
As everyone knows, Daniel Defoe’s best-known novels, Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders, feature extended involuntary sojourns in the Americas for their title characters. These sojourns effect spiritual transformations that allow these characters to enact their own redemptions. Read this way, as they often have been, Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders reveal themselves to be as much spiritual allegories in the manner of Pilgrim’s Progress as they are adventure or crime novels. However, Dennis Todd, in his fascinating and often revealing study, argues that Defoe’s use of America in these two novels and in Colonel Jack links individual redemption with Britain’s colonizing activity in the New World — specifically, in the Caribbean and in parts of the Chesapeake Bay area. Defoe, suggests Todd, “created characters who, for all their spiritual dimensions, seized on the sheer material promise of America which Defoe himself enthusiastically embraced” (13). Unlike Pilgrim’s Progress, then, the novels’ settings are not merely allegorical fantasy lands but real places in which the real-life counterparts to Crusoe and Moll may enact their redemptions.

Defoe’s ardent support of colonization in the Americas, as evidenced in works such as A New Voyage Round the World as well as his “colonial” novels, colors his seemingly-glowing presentations of Crusoe’s conversion of the heathen savages and of Colonel Jack’s and Moll Flanders’s years spent as indentured servants. However, Todd also notes that Defoe was well aware of his own ambivalent views of human nature, which prohibits easy distinctions between “civilized” and “savage”; moreover, Defoe well knew that indentured servitude, while preferable to the gallows, was often a harrowing and brutal existence at times indistinguishable from slavery. Todd explores Defoe’s ambivalence in these novels and attempts to sort out what exactly Defoe knew about the realities of American colonization by comparing Defoe’s fictions with contemporary accounts of colonial America.

Todd’s book is, by and large, a series of close readings of each of the three novels, although he does include some worthwhile contextual material relevant to
these readings. In Chapter 1, “Defoe’s America,” Todd examines the geographical and social realities of the Chesapeake Bay region as they would have existed in the late seventeenth century, the time frame for both *Moll* and *Colonel Jack*. He notes that the idealized Maryland plantation culture that Defoe portrays so vividly in both novels had largely disappeared by the second decade of the eighteenth century, a fact that seriously undermines the effectiveness of these texts as advertisements for colonization. In addition, while Defoe gets some geographical details of colonial Maryland wrong, as one might expect from an author with no first-hand knowledge of the region, Todd focuses on the painstaking details Defoe gets right, such as his situating Moll and Jemy in a part of Dorchester County that was — and still is — uninhabitable marshland, and having Moll remark on its unsuitability as a settlement. For Todd, this suggests a writer whose interest in America was keen indeed and ultimately justifies his point that we need to study carefully how Defoe uses America in his fiction.

At the same time, *Defoe’s America* is not simply a check-list of historical and geographical footnotes to Defoe’s fiction. Chapter 2 takes us onto Crusoe’s island and explores Crusoe’s spiritual journey in light of its specific Caribbean setting. The island, Todd suggests, provides Defoe with a paradigm of material abundance that must be both tamed and nurtured by reason and submission; Defoe will employ variations of this paradigm in both *Moll* and *Jack*. Moreover, the drama of Friday’s conversion — itself a forerunner of Jack’s conversion of the African slaves — forms a backdrop to discussing the whole question of the place of aboriginal people in colonialism. Defoe works through a particular view of human nature that carefully avoids assumptions of racial superiority (Crusoe’s experience of European civilization, not his white skin, convinces him that cannibalism is wrong) without falling into cultural relativism (he cannot justify cannibalism as simply an alternate cultural practice: it’s wrong even if the cannibals themselves don’t know it’s wrong). Todd notes that Crusoe’s assumption that Friday has a soul at all, let alone a soul worth saving by conversion to Christianity, stands in sharp contrast to what Defoe would have accepted as the Black Legend, the web of accounts of the horrific and bloody Spanish genocides in the New World, as recounted by Bartolomé de las Casas and others. Unlike the Spanish, the British attitude toward native peoples was one of fair and humane treatment. However, Defoe imbues his account of Friday’s conversion with a particular irony: the fact that Crusoe himself is something of a convert, a man who before his experiences on the island had little time for religious practice or spiritual thought, but one who gradually comes to value the Bible as a constant and faithful companion. Todd notes that Defoe’s focus on Crusoe’s spirituality has an important historical basis: the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was a mechanism that operated not so much to convert aboriginal peoples as to build up religious devotion among British colonials, who would then provide a suitable
example for the native population to imitate. It is, therefore, imperative that Crusoe set his own spiritual house in order before he can think of converting Friday.

Although Crusoe does not suffer indentured servitude like Moll or Jack, Todd notes that Crusoe’s submission to “reason…reality…and the will of God” constructs an important framework for understanding how Defoe treats servitude in these later novels. In Chapter 3, Todd offers a detailed reading of *Colonel Jack* that shows how Jack’s secular transformation from accomplished pickpocket to respected plantation owner parallels Crusoe’s spiritual transformation. Jack’s “transportation” to America, and particularly the circumstances of his servitude, allows him an opportunity to reform himself that is not open to him in England. In America, Jack’s pretension to gentility — which drives a growing moral awareness that is, because of England’s intolerant class system and flourishing criminal culture, repeatedly stunted — stands a fair chance of being realized. However, Todd notes that many of Defoe’s contemporaries did not hold the view that America was necessarily conducive to moral regeneration, despite its natural abundance and its isolation from the temptations to vices ever-present in the Old World. Even Defoe himself, Todd argues, does not actually agree with the idea that one can become morally whole by removing oneself from society — in fact, as Todd demonstrates, Defoe believed precisely the opposite and therefore places Jack in a context where his elevation in status and his material prosperity both depend in large part on his humane treatment of African slaves.

Todd’s point about Defoe’s view of servitude is treated more fully in Chapter 4, which deals exclusively with *Moll Flanders*. Here again, he argues that Defoe’s view of servitude in the novels as offering “the way to mastery, freedom, and a fuller integration into society at large” is at once a powerful endorsement of colonialism and a blatant misrepresentation of the actual experience of indentured service. Todd spends a good deal of this chapter navigating the subtle distinctions between servitude and slavery, in part to reveal how Defoe recreates the experience of servitude to further his ends and in part to provide some sense of how Defoe’s contemporaries would have received Moll’s description of her adventures.

*Defoe’s America* is, on the whole, less an exercise in contextualizing the historical Americas Defoe uses in his fiction and more a critical reading of that fiction informed by salient facts about the historical Americas. Todd devotes as much energy and space to working out Defoe’s views on servitude, cannibalism, and colonial economics as he does to seventeenth-century America. That is only fair: lasting definitive statements about Defoe’s thought are hard to come by, and even then are subject to further scrutiny. The book’s focus on these three novels alone barely allows for more than a mention of *Captain Singleton* and *A New Voyage Around the World*. The journals of indentured servants or the captivity narratives from which Todd so tantalizingly quotes are also not given adequate space. The chief value of the book, then, is Todd’s exploration of how Defoe constructed “America” as a fictional space
into which he poured his enthusiasm for and ambivalence about colonialism, the
possibility of redemption, and the true nature of humanity. About America itself, even
in Defoe’s universe, there is still much more to say, although Defoe’s America gives us a
fine starting point.

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