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## Humanist Masterpieces

Brian McClinton

# 11. The Diary of Samuel Pepys

In her acclaimed biography of Samuel Pepys, *The Unequaled Self*, which won the 2002 Whitbread Book of the Year, Claire Tomalin applauds his diary as ‘a triumph of humanism’ and ‘a work of genius’, that ‘carries him to the highest point, alongside Milton, Bunyan, Chaucer, Dickens and Proust’. He was, she concludes, ‘both the most ordinary and the most extraordinary writer you will ever meet’.

Samuel Pepys was born in London in 1633, just off Fleet Street. His mother was once a washmaid and his father a tailor. For a time during the Civil War and an outbreak of the plague he was sent to Huntingdon to live with his uncle, who was steward to the Montagu family of Hinchinbrooke. When he returned to London he was sent to school at St. Paul’s, from where he won an exhibition to Cambridge. After taking his degree in 1654, he entered the service of Edward Montagu, MP, as his secretary, and 6 years later became Clerk of the Navy Board.

In 1655 he married Elizabeth St Michel, the 15-year-old daughter of a Huguenot refugee. They had no children but, although Pepys had many mistresses, he had great affection for her. She died in 1669, shortly after he ceased to keep the diary. He never remarried. In 1665 Pepys was elected to the Royal Society (in 1684 he became its President). In 1673 he became Secretary to the Admiralty and was elected MP for Castle Rising. He retired from the Admiralty in 1689 and died in 1703.

The diary itself was begun on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1660 and stopped on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1669 on grounds of eye strain. He felt – wrongly, as it turned out – that he was losing his sight. Its six 282-page notebooks were written in shorthand without any thought of publication as a private exercise for his own enjoyment – which explains both its charm and its frankness and why it so vividly reveals the writer and the world in which he lived. But that unique frankness was not discovered until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the original six bound volumes of manuscript were not decoded and published until 1825, when it was initially deciphered by John Smith and edited by Lord Braybrooke and published in abridged form. The first complete edition did not appear until 1983, by Robert Latham and William Matthews.

The general public come to the diary through a selection. Be careful, therefore, that you obtain the selection edited by Latham (Penguin Classics) and not the selection by Braybrooke, which is also published in paperback. The reason is that Braybrooke removed the sexy bits and ‘cleaned it up’ for a 19<sup>th</sup> century readership and thus did it a great disservice.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a wave of enthusiasm for diary-keeping in England. Christians were sometimes advised to keep them as a form of moral accounting that encouraged the individual to watch and discipline himself. But, as Tomalin writes, nothing could be further from what we find in Pepys, whose private themes were to be not spiritual but intensely human: work, ambition, avarice, worldly pleasure in all its forms, jealousy, friendship, gossip, cheating and broken vows. “From the first page he produced a narrative with an entirely individual and wholly worldly point of view” (p84).



A good example is his attitude to religion. The motto he adopted in later years was, as Tomalin says, essentially a humanist one, taken from Cicero, meaning ‘the mind is the man’. Tomalin suggests that he was ready to follow the conventional religious practice of his society but reserving the right to think for himself.

Two references in the diary are worth quoting. On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1660 he records that he walked for two hours with Lord Montagu, “talking together upon all sorts of discourse – as religion, wherein he is I perceive wholly sceptical, as well as I, saying that indeed the Protestants as to the Church of Rome are wholly fanatics”. Later, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1660, when he found a thin congregation at Westminster Abbey, he writes: “I see religion, be it what it will, is but a humour, and so the esteem of it passeth as other things do”.

As the diary reveals, Pepys’ main preoccupations were his career, money, books, music, the theatre – and sex. With great gusto, he lays bare his ambitions, his avarice, his love of books, music and plays; but, above all, he lays bare his lusts. Hypocritically, this serial groper and philanderer bedded his wife’s maids and a host of other women, while professing disgust at the sexual profligacy of others. He confesses everything: his assignations, his erotic dreams about the Queen, his hangovers, his bowel movements and his ejaculations. When recording his sexual encounters he frequently slips out of shorthand into a kind of linguistic cocktail as, when riding with a servant girl in a coach, he finally succeeds in making her “tener mi cosa in her mano while mi mano was sopra su pectus, and so did hazer with grand delight”; or when his wife finds him with her maid, ‘con my hand sub su coats’.

Pepys was an acute observer of his time and his diary is an invaluable source of evidence about momentous events like the Restoration, the Plague and the Fire of London. His passion for apparently little details is encapsulated in an incident in the Restoration on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1660 when Charles II landed at Dover. Pepys was in one of the boats in the flotilla: “I went, and Mr Mansell and one of the King’s footmen, with a dog that the King loved (which shit in the boat, which made us laugh and me think that a King and all that belongs to him are but just as others are)”. This incontinent canine is a brilliantly improper presence in an account of a great historical occasion.

Pepys was the only writer of his time who demonstrated that there was such a thing as a secular, worldly way to examine and interrogate an individual life and an individual character. He created a stream of consciousness and a record of the totality of experience that was not matched in the English language until Joyce wrote *Ulysses*. It is instructive that both suffered a similar fate. The diary was initially published only in an expurgated form, while in Ireland Joyce’s novel was not exactly banned but kept under the counter. These facts say much about the repressive nature of both societies.

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