

Introduction

clear from his letters and memoranda as well as from his diary.¹⁴ In the diary his method of presentation will often vary with his subject. When recalling the voluminous views of Sir Philip Warwick on public finance, he writes as he would write an office memorandum. When he makes observations on the ordinary events of an ordinary day, his language can be fresh and flexible, so that one can almost catch the inflexions of his voice. ‘I to church’, he writes at 31 January 1669 (obviously here using no notes) ‘and there did hear the Doctor that is lately turned Divine, I have forgot his name – I met him a while since at Sir D. Gawden’s at dinner – Dr. Waterhouse’. On other occasions his words are more artfully composed – to describe a scene, such as the Fire, or to express a mood, as in the moving passage with which the diary ends. If he tells a story he tells it well – unhurriedly, giving full value to every significant turn in the story, and holding the reader in delighted suspense. At 29 November 1667 there is for example the tale of his mistaking the chimney sweep for burglars; and in October of the same year the long account of his search for his buried gold in the Brampton garden, when he and Hewer dug around for hours and panned the earth in the summer-house ‘just as they do for Dyamonds in other parts of the world’. Best of all in narrative power, his story of those agonising weeks in the autumn of 1668 when Elizabeth discovered his affair with her companion, Deb Willet, drove the young girl from her service and put Pepys under orders as strict as she could make them never to see Deb again. A novelist might envy the sensitivity and understanding with which it is told.

Pepys as a writer has in fact some of the characteristics of a novelist. He is notably observant, often catching his characters in an informal pose – the King weighing himself after tennis, Lord Clarendon nodding off at a meeting. Some of the figures who appear only casually are made unforgettable – the waterman who carried pins in his mouth, the ‘mighty fat woman’ who sang with ‘so much pleasure to herself . . . relishing it to her very heart’, and (most memorable of all perhaps) the shepherd on Epsom Downs, with his iron-shod boots and his woollen stockings and his little boy reading the Bible to him – ‘the most like one of the old Patriarchs that ever I saw in my life’.

A good case could be made for Pepys as the most evocative of