Daniel De Foe

This gentleman acquired a very considerable name by his political and poetical works; his early attachment to the revolution interest, and the extraordinary zeal and ability with which he defended it. He was bred, says Mr Jacob, a Hosier, which profession he forsook, as unworthy of him, and became one of the most enterprising authors this, or any other age, ever produced. The work by which he is most distinguished, as a poet, is his True Born Englishman, a Satire, occasioned by a poem entitled Foreigners, written by John Tutchin, Esq.¹ This gentleman (Tutchin) was of the Monmouth faction, in the reign of King Charles II and when that unhappy prince made an attempt upon his uncle’s crown, Mr Tutchin wrote a political piece in his favour, for which, says Jacob, he was so severely handled by Judge Jeffries, and his sentence was so very uncommon, and so rigorously executed, that he petitioned King James to be hanged.

Soon after the revolution, the people, who are restless in their inclinations, and loath that, to-day, for which they would yesterday have sacrificed their lives, began to be uneasy at the partiality their new King discovered to his countrymen. The popular discontent rose to such a height, that King William was obliged to dismiss his Dutch guards, and though he died in possession of the crown of England, yet it proved to him a crown of thorns, and he spent fewer peaceful moments in his regal station, than before his head was environed with an uneasy diadem. De Foe, who seems to have had a very true notion of civil liberty, engaged the enemies of the new government, and levelled the force of his satire against those, who valued themselves for being true-born Englishmen. He exposes the fallacy of that prepossession, by laying open the sources from whence the English have sprung. ‘Normans, Saxons, and Danes, says he, were our forefathers; we are a mixed people; we have no genuine origin; and why should not our neighbours be as good as we to derive from? and I must add, that had we been an unmixed nation, I am of opinion, it had been to our disadvantage: for to go no farther, we have three nations about us clear from mixture of blood, as any in the world, and I know not which of them we could wish ourselves to be like; I mean the Scotch, Welsh, and Irish, and if I were to write a reverse to the satire, I would examine all the nations of Europe, and prove, that these nations which are the most mixed, are the best, and have least of barbarism and brutality amongst them. Mr De Foe begins his satire with the following lines,

Wherever God erects a house of pray’r,
The devil always builds a chapel there: And ’twill be found upon examination, The latter has the largest congregation.

After passing a general censure on the surrounding nations, Italy, Germany, France, etc. he then takes a view of England, which he charges with the black crime of ingratitude. He enumerates the several nations from whence we are derived, Gauls, Saxons, Danes, Irish, Scots, etc. and says,
From this amphibious ill-born mob began
That vain ill-natur’d thing, an Englishman.

This satire, written in a rough unpolished manner, without art, or regular plan, contains some very bold and masculine strokes against the ridiculous vanity of valuing ourselves upon descent and pedigree. In the conclusion he has the following strong, and we fear too just, observation.

Could but our ancestors retrieve their fate,
And see their offspring thus degenerate;
How we contend for birth, and names unknown,
And build on their past actions, not our own;
They’d cancel records, and their tombs deface,
And openly disown the vile degenerate race:
For fame of families is all a cheat,
’Tis pers’nal virtue only makes us great.

The next satire of any consequence which De Foe wrote, was entitled _Reformation of Manners_, in which some private characters are severely attacked. It is chiefly aimed at some persons, who being vested with authority to suppress vice, yet rendered themselves a disgrace to their country, encouraging wickedness by that very authority they have to suppress it.

Poetry was far from being the talent of De Foe. He wrote with more perspicuity and strength in prose, and he seems to have understood, as well as any man, the civil constitution of the kingdom, which indeed was his chief study.

In the first volume of his works there is a prose essay, which he entitles _The Original Power of the Collective Body of the People of England, Examined and Asserted_; this was intended to refute a very ridiculous opinion, which politicians, more zealous than wise, had industriously propagated, _viz._

[reprint of extract from _The Original Power_]

In the same volume is a tract entitled _The Shortest Way with the Dissenters_, which contained reflexions against some ecclesiastics in power, for breathing too much a spirit of persecution. He became obnoxious to the ministry on this account, and was obliged to justify himself by writing an explanation of it. Mr De Foe in his preface to the second volume of his works, collected by himself, takes occasion to mention the severe hardships he laboured under, occasioned by those Printers, more industrious than himself, who make a practice of pirating every work attended with success. As an instance of this kind of oppression, he mentions the _True Born Englishman_, by which, had he enjoyed the full profit of his labours, he must have gained near a thousand pounds; for besides nine editions which passed under his own inspection, this poem was twelve times pirated: but the insolence of those fraudulent dealers did not stop here. A Printer of a bad reputation collected a spurious and erroneous copy of several pieces of De Foe, and entitled them _The Works of the Author of the True Born Englishman_; and though he was then embroiled with the government for one of the pamphlets which this collection contained, yet had this man the impudence to print amongst them the same pamphlets, presuming so far upon the
partiality of the public resentment, that he should pass with impunity for publishing that very thing for which the author was to be prosecuted with the utmost severity. This, however, was an irresistible testimony, that the resentment shewn to the author was on some other, and less justifiable account, than the publication of that book; so was it a severe satire on the unwariness of the ministry, who had not eyes to discern their justice plainly exposed, and their general proceedings bantered by a Printer, for publishing in defiance of them that same book for which another man stood arraigned.

Mr De Foe, who possessed a resolute temper, and a most confirmed fortitude of mind, was never awed by the threats of power, nor deterred from speaking truth by the insolence of the great. Wherever he found vice he lashed it, and frequently, as Pope says, he

Dash’d the proud gam’ster from his gilded car,
Bar’d the mean breast that lurk’d beneath a star.

For some vigorous attacks against the measures of a prevailing party, which Mr De Foe reckoned unconstitutional and unjust, he was prosecuted, and received sentence to stand on the pillory; which punishment he underwent.

At the very time he was in the hands of the ministry, to shew the invincible force of his mind, he wrote a Hymn to the Pillory, as a kind of defiance of their power. ‘The reader (says he)’ is desired to observe this poem was the author’s declaration, even when in the cruel hands of a merciless, as well as unjust ministry; that the treatment he had from them was unjust, exorbitant, and consequently illegal.’ As the ministry did not think proper to prosecute him for this fresh insult against them, that forbearance was construed a confession of guilt in their former proceedings.

In the second volume of our author’s works, is a piece entitled More Reformation, a satire upon himself. We have already taken notice of a satire of his called Reformation of Manners, in which some personal characters are stigmatized, which drew much odium on Mr De Foe. This satire called More Reformation, is a kind of supplement to the former. In the preface he complains of the severe usage he had met with, but, says he, ‘that the world may discern that I am not one of those who practise what they reprove, I began this satire with owning in myself those sins and misfortunes which I am no more exempted from, than other men; and as I am far from pretending to be free from human frailties, but forwarder to confess any of the errors of my life, than any man can be to accuse me; I think myself in a better way to reformation, than those who excuse their own faults by reckoning up on mine.’

[reprinted extract from More Reformation]

We have been induced to make this extract, as it seems to shew the genius and spirit of the author in a more advantageous light, than we could have otherwise done. Though he was a resolute asserter of Whig principles, and a champion for the cause of liberty, yet was he never blinded by party prejudice, but could discern designing, and selfish men, and strip them of their disguises, though joined with him in the same political contests.
In the conclusion of the *Hymn to the Pillory*, which is written with great strength of expression, he assigns the reasons for his being doomed to that ignominy.

[reprinted extract from *A Hymn to the Pillory*]

There are in the same volume many other poetical pieces, and political, and polemical tracts, the greatest part of which are written with great force of thought, though in an unpolished irregular stile. The natural abilities of the author (for he was no scholar) seem to have been very high. He had a great knowledge of men and things, particularly what related to the government, and trade of these kingdoms. He wrote many pamphlets on both, which were generally well received, though his name was never prefixed. His imagination was fertile, strong, and lively, as may be collected from his many works of fancy, particularly his *Robinson Crusoe*, which was written in so natural a manner, and with so many probable incidents, that, for some time after its publication, it was judged by most people to be a true story. It was indeed written upon a model entirely new, and the success and esteem it met with, may be ascertained by the many editions it has sold, and the sums of money which have been gained by it. Nor was he less remarkable in his writings of a serious and religious turn, witness his *Religious Courtship*, and his *Family Instructor*; both of which strongly inculcate the worship of God, the relative duties of husbands, wives, parents, and children, not in a dry dogmatic manner, but in a kind of dramatic way, which excites curiosity, keeps the attention awake, and is extremely interesting, and pathetic.

We have already seen, that in his political capacity he was a declared enemy to popery, and a bold defender of revolution principles. He was held in much esteem by many great men, and though he never enjoyed any regular post under the government, yet he was frequently employed in matters of trust and confidence, particularly in Scotland, where he several times was sent on affairs of great importance, especially those relative to the union of the kingdoms, of which he was one of the negotiators.

It is impossible to arrive at the knowledge of half the tracts and pamphlets which were written by this laborious man., as his name is not prefixed, and many of them being temporary, have perished like all other productions of that kind, when the subjects upon which they were written are forgot. His principal performances, perhaps, are these,

*A Plan of Commerce*, an esteemed Work, in one large volume, octavo, of which a new edition was lately published  
*Memoirs of the Plague*, published in 1665  
*Religious Courtship*  
*Family Instructor*: Two volumes  
*History of Apparitions* (under the name of Moreton)  
*Robinson Crusoe*: Two Volumes  
*Political History of the Devil*  
*History of Magic*  
*Caledonia*, a Poem in praise of Scotland  
*De Jure Divino*, a Poem  
*English Tradesman*, etc.
History of Colonel Jack
Cleveland's Memoirs, etc. are also said to be his

Considered as a poet, Daniel De Foe is not so eminent, as in a political light: he has taken no pains in versification; his ideas are masculine, his expressions coarse, and his numbers generally rough. He seems rather to have studied to speak truth, by probing wounds to the bottom, than, by embellishing his versification, to give it a more elegant keenness. This, however, seems to have proceeded more from carelessness in that particular, than want of ability: for the following lines in his True Born Englishman, in which he makes Britannia rehearse the praises of her hero, King William, are harmoniously beautiful, and elegantly polished.

[reprint of extract from The True Born Englishman]

What provocation De Foe had given to Pope we cannot determine, but he has not escaped the lash of that gentleman’s pen. Mr Pope in his second book of his Dunciad thus speaks of him:

Earless on high stood unabash’d De Foe,
And Tutchin flagrant from the scourge below.

It may be remarked that he has joined him with Tutchin, a man, whom Judge Jeffries had ordered to be so inhumanly whipt through the market-towns, that, as we have already observed, he petitioned the King to be hanged. This severity soured his temper, and after the deposition and death of King James, he indulged his resentment in insulting his memory. This may be the reason why Pope has stigmatized him, and perhaps no better a one can be given for his attacking De Foe, whom the author of the Notes to the Dunciad owns to have been a man of parts. De Foe can never, with any propriety, be ranked amongst the dunces; for whoever reads his works with candour and impartiality, must be convinced that he was a man of the strongest natural powers, a lively imagination, and solid judgement, which, joined with an unshaken probity in his moral conduct, and an invincible integrity in his political sphere, ought not only to screen him from the petulant attacks of satire, but transmit his name with some degree of applause to posterity.

De Foe, who enjoyed always a competence, and was seldom subject to the necessities of the poets, died at his house at Islington, in the year 1731. He left behind him one son and one daughter. The latter is married to Mr Henry Baker, a gentleman well known in the philosophical world.

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1 Jacob, Vol.II, 309.
2 See Preface to the True Born Englishman.
3 See Preface to Vol.II.