

Title	"Having Thus Passed the Rubicon" : Interpreting Defoe's Design for North Britain in His Tour
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 50 P.13-P.29
Issue Date	2012-01-24
Text Version	publisher
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25145">https://doi.org/10.18910/25145</a>
DOI	10.18910/25145
rights	
Note	

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# "Having Thus Passed the Rubicon": Interpreting Defoe's Design for North Britain in His *Tour*

HAYASHI Tomoyuki

## Introduction

In *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26), Defoe says, "I had once, indeed, resolved to have coasted the whole Circuit of Britain by Sea, as 'tis said, *Agricola* the Roman General, did."<sup>1</sup> Although he did not actually voyage around the coast, Defoe clearly revealed his ambition to describe in detail all parts of Great Britain in his *Tour*. Defoe wrote his *Tour* not only to narrate the facts he sees, but also to paint an image of the prevalent trade networks in his imagination. Hence, he frequently refers to other materials like William Camden's *Britania* for further information. For Defoe, London is the heart of the trade network in the whole nation: "[T]he main Stream will run to the Center... as the Blood to the Heart" and London is "the Center of England" (2: 65). It seems that Defoe considers London to be the center of trade activities, just as ancient Rome was connected to many cities by road.

However, there is another aspect. Some critics consider that "the *Tour* is, in some respects, a more literary work than Defoe's novels," for "the *Tour* employed metaphor, hyperbole and paradox" more frequently (Sill 80). As a piece of travel literature, it is very interesting. After crossing the bridge at Nottingham, Defoe claims, "Having thus passed the Rubicon (Trent) and set my Face Northward, I scarce knew which Way to set forward, in a Country too so full of Wonders" (3: 21). Unlike Julius Caesar, Defoe cannot resolve which way to proceed. He seems

less confident when he describes the remotest parts from London. However, another purpose of his *Tour* is to describe the details of Scotland to prove the fact that "Scotland is not so barren of Things, worth Observation" (3: 161). In fact, he spares a quarter of all his pages to describe Scotland. Defoe continues his journey to John o' Groats, the northernmost part of Great Britain.

In his *Tour*, his primary intention is to provide an account of London, but later Defoe changes his mind and provides a whole picture of the United Kingdom. Hence, Defoe compares himself to the Roman General who made an expedition into Scotland. In this thesis, I'll treat his descriptions of North Britain, especially Scotland, to examine his ideas about how this part could contribute to the improvement of the whole nation.

### **Chapter 1: Defoe's Remedy for Centralism**

G. M. Trevelyan praises Defoe's *Tour* in his *English Social History* thus: "Defoe was one of the first who saw the old through a pair of sharp modern eyes.... [T]his picture of England, drawn by Defoe... leaves the impression of a healthy national life, in which town and country, agriculture, industry and commerce were harmonious parts of a single economic system" (293-94). For Trevelyan, "a healthy national life" is composed of the local networks to London. To have a harmonized development of "agriculture, industry and commerce," Defoe considers booming river traffic very important. He mentions the names of major rivers like Thames, Wye, Avon, Tweed, and Leith. It is important that he makes his tour along these rivers. For example, Defoe praises the fact that in the town of Bury, the inhabitants enlarged a small river and made it "navigatable" to a larger one, River Lynn, so that "all their Coal and Wine, Iron, Lead, and other heavy Goods, are brought by Water... from London, by the way of *Lynn*" (1: 97). These "navigatable" rivers, which

cross the country, connect all its parts with London.

Defoe judges the prosperity of towns by the amount of trade. In describing Wiltshire, Defoe says with hyperbole:

*Wiltshire* itself helps to supply *London* with Cheese, Bacon, Malt, Three very considerable Articles... and I may, without being partial, say, that it is thereby rendered one of the most important Countries in *England*, that's to say, important to the public Wealth of the Kingdom. (2: 36)

In his *Tour*, Defoe frequently links the amount of goods traded to London with "the public Wealth." People in the country send their agricultural products to London, and, in return, gain the goods they wish from the London market. Even from Scotland, commodities are brought to this capital city: "These *Scots* Runts, so they call them, coming out of the cold and barren Mountains of the Highlands in *Scotland*, feed so eagerly on the rich Pasture... and the Beef is so delicious for Taste, that the Inhabitants prefer 'em to the *English* Cattle" (1: 108). In his *Tour*, Defoe explains to the readers about this economic system of the Great Britain.

Meanwhile, he places particular emphasis on the decline of towns. In the preface, he says, "Great Towns decay, and small Towns rise" (1: 48). So far, many researchers like Schellenberg talk about Defoe's concept of "decay". The following is the famous passage in his *Tour*:

This Town [Dunwich] is a Testimony of the decay of Publick Things, Things of the most durable Nature; and as the old Poet express it,

'By numerous Examples we may see,  
That Towns and Cities Die as well as we.'

The Ruins of *Carthage*, of the great City of *Jerusalem*, or of antient *Rome* are not at all Wonderful to me. (1: 98)

Betty Schellenberg says, "[D]ecay seems genuinely puzzling to Defoe as meaningless even godless, failure of art in its responsibility to nature" (300). She disagrees with the idea of decay as the "counter-image" for "every image of growth" in Defoe's *Tour*.

For example, Defoe talks of Ipswich, the "decaying" town thus: "The loss or decay of this Trade [of constructing ships] accounts for the present pretended decay of the Town *Ipswich*" (1: 86). However, later Defoe reveals the truth that "the neighborhood of *London*, which sucks the Vitals of Trade in this Island to itself, is the chief Reason of any decay of Business in this place" (1: 88) and points out "the immense Indraft of Trade to the City of *London*." I agree with Schellenberg's claim of "Defoe's description of London as the vortex or swallowing mouth of England's economy" (302). London actually has the possibility to destroy the rural economy as well as to allow it to flourish. Defoe also has a fear that this prosperous capital, in future, will perish as did "antient Rome," which he considers as the model.

How will Defoe find a remedy for the bad effects of economic centralization? We can find the answer in his journey to the northern part of Great Britain. After he reaches Nottingham, Defoe divides the Island of Great Britain by the River Trent:

It is true, the Northern Part is much larger than the Southern, now [that] *Scotland* is united.... But it must be allowed, still, that the Country South by *Trent* is the Richest by far, and most populous; occasioned chiefly by the City of *London*.... [W]e shall find them matched if not out-done, by the Growing Towns of *Liverpool*, *Hull*, *Leeds*, and *Manchester*, and the Cities of *Edinburgh* and *Glasgow*.... (3: 14)

These "Growing Towns and Cities" in the north are what Defoe emphasizes as the new hub for all trading activities. Let us

examine the example of Hull in the mouth of the River Trent. He says that Hull is now matched with other European cities like Hamburg or Rotterdam in trade. Praising its growth, he concludes, "[T]here is more Business done in *Hull* than in any Town of its bigness in Europe" (3: 110).

Indeed, after crossing the River Trent, that Defoe can get rid of the bad influence of London. It is evident from Figure 1 that Defoe first makes small circuits from London. He says, "I BEGAN my travels, where I Purpose to End them, *viz.* At the City of *London*" (1: 51), he, at first, considers that the end of the circuit is London. However, later he makes the circuit larger through North England and Scotland. He also starts his circuits from Nottingham, Liverpool, and Edinburgh. For this northern part there is a little amount of updated information. Hence he becomes more engaged in visualizing the making of a national state.

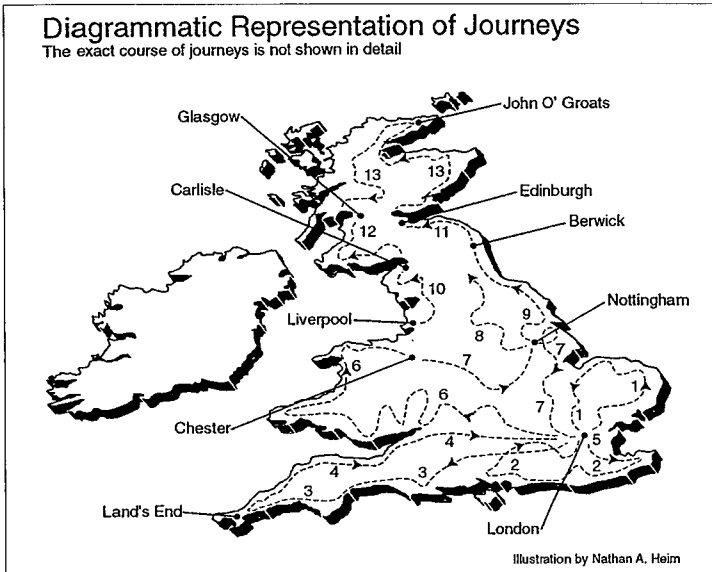


Fig. 1 Defoe's Routes in his *Tour* (Rogers, *The Text of Great Britain: Theme and Design in Defoe's Tour* 18)

To Defoe, trade is particularly advantageous to the northern part of Britain. We should also direct our attention to his description of the Peak District in Derbyshire. When he crosses the steep hills, he is impressed by the bustling and prosperous town. He praises it as an "ideal" place, using a biblical image of the "past golden age".

People here... generally live to a great Age, a certain Testimony to the goodness and wholesomeness of the Country, which is, without doubt, as healthy as any Part of *England*; nor is the health of the People lessen'd, but help'd and establish'd by their being constantly employ'd and... they find a double Advantage by their being always in Business.  
(3: 63)

For Defoe, the place is ideal, for the "health" of people is directly connected to the "wealth" of their business. Here, it is interesting to note that this "health" is not completely related to the networks of London. Rather, people can get these benefits by being remote from the capital city. The "development" sometimes causes "decay" of towns like Ipswich for national prosperity. Defoe thus finds the real "healthy" and "wealthy" country.

Here arises a question: Why does Defoe use the phrase "crossing the Rubicon" while crossing the River Trent? He means "a point of no return," but he might have deliberately used the phrase to denote the political arrogance implied in such a mission. This entails a journey away from the capital city of London towards the boundaries to know about remote northern countries. As Caesar led his army from his province across the Rubicon, breaking the law, Defoe also tries to reinforce the merging of the "whole" of Britain, that's to say, England and Scotland. In chapter 2, I'll deal with Defoe's Scottish tour and consider Defoe's emphasis on the benefits by the past Union of 1707.

## Chapter 2: Instruction of the Improvements

"[A]s I shall not make a Paradise of *Scotland*, so I assure you I shall not make a Wilderness of it," says Defoe before beginning the Scottish section. Then he adds to it, "I shall endeavour to shew you what it really is, what it might be, and what, perhaps, it would much sooner have been" (3: 148). Clearly, Defoe intends to show not only the facts, but also the possibility of improvements in Scotland. Some researchers criticize Defoe for his "English" perspective. Schellenberg says, "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" (306). However, I think it's also true that Defoe is one of the few eighteenth-century English writers who reflect deeply on the Scottish part of Britain. In his affection for Scotland, Defoe clearly exceeds other travel writers of the age like John Mackey (?-1726) or Celia Fiennes (1662-1741). I'll rather evaluate Defoe's position as a mediator between the two nations. First, I'd like to pay attention to his description of the rebellion of 1715.

Defoe says, "*Scotland* is now established in a lasting Tranquility.... I am still of Opinion *Scotland* will be Gainer [by the Union]: But I must add, that her own Nobility, would they be true Patriots, should then put their helping Hand to the rising Advantage of their own Country" (3: 237-38). In his *Tour of Scotland*, he frequently refers to the Jacobite Rebellion in 1715. He hostilely talks of the threat by the Old Pretender, James Francis Edward Stuart. He emphasizes that the Pretender's invasion is made with the support of France. He adds that many Scottish noblemen lose their honor and seats for the reason of their cooperation with the rebels. Defoe talks of the wisdom of the Duke of Gordon, who gets off "without a Forfeiture, having prudently kept himself at a Distance from them [rebels] till he



might see the Effect of things" (3: 264). Giving the example of the Scottish nobility, Defoe emphasizes the necessity of being prudent during the Scottish rebellion.

He realizes the craftiness of Scotland from its response to the rebellion. He doubts if some cities can gain benefits from both opposing sides. He takes up Perth as an example. He says, "[T]he Towns men got so much Money by both Parties," and explains about it thus:

[T]he Pretender and his Troops lay near or in this Place a considerable Time; now the bare Consumption of Victuals and Drink is very considerable Advantage in *Scotland*, and therefore 'tis frequent in *Scotland* for Towns to petition the Government to have Regiments of Soldiers quarter'd upon them, which in *England* would look monstrous, nothing being more terrible and uneasy to our Towns in *England*. (3: 248)

As military camps, the war enriches Scottish towns like Perth. Defoe asserts that we cannot consider Perth as a victim, saying "It seems a little Enigmatick to us in the South, how a Rebellion should enrich any Place" (3: 247). To Defoe, there remains a doubt whether some towns in Scotland are cooperating with both the government and the rebels.

However, Defoe still emphasizes the national benefits gained by the Union. He tries to trust Scotland and its possibility for further development. He admits Scotland as the developing part by using words like "Gainer" and "the rising Advantage." Indeed, in describing Glasgow, he analyzes the benefits of trades thus:

[H]ere is the Face of Trade, as well Foreign as Home Trade; and I may say, 'tis the only City in *Scotland* at this Time, that apparently Encreases and improves in both. The

Union has answer'd its End to them more than to any other Part of *Scotland*, for their Trade is new form'd by it.... (3: 200)

Defoe uses the phrase "the Face of Trade." It means Glasgow holds major portion of the trade in the United Kingdom. To his regret, Glasgow is the "only City" which receives the benefits, but Defoe is careful enough to use the phrase "at this Time." He believed that, in future, other cities in Scotland would also become as prosperous as Glasgow is. He therefore considers the need to "improve" Scotland further so that it becomes the ideal trade center.

As we pointed out in Chapter 1, river traffic is a very important factor for developing trade relations and enhancing the prosperity of the city. Defoe seriously discusses the necessity of the "Navigation of Art" by the canals in Scotland.

[T]he two *Firths*, from the *Firth* of *Clyde* to the *Firth* of *Forth*, have not an Interval of above twelve or fourteen Miles, which, if they were join'd, as might easily be done, they might cross *Scotland*, as I might say, in the very Center.

Nor can I refrain mentioning how easy a Work it would be to form a Navigation, I mean a Navigation of Art from the *Forth* to the *Clyde* and so join the two Seas.... (3: 198)

He believes that the construction of the canal would be extremely advantageous for the growth of commerce. It is necessary that the canal run across the "Center" of Scotland to ensure a good flow of traffic between the eastern and western coasts of the country. Defoe's project of the canal is not impractical. His idea is realized in later years with the growth of a network of Scottish canals, like the Forth and Clyde canal. After all, Defoe insists on the expansion of river traffic as he does in England.

Later, he talks of Glasgow thus: "Could this City but have Communication with *Firth of Forth*, so as to send their Tobacco and Sugar by Water to *Alloway*, below *Sterling*, as they might thence again to *London*, *Holland*, *Hambrough* and the *Baltick*, they would... in a few Years double their Trade" (3: 201). Hence, he reiterates the necessity of connecting Clyde and Forth by canal. By developing this effective network, he thinks Scotland can even trade with foreign countries like Holland, Hamburg, and the Baltic States. From these descriptions, it is evident that he considers Scotland's economic growth as an essential factor that can benefit the whole of Britain.

To understand the prospect of Scotland's development, it is necessary to have a clear knowledge of its geography. Defoe counts on Roman antiquities as his milestones. We should not forget the fact that Defoe always refers to the history of *Britania* in the old age of Rome. For example, he sometimes talks of the "Roman Highway" near Cirencester, Warwick, and Perth, as the archetype of the traffic. However, he loses the trace of Romans in North Scotland. He says, "[T]he *Firth of Tay* was the utmost Bounds of *Roman Empire in Britain*", and that the General Agricola "always return'd to his Post, making the *Tay* his *Frontier*" (3: 254). He knows that North Scotland isn't familiar to the English, too. He says, "they [Geographers] are oblig'd to fill it up with Hills and Mountains, as they do the inner Parts of *Africa*, with Lyons and Elephants, for want of knowing what else to Place there" (3: 269). To project the actual picture, he needs to travel to John o' Groats, the northernmost point.

Then he claims the superiority of the English to the Romans in the former's feat of marching into Scotland, but ironically reveals the Scottish valor. While the Roman general returned to see no advantage from the conquest, the English relentlessly advanced further:

[O]ur *English Caesars* have outgone the *Romans*; for *Edw. I.* as is said, pass'd the *Tay*, for he rifled the Abbey at *Scoon*.... And from these Retreats the *Scots* always return'd *Antaeus* like, with double Strength after every Defeat till in the next Reign they overthrew his Successor *Edw. II* at *Bannockbourn*, and drove the English out of the Whole Country.... (3: 255)

It seems that Defoe's English pride of the conquest gradually turns into praise of the unvanquished spirits of the Scots. Defoe doesn't especially touch this subject for fear that it would arouse the English trauma because this defeat results in "the Animosity... implacable between the two Nations" (3: 207). We can criticize the "English" Defoe, for what Edward I did can be seen as one of major causes of Scottish hostility, but it is wise of Defoe to refrain from writing about the history in detail for it could become an obstacle to the Union.

However, Defoe compares himself to the Roman General Julius Agricola many times in his *Tour*. We cannot deny the imperialistic designs that Defoe had in mind against Scotland. Then, should we consider Defoe's exploration only as a reflection of his desire for the invasion? This question poses a difficult problem. In a sense, his travel leads to its conquest. In the next chapter, we will then compare the descriptions of the capitals of England and Scotland, and I'd like to emphasize Defoe's idea of Edinburgh as another center of the north. Finally, let us move to the scene of the Borders. His act of climbing the Cheviot Hills can highlight his idea of peace by the Union.

### Chapter 3: Defoe's Future Perspectives

Defoe makes a fair analysis of Edinburgh and describes it as "a large, populous, noble, rich and even still a Royal City" (3: 168). He defends its high location because Edinburgh stands

upon the hill for fear of the sudden attack of enemies, which includes the English and the Irish. However, he also points out the fact that this also acts as a disadvantage, for it prevents the expansion of trade and increase in population. Defoe concludes that for the benefit of the city, he cannot consider it as "a Prospect in Hope" (3: 168). John Glendening says, "Examples like Edinburgh undermine Defoe's official position, never advanced very forcefully in the first place, that Scotland, rich in valuable attributes, has been enriched further by the Union" (44).

However, I disagree with Glendening's opinion because Defoe adds that Leith, the neighborhood town, which is located in the mouth of the river, should be considered as "the Sea-Port of *Edinburgh*" (3: 176). He also says that Leith is "able to discharge much more business than the Place supply" (3: 176). Defoe insists that the Scots should trade in more articles in this harbor than they did before, so that they can establish an important trade center. He again emphasizes thus: "Here had been a plain large enough to have contain'd a second *London*" (3: 167). The phrase "a second *London*" means that Edinburgh still has room to develop as a trade center. After all, Defoe's impression of Edinburgh is not so bad as Glendening suggests. He doesn't give up his hope for the future development of Edinburgh.

It reminds me of Defoe's description of London. Unlike Edinburgh, London lies on flat ground and Defoe says, "[A]s the City [London] stood before, it was strangely exposed to the Disaster, which happen'd" (2: 75). In a word, London, as a capital, had a fatal weakness to the disaster. However, owing to the Great Fire in 1666, people can, paradoxically, recreate the city much better than before. Here, he compares the past picture of London with the present one, and highlights the merit in the latter. He observes: "[T]ho' by the New Buildings after the Fire, much Ground was given up, and left unbuilt, to inlarge the

Streets" (2: 75). Thus, Defoe convinces us that Edinburgh will be a much better city in the future as well as London.

Finally, we'll move to the Borders and analyze the scene of Defoe's climbing the Cheviot Hills. In his *Tour*, he crosses many mountains like the Pennines, as well as hills, but it is rare that he climbs the hills for fun. He begins this excursion at Kelso: "By the Sight of *Cheviot Hills*... we thought at *Kelso* we were very near them, and had a great Mind to take as near a View of them as we could" (3: 218). Defoe clearly knows that the battle had been fought between the Earl of Douglas leading the Scots and the Earl of Northumberland. He usually pretended to be indifferent to the past, saying, "The antiquity is not my work" (2: 11), but here he cannot help showing his interests in the battlefield by referring to the ballad of *Chevy Chase*.

Defoe says, "Here we enquired after the famous Story of *Cheviot-Chase*, which we found the People there have a true Notion of, not like what is represented in the Ballad of *Chevy Chase*, which has turn'd the whole story into a Fable" (3: 221). Defoe dismisses the credibility of the ballad as "a Fable" and tries to find "a True Notion." Thus, he cannot believe that this steep hill was the battlefield. However, the local people assured Defoe of the history: "both the Bodies [of army] meeting at the Foot of *Cheviot Hills*, fought a bloody Battle, wherein both the Earls were slain" (3: 221). Then he adds: "[S]o many kill'd on both Sides, that they that out-lived it, went off respectively, neither being able to say which had the Victory" (3: 222). We can thus observe that this place had been unfortunate for the English and the Scots. To learn of more about the history of hostility between the two kingdoms, Defoe decides to climb up the hill.

He hires a local guide to climb up the hill and says, "We were the more uneasy about mounting higher, because we all had a Notion, that when we came to the Top, we should be just as

upon a Pinnacle, that the Hill narrowed to a Point" (3: 220). He experiences many fears in climbing up the hill, but the guide soothes him. At the end, he gets to the top and feels satisfied with the view:

We saw likewise several Hills, which he [the guide] told us were in *England*, and others in the West of *Scotland*....

We saw *Berwick* East and the Hills called *Soutra* Hills North, which are in sight of *Edinburgh*. In a Word there was a surprising View of both the united Kingdoms, and we were far from repenting the Pains we had taken. (3: 221)

The repetition of the phrase "we saw" shows Defoe's excitement in getting the panoramic view of England and Scotland. Defoe can imagine the peaceful sight of the Union from the top of the hill, where once the English had a bloody battle with the Scots. Peace, he thought, would be one of the best benefits of the Union.

Here he offers a maxim: "Fear magnifies the Object and represents Things frightful at first Sight, which are presently made easy when they grow familiar" (3: 221). Can we not use this idea as the remedy for the English trauma against Scotland which I referred to in Chapter 2? If the English and the Scots cease to fear each other for the benefit of the Union, they will surely understand the concept of the whole Island of Great Britain. Defoe says, "We were far from repenting the Pains we had taken." To know he can see Edinburgh "in sight" from the Borders, Defoe finds the merit of the city.

The Borders enable Defoe to explore the prospects in North Britain. He travels from south to north to acquire the knowledge of the countries. Then he appeals to readers effectively to make the Union possible. As I have mentioned earlier, Defoe is indeed one of the writers who reflect deeply on how Scotland can

bring about growth and development of the whole nation. From this perspective, Defoe's *Tour* becomes all the more interesting.

### Conclusion

In *Tour*, Defoe sees a horse race at New-Market and fancies himself "in the *Circus Maximus* at Rome, seeing the antient Games, and the Racings of the Chariots and Horsemen" (1: 118). Interestingly, Defoe uses the similar phrase at Nottingham in North Britain: "[H]ow it [the horse race] brought into my Thoughts the *Olympick Games* among the Greeks; and the *Circus Maximus* at Rome" (3: 21). Thus, Defoe can envision the glory of ancient Rome in the cities in South and North Britain. Indeed, he consciously uses a similar phrase at Nottingham, for he adds that the amount of audience is "greater, as it was really more numerous, than ever I saw at *Newmarket*" (3: 21). As I have mentioned earlier, Defoe considers "antient Rome" as a model for Great Britain, but it is important to note that he doesn't compare London with Rome, but sees its glory in many rural places of Great Britain.

Defoe divides Great Britain into North and South by the River Trent and considers Scotland as an excellent part of the whole Britain. Although the metaphor of the Roman general Agricola implies an inherent imperial ambition, especially with regard to Scotland, Defoe prefers a peaceful amalgamation of the North and South. He thereby considers how North Britain may be developed in the future. After all, Defoe judges "the Whole Island" fairly, paying attention especially to the commerce. His *Tour* was actually one of the bestsellers in the eighteenth century. It became famous especially as a guide to the commercial activities of all parts of the nation.

He always insists on water navigation, and emphasizes the development of canals for Scotland. His dream partly comes true



as the Forth-Clyde canal. Actually, the benefits of the canal greatly contribute to the prosperity of many cities in Scotland. However, he cannot foresee the further Jacobite rising in Scotland in 1745. By this war, the English and the Scottish, again, came to hate each other. His efforts to pacify both nations can be considered premature. Yet, it is also true to this rebellion that Defoe considers Bannockburn as the trauma. The same thing happens in the battles like Culloden in 1745. Ironically, the Scots are more suppressed after 1745.

For these reasons, Defoe's *Tour* is highly rated by recent scholars. It is often said that Defoe considers London as a center of trade, but the truth is that he spends more pages describing rural places than London itself. A close reading will reveal that he emphasizes the fact that products in these places are transported not only to London, but also to the North, or foreign countries like France, Germany and the Netherlands. He clearly gets rid of what we call "London-centrism" by treating the North independently from the South. Hence, Defoe uses the title "Rubicon" to the River Trent in order to suggest future prosperity. By traveling himself, Defoe proves the fact that North Britain can be a great trade center. His greatest achievement is to make his readers aware of this economical network in Great Britain.

### Notes

1. Daniel Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 3 vols. ed. John McVeagh (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2001). Vol. 2, p.9. All references to the novel are to this edition: Volume and page numbers are shown within parentheses hereafter. In this thesis, I have abbreviated the title *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* to Defoe's *Tour*.

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