

Pepys

The Unequalled Self

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I first encountered the diary of Pepys in a slim volume found by chance in the local library of my hometown. I was a teenager and this would have been in the late 60's, before any full and unbowdlerized edition of the diaries was available. Nevertheless I found myself shocked by the licentiousness of the diarist and I dismissed him as a trivial figure, only to be surprised later on in life by the respect that I discovered was accorded to him.

To read a biography of Pepys rather than the diaries themselves might be, and in fact should be, considered a case of blatant cheating, but as with most incidents of cheating resulting from irresistible temptation. The diaries, although limited to a decade of life, runs to many volumes, and supposedly being a purely private affair (and more about that later) must inevitably be marred by long and tedious passages of little concern to anyone but the diarist himself. Still there is the phenomenon of the road to universality going through the specific. The self-centered author, by his very self-centeredness, strikes a sympathetic chord with the reader, as self-centeredness goes to the root of introspection.

The biographer - Tomalin, concludes her book by claiming that Pepys was the most ordinary and extraordinary of writers, ordinary, one suspects in his passions and quotidian concerns, extra-ordinary in his ability to express them. She compares him favourably to Proust, which may be appropriate as far as historical interest and bulk of writing is concerned, but maybe less so with style of writing.

The fact remains that nothing comparable survives from the 17th century offering us a unique window of the times. It is probably true that the keeping of diaries was a more common habit than it is today, but many of them were written in a formal way, just as Pepys latter attempts. What is so special about Pepys is his honesty, and the interesting question is how he achieved it and why he was unable to achieve it later. But before it may be appropriate to make a recapitulation.

Pepys was born in 1633 the child of humble parents, the father a tailor, the mother a laundress; yet distantly on his father side he was related to more exalted personages, to which he obviously owed his release from his restricted circumstances. He was given an education being sent to Cambridge, where he discovered a flair for literary composition, resulting in a juvenile attempt at a novel (later to be destroyed by him). His health was not robust as a child, suffering as he did from kidney-stones. His pivotal decision in his youth was to submit himself to an operation of his bladder, which given the times, was a very risky and painful undertaking, with a high fatality rate. The operation was succesful and he recovered quickly, giving him a new lease on life to last for almost five decades. Few things are more conducive to optimism and energy than to emerge victorious from the clutches of death, especially at the beginning of your life.

The author is at pains to point out similarities of the period of Pepys with that of

our own, conforming to the general adage, that human nature has changed very little. This is certainly true, but when everything is essentially the same, differences become more interesting than similarities, and the major difference between the past and the present was the omnipresence of death. Life was indeed a precious gift of which you could never be assured. Most of Pepys siblings died at a young age, and this was a fact of life, to which there was little consolation, beyond stoical acceptance. In fact it is doubtful whether religious conviction existed beyond conventional piety, and Pepys himself was definitely a free-thinker in private, which was hardly exceptional and he was most likely sharing his attitude with most of his friends. Pepys married young, taking a bride of the age of fourteen. Maybe a rash step, and as such out of character, as she was of poor progeny, of French stock and Catholic persuasion, which later would prove a liability to her husband. He quickly made a career for himself as a civil-servant in the navy, taking to work with abandon, proving himself to be a competent and devoted administrator working long hours. His rise would have been impossible without the support of powerful mentors, especially that of his distant relative Montague, later earl of Sandwich, who had come to eminence by making a volte-face abandoning his republican cause (having valiantly fought for Cromwell in his youth) for restoring the monarchy of Charles II. The early years of Pepys life had been played out against political turmoil and civil war, only subsiding as he got into manhood. The 1660's constituted the pinnacle of his life, as well as the eminently documented one.

The ultimate motivations for Pepys to start a diary remain, and will always remain, a mystery. Obviously he had a flair for composition, as referred to above, and previously finding an outlet in the writing of letters, but the diary is something altogether different. Seriously writing a diary becomes not only a means of documentation but also self-discovery, not to say a self-forming and self-defining process, of which Pepys may never have been consciously aware. The writing of the diary quickly developed into an obsession, and as such ruled by internal strictures and an indigenious morality, against you could only sin at your peril. His lauded honesty, thus I believe, was less a means to an end, but an end in itself, becoming a corollary of the process of regular writing. The obsession took hold of him, never letting him out of his grip, so when direct insertion in the diary became impossible he resorted to notes, later to be developed and transcribed. What may have started as a whim, became a major component of his life, and when in 1666 the great fire threatened his home, the first thing he sought to safeguard were his diaries. So instead of constituting a chore, a duty to be performed, it became a *raison d'être* for his existence, in which life was transcribed, with no temptation to resort to counterfeits. Therein lies their true fascination that goes beyond the mere historical documentation.

So what did he put in his diary? The external events of the times, as far as they impinged upon him, his social life, his rows with his wife, meticulously put down with the cold eye of an impartial observer in the midst of domestic turmoil, testifying to the discipline imposed by his writing. Also he made records of his dalliances, which so shocked me as a youth. Pepys had no natural sexual confidence, he confessed his desire to be able to casually pick up women, just as the more assertive males of the circles he frequented. Thus his prey tended to be those who were dependant upon him, be it the wives of his underlings, his maids, women who openly offered themselves, and in a few instances also

young girls, who nowadays would have landed him in jail for pedophilia. (The reaction of Tomalin at this point is interesting, torn between her sympathy for Pepys the diarist and the decorum of our time, yet able to successfully compartmentalize.) The marriage with his wife remained childless, and in spite of his adulterous activities, no progeny of his was ever reported let alone admitted by himself.

But after a decade of writing he gave it up, fearful of losing his eye-sight. Being long-sighted he naturally must have felt the effects of decreased accommodation in his middle-thirties, and with internal lightning being substandard as well as the manufacture of spectacles, his problems naturally were augmented. Thus we have no first-hand account of the death of his young wife in 1669 taking place shortly thereafter. (The death of his brother Tom a few years earlier is particularly revealing as to the all-too human vacillation of Pepys, too unconcerned and busy to help him in his sickness, too squeamish to witness his last breath, and so eloquent in expressing his own grief.)

Tomalin is committed to provide a full account of Pepys life, which admittedly becomes far less vivid when deprived of proper documentation after the cessation of the diary. He did pick up another young woman shortly thereafter, although never legalizing the relationship that lasted for three decades. He led a very active social life, became involved in the Royal Society, did time as an MP, noted for his excellent speeches, but also hounded for supposed ties to Papists (the Catholicism of his late wife, as noted earlier, becoming a liability). He was even accused on trumped up charges, spending time in the Tower, risking execution, but able to conduct researches discrediting the witnesses of the persecution. His rise in the Navy continued, and at one time rising to serve as its minister. He stayed loyal to the King and his brother to the very end, although he was very critical of their frivolity as to reigning; and consequently resigning from public life, when the latter, as James II, was expelled in 1688 from the country. The last fifteen years of his life was spent in comfort but outside any political or administrative power. His health deteriorated and the biography briefly comes to life again in 1703, as his death-bed scene is being enacted in detail, thanks to the documentation of his favourite nephew. Promptly after his death his body was autopsied. His heart appeared in good condition, as one of his kidneys, the other was badly disfigured and his bladder was gangrenous. Modern medicine may easily have added ten or twenty years to his span.

He left no issue, taking pains to having his library remain intact and properly taken care of through Cambridge university. The personal library in which his diary, his one claim to the attention of posterity, was hidden. The gradual discovery of his diary constitutes a final chapter by itself spanning a time greatly exceeding that of the life of its compiler, not to mention the time of the compilation itself.

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