face;  
 The Characters are legible and plain,  
 And perfectly describe the *Monster, Man*. (lines 1–8, p. 71)

Note Defoe's striking ability to write 'pseudo-proverbial' maxims. These produce an aphoristic concision that is Defoe's signature as a popular poet.

From 1704 to 1713, as a secret political operative for Harley, Defoe travelled widely and anonymously in England and Scotland, both gathering intelligence and, in Scotland, promoting the union of the two kingdoms, which happened in 1707. But in 1714, Queen Anne died and the Tory government fell, along with Defoe's patron. With the arrival of the Hanoverian dynasty and the installation of a Whig government, Defoe naturally turned to other literary genres and away from politics. Several of his writings were boldly inflammatory, landing him in Newgate Prison again. Their titles illustrate how rash they were, manifesting a self-destructive, contrarian tendency in Defoe. He surely realized that such pamphlets were bound to be troublesome to the authorities: *Reasons Against the Succession of the House of Hanover, with an Enquiry how far the Abdication of King James, supposing it to be Legal, ought to affect the Person of the Pretender* (February 1713); *And What if the Pretender Should Come? Or, some Considerations of the Advantages and real Consequences of the Pretender's Possessing the Crown of Great Britain* (March 1713); and *An Answer to a Question that No Body Thinks of, viz. But What if the Queen Should Die?* (April 1713).

The chief justice, Sir Thomas Parker, ordered Defoe's arrest for these pamphlets, which he characterized as 'libellous and seditious, and neare Treason'. He was also troubled by their rhetoric: 'There is in some parts a Mixture of what They call banter which seems design'd to screen the rest ... To which I shall say no more at present than that these are not Subjects to be play'd with.'<sup>5</sup> And yet it is this subversive playfulness that renders Defoe's prose still attractive for modern readers and that sets him distinctively apart from most of his contemporaries.

From 1715 until his death, Defoe produced a multitude of works, including in 1719 *Robinson Crusoe* and its sequels, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* (1720). Two years later came *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), and in that same year two prose narratives, *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack*, and in 1724 another fiction, *Roxana*. He also wrote religious and moral conduct books, including *The Family Instructor* (1715) and its sequel, *A New Family Instructor* (1727). The 1720s also featured books like the popular social and moral polemic *Every-body's Business is No-Body's Business* (1725), *The Political History of the Devil* (1726), *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), *The Compleat English Tradesman* (2 vols., 1725, 1727), and *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728). Accompanying these books, there appeared from 1724 to 1726 Defoe's most ambitious work, perhaps his best: *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (3 vols.), grounded in his travels for Harley around England and Scotland. In place of the aggrieved energy of many of his works, the *Tour* offers a positive celebration of Britain's dynamic greatness. Defoe dwells on the prosaic realities of everyday life in Britain. But he also articulates a stirring vision of a progressive nation: '[E]very New View of Great Britain would require a New Description; the Improvements that encrease, the New Buildings erected, the Old Buildings taken down; New Discoveries in Metals, Mines, Minerals ... These Things open new Scenes every Day.'<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

- 1 *An Essay upon Projects* in W. R. Owens (ed.), *Political and Economic Writings of Daniel Defoe*, vol. 8: *Social Reform*, The Works of Daniel Defoe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), pp. 34–5. All further references in the text are to this edition.
- 2 Quoted in Pat Rogers (ed.), *Defoe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 38.



- 3 W. R. Owens (ed.), *Political and Economic Writings of Daniel Defoe*, vol. 3: *Dissent*, The Works of Daniel Defoe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), p. 109.
- 4 P. N. Furbank (ed.), *Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe*, vol. 2: *Jure Divino*, The Works of Daniel Defoe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), p. 63. All further references in the text are to this edition.
- 5 Parker's letter is reprinted in George Harris Healey (ed.), *The Letters of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 410–11.
- 6 John McVeagh (ed.), *Writings on Travel, Discovery and History by Daniel Defoe*, vols. 1–3: *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, The Works of Daniel Defoe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), vol. 3, p. 3.

## CHAPTER 2

*Defoe's Connections**Brian Cowan*

By his own admission, Daniel Defoe was a man who had few close friends and many enemies. He complained of having 'Very Few Friends' in the world, especially when he found himself facing persecution from his creditors or his political enemies. When he did correspond with a friend, such as John Fransham, the Norwich linen draper, sometime pamphleteer, and distributor of Defoe's publications, he admitted that their connections were far from frequent. 'It is a long time since I had the least hint from any body that you or any of my Friends in Norwich were in the Land of the Living', he observed, before noting boldly, 'I take this occasion to let you know that your old Friend and humble Serv[an]t is yet alive in Spite of Scotch Mobs, Swedish Monarchs or Bullying Jacobites and is going to London to shew his Face to the worst of his Enemies and bid them defiance.'<sup>1</sup> In his correspondence and especially in his printed personae, Defoe always appears more comfortable confronting his enemies than he was comforting his friends.

Defoe was unusual for a man of his time. He was remarkably individualistic in his relationships with others, and his relationships tended to be more transactional and 'weak' than those of contemporaries with less expansive, but more intensive, social networks built on 'strong ties'.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Defoe's connections were much more modern than was customary for his contemporaries. Defoe was also singular in his energies, his self-confidence, and of course his literary talents. Very few people in the early eighteenth century would respond to imprisonment and the threat of conviction for seditious libel by recommending to a secretary of state that he should be allowed to serve as a cavalry commander in the war against France in lieu of punishment for his offence. But this is exactly what he proposed to the earl of Nottingham in January 1703, when he faced prosecution for writing *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* (1702).<sup>3</sup> Defoe's relative 'modernity' and his personal distinctiveness surely account for the enduring interest his writings have held ever since he began to