

PEPYS AND HIS OXFORD FRIENDS

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Samuel Pepys was one of the best public servants this country has ever had, and, since the publication of his Diary, we all know that he had a streak of genius. Then, too, few men have had so full and fruitful a life: not only the devoted administrator of the Navy but scholar and connoisseur, book-collector and musician, the writer and amateur of curiosities, *amateur* — in the best sense — of the fair sex. All these are aspects of his intense vitality and enjoyment of life; the genius consisted in his capacity to express them and communicate them to us, for genius annihilates the years. Mr. Pepys is as alive to us today, as when he attended church here.*

Various aspects of this many-sided man have been presented from this familiar place: may I present a side to him that is less familiar? He was a loyal son of Cambridge, and left his nursing mother the magnificent bequest of his Library, so beautifully housed there at Magdalene. But it so happens that in his later years he became acquainted with a number of Oxford men, and much of his correspondence is with them. It was Oxford, not Cambridge, that awarded him a diploma — I suppose an honorary degree — which he much prized: after that, it becomes 'my dear Aunt, the University of Oxford.'

So my subject is Pepys and his Oxford Friends.

The first and greatest friendship, the closest and most long-lasting, is, of course, with that Balliol man, John Evelyn. It is too often overlooked that Evelyn was a projector, and that the Royal Society was virtually an Oxford foundation. Evelyn suggested a number of projects of great value to the country, and one of them was a college to advance experimental science. He was a foundation Fellow at the first meeting at New Year 1661; four years later Evelyn had the pleasure of welcoming his friend as a Fellow, who became President in 1684. Evelyn was twice pressed to accept the office, but declined it.

Both Pepys and Evelyn were devoted to the public service, the first as a professional, the second — as an independent country gentleman — appearing as an amateur; but, in fact, their interests converged in deep love of their country. Soon they found that they shared intellectual interests and common tastes, and then came to have deep respect and warm affection for each other. Their friendship is one of the most appealing in that admirable English tradition; and it is curious to think that it was the publication of Evelyn's Diary first — he was much better known — that suggested that of Pepys. Pepys's came to overshadow its precursor, by its greater vivacity and sparkling sense of life.

Evelyn and Pepys worked together in the Dutch War; the first, as commissioner for the wounded, conceived the project for a Seamen's Hospital, which they discussed together in Lord Sandwich's coach. 'Which I mightily approve of and will endeavour to promote it, being a worthy thing and of use — and will save money.' Pepys was as good as his word; the Navy Office took it up — the origin of Greenwich Hospital.

As commissioner of the Mint — and never were there more beautiful coins engraved than then — Evelyn was in and out of the Tower, as Pepys was on ordnance for the Navy. Until the surprising day came when Pepys found himself incarcerated there. Buoyant as a cork, he

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was not at all downcast—after all, one was nobody in that age if one wasn't sent to the Tower, one could hardly be said to have lived; and besides, wasn't it the place for peers, not commoners? The King himself sent him a fat buck from Enfield Chase to feast his friends, and Evelyn came to sympathise, and dine and wine. 'Mr. Pepys is to be pulled to pieces,' someone wrote; not a bit of it: he greatly enjoyed himself as usual, and the added consequence it gave.

Both Pepys and Evelyn were patriots: I gather that one is supposed to apologise for that nowadays — it certainly would not recommend them to the B.B.C., or TV, which of course are above such people. After the Dutch War Evelyn gave Pepys a drawing of the Dutch fleet in the Medway, which had so grieved them both. Pepys particularly — to the Navy man the reproach gave him as much disquiet, he said, as the man who recognised his portrait in Michelangelo's Hell. He wished that Evelyn's drawing of the disgraceful event of 1667 might take the place in the House of Lords of the famous Armada tapestries of '88, 'till the depravity of this were reformed to the temper of that age, wherein God Almighty found his blessing more operative than (I fear) he doth in ours.'

— So we, in our time, have reason to look back on the wonderful achievements of last century, the Victorian Age, when all went well with us.

Evelyn was writing a salutary History of the Dutch War, which was held up and frustrated by the pro-French minister, Lord Clifford of the Cabal, a kind of Appeaser of the day, who carried off Evelyn's papers to Devonshire. I don't know if they are still there at Ugbrooke, along with the unique copy of the Secret Treaty of Dover, the pearls and diamonds that are duplicated in the portrait of Queen Catherine of Braganza, and Dryden's white deer in the park.

Meanwhile, Pepys was endeavouring to write his Memoirs of the Navy, and putting a host of queries to Evelyn for answer. Evelyn expressed his readiness to be 'subservient to such a genius as Mr. Pepys.' The latter found the job beyond him: 'it is not imaginable, to such as have not tried, what labour an historian — that would be exact — is condemned to. He must read all, good and bad, and remove a world of rubbish before he can lay the foundation.'

We need not conclude that it is easier to make history than to write it, or that it is less difficult to administer than to be a writer; but evidently these eminent diarists found it an easier option to write a diary than to become historians.

Neither of them finished his history; on the other hand, their diaries became first-hand sources for the historians of their time. Even Pepys's Second Diary is, the Journal of his official Voyage to Tangier, the interest of which people are apt to underestimate — perhaps because there were no ladies present to enliven the diarist's fancy (but he was twenty years older and staid, now in 1683). Evelyn wrote to him with charming courtesy: 'You leave us so naked at home that, till your return from Barbary, we are in danger of becoming barbarians. The heroes are all embarked with my Lord Dartmouth and Mr. Pepys; nay, they seem to carry along with them not a colony only but a college; nay, an whole university, all the sciences, all the arts, and all the professors of 'em too.'

What a polite way of writing they had! But that it was not just politeness we know from Evelyn's concern at the wreck of the Duke of York's ship approaching the Scottish coast, when he feared that Pepys was on board: 'which gave me apprehensions and a mixture of passions not really to be expressed, till I was assured of your safety.'

Then as the old friends get older, we find them consoling each other over their ailments, recommending each other possets and medicines. Pepys has left off all malt-drink and is

betaking himself wholly to barley-water, 'blanched with a few almonds and sweetened with a little sugar.' Evelyn is down at Wotton gardening and planting, and when it rains too hard, reads and scribbles and builds castles in the air. 'I am sewing (draining) of ponds, looking after my hinds, providing carriage and tackle against reaping time and sowing. *Venio ad voluptates agricoliarum*, which Cicero reckons amongst the most becoming diversions of Old Age.' Meanwhile young John Evelyn is giving up Balliol College; and Pepys fully agrees 'with your excellent grandson in thinking it no longer worth his while to stay there.'

Pepys having retired from London, Evelyn can never pass York Buildings without a sigh: 'Saturday, which was wont to be a jubilee . . . and the most diverting to me of the weekly circles, is from a real sabbath now become wholly saturnine, lugubrious and solitary.' They had had so much to talk about, shared so many interests, and now it was over.

In these later years Pepys was making a number of friends at Oxford, though none so close as Evelyn. One of his many good qualities was his faculty for admiration — it shows a want of good nature to be unable to admire, and Pepys was above all good-natured. He had the deepest respect for John Wallis, whom Oliver Cromwell had sent over from Cambridge to teach Oxford mathematics — Wallis was the immediate precursor of Newton, who learned much from him.

Pepys formed the project of having Wallis's portrait painted to present to the University. When Kneller learned of this, he jumped the gun — like the boorish German he was — and incontinently went down to Oxford and painted it. Pepys was having a medallion of himself made by Cavalier; but Sir Godfrey writes, in broken English, 'this man having received so much kindness in Germany, has spoiled him, being a Frenchman and should be kept low.' The affair led to a good deal of correspondence, and Pepys's acquaintance, the Master of University College, reported to him: 'It was a very sensible satisfaction to me that the obscurities of Sir G. Kneller's proceedings were unveiled, which to me were all shadow, and natural cause of umbrage.'

However, the upshot was that Oxford got a fine portrait, which Kneller thought one of his best: there is Wallis, in full doctor's robes, in the Bodleian today for us all to see. We owe it to Pepys, and Oxford was duly grateful.

The Master of University's young companion, Humphrey Wanley, who shared Pepys's passion for book-collecting, wrote in much better style than Kneller: 'Tis never any drudgery to wait on Mr. Pepys, whose conversation, I think, is more nearly akin to what we are taught to hope for in Heaven, than that of anybody else I know.' It seems that that did not go down at all badly with Mr. Pepys.

In fact he became so loyal to 'his dear Aunt, the University of Oxford' that he took her side against the famous Bentley in the celebrated controversy over the Letters of Phalaris. Actually, Bentley though rude, was right: in the end that one Cambridge man demolished all the young wits and chits of Christ Church.

Pepys was luckier with his All Souls acquaintance. He became friendly with the eminent lawyer, Sir Nathaniel Lloyd, whose portrait I see every night when dining in hall, who went from Oxford to teach Cambridge law. We find Lloyd, a generous and philanthropic Welshman, bringing a volume of Oxford Poems up to Pepys in London.

We know how kind Pepys was in doing good turns to everybody, how he took on the burdens of his hopeless brother-in-law, Bartholomew St. Michel; and then of his house-keeper, Mrs. Skinner's graceless son, who got into trouble by getting to know the republican Milton and fixing up to publish his work in Holland. (I suppose young Skinner was a relation

of Cyriac Skinner of Milton's Sonnet; anyway the young man departed without saying goodbye to Pepys, but leaving an apology, 'as for Milton or his works or papers I have done withal; and indeed never had had to do with him, had not ambition to good literature made me covet his acquaintance.' It seems a sufficient excuse, but Milton was dangerous ground.)

Pepys had better luck in using his influence with Lloyd to get the admirable scholar, Thomas Tanner, elected Fellow of All Souls. Pepys backed a winner in him: not only did Tanner become a great antiquarian, an authority on manuscripts and coins, after Pepys' own heart, but he even attained to an episcopal throne, if the diminutive one of St. Asaph.

I do not think that Pepys was a friend of our Warden, Warden Finch; for, from what the Tory Hearne said about him, I think he must have been a Whig. Hearne's principle was that of Dr. Johnson, not to let the Whig dog have the best of it — and what Hearne said was, 'Warden Finch is an enthusiastic actor and an outrageous debauch.'

We wonder indeed what Mr. Pepys would make of it all — though we may be sure that he, whom neither the Dutch in the Medway nor imprisonment in the Tower could daunt, would find something to amuse him, something to enjoy in it. At the very end we find him relishing a third reading of that great Oxford book, Clarendon's *History*. 'with the same appetite, I assure you, to a fourth that ever I had to a first.' While Evelyn reciprocates with 'I cannot but let you know the incredible satisfaction I have taken in reading my late Lord Chancellor's *History of the Rebellion*, so well, and so unexpectedly well written.' To this day the University profits from its sales.

And so to that last communication from Pepys' nephew, sending Evelyn mourning and mourning rings for remembrance of 'my good uncle Pepys, whose body was last night interred in the parish church of St. Olave's, Hart Street, by the Navy Office.'

One word as to Pepys' historic public achievement: it was his energy and efficiency that pushed through the decisive programme of building 30 capital ships from 1677 onwards. Only that saved this country, and helped to save Europe, from the domination of Louis XIV. The sheet-anchor of our security for three centuries — our great days — was to make ourselves the linch-pin of a Grand Alliance of all the smaller powers whose existence was threatened by a greater, whether by Philip of Spain, Louis XIV or Napoleon, or the Kaiser's Germany. We lost sight of that only in the 1930's, to appease Hitler's Germany — and ruined our country.

In Pepys' time the House of Commons, as usual, was slow to realise the danger. But Pepys not only urged his programme upon the Commons, but carried it through as an administrator. He rightly regarded his Thirty Ships programme as his greatest achievement. A rapid and efficient worker, 'his activities extended over the whole field of naval administration' — he himself saw to everything: the insatiable curiosity we recognise in the Diarist became an asset to the nation.

For his outstanding services he was *twice* put in the Tower. Where do you think we should put the disastrous makers of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of the 1930's?

In the long run it was William III and Marlborough who profited from Pepys' ships, and they succeeded, after twenty years, in defeating Louis XIV. Yet, such is the irony of politics, that when William III captured the English throne, Mr. Pepys was popped into the Tower again.

But very briefly: he was soon out and about. His comment on this was, 'the worse the world uses me, the better I think I am bound to use myself.'

It seems to me a very good principle to hold on to in bad times.

Pepys's gift for friendship is related to those keynotes of his personality and character: his constant kindness and his enjoyment of life. Though he had a good conceit of himself, he had no spiritual pride. It is sound Catholic doctrine that sins of the flesh are more forgivable than sins of the spirit. He was very human — particularly about the ladies; really innocent and naif: it is part of his charm, part of his acute sense of life, though his rendering of it back again to us amounts to genius. At bottom he was really a humble man of heart: we might say of him, *anima naturaliter christiana*.