

Lee, William. 'Daniel Defoe, The News Writer'. *Notes and Queries*. 3rd Series. VII (25 March 1865): 244-45.

In a former article I epitomised the "history" contained in the recently-discovered *Letters of Daniel Defoe*, and made some remarks on the criticism of the *London Reviewer*. I reserved for consideration what Defoe did under his engagement, therein mentioned, with the government; and, the morality, or otherwise, of his conduct.

To form an accurate judgment as to the actions and conduct of men, we must place ourselves, as far as possible, in the midst of the circumstances by which they were surrounded. In 1718, when the Letters in question were written, all authors, of any considerable reputation and standing, had themselves been subjected to a rigid official censorship of the press. It cannot be doubted that the abolition of such censorship tended greatly to consolidate the principles of the revolution, and to establish the freedom we now enjoy; but another century required to elapse before Governors would be able to bear free public discussion of their policy. The Lord Treasurer for the time being was the head of the Government, and exercised some general superior authority; but there was then no Cabinet, as we now know it. The administration often consisted of discordant members, acting in their respective departments as judgment or caprice might dictate. The struggle of the preceding reign, for and against High Church principles, had scarcely ceased; and recently had given place to a fiercer conflict between the adherents of the newly acceded House of Hanover, and the friends and followers of the Pretender. The goals still contained numerous Jacobite rebels; and more were at large, who did not always conceal their disaffection to the existing Government.

We can scarcely wonder that State authorities of the Home Department should, in such circumstances; evince great jealousy and over-sensitiveness as to public criticism; or should, under feelings of official isolation and insecurity, use what they considered effectual means to ward off, or punish, all attacks on their administration. Newspapers and other periodical publications were therefore all examined, and frequently, for offensive comments or opinions (that would not, in our day, excite more than a good-natured smile on the face of the minister), "messengers" were dispatched to search and ransack the premises of the printer and publisher; and to take into custody, not only him, but all persons found there. The zeal of the myrmidons was sometimes excessive to a ludicrous extent: not only compositors and pressmen, with their copy and sheets, but the "devil," and the old housekeeper, and any unfortunate lodger who happened to be under the same roof, all were seized, and carried before the proper members of the administration. After examination, the innocent were released, the mere instruments discharged with suitable admonition, and the actual delinquent dealt with according to the degree of his political turpitude. For a minor offence, detention for a time in the private dwelling-house of the messenger sufficed, with a subsequent release upon recognizances, which the culprit was compelled from time to time to renew. Graver faults ensured committal and trial, with the punishment of pillories, whipping, fines, and imprisonment. For printing a pamphlet stating that James was the rightful king, a young man named Matthews was, in the following year, (1719) sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered.

This will show that the conduct of a public journal was attended with much and continual danger to its proprietor; especially if it ostensibly took the side opposed to the Government.

Defoe knew, by sad experience, what it was for “an unhappy author” to suffer the displeasure of Government; and, on entering into the engagement we have now to consider, urged that the setting up a Weekly Paper to answer scandalous attacks on the Government, would be inadequate either to prevent such attacks, or, to avert the punishment of the offenders. He therefore too readily agreed to lay that aside, and accept the proposal of Lord Townshend, that he might be more serviceable by writing as if “under the displeasure of the Government, and separated the Whigs.” His great talent as a writer made him an acquisition to any journal, and his connection with its management would enable him, on the one hand, to serve the Government, by suppressing the treasonable or seditious papers of contributors, and, on the other, to save the owner of paper from fines, imprisonment, and, the common result, absolute ruin.

The details of the arrangement were left to the direction of a subordinate officer, Mr Buckley. The journals in which Defoe was to write were “to seem to be on the same side as before, *to rally the Flying Post*, the Whig writers, and even the word ‘Whig,’ &c., and to admit foolish and trifling things in favour of the Tories.”

The “recently discovered Letters” show that he insisted on these conditions with the owner of one of the papers in which he was to write. When Mr Mist did not faithfully adhere to the compact, Defoe threatened not to “serve him any farther, or be concerned any more.”

That I might be qualified to state what Defoe did under this engagement with the Government, and, to form a judgment on the morality or otherwise of his conduct, it became necessary to examine the publications referred to in his Letters namely, *Mercurius Politicus*, *Dormer’s News-Letter*, and *Mist’s Journal*. I intended at first only to make such an investigation as would enable the readers of *Notes and Queries* to say, *Guilty*, or, *Not Guilty*, on the indictment against Defoe in the *London Review*, My manuscript of his hitherto unknown writings has, however, now grown to the capacity of an ordinary octavo volume; and I must therefore, after a few brief illustrations of what he *did*, incur the risk of pronouncing a somewhat dogmatic judgment on his moral and political conduct; promising, that if all be well, the whole shall be laid before the public for final decision.

I. Mr Buckley had directed, “Seeming to be on the same side as before.”

With respect to the condemned rebels, especially in Scotland, he says, in *Mercurius Politicus*, May, 1716 :

“It has been a mightily disputed case amongst the Parties here, whether Justice, so it is call’d as respects the Publick; or REVENGE, so it is call’d as respects Parties, should be extended against the Rebels in general; or whether MERCY should interpose to the saving them from the Hand of the Executioner ?

It is not the business of these Collections to enter into the debate, neither does it consist with the Impartiality Profess'd in the Introduction, and to which we resolve steadily to adhere," &c.

In the same number, however, he finds nearly eight pages octavo, to print in full an able memorial by Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Advocate of Scotland, pleading for mercy towards the Scotch rebels. In *Mist's Journal*, October 4, 1718, he says :

"Our Scout employed in the districts of Long Acre, Covent Garden , and Drury Hundreds, writes us an account that a Parrot in Henrietta Street, having spoken very Seditious and Scandalous Words, a neighbouring Justice of *De Peace* had consulted several of his Brethren, in what manner they should proceed against the Parrot, or his Master."

In the same Number is the following characteristic anecdote :

"They write from Edinburgh, that by a Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Perth, several Bills of Indictment were drawn up, and presented to the Grand Jury there, against several that were supposed to have been in the late Rebellion, and came home from France, and the Bills were all returned Ignoramus; upon which the Prisoners were discharged, and the Cryer, thereat standing up, proclaim'd it in Court; at the end of which, as usual, he spoke, with a loud Voice, *GOD save the King and the Judges*. At which a Gentleman standing by added, *and this Jury* : The Cryer hearing it, and thinking it was a Direction to him, he likewise bawl'd out, *AND THIS JURY*."

II. The papers under Defoe's management were to "rally the *Flying Post*, the Whig writers," &c.

In *Mist's Journal*, July 19, 1718, is a communication as to the general incredulity of some persons, and especially of a Whig whom he had recently met. He says : "I quoted the *Flying Post*, and ask'd him if he believ'd that ? He told me, with a sneer, I has clenched it now, by asking him if he believ'd a Paper that no Body believ'd."

In the *Journal* of April 18, 1719, was inserted the following paragraph of false news :

"On Monday last died Mr Cibber, an Actor at the Theatre in Drury Lane; he was notorious for his late comedy called the *Nonjuror*, which was calculated to triumph over the misfortunes of those unhappy Gentlemen, who lately fell under the Displeasure of the Government for their attempt in favour of the Chevalier, and by which he lost himself much of the Reputation he acquired by his former Performances."

In the *Journal* of May 2, Defoe corrects the error as follows :

"It seems by an Advertisement published last Thursday se'ennight that *Mr Flying Post* is very angry that *Mr Cibber*, who was reported to be dead, is

alive; and appears to Act upon the Stage again, and a great Triumph he makes over *Mr Mist* for having been wrong inform'd, to which *Mr Mist* answers -

'1. As to Mr C-, he says, as the famous Tatler said of old Partridge, the Almanack maker, that if he was not dead, he should ha' been dead, for any good he was like to do while he was alive.

'2. If *Mr Mist* has gained *Immortal Honour* by believing a Lie of another Man's making, how many Immortalities of Praise are due to *Mr Ridpath*, that has made so many for other People to believe ?

All this is upon a Supposition that Mr C- is alive; he does not indeed know but he may be so, and should have been inclin'd to ha' believ'd it, had'n't it been publish'd in the *Flying Post*."

On the same day that he wrote the third of the letters to Mr De la Faye, "recently discovered" in the Record Office, namely, May 10, 1718, he "rallied the Whigs," in *Mist's Journal*, thus :

"One *Mr Oliver Testy* has sent us a very good-natured peevish Letter, wherein he threatens Mr Mist to write a Satyr on him shall make him go hang himself; and all this for taxing the Whigs with being the Chief Favourites of *Curlicism*, or Bawdy Books; but, by the way, does not deny the Thing to be true, so we need say no more of that."

III. As to his manner of dealing with the High Church and Jacobites, and the suppression of sedition and treason.

The Journal of the date just quoted contains an instance :

"We heartily fall in with the opinion of the Reverend *Mr Jonathan Cassock* relating to the Government of the Church; but, it being too tender a point for us to meddle with, we desire to be excus'd."

This must have been merely a questionable communication. The following reply, in *Mist's Journal* of March 29, 1718, probably relates to the subject of his Letter to Mr De La Faye, dated April 12, 1718 :

"Among other Letters, we have lately received two from *Mr Paul Fogg*, we should say, two Treasonable Papers; we hope, if he expects we should publish them, he will first come and set his Name to them, which, if he thinks fit to do, in the cause of Murther and Assassination of Kings, he may hear farther; but we cannot but wonder to what purpose any Man should send Letters to be put into a Publick Paper, when he must needs think, whoever should Print them could expect nothing but to be try'd for *High Treason*, and sent to the Gallows. However, we are bound to thank our cozen Fogg for his good will, and take our leave of him in the terms of an Old Parliament Satyr, which may serve to answer him and those of our Loving Friends who desire we should hang for them, viz.

"Mist, at this time, having no need,

Thanks you as much as if he did.”

IV. His impartiality in writing the foreign and other news.

In *Mist's Journal* of July 5, 1718, after deprecating the exaggerations, untruthfulness, and contradictions of the Foreign Affairs in other newspapers, he says:

“In this Madness we shall endeavour, as we have hitherto always done, to relate the events of this approaching War, which we believe will be very obstinate and bloody, with the utmost Exactness, and with a perfect Impartiality. We are utterly ignorant of the Necessity there is to lessen Things on one Side, or double them on the other, to please one side or other. We do not see that it is of such a mighty consequence to us which Popish Prince prevails over the other, that we should be afraid to give a full and true Account of any Action, let it fall how it will. The giving true Intelligence is the business before us, and we resolve to favour neither one side nor the other.”

The above are fair examples, from the mass of manuscript now in my possession, of what Defoe did under his engagements with the Whig Government and with the Tory newspapers, respectively mentioned in his Letters “recently discovered.” In other papers, Whig and Tory, of the same period, I have observed much pandering to the prurient passions of readers; but not in any of the papers with which Defoe was connected. The continual tendency of them was to promote religion and virtue. With respect to politics, he constantly aimed at impartiality; and I have not found that he actually wrote, in any Tory journal, anything contrary to the liberal principles he had all his life professed. He was undoubtedly restrained by his position from writing in such journals directly in favour of his own political views; but it is right to add, I have discovered that those principles were freely expressed and advocated in another journal, established in September, 1718, under the management of Defoe, and published thrice a week; and also, in a daily paper established in the following year.

In connection with Tory journals Defoe had to meet continually persons very uncongenial to him, and to suppress, or remodel, Tory advices, essays, and letters, often of most objectionable character. He had further to contend against the prejudice, bigotry, and *quasi* loyalty of his printers and publishers; and to bear, in silence, the most virulent personal odium from two of the contemporary Whig journals. His motives and his conduct in so trying circumstances appear to have been upright, and the consciousness sustained him; but he had certainly placed himself in an irksome and a questionable position, and I cannot doubt he felt it most bitterly, when he wrote the words “Thus I bow in the house of Rimmon.”

The proper name of Mist's paper was *The Weekly Journal, or Saturday's Post*; and as far as *it* was concerned I am able to add, in further proof of Defoe's strict integrity, that he firmly adhered to his determination of suppressing all offensive articles, or ceasing to be connected with the journal. In October, 1718, when a letter to which he objected was inserted, he added a note replying, and disavowing its principles in the name of Mr Mist, and at once severed himself entirely from the management of the paper.

Mr Mist discovered his mistake by finding himself and his servants shortly in the custody of government officials; and after his liberation, on security given for future good behaviour, he very soon further discovered, by a rapidly declining circulation, that the good genius of his journal had departed. Self-interest compelled him to seek, and to put himself again into the hands of, Defoe, who resumed its management at the end of January, 1719, on his absolute terms; and it so continued for several years, exhibiting nothing of Toryism in its character beyond the mere pretension of adherence to its past reputation.

My judgement, after more than two months' careful investigation, is that in his connection with the Government, and the several Tory journals mentioned in his "recently discovered Letters," Daniel Defoe unwisely consented to place himself in a very questionable position; but that, in such position, he did nothing to disparage, positively, his moral character as a man, a patriot, and a Christian.

William Lee

Lee, William. 'Daniel Defoe, The News Writer [III]'. *Notes and Queries*. 3rd Series. VII (29 April 1865): 343-44.

Pursuing my investigations as to the hitherto unknown writings of Defoe, I have disinterred the following. It may be taken as supplemental to what has already appeared in *Notes and Queries* under his name. I must however premise a few words.

Defoe was left in the management of *Mist's Journal*, but Mr Mist had so great a tendency to gravitate towards Jacobitism, that, about the middle of the year 1720, a separation again took place (except as to the articles on "Foreign Affairs"), and Defoe connected himself with *Applebee's Original Weekly Journal*.

As on a previous occasion, poor Mist was no sooner left to himself than he fell into trouble, but this time it ended in ruin. Omitting, for brevity, all that intervened, I quote the following from *The Post Boy* of February 14th to 16th, 1721:

"Last Monday Mr Mist appeared on his Recognizance at the King's Bench Bar, Westminster, to receive Judgment for some Reflections on his Majesty's Interposition on behalf of the Protestants in the Palatinate, of which he had been convicted the last Term; and the Court pronounced Judgment, as follows, viz. That he stand in the Pillory, at Charing Cross and the Royal Exchange; pay a Fine of 50*l.*; suffer three months' Imprisonment in the King's Bench, and give Security for his good Behaviour for seven years."

Editorial leading articles in the public journals of the early part of last century appeared in the humble forms of Letters Introductory, with continual changes of the subscribed initials, or fictitious signatures. On February 18th appeared the following Introductory Letter by Defoe in *Applebee's Original Weekly Journal* :

"Sir, It is a Rule in our Accidence, and which in Latin begins with *Felix quem faciunt*, that they are happy who take warning by other Men's Disasters : I think this is a Time of Day when this Rule stands in Need of much Application; and there are many Occasions which tell us *who*, and *who*, and *who* ought to take Notice of it.

You publish, it seems, Dying Speeches, and from thence 'tis natural to preach to the Gentlemen of the Pad, that they Beware, or else that they provide their last Speech and Confession, and send them to your House to be ready for the Press.

The *South Sea Company* have chosen new Directors; and the Conduct of their Predecessors, pr rather the Consequences of that Conduct, stands as so many Warning Pieces, or Mementos, to bid them beware how they go on; and, as a Beacon upon a Sand, to bid them stand off, and live, draw near, and dye; to call to them stand take Care, lest they run a Ground, and are stranded, as others did before them.

A Brother Journal Man has fallen into the Pit lately; Humanity directs you not to insult him in his Disaster, but to the contrary to an extrem; but Prudence gives a Hint; *Gardez Vous, Monsieur*, take care of yourself, lest unwarily you fall into the like Snare.

Another bold Journal Scribe writes strongly for *Freedom of Speech*, by which may be understood, he would have a Freedom for the Press to speak what it would; the Truth is, by the Liberty he takes, one would hardly think there was any Freedom deny'd, or which he could not venture upon : But I counsel you, wonderful Sir, to remember that the Press and the Pit are alike open, and stand very near together : the Press is open, that is true; and the Prison is open, that is as true; *Gardez Vous*, Mr App; write warily, write cautiously.

But you will say, What must a poor Printer do? Must he turn his Tale as the Weather-cock of State turns? And when the Wind blows a Whig Gale from Court, turn Whig; when it blows a High Church Gale, face about to the High Church; and in times of the unsteady Gales, trim and look every Way, and no Way, all at once? What must he do?

No no, Mr App, be honest and be wise; be steady to yourself; but knock your head against no Stone Walls, lest the few Brains you may have go to wreck in the Storm, and the little Money you have follow after them.

It is the Wisdom of a Publick Writer to give no Offence to the Powers to which his Allegiance is due, or such whose Authority he is subject to; and yet no Man seems to be under the Necessity, either of Flattery or Falsehood, in any Reign, or under any Times whatever. If we look back upon all the Prosecutions and Tryals which have been against Printers, or Authors, in our Age, not in this Reign only, but also in the Reigns precedent, they have not been for the plainness of their Writing so much as the Passions, *that is to say*, the follies of the Writers.

Plainness is a Virtue in Writing, and no Author that is honest ought to go from it : But Passion, in the very same Cause, may be the height of Folly; even a Satyr may be so couch'd in its Terms, as to give no legal Offence, and yet no Part of the Edge, or Point, be abated.

Let him that writes Satyr, then, take care to have it sharp, but not sour; mettled, but not raging; *full*, but not *foul* : How many a gallant Prince has borne the Edge of the Satyr, for the Wit of it? But remember, that all the Wit of a Satyr perishes when the Manners decay.

But, after all, what have you Men of Scribble to do with the Times? Or why must you dip into the Passions and Parties which agitate the People? Leave off the Comment, and keep to the Text (*Facts*); when a Wretch in contempt of God and Government, hangs himself, and robs the King of a Subject, however worthless and useless, it is a Crime no doubt; But what have you to do with that? Your Business is to tell us the Story, and leave the World to the relish of it their own Way; *and the like*, of all other cases

: Suppose 'tis of Rebellion, Treason, South Sea Thievery, or of any other sort of R-y, be the Story your Province; leave the Reflection to the Readers; lay your Finger on your Mouth and when you talk of State Affairs, *ware Pillory, ware Printer*; be wise and be wary; you may have room enough to please your Friends, without displeasing those who have Power to resent and to punish.

What Business have Printers to espouse Parties at their own Expense? Make the Passions of private Men speak in Publick, and take a Liberty of Speech not supportable in itself, and which Men in Power, let them be of which Side they will, cannot bear?

If you are prepar'd for Martyrdom indeed, 'tis another Case; then you may come with *Vox Populi*, and *Vox Dei*, and *Vox any Body*; you know the Way that has been trod before you : but, if you will act the prudent Part, cut no Throats but with a Feather, shoot no poison'd Arrows : Let Wit and Waryness joyn in your Work; and so I end my Advice to you where I began it : *Felix quem faciunt aliena Pericula cautum*.

Your Friend,
"Solomon Waryman"

Vox Populi Vox Dei was the title of a treasonable publication, for printing which a young man named Matthews had been hanged at Tyburn during the proceeding year.

William Lee