CHAPTER I

The Identity of Britain

Opening his massive appraisal of the Gallic environment, The Identity of France, Fernand Braudel stresses the diversity of the nation, geographically and humanly: ‘Every village, every valley, a fortiori every pays . . . every town, every region, every province has its own distinct character – visible not only in the particular features displayed in the landscape and the many imprints man has left upon it, but also in a lived culture.’ He cites a previous author who observed that ‘Even for the traveller on foot . . . the landscape is always changing.’ The reader who follows in Defoe’s steps on his Tour, whether those were taken on two legs or four, or even by carriage, will find something of the same diversity in Britain. Braudel defines pays as meaning ‘an area with its own identity, as the pays de Bray, pays de Caux’. He adds that ‘not so long ago there still survived intact local privileges . . . local dialects, folklore, traditional houses . . . and local costumes’. Most of these things are apparent in the Tour, as the work enshrines a range of customs and social practices across Britain from Land’s End to John o’Groats. In the language of wines, we get the ‘race’ of each district – the flavour of life as it was lived in early modern days, from the Isle of Ely to the Solway Firth, from the Weald to the Pennines, from the Peak to the Brecon Beacons, from the Vale of Evesham to Strathearn.

At the start of the second volume of his Tour, Defoe reflects on the progress of his circuit to date. His supposed journey had got as far as Land’s End, the extreme tip of the British landmass as it juts out into the Atlantic Ocean: ‘My last letter ended the Account of my Travels, where Nature ended her Account, when she meeted out the Island, and where she fix’d the utmost Western Bounds of Britain’ (2: 9). The syntax equates Defoe’s own narrative with the ‘Account’ of nature herself, and prepares us for a ceremonial beating of the national bounds conducted by the author as he carries forward his description of the country’s imagined corners. This sentence continues:

being resolv’d to see the very Extremity of it, I set my Foot into the Sea, as it were, beyond the farthest Inch of dry Land West, as I had done before near
the Town of Dover, at the Foot of the Rocks of the South-Foreland in Kent, which, I think, is the farthest Point East in a Line; And as I had done, also, at Leostoff in Suffolk, which is another Promontory on the Eastern Coast, and is reckon’d the farthest Land Eastward of the Island in general; Likewise I had used the same Ceremony at Selby near Chichester, which I take to be the farthest Land South . . . so, in its Place, I shall give you an Account of the same Curiosity at John a Grot’s House in Caithness, the farthest Piece of Ground in Great Britain, North. (2: 9)

In time Defoe does fulfil his last promise here – not something that applies to all the claims and protestations scattered through the text. Very near its end, the narration reaches northern Scotland and the antipodal point on the mainland from Land’s End:

Here is the House so famous, call’d John a Grot’s House, where we set our Horses Feet into the Sea, on the most northerly Land, as the People say, of Britain, though, I think, Dungsby-Head is as far North . . . The Dominions of Great Britain are extended from the Isle of Wight, in the Latitude of 50 Degrees, to the Isle of Unsta in Shetland, in the Latitude of 61 Degrees, 30 Minutes, being Ten Degrees, or full 600 Miles in Length; which Island of Unst or Unsta being the most remote of the Isles of Shetland to the North East, lyes 167 Leagues from Winterton Ness in Norfolk. (3: 273)

Even into the last pages of his book, Defoe is intent on charting limits, extent, dimensions. It is as though the subject exists only if it is defined by measurement.

The Whole Circuit

Why should Defoe have made such a fuss about the gesture of dipping feet – his own, or his horse’s – into the sea? The question grows more urgent if we recall that he had probably never once ventured far into the Scottish Highlands, let alone into the remote fastnesses of the northern peninsula. (The purported correction regarding nearby Duncansby Head is a characteristic sleight of hand, drawing on material filched from maps and gazetteers). Several explanations might suggest themselves, involving, for example, the need for Defoe to give his narrative a shape by placing emphasis on these moments of arrested motion and recoil. But in the first place, the author was mimicking the ancient rites of ‘beating the bounds’, when local officers, accompanied often by children, would make a complete circuit of the parish. Before accurate mapping or surveying existed, this was a way in which a community could establish its borders and proclaim its identity. The ritual, commonly performed on Ascension
Day, had its religious and mystical functions, and when he projected the ceremony on a national scale Defoe carried out his own piece of sympathetic magic, as though placing feet into the water would absolve him from error, and thus confirm the claims he is making on behalf of Britain.

His first impulse as a writer was to convey a sense of precision – hence all the details about the time and place of robberies committed by Moll Flanders. Or again the way that the relentless march of the plague is charted, day by day, through London, with careful documentation of the mortality figures on a parochial basis, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Such attention to the minutiae of experience has been codified by critics as the ‘formal realism’ of his fiction. But it has its equivalent in the specificity of his political pamphlets, which regularly cite particular treaties and dates; and in the factual density of many of his historical and biographic works. Above all, his contributions to the literature of commerce play around elaborate displays of statistics: books such as *A Plan of the English Commerce*, published soon after the *Tour* in 1728, rest on a bewildering array of facts and contentions with regard to economic history. Occasionally these are quite inaccurate, as we shall see in the case of the *Tour* itself, but Defoe brandishes his evidence with an air of confidence that can easily hoodwink the reader.

Likewise, with the spatial data we have been looking at. When the *Tour* stops at London, in the fifth of its ten English sections, the principal aim of the treatment is to inscribe the centrality of the capital within the nation – politically, socially, culturally, but above all economically. In characteristic fashion, Defoe begins by taking a ‘Measure’ of the ‘mighty’ body of London. As we have seen in the Introduction, several pages are devoted to ‘A LINE of Measurement, drawn about all the continued Buildings of the City of London, and Parts adjacent, including Westminster and Southwark, &c.’ (2: 67). Nine numbered paragraphs cover the area north of the Thames, five to the south: each gives a minute street-by-street account of the city limits, accompanied by an estimate of the ground traversed in miles, furlongs and rods (as with Washington and Jefferson, it looks as if Defoe would have been happy to spend his life as a surveyor). There is even a running tally of distances carried over from page to page, testifying equally to the accountant manqué in Defoe. Several of the many guides to London in this period have maps of the city: but apart from the *Tour* only one gives a precise account of the extent of the boundaries – the parish clerks’ survey, *New Remarks of London* (1732), a work that is organised entirely by parishes and sticks to the official lines of the municipal map.
Uniquely, Defoe charts more than the virtual lines of civic responsibility, though he is aware of these. He traces instead the physical margins of built-up London, and hence modern historians have sometimes used his data to compile their own models of the growth of the city, taking 1725 as their baseline. As with the macrososm, so with the microcosm of the nation which is the capital: to circumscribe the area is to define the topic. All Defoe’s claims about the size and grandeur of Britain, its spectacular growth, its economic power, its competitive advantages, its opportunities for further increases in commercial and civic development, as well as personal prosperity – all these start from a vivid bird’s eye view of the whole island. As we know, he had not really visited every part of the country, and some of his optimistic projections would never match the facts. But most of what he said about ongoing developments in the nation was true, insightful and even prescient.

The fictional journey derives by extrapolation from the author’s own restless peregrinations during his early years, especially the travelling he did on behalf of two patrons, the important politicians Robert Harley and Lord Godolphin. Significantly, it takes Robinson Crusoe more than five years to ‘make a Tour round the Island’. Defoe himself would have found it impossible to hang around in this way for such a long period. In fact, the narrator of the Tour tells us that he had planned a more substantive sea voyage around the coast:

I had once, indeed, resolved to have coasted the whole Circuit of Britain by Sea, as ‘tis said, Agricola the Roman General did; and in this Voyage I would have gone about every Promontory, and into the Bottom of every Bay, and had provided myself a good Yatch, and an able Commander for that Purpose; but I found it would be too hazardous an Undertaking for any Man to justify himself in the doing it upon the meer Foundation of Curiosity, and having no other Business at all; so I gave it over. (2: 9)

He explains that his project was abandoned owing to the difficulty of finding pilots who would help him to enter all the bays, creeks and estuaries around the coast. As a result, he satisfied himself with making ‘the Circuit very near as perfect by Land’ (2: 10). In reality, the disparate trips that Defoe took over many years followed no consistent pattern and seldom joined up into any kind of circle. The symmetrical design of the book is entirely a matter of artifice, intended to express the fullness of the author’s grasp of Britain in its variety and plenitude.

Almost eighty years ago, G. M. Trevelyan gave eloquent tribute to Defoe’s value as a witness to the significant historical processes of his time. His comments on Defoe as one who ‘first perfected the art of the
reporter’ come from one who had compiled what is still the most complete survey of England under Queen Anne:

So then, the account that this man gives of the England of Anne’s reign is for the historian a treasure indeed. For Defoe was one of the first who saw the old world through a pair of sharp modern eyes. His report can be controlled and enlarged by great masses of other evidence, but it occupies a central point of our thought and vision.4

Since Trevelyan wrote these words, we have had the benefit of more than half a century of increasingly sophisticated research into early eighteenth-century Britain. Recent authorities continue to quote Defoe, to cite his information and to debate his conclusions. But nothing has emerged that invalidates the central thrust of Trevelyan’s comments. In the remainder of this chapter I shall try to show the ongoing relevance of the *Tour* for anyone who wishes to get a full grasp of the age, and to assess the worth of the book in the light of modern research. In turn I shall consider the significance of London in the life of the nation; the demographic issues charted in the *Tour*; the use Defoe makes of historical and topographic sources in his library; the importance of the system of transport, by land and water; and finally the vision of nationhood expressed in the book.

**London**

The *Tour* contains one notorious gaffe. This occurs when Defoe attempts to estimate the size of London:

The Guesses that are made at the Number of Inhabitants, have been variously form’d; Sir William Petty, famous for his Political Arithmetick, supposed the City, at his last Calculation, to contain a Million of People, and this he judges from the Number of Births and Burials; and by his Rule, as well by what is well known of the Increase of the said Births and Burials, as of the prodigious Increase of Buildings, it may very reasonable to conclude, the present Number of Inhabitants within the Circumference I have mentioned, to amount to, at least, Fifteen Hundred Thousand, with this Addition, that it is still prodigiously increasing. (2: 72)

This is an absurdly high figure. London, as then defined, had grown at an astonishing rate in the seventeenth century, from 200,000 people at the start of the century to almost 575,000 at the end. By 1750 it reached 675,000, and by 1800 not far short of a million. The demographic area covered by the ‘bills of mortality’ included the historic city within and without the walls, together with adjoining parishes in Middlesex and the
city of Westminster, as well as Southwark on the other side of the river. The boundaries of Defoe’s ‘Line of Circumvallation’ stretch a little way in to outlying villages which had not yet been assimilated into the official returns. He observed with a certain alarm “That Westminster is in a fair way to shake Hands with Chelsea, as St. Gyles’s is with Marybone; and Great Russel Street by Montague House, with Tottenham-Court: all this is very evident, and yet all these put together, are still to be called London’ (2: 66). The image of shaking hands seems benign enough, but in spite of Defoe’s feelings of wonder at this explosive growth there is something sinister, too, about the ‘joining’ of these tentacles.

In one of the most challenging accounts of this section of the Tour, Max Byrd notes that ‘as Defoe struggles ... to organize the city ... [he] turns again and again to images of the human body for his description’. Simply as ‘a temporary stay’, he arranged for a measure to be taken ‘of this mighty, I cannot say uniform Body’. For Byrd, ‘Defoe’s sense of London as restless, unpredictable, devouring awakens a universal anxiety.’ This is why he ‘attempts to fence in the city, to erect a “Circumvallation”’. The sense of terror that Byrd observes seems to me slightly exaggerated, and plays down Defoe’s obvious delight in the growth and grandeur that had become apparent in the metropolis during his lifetime. Nevertheless, this reading does point to genuine contradictions that surface throughout the Tour, where a strong endorsement of the present and faith in the future (the world of ‘improvement’) are sometimes cut across by a sense of the past and an evocation of loss (expressed in terms of decay and dissolution).

For one thing, he could see the process of urban sprawl working itself out beneath his nose, at the level of just one or two blocks:

The Town of Islington, on the north Side of the City, is in like manner joyn’d to the Streets of London, excepting one small Field, and which is itself so small, that there is no Doubt, but in a very few Years, they will be entirely joyn’d, and the same may be said of Mile End, on the East End of the Town. (2: 66)

Such changes are often registered more comfortably when they do not impinge on one’s own neighbourhood. To the south of the river, Newington ‘is so near joining to Southwark, that it cannot now be properly called a Town by itself, but a Suburb to the Burrough, and if, as they now tell us is undertaken, St. George’s Fields should be built into Squares and Streets, a very little Time will shew us Newington, Lambeth, and the Burrough, all making but one Southwark’ (2: 66). Suburbs made up a largely new phenomenon in European cities, but Defoe might almost
have had access to a roadmap from the 1800s. In a daring rhetorical move, he asserted that the boundaries of the city now spread further still: ‘The Town of Greenwich, which may, indeed be said to be contiguous with Deptford, might be also called a Part of this Measurement; but I omit it, as I have the Towns of Chelsea and Knights-Bridge on the other Side, tho’ both may be said to joyn the Town, and in a very few Years will certainly do so’ (2: 72). Such a claim amounts to a radical reconceptualization of London, as it had been defined up till then. Literally, of course, suburbanisation had taken place ever since Westminster and Southwark grew up outside the walls of the ancient City. But these localities remained within sight and hearing of the older centre, and in the case of Westminster especially took on a centrality of their own. It is quite another matter with the outlying parishes in Deptford, Islington, Hampstead, and Fulham – even Defoe’s own Stoke Newington. By 1747 John Rocque would be unable to squeeze any of them into his famous map of the city, which he began to survey eight years earlier. Yet they already existed in a symbiotic relationship with the inner portions of the capital, and had started to lose some of the rural appendages that gave them their character as villages. This unplanned growth presented so many challenges that Defoe was even led to propose restrictions on future building in some districts.6

The serious inaccuracy of his estimate of the city’s population can be explained partly by a reliance on the undependable registers of births and deaths, a parochial rather than a civil responsibility. But the miscalculation also reflects Defoe’s strong sense of the way London was creeping remorselessly away from its old nucleus. As we have just seen, a map of the city as little as a generation later would show that the kind of process he describes, with the assimilation of surrounding communities into the main urban mass, had already taken place. As often happens, Defoe was just a little in advance of reality. But what matters here is the nature of his exaggeration. He always tends to round figures up, but he does so most recklessly when he witnesses a process of rapid growth. His coverage of London is dominated by an awareness of the changes that had taken place in his own lifetime, and hence he lays the principal emphasis on the dynamic and accelerating pace of the transformations, which were going on under his very nose. This means that his account of relative size (between two cities, or a city in two stages of development) is nearly always correct, even though he falsifies the absolute figures by boosting them to an implausible total.

A prime rhetorical aim is to focus attention on the centrality of the capital in national life. Defoe had it altogether right here: London made up about a tenth of the population of England and Wales, whereas only one in
forty of French nationals lived in Paris. Among major European cities only Amsterdam had anything remotely approaching a similar dominance, with 7 per cent of the much smaller Dutch population. Modern demographers have calculated that a sixth of the adult population (again these counts relate to England and Wales only) would reside in London at some stage of their life. The metropolis had become an irresistible magnet for people of all sorts and conditions: heavy immigration took place from Scotland and Ireland, from nearby continental countries, and from further afield. For instance, a large number of Protestants fled from France in the 1680s, including Defoe’s fictional heroine Roxana. But the main agency was internal migration, with a steady stream of mostly young men and women flowing in from the provinces. As a result, around 1700, a net total of some 8,000 immigrants swarmed into the city each year, a process that would continue unabated for the rest of the century. This helped to create a steady rise in population, despite a relatively stable birth-rate and initially little decline in the death-rate. The high incidence of young people in search of work had consequences which are reflected by the cautionary tales found in the works which Defoe wrote on social topics, such as *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725–7), and on the plight of London itself, such as *Augusta Triumphans* (1728).

However, the significance of London in the nation went a long way beyond its mere size. Admittedly, the city stood out as a colossus in a predominantly rural society, where only Norwich and Bristol reached over 20,000 inhabitants, with a further six towns whose population exceeded 10,000, and perhaps twenty-five over 5,000 people. The key fact grasped by Defoe was that London served as the main engine of economic activity in Britain. He saw ‘the general Dependance of the whole Country upon the City of London . . . for the Consumption of its Produce’ (1: 48). E. A. Wrigley quotes this observation in the definitive modern discussion of the subject, ‘A Simple Model of London’s Importance in Changing English Society and Economy, 1650–1750’. First published in 1967, but often reprinted and endlessly cited, Wrigley’s article documents the ways in which the capital came almost to monopolise some crucial aspects of national life around the time that Defoe wrote. Wrigley identifies ten economic, demographic and sociological changes over the period. These range from ‘the creation of a single national market’ and a better transport network to ‘the spread of the practice of “apining one’s betters”’, that is aspirational and emulative behaviour. Defoe has a lot to say on these matters, as in *The Compleat English Gentleman* (written c.1730), while
another of Wrigley’s categories, the provision of more commercial and credit facilities, underlies much of the Review and the pamphlets Defoe wrote at the time of the Harley administration from 1710 to 1714.

Defoe concerns himself principally with London as a centre of trade and industry. He dilates upon the various markets for commodities such as meat, fish, herbs, corn, leather, coal and much more. He has a long section on the port: ‘The whole River, in a Word, from London-Bridge to Black Wall, is one great Arsenal, nothing in the World can be like it’ (2: 95). He goes into some detail on the dock facilities, and emphasises the scale of shipbuilding downriver. These sections actualise the notion of London as the great emporium of the world, which had been expressed in terms of a mythical aspiration in works such as John Dryden’s Annus Mirabilis (1667). The Thames was, after all, the busiest thoroughfare in the city. Apart from its international shipping, London served as the base for a huge volume of coastal trade, with a high proportion of the mercantile fleet occupied in transporting coal from the northern mines around Newcastle to keep the wheels of the capital turning. In addition, Defoe writes with approval of the supply of piped water recently introduced, and discusses various support systems for business, including the customs house, the stock exchange and the insurance companies – these last also a new innovation.

But even for Defoe, trade was not everything. At the same time he celebrates the great public buildings, among them architectural monuments such as St Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. He gives an elaborate account of the palace of Whitehall, which had been the impressive centre of government in his own youth before fire had destroyed most of its structures. He even sets out a fully documented proposal, occupying several pages, to erect a new palace on the site, something which would never be realised. Along with the court and the parliamentary buildings around Westminster Hall, he mentions one nearby black spot, the only street that gives the surrounding area ‘a Communication with London’. This was King Street, ‘a long, dark, dirty, inconvenient Passage’ from Westminster to the city (2: 112). But then for good measure he lists the public gaols up to a number of almost thirty: and along with these the schools, charities and hospitals, including the foundation just set up by Thomas Guy, whose progress he monitors throughout the text in appendices and addenda. Defoe’s Britain is a work in progress, not least on the capital, and the structure of his book mirrors this fact.

London is the fulcrum of a machine that engages in a whirl of perpetual motion, where the spectacular growth in population and prosperity is matched by the renown of cultural institutions and noble edifices which
fill the skyline of the capital: ‘But the Beauty of all the Churches in the City, and of all the Protestant Churches in the World, is the Cathedral of St. Paul’s’ (2: 81). Aesthetic appreciation goes with ideological fervour: the physical grandeur of the city expresses the emergent power of the nation, which had been locked for generations in a struggle for domination with its Catholic neighbours in Europe.

In point of fact, Defoe had surplus resources for his task. If the form of his book had permitted it, he could have drawn on a large body of material that is used in his other work, especially his pamphlets on social issues. These contain discussions of matters of great interest to contemporary historians of London, for example servants, the poor law, workhouses, beggars, prostitutes, Bridewell hospital, foundlings, charities, education, lotteries, street crime, transportation, executions, the bankruptcy law, the menace of gin and so on. If his purposes had been different, he could have expiated on such topics with a flow of ideas and proposals – not all wise or feasible, but each proceeding from a well-stocked mind and a deep familiarity with London lives.

Vital Statistics

We observe the same tendency to exaggerate population figures, where they are high and rising, in other sections of the book. An extreme case occurs in Defoe’s account of the wool towns of the West Riding of Yorkshire, where he describes Halifax as the most populous ‘country Parish’ in England. He cites a dubious source, and then commits himself to endorsing the information: ‘It is some Years ago that a Reverend Clergyman of the Town of Halifax, told me, they reckoned that they had a Hundred thousand Communicants in the Parish, besides Children’ (3: 67). This calculation is preposterously inflated, even granting the shock which must have come to a previously remote community on the slopes of the Pennine hills as the wool trade expanded. (Defoe had visited the place for Robert Harley in 1705, and knew a local dissenting minister, so his credulity is just about explicable, if not excusable). The reality is that Halifax itself would not have had much more than 5,000 inhabitants, and the cluster of villages in the surrounding valleys can barely have doubled this total. But a poetic truth lurks behind the claim: Halifax was certainly one of the largest parishes in the nation, along with Manchester, and one of the most densely populated communities outside a large conurbation. Defoe’s overstatement dramatises a real social dynamic which was just getting under way. Population moved from the south and west of England
to the north as industrialisation gradually shifted the main locus of manufacturing, to the detriment of the older centres of the textile trade, in East Anglia and the south-western counties. A century later, the biggest cities in the country after London would no longer be Norwich or Bristol, but places like Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester that all depended on the textile industry. What has puzzled economic historians is that Defoe sometimes writes as if this process had already reached an advanced stage, if not practically achieved completion, whereas in fact it had only just begun. As with his figures, the *Tour’s* observations bizarrely appear more accurate if we project them forward a few decades.

The same thing is largely true of what is said of Manchester. Defoe writes that the town is ‘one of the greatest, if not the greatest meer Village in England’. This is because it has no corporation and sends no MPs to Westminster. Despite that, together with the ‘Suburb . . . called – [Salford] over the Bridge, it is said to contain above fifty thousand People’. Nervously, he offers a half-retraction: ‘Though some People may think this strange, and that I speak by guess, and without Judgment, I shall justify my Opinion so well, that I believe, it will convince you my Calculation is at least very probable, and much under what Fame tells us is true’ (3: 129). The justification takes the form of pointing to a sharp increase in trade over the last thirty or forty years; a commensurate rise in the number of buildings; the statement by Gibson in his edition of *Britannia* that long before the parish had 20,000 communicants – to which Defoe adds an estimate of 10,000 children; and the belief of some ‘antient Inhabitants’ that the true figure exceeds 60,000 (3: 129–30). Of course, the number is still far too high. The population zoomed up from less than 10,000 at the start of the century to 20,000 by its midpoint and 75,000 by 1800. Thus, the account in the *Tour* foresaw an extraordinary leap in the upcoming decades, but got a little ahead of itself.\footnote{We can generally rely on the comparative scale of numbers that the *Tour* provides. Defoe likes to take the instance of the tiny ‘city’ of Wells in Somerset, a place where he could find only a small share in the stocking industry. Wells owed its status to the presence of the cathedral, so that civic life went on around the ‘dignified Clergy’ in their ‘very agreeable Dwellings’ round the close (2: 30). Elsewhere he observes that Deptford, on the eastern fringe of London, ‘is no more a separated Town, but is become a Part of the great Mass, and infinitely full of People too . . . were the Town of *Deptford* now separated, and rated by itself, I believe it contains more People, and stands upon more Ground, than the City of *Wells*’ (2: 66). This time the claim is justified: Wells probably had fewer...}
than 2,000 inhabitants with a static population, a figure eclipsed by the rapidly growing Deptford.\textsuperscript{12} A similar comparison is used to define Frome, a nearby Somerset town engaged in clothing manufacture, which had seen a spectacular growth in the last few decades:

The Town of Froome . . . is so prodigiously increased within these last Twenty or Thirty Years, that they have built a New Church, and so many Streets of Houses, and those Houses are so full of Inhabitants, that Frome is now reckoned to have more People in it, than the City of Bath, and some say, than even Salisbury itself, and if their Trade continues to increase for a few Years more, as it has done for those past, it is very likely to be one of the greatest and wealthiest Inland Towns in England. (2: 32–3)

This time the comparison was not quite so solidly based, and it would be falsified in the course of time. Salisbury continued to have a fairly small and static population, but Bath (which had little more than 1,000 residents in 1660) had begun to climb as the resort grew more fashionable. The resort had its big take-off in the late 1720s, immediately after Defoe wrote, with important new building developments by John Wood the elder, so that by 1741 the town had reached 6,000. By contrast the meteoric rise of Frome spluttered to a halt, as the clothing industry migrated northwards, and it climbed only slowly to 9,000 late in the century. Though Defoe picked some unlucky examples, his calculation may just have been valid for a tiny window of time around 1710, soon after he himself visited Frome on his electioneering trips. Not that many readers in London would have spotted the error: most would have been unaware of the changes overtaking commercial towns in the provinces.

Moreover, we can place complete reliance on Defoe’s descriptive terms, such as ‘a Town of good Figure, and has in it several eminent Merchants’ – this of Lyme Regis, taking one example out of scores of similar epithets (1: 246). Where he observes signs of decline, as with the shipping industry at Ipswich, we always find contemporary documents to support the allegation of a decay in trade and prosperity. Where he notes a swing in the competitive position of two neighbouring towns, such as the gains of Bideford on the coast of Devon at the expense of its rival Barnstaple (2: 14–16), the archival evidence confirms what Defoe had picked up, very often by first-hand observation. The detailed account he gives of the layout of some cities, such as Chester, provides a concrete basis for the assertions he makes about their size and prosperity. The facts were sacrosanct, when it came to matters pertaining to trade, even if he sometimes played fast and loose with the more striking or hyperbolic of his figures.
A Cross-section of England

Among the distinguishing features of the Tour are the variety of materials and the range of approaches it exhibits. Both aspects contribute to the book’s readability, as the tone shifts from that used to convey solid information to that suitable for protestation, elegy or comedy. One way to make sense of these separate strands would be by means of a longitudinal survey, charting the presence through the entire work of a given element (say, market towns), and a given mode of description (say, demographic). A more convenient method used here is what might be termed a vertical cross-section, that is analysis of a part of the text by subject-matter and line of approach.

The sample chosen comes from the first volume, embracing the second part of Letter 2, in which the narrator describes the return leg of his supposed journey from Portsmouth to Southwark. It consists of about 16,000 words, just under half of the entire Letter. The route takes a north-easterly course, approximating to the modern A3 in stretches, but there are divagations to the right and left – Hampshire is treated more fully in Letter 3, but this is the only segment of the book to cover Kent, Sussex and most of Surrey. Table 1 shows some of the principal matters that come under consideration, and the mode of enquiry. A number of short passages are ignored where they simply link the narrative or provide very brief descriptions of small aspects of the landscape.

This slice of the nation is not, of course, representative of every part of Britain. Sussex and Surrey were more thickly populated and at the same time less industrialised than some other counties. They did not have the archaeological riches of Wiltshire, with its hoard of prehistoric sites, or the wild scenery of the Scottish Highlands. Nevertheless, the segment does convey something of the diversity of the Tour, alike in content and treatment.

Going behind the data, we can draw some conclusions about the space devoted to certain topics. It is natural that Portsmouth, with important docks, shipyard and naval business, should receive some of the fullest coverage – ten paragraphs, amounting to about 1,450 words. There is good reason too for the extensive paragraph on the fashionable resort of Epsom, which together with Banstead Downs occupies nearly 1,600 words in sixteen paragraphs, written very much in the same style as the description of Bath (2: 155–7). We can also understand that Defoe is quite brief on Southwark, with just 730 words, since he promises more in the section on London in Letter 5. However, the exceptional amount of time that he
Table 1  Cross-section of Letter 2 (in part)

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spends on Dorking, or rather on the ‘disappearing’ River Mole, can only be explained by Defoe’s intimate familiarity with this district as a result of a long sojourn there as a boy. He was anxious to correct Camden and Gibson on the issues, and to make use of other pieces of local knowledge he had picked up. So much so that he was willing to expend more than 2,000 words on the river, with a further 1,100 on the town and its environs. If this balance seems awry, we should recall that Macky devotes over twenty pages to Epsom, that he has only the briefest ‘Excursion’ (eighty words) to Guildford to praise its horse racing and the clean linen for which its inns are noted, and that he evidently considers Petworth as the most important place in Sussex because the Duke of Somerset has his seat there.\textsuperscript{13}

The facts displayed in Table 1 hold a wider significance. They show how the author managed to keep in motion a sustained fiction of travel, while discursing across a broad spectrum of issues. Among the classic British travellers, only Cobbett comes close to rivalling Defoe, but even he has a narrower remit as he can afford to neglect large urban centres, and leaves out vast tracts of the nation. In the main series of \textit{Rural Rides}, he never deigns to refer to a single mountain. Defoe was less prone to believe that if you could not grow crops or cultivate sheep on a stretch of ground it did not exist.

\textbf{History and Topography}

Defoe’s version of contemporary Britain owed much to his lifelong absorption in two allied branches of literature and knowledge. These are respectively the study of antiquity, especially the earlier history of England and Scotland (he does not seem to have been well versed in Welsh antiquarian matters); and the literature of travel and topography. This is a topic investigated in more detail in Chapter 9. For now, we should note that at the start of his career Defoe compiled a volume of \textit{Historical Collections}, never published and lost since the eighteenth century. After this, he wrote a number of books in the area of biography and historiography, and he maintained a keen interest in everything connected with travel, exploration and geography. He was evidently a close student of maps. Plenty of evidence for these obsessive concerns can be found within the text of his \textit{Tour}, as Parts II and III of this book will document.

Our best guide to the range of Defoe’s reading comes in the sale catalogue of his books, sold after his death. Unfortunately the list also embraces the collection of Dr Phillips Farewell, a High Church clergyman who died in late 1730, just a few months before Defoe went to his own
grave, and many scholars have pointed to the risks we take if we assume that any given book in the catalogue belonged to either man. However, we may reasonably suppose Defoe to be by far the likelier candidate in some areas, including books on history, especially those on England and Scotland (where Defoe had many links, Farewell none at all), and those on travel. From sources identified by Defoe himself in the *Tour*, we can be absolutely certain that he had access to a number of titles on the list.

More than once, the narrator emphasises his lack of interest in antiquarian lumber, and his refusal to follow previous travellers in swelling out his text with irrelevant gobbets of historical information. One passage explains his attitude more fully and openly:

> I have many times repented that I so early resolved to decline the delightful View of Antiquity... for the Trophies, the Buildings, the religious, as well as military Remains, as well of the Britains, as of the Romans, Saxons, and Normans, are but, as we may say, like Wounds hastily healed up, the Calous spread over them being remov’d, they appear presently, and though the Earth... has defaced the Surface, the Figures and Inscriptions upon most of these Things, yet they are beautiful, even in their decay. And the venerable Face of Antiquity has something so pleasing, so surprising, so satisfactory in it, especially to those who have with any Attention read the Histories of pass’d Ages, that I know nothing renders travelling more pleasant and more agreeable.

But I have condemn’d my self (unhappily) to Silence upon this Head, and therefore, resolving however to pay this Homage to the Dust of gallant Men and glorious Nations, I say therefore, I must submit and go on. (3: 121)

In reality, Defoe stuffed the text with materials from earlier writers, especially his primary source, William Camden’s *Britannia*, first published in Latin in 1586. Two versions came out in Defoe’s lifetime of a new augmented translation and edition by Edmund Gibson (1695, 1722). The earlier edition duly appears in the sale catalogue as item 186, along with a reply to Camden, reissued in 1724; investigation reveals that it was the 1695 version that Defoe generally used. Scores of borrowings from *Britannia*, often quite lengthy, can be detected in the *Tour*; some are acknowledged, but many more of them are not. The presence of Camden’s great book in such a dense concentration within the text provides a clue to Defoe’s aims: he wished to create not just a storehouse of antiquities, but a hymn to the nation, with its roots, development and structure considered under the historical aspect. Using *Britannia* in this way enabled him to give the surface of his narrative a kind of historical undercoat on which he could paint in his own observations.
We can trace many of the other sources from which Defoe took his information, and from which he derived his sense of the nation’s past. He used books such as Elias Ashmole’s *History of the Order of the Garter* (1715), John Aubrey’s *Miscellanies* (1721), Richard Carew’s *Survey of Cornwall* (1723) and the work mentioned in an earlier citation, Sir William Petty’s *Political Arithmetick* (1691). Significantly, every one of these was in his library. Other books listed in the collection that are not acknowledged in the text, but possibly used in compiling the *Tour*, were antiquarian works by Richard Rawlinson, Jodocus Crull, Sampson Erdeswicke and Bulstrode Whitelocke. When the narrative reaches Stonehenge (1: 229–31), abundant evidence demonstrates that Defoe had consulted not just Camden on this topic, but also speculations by others such as Inigo Jones and John Aubrey on the origins of this monument. Taken together, these facts conclusively show that it is impossible to take Defoe at his word, as critics and historians used to do, and suppose that he had a limited interest in the history of places he visited on his imaginary journey.

Easier to spot is Defoe’s fascination with topography and cartography. We can be sure that he availed himself of books in the collection such as John Ogilby’s *Britannia* (1698), or *A Book of the Names of all the Parishes, Market Towns, Villages... in England and Wales, with Maps* (1668). Surveys of Middlesex, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire, reprinted in 1720 and 1723, would have proved highly germane to Defoe’s task. As for previous British travels, one item stands out above all others. Item 950 contains John Macky’s *A Journey through England in Familiar Letters*, together with its sequel *A Journey through Scotland* (1722–3). Defoe peppers the text with contemptuous references to his rival’s alleged blunders, but always under the guise of ‘a late author’ or some variant which scornfully denies Macky a name. Unquestionably he wrote the *Tour* with one eye on the *Journey*, his gaze at once corrective and acquisitive. Defoe certainly knew, and perhaps carried with him on his trips, one of the roadbooks which gave detailed itineraries for travellers, even though none of these was sold with the library collection. The works of Emanuel Bowen, for example, had started to appear in time to be of use to Defoe in plotting routes and calculating distances. In addition, the county maps supplied by Bowen may have been of assistance, especially in remote corners of Wales. Moreover, these guides show enough detail about the nature of the countryside (listing open fields, woods, hills, small streams, and so on) for an astute author to be able to stitch together a convincing description of the scenery, just as if he had recent memories of the landscape to draw on. Finally, the catalogue of Defoe’s collection records ‘A map of Middlesex,
Essex, and Hertfordshire, done by actual survey, six feet by four, with 728 coats of arms round the map’. Middlesex and Essex were the two counties where the author had the closest contacts, with Hertfordshire also high up on the list.\(^{17}\) We might reasonably speculate that, granted some skill in draughtsmanship (and Defoe’s handwriting is exceptionally neat), he could have run off such maps himself without too much trouble.

### The Transport System

In Wrigley’s model, we find categories such as agricultural change – a topic on which Defoe had less expertise than on trade, especially, and manufacturing, but which he does highlight in many places, as for example when he discusses sheep husbandry, something with obvious relevance to the clothing trade he knew so well. But the category which stands out for a reader of the *Tour* is that relating to ‘the creation of a better transport system to reduce the cost of moving goods from place to place; to make it possible for goods to move freely at all seasons of the year’.\(^{18}\) Few had fuller experience than Defoe about the rigours of eighteenth-century travel, and his book describes the scorching reflections that blinded a weary summertime traveller on the ridge called the Hog’s Back in Surrey, along with the deep mud through which carts sank like stricken boats in Sussex each winter. He gives us the perils of crossing the high Pennines in a snowstorm, and (although this is most likely pure invention) the hazards of negotiating a route past the towering precipices of Penmaenmawr on the coast of North Wales. The *Tour* actualises the experience of travel. This makes for a sharp distinction from Macky and his breed, since they simply list successive towns and appear to be magically wafted from one stopping-place to another. Defoe’s method here owes much to his invention of separate ‘circuits’, closed systems which yet form a coherent pattern, radiating out from London and Edinburgh respectively in the English and Scottish sections.

As with the course of industry and agriculture, the full transport revolution had barely started in Defoe’s time. Canals lay over the horizon, and railways would not start to sweep across the land for another hundred years. Even in the case of roads, the most important technological advances came with the road-surfacing and bridge-building methods of John McAdam, John Smeaton and Thomas Telford later in the century. But the first whiff of change was in the air, and Defoe had the most sensitive nostrils to pick up this scent. He saw that better transport was the key not just to improvements in trade, but also to the creation of a more united
kingdom. Indeed, the modern double sense of ‘communications’, with a kind of pun on two meanings (transportation/personal interaction) could have been invented to explain the underlying message of the *Tour*, with its constant emphasis on the interdependence of different regions, cities, trades and employments. At this date transport of heavy goods by water was far cheaper than land-carriage, often by a factor of three or four. Before the canals emerged, this situation placed great responsibility on natural water systems, and Defoe was quick to spot the importance of the ‘navigation’ acts, which enabled communities to open up links to other parts of the country, both close at hand and distant. It will suffice to cite just one example, since Defoe’s first impulse when he comes to a river is always to assess its potential for navigation:

The *Trent* is navigable by Ships of good Burthen as high as *Gainsborough*, which is near 40 Miles from the *Humber* by the River. The Barges without the Help of Locks or Stops go as high as *Nottingham*, and farther by the Help of Art, to *Burton* upon *Trent* in *Staffordshire*... .This, and the Navigation lately, reaching up to *Burton* and up the *Derwent* to *Derby*, is a great Support to, and Encrease of the Trade of those Counties which border upon it, especially for the Cheese Trade from *Cheshire* and *Warwickshire*, which have otherwise no Navigation but about from *West Chester* to *London*; whereas by this River it is brought by Water to *Hull*, and from thence to all the South and North Coasts on the East Side of *Britain*... especially in Time of the late War, when the Seas on the other Side of *England* were too dangerous to bring it by long-Sea. (3: 14–15)

We see from this account how local measures could have regional and even national consequences. All the river improvements mentioned here had happened quite recently, and the Derwent navigation act had been passed only in 1719.

These facts enable us to scotch a persistent canard, to the effect that Defoe had got all his preparatory work out of the way years before he wrote the *Tour*. In reality, the book is commendably up to the minute on a range of topics, and nowhere more so than in the case of matters relating to transport. In one section this sense of contemporaneity rises almost to the quality of visionary insight. It comes in the famous appendix to the second volume, devoted almost entirely to the state of the English roads and to the major hope for a better future, that is the new system of turnpikes, discussed more fully in Chapter 10. These devices took the responsibility for maintenance of major highways from the antiquated and inefficient mechanism in use (unpaid labour by a gang of reluctant locals at long intervals) in favour of new trusts, operating to make a profit from the tolls
charged but discreetly monitored by the presence of men like justices of the peace among the trustees. Though one or two isolated turnpikes had been set up earlier, the trend only gathered momentum in the second decade of the eighteenth century, with a rapid acceleration in the 1720s. The instances cited by Defoe include one pioneering venture in 1696, and a number of trusts which had sprung up in the ten years prior to the appearance of the *Tour*.

What is just as striking as the freshness of Defoe’s information is the clarity with which he envisions the issues at stake. Overwhelmingly, these early projects were carried out along the major trunk roads leading out of London, and it was only gradually that the network spread to the minor routes scattered round the provinces. This fact suits Defoe’s purposes, in emphasising the crucial position of the capital in the business of the nation. He also points out that these improvements themselves constituted ‘an infinite Improvement to the Towns near London, in the Conveniency of coming to them, which make Citizens flock out in greater Number than ever to take Lodgings and Country Houses’. Such were the advantages now that ‘such Tolls are erected now on very Side of London, or soon will be’, but he did not doubt that ‘in Time it will be the like all over England’ (2: 243).

On the turnpikes, Paul Langford has observed that ‘Defoe was excited by their galvanizing effect.’19 The writing in this appendix does indeed have an extraordinary energy, whether Defoe is lamenting the sad state of the old road system or greeting the arrival of the new promised land, fed and watered the revolutionary changes he saw in progress. Thus, he deprecates the condition of the road from London to the West Midlands:

Suppose you take the other Northern Road, namely, by St. Albans, Dunstable, Hockley, Newport Pagnel, Northampton, Leicester, and Nottingham, or Darby: On this Road ... you enter the deep Clays, which are so surprisingly soft, that it is perfectly frightful to Travellers, and it has been the Wonder of Foreigners, how considering the great Number 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 heavy Charge to the Country, that new Building of Causeways, as the Romans did of old, seems to be a much easier Expence. (2: 234)

And now the prospect in store:

Upon this great Road there are wonderful Improvements made and making, which no Traveller can miss the Observation of, especially if
he knew the Condition these Ways were formerly in; nor can my Account of these Counties be perfect, without taking Notice of it; for certainly no publick Edifice, Alms-house, Hospital, or Nobleman’s Palace, can be of equal Value to the Country with this, no nor more an Honour and Ornament to it. (2: 239)

This was quite a new way of measuring the state of the nation. Others had doubts concerning the value and profitability of turnpikes, but Defoe understood that most users would find tolls preferable to plunging into ‘Sloughs and Holes’ (2: 238). He saw, too, something we might miss, that better roads would facilitate not just speedier passage for passengers and goods vehicles, but also the driving of cattle and sheep over long distances, an essential part of the annual cycle in agriculture.

‘Improvements made and making’. This phrase sums up Defoe’s attitude to Britain, as a country in the process of rapid and mainly beneficent change. He did not get everything right, but he perceived as early as anyone that a more efficient transport network was vital to any advance in the commercial and manufacturing sphere, and by extension to wider possibilities for the national way of life. One of Wrigley’s categories, we may recall, involved new habits of consumption. Defoe saw very clearly the role which markets play in economic activity, and the need to encourage consumers to find producers, and producers to satisfy consumers. He hymned the traditional activity at Stourbridge Fair near Cambridge, but he also described with a hint of reserve the new leisure resorts and spas such as Bath and Bury St Edmunds, with their opportunities for conspicuous consumption: ‘I left Tunbridge,’ he records drily, ‘for the same Reason that I give, why others should leave it, when they are in my Condition; namely, that I found my Money almost gone’ (1: 166).

Forging the Nation

Humour is one of the key ingredients in the book, expressing Defoe’s amused and frequently sceptical take on the world he saw around him. But at other moments the work attains a plangent and even tragic tone, notably in his threnody for the losses suffered by some great mercantile figures as a result of the South Sea Bubble, just four years distant when he wrote:

I shall cover over as much as possible the melancholy part of a Story, which touches too sensibly, many, if not most of the Great and Flourishing Families in England: Pity and matter of Grief is it to think that Families, by Estate, able to appear in such a Glorious Posture as this, should ever be Vulnerable by so mean a Disaster as that of Stock-Jobbing: But the General
Infatuation of the Day is a Plea for it; so that Men are not now blamed on that Account: and if my Lord Castlemain was Wounded by that Arrow shot in the Dark, ’twas a Misfortune. (1: 131)

This passage will be discussed more fully in Chapter 7 as it relates to the Bubble: it is cited here to illustrate one of the more profound reflections in the text. The ‘Story’ recurs as a main thread in the plot of the book, as it represents a perilous moment when the march of Britain towards peace and plenty nearly hit a sudden roadblock. One other recent event had similarly jangled the alarm bells, but the Jacobite rising of 1715–16 was still too delicate a subject to be met head on. A more detailed analysis of this subject follows in Chapter 6. Instead, the author generally tiptoes around the episode, except where he comes to the site of a major encounter such as Preston, scene of ‘the late bloody Action with the Northern Rebels’ (3: 135). In his Scottish sections, he is forced to acknowledge the existence of Jacobites and their fate. But he nearly always chooses to write without undue edge or emphasis: thus, the Duke of Gordon ‘has been embroil’d a little in the late unhappy Affair of the Pretender; but he got off without a Forfeiture, as he prudently kept himself at a Distance from them till he might see the Effect of Things’ (3: 264).

For the most part, Defoe provides adequate coverage of lowland Scotland, though never quite as convincingly as in the south and west of England. His lack of first-hand knowledge of the Highlands shows up clearly: but then the mountains and glens had not yet really been brought under the remit of the Hanoverian government, despite the Union of parliaments in 1707. (And Wales is given almost as sketchy a treatment). In that earlier phase of his life, Defoe had been employed as an agent for Godolphin and Harley, nominally as ‘a person employed for the Queen’s service in Scotland for the revenue, etc.’, but really to promote the Union. He strongly supported the measure, but recognised that it could only achieve success with the willing consent of the Scottish people. The terms certainly satisfied the needs of the political class in the Lowlands, where Defoe was operating. In addition, he insisted that Scotland needed to develop its economy along the lines England had followed, so as to introduce improvements in trade, manufacturing, shipping, fishery and agriculture.

Already, Defoe had explored these issues in the pamphlets that he wrote during the time he spent in Edinburgh between 1706 and 1712; but he returned to them with fresh energy in the Tour. At Glasgow he sets out the ways in which the Scottish export trade could be boosted, despite the fact
that it had been held back by the absence of profitable trade with the colonies, especially America (3: 201–4). On the coast of Fife he takes up a different aspect of the problem, and recommends that more of Scottish production should be applied to consumption at home:

I know . . . that Scotland is now established in a lasting Tranquillity; the Wars between Nations are at an End, the Wastings and Plunderings, the Ravages and Blood are all over; the Lands in Scotland will now be improv’d, their Estates doubled. The Charges of defending her Abroad and at Home lies upon England; the Taxes are easy and ascertain’d, and the West-India Trade abundantly pours in Wealth upon her; and this is all true; and, in the End, I am still of Opinion Scotland will be Gainer.

The answer is simple:

I must add, that her own Nobility, would they be true Patriots, should then out their helping Hand to the rising Advantages of their own Country, and spend some of the large Sums they get in England in applying to the Improvement of their Country, creating Manufactures, employing the Poor, and propagating the Trade at Home, which they may see plainly has made their united Neighbours of England so rich. (3: 237–8)

Nationhood is a fragile thing, so that the creation of a truly united kingdom took several generations and never attained a perfect state. As Linda Colley has shown, many decades passed before Scotland was properly integrated into a single commonwealth, and it retained distinctive religious, educational and legal structures. But at the start of the process, one prerequisite for the Union to gain acceptance (passive at least) was a clear argument on its behalf, setting out the political objectives, the economic potentiality, and the cultural benefits which might accrue. Defoe did as much as anyone to carry out this public relations exercise, and he was still promoting the agenda in his Tour, more than a decade after the Union came into being. In fact the case gains much greater strength in 1726: partly because he could already point to hopeful signs that the programme had begun to work, and partly because he was able to argue the case in detail with reference to particular places and trades he had encountered on his supposed journey. Above all, the instructive contrast with English experience builds up over the course of the narrative. A truly united ‘whole island of Great Britain’ will only emerge when the parts cohere, in a way that the design of the Tour brings them together as a single organic unit.

For an important analysis of the Tour under this aspect, we turn to the work of Betty A. Schellenberg. Her basic claim is that the Tour attempts
to portray a constructed nation, which is ‘as much a reflection of Defoe’s need to impose some organizing principle upon the chaotic detail of his (and his readers’) experience of Britain as it is a confident “Whig” departure from traditional ordering structures’. Enlisting theoretical insights from writers such as Benedict Anderson and Homi K. Bhabha, she detects four governing models within the work, ‘the nation as aestheticized landscape, the nation as body, the nation as centred circle, and the nation as network’. For our purposes, the last two of these are the most relevant. She argues that ‘Defoe’s concern with internal coherence is evident as well in the care with which he pushes borders beyond what is English to what is British in the aftermath of the 1707 Act of Union.’ This creates a difficulty because ‘Defoe’s neatly temporal means of assimilating the other is apparently unable to control the destabilizing fact that the Union has made of Scotland a hinterland of London’. It follows that ‘England and Scotland never quite become Britain, because Scotland has not succeeded in becoming England; or, in other words, because Defoe’s image of “Britain” is in fact one of England.’ This analysis leads to the conclusion that, ‘Although Defoe earnestly recommends to readers his vision of “a Nation, pushing and improving,” these raw edges and unruly images remain. . . . Ironically, then, the public participation that Defoe invites in imagining Great Britain leads in fact to the dissolution of his vision.’

This is one of the most searching discussions of the Tour to have appeared so far. In my view it exaggerates the rhetorical problems that the text displays, and overstates the ‘dissolution’ of the underlying vision. There is something close to circular about Schellenberg’s argument that the construction of the nation reflects a need to impose an organizing principle upon recalcitrant material: it would not be constructing a nation if there were no such organisation. Much of the textual detail is anything but chaotic, having been chosen and set out with careful attention to its place in the whole (to take just one instance, the way that the appendix on the highway system ties together disparate experiences that have presented as the narrator journeys along the roads). Equally, the case with regard to Scotland would be more convincing if Defoe had ducked the issues, but on the contrary Letters 11–13 repeatedly stress the need for Scotland to take up improvement in a serious way, that is to become fully integrated within the united kingdom. Far from seeing it as a mere hinterland of London, he urges the Scots to embrace their destiny, cultivate their strengths and develop their own resources as England had done (see for example 3: 148–9; 157–8; 190–93; 234–8). Defoe is clear that Glasgow has been doing just what he recommends, and that there is great potential for the surrounding
region to outdo London, Bristol and Liverpool in some areas of trade (3: 202–3). Again, the work has acknowledged from page 1 the necessity of taking in Scotland, and the separate Introduction to these last three letters (147–9) recognises its independent situation even after the Union. Finally, Schellenberg’s discussion neglects the many balanced, repeated and interlocking parts that operate throughout the entire work to provide a unifying force. The Tour is not primarily defining England against Scotland: if there is a shadowy other present, this would be the Catholic nations of Europe, or in some cases the Dutch, as these are the only powers able to challenge Britain’s hegemony in the world.

A reading with some similar features but one that takes a more radical course is that of Trevor Speller. He argues that ‘Defoe portrays plenty of spaces in the nation that need to be brought under forcible, rational control. A nation whose pockets of irrationality may at any time flare up and threaten rational political life is far less communal than anything [Benedict] Anderson suggests.’ This is because ‘Great Britain is a landscape of political struggle, an island that must enclose and suppress various forms of irrationality, whether philosophical, political, religious, or otherwise. These pockets of irrationality are not just limited to inhabitants; they are deeply rooted in the traditions, histories, and even the topography of the landscape.’ More specifically, the argument stresses ‘moments when Defoe’s book makes excurses into narrative or history, when it escapes the stylistic homogeneity of mere present-centered description, and when disorder develops into anomaly, violence, and irrationality.’ Speller concludes that, ‘If irrationality bubbles up in certain territories, it is often at the same moment when Defoe’s narrative bubbles up in excurses, or differences in genre. After all, in these moments of heterogeneity, Defoe is writing the landscape in novel ways, inscribing its relationship to reason and questioning his own sense of a new national order.’

As with Schellenberg, the discussion seems to lay undue emphasis on a deliberate selection of marginal and atypical portions of the text, neglecting hundreds of pages where ‘the new national order’ is confidently proclaimed and illustrated. The violence that has to be contained is much less pervasive in the Tour than a reader of this article would suppose. Nor do the admitted shifts in the manner of narration ever seem to constitute differences in genre, precisely.

Some oddities are apparent in what Speller writes. For one thing, though he discusses editions of the work, he completely overlooks McVeagh’s now standard edition of 2001, which supplies information that might qualify his case. He is almost alone among commentators in finding the interpolated...
narrative of the siege of Colchester in Letter 1 as an integral and even crucial part of the overall drift of the book. This is in defiance of several facts: (1) it is the only extended passage in the entire Tour dealing with purely historical material; (2) it is the only long section contributed by a third person (‘so good a Hand’), unidentified but very unlikely to be Defoe himself; (3) it is the only bit of the work with its own map; (4) it is never referred to elsewhere in the three volumes, nor does it establish cross-references to persons or places mentioned later, other than two very brief allusions – less than a sentence each – to General Fairfax in Letters 8 and 9; and (5) the narrative makes a sudden interruption, mid-paragraph, into an ongoing description of Colchester, which reads smoothly enough if the entire block is removed, as happened in all subsequent eighteenth-century editions. Speller also makes much of the proposed scheme to settle the poor Palatines, set against the chaos of London, marked by ‘The monstrosity of the metropolis’s uncontrolled sprawl’; but he fails to observe the restorative projects for the city described in Letter 5, notably ‘A Scheme for a Royal Palace in the Place of White-Hall’ by an author Defoe claims to have known, and running to almost 3,000 words – longer and far more detailed than the proposal for Palatines. In fairness it should be added that Speller makes a number of perceptive observations on the Tour, even if his view of the work differs sharply from the one outlined in this book.

Conclusion

Half a century ago, the introduction to my abridged edition of the Tour ended with what then seemed daring words: ‘Out of this picture of grandeur et décadence there emerges not just a mirror of Britain, as the older writers put it, but a vision of nationhood.’ Since that time, other writers have used similar phraseology: for example, Peter Borsay has said that ‘the Tour is not so much a travelogue as an anatomy (even a vision) of the nation’. As we have just seen, Betty A. Schellenberg has recourse to the expression. The work is available on a website devoted to ‘A Vision of Britain through Time’.

What the book was intent on creating had to do with something less than nationalism in the later sense. Nationalism ‘becomes pervasive and dominant only under certain social conditions, which in fact prevail in the modern world, and nowhere else’. Defoe’s patriotism took the form of espousing an aggressive overseas trade policy, but he saw international trade as a mutually beneficial activity rather than an out-and-out struggle to the death, or war by other means. Internally, he wanted to see Scotland
properly integrated into the Union. He saw Britain evolving into a great
world power, not just by military strength but by economic expansion.
Trade, radiating out from its great power-house in London, would harness
natural resources and, along with agriculture, take advantage of improve-
ments devised by the innovating spirit of the people. As he made his way
round the country, his report fell short of accuracy in every detail, and not
all his predictions came true. But history has abundantly shown that he was
more often right than wrong. The author dipped his toes into the sea at the
extreme corners of the nation, and the book left its own footprint on the
English imagination.