

INTRODUCTION

In his own lifetime Pepys was best known as a great naval administrator. To a select public he was also known as one of the leading amateurs of learning of his day and the owner of a remarkable library. It was not until the nineteenth century that he earned his widest fame – as a diarist. His diary was first published (in a heavily abbreviated form) in 1825. He had written it as a young man without any thought of publication, for diaries, though commonly enough written, were not thought suitable material for the printing press. In the Civil War a few military journals had been printed, and extracts from Archbishop Laud's diary had been published by his enemy William Prynne, but these were publicity exercises and quite exceptional. Diaries were, of their nature, private: Pepys kept his entirely for his own enjoyment. Hence its unselfconscious charm; hence too its frankness. More vividly and more completely than any other diary in the language it reveals both the writer and the world he lived in.

He was born in London on 23 February 1633 in Salisbury Court, off Fleet Street. His mother was a Londoner of simple birth, once a washmaid; his father, John, a tailor. But the Pepyses of earlier generations (mostly Cambridgeshire farmers) had included men of ability. In the fifteenth century they were bailiffs to the abbey of Crowland, and in John Pepys's generation there were several of his cousins who rose to eminence as lawyers – one of them, Richard Pepys, a Lord Chief Justice of Ireland under the Commonwealth. Of John's sons the diarist was the only one to show promise. Tom, a year younger, succeeded to his father's business, and died at 30. Another son, John, eight years Pepys's junior, made his way to St Paul's School and Cambridge, then drifted into Holy Orders out of want of ambition, but failing to obtain preferment was found a place by his brother in the public service as Clerk to Trinity House and later Joint-Clerk to the Navy Board. He made no mark in either post and died unmarried