

AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE PEPYS  
COMMEMORATION SERVICE IN THE CHURCH OF  
ST. OLAVE, HART STREET IN THE CITY OF LONDON  
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We are here to commemorate the late Samuel Pepys, of this parish, esquire—he was addressed as esquire in March 1660, “of which, God knows, I was not a little proud”,—Member of Parliament for Castle Rising and Harwich, Secretary of the Admiralty under their late Majesties Charles II and James II, Master of Trinity House, Master of the Clothworkers Company, President of the Royal Society, benefactor of Magdalene College, Cambridge, etc.; a man, as these qualifications show, eminently worthy of public commemoration. He also, in his indiscreet youth, before he had risen to any of these public positions, kept, for just over nine years, a private diary. Alas, it must be admitted, it is not his discreet public service that has earned him this public commemoration. How many Masters of the Clothworkers Company, and even Secretaries of the Admiralty, have passed with dignity, after one brief funeral tribute, into oblivion or the *D.N.B.* This majestic gathering pays its annual tribute not to the admirable civil servant, but to the uninhibited diarist who wrote not for us but for himself alone, and whose work, though gradually released to the public more than a century after his death, is such that the full text, according to that great Victorian Sir Leslie Stephens, “cannot possibly be printed”. I am sure that we all rejoice that this impossibility is now being overcome, and that the diary is being printed, in full, by modern editors, publishers and printers no less respectable than Sir Leslie Stephen.

Since we commemorate the diarist rather than the civil servant, the person rather than the *persona*, I shall be excused, I hope, if, in this brief address, I say little of his public life and service. I could, of course, if you wished (after the necessary briefing) extend myself on both subjects. But that might require the same generous allowance of time as Pepys himself took when he defended the administration of the Navy before a full House of Commons on 5th May 1668. On that occasion, as he tells us, being rather nervous (as who is not when facing a distinguished and critical auditory), he stoked up in advance with half-a-pint of mulled sack at the Dog and a dram of brandy at Mrs. Hewlett’s in Westminster Hall, and then spoke, non-stop, for over three hours; after which, honourable members thronged around him with competing and hyperbolic compliments and Mr. George Montagu kissed him and declared that he was another Cicero; which must have been a very gratifying experience, only slightly qualified by the admission that many of the members, during so long a speech, “had gone out to dinner and come in again half-drunk”—a situation which we would not wish to see repeated in this church.

Let me then say a few words in praise of Pepys the diarist, Pepys the man, as revealed by his diary. That diary, we all admit, is the greatest diary in our language, and it owes that title to that very freedom and freshness which, not stopping at the limits set by later moralists, exposed, with an almost child-like *naïveté*, which Victorians might call shamelessness, the workings of a mind sufficiently exceptional to command our interest but not so far

above our own as to baffle or humiliate us. There are many worthy diarists in our literature: useful recorders of their lives and times. But these are of interest, primarily, to historians, for whom they provide raw material: we do not read them as literature. There are also the accidentally great diarists: those who kept diaries because they lived through great events and were in a position to give vivid first-hand accounts of them. And there are admirable diarists: men who—like Pepys' friend John Evelyn—present, through their diaries, an apparently natural pattern of high-minded virtue. But these, on further examination, often prove somewhat artificial. I am afraid that I always distrust virtuous diarists. The virtuous diarist seems to me a contradiction in terms, a man who has shirked his proper function, which is to reveal himself as he naturally is, not as he would like us to think that he has been; and we are none of us naturally virtuous: otherwise we would have no need of religion or morality.

Pepys' diary is a great diary in all these three respects. At the lowest level, it is a quarry for an historian. It is also, by chance, a literary record of great events. And always, against the background of events, whether great or small, it reveals a personality which, whatever our initial prejudices or expectations, we come gradually to love, because it speaks to us unguarded, without art or hypocrisy, revealing a character which we can recognise and, at times, since we come to trust the honesty of the writer, genuinely admire.

Such diarists are rare in history, and in our own literature Pepys is the earliest. Perhaps this has an historical explanation. Like Montaigne in France, of whom he so often reminds us—by his scepticism, his candour, his power of uninhibited, dispassionate self-observation, and of course his perpetual trouble with that painful ailment of the time, the stone—he was brought up in a period of civil war and ideological pretensions, and when he came to write, he had had enough of public attitudes, of hypocrisy.

Any man, or generation of men, that grows up in a time of revolution is likely to become sceptical of professed ideals. Pepys had been seven years old when the Long Parliament had first challenged King Charles I in the name of liberty and property. His home had been in London—Puritan London. He had been educated at St. Paul's School under Puritan teachers, and had become, in his own words, "a great roundhead". At the age of 17 he had witnessed the execution of the King, and on that occasion had made to his schoolfellows a ringing declaration which, fortunately, only he would remember: "that were I to preach upon him, my text should be, 'The memory of the wicked shall rot'." If he left London, in the 1650s, it was only to exchange the Puritan capital for the Puritan university. He spent three years at Cambridge, first at Trinity Hall, then at Madgalene College. How many a weary sermon he must have heard in those days from the pampered Puritan clergy who, in the years of war, trooped up to London to settle in the rich city benefices, from which the old uncovenanted clergy had been ejected, and from the complacent Puritan Fellows whom the Parliamentary Visitors had installed or continued in the Elect University! In London, too, since we know his passion both for politics and for sermon-tasting, he must have heard some of the blood-thirsty political sermons of the radical saints of Coleman Street and Blackfriars, and, perhaps (like Lord Keeper North) out of curiosity, "sank so low as to hear Hugh Peters preach". These were the prophets of those tumultuous years: they believed that they were bringing about an instant reformation of manners, creating a new generation of saints and evangelists to regenerate the land. In fact, they created a new generation of wordlings, disgusted alike with their doctrines, their claims, their whole mentality. As the English Republic lurched from expedient to expedient, and the moral gymnasts of Puritanism performed

their dazzling feats of casuistical double-think, ordinary men lowered their aims and instead of a godly commonwealth looked for stability and consistency on the old basis. As long as Oliver Cromwell was there to maintain order, they would support him, hoping that he would become their king and rule within the old law. When Oliver died and anarchy returned, there was no man of genius, no charismatic leader, to replace him. "It is now clear", Pepys would write, "that either the Fanatiques must now be undone, or the gentry and citizens throughout England, and clergy, must fall, in spite of their militia and army". The only solution was to return to the old institutions; to bring back the time-honoured monarchy which could at least sustain itself, even if the monarch himself were untried, and perhaps unpromising.

So, in 1660, Pepys, with so many of his contemporaries, rejoiced in the return of legitimate King and Established Church, and the former "great roundhead" went forth, without vindictiveness indeed, but with evident satisfaction, to see the most violent of the regicides, the Messianic Fifth-Monarchist Major-General Harrison, hanged, drawn and quartered. "Thus", he recorded, "it was my chance to see the King beheaded at Whitehall, and to see the first blood shed in revenge for the King at Charing Cross".

How fortunate it is for us that Pepys decided to keep a diary precisely in the year of Restoration, 1660! Did he sense, on that New Year's Day when he wrote the first page, that great events were coming and that he would have the opportunity to be their eye-witness? Did he guess that his patron and cousin, Edward Montagu (afterwards Earl of Sandwich), Cromwell's General-at-Sea, would sail to Holland to fetch the King home and that he himself, though a mere clerk and secretary, would have the singular good fortune to accompany him; that he would kiss the hands of the King and Duke of York as they came aboard his ship; that he would watch them dine, see them rechristen the ships of the Republic—the *Naseby* becoming the *Charles*, the *Dunbar* the *Henry*, etc.—and, finally, that he would hear from the King's own lips the dramatic story of his escape in 1651? "Upon the Quarter-deck he fell in discourse of his escape from Worcester. Where it made me nearly to weep to hear the stories that he told of his difficulties that he had passed through. As his travelling 4 days and 3 nights on foot, every step up to the knees in dirt, with nothing but a green coat and a pair of country breeches on and a pair of country shoes that made him sore all over his feet that he could scarce stir", etc., etc. Afterwards the King would repeat these stories so often that his courtiers would almost weep for boredom, and Pepys would again be in at the final, revised version. In 1680, at Newmarket, Charles II suddenly and surprisingly decided, in Mr. Matthews' words "to withdraw himself from the delicious distraction of jockeys, horses, dogs, hawks and ladies of pleasure", and called on Mr. Secretary Pepys, "with his short-hand and well known efficiency", to record the classic tale for publication and posterity. The manuscript is in the Pepys library still, and we now have a scholarly edition of it by Mr. William Matthews, one of the editors of the new edition of the Diary.

How fortunate, too, that Pepys persevered with his diary for ten whole years! Thanks to that perseverance we have not only an authoritative account of the struggles of the Navy Office, an occasional glimpse into the cabinet of Charles II, and a running commentary on Restoration court politics, but also those other great set pieces: in particular, the most vivid account that we possess of the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666, that fire in which so many of the old London churches perished and which gave his great opportunity to Sir Christopher Wren.

To us, in retrospect, the Great Fire is the beginning of the City of London as we know it—or as we knew it till the second great fire of 1941 and the second rebuilding by the post-war developers. It gave the City its distinguishing monuments from St. Paul's downwards. But who could have foretold that at the time? To Pepys, as confirmed and committed a Londoner as Dr. Johnson, it seemed almost the end. In those terrible September days, as he watched the fire spread, he saw all the old landmarks disappear: the houses of his friends, the churches where he had sampled so many sermons, the theatres from which he had periodically but ineffectively vowed to abstain, the inns where he had consumed, on the slightest provocation, and at any time of day, so many barrels of oysters, lobsters, chins of beef, udders, dishes of steaks and rabbits, venison pasties, buttered salmon, wild geese roasted, marrow-bones and tongues, mulled wines, etc., etc., and had thereby softened up, fondled, "towsed", sported with and given a bout or tumble to, so many compliant ladies.

Day after day, in his diary, Pepys recorded the lamentable story of the destruction of the City. It began on 2nd September, Lord's Day, when "some of our maids, sitting up late last night to get things ready against our feast today, Jane called us up about 3.0 in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the City. So I rose and slipped on my nightgown and went to her window"; but thinking the fire far enough away, beyond Mark Lane, he returned to bed. Then at daylight he went out and began to realise the true scope of the disaster. Both ends of London Bridge were now ablaze, and the fire still raged unchallenged every way "and everything after so long a drought proving combustible, even the very stones of the Churches, and among other things the poor steeple by which pretty Mrs. [Horsley] lives, and whereof my old schoolfellow Elborough is parson, taken fire in the very top and there burned till it fell down". Pepys hurried to Whitehall, saw the King, and the Duke of York, was promised soldiers to help him in the work, and was sent back with a message to the Lord Mayor; but when he finally discovered the Lord Mayor, in Canning Street, among the swirl of citizens carrying their goods out of the blaze, he found him "like a man spent, with a handkercher about his neck. To the King's message, he cried like a fainting woman, 'Lord what can I do? I am spent. People will not obey me. I have been pulling down houses. But the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it.'" So Pepys took precautions for himself, buried his money, his wine and his Parmesan cheese in his neighbours' gardens, took steps to keep the fire from the Navy office in Seething Lane, and went on with his melancholy chronicle: in Thames Street he saw the warehouses of oil, wine and brandy, and the crowded stores of pitch and tar, go up in flames; all over the river, "with one's face in the wind, you were almost burned with a shower of firedrops" which carried the fire from house to house; from his office garden he was almost put out of his wits to see "how horridly the sky looks, all on fire in the night", for it seemed as if "the whole heaven was on fire"; all the Old Bailey was in flames, "and Paul's is burned, and all Cheapside . . . Fenchurch-Street, Gracious-street and Lombard street all in dust. The Exchange is a sad sight, nothing standing there of all the statues or pillars but Sir Thomas Gresham's picture in the corner . . . Lord, what a sad sight it was by moonlight to see the whole city almost on fire . . ."

This, of course, is the public side of the diary: the vivid autoptic chronicle of great events. But always, inseparable from it, giving to those events their authenticity, their immediacy, their dramatic quality, there is the diarist himself, constantly and artlessly revealed, the man of his age, sceptical, purged of all cant, alert, enquiring, politically sophisticated, agog for new experience, "in all things curious", "with child to see any strange thing", an epicure

in things material, an aesthete wherever there is beauty to see or hear. Most surprising, at first, is the sensitivity to beauty of this typical *homme moyen sensuel*. He would himself write of "the strange slavery that I stand in to beauty, that I value nothing near it".

He was a lover of art—exquisite art, the art of the portrait-painter—and of music: not the "dull vulgar music" of "trumpets and kettledrums", but the delicate music of church and chamber. How he loved music: the viols, the theorbo, the organ, the human voice, and that wind music which once "ravished me, and indeed in a word did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife". And yet this occasional rapture is combined with a meticulous eye for detail. He is a careful calculator, an exact housekeeper, a punctilious civil servant, critical of all disorder or irresponsibility, neat in his accounts as in his handwriting, a fastidious collector of books, a virtuoso, the friend of *virtuosi* and scientists, himself Baconian in his scientific interests, and therefore not unfit to be President of that Baconian foundation, the Royal Society. Above all, he is an observer of man, including himself; introspective, as a great diarist must be, but not morbidly so: like James Boswell, who so often resembles him (and yet so often differs from him), he looks into himself only so far as to see, and accept, the inconsequence, the contradictions, the occasional absurdity, of his own character, and, in that respect, its community with the species.

Having thus catalogued Pepys' interests I now see that I have omitted one which, in this place, should surely have been mentioned: religion. Pepys was not, it must be admitted, a religious man. No doubt, like so many of his contemporaries, he had had too much religion when young. Certainly, by the time when the diary begins, he had no use for puritanism. Late in his career, he would be accused of popery: the religion of the master whom he long and loyally served, James II. In fact he was not a papist: in 1668 he had been thoroughly "frighted" on hearing that his wife, born a Huguenot, had such leanings. He was a sound Restoration Anglican, a member of the established Church, which he accepted not, like the old royalists, as the true Church against all others, but rather as a comprehensive national institution providing, with the minimum of constraint, the best guarantee of ordered tranquility. He disliked sectarianism of all kinds; and since the old Anglican Church of Archbishop Laud had itself been sectarian, he had no love for those who sought to revive its exclusive claims. He did not love the restored bishops of 1660—to him, as to so many Londoners, they were "strange animals", "so high that very few do love them": it was unlikely, he thought, that they could "carry it so high as they do" for long; if they tried, they would "ruin all again". But he accepted the system, when it had settled down, while remaining fundamentally critical of clerical pretensions. If the house of Cromwell had lasted, no doubt he would have conformed happily enough with an established bishopless semi-Presbyterian Church, which, while reasonably tolerant, would have kept down "the fanatiques" whom he hated. As it was, he conformed with the restored Anglican Church, criticising its occasional intolerance, accepting much for the sake of its music, respecting some of its clergy, and visiting the churches of all denominations to sample the sermons, which, even if they were poor and dry, provided opportunities for criticism, relaxation or distraction. I think, for instance, of that "simple, bawling young" Scotchman "to whose voice I am not to be reconciled" and through whose sermons, in 1663, he invariably slept; and again, of that visit, in 1660, to Henry VII's chapel at Westminster "where I heard a sermon and spent (God forgive me) most of my time in looking upon Mrs. Butler". As for his own regular preacher here, the rector, Mr. Mills, I am afraid he was critical both of the

man ("a fat lazy priest") and of his "lazy, dull sermons"; but he was punctilious in his attendance, even hurrying on from another, and better, sermon—although on arrival he "stood privately at the great door to gaze upon a pretty lady", and after his devotions "from Church dogged her home, whither she went to a house near Tower-hill; and I think her to be one of the prettiest women I ever saw". In view of Pepys' critical comments on the words which he heard from this pulpit, I am rather glad he is not sitting in the audience now. Later, when "the fanatiques" raised their hue and cry against popery and his patron, Pepys moved to the right. High-churchmanship was now unable to persecute; after the Revolution it was unable to meddle in politics; and Pepys would take the last sacrament from a non-juring parson, who had never accepted the Revolution of 1688 and the deposition of his old master, whom he continued to honour, King James.

By that time the diary had long been closed. The six volumes, so neatly written in his own shorthand, so elegantly bound in his own binding, were in his library, destined for remote posterity. He had closed them in May 1669, reluctantly, for he had come to love his diary, as we do now. The last entry gives the reason: the strain on his eyes was too great; he was convinced that he was going blind; and that the diary, with its exiguous, exacting shorthand, would hasten his blindness. "Therefore, whatever comes of it", he wrote, "I must forbear . . . And so I betake myself to that course which is almost as much as to see myself into my grave; for which, and all the discomforts that will accompany my being blind, the good God prepare me!" Historians, of course, must lament the closing of that incomparable historical source. What would we not give for Pepys' own account, in his own informal style, of the great dramas of the Popish Plot and the stirring events which followed it, in which he too was involved? But for those to whom the diary is not merely a record of events but a portrait of the man, the record of those nine years are enough. It reveals his whole personality; and it is the personality thus revealed that we honour today, rather than the honest and loyal administrator, the fastidious bibliophile, the cultivated virtuoso, the generous benefactor; for these are but the roles in which that personality found its useful public expression and earned the friendship, respect and gratitude of the best of his own contemporaries.