

Daniel Defoe: As A Founder of Historical Novel

Paper Submission: 12/09/2020, Date of Acceptance: 25/09/2020, Date of Publication: 26/09/2020

Abstract

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, we propose to present a critical evaluation of historical ideas and novels of Defoe. Among novelists as historians, Defoe occupies a commanding position in the history of English literature, which needs a careful consideration and evaluation. His writings open new vistas of social realism. We have here a closer and penetrating look at man and manners, ideas and ideals of his times. Defoe definitely laid the foundation of the historical novel in the English literature. Defoe's writing reflects the ambivalence that existed in his time and place regarding the nature of historical knowledge and the boundary between historical and narrative writing.

Keywords: Historical Novels, Memoirs, Journal of The Plague Year, Colonial Jacque, Fiction.

Introduction

"I am most entertained with those actions which give me a light into the Nature of Man."

-Daniel Defoe

Defoe embellished virtually every kind of early eighteenth century professional writing in English pamphleteering propaganda journalism, social political and economic writing, religious and moral preaching novel and poetry. He undertook travel, discovery and historical writings, enjoyed satire and fantasy and dabbled in the spiritual writings. The most comprehensive collection of Defoe's writings which is known being under taken to be published could not accommodate the voluminous periodical journalism. If novelists can be considered as historians, Defoe occupies a place of pride in the history of English literature.

"In this way of talk I was always upon the inquiry asking questions of things done in public, as well as in private. I lov'd to talk with.....soldiers about.....the great..... battles that any of them had been in, and, as I never forgot anything they told me. I could.....in a few years, give almost as good an accounts of Dutch war..... the battles in Flanders..... and this made those old soldiers.....love to talk with me too and to tell me all the stories they could think of, and that not only of the wars then going on, but also of the wars of Oliver's time, the death of King Charles 1, and the like."

Mr. Whitten rightly considers this passage of "Colonel Jacque" by 'Daniel Defoe' as autobiographical. He says, "Defoe is doubtless giving us a page of self- portraiture when he makes the Colonel recall his sharp inquisitiveness as a youth."¹

Defoe in his boyhood was very inquisitive, his inquisitiveness probably going even beyond that of most-awake lads. Fortunately, in his growing period he was left free to read at large. Thus, he read books of all sorts, so that he was able to have, as he himself informs us, "the history of all the nations of the world in his head."

Keeping in mind the Defoe's faithfulness to fact in all his writings, historical narrative seems to be the fittest task for him. Many attempted the historical fiction in English literature before Daniel Defoe. "The Unfortunate Traveller or The Life of Jack Wilton" by 'Thomas Nash' may be regarded as the first example of historical fiction in English. Deloney also tried to give the historical interest in 'Jack of Newberry', by introducing Henry VIII and other historical figures of the age. Thomas Nash in 'Jack Wilton' did the same. The hero, Jack Wilton, a page in the reign of Henry VIII becomes an unscrupulous adventurer, and with him we wander through Flanders, Germany and Italy meeting many celebrities and witnessing some famous scenes. Wilton is present at the famous Anglo-French treaty signed by the



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two monarchs on the field of the Cloth of Gold, at the siege of Tournay, at the battle of Marignan, at the fall of Munster, and at the massacre of the Anabaptists; he becomes the friend of Surrey during that nobleman's courtship of Geraldine; he watches Erasmus writing his 'Praise of Folly' and Thomas more meditating his 'Utopia'. All these semi-historical scenes follow each other regardless of chronology and order, the writer shows no sense of a historical verity which is the first essential point of historical novel. He has no knowledge of what the men, whom he mentions in his book, were like in their real life. The simple reason is that he has not bothered himself about reading about the history of the period he is to deal with. Thus, by mentioning the famous historical names and events can not make a romance a historical one in the true sense. The spirit of history is not there. It was Defoe who first tried to bring out the spirit of history and succeed in his efforts. His works was so effective that the critics of recent times have been in doubt whether his historical novels were really not written by himself but by someone else.

Prof. Raleigh in his "History of English Novel" remarks, ".....the historical novelist who proceeded Scott choose a century as they might chosen partner for a dance, without qualification beyond a few outward verbal archaisms." This may be true of all others, but not of Defoe. His gifts were not limited to "a few outward verbal archaisms." Nobody was better qualified for the task which he undertook. He took great pains to make himself master of the history of the period. The first necessity of a historical novel is 'Verisimilitude.' Mr. A. T. Sheppard remarks, "I strongly believe, that the fewer liberties taken with the history the better, and that the important facts of background and event of detail should never be tempered with. But above all it is necessary to make the story seem true." In this Daniel Defoe is unsurpassed. "Memoirs of a Cavalier" and "The Journal of the Plague Year" shows all devices of circumstantial realism. There are persons invented to narrate their story. The 'Journal' is written by "a citizen who continued in London," while the 'Memoirs' were found among the papers of one of king William's secretaries.

Then, there are the hero's honest doubts about his own information. The journalist of the plague year takes care to say at several places that what he is saying is from report and not what he was himself an eye-witness to. Sometimes he doubts the accuracy of these reports, as the report of the unusual occurrences before the Plague actually visited the city, and also the story of the Merry Piper who was thrown into the 'dead-cart' among the dead bodies. He later inform us that this Piper was not blind as was reported, nor did he go on blowing his pipe while in the dead-cart, but was dead-drunk at the time, and that it was really in the churchyard that he came again to his senses. Sometimes, he vouches for his own statements, lest anybody should regard them as untrue.

There are again, those vivid and picturesque accounts of things done, the heaping up of minute and apparently trivial and unnecessary details. There

is one passage from 'Journal' - "I doubt not but there may be some ancient persons alive in the Parish who can justify the fact of this, and are able to show even in what place of the churchyard the pit lay better than I can. The mark of it also was many years to be seen in the churchyard on the surface, lying in length parallel with the passage which goes by the west wall for the churchyard out of Houndsditch, and turns East again into White Chapel, coming out nears the threenun's inn."

Another passage is from the 'Memoirs'. It is the account of the Swedish army's passage of the river Lech, under the guns of a powerful enemy. The Swedish king and his staff viewed the position from a hillock over looking the river, which ran almost straight till at the end of a reach it doubled short upon itself, making a round and very narrow point. The king decided to cross the river at that point. A reward of fifty dollars was offered to anyone who would find out the depth of the water between the banks, and a sergeant of dragoons volunteered to bring this information. "The fellow, being very well acquainted with the country, puts on a ploughman's habit, and went away immediately with the long pole upon his shoulder.....the dragoon with his long pole comes down boldly to the bank of the river, and calling to the sentinels which Tilly had placed on the other bank, talked with them, and asked them if they could not help him over the river, and pretended he wanted to come to them. At last, being come to the point where, as I said, the river makes a short turn, he stands parleying with them a great while, and sometimes, pretending to wade over, he puts his long pole into the water, then finding it pretty shallow he pulls off his hose and goes in, still thrusting his pole in before him, till being gotten to his middle, he could reach beyond him, where it was too deep, and so shaking his head, comes back again. The soldiers on the other side, laughing at him, asked him if he could swim. He said 'No', 'Why, you fool you,' says one of the sentinels, 'the channel of the river is twenty feet deep. How do you know that? Says the dragoon.....and so on. Any other hasty and impatient writer would have been satisfied with nearly stating that the depth of the river at the narrow turning point being find out, the king ordered the bridge to be constructed at that place. But here, like in all Defoe's novels, we have a picture of something happening, and we are so taken in by the details there of that we, in our way, are supposed to accept the whole fabric as true. The satisfaction with the solid numbers is also there, for example, when the Cavalier tells us the number of men in his army..... cavalry, dragoons and foot separately.... before the battles and counts the number again after them, so many made prisoners, so many wounded, so many dead and so much booty gained in which too he mentions different items separately.... so many horses, so many canon, so many ammunition and so much in the shape of clothes, ornaments and cash.

There are the topographical details in the 'Journal.' The whole of the London is the scene of the dreadful drama enacted. There are references to streets, alleys, parishes, churches, inns, even buildings with which the readers are familiar. His

Scottish tour benefited Defoe in the 'Memoirs' when he shows the Cavaliers and his army sojourning through the northern moors and wilds. He also gives the topography of France, Germany and Italy.

The stories and the fact both are very little tempered with, and seem true through all these devices. "The important facts of background and details" are very scrupulously adhered to. Although there are, sometimes, some minor mistakes in the details, for example, his account of the battle of Marston Moor is incorrect as regards the question of the commands being given to several commanders, and that of the placing of them, his accounts of battles in general are very accurate and impressive, yet very economic and true. Defoe himself says in his preface that almost all the facts are confirmed for their general part by all the writers of those times. As regards the 'Journal' Dr. Watson Nichol says: there is not a single statement in it "not based on historic fact."² He also points out that even the stories told by the imaginary narrator are founded on fact. This fidelity to fact is the most important thing in a historical novel. Dr. Baker regards the picture of the plague-stricken London given in this "Journal" as superior in its general truth and dramatic to that of any historian,² and so it truly is. When the historical novelist takes up the political aspect of an age he must show a superb detachment and must present the characters in reality in their lives. No theme could be more critical, or could demand detachment and impartiality. Defoe shows himself capable of this superb detachment. In the earliest of his writings, he had been putting somebody else's garb on himself and writing consistently from that man's point of view. Here, the Cavalier is not a fanatic adherent to one single cause. He is an adherent of the cause of Monarchy in England, but not a fanatic. He tells us also the defects of his party and those of his Hero King Charles³, as well as their strength and qualities. He is always ready to praise the inherent goodness of some of his enemies. When he sees the clever handling by the queen-mother or the rebels at Lyons, his conclusion is that "the queen understood much better than King Charles the management of politics and the clamours of the people."

In the same way he criticizes the "impolitic honesty", the "too much compliance when he was complying", and above all, the lack of resolution so that he was easily won over by any of his counsellors, always failing to assert himself over the subordinate officers, even when he did make a strong determination, pushing his scheme to the farthest end, which characterized the whole conduct of King Charles⁴ and which all joined to hasten his ruin. In the last pages of the novel he gives an exquisite praise to Lord Fairfax of the parliamentary forces. He cannot refrain himself from making 'a very honourable mention' of him. He says: ". I never saw a man of a more pleasant, calm, courteous, downright, honest behaviour in my life; and for his courage and personal bravery in the field, that we had felt enough of. No man in the world had more fire and fury in him while in action, or more temper and softness out of it." He exceedingly came near the character of my foreign

hero, Gustavus Adolphus, and much account is, of all the soldiers in Europe, The fittest to be reckoned in the second place of honour to him. In the same way other enemy generals too, Sir Thomas Fairfax, the Lord's son, are commended for their bravery and skill in fighting. He always criticized Prince Rupert's fatal tendency to pursue only a part of the enemy's force after routing it and leaving the main design which often turned victories into defeats. This impartial and disinterested attitude adds to the truthfulness of the 'Memoirs'. In this respect even so superb an artist as Thackeray failed. In "Henry Esmond" he gave a coloured account to Marlborough and Swift owing to his personal prejudices.

After the fidelity to historical fact and the appearance of truth in everything narrated, we come to the question of the setting of a historical novel to which Mr. W. H. Hudson called a "more or less detailed picture of the varied features of the life of a particular age."⁵

Historical novel aims at an imaginative reconstruction of the past. John Buchan said, "it attempts to reconstruct the life and recapture the atmosphere of an age other than that of the writer. Defoe was primarily concerned with the story; he did not care much for the setting of his novels. He narrated the incidents with such an appearance of reality that the reader is wholly taken in by the story, and does not care much, at least for the time being, for other things. It is no great wonder, if the 'Memoirs' do not acquaint us deeply with the social background of the period. If we take the depiction of only one aspect of the times, namely, warfare, there could be no better or more accurate picture than that provided by the 'Memoirs of a Cavalier'.

In the 'Journal of the Plague Year' the case is very much different. Here he is not concerned with the politics nor with the warfare of the period, but with the depiction of the state of London society during the plague, where there is no lack of atmosphere. The accounts of piteous or terror-striking incidents alternate with description of the sights encountered by day and night, the desolate aspect of the city, the deserted streets with the shops closely shuttered and most of the houses, too, shut, a few poor souls flitting by and shrinking from each other in deadly fear, plague-polluted bodies lying about the pavements, dreadful faces of the windows, the ghastly bell-man and his cry, 'Bring out your dead' and the 'dead-cart' heaped with corpses to be thrown indiscriminately and without any show of ceremony into the public grave. The 'sensation of horror' which are here in the most impressive manner, are "only to be matched" as Dr. Baker says, "in Bunyan's visions of destruction and The Book of Revelation."⁶

There is much less character-interest in the sense that the novelist should show us different persons, their emotions or aims conflicting together, and all the various aspects of a single individual's personality, the mental conflict between opposite thoughts-in his historical novels than in those of Scott and others, the character-drawing in the 'Journal' is superior to that in the 'Memoirs'. The narrator himself is no mere figment nor a mere alias for Defoe. He is

one of those sober, shrewd, God-fearing citizens whom Defoe regarded as models for all. In spite of all his thoughts and inclination against it he ultimately resolves to stay in the city and thus endangers his life in the hope that he may to do some valuable service to his fellow beings.

Defoe's practical instinct would not have let him take the risk and would have made him save his own life. His sermons to those who in their despair yielded themselves to crime and debauchery. Curiosity and sense of duty, reinforced by a firm belief that he is under divine protection, conduct him into the most diverse condition, for example, when he goes in the night to see how the corpses were thrown into the great pit. But he frankly admits his frequent misgivings, how he at first wavered whether he should stay and risk his life, or should go somewhere else and save himself (here we get a very impressive picture of a severe conflict that his mind continually suffered from); how he "generally came frightened and terrified home", yet could not restrain his desire to see what was happening in the town; how he talked threateningly to the women whom he found plundering his brothers warehouse, but was afraid to proceed to extremes lest they should take the law into their own hands. His doubts whether the official figures were to be trusted, his efforts to check every report and rumour inspire confidence in his veracity. He is profoundly religious man, but not at all superstitious. He never believes in the rumours of warning voices and of shapes and figures in the clouds. He regards them merely as dreams and hallucinations. Thus, he is very life-like and impressive figure. Other life-like and unforgettable figures in the book are his friend Dr. Heath, the 'under-sexton' and grave digger John Hayward, and the Mary Piper who is picked up dead drunk, and only comes to life when he finds himself in the cart among the dead bodies. The most picturesque of the minor figures is the Quaker Solomon Eagle, who went about denouncing judgement on the city.

The special force of the Defoe was his narration. He represents the plot interest in a very remarkable way. The battles in the 'Memoirs' are given so minutely and accurately that we see them happening once again before our minds eye. The 'Journal' has the consistency of the plot of a real novel. Dr. G. H. Maynardier says, 'the adventures of either Moll Flander or Captain Singleton might have been abridged without altering the effect of the book in which they are related. If you cut out one of the stories about the plague however, you lesson by just so much the vividness of whole impression.'⁷

Defoe avoided both archaisms and facts from anachronisms because the language of a historical novel should avoid both of them. Defoe selected recent past for his field, the time of his father and uncles, not even of his grandfather. Sufficient time had relapsed as to give the incidents a historical value but not so much as to obscure the facts, or to effect any very considerable changes in the language of the common people. Most of his readers had a clear remembrance of the plague of 1665 and a first-hand report of the civil war. Therefore they could not be

satisfied with anachronisms. There are changes, for the better, for the particular, which he adds to the general information about the wars, only 'embellish' the known facts, for example, the accounts how different battles actually fought, a piece of information not available in the history is of the period and would be given only by a participant. These accounts are the essence of the book. Hear the language is easy, colloquial, plain, homespun English of the common man. But in these two novels there is a distinct advance upon the language of his former novels. In the language of the Cavalier gentleman many of his mannerisms have naturally disappeared a fact. Some critics have used this fact for proving that Defoe did not write the 'Memoirs'. But actually it proves his versatility, the repetitions and verbal inaccuracies etc. Suit the saddler chronicler the language of such pathetic and emotional scenes as where he describes the awe-stricken and distracted state of the mother when she first sees the cursed spots on the body of her daughter, or where he describes the pathetic condition of the man who had lost his wife in the plague. His manner is not the cold-blooded manner of 'Moll Flanders.' Thus, the narrator keeps his feeling under restraint but he does not ignore them.

Objectives

1. To study the historical point of view in Defoe novels.
2. To critically evaluate the historical novels of Daniel Defoe.
3. To analysis the fiction in Defoe novels.

Conclusion

So Daniel Defoe can be regarded as the founder of the historical novel in English in that he passed of what he wrote as history and not fiction. This illusion has been so great that ever since the publisher of the posthumous second edition of the 'Memoirs' declared that he had at last found out they had been written by one Mr. Andrew Newport, many critics have been inclined to take him or some other gentleman to be their real author. Dr. Watson Nicholson has written a whole book "The Historical sources of Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year" to show that it is history and not fiction. The Memoirs of the Cavalier of the Plague, of Captain Carleton and a large part of 'Colonial Jacques' are historical fiction. It is transitional between pseudo-history or pseudo-biography and historical fiction which pretends nothing. Dr. Baker suggests that pseudo-historical memoirs had been written on the model of the contemporary French writer Courtilz de Sandras (1646?-1712) and was only the next step to genuine historical novel.

Endnotes

1. Wilfred Whitten- 'Daniel Defoe' - 'The Westminster Biographies' series Quoted by Dr. Maynardier in his Introduction to Memoirs of Cavalier.
2. p.279
3. A. T. Sheppard- 'The Art and Practice of Historical Fiction'-p. 182
4. The Historical Sources of Defoe's 'Journal of the Plague Year'-quoted by Dr. Baker,- p.199 (footnote)

5. 'History of the English Novel'-Vol. III- p.199
6. 'Introduction to the study of Literature'-p. 211
7. 'History of the English Novel', Vol. III, p. 202
8. Introduction to the 'Journal of the Plague Year.'

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2. *The History of the Wars of his Present Majesty, Charles XII.London.1720.*
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