

**ENGLISH MEN OF
LETTERS.
DANIEL DEFOE**

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English Men of Letters. Daniel Defoe by William Minto

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WILLIAM MINTO

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BY

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P R E F A C E.

THERE are three considerable biographies of Defoe—the first, by George Chalmers, published in 1786; the second by Walter Wilson, published in 1830; the third, by William Lee, published in 1869. All three are thorough and painstaking works, justified by independent research and discovery. The labour of research in the case of an author supposed to have written some two hundred and fifty separate books and pamphlets, very few of them under his own name, is naturally enormous; and when it is done, the results are open to endless dispute. Probably two men could not be found who would read through the vast mass of contemporary anonymous and pseudonymous print, and agree upon a complete list of Defoe's writings. Fortunately, however, for those who wish to get a clear idea of his life and character, the identification is not pure guess-work on internal evidence. He put his own name or initials to some of his productions, and treated the authorship of

others as open secrets. Enough is ascertained as his, to provide us with the means for a complete understanding of his opinions and his conduct. It is Defoe's misfortune that his biographers on the large scale have occupied themselves too much with subordinate details, and have been misled from a true appreciation of his main lines of thought and action by religious, political, and hero-worshipping bias. For the following sketch, taking Mr. Lee's elaborate work as my chronological guide, I have read such of Defoe's undoubted writings as are accessible in the Library of the British Museum—there is no complete collection, I believe, in existence—and endeavoured to connect them and him with the history of the time.

W. M.

January 1879.

ROYAL
LONDON
YEARLY

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DANIEL DEFOE

CHAPTER I.

DEFOE'S YOUTH AND EARLY PURSUITS.

THE life of a man of letters is not as a rule eventful. It may be rich in spiritual experiences, but it seldom is rich in active adventure. We ask his biographer to tell us what were his habits of composition, how he talked, how he bore himself in the discharge of his duties to his family, his neighbours, and himself; what were his beliefs on the great questions that concern humanity. We desire to know what he said and wrote, not what he did beyond the study and the domestic or the social circle. The chief external facts in his career are the dates of the publication of his successive books.

Daniel Defoe is an exception to this rule. He was a man of action as well as a man of letters. The writing of the books which have given him immortality was little more than an accident in his career, a comparatively trifling and casual item in the total expenditure of his many-sided energy. He was nearly sixty when he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*. Before that event he

had been a rebel, a merchant, a manufacturer, a writer of popular satires in verse, a bankrupt; had acted as secretary to a public commission, been employed in secret services by five successive Administrations, written innumerable pamphlets, and edited more than one newspaper. He had led in fact as adventurous a life as any of his own heroes, and had met quickly succeeding difficulties with equally ready and fertile ingenuity.

For many of the incidents in Defoe's life we are indebted to himself. He had all the vaingloriousness of exuberant vitality, and was animated in the recital of his own adventures. Scattered throughout his various works are the materials for a tolerably complete autobiography. This is in one respect an advantage for any one who attempts to give an account of his life. But it has a counterbalancing disadvantage in the circumstance that there is grave reason to doubt his veracity. Defoe was a great story-teller in more senses than one. We can hardly believe a word that he says about himself without independent confirmation.

Defoe was born in London, in 1661. It is a characteristic circumstance that his name is not his own, except in the sense that it was assumed by himself. The name of his father, who was a butcher in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate, was Foe. His grandfather was a Northamptonshire yeoman. In his *True Born Englishman*, Defoe spoke very contemptuously of families that professed to have come over with "the Norman bastard," defying them to prove whether their ancestors were drummers or colonels; but apparently he was not above the vanity of making the world believe that he himself was of Norman-French origin. Yet such was the restless energy of the man that he could not leave