On Reciting *The True Born Englishman*

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DEFOE'S *The True Born Englishman* was nothing less than the single most popular poem of the entire century. Here are the opening lines of part I:

WHEREVER God erects a house of prayer,
The Devil always builds a chapel there:
And 'twill be found upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation:
For ever since he first debauched the mind,
He made a perfect conquest of mankind.
With uniformity of service, he
Reigns with a general aristocracy.
No non-conforming sects disturb his reign,
For of his yoke there's very few complain.
He knows the genius and the inclination,
And matches proper sins for every nation.
He needs no standing-army government;
He always rules us by our own consent:
His laws are easy, and his gentle sway
Makes it exceeding pleasant to obey:
The list of his vicegerents and commanders,
Outdoes your Cæsars or your Alexanders.
They never fail of his infernal aid,
And he's as certain ne'er to be betrayed.
Through all the world they spread his vast command,
And Death's eternal empire is maintained.
They rule so politicly and so well,
As if they were Lords Justices of Hell,
Duly divided to debauch mankind,
And plant infernal dictates in his mind

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There is nothing at all difficult or subtle about such verse, which is deliberately regular and insistent in its drumbeat rhythms and its predictable rhymes; but the poem is lively, pointed, and direct in its assertions and witty turns of phrase. Defoe is a sort of political Ned Ward; he is out to entertain and instruct, and of course he makes no bones about it. Rhyme and rhythm are designed to make things simple and plain; the couplets are free of the balancing intricacies and variations of caesura and accent that one finds in Pope’s masterful verses. This is verse by the numbers, sometimes downright clumsy in its rhymes. From these opening lines, the idiom is quasi-proverbiaal and (one might conjecture) deliberately amateurish, rough the way many thought verse satire should be.

Defoe composed the poem in 1701 in the wake of attacks on his hero, the Dutch-born King William III, specifically in response to John Tutchin’s *The Foreigners* (1700), a xenophobic poem attacking the king and his Dutch advisers. The most memorable part of the poem is Defoe’s riotous demolition of the myth of simple or straightforward English identity, which he breaks down by enumerating in irreverent terms the various foreign invaders who have over the centuries produced the English nation. Here is a small sample:

And here begins our ancient pedigree,
That so exalts our poor nobility:
’Tis that from some French trooper they derive,
Who with the Norman bastard did arrive;

The trophies of the families appear,
Some show the sword, the bow, and some the spear,
Which their great ancestor, forsooth, did wear.
These in the herald’s register remain,
Their noble mean extraction to explain,
Yet who the hero was, no man can tell,
Whether a drummer or a colonel:
The silent record blushes to reveal
Their undescended dark original.
But grant the best, how came the change to pass,
A true-born Englishman of Norman race?
A Turkish horse can show more history,
To prove his well-descended family.
Conquest, as by the moderns it is expressed,
May give a title to the lands possessed:
But that the longest sword should be so civil
To make a Frenchman English, that’s the devil.
These are the heroes that despise the Dutch,
And rail at new-come foreigners so much,
Forgetting that themselves are all derived
From the most scoundrel race that ever lived;
A horrid crowd of rambling thieves and drones,
Who ransacked kingdoms and dispeopled towns,
The Pict and painted Briton, treacherous Scot,
By hunger, theft, and rapine hither brought;
Norwegian pirates, buccaneering Danes,
Whose red-haired offspring everywhere remains,
Who, joined with Norman-French, compound the breed
From whence your true-born Englishmen proceed.

And lest by Length of time it be pretended
The climate may this modern breed ha’ mended,
Wise Providence, to keep us where we are,
Mixes us daily with exceeding care.
We have been Europe’s sink, the jakes where she
Voids all her offal outcast progeny.

Energetically, almost maniacally, doggedly assertive and endlessly fluent, Defoe’s verse gallops along and depends upon a readership that is more or less aware of English history from the Roman invasion on and can relish the irreverent and slangy version Defoe versifies. To the considerable extent that its effects depend upon ridicule of an early eighteenth-century chauvinism about English identity summed up in Tutchin’s poem, *The True-Born Englishman* is decidedly ephemeral. And yet I think parts of it can still be enjoyed for their demotic energy and unfailing inventiveness, for its total lack of pretension and poetic ambition, unafraid to speak directly and forcefully. Its effectiveness derives from a world where verse is a medium of effective and popular communication rather than special revelation. Defoe’s poem is satirical but it is not “literary”; it is popular in its radical separation from generic ambitions and literary self-consciousness. Its occasion, of course, is another poem; it is in rough and ready dialogue in the public sphere, attacking Tutchin and others like him. It belongs to the world of action, and seeks to bury its opponents rather than to memorialize and monumentalize its subject or to point to its own self-expressive variation on generic expectations. Its ephemerality, then, is precisely its strength.

For me, recording Part I was challenging for several reasons. One, even just the first part is very long (Defoe’s strong suit was never brevity) and lacks the kind of tonal subtlety and implicit dialogue that has made recording other poets from the period, notably Pope and Swift, more satisfying for me. The “Satire” that Defoe at several points evokes to speak for him is (like Defoe of course) long-winded in the extreme, and the poem is a rush of words; one thinks it will never stop (and it almost doesn’t). It is declamatory without being eloquent. Two, the challenge was to do
justice to the energy and propulsive drive of the verse, but the temptation to shout it out needed to be resisted. I do not think I ever found quite the right pace for the reading, and I do stumble occasionally. Although I generally feel that eighteenth-century verse gains from being read aloud, I am not sure that reading this poem aloud produces much real gain. As energetic as the poem is, the repetitive insistence works against oral delivery; reading it aloud, one cannot sustain the outrage. Or in simpler terms, there is no real development, just a reiteration and variation on a simple if amusing point.

Perhaps the most amusing aspect of the poem and in the end for me its saving grace is Defoe’s English chauvinism, which at the same time does not spare all other nations, making the Spanish ridiculously proud, the Italians consumed by lust, the Germans by drunkenness, the French by fickleness and untrustworthiness, and so on. England, too, is possessed by a devil, and in fact among the European nations it is a Johnny-come-lately, since other European nations have older ruling families and dynasties. So Defoe’s complexity, both chauvinistic and subversive of thoughtless and a-historical English chauvinism, does emerge as one reads the poem.

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