

**DANIEL DEFOE: THE  
STANHOPE  
ESSAY, 1890**

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Daniel Defoe: The Stanhope Essay, 1890 by David Watson Rannie

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Daniel Defoe.

THE  
STANHOPE ESSAY,

1890.

BY

DAVID WATSON RANNIE,

ORIEL COLLEGE.

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## DANIEL DEFOE.

### I.

#### INTRODUCTORY.

It is perhaps hardly a sufficient reason for making a man of letters the subject of a historical essay that he has written much and written well on questions of paramount political and historical importance. The historian concerns himself chiefly with men of action; not because he underestimates the importance of thought in the world of politics, but because, in the interest of the division of labour, he leaves its analysis to others, to the philosopher and the literary critic. Yet there have been writers and kinds of literature as historically important as the lives of institutions or the labours of statesmen. Rousseau and the Encyclopedists are as significant to the historian of the French Revolution as to the critic of European literature and philosophy in the eighteenth century; and the student of the Great Rebellion must deal with Hobbes as well as with Hampden. Few individual journalists of our day may come to rank as historical personages; but the historian of the times in which we live will find in journalism, taken as a whole, not only a storehouse of facts, but a source of political influence and an indicator of social temper, without the help of which his work could not be done.

It is as the supreme journalist of his age that Daniel Defoe first attracts our notice. He was no impassioned preacher of a new social evangel, soon to realize itself in ominous and far-sounding deeds; no expounder of a political philosophy which was the theoretic counterpart of a system of government. But all the help which the journalist can give to the student of society and politics is given in perfection by Defoe. He is most familiar to the world as the author of one immortal work of fiction; but even in his novels we find the qualities which made him the most copious of pamphleteers and the most indefatigable of newspaper-writers; we find the fluency, the readiness, the suggestiveness, the docility, which we associate with one of the most characteristically modern forms of literary effort.

The historical aspect of Defoe.

Defoe specially a journalist.

though  
also a  
Govern-  
ment  
agent.

✓  
The time  
and the  
man  
suited to  
each  
other.

The eight-  
teenth  
century.

Perhaps we ought to consider that Defoe was one stage nearer historical importance than any mere writer could ever be, on account of his frequent employment as a government agent and negotiator. As we shall see, he managed to gain the ear of the Executive at a time when there was yet no very clear distinction between Court and Government, between Council and Cabinet; and we shall find him acting as the adviser of Ministers and the conductor of delicate negotiations long after his first royal patron had passed away, and with him seemed to have passed away for ever the era of personal government. Yet it is not as a statesman (even if one could ever know what his statesmanship really was) that we can permanently think of Defoe. Our first impression of him turns out to be the abiding one. The further we search into the condition of the England in which his busy mind wrought the more clearly we realize that the time and the man were peculiarly suited to each other, and that of the time we can have no better exponent than the man. His standard and his practice, his ways and his words show us English affairs as in a mirror, not merely because he had much to say about them, not merely because he was an occasional actor in them, but because, from his journalistic facility and versatility, he had an unrivalled sensitiveness to impressions of events and an unrivalled power of reproducing them. As we read his pamphlets we see his England and understand it, just as, when we read *Robinson Crusoe* and *Colonel Jack*, we see the solitary at work in his island, and the solemn little rascal asleep in the glass-house, or, in his later days, paying his visit of reparation to the robbed dame of Kentish Town. Periods in which greater issues were at stake, periods of greater earnestness and intensity, could not have become incarnate in such a figure as Defoe. He lived in a time which we may well call specially modern, because a new spirit was abroad in it, a spirit which was hardly known before the Revolution. The great forces which had been let loose in the period of the Reformation had by this time spent their early strength; the time had come for their more equal diffusion and gentler influence. The results of the discovery of the New Worlds of the East and the West were indeed only coming into full view; but they were showing themselves now not in the region of wonder and daring, but in that of every day commerce and general well-being. Religious difference had passed the stage of sublimity and agony, and entered upon that of incessant argument, of harassing controversy, of paper-war. Political liberty had been fought for and practically won; it had now to justify its existence and to adapt itself to its environment. The dreaded forms of royal tyranny and papal interference no longer threatened;



it was for the various sections of the emancipated people to settle the balance of power among themselves, and to do so, not now by physical or even moral force, but by intellectual suasion and the indeterminate victories of right reason. Such an age obviously lends itself not to prodigies of heroism and genius, to imaginative poets and religious martyrs, to military despots and inspired deliverers, but to men of superlative shrewdness and superlative tact; men whose standard is not so high as to put them out of sympathy with their fellows; men who have no taste for isolation, but are ready to associate, able to absorb, and willing to communicate.

## II.

### THE TIME INTO WHICH DEFOE WAS BORN AND GREW UP.

Birth and early life. DANIEL DEFOE was born in London in 1661,<sup>1</sup> his father, James Foe, being a Nonconformist butcher in St. Giles', Cripplegate, and his grandfather apparently a yeoman or gentleman-farmer of Northamptonshire, in sufficiently substantial circumstances to keep a pack of hounds.<sup>2</sup> Our author thus saw the light in the year after the Restoration; he was twenty-four when James II. came to the throne in 1685, and twenty-seven in the year of the Revolution. He seems to have made his first appearance in the world of letters in 1683, when, according to his own account of the matter, he resorted to his pen in order to carry on a controversy with his Whig associates about the Turkish capture of Vienna; while his entry on the stage of public life dates from 1685, when he tells us that he took part in Monmouth's insurrection. We do not know of his having published again before 1691, when he was just thirty; and the next time we encounter the rebel of 1685 is in 1688, when we find him riding in the force with which William of Orange entered London, and afterwards escorting William and Mary from Whitehall to a banquet in the City. It is thus evident that Defoe's entry on public life was by no means hasty, and that his time of silence and preparation practically coincided with the period between the Restoration and the Revolution. Before we begin to deal with our author's work in the world, something must be said of the world in which the work was done, of the condition of things into which the worker was born, and of the changes which were in progress while he was coming to maturity.

We have outlived the belief in history as mainly concerned with kings and their satellites; and it is unnecessary to insist on the fact that the deeper lessons of the Restoration-period are not to be learned in the unedifying study of Charles II.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. G. A. Aitken, to whom we owe the most recent light on Defoe's domestic history, argues that he must have been born in 1659 or 1660.—See *Athenæum*, Aug. 23rd, 1890.

<sup>2</sup> See *Review*, vii., Preface. It has been recently suggested that James Foe, the grandfather, lived at Elton in Huntingdonshire, and the matter remains in doubt.

and his Court. We know that the shock of reaction which we feel on passing from the bracing atmosphere of the Civil War and the Protectorate to the atmosphere of servility and licence which took its place must not be allowed to deaden us to the sense of the social robustness and constitutional progress which give the period its greatest and most enduring interest. Nor must we look in the wrong quarters for the most pregnant events of the time. The excesses of Royalist enthusiasm, the ingenious cruelties of ecclesiastical despotism, the disgraceful mis-alliance with France, are not the things for which the reign of Charles II. best deserves to be remembered. They are glaring instances of popular fickleness and bad government; but it was not by fickleness or bad government that the Triple Alliance was formed, the Habeas Corpus Act produced, or the Revolution wrought out. The Revolution and its success would be indeed scarcely short of miraculous if the Restoration had permanently undone the work achieved by the Parliamentary opposition to James I., and the military opposition to his son. If zeal for the Stuarts had its disastrous excesses, so also had zeal for the Parliament and the Protectorate; the advance of the future was to be neither on the lines drawn by the Cavalier nor on the lines drawn by the Roundhead. The great lesson of English history, namely that the State is a slowly developing organism with a vitality continuous through the most trying and apparently adverse conditions, is impressed upon us as strongly at the close of the seventeenth century as at any other time; as strongly under Charles II. and his brother as under Cromwell and his soldiery; as strongly by the improved law of Habeas Corpus as by its germ in the Great Charter; as strongly by the slow emergence of ministerial responsibility in the modern sense, as by the boldness and success of Parliamentary claims under Edward III., or the new life that blossomed after, and even under, the despotism of the Tudors.

It is not possible here to enter on a complete analysis of the reigns of Charles II. and James II., nor is it necessary for our purpose. But we may perhaps be able to seize upon one or two of the main features, and to indicate the lines of immediate development, progress and change, so as to understand the circle of interests in which Defoe's activity was to work.

Between the state of things under William and Mary, and that under Anne and George I. there is no real break; and the Revolution of 1688 itself seemed to be introduced by a kind of side wind. The power which was used in 1688 and the spirit which prompted the use of it were, we must believe, no sudden spasmodic energies, but the result of centuries of training in habits of reasonable independence and orderly

The Restoration not a mere reaction.

Constitutional progress not checked.

The Revolution part of a great change.