

Daniel Defoe, England's Roads, and the Politics of Movement

Daniel Defoe feared isolation. The condition haunts his late novels, sparking his fearful creativity. *Moll Flanders* is a romp, but it is energised by Moll's need for social connection; she observes at one juncture how 'to be friendless is the worst condition, next to being in want, that a woman can be reduced to'.¹ She bemoans how 'when a woman is thus left desolate and void of counsel, she is just like a bag of money or a jewel, dropped on the highway, which is prey to the next comer' and admits 'this was evidently my case for I was now a loose, unguided creature, and had no help, no assistance, no guide for my conduct.'² She feared her loneliness was a forerunner of penury; that her isolation would incur her destitution. In contrast, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is, most obviously, a forensic study of the effect of isolation on the individual. While still often written up as a capitalist fable, the novel also rehearses the question of how social animals survive when deprived of sociability. Even *Crusoe*, the book ultimately admits, requires companionship. Similarly, *A Journal of a Plague Year* (1722), now subject to a scholarly revival of interest, concerns the impact of isolation on society. Again, commonly rendered as a fable of capitalist political arithmetic, this work also revolves around the sudden collapse of connection. In all these cases Defoe related isolation to constriction: can Moll find economic security through romantic sexual liaisons; can *Crusoe* survive when he is restricted to a single island; can a country cope when people cannot congregate?

¹ Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722; London: Vintage, 2010), 128.

² Ibid. She proceeds, 'I wanted to be placed in a settled state of living, and had I happened to meet with a sober, good husband, I should have been as faithful and true a wife to him as virtue itself could have formed.' Ibid.

If Defoe despised isolation, he gloried in mobility. His novels delineate an emergent global connectivity; here for instance is the young Crusoe rejecting his father's advice to stay in York. Crusoe admits to his mother that

my thoughts were so entirely bent upon seeing the world, that I should never settle to anything with resolution enough to go through with it, and my father had better give me his consent than force me to go without it; that I was now eighteen years old, which was too late to go apprentice to a trade, or a clerk to an attorney; that was sure if I did, I should never serve out my time, and I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out, and go to sea.³

Similarly, Flanders has a taste of this liberty, located emblematically in the American colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Unlike her tempestuous search for connection on the British island, her romantic sojourn in Virginia is a moment of relative reprieve from a life of vice. Virginia holds a similar place in the narrative of *Colonel Jack*, the sibling novel to *Moll Flanders*, published in the same fecund year of 1722. A male version of Moll's story of petty criminality and subsequent redemption (whereas Moll has childhood pretensions to be a lady; Jack is concerned with growing up to be a gentleman), Jack argues for the redemptive potential of transportation as an alternative to the stark finality of capital punishment. Indeed, he halts the story to remark that:

Virginia, and a state of transportation, may be the happiest place and condition they [convicts] were ever in, for this life, as by a sincere repentance and a diligent application to the business they are put to; they are effectually delivered from a life of flagrant wickedness and put into a perfectly new condition, in which they have no

³ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Angus Ross (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1985), 30.

temptation to the crimes they formerly committed, and have a prospect of advantage for the future.⁴

Thus, in Defoe's work constraint was to be feared while mobility was enabling. It underpinned freedom and self-expression. It was the outlet for frustration and contained the promise of improvement. If travel then embodied liberty, how could those who stayed behind – Crusoe's father viewed travel as being 'for men of desperate fortunes on the one hand, or of aspiring superior fortune on the other who went abroad upon adventures' – remain at liberty?⁵ Was not the father's desire for a stable secure life lived in one locality actually a trap, and self-ordained prison? Far from being 'the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness, not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labours and suffering of the mechanic part of mankind', was this not a life of stifling tedium and unthinking self-abnegation?⁶ How might a life lived in the locality embody human flourishing; how might the population of England, who remained steadfastly in their localities, be considered free?

In answering this question Defoe offered the reader a reimagining of the condition of England in the post-revolutionary decades. If, as Steve Pincus has argued, the Williamite regime offered a reorganisation of English political economy, rejecting the Jacobite reliance on landed wealth and replacing it with a system grounded in mobile wealth, Defoe here extended that vision to the society it serves.⁷ Living through the decades which followed the 1688 Revolution, Defoe saw the early stages of both the financial and commercial revolutions that propelled England into first British and then imperial hegemony.⁸ In this the political

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Colonel Jack*, Gabriel Cervantes and Geoffrey Sill (eds) (Peterborough ON; Broadview Press, 2016), 216.

⁵ Defoe, *Crusoe*, 28.

⁶ Defoe, *Crusoe*, 28.

⁷ Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 366-400.

⁸ The literature here is large but see P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London: Macmillan, 1967); Daniel Carey and Chrispher Finlay (eds), *The Empire of Credit: The Financial Revolution in Britain, Ireland and America, 1689-1815* (Dublin: Irish

landscape saw both the internal colonialism that Michael Hechter has tracked across the island, and an imperial project that Krishnan Kumar has suggested made the English into an 'imperial state'.⁹

In reflecting such radical reconfiguration, Defoe's work underlined the necessity for the English to themselves become mobile, commercial selves. His novels narrated the lives of people as shaped by chance, by change and by commercial imperatives, and are concerned with the question of movement. And his travelogue suggests that English liberty was newly dependent on freedom of movement: freedom to change circumstance, to reinvent oneself and to propel oneself through a transitory, metamorphosing society.

In offering this vision, Defoe was necessarily concerned with the question of infrastructure. For the English to be mobile, they required routes and roads to traverse. Thus, liberty implied a commitment by the state and the society to the creation of a network that enabled people to move. And while Defoe's novels were oftentimes engaged with movement into the empire, he was equally cognisant that a mobile society at home was dependent on a reliable and well-maintained internal road network. This commercial, mobile, England was therefore fashioned by its infrastructure.

By infrastructure what is implied is both the original meaning of the term as an organizational term within the technology of railroad building to imply work that was done below the tracks, and the more plastic, open-ended contemporary meaning of infrastructure

Academic Press, 2011); Charles Ivar McGrath and Chris Fauske (eds), *Money, Power and Print: Interdisciplinary Studies of the Financial Revolution in the British Isles* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (eds), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993); Dwight Codr, *Raving at Usurers: Anti-Finance and the Ethics of Uncertainty in England, 1690-1750* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

⁹ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34.

as ‘a synonym of social overhead capital.’¹⁰ He was engaged with infrastructure both as a physical object – the road system that criss-crossed the landscape – and the wider cultures that served to maintain and expand that network.

First expressed in the early *Essay upon Projects* (1697) Defoe’s interest in infrastructure came to full fruition in the *Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-6). But in analysing his ongoing concern, it is necessary to take a series of discreet steps. Thus, the first part of the article explores how the *Tour* is itself constructed as a mediation on roadways as the network connecting England as a place. Second, it illustrates how, the *Tour* attends to the thing described and foregrounds the sensory experience of encountering infrastructure of differing kinds; notably the difference between travelling by track or by road. The third section assesses Defoe’s argument for enhancing domestic infrastructure through the building of a toll road system, a process Defoe both witnessed and lauded in his *Tour*. It also draws on the *Essay* to illustrate how Defoe connected road building to a community of investors, conceived in turn as successful agents of state-sanctioned development. The fourth part will then return to the *Tour* to deploy the more plastic definition of infrastructure. In doing so it will examine how towns both relied upon strong infrastructural links and enabled forms of social mixing that were a consequent of the mobility that Defoe admired. The fifth part will trace some of the resistances to the state’s expansion as they appear in brief windows in the *Tour*, connecting them to a form of modernity which resonates with Marhsall Berman’s concentration of creative destruction.

Finally, in taking up Defoe’s equation between mobility and freedom the conclusion will identify the connection between the emergent infrastructure and Defoe’s

¹⁰ Ashley Carse, ‘Keyword: Infrastructure: How a Humble French Engineering Term shaped the Modern World’, in P. Harvey, C. Jensen, and A. Morita (eds), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion* (London: Routledge, 2017), 33.

conceptualisation of England, which codifies infrastructure as a source of fantasy and desire that represents the country's emergent industrial and commercial society as the out-workings of mobility; an image which sits in stark contrast to the rural imaginings of the country as a agricultural estate populated by settled Tory squires and patriotic yeoman. Rather what Defoe offered was an image of England as urban, commercial and mobile. This conclusion connects to what Brian Larkin has posited as the 'as if' idiom, in that it further contends that in Defoe's *Tour* what one can read is a chronicle of how infrastructural changes supported the transformation of England in an act of self-conscious internal colonialism.¹¹

I

There were many roads taken. *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26) traces Defoe's fictional transit through England, Wales and Scotland in the 1720s.¹² Defoe himself claimed that the observations of the country he recounted derived from 'seventeen very large Circuits or Journeys [which] have been taken thro' divers Parts separately, and three general Tours over almost the whole *English* Part of the Island ... Besides these several Journeys in *England*, he has also lived some time in *Scotland*, and has Travell'd critically over great Part of it; he has viewed the North Part of *England* and the South Part of *Scotland* five several Times over.'¹³

As this suggests Defoe's own life was peripatetic in kind. Born in London around 1660, he lived through the Restoration, the Revolution of 1688 and the Hanoverian succession and the accession of George II, as well as the Jacobite Rising of 1715 and the South Sea Bubble of

¹¹ Brian Larkin, 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 335; Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (1975; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹² For a survey of the work's influence on the treatment of the period by historians see Pat Rogers, 'Defoe's *Tour* and the Historiography of Early Modern Britain', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42 (2019), 365-379.

¹³ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, in John McVeagh (ed.), *Writings on Travel, Discovery and History* (3 vols; London: Pickering and Chatto, 2001), I, 49.

1720, before dying in 1731.¹⁴ As well as having a career as a journalist, and as a trader – he speculated at various times with hosiery, wine, and linen, amongst other goods, and spent time in debtors’ prison – he was in the pay of the politician Robert Harley and served as a spy for his administration.¹⁵ This work sent him across and through much of England in 1704 and into Scotland in 1706 where he reported back on the negotiations surrounding the parliamentary Act of Union that followed the next year. He returned again to the northern kingdom in 1709 and 1712. All this travel allowed him to cultivate what Paula Backscheider describes as ‘an unrivalled intelligence network’.¹⁶ And he did so by spending much of his time on the road. Thus, his account of the state of the nation was informed in part of reminiscences and recollections, immediate observations drawn from the 1690s to the point of composition. Turning late in life to novel writing, Defoe coupled this imaginative work with the kind of cumulative reportage that was embodied in the *Whole Tour*.

Yet for all his powers of recollection, Defoe’s *Tour* is a kind of historical fiction, drawing on a life of travel rather than recounting specific trips made in pursuit of the book’s composition, even as it offers observations and statistics that were intended to be at once accurate and as up-to-date as feasible in such a large endeavour. As Pat Rogers nicely puts it: ‘the evidence shows that he cobbled together impressions of various journeys undertaken over a number of years. Beyond that’, Rogers continues, ‘much of his text, covering areas of the nation he had never penetrated, was based on a medley of blind assumptions, guesses and naked thefts from earlier writers.’¹⁷

¹⁴ For a biographical account see John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

¹⁵ For an account which focusses on his political views see P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens, *A Political Biography of Daniel Defoe* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006).

¹⁶ Paula R. Backscheider, ‘Defoe, Daniel’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7421>, accessed 19.10.2023.

¹⁷ Pat Rogers, *Defoe’s Tour and Early Modern Britain: Panorama of the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 48.

In this monumental construction, England is a country that permits itineraries, indeed, 'it is possible to plan, to choose routes, to estimate times and distances with complete assurance.'¹⁸ Space here is depicted as 'something mastered, easily comprehensible, already named and measured.'¹⁹ It is already a place. And yet what holds the country together are the roads. If the diverse journeys speak to Defoe's credentials as a reporter, it also accentuates his mobility. Indeed, 'Defoe does all he can to suggest leisurely and controlled progress. Distances are not too large', Rogers observes, 'and are generally not cumulated ... This is because we are moving in chartered territory: there is no expanding frontier'.²⁰ This is a country that is moved through not across. He is always going somewhere specific, not traversing underknown terrain. This is travel with only intermittent discomfort, not perpetual hardship.

The Tour is thereby a book that is dependent on hostels, inns, and waystations. It traverses the countryside by rivers, routes, and roads. These constitute the non-places that underpin Defoe's concept of the nation as, paradoxically, a place of freedom. Non-places are, as Marc Augé has suggested, are what lie between places.²¹ They serve to move people across the gap between location. They are transit zones, anonymous sites of transient populations. They are not where people meet but where they pass each other by. They are, however, the veins and arteries of trade and of migration. They are what the mobile move through and along in their hurry to be somewhere. Defoe was conscious of this dependency on infrastructure in binding together the disparate nation he is interested in depicting. The *Tour* is made by barge and ship, by foot, by horseback, and by carriage. It is an exploration of the

¹⁸ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 154.

¹⁹ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 154.

²⁰ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 150.

²¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1992).

arteries and veins of the English body politic. And this occasionality is made a virtue in the preface to the second volume, setting it apart from the writings of both of antiquarian surveyors and of armchair travellers:

To describe a Country by other Men's Accounts of it, would soon expose the Writer to a Discovery of the Fraud; and to describe it by Survey, requires a Preparation too great for any Thing but a publick Purse, and Persons appointed by Authority ... But to describe a Country by Way of Journey, in a private Capacity, as has been the Case here, though it requires a particular Application, to what be learn'd from due Enquiry and from Conversation, yet it admits not the Observer to dwell upon every Nicety, to measure the Distances, and determine exactly the Scite [sic.], the Dimensions or the Extent of Places, or read the Histories of them. But it is giving an Account by way of Essay, or, as the Moderns call it, by Memoirs of the present State of Things, in a familiar Manner.²²

Here Defoe at once accounts for his process of selection, admits and defends the weaknesses of the work in terms of detail and precision, and explores how the *Tour* operates both as a literary form – a memoir of the present – and as an aesthetic experience for the reader. The *Tour* is a portrait of the country as a traveller might encounter it. It is a living entity, changing and altering its aspect as the miles pass.

II

In constructing his *Tour*, Defoe is openly concerned with the sensory demands made upon the traveller by the state of the road network. He remarks frequently on how the routeways, tracks worn into the earth through repeated use, are made impassable or treacherous by

²² Defoe, *Tour*, II, 3. On his plagiaristic use of antiquarian sources, see Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 111-116.

inclement weather, and how connectivity can be broken by the simple fact of the changing seasons. The book is peppered with allusions to the problems of travel in a period when most transport links were little more than dirt tracks, often rutted and prone to getting waterlogged in frequent wet weather. For instance, he identified a problem with the soils in the Midlands, as being too soft a clay and prone to churning up in poor weather and with overuse. This led him to fret as to how

it is perfectly frightful to Travellers, and it has been the Wonder of Foreigners, how considering the great Numbers of Carriages which are continually passing with heavy Loads, those Ways have been made practicable; indeed, the great Number of Horses every Year kill'd by the Excess of Labour in those heavy Ways has been such a Charge to the Country.²³

This kind of difficulty had direct implications for inhabitants of these ill-furnished conurbations. Of Epsom, a pleasure town near London, he lamented how:

In the Winter this is no Place for Pleasure indeed ... the ordinary Roads both to it and near it, except only on the side of the *Downs*, are deep, stiff, full of Sloughs, and in a Word, unpassable; for all the Country, the side of the *Downs* as I have said, only excepted, is a deep stiff Clay, so that there is no riding in the Winter without the utmost Fatigue [sic.], and some hazard, and this is the Reason that *Epsome* is not (like *Hampstead* or *Richmond*) full of Company in Winter as well as Summer.²⁴

If these routes were the cause of physical hardship and economically deleterious, the roads were equally uncertain in their condition. Although more reliable than routeways, the cost of establishing and maintaining properly built roads was oftentimes prohibitive in a world

²³ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 234.

²⁴ Defoe, *Tour*, I, 196-197.

of local government and competing calls on limited resources. In particular, the more rural the location, the less likely it was the taxation from the population might stretch to encompass roadworks. Thus, what ensues was a lottery of local investment strategy, what Jo Guldi describes as ‘a patchwork of economic and political experiments ... Defoe’, Guldi notices, ‘recorded a dozen ... examples of start-up turnpikes, from small, gated trails to great paved causeways [which] ... created archipelagos of industrial luxury within a sea of premodern agriculture.’²⁵

In the appendix to volume two of the *Tour* Defoe digressed on the road network in the midlands of the country, proposing reforms of the turnpike system that funded its maintenance and extension – charging users of the throughfare a fee, which would be used to expand and maintain the network.²⁶ Establishing such infrastructure by Acts of Parliament, he observed had effected a positive change in the infrastructure of Essex for instance. ‘These Roads’ he notes, ‘were formerly deep, in time of Floods dangerous, and at other times, in Winter, scarce passable; they are now so firm, so safe, so easy to Travellers and Carriages as well as Cattle that no Road in *England* can yet be said to Equal them.’²⁷ While praising some earlier local initiatives, such as the road between Ware and Royston, Defoe now offered plaudits to the work being done to improve the ‘a Branch of the *Northern* Road, and is properly called the Coach Road, and which comes into the other near *Stangate Hole*’. This route, he observed,

is [in] a most frightful Way ... Here is that famous Lane call’d *Baldock Lane*, famous for being so unpassable, that the Coaches and Travellers were oblig’d to break out of the

²⁵ Jo Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

²⁶ For a close treatment of this appendix, see Rogers, *Defoe’s Tour and Early Modern Britain*, 210-231.

²⁷ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 236.

Way even by Force, which the People of the Country not able to prevent, at length placed Gates, and laid their Lands open, setting Men at the Gates to take a voluntary Toll, which Travellers always chose to pay, rather than plunge into Sloughs and Holes, which no Horse could wade through.

This terrible Road is now under Cure by the same Methods and probably may in Time be brought to be firm and solid.²⁸

The expansion of the toll road system was doubly beneficial for Defoe, for as he recognised the increase in trade and traffic of goods was complemented by the movement of people.²⁹ As well as highlighting how ‘the fat Cattle with drive lighter, and come to Market with less Toil’, he applauded how the network around London benefitted the towns in its immediate hinterlands, as it augments ‘the Convenience of coming to them’ enabling ‘Citizens [to] flock out in greater Numbers than ever to take Lodgings and Country-Houses’.³⁰ Circulation here is valued for its economic vitality, as the benefit it to be measured ‘in the Difference in the Rents of Houses in those Villages upon such repair’d Roads, from the Rents of the like Dwellings and Lodgings in other Towns of equal Distance’.³¹ Improvement was to be imagined as a virtuous path.

III

Jo Guldi writes, the infrastructure state is where ‘governments regularly design the flow of bodies, information and goods’, before dating its origins in 1726, when the British state began to directly invest in building a fulsome road network to complement not only military

²⁸ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 238.

²⁹ ‘In the Augustan period it has been suggested that roughly two in every three people changed their parish of domicile at least once in their lifetime, and it has been argued that to support London’s size and growth a sixth of the nation, or even higher, must have resided in the city at some point in their lives. Peter Borsay, ‘Urban Development in the Age of Defoe’ in Clyve Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 202.

³⁰ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 242, 243.

³¹ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 243.

oversight but commercial opportunities.³² As this implies, and as Guldi goes on to document, road building was an exchange of surveillance for sociability; control for connectivity; governmentality for wealth creation. In extending the state's control over the landscape, road building opened up the dark corners of the archipelago and refashioned the economic possibilities of London's political hinterlands.

As William Albert notes in his history of the turnpike system, there were, by 1750, some thirteen main routes leading out from London, including notably the Great North Road, that was he observed, 'the longest and most heavily travelled roads in the country'.³³ A map of the development by mid-century certainly underlines the hub and spoke nature of the network. However, the system had extended north of Newcastle and had another hub in Bristol which connected the localities of the Southeast corner.³⁴

The financial mechanism underpinning this development dated back to 1663 when a temporary measure was passed by parliament to provide funds to support the Great North Road.³⁵ But whereas the early formulations of the turnpike system relief relied upon the direction and diligence of the local justices of the peace, this gave way to a broader and more accessible model in 1706. As Albert describes it,

By an act [of parliament] of that year, the road from Fornhill to Stony Stratford was placed under the control of a group of thirty-two trustees, whose power for repair, toll collection etc were generally the same as those enjoyed by the justices under the

³² Guldi, *Roads to Power*, 3, 5.

³³ William Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England, 1663-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 31.

³⁴ A map can be found in Greg Laugero, 'Infrastructures of Enlightenment: Road-Making, the Public Sphere, and the Emergence of Literature', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1995), 46.

³⁵ Albert, *The Turnpike Road System*, 17.

previous acts. By 1714, the 'turnpike trust' had completely replaced the older 'justice trusts'.³⁶

Crucial in this reform was the opening of turnpike roads to a broader community of investors, who in turn could then support local employment in toll collecting and road repair. In this, the trusts aligned the turnpikes with what Susan Leigh Star has termed 'the ethnography of infrastructure' in that it reflects on the practices which are embedded in the hidden or presumed underpinnings of social organisation. As Star highlights, 'struggles with infrastructure are built into the very fabric of technical work.'³⁷ This is to read the infrastructure of the road network as itself an outcome of political action, local initiative, financial instruments as well as the raw materials that made up the road's physical presence on the landscape.

Defoe's awareness of these intersecting processes was articulated in his *Essay Upon Projects*, in a chapter entitled 'On the Highways'. The idea that roads required strategic attention was one amongst a slew of proposals whereby Defoe offered ideas for improving the state of the nation. As David Alff has noticed, 'projection [of this kind] was distinct from counterfactual science, utopia, and novelistic world-making in that it endeavoured not just to describe reality or modify behaviour, but to make real the precise vision it advanced.'³⁸ Thus, Defoe's chapter was both speculative and specific, availing of his skill in political arithmetic to provide a close case study of how the road repair could be initiated, managed and financed. And it began with an Act of Parliament, permitting 'undertakers to dig and trench, to cut down hedges and trees, or whatever is needful for ditching, draining and carrying off water,

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Susan Leigh Star, 'The Ethnography of Infrastructure', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 43 (1999), 377-391.

³⁸ David Alff, *The Wreckage of Intentions: Projects in British Culture, 1660-1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 7.

cleaning, enlarging and levelling the roads.’³⁹ As this suggests, Defoe scheme relied heavily on the mobilisation of local actors, for as he explained:

Besides this Act of Parliament, a commission must be granted to fifteen at least, in the name of the undertakers, to whom every county shall have power to join ten, who are to sit with the said fifteen so often and so long as the said fifteen do sit for affairs relating to that county, which fifteen, or any seven of them, shall be directors of the works, to be advised by the said ten, or any five of them, in matters of right and claim, and the said ten to adjust differences in the countries, and to have right by process to appeal in the name either of lords of manors, or privileges of towns or corporations, who shall be either damaged or encroached upon by the said work.⁴⁰

So too Defoe made provision for those for those who would labour to build the new infrastructure, stating that,

Another branch of the stock must be hands ... to which purpose every county, city, town, and parish shall be rated at a set price, equivalent to eight years’ payment, for the repair of highways, which each county, &c., shall raise ... by pressing of men ... in which case all corporal punishments—as of whippings, stocks, pillories, houses of correction, &c.—might be easily transmitted to a certain number of days’ work on the highways.⁴¹

And as this passage hints at the *Essay on Projects* also laid down some guidelines for the financial support which would allow the roads to be maintained, with a bank being mooted to distribute the monies raised by a ‘tax on land and tenements’.⁴²

³⁹ Daniel Defoe, *An Essay upon Several Projects, or Effectual Ways of Advancing the Interests of the Nation* (London: Thomas Ballard, 1702), 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77-78.

⁴¹ Ibid., 81-82.

⁴² Ibid., 92.

And at the heart of the proposal lay consideration for the physical nature of the roadworks themselves with Defoe advocating for a system in which

From London every way ten miles the high post-road to be built full forty feet in breadth and four feet high, the ditches eight feet broad and six feet deep, and from thence onward thirty feet, and so in proportion.

Cross-roads to be twenty feet broad, and ditches proportioned; no lanes and passes less than nine feet without ditches.

The middle of the high causeways to be paved with stone, chalk, or gravel, and kept always two feet higher than the sides, that the water might have a free course into the ditches.⁴³

If the *Essay on Projects* hoped to initiate political action, mobilise local initiative, direct and financial resource towards a rejuvenated road system, Defoe's *Tour* reflected a final stage in that process, providing a none-too-subtle subtle advocacy for the further enhancement of the system which by 1724 was well under way.⁴⁴ His text now offered a positive reflection on the work done to date, offering empirical backing for his case for greater financial investment, local engagement, and the passage of parliamentary legislation.

As this advocacy for the toll road system suggests, Defoe is deeply implicated in the emergent politics of the infrastructure state. He happily opined of the improved road system that 'no publick Edifice, Alms-house, Hospital or Nobleman's Palace can be of equal Value to

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ In this toll roads moved beyond mere potential, the condition at which Alff suggests most projects remained. The chapter 'Of the Highways'; was therefore notably more successful than his proposal to locate colonies of Palatine refugees in the New Forest. As Alff relates, Defoe reflected in this failed project in the *Tour*. See Alff, *The Wreckage of Intentions*, 166-178.

the Country with this, no nor more an Honour and Ornament to it.⁴⁵ The *Tour* was in this sense political propaganda as much as an ethnographic description. For as Defoe indicated

as farther confirmation ... [that] we may expect, according to this good beginning, that the roads in most parts of England will in a few years be fully repaired, and restored to the good same condition, (or perhaps a better, than) they were during the Roman government, we may take notice that there are no less than twelve bills, or petitions for bills, depending before Parliament at this time sitting for the repair of the roads, in several remote parts of England ... some of which gives us hopes that the grants, when obtained, will be very well managed, and the country people greatly encouraged by them in their commerce.⁴⁶

Tolls roads here are a marker of the state's positive intervention in the locality, bringing the periphery into the orbit of national trade.

In this way Defoe's *Tour* is an exercise in economic cartography.⁴⁷ The roads map out the connectivity that enables trade and brings the regions into proximity with the powerhouse of London. As the military expansion of the road network enacted by General Wade was to happen later in the 1720s, and hence was not part of Defoe's vista, for the English dissenter, the roads were less a tool of state control than of state support: they were imagined not as the infrastructure of a nascent fiscal military state as John Brewer would have it, but as conduits along which the emerging commercial society could thread its way into the communal life of the country.⁴⁸ The connection in Defoe's mind was not with the army but

⁴⁵ Defoe, *Tour*, II, 239.

⁴⁶ Defoe, *Whole Tour*, appendix, 443

⁴⁷ For a reading of this theme in the *Tour* which, in contrast to the reading offered here, places emphasis on the points of resistance to the incorporation of the regions into the national economy, see Adam Sills, *Against the Map: The Politics of Geography in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2021), 127-164.

⁴⁸ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State* (London, Routledge, 2014)

with the trader. The road network was less an agent of surveillance than of improvement, and connecting people to the network was an act of spatial justice.⁴⁹

IV

If the *Tour*, in its concentration on roads, imagines the country as an integrated network, it is the hubs – the nodal points – of that infrastructure which occupy most the text. Indeed, the *Tour* constitutes a praise-poem to the town.⁵⁰ Despite the noted commentary on the toll roads discussed above, the non-places and the countryside often escape attention, making the country into a rolling townland with one conurbation blending into another. Rhetorically, as Rogers highlights, Defoe's had a propensity to measure miles of distance to places, which 'allows us to reach the destination before we are aware of the intervening ground to be covered'.⁵¹ Defoe writes as follows:

Darlington, a Post Town, has nothing remarkable but Dirt, and a high Stone Bridge over little or no Water; the Town is eminent for good Bleaching of Linen, so that I have known Cloth brought from *Scotland* to be Bleached here. As to the Hells Kettles, so much talked up for a Wonder, which are to be seen as we ride from the *Tees* to *Darlington*, I had already seen so little of Wonder in such Country Tales, that I was not hastily deluded again. 'Tis evident they are nothing but old Coal Pits filled with Water by the River *Tees*.

Durham is next, a little compact neatly contriv'd City, surrounded almost with the River *Wear*...⁵²

⁴⁹ On the concept of spatial justice as it pertains to transport, see Edwards W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1-13.

⁵⁰ For a survey of the towns in this period, see Borsay, 'Urban Development', 195-219.

⁵¹ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 152.

⁵² Defoe, *Tour*, III, 115.

Here a distance of twenty-one miles is almost entirely shorn from view. While the account suggests how the town relied on transport links, the physical act of moving between them was written out. And while inhabitants of Darlington relied on trade from Scotland for its livelihood, Defoe also related how Durham was populated, being 'full of Roman Catholicks, who live peaceably and disturb no Body and no Body them; for we being there on a Holiday saw them going as publickly to Mass as the Dissenters did on other Days to their Meeting-house.'⁵³

Letter Nine, from which this passage is taken and in which Defoe travels through Northeast England, exemplifies his tendency to concentrate on the urban world. Towns are described not just through their major landmarks and their current condition, but, as in his description of Scarborough, through their trading connections and the nature of the people who congregate there.

a Place formerly famous for the strong Castle [the landmark], situate on a Rock, as it were hanging over the Sea, but now demolish'd, being ruined in the last Wars. The Town is well built, populous and pleasant [its condition] and we found a great deal of good Company here [the people] drinking the Waters who came not only from all the North of *England* but even from *Scotland* [the travel links].⁵⁴

Similarly, Beverley, a spa town noted for the miraculous properties of the waters which when 'wash'd in dries scorbutic Scurf, and all sorts of Scabs, and also very much helps the King's Evil.'⁵⁵ From this, Defoe wryly wrote, 'it is easie to conceive how *Beverley* became a Town from this very Article, namely, that all the Thieves, Murtherers, House-breakers and Bankrupts, fled hither for Protection; and here they obtained Safety from the Law whatever

⁵³ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 116.

⁵⁴ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 114.

⁵⁵ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 105.

their Crimes might be'.⁵⁶ Despite the closure of the church in the age of Henry VIII, 'the Town continues a large, populous Town; and the River *Hull* is made navigable to it for the convenience of Trade'.⁵⁷ Again, the landmark, the current condition, the people and the trade links made up the composite parts of Defoe's pencil sketch.

In this basic structure of description – landmark, current condition, people and trade links – Defoe is actively drawing the reader's attention to the infrastructure of the towns. Defoe understands the town in a similar light to what Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin have depicted as the 'networked metropolis'. The urban centre is in this reading to be understood as a congruence of the local geography, the transport links and the economic activity of the community. Furthermore, towns can be identified as 'staging posts in the perpetual flow of infrastructurally mediated flow, movement and exchange'.⁵⁸ They are places for the intranational, and international movement of people, things and ideas; and as such they are nodal points in the intricate weave of infrastructure that underpins the social organization of the economy. In his description of Newcastle, for instance, Defoe valorised the steady labour he witnessed, while highlighting the ways in which one industry might generate downstream business generation. 'They build Ships here to perfection', he remarked,

I mean as to Strength, and Firmness, and to bear the Sea; and as the Coal Trade occasions a demand for such strong Ships, a great many are built here. This gives an addition to the Merchants Business, in requiring a Supply of all Sorts of Naval Stores to fit out those Ships.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 105-106.

⁵⁷ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 106.

⁵⁸ Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

⁵⁹ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 119.

One trade led on inexorably to another; a virtuous connectivity that enables the survival of the population and enriches the urban conurbation.

Similar praise was bestowed on Liverpool, which Defoe recollected in Letter Ten as being 'one of the Wonders of *Britain*'.⁶⁰ If Pat Rogers is correct and Defoe's 'developing theme was England in the wake of the [South Sea] Bubble – the financial crash that destabilised British politics in the early 1720s, then Liverpool can be read as a beacon of hope, a place of steady, incremental progress built on hard work and industriousness.⁶¹ And as Peter Borsay notes, it was a city of the verge of joining an illustrious cohort of towns that acted as regional centres, with populations around 10,000, and which 'presided over a great wedge of the nation; Norwich (30,000) over East Anglia, Bristol, (20,000) the mid and south west, Newcastle (16,000 the north east, Exeter (14,000) the south west, York (12,000 the north, Chester (8,000 the mid and north west and Shrewsbury (7,500) the mid-west and Wales.'⁶² Given Liverpool's immediate history of expansion, Defoe was anxious to draw the reader back to the decades before financial speculation took hold:

The Town was, at my first visiting it, about the Year 1680, a large handsome, well built and encreasing or thriving Town; at my second visit, *Anno* 1690, it was much bigger than at my first seeing it; and by the report of the Inhabitants, more than twice as big as it was twenty Years before that; but, I think, I may safely say at this my third seeing it, for I was surpriz'd at the View, it was more than double what it was at the second; and I am told, that it still visibly encreases both in Wealth, People, Business and Buildings.⁶³

⁶⁰ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 123.

⁶¹ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 76; see also *ibid.*, 31-35.

⁶² Borsay, 'Urban Development', 199.

⁶³ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 123-124.

Liverpool's wealth was grounded in the colonial trade, as Defoe recognised, connecting to both Ireland and Virginia and the northern American colonies. This was complemented by trade in its own hinterland, 'particularly into *Cheshire* and *Staffordshire*, by the new Navigation of the Rivers *Mersee*, the *Weaver* and the *Dane*, by the last of which they come so near the *Trent* with their Goods that they make no difficulty to carry them by Land to *Burton* and from thence correspond quite through the Kingdom'.⁶⁴ Out of this commercial wealth the populace invested in their surrounds; as a result, 'there is no Town in *England*, *London* excepted, that can equal *Liverpoole* for the fineness of the Streets, and the beauty for the Buildings'.⁶⁵

Defoe's England, then, is imagined in opposition to the image of the country which emanated from rural life. He gives only little heed to a bucolic, rustic idealisation of life in the country.⁶⁶ The big houses he celebrates are being built – modern expressions of wealth creation, not nostalgic reminders of the hierarchies of the past.⁶⁷ And when the homes were lost to the financial scandal of the South Sea Bubble, Defoe limited his denunciation to the actions of the stockjobbers, not the investors caught up in the whirl of speculation.⁶⁸ In this he openly rejects the Tory conceit avowed to by Pope and Swift: one in which the true patriots were the landed gentry who looked on urban life with distrust and unease, derived from philosophical and moral scepticism. 'Despite its general lack of party bias,' as Alastair Duckworth observes, 'the *Tour* is notable for its virtual eclipse of the England of Tory squires and parsons in favour of that of the Whig grandees and their trading allies.'⁶⁹ So too, he

⁶⁴ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 125.

⁶⁵ Defoe, *Tour*, III, 126.

⁶⁶ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 135-146.

⁶⁷ See the treatment of Cannons, the home of the duke of Chandos: John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 325. See also Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 181-185.

⁶⁸ Rogers, *Defoe's Tour and Early Modern Britain*, 162-171.

⁶⁹ Alistair M. Duckworth, "'Whig' Landscapes in Defoe's *Tour*", *Philological Quarterly*, 61 (1982), 455.

continues, 'the retrospective nostalgia for the gothic and medieval ... is notably absent from the *Tour*, which with a few insignificant exceptions, praises ... what is architecturally new or has been improved in modern taste.'⁷⁰ Defoe is then offering a different view; a country that identifies with local business and industry, a land of shop keepers and of manual labour. It is a vision of bartering mobile wealth, not the accretion of inherited land. It is a free country because it is a country on the move.

V

For all that Defoe celebrated commercial endeavour, he was deeply sensitive to the oftentimes cruelly oppressive nature of the new polity he inhabited. As Betty Schellenberg puts it 'Defoe is not only self-conscious in his attempt to construct a national image, but also aware of a fragile boundary between that coherent image and the potential for multiple signification, if not for complete fragmentation, of his material'.⁷¹ Trevor Speller goes further, suggesting that 'We should see *The Tour* as a text whose overt desire for national homogeneity is subverted by its own insistence on anomalous territories ... Its style has been miscast with the same sense of homogeneity. Defoe actively depicts such monstrous and violent places, engages them in the language of rationality, and in turn follows them up with fantasies of violent suppression and strategies of rhetorical containment.'⁷²

While this may overstate the dominant tone, there are discursive moments in which this holds true. As Schellenburg has it, in the *Tour* 'the discourse of improvement overrides all other rhetorics and provides the coherence Defoe needs, but intractable details remain'.⁷³

⁷⁰ Duckworth, "'Whig' Landscapes', 456.

⁷¹ Betty A. Schellenberg, 'Imagining the Nation in Defoe's *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*', *ELH*, 62 (1995), 297.

⁷² Trevor Speller, 'Violence, Reason and Enclosure in Defoe's *Tour*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 51 (2011), 587.

⁷³ Schellenberg, 'Imagining the Nation', 300.

Or, as she later expresses it, 'the rhetorical difficulties in which Defoe finds himself reveal to what degree his eye produces the structures it purports merely to detect.'⁷⁴ Similarly, Speller notices how Defoe's plan for a new town in the New Forest provides a false sense of containment and order.⁷⁵ The region was in fact contemporaneously, as E. P. Thompson documented, witnessing resistance to Whig oligarchy from organised bands of poachers.⁷⁶

Indeed, as Rogers recognises, there is a strong sense in the *Tour* that the 'increase' he celebrates is twinned with 'decay'; as one world metamorphoses into another.⁷⁷ One sequence makes the point succinctly. Near Bebbington, he remarks on the 'Seat of Mansion House of Sir Nicholas Carew'. While delighting in the house, and declaring the gardens 'exquisitely Fine' he also took time to record an anecdote concerning how

The Ancestor of this Family, tho' otherwise a very honest gentleman, if Fame lyes not, was so addicted to Gaming, and so unfortunately over-match'd in his Play, that he lost this Noble Seat and Parks, and all the fine Addenda which were then about it, at one Night's Play, some say, at one case of Dice to Mr *Harvey of Comb* near *Kingston* What Misery had befallen the Family, if the Right of the Winner had been Prosecuted with rigour, as by what I have heard it would have been, is hard to Write: But God had better Things in store for the Gentleman's Posterity than he took thought for himself; and the Estate being Entail'd upon the Heir, the Loser dy'd before it came to Possession of the Winner, as so it has been preser'd, and the present Gentleman has not only recover'd the Disaster, but as above, has exceedingly impro'd it all.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Schellenberg, 'Imagining the Nation', 306.

⁷⁵ Speller, 'Violence, Reason and Enclosure', 591-592.

⁷⁶ EP Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (1975; London: Penguin, 1990)

⁷⁷ Rogers, *Text of Great Britain*, 119-134.

⁷⁸ Defoe, *Tour*, I, 192.

In this Defoe recognised how precarious the possibility of improvement remained, and how far progress relied on the virtuous exercise of commercial probity and long-term thinking.

This passage also highlights how the *Tour* provided a vision of England as captivated by the creative destruction Marshall Berman has identified with the condition of modernity. Defoe captures some of the nervous energy of a nation in the moment of its construction, and which thus inhabited some of the opportunities and experienced many of the losses that Berman marks out as decisively modern. These include

the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us: our desire to be rooted in stable and coherent personal and social past, and our insatiable desire for growth – not merely for economic growth but for growth in experience, in pleasure, in knowledge, in sensibility – growth that destroys both the physical and social landscapes of our past, and our emotional links with those lost worlds.⁷⁹

VI

Despite such eddies in the narrative, the *Tour* is at its heart a celebration of England in a state of becoming.⁸⁰ Defoe's sense of the rise of England as a mercantile nation accords with the tumult produced by the process of internal colonialism identified by Michael Hechter.⁸¹ In the preface to part two of the *Tour* Defoe offers a national apotheosis:

[T]here will always be something new, for those that come after; and if an Account of *Great Britain* was to be written every Year, there would be something found out, which was overlook'd before, or something to describe, which had its Birth since the former Accounts: New Foundations are always laying, new Buildings always raising, Highways repairing, Churches and publick Buildings erecting, Fires and other

⁷⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 35.

⁸⁰ Pat Rogers writes 'Defoe's Britain is a work in progress', Rogers, *Defoe's Tour and Early Modern Britain*, 27. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*.

Calamities happening, Fortunes of Families taking different Turns, new Trades are every Day erected, new Projects enterpriz'd, new Designs laid; so that as long as *England* is a trading, improving Nation, no perfect Description of either the Place, the People, or the Conditions and State of Things can be given.⁸²

Here Defoe's *Tour* offers is a vision of England as a commercial enterprise that aligns with the revolution in political economy, finance and commerce that historians have identified. But more than that, Defoe's *Tour* is a fable about how the country can become interconnected, through the rising infrastructure of the roads and the mixing of peoples in the towns, drawn there along the routeways by the allure of labour and of commerce. In Defoe's vision, it is the movement itself which is emblematic of the creative forces that are shaping the nation. England was being forged by the roads he travelled and embodied by the people he met. It was a nation which was brought together by infrastructure and bound together by a desire for movement.⁸³

And it is that movement which in Defoe's writings are commensurate with freedom. Movement brings people together and gives them ways to escape. They are not bound by their birthplace, nor are they trapped by the traditions of their community. Travel both permits reinvention and sparks creativity. It enables commercial exchange and sociability. And this is true not just of those who take to the high seas, such as Moll Flanders, Colonel Jack, or Robison Crusoe, but of the ordinary townsfolk of Newcastle, Liverpool, and London. England is free because its people are mobile. And they are mobile because the routes and

⁸² Defoe, *Tour*, II, 3-4.

⁸³ This aligns with by does not replicate Kirishnan Kumar's contention that Englishness involves the 'nationalism of an imperial state'. See Krishan Kmar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), passim, quotation on *ibid.*, 34.

roads of the kingdom are well managed and maintained. Infrastructure is the bedrock of English liberty, Defoe contends, and the *Whole Tour of Great Britian* illustrates that this is so.