



Maximillian E. Novak. *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 756 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-812686-7.

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The Life and Opinions of Daniel Defoe

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Professor Novak's major biography of Defoe has been maturing for many years, like a grand cru wine, in the process ageing into what will surely become the standard life. For though there are several scholarly biographies available, of which that by Paula Backscheider, an erstwhile collaborator with Novak, is the most recent, his is unique in its integration of Defoe's career and writing. The subtitle, "Master of Fictions," indicates Novak's intention to write a life of Defoe "that would see him mainly in terms of his development as a writer of fiction and travel literature" (p. 9). His aim to produce a definitive literary biography succeeds admirably.

One of the problems about approaching Defoe through his writings is that there has been considerable controversy about the canon of his works. John Robert Moore's *Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe*, 2nd ed. (1971) attributed a considerable number to him, many of the attributions being made on the hazardous basis of style alone. Almost any anonymous "whiggish" pamphlet could be assigned to him on these grounds. Several were later proved to have been written by other authors on more objective evidence. The subjective approach was subjected to a devastating criticism by P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens (1995), who removed over 200 titles from the "Checklist." Novak rightly rebukes them for their scorn not only of bibliographers but of previous scholars in the field, accusing them of impugning their intelligence and motives. He himself remarks on anonymous works why he regards them as canonical, and provides his own "checklist" in the bibliography of "works cited." Few would dispute the titles he ascribes to Defoe.

The exposition of his works inevitably involves the text more in literary criticism than in history. Indeed it could be said that the historical context, from the

disputes over the standing army in the 1690s to the crisis of the South Sea Bubble, relies more on older authorities than on recent scholarship. The omission of Manuel Schonhorn's *Defoe's Politics* (1991) is especially curious given that his other contributions are acknowledged. This was perhaps not just an oversight, as is apparently the omission of Craig Rose's book on *England in the 1690s* (1999), for instance, which could have been profitably used. But a study that has been so long in the making cannot really be criticized for overlooking contributions to what is after all the background.

The foreground is occupied squarely by a very believable Defoe. He is not an author Novak wishes to rescue from all the criticism levelled at him by contemporaries and posterity. Thus he concedes that the man who decried aristocrats as parasites, and extolled the virtues of horny handed sons of toil, was a social upstart who added the de to his family name of Foe, thereby claiming a spurious gentility. Similarly paradoxically, the man who condemned the slave trade defended the Africa Company! Novak points out that the staunch upholder of family values in his tracts neglected his own wife and children, and was probably found with an obscene poem in his pocket when arrested for writing *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. He accepts that Defoe was inconsistent in his views to the point where he was decried as being prepared to prostitute his pen to any employer. At times he worked both sides of the street, like a reporter employed by CNN and Fox News simultaneously. He was no doubt a whig at heart, but needed money for his family and sold out to Robert Harley in the last four years of Queen Anne's reign. Despite his earnest and at times po-faced mask, Defoe positively reveled in disguise and deceit. He was particularly a master of disguises when he worked as a government spy in Scotland at the time of the making of the

Union. The successful outcome of the negotiations, which he helped to bring about, were celebrated by him in two long and excruciating verses *A Scots Poem* and *Caledonia*. Although Defoe himself was proud of his poetry, and Novak makes a spirited attempt to rescue his reputation as a poet, much of his verse is execrable, written in a tremendous hurry like much of his prose, but without the quality control.

It is indeed for his novels, rather than for even his best verse, such as *The True Born Englishman*, that Defoe is now remembered. Novak shows how his career as a journalist helped to create many of the ingredients which make up *Robinson Crusoe*, in the end the creation of such a novel work came as a surprise, not least to Defoe himself. Curiously Novak has relatively little to say about *Moll Flanders* compared with *Crusoe* or even *Roxana*. Yet Moll can be read as an allegory of Defoe's attitude to trade, which,

as Novak points out, like Mandeville's, tended to divide economics from ethics. Defoe's own unfortunate experiences as a tradesman, which led to bankruptcies and even having to dodge a creditor in the last months of his life, are well analyzed and related to his treatises on trade.

The cumulative effect of this long investigation of Defoe's life and writings is to build up a credible portrait of a man who, despite his hypocrisy and his lies, can engage our sympathies as well as Novak's. If he was a rogue, he was true to some principles. He defended his hero William III, even if he exaggerated his own role in the reign. He stood by the Protestant Succession in the House of Hanover, even if he was prepared to contribute to Jacobite journals. Above all he believed in a moral universe, even if his God helped those who helped themselves.

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