

The Shorter Pepys

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This review of *The Shorter Pepys*, selected and edited by Robert Latham, (London, 1985) appeared in *The New Zealand Listener* in 1986.

This thousand-page book contains one third of the text of Samuel Pepys's diary, along with maps, a chronology, a glossary of archaic words, and an unusually helpful index. The diary, written in commercial short-hand, spans the 1660s, a decade in which power passed from the Roundheads to Charles II, London was ravaged by plague and then by fire, the English repeatedly fought the Dutch, and Pepys grew to be one of the most important civil servants in the land ('the father of the English Navy', according to some).

The diary, which I know only in this abridged version, has given me more sheer pleasure than any other book I have ever read.

Writing for himself alone, Pepys had no sense of posterity looking over his shoulder with judgments about public, historic importance. He selected things for inclusion in the diary purely on the basis of how they struck him. This grand subjectivity would be fatal in a dull or passive or insensitive writer, but in Pepys it makes the work fresh and vibrant, constantly surprising, unlike anything else in literature.

Even when describing an 'important' scene, he is still his natural self and gives touches of his own behaviour, like this at the King's coronation:

But so great a noise, that I could make but little of the Musique; and ended, it was lost to everybody. But I had so great a list to pisse, that I went out a little while before the King had done all his ceremonies. . .

Not just his behavior, but also his reactions:

As it grew darker, [the fire] appeared more and more, and in Corners and upon steeples and between churches and houses, as far as we could see up the hill of the City, in a most horrid malicious bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire.

That is from Pepys's stunning account of the first day of the great fire of London. It has no conscious artifice: Pepys's descriptions owe their power to his uncanny knack for capturing on the page how the events *struck him*. So he gives details which a more 'responsible' writer would have omitted, and probably overlooked: 'Among other things, the poor pigeons I perceive were loath to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconies till they were some of them burned, their wings, and fell down.'

Much of the diary concerns insignificant matters. *The Shorter Pepys* gives us the texture of Pepys's daily life—what he wore, what he ate, what skirts he lifted, and what he

paid in hard cash for all this; the plays he saw, how the audiences behaved, the doorman who swindled him out of a shilling; his book collection, his musical instruments, the improvements to his apartment; his growing wealth, from sources bright and shady; his bowels and his testicles; the list is endless.

Along with stories that are variously amusing, touching, shocking, there are episodes that are. . . well, that are like this:

Before going to bed, I stood writing of this day its passages—while a drum came by, beating of a strange manner of beat, now and then a single stroke; which my wife and I wondered at, what the meaning of it should be.

And this:

I sat up till the bell-man came by with his bell, just under my window as I was writing of this very line, and cried 'Past one of the clock, and a cold, frosty, windy morning.' I then went to bed. . .

Considered as anecdotes, these are nothing. Considered as fragments of a man's life, they stretch across the centuries to make us feel that we are there.

One source of the diary's power to grip and entrance and delight is its subjectivity. There is another. One of the topics is Pepys himself—his thoughts, feelings and actions, and his thoughts and feelings about these. He had a lively inner life, to put it mildly, was intimately in touch with it, and had the ability to know at any given moment how he felt and to write about it clearly and purely.

With one strange kind of exception, he does not falsify the record in order to cut a better figure. The exception concerns his enjoyment of pornographic talk and books, such as 'that idle, roguish book, *L'escolle des Filles*; which I have bought in plain binding. . . because I resolve, as soon as I have read it,

to burn it'. Of this, Pepys says on the very next day: '[I read] a little of *L'escolle des Filles*, which is a mighty lewd book, but yet not amiss for a sober man to read over to inform himself in the villainy of the world.' Is he uncomfortable about pornography because it is passively experienced? He is candid enough about his active sexual adventures.

For the rest, we get Pepys warts and all. He does not pose for his self-portrait. When a stranger importunes his wife, he records, 'I did give him a good cuff or two on the chops; and seeing him not oppose me, I did give him another.' This is not the writing of someone who wants to be a hero to his diary! Often he bewails or derides his conduct, as when he exclaims about his 'folly and childishnesse' that he 'cannot forbear carrying [my new] watch in my hand in the coach all this afternoon, and seeing what o'clock it is 100 times' (there is more about this; it is delicious).

Some of his self-accusations are graver than that, having to do with his capacity—amazing in one so able and successful—for neglecting work and career in the pursuit of pleasure. On a day when he had a bout with one of his mistresses, then went to see another but found that she was away:

So I back again to my office, where I did with great content faire a vow to mind my business and *laisser aller les femmes* for a month; and am with all my heart glad to find myself able to come to so good a resolution, that thereby I may follow my business, which, and my honour thereby, lies a-bleeding.

(Where active sex is the topic, Pepys usually scatters French and Spanish words through his text; Robert Latham, the editor, calls this 'macaronic English'.)

Sometimes he scolds himself for his feelings. After appearing before a tribunal of inquiry, and concluding that he is not in *much* trouble, he writes:

And yet though this be all, yet I do find so poor a spirit within me, that it makes me almost out of my wits, and puts me to so much pain that I . . . vex and fret and imagine myself undone—so that I am ashamed of myself to myself, and do fear what would become of me if any real affliction should come upon me.

He later remarks that the tribunal had treated him ‘as a Criminall’, kept him waiting and made him stand; but he seems not to have reflected that that is why he was so depressed. He is always interested in his inner life and willing to respond to it, judge it, lament it, rejoice in it; but as a child of his times he is not challenged to try to understand it.

The Navy Board, and therefore Pepys himself, were potentially in much greater trouble only a month later. He did not collapse. His three-hour speech to the House of Commons was a triumph, though it is described by him in less than a sentence: ‘I begin our defence most acceptably and smoothly, and continued at it without any hesitation or losse but with full scope and all my reason free about me, as if it had been at my own table. . .’.

Pepys was able to enjoy *himself*, to take his triumphs without vainglory and his reverses without self-deception. He had, as Robert Latham puts it, ‘a gift for happiness that amounts to genius’.

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[Added in 2012: I add here my favourite short passage from the diary—Pepys’s account a dream he had about fornicating with the King’s mistress. Note that he had the thought ‘This must be a dream’ while the dream was happening; note also the precise use of ‘real pleasure’. But quite apart from all that, this passage is wonderful for its candour, intimacy, complexity and humour, for the skill of the writing, and for the sudden dark turn at the end.]

Up by 4 a-clock and walked to Greenwich, where called at Capt. Cokes and to his chamber, he being in bed—where something put my last night’s dream into my head, which I think is the best that ever was dreamed—which was, that I had my lady Castlemayne in my armes and was admitted to use all the dalliance I desired with her, and then dreamed that this could not be awake but that it was only a dream. But that since it was a dream and that I took so much real pleasure in it, what a happy thing it would be, if when we are in our graves (as Shakespeare resembles it), we could dream, and dream such dreams as this—that then we would not need to be so fearful of death as we are at this plague-time.