

Exploring Defoe's Concentration on Trade: A Window into 18th-Century Views on Commerce

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Abstract

This article looks at how author and journalist Daniel Defoe writes to benefit the commercial industry. Defoe supported trade and included characters who emphasized its benefits in stories like Robinson Crusoe and publications like "Essay upon Projects" and "Complete English Tradesman." Although the merchant's profession is originally represented negatively in "Robinson Crusoe," Defoe gradually came to appreciate the qualities that allowed people to succeed in the trading industry. Joseph Addison was also an editor of The Spectator, a journal that promoted the benefits of the private sector.

Keywords *Eighteenth-Century English Literature, Essay upon Projects, Complete English Tradesman, Defoe, Trade and Commerce.*

Introduction

Daniel Defoe was a passionate advocate of the business world who wrote both novels and journalism. Defoe relentlessly supported trade from the moment he released "Essay upon Projects" in 1698 until the publication of "Complete English Tradesman" in 1726 and 1727. His Journey Across the Entire British Island highlighted that –

“this whole kingdom, as well as the people, as the land, and even the sea, in every part of it, are employed to furnish something . . . to supply the city of London with provisions.”¹

When he saw so many ships moored under London Bridge, he was ecstatic. These ships connected the kingdom's center to other parts of the world and allowed access to far-off places. As a result, Britain became-

“the most flourishing and opulent country in the world.”

Defoe did more to advance trade than only write books. In addition to trading in tobacco, wool, and hosiery, he also managed brick and tile enterprises. He also engaged in several business ventures. However, he was not always successful in his business endeavors, and at one point he was bankrupt. Still, he continued to write in support of trade because he was a firm believer in its possibilities.

In addition to business, Defoe promoted social and economic mobility. He believed that anyone, from any background or socioeconomic class, could achieve success through perseverance and hard work. His work "Moll Flanders" serves as an illustration of this conviction. The titular character, who at first seems to be a convicted felon, eventually changes into a wealthy and well-respected member of society through a series of devious business dealings. Defoe's views on social mobility and entrepreneurship, however, were not without controversy. He has drawn criticism for encouraging materialism and selfishness as well as elevating the chase of wealth at the expense of moral and spiritual principles. Defoe's contributions to commerce literature and his advocacy of the business community, however, continue to be highly regarded.

Daniel Defoe's Enthusiasm for Commerce in Literature: Incorporating Real-Life Merchants in Novels

The advantages of trade often appeared in his literary writings, where he showed the same level of fervor. He even went so far as to incorporate a real-life dealer named Sir Robert Clayton into the book Roxana. As he gives the heroine a lesson on the benefits of trade over land, Sir Robert says to her:

“that an Estate is a pond, but that a Trade was a spring; that if the first is once mortgag’d it seldom gets clear, but embarrass’d the person for ever; but the merchant had his estate continually flowing.”²

Some have read Robinson Crusoe as a love letter to business. In the book, Crusoe starts as a seafarer instead of a trader. At the age of eighteen, he moves out of his parent's home because he can no longer work as an attorney's clerk or train to be an artisan.

He claims to have made money as a mariner on his first journey to Guinea when he exchanged toys worth £40 for gold dust worth almost £300.

“made me both a sailor and a merchant.” He therefore “set up for a Guinea trader.”

Defoe writes about commerce and the commercial world with admiration in both his literary and non-fiction works. In his book *The Complete English Tradesman*, he highlights the need for diligence, thrift, honesty, and integrity to encourage and advise aspiring businesses. He acknowledges that the corporate environment may be hazardous and unpredictable, but he also stresses how rewarding achievement is for both the individual and society at large.

He writes –

"The merchant has a thousand ways of growing rich, and, by the just and diligent exercise of his employment, he cannot fail of doing it; and the same time the public is served, and mankind made happy."

Moreover, Defoe admires the merchant's profession in other characters besides Robinson Crusoe. In his other works, he also portrays the lives and adventures of those working in the commercial and nautical sectors, such as *Moll Flanders* and *Captain Singleton*. This suggests that his fascination with trade was not only a fleeting curiosity but rather stemmed from a deep-seated belief that trade has the power to alter both the path of history and the lives of people.

Crusoe's Adventures and the Perils of Imprudent Business Ventures

After working as a planter in Brazil, Crusoe's circumstances began to improve, and he estimated that in a few years, his net worth could reach £3,000 or possibly £4,000. However, his decision to become involved in the slave trade proved to be disastrous, leading to his shipwreck and prolonged stay on a barren island. While on the island, Crusoe put his inventiveness to use and honed his multi-talented talents by learning how to make boats, baskets, millwork, ceramics, tailoring, and even umbrellas.

At first look, Crusoe's adventures don't always seem to present a favourable picture of the merchant industry. At first, Crusoe attributes his bad luck to fate, but later, Defoe holds him accountable for his death due to his lack of religious piety and poor judgment. Disobedience to his father's wishes causes Crusoe's first disaster in the waters around Yarmouth, and his poor business decisions ultimately leave him alone on the desolate island. Defoe, who had personal experience with company failures, thought that moral and psychological defects in the businessperson had a greater role in causing these failures than did external factors. In *The Complete English Tradesman*, he stated as follows:

"There must be some failure in the tradesman, it can be no where else; either he is less sober and less frugal, less cautious of what he does, who he trusts, how he lives, and how he behaves, than tradesmen used to be; or he is less industrious, less diligent, and takes less care and pains in his business, or something is the matter."³

When his plantation was beginning to prosper, Crusoe acknowledges this-

"for me to think of such a voyage was the most preposterous thing that ever man in such circumstances could be guilty of."

One interpretation of Crusoe's experience on the remote island is that it serves as a lesson in the importance of adaptability and perseverance in the corporate world. He was able to adapt to his

environment and pick up new talents while being completely alone to survive and even thrive on the island. This is a helpful trait for anyone in the company, considering how erratic and constantly shifting the market can be. Long-term success will be more likely for individuals who can swiftly adapt and pick up new abilities.

Crusoe's time on the island also serves as a lesson in the importance of perseverance and courage in the face of adversity. Despite being stranded on the island for years and facing several challenges like illness, loneliness, and cannibal attacks, Crusoe persisted in his attempts to ultimately escape. Such a mindset is essential for success in the corporate sector, where failures and setbacks are common. Those who keep their positive attitude and keep working toward their goals in the face of difficulties have a higher chance of success in the end. All things considered, Defoe's account of Crusoe's adventures may not present a positive image of the commercial world, but it does offer wise counsel on the significance of flexibility, tenacity, and perseverance strengths essential for success in any field.

Defoe's admiration for practical prudence and religious piety in Crusoe's survival on the deserted island, and the role of commerce in society

Crusoe overcomes the challenges he faces on the remote island by growing in both religious piety and practical caution. How Defoe portrays Crusoe's capacity to endure on the island serves as an example of the traits that were essential for success in the corporate world. In doing so, Defoe conveys his admiration for the qualities that made people successful in the business sector. The Spectator, edited by Joseph Addison, was another publication that supported the private sector. On its pages, Addison advocated business community concerns. "There are not more useful members in a commonwealth than merchants," he observed in one work.

"They knit mankind together in a mutual intercourse of good offices, distribute the gifts of Nature, find work for the poor, add Wealth to the Rich, and magnificence to the Great."

In addition to showing off Crusoe's survival abilities, Defoe's portrayal of the character on the remote island highlights the need for adaptability and perseverance in the face of adversity. Because of his ability to grow from his mistakes, invent and adapt to meet his basic needs, and acquire new talents, Crusoe finally manages to survive and thrive on the island. These qualities are also highly prized in the business world, where managing a competitive environment requires adaptation and resilience. Defoe's appreciation of practical talents, personal resilience, and a strong work ethic, as well as his portrayal of Crusoe as possessing these attributes, highlight the idea that success in both survival and trade requires a mix of these qualities. In the same vein, Addison highlights the importance of trade in promoting social and economic development in his works, which draw attention to The Spectator's endorsement of business.

Joseph Addison's Characterization of Sir Andrew Freeport as a Model Merchant in the Spectator Club

In the Spectator Club, Joseph Addison crafted Sir Andrew Freeport, a conventional merchant who possessed these same attributes:

“a merchant of great eminence in the City of London: a person of indefatigable industry, strong reason and great experience. His notions of trade are noble and generous, and he calls the sea the British common.”⁴

Joseph Addison's portrayal of Sir Andrew Freeport in *The Spectator Club* represents a significant shift in the way merchants were portrayed in literature during the eighteenth century. Unlike earlier literary works that usually represented merchants as dishonest, greedy, and lacking in morals, Freeport is portrayed as an honest, hardworking, and morally decent trader. The values of the early modern mercantile class, who strongly emphasized the importance that trade and commerce played in building society and the economy, are embodied in the character of Freeport. Freeport's connection of the sea to the British Commonwealth serves as another evidence of the importance of marine trade in the development of British power and prosperity. All things considered, Freeport represents a new and gaining traction in the 18th-century idea of the trader as a morally reclusive and essential part of society.

The transition of prosperous businesspeople into country gentlemen in 18th-century England

Even though Sir Andrew Freeport is the model merchant, he ultimately chooses to sell his business and adopt the persona of a country gentleman. Before departing the *Spectator Club*, he tells the members of the club that he is heading out of the corporate world to establish himself as a landed proprietor:

“as the greatest part of my estate has been hitherto of an unsteady and volatile nature, either tost upon seas or fluctuating in funds; it is now fixed and settled in substantial acres and tenements.”

The image of a prosperous businessman who retires from labor and purchases a country estate is personified by Sir Andrew Freeport. The writers of the era both praised and made fun of this aspiration for career advancement. But the quest for property has come under fire for allegedly weakening England's spirit of enterprise. Political satires of the era often portrayed the businesspeople who rose to prominence by abusing the fiscal system established during the Financial Revolution, eventually acquiring landed estates and adopting the image of country gentlemen. The inspiration for them was Charles Davenant's creation, Thomas Double, who started as an apprentice shoemaker in London but left to utilize money his grandmother left him to get a job in the Customs department-

“who sold barley broth and furnity by Fleet ditch.”

However, he was dismissed from the Customs office under James II's reign after being found guilty of fraud. From being a devoted Tory, he became into "a furious Whig."

As the influence of his grandma faded, he was-

“forced to be a corrector of a private press in a garret, for three shillings a week.”

He then used a bold confidence trick to appear to be an ambassador of the Prince of Orange, which helped the Revolution work in his advantage. He also used rigged gambling to deceive his victim. This made it possible for him to begin amassing fortune under the new administration, initially through investments in the unearthing of Crown estates and then into larger ventures via the fraudulent sale of confiscated Irish holdings. The Financial Revolution was credited to Double, who had –

“run the nation head over ears in debt by our funds, and new devices.”

He confessed that –

“£50,000 had stuck to his fingers when he acted as receiver of taxes, and although it had cost him £20,000 to buy off a parliamentary inquiry by bribing MPs, he still had enough left to live at ease, with his country seat, a town house and a coach and six.”⁵

This story explains how wealthy merchants in England during the Financial Revolution turned into country gentlemen and landowners. Even if Sir Andrew Freeport embodies the archetype of a prosperous businessman who purchases a rural estate and retires from labor, the aspiration to possess property is critiqued for potentially weakening the entrepreneurial spirit. Thomas Double, who rose to fame by manipulating the financial system and eventually utilized deceit to obtain a townhouse, a country seat, and six through fraudulent means, is also introduced in the narration. The purpose of bringing up Double is to warn of the corruption and traps that come with chasing status and fortune. The piece sheds light on the complex social and economic landscape that existed in England during the Financial Revolution and the different ways that people dealt with it.

Conclusion

Daniel Defoe showed his unwavering support for business and trade in his writings. His works always emphasized the importance of trade for the growth and prosperity of the nation. Defoe believed that trade's advantages were crucial to Britain being the richest country in the world. Robinson Crusoe, his best-known book, is also a glorification of commerce, highlighting the need for moral integrity and religious devotion in the trading world. Because trade united people and shared nature's gifts, giving riches to the affluent and grandeur to the strong, Defoe respected those who succeeded in it. By using his writing to further corporate interests, Defoe not only contributed to the growth of the British business community but also laid the groundwork for future generations of writers to continue the tradition.

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