

Lee, William. 'Defoe's *Mercurius Politicus*: Mesnager's Negotiations'. *Notes and Queries*. 4th Series. V (12 February 1870): 177-79.

No one is more competent than my friend MR CROSSLEY to appreciate the grave consequences involved in the consideration "Who wrote the *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*? And I cannot doubt he shares my regret that when I was preparing to write the *Life of Defoe*, and asked his help to a knowledge of my author's letter in *Mercurius Politicus* (apparently disclaiming the *Minutes of Mesnager*), his library was in so unsettled a state, from a compulsory removal, that he was unable to lay his hand upon the volume. I am sure he will acquit me of any neglect to investigate the subject fully, and at the proper time.

That letter has, since the publication of my work, appeared in your columns; and as I have included the book in question among the works of Defoe, I admit that I am bound to state my reasons for so doing, and, as far as possible, to reconsider the whole matter. The time that has elapsed between MR CROSSLEY'S article and this reply must not therefore be taken as any indication of unwillingness to discuss the subject, but as a measure of the deliberation due to its importance, and of the special research necessary to elucidate its primary and collateral issues.

Irrespective of Defoe's statement, the question whether he did, or did not, write this book is, perhaps, incapable of strictly logical proof; yet the concretion of ascertained facts may constitute a body of circumstantial evidence upon which the reader can find his own verdict.

The pursuit of truth ought to be the highest object of the literary investigator, irrespective of consequences; and even if, in this case, the character of Defoe should seem to suffer, I shall, at least, be exonerated from any disposition to disparage him by those critics whose only charge against me has been the easily forgiven one that, in writing his *Life*, I have shown myself a hero-worshipper.

The inquiry as to Mesnager's book comprises the following heads :

- I. Its genuineness
- II. Its authenticity
- III. Its object
- IV. Its author
- V. Defoe's disclaimer
- VI. If Defoe did not write it, who did?

The investigation required a minute critical examination of the book itself, of the contemporary newspapers, and the historical records of the secret proceedings between the last Ministry of Queen Anne and Monsieur Mesnager, preliminary to the public negotiations at Utrecht. Also as to the examinations and report of the Committee of Secresy appointed by the first Parliament of George I, the articles of impeachment against the principal members of the then late Administration, more especially those against the Earl of Oxford and Lord Bolingbroke, and the trial and acquittal of the former. Also, as to the time and manner of the publication of Mesnager's book; the opinions of contemporary writers as to its authorship and contents; the internal, external, and comparative evidence, if any, that it was written

by Defoe; his strong inducements to avoid the imputation of having written it, and his apparent disclaiming many other works attributed to him. And lastly, as to the existence of any other contemporary author who, naturally or imitatively, wrote so exactly like Defoe as to deceive his own and later generations.

I. *The Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager* professes to have been “Written by himself”, and “Done out of French”. He states, however, that he had “little of the English tongue”, and could not read it distinctly. There can be no pretence, therefore, that he translated it himself. But had the book any existence in French? All my research ends negatively. I cannot find any trace of such a work, either in manuscript or print, or quoted in any other book. But I find Abel Boyer, himself a Frenchman, designating the English edition, soon after publication, a “forgery”; and in his monthly pamphlet, *The Political State of Great Britain*, challenging the world to prove that it had any existence in French. To that challenge neither Defoe nor any one else replied. My only reward for this part of my labours was the fact that Monsieur Mesnager died in the autumn of 1714. This was of service in the analysis of the book.

As Mesnager first came to London very secretly, a stranger would be unable to venture upon the precise day of his arrival, although nothing could have been more certain to Mesnager himself than the advent of the most memorable undertaking of his life. I find the book stating (page 81), “I arrived in London the -- day of --, 1710.” His second visit to London was made publicly, and therefore the writer of the book had no difficulty in stating (page 212) that it was “in the beginning of *September*, 1711. He says (page 80), that the immediate occasion of the French king’s sending him to London was the death of the Earl of Rochester, uncle of Queen Anne; yet he states afterwards (page 97) that, soon after he arrived in London, Count Guiscard attempted to assassinate Sir Robert Harley. That attempt was on March 19, 1711; but the Earl of Rochester did not die until May 2 following, being the same day on which Harley made his first appearance in Parliament after the attack on his life. At page 4 the writer speaks of the King of France as dead, yet he lived a full year after the death of Mesnager. In like manner I find him (pages 41-43) speaking of Queen Anne as deceased, yet she lived until Mesnager died. Again, pages 48, 51, 52, and 53 refer to circumstances connected with the Earl of Oxford which did not occur until long after the decease of Mesnager.

After the above anachronisms, out of many more, I need not enlarge upon the incredibility that the diplomat of a great nation, who had been so secretly employed, would come publicly forward in his own person, so soon afterwards, while those immediately concerned with him herein were anxiously destroying every vestige of such negotiations, and would, without the least reserve, tell all his secrets to the world. The reader will be able to decide whether or not the book was “Written by himself”, and if it was “Done out of French”.

II. Its authenticity. Does it give a true account; or, it is partly or wholly fictitious? The most considerable and important parts of the book consist of the intercourse between Mesnager and one designated “my Lord --”. Their interviews were frequent, of long continuance, and their dialogues are given as verbally as if taken by a shorthand writer. Who was “my Lord --”? These meetings had commenced on April 11, 1711, and continued, with a short intermission, until September 20 in the same

year, before any other member of the Queen's Ministry took part in the proceedings. That no other than Lord Bolingbroke was intended is evident from history. His office as Secretary of State; the peculiar relations between himself and the Earl of Oxford; the order of the Regency, immediately after the Queen's death, that all letters and packets directed to the Secretary of State should be sent by the Postmaster-General to Joseph Addison, Esq.; the seizing and sealing of his official papers; the discovery that, amongst others, all those relating to the secret negotiations with the French plenipotentiary, with one or two exceptions, were missing; the proceedings and report of the Committee of Secresy, and the subsequent articles of impeachment, after his escape to France, all combine to prove that he was "my Lord --". Yet it does not tell in favour of the authenticity of *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*, 1717, that the writer, able professedly to give the conversations in 1711, above referred to, word for word, did not happen to remember that "my Lord --" was only plain Mr St John until July 4, 1712. No one was present at these secret interviews but the two persons concerned; and if either had written out the dialogues immediately afterward, while memory was fresh, the words "my Lord --" could not possibly have been used.

When events in England seemed to go as the King of France wished, Mesnager is made to say (page 104) : "The King was so surprised, that he began to think it was the effect of my secret management." He disclaims the praise, and says, "Nor had I so much as made any of my acquaintance yet in England, much less begun any negotiation." Yet in other parts of the book he declares that he did nothing but what the King had previously directed, and that every transaction was immediately afterward reported by him to the King.

Time and space forbid my multiplying these instances of inaccuracy and inconsistency; and it must therefore suffice to say, under this head, that the writer appears to have obtained what is historically true from the newspapers – from the returns presented to the House of Commons by Mr Secretary Stanhope, on April 8, 1715, of all the papers discovered relating to the negotiations for peace, and from the proceedings and report of the Committee of Secresy. The hiatus caused by the abstraction of all the papers relating to the earlier and secret negotiations enabled him to fill out from imagination the remainder - including the dialogues - without fear of contradiction, at least until the book should have accomplished its intended object. This brings me to the next point requiring consideration.

The object of the book. Twelve days before the presentation to Parliament of the papers just referred to, Lord Bolingbroke fled in disguise to France. The night before such presentation, the Earl of Oxford came to London from his country seat, and caused his brother publicly to announce the fact in the House of Commons. On June 9 following, the Committee of Secresy, to whom the papers had been referred, presented their report, when that able lawyer, Sir Joseph Jekyll, one of the Committee, declared to the House :

"That as to Lord Bolingbroke they had more than sufficient evidence to *convict* him of high treason, upon the Statute 25 Edward III. But that as to the Earl of Oxford, he doubted whether they had either sufficient matter or evidence to *impeach* him of treason."

I quote the above as showing the difference between the two cases, and the conduct of the accused statesmen. Bolingbroke had served the French interest, and in doing so had acquired the friendship of Monsieur Mesnager. The Earl of Oxford had served a Queen weary of war and bloodshed, but had held no more intercourse than was absolutely necessary with the French emissary. Had Mesnager written the book called by his name, the conduct of Lord Bolingbroke would have been placed in the most favourable light, whatever might have been its adverse influence on the fate of Lord Oxford. The object of the writer, whoever he might be, was the reverse of this. Not only are all known facts stated unfavourably towards Lord Bolingbroke, but the fictitious conversations between Mesnager and "my Lord --" are intended to concentrate upon the head of the latter all that might be treasonable in the negotiations, and thus by implication to clear Lord Oxford. The time of its publication, however, sets at rest the object of the book. The trial of the Earl of Oxford was fixed to take place on June 13, 1717, but adjourned to the 24th. On the 17th of the same month appeared *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*, so as to admit of being read before and during the trial, but without affording any opportunity of neutralising the favourable impression until after the proceedings should have terminated. On July 1, Lord Oxford was discharged from his impeachment.

I submit to the judgement of the reader whether the facts stated under the three proceeding heads do, or do not, point to the conclusion that this book was hastily written in defence of Lord Oxford, shortly before it was published, and consequently long after Mesnager's death.

Lee, William. 'Defoe's *Mercurius Politicus*: Mesnager's *Negotiations*'. *Notes and Queries*. 4th Series. V (19 February 1870): 202-3.

IV. Its author. Having already considered the negative part of the question, it must now be ascertained in what direction such evidence as we have - traditional, circumstantial, and internal - directly leads us.

The character of the book takes along with the inevitable condition, that we must look for its author within limits not circumscribed by a large radius. A practised political writer, who, from whatever cause, did not find or give himself time to correct his manuscript, yet had a fertile imagination, a rare faculty of combining fiction with fact, so as to appear truthful, and to captivate the understandings of his readers. Skilful in dialogue, wherein the interest is sustained, and the argument moves on naturally, without any appearance of foregone conclusion, or of one speaker being made "dummy" to the other. One who agreed in many respects, but not in all, with the political principles of the Earl of Oxford; and approved, but only with the same limitation, of his lordship's political conduct. What, however, above all, seems to narrow the area within which we have to search is, that while other known and able political writers (who had long fed upon the Lord Treasurer's bounty) forsook him when fallen - a prisoner in the Tower, sick, and awaiting his trial for life - the writer of *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*, whoever he might be, continued his lordship's faithful friend and defender.

Mr Abel Boyer was hostile to the Earl of Oxford, and I have not been able to find that he was charged by any one with being either author or translator of the book; but he chooses to say so, for the purpose of angrily protesting against any such charge, and abusing the book and its author.¹ Such protest was very gratuitous. Nothing could be less like, either in principle or style, his avowed writings.

Every contemporary writer I have been able to discover as having noticed the book, not even excepting Boyer himself, attributes the *Minutes of Monsieur Mesnager* to the pen of Daniel Defoe.

When this book was published, little more than two years had elapsed since the appearance of Defoe's *Appeal to Honour and Justice*. In that pamphlet he speaks of the fall of the Earl of Oxford, and that his lordship was threatened with impeachment. His chief object in writing it was, in his own words, to

“Produce a sufficient reason for my adhering to those whose obligations upon me were too strong to be resisted, even when many things were done by them which I could not approve.”

He then goes on to say that when he was lying “friendless and distress'd in the prison of Newgate,” his family ruined, and himself “without hope of deliverance,” the Earl of Oxford (then the Right Hon Robert Harley, and Secretary of State), with whom he “had never had the least acquaintance,” first inquired what he could do for him, and then did not rest until he procured his freedom, relieved his family, and induced the Queen to take him into her service. Well might he add :

“Here is the foundation on which I built my first sense of duty to Her Majesty's person, and the indelible bond of gratitude to my first benefactor. Gratitude and fidelity are inseparable from an honest man. But to be thus obliged by a stranger, by a man of quality and honour, and after that by the Sovereign under whose administration I was suffering, let any one put himself in my stead, and examine upon what principles I could ever act against either such a Queen, or such a benefactor; and what must my own heart reproach me with, what blushes must have covered my face when I had looked in, and called myself ungrateful to him that saved me thus from distress?”²

Thus wrote Defoe, putting his name in full on the title-page, *eleven years* after his own deliverance, and only *six months* before his deliverer was incarcerated in the Tower on a charge involving life or death. Can we suppose that the man who had so many years continued faithful (often to his own injury) was able, immediately after writing such *Appeal*, to cancel “the indelible bond of gratitude”? that he who had resolved “never to abandon the fortunes of the man to whom I owed so much of my own,” could silence the reproaches of his own heart during the two years that his “great benefactor” was lying in prison, and that while his restless pen was engaged on all other subjects, it was unmoved on this? I will not presume to decide whether or not ingratitude, under such circumstances, would be a greater libel on his character than the charge of denying his authorship. Need we wonder, however; that a book so calculated to serve his lordship, in its contents and in the time and manner of its

publication, as the *Minutes of Mesnager* should have been at once attributed to Defoe, and to no one else, so far as has been ascertained?

As to internal evidence. I find in the *Minutes*, too numerous to be quoted, all those constantly-repeated words and sentences rarely, if ever, used by any other writer of that age, but which have hitherto been considered the peculiar characteristics of Defoe's style, and have enabled careful students of his writings to distinguish them from the works of any other author. More than this, I have specially analysed the writings attributed to him during the two years preceding and the two years following the publication of *Mesnager*, and have discovered many that I may call extraordinary expressions, not among those common to the whole range of his works, but repeated more than once in the *Appeal to Honour and Justice*, 1715; *Mercurius Politicus*, 1716; *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*, 1717; the recently discovered letters addressed by Defoe to Mr de la Faye in 1718; and in *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719. I may instance one or two such :

“Of all things in the world most abhorred by me...
Though it be of my worst enemies.”³

Compare with :

“A thing justly abhorred by all Christian princes, though against their worst enemies.”⁴

Again :

“A further allowance as service presented.”⁵

Compare with :

“As occasion should present.”⁶

And again (deceiving the Tories) :

“Should continue Tory, as it was, that the Party might be amused, and not set up another which would have destroyed the design.”⁷

Compare with (deceiving the Whigs) :

“That the Whigs might be amused with generals, and be able to dive into no particulars.”⁸

Monsieur Mesnager is made to express (pages 108-9) his admiration of an anonymous tract in favour of peace (written by Defoe), and to relate that he endeavoured to bring this author into his measures by causing

“an hundred pistoles to be conveyed to him, as a compliment for that book, and let him know it came from a hand that was as able to treat him honourably, as he was sensible of his service. But I missed my aim in the person; for I afterwards understood that the man was in the service of the

State, and that he had let the Queen know of the hundred pistoles he had received. So I was obliged to sit still, and be very well satisfied that I had not discovered myself to him.”

A friend, for whose judgment I have great respect, suggests as an objection, that, on the hypothesis of Defoe’s authorship, he would here publish, without adequate reason, an incident not otherwise known, and would furnish his enemies with the means of annoyance. I submit that the weight is on the other side. In the first instance the circumstances were known only to Mesnager and Defoe. Mesnager attempted to bribe, but believed himself entirely concealed. The writer of the book, whoever he was, knew all about the transaction. Defoe knew at the time where the money came from, and he had “let the Queen know,” most probably through her ministers. He had, therefore, if the author, no reason for concealment or suppression, when, long afterwards, making Mesnager give an account of his own negotiations. It was discreditable to the diplomatist to “miss his aim,” and expose himself. It was creditable to Defoe that he was not to be purchased.

V. Defoe’s disclaimer. In this, the least agreeable part of my duty, I shall avoid, as much as possible, the casuistical question, if, or how far, a writer may deny the authorship of his own works. That there have been many and eminent instances in which it has been persistently done, and after discovery justified, is well known to all scholars. I prefer to eliminate, as far as possible, facts bearing on the subject, and to leave the decision to your readers.

The letter of Defoe containing this disclaimer, for the reproduction of which in your columns we are indebted to Mr Crossley, is copied from *Mercurius Politicus* for the month of July, 1717. By referring to his now celebrated letters to Mr de la Faye, the fact is beyond all dispute that Defoe was, on May 23, 1718, and had then been, in his own words, “two year or more,” the author or responsible editor of *Mercurius Politicus*, indeed from its very commencement in May, 1716. He was its author, therefore, when this disclaimer of the *Minutes of Monsieur Mesnager* appeared; and the intentionally non-lucid introduction, as well as the letter itself, was written by him.

The reasons assigned in such introduction for reprinting Defoe’s letter from the *St James’s Post* are, that he had “been injuriously treated” on account of *Mercurius Politicus*, “and being falsely reproached with writing these collections” (ie *Mercurius Politicus*). Now Boyer, in enumerating fourteen works attributed to Defoe, had merely said of the one in question :

“To this famous writer we are, among other learned lucubrations, indebted for ...” 13, *Mercurius Politicus* (or monthly scandal upon the present Government).⁹

Any *injurious treatment* contained in these words must have fallen very lightly on Defoe, judging from the fact that in his vindictory letter, immediately following, *Mercurius Politicus* is not even mentioned. It cannot be denied that the words, “being falsely reproached with writing these collections,” seem almost as emphatic a disclaimer of his authorship of *Mercurius Politicus* as the words used in a later part of the same communication are of the art of *Monsieur Mesnager*. It is a trite objection that if Defoe was the author of *Mesnager’s Minutes*, his disclaimer could have been contradicted by the printers and publisher of the book, and that he would not have

thus incurred the risk of exposure. The practice of the trade was then secrecy, so inviolable that the publishing house that issued *Mesnager* had previously more than once silently incurred the terrors of the law on account of Defoe's authorship, and had only been released by his voluntary personal avowal. If even we assume that another hand wrote the introduction to Defoe's letter, yet he was at the time the author of *Mercurius Politicus*, and by allowing such disclaimer of it to appear uncontradicted, then or subsequently, he may be fairly said to have editorially adopted the intention thereof.

I am tempted to remark upon other parts of the letter and its introduction, but must confine this long article to what strictly relates to the authorship of the *Minutes of Mesnager*, and therefore only observe upon the following :

“We hear since, that the person who is the author of the book which is charged upon Mr De Foe has premised publicly a second edition of it, and set his name to the work.”

The editor of *Mercurius Politicus* believed the author of *Minutes of Mesnager* to be then alive, though Mesnager himself had been long dead. It does not necessarily follow that Defoe, the author of *Mercurius Politicus*, knew the name of the author of *Mesnager*; but otherwise it is singular that he should have heard what the latter “promised publicly,” yet never performed. The second edition was anonymously published shortly afterward, and the world persisted in ascribing the book to Defoe. Is it possible that these words were only intended to divert the reader's attention from the real author? In the following month Boyer repeats, “that in the general opinion” Defoe was the forger of *Monsieur Mesnager's Minutes*. But it is right to add, for what it may be worth, that he took Defoe's disclaimer for a denial of authorship.¹⁰

It is no part of my present duty to explain away the words in which Defoe appears to disclaim the authorship of this book; but I may state the fact that, in more or less ambiguous terms, he thought fit, in respect of many other of his works, to create so much doubt as effectually to mislead his enemies and seriously embarrass his biographers. As illustrations may be mentioned *Legion's Address to the Lords*; *The Balance of Europe*; *Armageddon*; *Mercator*; *Secret History of the White Staff*; two tracts on *Triennial Parliaments*; and *Mist's Journal*. In none of these cases had he probably so powerful inducements to conceal or disclaim his authorship as would press upon him if he were truly the author of *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*.

The Earl of Oxford, when Mr Harley, had undermined the influence of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough at Court, and had procured the ignominious dismissal of the great Duke from his command of the army. It was but natural that every connection of the Churchill family should entertain the most bitter feeling of resentment against the man who had done them such disservice. The Earl of Sunderland had married the daughter of the Duke; and, on examination of the proceedings of the House of Lords relative to the trial of the Earl of Oxford, I find no more energetic and persevering adversary of the accused, from first to last, than the Earl of Sunderland.

It was about April, 1716, that Defoe was appointed to a censorship of the Tory journals, by Lord Townshend. On the 12th of April, 1717, the Earl of Sunderland succeeded Lord Townshend as Secretary of State, and Defoe says his lordship “was pleased to approve and continue this service, and the appointment annexed.”¹¹ As already stated, the book called *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager* was published on the 17th of June, 1717; the trial of Lord Oxford commenced on the 24th of the same month, and he was acquitted on the 1st of July. On the same day appeared Boyer’s *Political State*,¹² publicly charging Defoe with the authorship of the book; and, whether such charge were true or false, Defoe would see immediately before him only two alternatives - a public disclaimer of the work, or an instant and disgraceful dismissal from a lucrative position in the department of which the Earl of Sunderland was the official head.

VI. If Defoe did not write *Mesnager’s Minutes*, who did? Had he a “double,” or an imitator never heard of or suspected by himself, his friends, or his numerous enemies, and yet holding all his political principles, thinking the same thoughts, and clothing them in precisely the same peculiar phraseology, having the same gratitude towards the Earl of Oxford, and continuing faithful to him throughout his imprisonment?

On the hypothesis that Defoe did not write the book, Mr Crossley very properly asks :

“Who was the contemporary who imitates so well his style and manner of writing, as it cannot be denied that some of the tracts repudiated by Defoe bear strong traces of his pen?”

The question is more easily asked than answered, because 1. If we conclude that Defoe had no such contemporary imitator, but wrote the book himself, though obliged for prudential and other reasons to publish an apparently full disclaimer of his authorship, we are driven to condemn him of intentional misleading. 2. If we conclude that such a contemporary imitator existed, and was the writer of this book, we explode a mine that may be far more destructive of Defoe’s fame than we or the world can calmly contemplate. Apart from this apparent disclaimer, and considering the whole question only upon the grounds of contemporaneous reputation, unbroken tradition, and internal evidence, the proofs are stronger that he wrote the *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager*, than that he was the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, or of *Captain Singleton*, or of the *Journal of the Plague Year*.

Unwelcome and unpromising as the inquest appeared, I still felt myself obliged to ascertain, if possible, whether or not there was at that time any living writer who was either “double” to or an imitator of Defoe. With this view, I made out from my extracts of the old journals, from a considerable bibliographical library, and many thousands of pamphlets in my own possession, and from the catalogues of the British Museum, a list of known and anonymous authors of the period, and of such of their works as I had not already examined. Thus prepared, I have laboured for several months among such pamphlets and books with an earnest desire to discover the truth, in whichever direction it might be found; but my only reward is the negative result, that I have utterly failed to discover any contemporaneous imitator of Defoe, or to sift out any book or pamphlet that will bear all the requisite tests of critical comparison, except those written by himself.

Having now stated the facts I have been able to bring together, I recapitulate the heads, and leave each reader to decide for himself :1. Was the book entitled *Minutes of the Negotiations of Monsieur Mesnager* “written by himself,” and “done out of French”? 2. Does it contain a true account, or is it partly or wholly fictitious? 3. For what object was it written, as aiding to discover its author? 4. Is there any sufficient evidence that Defoe was its author? 5. His apparently plain disclaimer of its authorship, and what weight should be attached thereto? 6. If Defoe did not write this book, who did?

William Lee

¹ *Political State*, June, 1717.

² *Appeal to Honour and Justice*, page 13.

³ *Ibid*, page 36.

⁴ *Mesnager*, page 205.

⁵ Second letter to Mr de la Faye.

⁶ *Mesnager*, page 153 and page 273.

⁷ Second letter to Mr de la Faye.

⁸ *Mesnager*, page 187.

⁹ *Political State*, xiii, pages 632-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, xiv, page 100.

¹¹ Second letter to Mr de la Faye, 1718.

¹² The same number of *The Political State* also contained an account of the Earl of Oxford's trial and acquittal; and of the Earl of Sunderland's opposition to him.