

Introduction

and his theatre-going. Little or nothing seems to be left for the Recording Angel to cover. Perhaps the extraordinary frankness and honesty for which the diary is famous is in a way a reflection of this thoroughness. He does not hesitate to admit to the record his fits of bad temper and jealousy, and the occasions when he was guilty of physical (and even moral) cowardice, of dishonesty in the office and of infidelity to his wife. These were facts and the record would be incomplete without them. There was little danger of prying eyes discovering them since they were all concealed in the shorthand, and some (the philandering episodes) concealed still further in a macaronic mixture mainly of English, French and Spanish. Moreover, to confess was also to remind himself of the need to reform. He often, after a lapse, renews his vows against self-indulgence. There was more than a trace of the Puritan in Pepys.

His history of public affairs is marked by similar thoroughness. There is no better contemporary account of the 1660s. His first-hand reports of the Restoration, the Dutch War, the Plague and the Fire have become classical. In addition he recounts the course of political events in close, almost daily, detail. He had had a passionate interest in politics from the days when he had raised a schoolboy's cheer at the execution of Charles I. Now he had the entrée to the court, rubbed shoulders with royalty and knew a wide range of courtiers, ministers and members of parliament. As a result, his diary contains an extremely well-informed though discontinuous history of ministries, parliament and public opinion. His own part in public affairs is naturally in the forefront of the story. He reveals how business was managed in the Navy Office – how he and his colleagues cooperated and quarrelled; how they worked with other departments and with members of the mercantile and shipping community of the City; how they prepared estimates for parliament. It is the only insider's history of the work of the civil service that we have for this period.

A diary so packed with matter, however interesting, might well be unreadable were it not for its manner. But Pepys had a gift for happiness that amounts to genius, and it lights up almost every page. Whenever he pauses to reflect on his condition, it is usually to thank God, despite his troubles, for his good health and his good fortune. Moreover, he had a natural flair for writing, as is