

## SAMUEL PEPYS

Commemoration Address, May 25th, 1950,  
St. Olave's Mark Lane

BY JOHN F. NICHOLS, M.C., M.A., PH.D., F.S.A.,  
F.R.HIST.SOC.

*Vice-President of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*

*Mens cuiusque is est quisque*

SIXTY years ago when the memorial to Samuel Pepys was unveiled in St. Olave's, Hart Street, in the presence of a distinguished and representative gathering, James Russell Lowell, the Minister from the U.S.A. who delivered the address, declared that it was not Pepys the official who had brought that assembly together but Pepys the diarist. During the years that have since intervened our appreciation of the diary and our affection for its author have by no means diminished but we have learnt from the researches of naval historians to have a fuller realisation of the value and importance of his official duties and to see in him an administrator of genius, a great patriotic statesman, a paragon of public servants unequalled in devotion to duty, tirelessness of effort and constructive ability.

To-day, we may perhaps be forgiven for thinking of him first as a great Londoner, for the keen perception, skilful artistry and discriminating selection shown in the diary he kept for nearly ten years (1660-1669) enable us to see with his own eyes the London of his days.

Born within the City (23rd February, 1633) at Salisbury Court, off Fleet Street, the son of a working tailor in a small way of business (though connected with a family of some pretension at Cottenham in Cambridgeshire), baptised at St. Bride's, he had his schooling at St. Paul's and, after spending some years at Magdalene College, Cambridge, returned to London with a sound knowledge of the Classics, a real love of letters and an unquenchable curiosity. He entered the public service through the influence of a kinsman, Sir Edward Montague (late Earl of Sandwich) as a clerk to one of the Tellers of the Exchequer. Ignoring all considerations of worldly prudence he married a beautiful but quite portionless girl of

fifteen and set up a modest household in Axe Yard, Westminster. Shortly afterwards he was appointed Clerk of the King's Ships, or of the Acts of the Navy and moved to an official residence in the Navy Office then situated between Crutched Friars and Seething Lane. Here for some years he laboured and prospered, regularly occupying his seat in the Navy Office pew in St. Olave's. He took a justifiable pride in his promotion to the Secretaryship of the Admiralty, and remained manfully at his post during the Plague; after seeing, from All Hallows by the Tower, how "Paul's was burned, and all Cheapside," he showed courage and resource in saving the Navy Office buildings and in trying to check the spread of that great conflagration. Some years later he moved to York Buildings in the Strand, and retired to end his days with his life-long friend Will Hewer at Clapham and was buried beside his wife in St. Olave's. He became Master of Trinity House and a Governor of Bedlam and of Christ's Hospital, where he strove earnestly to establish a mathematical school intended to send out good Latinists and competent navigators to serve in His Majesty's ships.

But Pepys had a prodigious zest for all that life could offer and there were other fields in which his genius was exercised, for he lived at a time that witnessed not only the real founding of the British Empire but also the intellectual renaissance through which the England of Newton and Wren and Locke was then passing. His serious interest in scientific discovery led to his election to the Fellowship and later to the Presidency of the Royal Society. A great lover of music and of the theatre, a patron of art, a collector of books and compiler of naval records, he was not only the cherished companion of so rare a character as Evelyn, but a genial friend to men and women of all classes from courtiers and officials to honest craftsmen and the frequenters of riverside taverns: his warm humanity made him acceptable to all.

The more carefully we consider his work for the Navy the more clearly do we see him as the creator of the modern Civil Service both in form and spirit. The dominant characteristics of that work were whole-hearted devotion to the nation's needs and orderly method in supplying them. He was never content to be a mere supervising official, but united great powers of reflection to equally good executive ability; it is not often that a man possessed of such insight and imagination has shown such skill and efficiency in the practical handling of

affairs; and thereby he created the Secretariat in its modern sense. He established a great public department, transforming it from the muddle of a medieval survival run to seed into an efficient organisation with unity of purpose and a centralised control supervising the activities regularly delegated to responsible subordinates. Lord Barham, wielding the weapon he had forged, declared during the crisis of the nation's struggle against Napoleon that there was not a department of the Admiralty not governed by the rules he laid down in the 17th century, and in truth the administrative principles he established have continued to this day.

Unsparring of his own labours he was able to impose a strict sense of duty and discipline on all who worked under his direction and to insist on the highest standards of integrity and inflexible service. And this he did almost single-handed, not only without official encouragement but often in spite of factious and unscrupulous opposition: throughout he showed heroic fortitude in spite of distressing ill-health and many personal and domestic anxieties. It is quite literally true that he often worked from daybreak until long after midnight, and in doing so permanently ruined his eye-sight. Living in a corrupt age he was never corrupted. Although he obtained his early preferment by what would to-day be described as jobbery, and although he sometimes showed more than a trace of cupidity in accepting the gifts and commissions that were usual in his day, he never sacrificed the nation's interest to his own and he set his face sternly against corruption in others. Nor did he ever betray a trust.

Coming to the Navy Office completely ignorant of shipping, and even of elementary mathematics, he set himself industriously to acquire the necessary knowledge, visiting the dockyards, inspecting hemp, cordage and sailcloth, learning to measure timber, and even mastering the multiplication table at the age of thirty. Within a few years he could boast that no man knew more of naval affairs than he, and he had set up a system of records and accounts and of storekeeping of the utmost usefulness and efficiency. His plan for the training of Navy lieutenants, with its examinations and certificates, ensured that promotion should depend on efficiency and merit: the present system of competitive examinations for the Civil Service may not unfairly be regarded as a continuance of that tradition.

When the Navy Office was attacked for the deficiencies revealed during the Dutch War, while his colleagues were busy defending themselves, he was concerned with the defence of his department; he did this with consummate ability, and established the valuable tradition of departmental loyalty. This did not prevent him later from taking drastic action to bring about the reforms he knew to be necessary, for he was ever "a zealous reformer of abuses." He entered Parliament in order to be able to uphold the Navy, a situation quite impossible for a Civil Servant to-day, but in doing this he recognised and fully accepted the principle of the responsibility of the Executive to the elected representatives of the people. Not only did he take pains to acquire the full and detailed knowledge necessary to sustain his case, but he also, and perhaps because of this, was completely successful in expressing himself clearly and forcibly. "No man in England," said Clarendon, "was of greater method nor made himself better understood." And he knew his worth: "I see that on all these occasions they rely most on me."

The results of his labours may be seen to-day in the "Rules and Precedents" he laid down, in the "General Instructions for Officers," in the registers he compiled of naval affairs, and in the bound volumes of his Letters and Papers in the Pepysian Library at Magdalene College and in the Rawlinson MSS. at the Bodleian.

The diary reveals the very soul of the man: we see that he was no humbug but essentially sincere, fully conscious of his own weakness, generous minded and by no means lacking in piety. He had his share of human frailty, but his failings were those of the flesh, always more easily forgiven than the vices of spiritual meanness of which he was entirely free, and he knew, and was shamed by, his own relapses. In spite of the amorous buffoonery to which he confesses, he was no mere libertine, but had a chivalrous understanding and respect for all that was best in womankind. How much, for example, would he have been impressed by the fortitude and constancy shown by the many thousands of young women office workers who laboured so gallantly during the dangers and discomforts of war-time London, and yet continued to look cheerful and becomingly attractive as morning after morning followed its night of terror and destruction.

This is no empty ceremony in which we take part to-day. The memory of Samuel Pepys is embodied in a living tradition

without which the country must cease to count as truly great. His life, work and character have inspired generations of public servants not in this country alone, but in the King's dominions overseas. It was fully evident in his day that it was upon the Navy under God's good providence that the safety, honour and welfare of this country do chiefly depend. In like manner, it may be affirmed, in an age that has accepted Social Democracy as a political ideal, that it is upon His Majesty's Civil Service that the security and well-being of the people depend. The spirit in which Pepys worked provides the surest safeguard against the abuses of bureaucratic power and soulless authoritarianism. The Welfare State, however, must fail miserably if it is not imbued with that glowing feeling of a common humanity that Pepys so amply shows. "Englishmen, and more especially seamen," he writes in one of his Naval Minutes, "love their bellies above everything else, and therefore it must always be remembered in the management of the victualling of the Navy that to make any abatement from them in the quantity or agreeableness of the victuals is to discourage and provoke them in the tenderest point, and will sooner render them disgusted with the King's Service than any one other hardship that can be put upon them." His tradition can give us an orderly governmental system and at the same time save us from the economy of the ant-hill.