

Review

Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn: The Diarist of the Seventeenth Century

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Diaries written in the Restoration age provides us an insight into the day to day life of that period. These diaries were not written with an intention of being read by others. The writers did not wish to make any claim to having produced literature. These are frank and sincere accounts of what actually happened. Diaries and memoir writers supplied one of the most remarkable divisions of prose of the seventeenth century. The development of newspaper and the periodical is also an interesting literary sideline of this era. The civil war undoubtedly stimulated a public appetite for up to the minute news which was supplemented by a new way of living and thinking. The most well known of the diary writers are Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn and Roger North. Samuel Pepys's diary provides us an accurate picture of the social and political life of that age. Through the diary Pepys seemed to be talking to himself. His language is spontaneous. He wrote what comes to his mind and did not try to refine it. One comes across slips and abbreviation in his writing. There was at times an irregularity in sequence. The writing was based upon active observation which is continuously analyzed. Evelyn's diary was full of accurate information. He also had his own unique style of narration.

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INTRODUCTION

The diary is essentially an autobiographical work, yet it should not be confused with an autobiography. An autobiography and a diary are clearly different. Dean Ebner has made the important point that an autobiography is a 'life-review', in which the individual undertakes an autobiography as an exercise in examining one's personal life history. It is essentially retrospective, while the diary is written as life proceeds. The diary tries to keep pace with the individual's life and the reader does not expect the same level of

retrospective analysis in a diary that would be found in an autobiography. Thus, while the diary can be classified as autobiographical writing, it is distinct from the 'autobiography' as it is undertaken in a different manner. In the diary there is less room for retrospection; the problems and worries of daily life which concern the diarist are past history for the autobiographer. For Linda Pollock the 'pure' diary consisted of 'the outflow of the spontaneous impulse to record experience as such and so preserve it'. The essence of the diary is thus to record

life as it is lived, yet as we shall see some 'diaries' were editions of earlier personal accounts put together selectively and giving the author's version of his or her life. As Pollock concedes, the diarists did select, either consciously or unconsciously, the information which they recorded.

The diary writers have played an important role not only in literary development but also in the recording of historical events. For the recreation of a past age the diarists are perhaps our richest source of detail. They provide detailed accounts not only of major historical events but also of personalities. They provide information about their social background, manners and morals, contemporary tastes and fashion in recreation, food and dress.

Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn

The most well known friendship between diarists of this period was that which existed between Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. Both were members of the Royal Society, a society founded in the 1660s to engage in scientific experiments, debate and promote learning, and, although they were by no means close friends, during the years of Pepys' diary at least, they frequently recorded their meetings and compliments for one another in their diaries. Evelyn held the post of Commissioner for the Sick and Wounded, a post which brought him into the same professional sphere as Pepys during the Dutch conflict of the 1660s. Pepys mentioned a scheme of his in 1666 to get Evelyn into the Navy office as a Commissioner, so obviously Pepys had a high regard for his talents and his loyalty to himself. Pepys first mentioned Evelyn on 1 May 1665. Evelyn was not mentioned very frequently in the Pepys diary, and he appears to have been someone with whom Pepys had a general acquaintance concerning navy business, and whom he occasionally met around the governmental areas of Whitehall or Westminster, or at the Royal Society. Evelyn mentioned their acquaintance in a diary entry for June 1669; Pepys traveled with him when the two men went together to visit Evelyn's brother in order to encourage him to have an operation.

The Diary of Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys, (1620 – 1706) the most famous diarist of the period, seems to have begun his diary because he was aware of the crisis affecting the nation at the start of 1660. Pepys was diligent, able and patriotic. This master diarist started his diary in 1660. He wrote his diary for nine years. For some years he joined the naval force and during the time of the plague he and his clerk lodged at Greenwich. His interests were varied and perhaps this quality made him a keen observer of his surroundings.

His diary presents him as a man, who was inquisitive, childish, clear headed, vain ambitious and quarrelsome. He was at one and the same time a hard and diligent worker and one capable of total abandon on enjoyment of the moment. He had a zest for living and there were a few things that did not interest him. He had an eye for the strange and novel occurrences in life. In his works he seems to be looking upon life with the inquisitiveness and enthusiasm of a child. His personality was versatile and he had an open and straightforward outlook. There is no hypocrisy or affectation in his writing which can be seen clearly from the passage from his Diary. His diary provides a panoramic view of an age. He had a great attraction for the theatre and is said to have played truant from work and emptied his pockets to enjoy it.

This theatergoer was an exacting if not always discriminating critic. He makes tart comments about plays and their performances. About "A Midsummer Night's Dream" he has commented – 'the most insipid, ridiculous play I ever saw in my life'. There are details regarding dress in his diaries. The diary is an honest record of all Pepys' virtues and vices his quarrels with his wife, attraction he felt for women and the general happy disposition of his mind. He is critical of excesses in public. He describes in detail life in the court and about the scandals and rumours of his time.

Pepys' eye witness descriptions are very absorbing. We find a graphic description of the plague in his diary. It began in the month of June in 1665. Pepys noticed houses marked with a red cross upon the doors and 'Lord have mercy upon us!' written upon them. The court fled to the country and Pepys too sent his mother out of town. The following passage dated 12th of August, 1665 appears in his diary.

"The people die, so that now it seems they are fain carry the dead to be buried by day-light, the nights not sufficing to do it in. And my Lord Mayor commands people to be within at a night, all (as they say) that the sick may have liberty to go abroad for ayre. There is one also dead out of one of our ships at Deptford, which troubles us mightily; the providence fire-ship, which was just fitted to go to the sea. But they tell me today, no more sick on board. And this day W. Bodham tells me that one is dead at Woolwich, not far from Ropeyard. I am told too, that a wife of one of the grooms at the court is dead at Salisbury, so that the King and Queen are speedily to be all gone to Milton (Reite Wilton, the Earl of Pembrooke's house, three miles from Salisbury. The project to go there was soon abandoned and the court moved to Oxford on 23 September. The plague victim was the wife of a groom in the service of an equerry to the queen; efforts were made to conceal the illness). God preserve us!"

In this passage Pepys has described the psychology of the period of plague. Such a large number of people died from the disease that burials took place during daytime as well as nighttime. Any news of death due to plague made people feel worried and upset. People were terribly scared of the disease. Pepys points out that the royal family decided to change their lodging after learning about the death of the wife of a groom at the court. A year later, Pepys survived unscathed the second great catastrophe of the 1660. A great fire broke out at Whitehall and Pepys was the first to carry the news to the king. He describes in great detail the scene of destruction and distress – people running hither and thither trying to save their possessions. Some piled them into churches and friend's houses still intact. Some transferred their goods on the boats on the river – this and much more is narrated by Pepys with all the urgent actuality of a modern running commentary.

The essence of the impulse of a diary writer on writing his diary is self expression. He writes for his own satisfaction. He records his experience. This imposes a sense of order upon the fragmentary business of living. A diary provides a self – portrait of someone who is not posing and is completely off – guard, for example, Swift's character is truly revealed through his journal written to Stella. A diary often reveals a side of the writer's personality which is quite contradictory to the one posed in public.

The Diary of John Evelyn

One very important diary writer of Pepys period is John Evelyn (1633 – 1703). It is important to note that John Evelyn was one of the founder members of that group of men interested in science and the improvement of natural knowledge by experiment, which became the famous 'Royal Society'. Evelyn was a cultivated gentleman of wide curiosity who travelled in France and Italy as well as in England and later held a variety of public positions. Travel, architecture, the arts of life and inventions that made his life easier or more interesting remained Evelyn's chief interests. His self-possession, urbanity, quiet loyalty and self-discipline remind us that the Restoration gallants shown in the comedy of the time do not altogether represent the Restoration gentleman. He was interested in drawing and music (an interest he shared with his friend Pepys). His diary opens in 1641 when he was twenty one with a retrospective summary of his parentage, birthplace and boyhood. He continued to write his diary till his death. His diary contains a record of events which took place till nearly a month before his death. He lived a long and busy life of nearly sixty-five years. He borrowed generously from newspapers of the day in order to supplement his personal observations. His diary provides an account of the first blood transfusion

and various experiments and discoveries made in his period. In his diary Evelyn wrote an account of the Great Fire of his time. His records are full and to the point. He has also given an apt and complete description of life in the Whitehall just before the death of Charles II. His account of the great fire which broke out in London in September of the year 1666 remains, with Pepys the best known contemporary description which has come down to us.

“All the skie were of a fiery aspect, like the top of a burning oven, & the light seene above 40 miles round about for many nights. God grant mine eyes may never behold the like, who now saw above ten thousand houses all in one flame, the house & crackling thunder of the impetuous flames, the shrieking of women & children, the hurry of people, the fall of towers, houses and churches was like an hideous storme, & the aire all about so hot & inflame'd that at the last one was not able to approach it..... Thus I left this afternoon burning a resemblance of Sodome, or the last day. “

Evelyn describes the scene of the fire. The fire continued to burn for many nights and could be seen from a distance of forty miles. He describes in detail the destruction it caused and how it affected human life.

Later on, Evelyn submitted various proposals for rebuilding the destroyed areas. He was intensely concerned with the welfare of the capital. He was full of plans for the improvement of its streets and buildings and purifying its air of factory smoke. His diary also provides and insight into the deep influence of religion on day-to-day life of people.

In the summer of 1688, John Evelyn was close to seven protestant bishops who were put on trial by the catholic James II and who, when acquitted, became heroes for resisting popery. In October Evelyn noted the 'strange temper' that the nation had been reduced to, and wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, after his release from the Tower, urging him to co-ordinate his opposition with that offered by the earl of Clarendon and other lay devotees of the established church. Neither Archbishop Sancroft nor Clarendon were revolutionaries; nor was Evelyn. When he heard of William of Orange's landing, Evelyn thought it 'the beginning of sorrows' unless a free parliament could reconcile the king and the prince, and he seems to have been as surprised as any that the outcome was the crowning of William and Mary as joint monarchs. So when, on 22 February 1689, he attended their coronation, he had expected they would have shown at least 'some reluctance', but, he noted sourly, 'nothing of all this appeared'. Evelyn acquiesced in the result of revolution, but it would seem he had not predicted its outcome.

CONCLUSION

These two men saw the revolution in different ways. Pepys had a fond of intellectual curiosity, but he reveals himself in his diary there is much more of ordinary human frailty – vanity, lust, ambition I his makeup than Evelyn's more self-conscious recording reveals. A distinguished English historian has called about Pepys, "perhaps the greatest administrator in the history of the British Navy". His career as civil servant emerges from his diary in the midst of the vanities, trivialities, gossip and domestic problems which he presents with engaging frankness. Whereas, Evelyn's diary is in no sense a private confession but a confident, almost at times too consciously articulated, account of what he did, thought and saw. Pepys' diary is not literature but it reveals a man and his age with fascinating particularity. Restoration England is brought to life in the pages of these diaries in a particularly engaging manner. Using the diaries as our source and reference we will spend a fortnight in the company of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, exploring their lives, beliefs, careers and the society in which they lived.

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