

INTRODUCTION

Our book is about Daniel Defoe's political career, but this phrase may be thought to call for some defining. Evidently, someone who functions mainly by means of his pen does not have a political career in the same sense as a statesman, whose daily and nightly preoccupation is power. There was indeed a brief and extraordinary moment in 1701 when Defoe might be said to have wielded power and have become a man of action: the time when he presented himself at Westminster, guarded by sixteen 'gentlemen of quality', to deliver a paper of grievances and demands (*Legion's Memorial*) on behalf of 'two hundred thousand Englishmen'. No doubt, too, by his advice to his patron Robert Harley, he exercised influence, but influence is not the same as power. By Defoe's 'political career', therefore, we are meaning his influence, or attempts at influence, as a purveyor of ideas and opinions, and also the influence, sometimes very unnerving, of political events on him. In consequence – the fact might seem like an irony but of course is not – we know a great deal more about Defoe's political ideas than we do about Harley's. Whatever ideas Harley had, and sometimes one wonders whether he actually had any, as distinct from instincts or schemes, he would have been inclined to keep to himself.

We must be clear, also, about another distinction. Defoe wrote voluminously on very many different topics, and one of them, from early on, was social reform. In 1697 he published a book-length *Essay upon Projects*, in which he made proposals for the development of banking and highroads, friendly societies and insurance; for setting up academies (and in particular an academy for women); and for improvement of the system for employing seamen and the law regarding bankruptcy.¹ He claimed to have been working on these ideas for five years, and there is no doubt that 'improvement' of this kind was a lasting interest on his part. He would pursue it, or anyway economic

improvement, on a lesser scale as regards Scotland; and late in life he would produce a series of writings – under the persona of ‘Andrew Moreton’ or ‘Squire Moreton’, a crusty old bachelor living with his sister in Highgate – making proposals for a ‘Protestant monastery’ or old peoples’ home, a secular university for London, the improvement of street-lighting, correcting the insolence of servants and shoe-cleaners, and the reforming or abolishing of select vestries. Such proposals would certainly have political implications today, but this was hardly so true in Defoe’s day, and it seems best to regard them as coming from a different part of his mind, thus as not belonging in the present book.

As for Defoe’s political ideas and actions, we get a very full picture of them from his pamphlets, his periodical the *Review* (launched on 19 February 1704) and his letters to Harley. But the *Review* expired on 11 June 1713, and the letters to Harley run out in September 1714; and from this point on it becomes much harder to follow his political activities. Indeed we used sometimes to be told that, after the accession of George I, they more or less came to an end – which is very far from the case.

The root of the problem, for biographers, is attribution. For there is reason to think that the Defoe ‘canon’ – as defined in John Robert Moore’s *Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe*,² where it ran to some 570 titles – is highly questionable, more questionable by a long way than the canon of any other major English writer. The present authors have gone as far as suggesting that nearly half of the works included by Moore may have no right to be there, in the sense that no really convincing reason has ever been offered for their being by Defoe.³ Ours may be an extreme view, but the relevance to biography is clear. In the case of a writer, and particularly a political writer, his writings are, after all, important events in his life, possibly even the most important ones, and a biographer can hardly tell the story of his life without deciding which writings are by him.

As regards Defoe, in the years following 1714, this is not easy. Indeed the problems, at least where politics are concerned, grow really daunting – as indeed they might have done earlier had there been no *Review* or letters to Harley which often provide convincing evidence. We have here the reason why, as it strikes us, the later pages of most biographies of Defoe tend to lose direction. It is not (it hardly needs

saying) that Defoe was just a political writer. He had a myriad of interests, casual or more sustained. He produced weighty historical works, religious treatises, writings on trade, finance and social reform, on travel, manners, magic and the supernatural; and for a brief period, from 1719 to 1724, he wrote novels. But it is with political matters that attribution becomes most problem-ridden. Biography and bibliography here become inextricably intertwined, and our effort throughout has been to elicit a coherent story. We have a feeling that no biographer, up to now, has quite succeeded in this, and that is why we are making a new attempt.

There are, indeed, certain major obstacles to getting this particular story right. We are thinking, for instance, of the influential theories or fantasies woven around his later years by Defoe's Victorian biographer William Lee.⁴ Biographers have recently grown more cautious about Lee. We no longer hear the stirring narrative he related about Defoe's relationship with the journal-editor Nathaniel Mist: his noble generosity towards Mist, the disgraceful ingratitude displayed by Mist in return, their furious quarrels over religion and politics, and their eventual duel. We also hear less about Defoe's relationship with John Applebee the publisher, as imagined by Lee, another colourful story: how he worked for Applebee as a hired crime-reporter, as an author of criminal lives and as Applebee's 'man', and how he stood in for Applebee in conducting interviews with prisoners at Tyburn. But what we do not find is any wholesale rejection from the canon of the huge mass of articles from *Mist's Journal* and *Applebee's Original Weekly Journal* which Lee reprinted as Defoe's 'recently discovered writings'. Yet, as we pointed out some time ago, to accept these articles *en bloc* as Defoe's is to add some very peculiar features to our picture of him, not least politically.⁵ Would one think it likely, judging from the rest that we know about him, that Defoe would (1 December 1722) offer a straight High Tory defence of 'passive obedience' to monarchs; or (16 December 1721) describe the execution of Charles I as 'the most unnatural Murder that ever was committed since the Crucifixion of our Blessed Saviour' (this being the same Defoe who teased Charles Leslie, champion of the 'divine right of monarchs', with a joke about 'wet' martyrdom, as suffered by Charles I, as opposed to 'dry' martyrdom, as suffered by James II⁶)? Does it seem probable that Defoe would (20 May 1721) speak bitter words about 'Sectaries and Dissenters',

blaming them for the spread of the infamous Arian heresy, ‘as if the Schism they had already made in the Church was not sufficient’?

But an even more important obstacle to the right understanding of Defoe’s later life is his famous letters to Charles Delafaye, the Whig Undersecretary of State, in which he claims to have been commissioned by Lord Townshend, Secretary of State in 1716, to insinuate himself into the management of Tory journals to restrain and ‘enervate’ them.⁷ Most modern biographers, very understandably, construct their account of Defoe’s later political career round these letters – the fact that they seem to be confessing to somewhat shady behaviour makes them, though this is illogical, seem all the more likely to be true – but we shall be arguing that they are, rather, a dazzling piece of mendacity. They are, in our view, a fiction only equalled by his claim to have known, and even been intimate with, King William.

It appears to us, then, that Defoe’s political career calls for some rethinking, and we have done our best to retrace its progress step by step. As hardly needs saying, this is not the same as writing a new biography in the ordinary sense. Indeed, as we shall argue, Defoe seems to have turned his back on politics (no doubt with some relief) at the end of 1720 – ten years before his death, and before many of his most impressive writings. For this reason, that is where we end our book.