

Introduction

Since he had an exact mind and an unflagging interest in everything that happened (as well as the means of writing quickly), it came naturally and easily to him to write in great detail, whether the subject was a coronation or a country walk or a quarrel with his wife. Evelyn has a graphic description of the Fire, but it is Pepys who notices the pigeons trapped on the window ledges and the cat that took refuge in a chimney-hole. It is this richness of detail that gives the diary its astonishing vividness.

The concern for detail follows from the thoroughness of his technique. Not everything is written down of course, but there is no important aspect of his experience (including his dreams) that is left without some record. No other diarist of his day attempted anything so comprehensive. Evelyn's diary (from 1620 to 1706) covers a lifetime, but is highly selective, being meant to be read by his descendants, and being rewritten to a large extent with that in view. The diary of Robert Hooke, the scientist and architect (1672–83), was regularly kept and covers a wide sweep of ground, but is thin, and often nothing more than disconnected notes. Other diarists, now deservedly forgotten, write irregularly and in the form of brief jottings, often using the printed almanacks whose increasing availability encouraged this sort of diary keeping. Others again might write voluminously, but on only one aspect of their experience – John Ray, John Locke or Celia Fiennes on their travels, Anthony Wood on university events, John Milward and Anchitel Grey on parliamentary debates, Ralph Josselin on village events as seen by a Puritan parson.¹² None of Pepys's contemporaries, as far as we know, attempted a diary in the all-inclusive Pepysian sense and on the Pepysian scale.¹³ But thoroughness was second nature to Pepys, and he was as thorough in the writing of his diary as in his work as a public servant or his achievements as a bibliophile.

The small and passing everyday events are set down with great regularity – almost always what he ate and drank, and often what he wore. Although there are no extended passages of introspection, he rarely fails, when the matter warrants it, to record his thoughts. He keeps careful notes on his health, enters the more important of his occasional disbursements and at appropriate intervals summaries of his financial balances, and rarely lets many days go by without an account of his music-making, his reading,