A Strange Surprising Adventure: Curating the Defoe Exhibition for the Lilly Library

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WHEN I was asked to curate an online exhibition for the works of Daniel Defoe, my first response was pretty much a blank stare. At the time, I was in the Masters of Library Science program at Indiana University, and I had just taken a job as an assistant web developer with the Lilly Library, which houses IU’s rare books and special collections. My job was to curate online exhibitions for the Lilly’s web site.¹ When I was asked to do this particular exhibition, however, my knowledge of Defoe ran to Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders but no farther. And when I came to understand just what was entailed in creating such an exhibition, the sheer number of works to choose from as well as the tangled history of the canon, I confess to some feelings of dismay. But putting on my best smile I plunged in. And what I discovered is what many of the readers of this journal discovered long ago—Daniel Defoe is fascinating. Tricky, yes. Enigmatic, yes. Frustrating, definitely yes. But fascinating nonetheless.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to try to show some of the process of how this exhibition came to be, what I struggled with, what I tried, and what I learned along the way. It is my hope that, although many of my readers know far more about the writings of Defoe than I ever will, that my discussion may in some way inspire you to see the study of Defoe in a slightly different way.

¹ In addition to the one on Defoe, I also curated exhibitions on the history of ballooning and on fore-edge paintings.
The Defoe collection at the Lilly Library is the work of many years, although the majority of the books in the collection date from the residency of John Robert Moore. Moore was added to the Indiana University faculty in 1922, and by the early 1930s and through the end of his career (he retired from IU in 1961, although he continued to work until his death in 1973) he devoted most of his energies to the literature of the Augustan period, from the reign of Queen Anne through the mid-1740s, concentrating especially on Daniel Defoe.

During this time, Moore contributed not only to the growth of the Augustan collection of books at the main library but, even more importantly, to the growth of the Defoe canon. The canon had been fraught with uncertainty for years, from as early as Defoe’s death, for it was the exception rather than the rule that Defoe signed his name to one of his works. Even worse, he often denied having written things that he actually had. And so for the last 250 years scholars have argued and justified their own conclusions, based sometimes on the style or content of the writing, sometimes on external evidence or contemporary attributions. But none have been as assiduous in this task as J.R. Moore. He spent years poring over not only the list of accepted works by Defoe but also the extensive corpus of anonymous works of the Augustan period, determined to discover whether some of them might have been in fact written by Defoe himself. Moore’s first major “discovery” was that *A General History of the Pirates* was by Defoe, and this opened doors to possibilities of attribution that had never appeared before. He was able “to use it and the analogues it provided as the basis for later assigning an immense number of other works to Defoe which had been classified as anonymous by the great libraries in whose possession they were.”

Under Moore’s hand, the Defoe canon grew by more than one hundred titles over the course of his career. And as Moore’s reputation grew, many libraries in the United Kingdom and the United States, including that of Indiana University, revised their cataloging records to reflect Moore’s attributions, although Moore himself was constantly adding to and removing items from his final list. The list itself, finally published in 1960 as his *Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe*, had 547 entries.

There were skeptics, of course, who contested some of Moore’s assertions, inclusions, and arguments (or lack thereof). As an instance of the latter, Maximillian Novak recounts hearing Moore justify some of his ascriptions by declaring, “Does a father not know his own son?” Such personal conviction could

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carry weight only for someone convinced of Moore’s infallibility, however, and the critics continued their challenges, the more so after Moore’s death in 1973.

Since then many scholars, most especially Furbank and Owens, have set out to correct what they see as Moore’s too cavalier method of assigning works to Defoe, which “attributions he made on the basis of bad reasoning and a fatal belief in his own flair.”\(^4\) This resulted in the publication in 1998 of their own *A Critical Bibliography of Daniel Defoe*, which now listed fewer than 300 works by Defoe, and many of these still only “probable” attributions.

The effect of this brief history of the Defoe canon on anyone wishing to put together an exhibition of Defoe’s works is perhaps only too obvious. As I mentioned above, the card catalog records at Indiana University’s library had been changed according to Moore’s recommendations, and those records, now at the Lilly Library, remain unchanged to this day. For while the Lilly is involved in the massive task of retrospective cataloging for all the old card catalog records for the books now housed there, many of the records still exist only in card format, the same card format used when Moore was at Indiana University forty years ago. And while it may have been a fine tribute to the greatest Defoe scholar ever to work at IU to rely on Moore’s constructions as the basis of an exhibition, it would have been unfair to an audience who expects to see only works by Defoe in an exhibition dedicated to him.

My starting point, therefore, was Furbank and Owens’s *Critical Bibliography*, which seemed to me a far more reliable and conservative listing of Defoe’s works. And although some other scholars have claimed that Furbank and Owens have been rather too fastidious in their rejection of certain “probable” attributions,\(^5\) it seemed wiser to be too conservative than too generous, especially as an exhibition is not meant to be a critical analysis of a subject but rather a snapshot, something to whet the appetite for a more in-depth study.

Exhibitions must be made to walk the line between showing too little or too much. Too little would not provide a broad enough context for the subject. Show too much, however, and the audience will be overwhelmed. Museums and other physical exhibitions are notorious for inducing sleep or at least boredom after a relatively short time, even in those whose interest is high, and the online exhibition is in no less danger. With a subject like Daniel Defoe it is almost impossible to show too little, and exceptionally easy to show too much.

And so, armed with Furbank and Owens, I was still faced with a daunting task. For even though I had limited my possible entries to those listed in Furbank and Owens and found that, of that list, the Lilly Library held only about a


\(^5\) See Novak, 580-3.
hundred titles (although in the case of Robinson Crusoe there were many editions of
the same title, both in English and in other languages), I still had to make sense of
those titles and select and arrange those that would make for a good exhibition. It
was, in a very real sense, a matter of creating meaning out of something that has
none, of imposing order on something that was never meant to be ordered.

In reality, of course, it was not as dire as all that. It requires no leap of the
imagination to group Defoe’s writings on the Union with Scotland in one place, or
to make a list of various political pamphlets he wrote throughout his career. But
what about “novels” or “fiction” in general? Was Defoe writing novels according to
our own definitions today? Or even by the definition of his own time? So much has
been written on the subject, and with no clear answer in sight, that I chose to opt
out of the “novel” debate altogether by classifying such works as Moll Flanders as
“Other Fiction,” and the question of what exactly constitutes “fiction” is silently
glossed over. It is one of the limitations of an exhibition that ambiguities such as
this cannot be fleshed out, at least not in any complete way, and it underscores the
importance of a curator who takes pains not to inadvertently lead the audience
astray.

In some ways online exhibitions have the advantage over physical ones. A
traditional exhibition necessarily requires the physical space for display cases in a
secure building, preferably equipped with rigorous environmental and lighting
controls. The books themselves must pass through the hands of the conservator,
who ensures that the book can withstand the strain of being open for months on
end, and who creates the necessary supports to minimize any damage. A book
being used in an online exhibition, on the other hand, needs to be open only long
enough to take the necessary images before being placed back on the shelf.

On the downside, of course, while one needs no display cases or special
lighting, one does need some level of skill with web coding. I was fortunate in that
there was another intern at the Lilly at the time who wrote much of the basic code
for me, based on my specifications, from which I could play with the design. The
basic template was inspired by the wonderful online exhibitions at Cornell, which
are not only elegant in their simplicity but make a wonderful use of color. It can be
difficult in an exhibition of books whose primary importance lies in the ideas they
contain rather than in any beautiful plates or bindings to find visually stimulating
images to show. In such a case it is even more important to at least have a visually
pleasing design for the site itself, which I hope I was able to accomplish here. Title
pages do not generally make for the most exciting images, and aside from the many
illustrated Robinson Crusoe editions and some of the voyage narratives, there was
little else to show but pure text.

Another difference in doing an online exhibition rather than a physical one
is that for the latter, in the interest of time or due to the lack of expertise of a curator
in a particular area, the text of the labels for exhibition items are often lifted from reference works or other published material such as dealer's catalogs. For an online exhibition, however, which is, in a sense, a “published” work, it is not possible to simply plagiarize from the experts without risk. I certainly drew much of my inspiration from the reference works I was consulting, but the text was necessarily all mine. And considering the great scope of Defoe’s works and of the canon, and considering my almost complete ignorance of the subject before I started, this was quite an undertaking. I cannot overstate, however, how much I learned by doing it this way. No semester-long class on Defoe could have crammed so much into my head in such a short period of time. There is something to be said for letting your mind be flooded (if not overwhelmed) with details, facts and ideas on a given subject until the connections between seemingly disparate works form, unbidden, to create a far more cohesive whole than you could ever have imagined.

One of the limitations of any exhibition (not merely an online one) is the fact that the audience gets only a glimpse of a work. In a physical exhibition, one sees only a title page or a binding, or perhaps a plate. An online exhibition can show multiple views, of course, but even these cannot really give an idea of the thing. And the “thing” is, of course, a book—a physical object that not only contains the ideas of the author who wrote it but that is in itself an object of meaning and interest. There is, somehow, a distinct difference between reading the Project Gutenberg version of Moll Flanders and actually holding the first edition (complete with contemporary calf binding) in one’s hands. You are holding history. You are now part of a chain of events, part of the history of that book. Great attention is often paid to provenance, and the fact that this Moll Flanders was owned by J.K. Lilly lends it even more prestige in the library that bears his name. But even a volume with no owner’s name, no discernible lineage, has its own past and is part of something larger than itself. In the exhibition, Moll Flanders is a two-dimensional collection of pictures. In the “flesh,” it is a living thing. This is the difference, I suppose, between some literary scholars and rare book librarians. For certain scholars, the ideas within the “container” (the book, the article) are all that matter, while for those of us drawn to rare books, the containers themselves are of value as well, for they “contain, in their physicality, unreproducible evidence that readers (scholars, students, and the general public) need for analyzing and understanding, with as much historical context as possible, the writings that appeared and reappeared in them.”

This then, is another aspect of what I learned while preparing the exhibition. As I mentioned above, I learned a great deal about Defoe from having read at least sections of every book that I included. But beyond this, the mere fact

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of having held in my hand and turned the pages of the first edition of *The True-Born Englishman*, or having noticed the paper tax stamps visible on issues of the *Review*, or what fonts were generally used by the printer, what punctuation, what style of binding—provided a level of experiential knowledge and understanding far beyond what a twenty-first century edition in Times New Roman with normalized spelling and punctuation could do. It couldn’t transport me back to the eighteenth century, but it got me a little closer.

The goal of this exhibition, then, was not simply to be able to offer a general understanding of Defoe and his works but to entice the reader to come in and see and feel and experience for him- or herself what it is to hold a piece of history in one’s hands.

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