

DANIEL DEFOE IN CONTEXT

Innovative in its structure and approach, *Daniel Defoe in Context* contains forty-two essays by leading scholars illuminating the life, times, and world of Daniel Defoe. Defoe is one of the most important literary figures in English history, thanks not only to his pioneering novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, but also to his notable works in journalism, travel writing, conduct literature, and verse, both satiric and serious. Written with general readers and students in mind, the essays in this volume provide up-to-date knowledge about eighteenth-century literature, culture, and history in a high-quality, clearly written, but completely accessible form. Together they demonstrate the ways not only in which Defoe's world shaped his writing, but also in which Defoe's writings profoundly affected his world, and therefore our world.

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DANIEL DEFOE IN CONTEXT

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Preface

‘One of these Authors, (the Fellow that was *Pillor’d*, I have forgot his Name) is indeed so grave, sententious, dogmatical a Rogue that there is no enduring him’ – thus writes Swift, impersonating a member of the Irish House of Commons in 1709, reminding readers that one of his foes in the latest pamphlet skirmish over the Sacramental Test had been pilloried for seditious libel a few years back. It was easy to pretend to forget Defoe’s name because he concealed himself under so many pseudonyms during his long career as partisan hack, religious controversialist, and periodical writer, not to mention poet, travel writer, and, in the last years of his life, author of some of the most enduring fictional narratives in the English language. Of course, Swift very well knew who Defoe was, as their pens kept crossing in the rough-and-tumble world of political and religious controversy. They were very much alike, talented men of humble origins who wrote for hire to seek preferment and earn their bread. They were also well versed in anonymous and seditious publication.

Because Daniel Defoe (c.1660–1731) had a well-earned reputation among his contemporaries, not just his enemies, as a Proteus and ‘a Rogue’, he occupies a singular, indeed peculiar, place in the canon of English literature. Both reviled and admired in his time for his voluminous output and fearlessness as a writer, he has remained of interest to readers and scholars for the past three centuries. Alexander Pope, the greatest poet of the age, skewered him in Swiftian fashion in his *Dunciad* – ‘Earless on high, stood unabash’d Defoe’ – reminding readers how Defoe had dodged the occasionally fatal dangers of standing in the pillory by having his associates vend his *A Hymn to the Pillory* (1703) to the mob, thus turning judicial shame into commercial triumph. Joseph Warton, however, glossed Pope’s line condemning Defoe with a generous assessment: ‘I am sorry to find De Foe placed in such company. He was a writer of uncommon genius and fertility of fancy.’

Nowhere is that ‘fertility of fancy’ more evident than in *Robinson Crusoe*, a work that has remained popular since its initial publication in 1719 as the purportedly true autobiographical account of the strange and surprising adventures of a mariner from York. Even though it was finally understood as a work of fiction, *Robinson Crusoe* has held the imagination, and the readership, of people around the world. It has been reprinted, abridged, translated, and adapted thousands of times. Defoe wrote other novels, including the perennially popular *Moll Flanders* (1722) and the enigmatic, unfinished *Roxana* (1724). His fictional narratives remain critical reading for students of the history of the novel.

But Defoe was a literary pioneer in many other genres as well. *The Family Instructor* (1715), with its scenes of religious instruction and generational conflict, shaped subsequent conduct books as well as the so-called domestic novel. *A Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–7) is an astonishingly detailed ethnographic and geographical account of the state of the British nation as it begins to assert its presence on the global stage. *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) blends fact and fiction in ways that anticipate the ‘new journalism’ of the twentieth century. It also found a new readership during the Covid pandemic as an inspiring record of human ingenuity, endurance, and survival when facing a mysterious deadly disease. Defoe’s periodical paper, the *Review* (1704–13), influenced both the newspapers of the period and Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, whose *Spectator* ushered the way for magazines and for various genres of social commentary. Defoe’s verses, like Swift’s, remain widely read and topical, with his most famous poem, *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), a defence of Dutch-born William III, shedding light on later theories of national identity in literature and politics.

Defoe was such a prodigiously prolific writer that, to this day, we are not entirely sure exactly what he wrote. Thus, arguments over attribution, de-attribution, and re-attribution will continue to proliferate. Defoe was also a man deeply engaged in and affected by such momentous historical events as the union between England and Scotland in 1707 and the bursting of the South Sea Bubble in 1720. He was a government spy, went bankrupt several times, and died while hiding from debtors. He was a religious Dissenter, an advocate for women’s education, and a visionary ‘projector’ – a contemporary term for the designer of an enterprise or venture, but with a negative connotation as a fantasist for conservative cultural commentators. Defoe was a true-born Londoner at a time when London was

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transforming itself into a powerhouse financial centre and the capital of a burgeoning overseas empire.

In many ways, despite three centuries of scrutiny, Defoe remains as opaque to us as he appeared to most of his contemporaries. *Daniel Defoe in Context* begins with a chronology of Defoe's life and career, moving on to other biographical and authorial concerns, to get at the heart of his mystery by illuminating it from various perspectives. The volume is divided into six sections and contains forty-two chapters written by experts on the literature and history of, and various aspects of British culture in, the long eighteenth century. A list of further readings and a comprehensive index round out the volume. We hope that our readers will come away with a sense and understanding of how Defoe's novels and other writings reflected and changed their world. As with other volumes in the Literature in Context series, the intended audience are students from undergraduate through postgraduate as well as scholars of English literature and other disciplines. We also hope that our collected efforts will appeal to general readers interested in learning more about the author of *Robinson Crusoe*.

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Chronology

- 1660 Restoration of monarchy. Charles II returns to England on 25 April. Daniel Foe is born (likely in autumn) to James Foe, London tallow chandler, and his wife, Alice. Alice's family owns a country estate.
- 1662 Act of Uniformity, requiring Nonconforming clergy to assent to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. As a result, the Foes leave the Church of England and become Presbyterians.
- 1665 Plague strikes London, killing more than 97,000 people.
- 1666 War between France and England. Great Fire of London on 2 September, destroying much of the city.
- 1668–71? Defoe's mother dies.
- 1672–73? Defoe attends the Rev. James Fisher's school in Dorking.
- 1674–78? Defoe at school at Charles Morton's Newington Green academy.
- 1681 Defoe decides not to pursue a career as a Nonconforming (Presbyterian) clergyman.
- 1683? Defoe establishes himself as a merchant near the Royal Exchange, London. Captured by Algerian pirates between Harwich and Holland, and quickly released.
- 1684 Defoe marries Mary Tuffley, aged about twenty, on 1 January; Mary's dowry is £3,700.
- 1685 Charles II dies on 6 February, succeeded by his brother, James II. The duke of Monmouth, Charles II's bastard, talked up as the 'Protestant' heir to the throne, rebels on 11 June, with Defoe joining Monmouth's armed forces. Monmouth is defeated on 6 July and beheaded for treason, in a gruesomely 'botched' execution, on 15 July. Defoe escapes capture and is pardoned in May 1687.

- 1685–92 Defoe trades as a merchant in various goods, travelling widely in Europe.
- 1688 The Glorious Revolution: William of Orange is invited by Parliament to become king, after James II flees to France.
- 1689 Crowning of King William III and Queen Mary II.
- 1692 Defoe goes bankrupt and is imprisoned for debt in Fleet Prison on 29 October, and again on 4 November.
- 1693 Defoe is imprisoned for debt in the King's Bench Prison on 12 February. After negotiating terms with creditors, Defoe works as manager-trustee for Thomas Neale's private lotteries.
- 1695 Defoe becomes proprietor of a brick and tile works in Essex. He serves as accountant for commissioners of the new Glass Duty, and the following year as manager-trustee of royal lotteries. At around this time he adds 'De' to his name.
- 1697 Defoe publishes his first major work, *An Essay upon Projects*.
- 1697–1701 Defoe acts as an agent for William III and becomes his leading pamphleteer.
- 1701 Defoe publishes *The True-Born Englishman*, a satiric poem ridiculing nativist opponents of the Dutch-born William III.
- 1702 William III dies, succeeded by Queen Anne, a strong supporter of the Church of England. Legislation follows, including The Bill to Prevent Occasional Conformity, which bars Dissenters such as Defoe from public office and denies them some civil rights. In response, Defoe publishes *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters*, a satiric prose tract attacking High Church Anglicans through assuming their voice.
- 1703 *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* is declared a seditious libel and ordered burned by the Common Hangman. Defoe is arrested on 21 May and imprisoned in Newgate. He is released on bail on 5 June but convicted on 7 July. He is sentenced to stand in the pillory three times, pay a fine, and find sureties for good behaviour for seven years. Bankrupt and imprisoned in Newgate, Defoe is released on 8 November with the help of Robert Harley, Speaker of the House and soon to become Defoe's patron and spymaster.

Chronology

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- 1704 Defoe begins writing the *Review*, his periodical essay, first published on 19 February.
- 1704 Defoe travels through the south and east of England on Harley's orders, learning about the communities, people, and politics of the country. These, and subsequent, travels form the research of his later *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*.
- 1706 Defoe travels to Scotland on 13 September to work as a propagandist for the proposed union of Scotland and England. Defoe's father dies in London.
- 1707 Act of Union between Scotland and England is approved by the parliaments of both countries, resulting in a unified country with one parliament and one set of economic laws, but with separate churches and educational systems.
- 1708 Harley is forced out of office on 11 February. Defoe's new patron is Lord Treasurer Sidney Godolphin.
- 1709 Defoe publishes *History of the Union of Scotland and England*, based on his time in Scotland and the many pamphlets he had published in favour of the Act of Union.
- 1709 On 5 November, the anniversary of the arrest of Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, the High Church Anglican clergyman Henry Sacheverell preaches an incendiary sermon attacking Dissenters.
- 1710 Although Sacheverell is impeached and convicted, with a verdict of suspension and the public burning of his two controversial sermons, public opinion turns in his favour, resulting in the election of a Tory government.
- 1713 England negotiates peace with France, ending its part in the War of the Spanish Succession, although some of its allies continue the fight. Defoe is arrested for debt on 23 March, spending eleven days in prison, and then arrested for seditious libel on 11 April, spending the weekend in Newgate, on account of satiric pamphlets. Upon Defoe's publishing an account of his arrest, he is committed to the Queen's Bench Prison for contempt of court. He apologizes in the 28 April and 5 May editions of his *Review*, pays a fine, and is released.
- 1714 Queen Anne dies on 1 August. George I, elector of Hanover, becomes king of England.

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1715	Jacobite rebellion. Defoe working for Secretary of State Townshend as a propagandist. Harley is indicted for high treason, with Defoe defending his former patron in print while writing against the Jacobites. Defoe publishes his long conduct book, <i>The Family Instructor</i> .
1716	Defoe begins <i>Mercurius Politicus</i> .
1718	Defoe's eldest son, Benjamin Norton, marries in Norwich.
1719	<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> is published in April, reaching four editions. <i>The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe</i> is published in August.
1720	<i>Memoirs of a Cavalier</i> and <i>Captain Singleton</i> .
1722	<i>Moll Flanders</i> , <i>A Journal of the Plague Year</i> , and <i>Colonel Jack</i> .
1722	Defoe starts another brick and tile factory and purchases land in Essex.
1724	<i>Roxana</i> (originally titled <i>The Fortunate Mistress</i>) and vol. 1 of <i>A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain</i> .
1725	Vol. 1 of <i>The Compleat English Tradesman</i> and vol. 2 of <i>A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain</i> .
1726	Vol. 3 of <i>A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain</i> .
1727	George I dies on 11 June 1727, succeeded by George II. Vol. 2 of <i>The Compleat English Tradesman</i> .
1728	Defoe is sued for debt by Mary Brooke and Elizabeth Stancliffe. <i>A Plan of English Commerce</i> is published.
1730	Defoe loses his court case to Mary Brooke. He goes into hiding to avoid imprisonment for his £400 debt.
1731	Defoe dies of 'a lethargy' (stroke) in Ropemaker's Alley in London on 24 April, and is buried two days later in Bunhill Fields, the Dissenting cemetery in north London. His wife, Mary, is buried next to him on 19 December 1732. Their graves are located near those of John Bunyan and William Blake.