Starting Out with Defoe in the 1950s

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BEFORE examining my experiences with Defoe and his writings at the beginning of my career, I want to say that, as various systems of criticism have come and gone over the past fifty years, there has always been something in Defoe’s writings that has been of interest. The reason has something to do with the amazing range of Defoe’s own interests; and something to do with his ability with language, his unique way of perceiving the world. Who would have thought in the 1950s that in a Nobel Prize speech, a famous modern writer would take a section of Defoe’s Tour devoted to decoys or “duckoys” and make it into an example of the writer’s ability to observe life and to dramatize it in language, but that, of course, is exactly what J.M. Coetzee did a few years ago. And Defoe has continued to play a role in Coetzee’s writing from the depictions of isolation in South Africa, through Foe and into Elizabeth Costello.¹

Such a praise of Defoe was certainly not on the horizon when I entered graduate school in 1952. After I had passed my first graduate examinations in 1954, I asked my mentor at UCLA, Professor Edward Niles Hooker, for some suggestions for a possible doctoral dissertation. At the time, this was not considered good form. A student was to come up with his or her own topic. Anything less showed a failure of scholarly imagination. But I was far from your single minded, professionally oriented graduate student. I was still uncertain about the field in which I intended to specialize. In Professor Hooker’s seminars, I had been working in English literature of the early seventeenth century, but that was partly because much contemporary poetry was modeled on the wit of the “Metaphysical Poets.” Christopher Isherwood lived in a small house on Professor Hooker’s property, and Hooker would have some of his students over when Auden or Spender passed through Southern California to visit him. I was as much taken with them as I was by Donne or Dryden. Unprofessional or not, Hooker gave me a list of about twenty-five topics. My favorite author was Swift, but the topic that attracted me had to do with the subject of Defoe and economics. In response to that interest, Hooker gave me an offprint of Ian
Watt’s “Robinson Crusoe as a Myth,” and finding inspiration in Watt’s essay, I wrote my first seminar paper on Defoe.

It was important for me to have first engaged Defoe in connection with so incisive a mind as that of Ian Watt, because I had an oppositional streak in me. When I encountered truly excellent arguments, I would find myself wanting to counter them with my own objections. Watt treated *Robinson Crusoe* as a crucial document in the history of world thought and literature, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx. Although the UCLA English Department encouraged historical scholarship and specialized in producing critical editions, I had read widely in the New Criticism and understood its theoretical underpinnings. Watt could do New Criticism as his famous essay on the first paragraph of James’s *The Ambassadors* was to demonstrate, but he combined literary criticism with a full awareness of the social milieu in which that literature was produced, and in treating the “Myth” of *Robinson Crusoe*, he gave respectability to seeing a literary work as part of the flow of history and ideas over the centuries.

By 1957, when *The Rise of the Novel* first appeared, I found more to criticize in Watt’s approach. It was clear that despite his admiration for Defoe’s realism—and for Watt, the achievement of a convincing reality in fiction was one of its highest claims to excellence—he tended to regard Defoe as a primitive writer, not fully aware of what he was doing and guilty of the kind of errors that a true artist would not make. Thus because Coleridge thought the irony of Crusoe’s famous speech over the uselessness of gold on his island depended on a comma, Defoe could not have intended any irony at all—this despite the fact that the same speech had been singled out by the *Journal des Scavans* in 1720 for its general irony. Of course, for the New Critics, “irony” was equivalent to artistic excellence, and Watt was reluctant to grant that to Defoe. Nevertheless Watt gave new prominence to Defoe and Richardson as masters of realist fiction.

But this is getting ahead of myself. I left UCLA in 1955 for a Fulbright to Oxford, where I worked under Herbert Davis and F.W. Bateson. The former provided encouragement, the latter gave me some excellent critical advice. I had hoped to transfer my studies to work under James Sutherland at the University of London. James was sympathetic to my wishes, but the Fulbright Commission insisted I remain in Oxford. And I soon came to love the way Oxford treated both teachers and students alike as equally joined in a search for knowledge. It was through working daily at the Bodleian Library that I was able to come to an understanding of Defoe in relation to his age as well as some of the problems involved in such an undertaking. While working at the UCLA-connected William Andrews Clark Memorial Library and its card catalogue, I had already encountered some works that seemed wrongly attributed to Defoe, but at the Bodleian and what is now the British Library, then located at the British Museum, I encountered a labyrinth of works that seemed doubtful. H. C. Hutchins’s bibliography of Defoe in the first
Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature included such works as Christian Conversation (1720) and Some Memoirs of the Amours and Intrigues of a Certain Irish Dean (1728). Hutchins had based his bibliography on William P. Trent’s lists, but some of these ascriptions were highly speculative. Works were sometimes thrown into the Defoe canon without any rationale or argument. Speculum Crape-Gownorum (1682), usually ascribed to John Phillips, still turned up in Chadwick’s biography of Defoe in 1859, and Bohn’s six-volume edition of Defoe (1854) contained, The Life and Adventures of Mrs. Christian Davies, Commonly Called Mother Ross (1740). I read through all of these works dutifully and doubtfully. Compared to this situation, the publication of John Robert Moore’s Checklist at the end of that decade, with all its problems, seemed almost miraculous.

One advantage of the Bodleian was that a parade of well known scholars came there during my years of residence, 1955–7. I first met John Robert Moore at the Bodleian, not long after I had met Arthur W. Secord, the author of an important study of Defoe and travel literature and the editor of a reproduction of Defoe’s Review. Secord, who regarded Moore as a scholar of doubtful repute, warned me that the manuscript about a colony in South America, that seemed so pertinent to Defoe’s A New Voyage Round the World, was actually by William Paterson. He urged me to be cautious about works that had been ascribed to Defoe. Shortly thereafter, I heard Moore deliver a paper, and I got to talk to him for the first time. I thought him a somewhat naïve enthusiast for anything having to do with Defoe. In his talk, he treated an insurance policy that Defoe had taken out with the Sun Insurance Company (which I believe Moore owned), as if it were a holy relic. I had been warned by my friend Irvin Ehrenpreis, a colleague of Moore at the time, that Moore was something of a charlatan, but I found him extremely knowledgeable in the minutiae of eighteenth-century history; and although I thought his ascriptions were sometimes rash, I have never changed that opinion. At least I knew why Moore was making his judgments, even if I disagreed with him.

When I started working on Defoe in the middle of the decade, then, it seemed as if ideas were swirling about Defoe’s work and reputation, as if studies in Defoe were becoming possible in a way they had not been before. Manuel Schonhorn has told me that at the University of Pennsylvania, during approximately the same period, writing on Defoe was regarded as a waste of time. F.R. Leavis, in The Great Tradition (1948) had, after all, dismissed Defoe as a mere footnote in the history of the novel, and some critics took his opinions seriously. Arthur Scouten’s seminar on Defoe at Penn was considered revolutionary at his school. Although I belonged to a Leavisite club at Oxford—Leavisite in that it emphasized criticism rather than historical scholarship—I had dismissed most of Leavis’s ideas on the novel when I had first encountered them in graduate school. Apparently I was good at not paying attention to some ideas that had become mainstream. When I took my first teaching job at the
University of Michigan in 1958, only Leavis-approved novels (for example, of Dickens, only *Hard Times*) were being taught.

That was a year after the publication of Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* and two years after Alan McKillop’s *Early Masters of English Fiction*. Unlike Watt, McKillop did not press a particular thesis, but his wide reading and critical acumen showed how open Defoe’s fiction was to an intelligent reading. Just a few years earlier, Benjamin Boyce had written seriously about Defoe’s treatment of emotion in his fiction,\(^5\) and Dorothy Van Ghent had argued for a consistent irony in *Moll Flanders*.\(^6\) And as if this was not enough, the great critics, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, had chosen Defoe’s female protagonists as wonderful examples of characterization, overturning years of criticism which argued that Moll and Roxana were simply versions of Defoe himself.

I had finished writing my thesis on the relationship between Defoe’s fiction and his economic ideas and had embarked on a thesis for Oxford based on his attitudes toward Natural Law as a basis for treating the relationship between character and society. Defoe’s interest in so many subjects seemed to provide endless opportunities, and the instability of his bibliography seemed a challenge rather than a stumbling block. There was nothing resembling an edition of his many writings and even the major fiction had few reliable texts and almost no notes. It was an immensely exciting time to be working on such an exciting author and from my standpoint it still is.

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1. On Defoe’s influence on Coetzee, see Radhika Jones’s article in this issue of *Digital Defoe*.
3. Trent’s manuscript lists are mainly in Yale’s Beinecke Library, but the Boston Public Library has a few. Trent published some of his lists in *The Nation*. See “Bibliographical Notes on Defoe” vol. 84 (6 June 1907): 515-18; vol. 85 (11 July 1907): 29-32; (29 August 1907): 180-3.
4. On Moore’s connection with the Defoe collection at the Lilly Library (Indiana University), see Denise Grigg’s article in this issue of *Digital Defoe*.