

***WILLIAM
MINTO***

A portrait of Daniel Defoe, a man with long, dark, curly hair, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat. The portrait is set against a dark background.

***DANIEL
DEFOE***

William Minto

Daniel Defoe

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PREFACE.

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There are three considerable biographies of Defoe—the first, by George Chalmers, published in 1786; the second by Walter Wilson, published in 1830; the third, by William Lee, published in 1869. All three are thorough and painstaking works, justified by independent research and discovery. The labour of research in the case of an author supposed to have written some two hundred and fifty separate books and pamphlets, very few of them under his own name, is naturally enormous; and when it is done, the results are open to endless dispute. Probably two men could not be found who would read through the vast mass of contemporary anonymous and pseudonymous print, and agree upon a complete list of Defoe's writings. Fortunately, however, for those who wish to get a clear idea of his life and character, the identification is not pure guess-work on internal evidence. He put his own name or initials to some of his productions, and treated the authorship of others as open secrets. Enough is ascertained as his to provide us with the means for a complete understanding of his opinions and his conduct. It is Defoe's misfortune that his biographers on the large scale have occupied themselves too much with subordinate details, and have been misled from a true appreciation of his main lines of thought and

action by religious, political, and hero-worshipping bias. For the following sketch, taking Mr. Lee's elaborate work as my chronological guide, I have read such of Defoe's undoubted writings as are accessible in the Library of the British Museum—there is no complete collection, I believe, in existence—and endeavoured to connect them and him with the history of the time.

W.M.

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CHAPTER I.

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DEFOE'S YOUTH AND EARLY PURSUITS.

The life of a man of letters is not as a rule eventful. It may be rich in spiritual experiences, but it seldom is rich in active adventure. We ask his biographer to tell us what were his habits of composition, how he talked, how he bore himself in the discharge of his duties to his family, his neighbors, and himself; what were his beliefs on the great questions that concern humanity. We desire to know what he said and wrote, not what he did beyond the study and the domestic or the social circle. The chief external facts in his career are the dates of the publication of his successive books.

Daniel Defoe is an exception to this rule. He was a man of action as well as a man of letters. The writing of the books which have given him immortality was little more than an accident in his career, a comparatively trifling and casual item in the total expenditure of his many-sided energy. He was nearly sixty when he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*. Before that event he had been a rebel, a merchant, a manufacturer, a writer of popular satires in verse, a

bankrupt; had acted as secretary to a public commission, been employed in secret services by five successive Administrations, written innumerable pamphlets, and edited more than one newspaper. He had led, in fact, as adventurous a life as any of his own heroes, and had met quickly succeeding difficulties with equally ready and fertile ingenuity.

For many of the incidents in Defoe's life we are indebted to himself. He had all the vaingloriousness of exuberant vitality, and was animated in the recital of his own adventures. Scattered throughout his various works are the materials for a tolerably complete autobiography. This is in one respect an advantage for any one who attempts to give an account of his life. But it has a counterbalancing disadvantage in the circumstance that there is grave reason to doubt his veracity, Defoe was a great story-teller in more senses than one. We can hardly believe a word that he says about himself without independent confirmation.

Defoe was born in London, in 1661. It is a characteristic circumstance that his name is not his own, except in the sense that it was assumed by himself. The name of his father, who was a butcher in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate, was Foe. His grandfather was a Northamptonshire yeoman. In his *True Born Englishman*, Defoe spoke very contemptuously of families that professed to have come over with "the Norman bastard," defying them to prove whether their ancestors were drummers or colonels; but apparently he was not above the vanity of making the world believe that he himself was of Norman-French origin. Yet such was the restless energy of the man

that he could not leave even his adopted name alone; he seems to have been about forty when he first changed his signature "D. Foe" into the surname of "Defoe;" but his patient biographer, Mr. Lee, has found several later instances of his subscribing himself "D. Foe," "D.F.," and "De Foe" in alternation with the "Daniel De Foe," or "Daniel Defoe," which has become his accepted name in literature.

In middle age, when Defoe was taunted with his want of learning, he retorted that if he was a blockhead it was not the fault of his father, who had "spared nothing in his education that might qualify him to match the accurate Dr. Browne, or the learned Observator." His father was a Nonconformist, a member of the congregation of Dr. Annesley, and the son was originally intended for the Dissenting ministry. "It was his disaster," he said afterwards, "first to be set apart for, and then to be set apart from, that sacred employ." He was placed at an academy for the training of ministers at the age, it is supposed, of about fourteen, and probably remained there for the full course of five years. He has himself explained why, when his training was completed, he did not proceed to the office of the pulpit, but changed his views and resolved to engage in business as a hose-merchant. The sum of the explanation is that the ministry seemed to him at that time to be neither honourable, agreeable, nor profitable. It was degraded, he thought, by the entrance of men who had neither physical nor intellectual qualification for it, who had received out of a denominational fund only such an education as made them pedants rather than Christian gentlemen of high learning, and who had consequently to submit to shameful and

degrading practices in their efforts to obtain congregations and subsistence. Besides, the behaviour of congregations to their ministers, who were dependent, was often objectionable and un-Christian. And finally, far-flown birds having fine feathers, the prizes of the ministry in London were generally given to strangers, "eminent ministers *called* from all parts of England," some even from Scotland, finding acceptance in the metropolis before having received any formal ordination.

Though the education of his "fund-bred" companions, as he calls them, at Mr. Morton's Academy in Newington Green, was such as to excite Defoe's contempt, he bears testimony to Mr. Morton's excellence as a teacher, and instances the names of several pupils who did credit to his labours. In one respect Mr. Morton's system was better than that which then prevailed at the Universities; all dissertations were written and all disputations held in English; and hence it resulted, Defoe says, that his pupils, though they were "not destitute in the languages," were "made masters of the English tongue, and more of them excelled in that particular than of any school at that time." Whether Defoe obtained at Newington the rudiments of all the learning which he afterwards claimed to be possessed of, we do not know; but the taunt frequently levelled at him by University men of being an "illiterate fellow" and no scholar, was one that he bitterly resented, and that drew from him many protestations and retorts. In 1705, he angrily challenged John Tutchin "to translate with him any Latin, French, or Italian author, and after that to retranslate them crosswise for twenty pounds each book;" and he replied to Swift, who

had spoken of him scornfully as "an illiterate fellow, whose name I forget," that "he had been in his time pretty well master of five languages, and had not lost them yet, though he wrote no bill at his door, nor set Latin quotations on the front of the *Review*." To the end of his days Defoe could not forget this taunt of want of learning. In one of the papers in *Applebee's Journal* identified by Mr. Lee (below, Chapter VIII.), he discussed what is to be understood by "learning," and drew the following sketch of his own attainments:—

"I remember an Author in the World some years ago, who was generally upbraided with Ignorance, and called an 'Illiterate Fellow,' by some of the *Beau-Monde* of the last Age...."

"I happened to come into this Person's Study once, and I found him busy translating a Description of the Course of the River Boristhenes, out of *Bleau's* Geography, written in *Spanish*. Another Time I found him translating some Latin Paragraphs out of *Leubinitz Theatri Cometici*, being a learned Discourse upon Comets; and that I might see whether it was genuine, I looked on some part of it that he had finished, and found by it that he understood the Latin very well, and had perfectly taken the sense of that difficult Author. In short, I found he understood the *Latin*, the *Spanish*, the *Italian*, and could read the *Greek*, and I knew before that he spoke *French* fluently—yet this Man was no Scholar."

"As to Science, on another Occasion, I heard him dispute (in such a manner as surprised me) upon the motions of the Heavenly Bodies, the Distance, Magnitude, Revolutions, and especially the Influences of the Planets, the Nature and

probable Revolutions of Comets, the excellency of the New Philosophy, and the like; *but this Man was no Scholar.*"

"In Geography and History he had all the World at his Finger's ends. He talked of the most distant Countries with an inimitable Exactness; and changing from one Place to another, the Company thought, of every Place or Country he named, that certainly he must have been born there. He knew not only where every Thing was, but what everybody did in every Part of the World; I mean, what Businesses, what Trade, what Manufacture, was carrying on in every Part of the World; and had the History of almost all the Nations of the World in his Head—*yet this Man was no Scholar.*"

"This put me upon wondering, ever so long ago, what this *strange Thing* called a Man of Learning *was*, and what is it that constitutes a *Scholar*? For, *said I*, here's a man speaks five Languages and reads the Sixth, is a master of Astronomy, Geography, History, and abundance of other useful Knowledge (which I do not mention, that you may not guess at the Man, who is too Modest to desire it), and yet, they say *this Man is no Scholar.*"

How much of this learning Defoe acquired at school, and how much he picked up afterwards under the pressure of the necessities of his business, it is impossible to determine, but at any rate it was at least as good a qualification for writing on public affairs as the more limited and accurate scholarship of his academic rivals. Whatever may have been the extent of his knowledge when he passed from Mr. Morton's tuition, qualified but no longer willing to become a Dissenting preacher, he did not allow it to rust unused; he at

once mobilised his forces for active service. They were keen politicians, naturally, at the Newington Academy, and the times furnished ample materials for their discussions. As Nonconformists they were very closely affected by the struggle between Charles II. and the defenders of Protestantism and popular liberties. What part Defoe took in the excitement of the closing years of the reign of Charles must be matter of conjecture, but there can be little doubt that he was active on the popular side. He had but one difference then, he afterwards said in one of his tracts, with his party. He would not join them in wishing for the success of the Turks in besieging Vienna, because, though the Austrians were Papists, and though the Turks were ostensibly on the side of the Hungarian reformers whom the Austrian Government had persecuted, he had read the history of the Turks and could not pray for their victory over Christians of any denomination. "Though then but a young man, and a younger author" (this was in 1683), "he opposed it and wrote against it, which was taken very unkindly indeed." From these words it would seem that Defoe had thus early begun to write pamphlets on questions of the hour. As he was on the weaker side, and any writing might have cost him his life, it is probable that he did not put his name to any of these tracts; none of them have been identified; but his youth was strangely unlike his mature manhood if he was not justified in speaking of himself as having been then an "author." Nor was he content merely with writing. It would have been little short of a miracle if his restless energy had allowed him to lie quiet while the air was thick with political intrigue. We may be sure that he had

a voice in some of the secret associations in which plans were discussed of armed resistance to the tyranny of the King. We have his own word for it that he took part in the Duke of Monmouth's rising, when the whips of Charles were exchanged for the scorpions of James. He boasted of this when it became safe to do so, and the truth of the boast derives incidental confirmation from the fact that the names of three of his fellow-students at Newington appear in the list of the victims of Jeffreys and Kirke.

Escaping the keen hunt that was made for all participators in the rebellion, Defoe, towards the close of 1685, began business as a hosier or hose-factor in Freeman's Court, Corn hill. The precise nature of his trade has been disputed; and it does not particularly concern us here. When taunted afterwards with having been apprentice to a hosier, he indignantly denied the fact, and explained that though he had been a trader in hosiery he had never been a shopkeeper. A passing illustration in his *Essay on Projects*, drawn from his own experience, shows that he imported goods in the course of his business from abroad; he speaks of sometimes having paid more in insurance premiums than he had cleared by a voyage. From a story which he tells in his *Complete English Tradesman*, recalling the cleverness with which he defeated an attempt to outwit him about a consignment of brandy, we learn that his business sometimes took him to Spain. This is nearly all that we know about his first adventure in trade, except that after seven years, in 1692, he had to flee from his creditors. He hints in one of his *Reviews* that this misfortune was brought about by the frauds of swindlers, and it deserves to be

recorded that he made the honourable boast that he afterwards paid off his obligations. The truth of the boast is independently confirmed by the admission of a controversial enemy, that very Tutchin whom he challenged to translate Latin with him. That Defoe should have referred so little to his own experience in the *Complete English Tradesman*, a series of Familiar Letters which he published late in life "for the instruction of our Inland Tradesmen, and especially of Young Beginners," is accounted for when we observe the class of persons to whom the letters were addressed. He distinguishes with his usual clearness between the different ranks of those employed in the production and exchange of goods, and intimates that his advice is not intended for the highest grade of traders, the merchants, whom he defines by what he calls the vulgar expression, as being "such as trade beyond sea." Although he was eloquent in many books and pamphlets in upholding the dignity of trade, and lost no opportunity of scoffing at pretentious gentility, he never allows us to forget that this was the grade to which he himself belonged, and addresses the petty trader from a certain altitude. He speaks in the preface to the *Complete Tradesman* of unfortunate creatures who have blown themselves up in trade, whether "for want of wit or from too much wit;" but lest he should be supposed to allude to his own misfortunes, he does not say that he miscarried himself, but that he "had seen in a few years' experience many young tradesmen miscarry." At the same time it is fair to conjecture that when Defoe warns the young tradesman against fancying himself a politician or a man of letters, running off to the coffee-house when he ought to be behind

the counter, and reading Virgil and Horace when he should be busy over his journal and his ledger, he was glancing at some of the causes which conduced to his own failure as a merchant. And when he cautions the beginner against going too fast, and holds up to him as a type and exemplar the carrier's waggon, which "keeps wagging and always goes on," and "as softly as it goes" can yet in time go far, we may be sure that he was thinking of the over-rashness with which he had himself embarked in speculation.

There can be no doubt that eager and active as Defoe was in his trading enterprises, he was not so wrapt up in them as to be an unconcerned spectator of the intense political life of the time. When King James aimed a blow at the Church of England by removing the religious disabilities of all dissenters, Protestant and Catholic, in his Declaration of Indulgence, some of Defoe's co-religionists were ready to catch at the boon without thinking of its consequences. He differed from them, he afterwards stated, and "as he used to say that he had rather the Popish House of Austria should ruin the Protestants in Hungaria, than the infidel House of Ottoman should ruin both Protestants and Papists by overrunning Germany," so now "he told the Dissenters he had rather the Church of England should pull our clothes off by fines and forfeitures, than the Papists should fall both upon the Church and the Dissenters, and pull our skins off by fire and faggot." He probably embodied these conclusions of his vigorous common sense in a pamphlet, though no pamphlet on the subject known for certain to be his has been preserved. Mr. Lee is over-rash in identifying as Defoe's a quarto sheet of that date entitled "A Letter

containing some Reflections on His Majesty's declaration for Liberty of Conscience." Defoe may have written many pamphlets on the stirring events of the time, which have not come down to us. It may have been then that he acquired, or made a valuable possession by practice, that marvellous facility with his pen which stood him in such stead in after-life. It would be no wonder if he wrote dozens of pamphlets, every one of which disappeared. The pamphlet then occupied the place of the newspaper leading article. The newspapers of the time were veritable chronicles of news, and not organs of opinion. The expression of opinion was not then associated with the dissemination of facts and rumours. A man who wished to influence public opinion wrote a pamphlet, small or large, a single leaf or a tract of a few pages, and had it hawked about the streets and sold in the bookshops. These pamphlets issued from the press in swarms, were thrown aside when read, and hardly preserved except by accident. That Defoe, if he wrote any or many, should not have reprinted them when fifteen years afterwards he published a collection of his works, is intelligible; he republished only such of his tracts as had not lost their practical interest. If, however, we indulge in the fancy, warranted so far by his describing himself as having been a young "author" in 1683, that Defoe took an active part in polemical literature under Charles and James, we must remember that the censorship of the press was then active, and that Defoe must have published under greater disadvantages than those who wrote on the side of the Court.

At the Revolution, in 1688, Defoe lost no time in making his adhesion to the new monarch conspicuous. He was, according to Oldmixon, one of "a royal regiment of volunteer horse, made up of the chief citizens, who, being gallantly mounted and richly accoutred, were led by the Earl of Monmouth, now Earl of Peterborough, and attended their Majesties from Whitehall" to a banquet given by the Lord Mayor and Corporation of the City. Three years afterwards, on the occasion of the Jacobite plot in which Lord Preston was the leading figure, he published the first pamphlet that is known for certain to be his. It is in verse, and is entitled *A New Discovery of an Old Intrigue, a Satire levelled at Treachery and Ambition*. In the preface, the author said that "he had never drawn his pen before," and that he would never write again unless this effort produced a visible reformation. If we take this literally, we must suppose that his claim to have been an author eighteen years before had its origin in his fitful vanity. The literary merits of the satire, when we compare it with the powerful verse of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, to which he refers in the exordium, are not great. Defoe prided himself upon his verse, and in a catalogue of the Poets in one of his later pieces assigned himself the special province of "lampoon." He possibly believed that his clever doggerel was a better title to immortality than *Robinson Crusoe*. The immediate popular effect of his satires gave some encouragement to this belief, but they are comparatively dull reading for posterity. The clever hits at living City functionaries, indicated by their initials and nicknames, the rough ridicule and the biting innuendo, were telling in their day, but the lampoons have