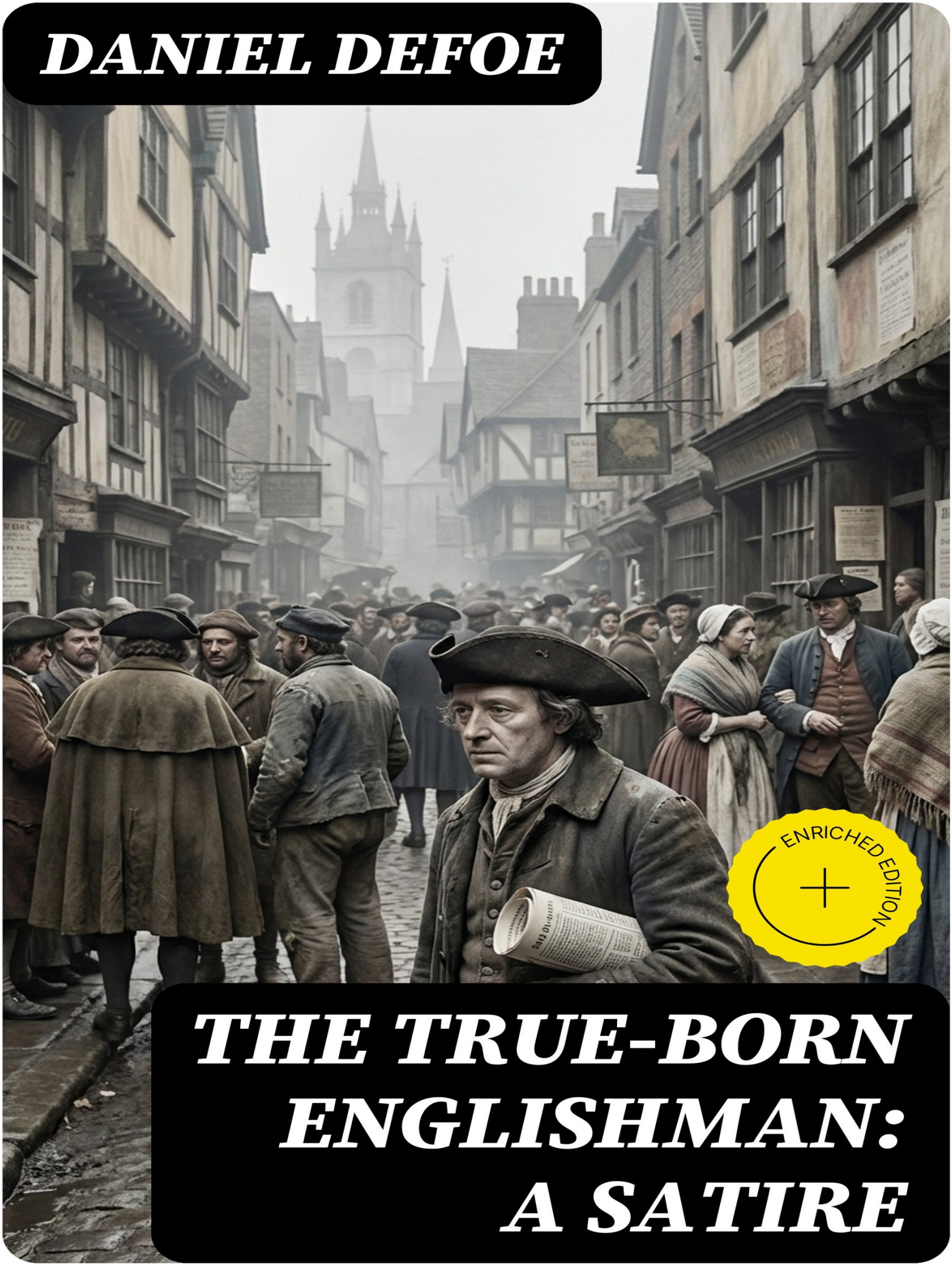
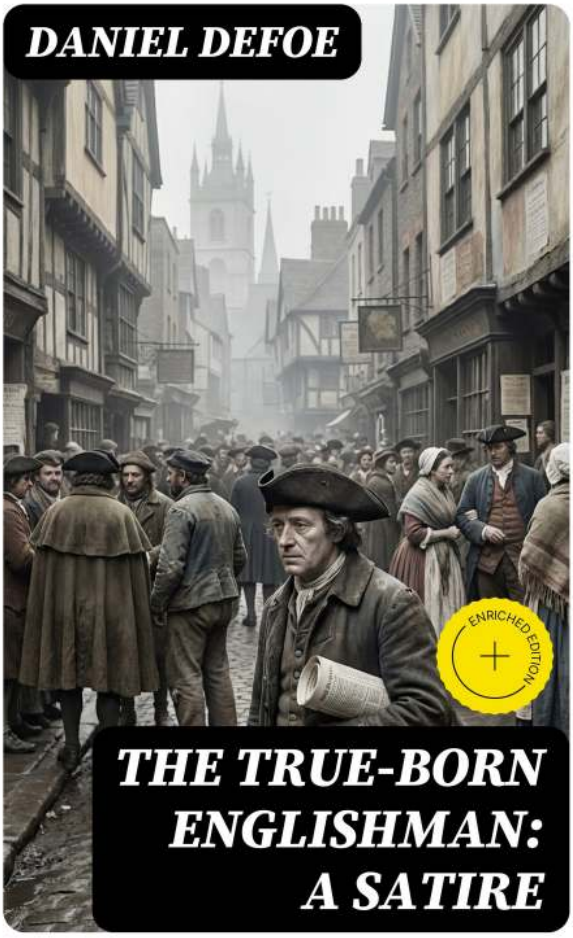
DANIEL DEFOE



THE TRUE-BORN ENGLISHMAN: A SATIRE


DANIEL DEFOE
ENRICHED EDITION
THE TRUE-BORN ENGLISHMAN: A SATIRE

Daniel Defoe

The True-Born Englishman: A Satire

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Julian Ellers

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Introduction

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A nation that proclaims its purity while living on a thousand mingled roots—conquests layered on commerce, exiles folded into kinship, faiths and fashions braided across time—stands before Daniel Defoe’s unblinking eye, where satire turns patriotic certainty inside out, lifts the seams of ancestry, and tests the fabric of pride by stretching it across the rack of history, asking whether love of country grows stronger when it is honest about its composite making or weaker when it clings to myths, and whether the story of belonging is a barrier to strangers or a bridge built from shared contingency.

The True-Born Englishman: A Satire, published in 1701, is a verse lampoon by Daniel Defoe, a writer, pamphleteer, and later celebrated novelist. Composed in the charged aftermath of the seventeenth century’s upheavals, it confronts attacks on foreigners and on the Dutch-born William III by arguing that English identity is historically mixed. Without relying on secrets or surprises, the poem’s premise is simple and daring: examine what “Englishness” really is by tracing how the nation was made. In doing so, Defoe turns the quarrels of the day into a broader meditation on inheritance, community, and political loyalty.

The work is a classic because it fuses popular immediacy with intellectual reach. It speaks to a crowd—quick, witty, topical—yet builds an argument that outlasts the moment. Its impact was palpable: readers recognized themselves, their neighbors, and their newspapers in its jibes, and they

recognized a national story recast in sceptical light. The poem helped establish Defoe as a formidable public voice. More than a period curiosity, it remained part of discussions about how literature can test national myths, showing later ages that satire can be both civic engagement and enduring art.

Defoe brought to this poem the energies of a dissenting upbringing, mercantile experience, and political journalism. He understood how trade knits strangers into common interest and how polemic heats and hardens identity. The result is satire that sounds like public debate: bustling, argumentative, moral, and opportunely timed. Rather than retreat to rarefied wit, Defoe uses familiar turns of phrase and pointed examples, aiming to persuade as much as to amuse. This commitment to intelligible persuasion would become a hallmark of his career and a reason the poem could travel beyond its immediate controversies into literary history.

The historical moment matters. England had lived through revolution, restoration, and the Glorious Revolution, and it was navigating wars abroad and religious tensions at home. Waves of refugees and migrants—well known in the period—brought skills and anxieties in equal measure. Against this backdrop, suspicions of “foreigners,” including the king’s continental origins, became politically useful. Defoe’s poem enters the scrum to argue that the island’s strength has long depended on mixture. It thus frames current hostility as amnesia about the past, inviting readers to consider how memory, law, and trade continually remake the nation’s character.

The poem’s method is to juxtapose history and attitude. Defoe moves from sweeping recollections of earlier invasions and settlements to sharply drawn vignettes of

contemporary pretension. Irony supplies the engine; accumulation supplies the pressure. The voice is purposely public—addressing the street, the coffeehouse, the scattered audience of pamphlet culture. This design lets the satire double as civics lesson: by tracing the layers from which a polity is constructed, it dismantles claims of exclusive inheritance. The point is less to wound than to expose incoherence and to reconstruct pride on a more honest foundation.

Its themes remain immediately legible. The poem ridicules hypocrisy—those who benefit from openness while decrying it—and it interrogates the social uses of scorn. It tests whether national esteem requires denigrating outsiders or whether, paradoxically, it requires welcoming the talent and industry outsiders bring. It questions the moral vanity that mistakes accident of birth for virtue. Above all, it articulates a patriotism grounded not in blood but in allegiance, law, and shared enterprise. The satire’s sting lies in how recognizable these tensions are in any age that argues about borders and belonging.

Controversy followed closely on its success. The poem circulated rapidly, met with rebuttals and defenses, and drew readers across political camps who either cheered its candor or bristled at its audacity. Its popularity—visible in frequent reprintings—testifies to the appetite for works that interrogate the fashionable bravado of the moment. The noise it generated also elevated Defoe’s profile, placing him squarely in the bustling marketplace of ideas. That very bustle is part of the poem’s subject: it is a document of a print culture where satire can both record and reshape public sentiment.

The True-Born Englishman helped energize a mode of English satire that treats national identity as a historical

artifact rather than a sacred essence. Later writers who explored patriotism, prejudice, and civility in verse and prose worked within a framework the poem popularized: national character as an argument, not a given. It showed how a poet could engage policy and prejudice without abandoning craft. It also modeled an approach to public reasoning that would echo in periodical essays and political verse, where sharp humor, clear structure, and moral challenge meet to form a common intellectual idiom.

To read the poem today is to encounter a performance of civic reasoning. Defoe cultivates a persona that is at once familiar and corrective, a neighbor with receipts. The satire’s energy flows from its invitation to think with history rather than weaponize it. It allows affection for country while refusing flattery, demonstrating that criticism can be an expression of care. This balance—firm, unsentimental, and public-spirited—accounts for why the work feels less like a scold than a call to steadier self-knowledge, a call that literature is uniquely equipped to sound.

As literature, the poem rewards attention to voice, cadence, and argumentative design. It proceeds by example and contrast, by piling observation upon observation until a pattern becomes incontrovertible. Readers attentive to its structure will notice how it moves from the national to the personal and back again, revealing the ways policy becomes attitude and attitude becomes policy. Its language, while anchored in its time, remains lucid enough for modern readers to catch the turns and relish the bite. In that clarity lies part of its legacy: accessibility without dilution of intellectual ambition.

The True-Born Englishman endures because it attaches the pride of belonging to the discipline of truth. In an era still debating immigration, ancestry, and national story, Defoe’s

satire offers both a caution and a resource. It cautions against myths that turn neighbors into strangers; it supplies a resource by insisting that mixed origins can be a source of strength. That double service—historical reminder and ethical provocation—secures its classic status. Readers return to it not for a museum piece, but for a live argument, conducted in verse, about what binds a people and why candor is a form of loyalty.

Synopsis

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Daniel Defoe’s The True-Born Englishman: A Satire, first published in 1701, is a vigorous verse polemic written amid controversy over King William III’s foreign origins and the presence of immigrants in England. Defoe organizes his argument as a sustained rebuttal to nativist pride, aiming to expose the inconsistency of boasting about a purely “English” identity. The poem moves from topical provocation to historical reflection, then to moral and political critique. Across these movements, Defoe seeks to replace anger at outsiders with scrutiny of national habits, urging readers to examine how England’s character was formed and what standards truly deserve public esteem.

The poem opens by confronting the immediate quarrel of its day: hostile attacks on foreigners, including the king’s allies and advisers. Defoe frames his satire as corrective rather than vindictive, asserting that resentment against outsiders distracts from the real sources of national weakness. He treats the wave of pamphleteering and street-level invective as symptoms of a deeper disease—self-flattery that refuses self-knowledge. By calling readers to a stricter honesty about their country’s condition, the opening establishes a tone of chastening candor. Defoe’s first task is to unmask the appeal of easy scapegoats and to question inherited boasts about birth and blood.

To undermine the conceit of a “true-born” national essence, Defoe presents a compressed panorama of England’s origins. He recounts the successive arrivals, conquests, and