

PRESS & MEDIA

Disassembling Defoe

THE SOURCE: “The Greatest Liar” by Nicholson Baker, in *Columbia Journalism Review*, July–Aug. 2009.

JOSEPH ADDISON LABELED Daniel Defoe “a false, shuffling, prevaricating rascal,” and even his 19th-century biographer, William Minto, admitted that Defoe was “perhaps the greatest liar that ever lived.” Yet he is also considered the first real journalist. “For a faker,” Nicholson Baker says, “Defoe had an enormous appetite for truth and life and bloody specificity.”

Both Defoes—the dissembler and the earnest seeker of truth—hover over one of his greatest creations, *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Published in 1722, when Defoe was in his sixties, it’s a first-person account of London’s great plague of 1665. The “first person” is not Defoe, but a saddler named H. F., who vividly describes such things as the “terrible pit” where the carts dump bodies that fall “promiscuously,” and the city so numbed by death that nobody looked up when a woman “gave three frightful screeches, and then cried, ‘Oh! death, death, death!’” In all ways, *A Journal of the Plague Year* is, Baker asserts, “an astounding performance. It’s shocking, it’s messy, it’s moving.” But is it true?

Determining an answer is as difficult as verifying details about the prolific writer’s life. He was born, most likely in late 1660, to a London

butcher or candle maker named James Foe; the Frenchified version of the family name was the writer’s affectation. Defoe worked as a hosier, tile maker, and speculator while penning satirical pamphlets on the side, but suffered a series of bankruptcies, from which some of

his wealthy literary patrons rescued him. In the early 1700s, one of his writings landed him in Newgate Prison for a time, where he started a newspaper, the *Review*. According to Baker, the author of both fiction and nonfiction books, Defoe’s appetite for news was boundless. A character in one of Defoe’s works, *Colonel Jack*, doubtless spoke for his creator: “In this way of Talk I was always upon the Inquiry, asking Questions of things done in Publick, as well as in Private.”



Daniel Defoe’s vivid depiction of the 1665 London plague straddled the line between fact and fiction.

In 1719 Defoe produced his famous novel, *Robinson Crusoe*. The work was billed as a memoir—"Written by H I M S E L F"—and initially taken as such, and it was only when that story unraveled that Defoe admitted that the work was fictional. Something similar happened when *A Journal of the Plague Year* appeared three years later, its title page boldly claiming it to be "Written by a Citizen Who Continued All the While in London." Initially accepted as an eyewitness account, it eventually came to be seen as Defoe's work, dismissed as "fiction masquerading as fact." That

view held until 1919, when a young scholar, Watson Nicholson, determined that there was not "a single essential statement in the *Journal* not based on historical fact." Others have confirmed Nicholson's judgment. The late man of letters Anthony Burgess proclaimed that "Defoe was our first great novelist because he was our first great journalist."

The two roles, Baker believes, are not mutually exclusive. With *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe, the relentless questioner and scribbler, felt the need to invent a new kind of narrative, one that would combine

his gift for tale telling with details gleaned from people's experiences. His stand-in, H. F., perhaps patterned after his own uncle, Henry Foe, is "more than a bit of commercial-minded artifice. The ventriloquism, the fictional first-person premise, helped Defoe to unspool and make sequential sense of what he knew." Defoe may also have recognized that his own reputation might work against him. As Baker cautions, "If you make up sad things and insist that they're true, nobody afterward will fully trust what you write."

HISTORY

Oil for Containment

THE SOURCE: "The Marshall Plan and Oil" by David S. Painter, in *Cold War History*, May 2009.

EVEN THE MOST ASTUTE STUDENT of Cold War history might fail to connect America's Marshall Plan directly to Middle Eastern oil. Yet oil was key to the "origins, operations, and impact" of the 1947 initiative, writes David S. Painter, a historian at Georgetown University. The policies put in place as part of the effort to rebuild Europe fostered an unprecedented dependence on oil from Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East.

Until World War II, Europe relied on coal for more than 90 percent of its fuel. The war shifted patterns of energy use toward oil, and by 1945 much of the crucial contin-

ental transportation network and an increasing number of factories relied on it.

America was the world's leading oil producer when the war ended, accounting for two-thirds of global production. As Europe's ruined factories and transport systems struggled to rebound, the price of oil rose and the bills were due in dollars. The fledgling economic recovery appeared threatened.

Dollars were scarce in the European states, and oil gobbled up more

More than 10 percent of the total aid extended by the Marshall Plan was for oil.

of them in most countries than any other single item. The nearby Soviet Union—once a leading oil producer and now in effective charge of the energy supplies of its Eastern European satellites—looked like a tempting supplier for the Western Europeans. American leaders, already in a Cold War mode, feared that the dollar shortage would increase economic distress, boost support for communist parties, and possibly push some of the desperate Western Europeans into the arms of the energy-rich Soviets.

The Marshall Plan provided some \$1.2 billion for oil, more than 10 percent of the total aid extended under the program. But the Americans didn't want to sell Yankee oil abroad. Europe's oil appetite was so voracious that U.S. officials feared it would siphon off supplies needed at home. Seventy-five percent of the petroleum financed from the principal account in the Marshall Plan came from "offshore sources." The Arabian American Oil Company, 30