

Introduction

Society, Aldrich, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and Bentley, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. The occasion was an impressive tribute to Pepys the Secretary to the Admiralty and Pepys the virtuoso – a man ‘unexcelled’, in Evelyn’s words, ‘in the Knowledge of the Navy . . . universally beloved, Hospitable, Generous, Learned in many things, skill’d in Musick, a very great Cherisher of Learned men’.⁸ It has been left to later generations to recognise their debt to a Pepys even more universally beloved – the Pepys of the diary.

The practice of keeping diaries seems to have become increasingly common in England from Elizabethan times, and had several specific origins, apart from the growth of literacy in general. In many cases it was a development from the keeping of household accounts. In other cases it reflected an interest in travel – a favourite subject. But perhaps it was the habit of self-examination encouraged by Protestantism, and the growing interest in public affairs, that more than anything else stimulated the practice.

Pepys nowhere states why he kept one. He occasionally mentions his diary’s usefulness (for example, in storing information that might help to protect him against parliamentary criticism of his official work, or to remind him of what tip to give to the parish sexton at New Year), but these were incidental benefits and could not have been in his mind when he started it. His reasons, like those of most diarists, are to be inferred from the diary itself. It is plain enough from the opening passages that he has clearly in mind what sort of diary he means to write. It is not to be a series of casual jottings about day-to-day events, or a baring of the soul in confession – two types of diary common enough at the time. It is to be a systematic account of his own affairs and also of what he calls the ‘state of the nation’. As the diary continues, the two themes run in counterpoint, as it were, now one, now the other, taking over as the main subject. At each of the summaries he writes at the end of the year or volume, the narrative is halted so that he may sum up the private and public events in turn, in much the same way as he makes up his monthly and annual accounts of expenses and savings. As a result his diary has a firm and clear structure. One of its origins, therefore, must be the love of order and neatness that was so marked a feature of