

who saw themselves engaged in an extraordinary effort to create societies in the image of the Old World through a constant process of improving the "wilderness" they had wrested from the Indians.

Although the volume of improvement literature generated during the seventeenth century was substantial, its principal spokesman was the political writer and novelist Daniel Defoe (1661?–1731), whose literary output during the four decades beginning in 1690 seems to have been unrivalled by any other writer in early modern England. *An Essay upon Projects* (London, 1697), which strongly influenced the young Benjamin Franklin, was perhaps the single work that most fully captured the optimism of the improvement writers and celebrated what Defoe called the "projecting spirit." But in volume after volume, in tract after tract, in poetry and in prose, Defoe heralded the achievements of the new age of practical experimentation. He consistently emphasized the extent to which those achievements had been made possible by and been a response to the commercial developments over the previous century. Among the most prominent of Defoe's works developing this theme were: two satires on the opponents of the new socio-economic order he so admired, *True-Born Englishman*\* (London, 1701) and *Jure Divino*\* (London, 1706); his two most important novels, *Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1719) and *Moll Flanders* (London, 1722); and a variety of miscellaneous works including *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*\* (London, 1724–27), *The Complete English Tradesman*\* (London, 1726), and *A Plan for English Commerce* (London, 1728).

As some of these titles suggest, Defoe viewed the industrious and enterprising merchants, entrepreneurs, and tradesmen as the heroes of the new commercial age, and he both praised their accomplishments and merit and welcomed the upward social mobility they represented. As the prime examples of the psychology of innovation and individual achievement that were the distinctive components of the rage for projects, these laudable figures were chiefly responsible for encouraging people to undertake the manifold projects that, in so many areas of human endeavor, had produced such a variety of new inventions, techniques, and institutions that seemed, especially in the economic realm, to have brought so many benefits both to individuals and to the nation by improving trade, increasing capital, and generating greater wealth. Unreservedly endorsing these changes, especially the many economic innovations of the 1690s, including the creation of the Bank of England and a stock exchange, and better credit, stock-marketing, and insurance facilities, Defoe became

the exponent of an ideology that was eager for change and confident that it would be beneficial.

Defoe thus depicted the world as a series of unresolved problems to be solved and of unfolding opportunities to be exploited by the ambitious and the industrious. Through the ceaseless striving and instrumental behavior of thousands of individuals, each pursuing his own self-interest, men of merit and ingenuity would reshape the world in ways that would bring material and social rewards to themselves, a variety of utilitarian benefits to society, and prosperity, growth, and greatness to a nation that, he hoped, would be presided over by the meritorious men responsible for these achievements. His views represented an extension into the socio-economic realm of the liberal individualist ideology of John Locke, a writer Defoe much admired. Indeed, through *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe may well have been more responsible than any other writer for popularizing Locke's ideas about the state of nature, contract, consent, and the sanctity of property among British and American readers during the eighteenth century.

But improvement was not something limited to the economic and social realms. For Defoe and, perhaps to an even greater extent, for his contemporaries and ideological allies Joseph Addison (1672–1719) and Richard Steele (1672–1729), the concept of improvement promised to produce better moral conduct among individuals and greater civility in society as a whole. In Addison's *The Freeholder; Or Political Essays*\* (London, 1716), his plays such as *Cato* (London, 1713), and his posthumously published *Miscellaneous Works*\* (London, 1721), which were widely owned in America; in Steele's many political writings and plays such as *The Conscious Lovers* (Dublin, 1722); and in the essays both Addison and Steele wrote for the Whig journal *The Spectator*\* (1711–14), these writers explicitly linked the development of commerce and the passion for individual and social improvement to the rise of culture and politeness. By promoting exchange and contact among nations, regions, and classes, commerce—they suggested in a formula that would become a commonplace of social and political discourse by the middle of the eighteenth century—served as an active civilizing agent that made societies more polite, more urbane, and less barbarous. By providing society's ruder segments with higher standards and models of behavior, commercial exchange, they contended, at once smoothed the rough edges of provincial behavior and improved manners, conversation, sociability, morals, and culture. In this view, enhanced refinement and civility