

John Evelyn

A Study in Royalist Piety*

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I

EVELYN'S DIARY, although not nearly so full or 'gossipy' as that of Pepys, is far more valuable to the historian. Pepys chronicled the events of his life for the ten years 1659-1669, while Evelyn relates the most important and interesting details of a long life lasting from 1620-1706.

Moving as Evelyn did in the highest society of his day on terms of intimacy not only with kings, courtiers and statesmen but with eminent men in religion, science and literature, both of his own and foreign countries, his *Diary* forms a valuable commentary on the contemporary events of the stormy and momentous epoch in which he lived, and is therefore of very great worth to the student of the history, social customs and scientific progress of the times. His ample fortune rendered Evelyn politically independent, and in spite of his personal predilections, he possessed on the whole an impartial and temperate judgment on the current events of his day. Although an ardent and enthusiastic royalist and on terms of intimacy with all the Stuart kings, Evelyn, like Clarendon, was strongly opposed to the arbitrary measures of these Sovereigns. From the Restoration till his death, however, he enjoyed unbroken royal favour. He must evidently have been a man not only of conspicuous ability but also of cultured tastes and engaging manners, since he was a *persona grata* with all the famous and eminent men and women of his time, who delighted to enjoy his society and to accept his hospitality. He travelled very widely on the Continent and spoke French, Italian and Spanish fluently.

The Evelyns were an ancient and honourable family who had for several generations been settled in Surrey, and they were possessed of considerable wealth. John Evelyn's great-grandfather manufactured gunpowder at Long Ditton. John received his early education from the village schoolmaster at Long Ditton and then at a Free School at Southover. Owing to his mother's early death, John was brought up by a too indulgent grandmother, and was certainly not over disciplined. Consequently, at the age of twelve he managed to defeat his father's design to send him to Eton, "the severe discipline" of which he dreaded. Being so much indulged he became a very idle boy to whom study made little appeal, although at sixteen he was entered at the Middle Temple to read Law. But he "spent his time in studying a little, but dancing and fooling more", and at seventeen he went up to Balliol College, Oxford, as a Fellow Commoner, where in May 1637 on his matriculation he duly subscribed the 39 Articles. He studied here for three years. But he confesses in 1637 that till about that year

* An exhibition devoted to John Evelyn opens at the Victoria and Albert Museum in February.

“ he had been extremely remiss in his studies ”, and that he went to the University “ rather out of shame of abiding longer at school than for any fitness ”.

His tastes were, however, at this time more in the line of music, sports and pleasure than of books or law, which he cared little about. Soon after the outbreak of the Civil War, finding that he could be of very little service to the King's cause, since his estates, being so near London, were completely in the power of the Parliament, he sought and obtained the royal leave to travel abroad and he made a tour of France, Flanders and Holland. As a young man Evelyn was a prodigious traveller for those days. He not only visited all the notable Paris churches and places of interest but he spent much time similarly engaged in Italy and especially in Rome. He declared that St. Peter's was “ the most stupendous and incomparable Basilica far surpassing any now in the world ”.

He had a young man's curiosity to see everything, except “ the inside of the Inquisition house ”, and so he was even willing to kiss the Pope's “ embroidered slipper ” to obtain a presentation to him. He also visited Naples, Milan, Venice and then Spain. He was assured that “ there was little more to be seen in the rest of the civil world after Italy, France, Flanders and the Low Countries, but plain prodigious barbarism ”. Evelyn appreciated fully all that was gay and beautiful, and he enjoyed good food and banquets. At Bristol he partook “ of a collation of fried eggs and excellent Spanish wine ”, and after the consecration of an episcopal friend in Westminster Abbey, he records “ the enjoyment of the most magnificent dinner I ever saw in my life ”. He played the lute and was very fond of music and of the theatre when not abused “ to an atheistical liberty or loose morality ”, for he had no use for the “ lewd play ” which often disgraced the Restoration period.

It was not till after 1652 that Evelyn finally returned from his exile to live in England under the government of Cromwell, whom he called “ the arch-rebel and traitor ”. He had twice paid short business visits to England, concerning his Estates, one of which involved eighteen months' absence from his young bride, whom he married in 1647. But he settled in 1652 at Sayes Court, Deptford, where he brought his wife, who was the daughter of Sir Richard Browne, the ambassador at the Court of Charles II in Paris, who for nineteen years had maintained the Church of England services in his chapel.

We are inclined to wonder whether the persecution and proscription of “ Prelatists ” and “ Malignants ” during the Commonwealth were as severe as has been sometimes represented when we find that Evelyn, a prominent churchman and Cavalier, lived comfortably and on friendly terms with the ministers at the Protector's Court, and was actually able to carry on unmolested a clandestine correspondence with Charles II through the medium of his father-in-law. The Government also apparently connived at his refusal to take the Covenant. In 1660 he was appointed to accompany the deputation from the Parliament to Charles II at Breda, inviting him to return to England, but illness prevented his compliance.

Evelyn was overjoyed at the return of Charles II and indignantly

refuted a "wicked forged Paper" "defaming his Majesty's person and virtues". But not long after he was sadly disillusioned on the latter point since on January 6th, 1662 he condemns the heavy gambling at Court and "retires home for a little", "not at all liking the life of the Court", while he attributed the violent tempests then occurring as a judgment "on this ungrateful and vicious Nation and Court".

After the Restoration Evelyn was much employed in the public or, as we should now term it, the Civil Service. He filled many important offices and sat on several Royal Commissions, although his retiring disposition led him to refuse any signal honours. He was Commissioner for improving the streets and buildings of London in Charles II's reign and later on was appointed Treasurer of the newly founded Greenwich Hospital and was Commissioner of the Privy Seal under James II. He frequently refused the dignity of a knighthood and in 1661 he also declined the honour of a knighthood of the Bath, as well as twice refusing the presidency of the Royal Society of which he had been one of the most active founders. In spite of his numerous public employments, Evelyn in his adult life was a diligent student and a voluminous Author, his best known works being his *Sylva* and his *Diary*. For his influence in securing the famous Arundelian marbles and library for Oxford University he was given the degree of D.C.L. It is also interesting to notice that shortly before his death he was elected a member of the newly formed Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

He suffered great bereavement in his family, several of his children dying when quite young, and only one son reaching manhood, who inherited his father's love of learning, but died before Evelyn himself at the comparatively early age of forty-four. His little boy of five was an amazing prodigy in learning and piety and Evelyn declared on his untimely death at this age, "Here ends the joy of my life". Among the many notable contemporary public events which Evelyn records—the execution of Strafford, the funeral of Cromwell, the Restoration of Charles II—certainly none is more fully or graphically described than the terrible Fire of London in 1666. "All the sky," he declares, "was of a fiery aspect, like the top of a burning oven, and the light seen above forty miles round about for many nights. God grant my eyes never behold the like, who now saw above 10,000 houses all in one flame. . . . The clouds of smoke reached near fifty miles in length. Thus I left it . . . a resemblance of Sodom or the last day. . . . London was, but is no more", while a week later he records, "I went to the ruins, for it was no longer a City".

II

G. W. E. Russell adduces Evelyn's life as a proof of the truth of Shorthouse's statement in *John Inglesant* that "the Cavalier was not invariably a drunken brute",¹ and certainly no better example of a truly pious Cavalier could be given. But while it is impossible to believe that all the piety and godliness of the day were with the Puritan

¹ Prefatory Note, p. 7, to Evelyn's *Diary*.

and all the profanity and vice with the Cavalier, there is little doubt that Evelyn's exemplary career is not fully representative or typical of the men of his party. His frequent laments at the dissoluteness and depravity of the society in which he mixed give us a fairly good indication that his own example was rather the exception than the rule amongst courtiers and Cavaliers of the Restoration period, even though they did not all, as Macaulay insinuates, "utter ribaldry and blasphemy and haunt brothels and gambling houses".¹

Evelyn's mother, a woman of exceptional piety, died when he was fourteen and his father when he was twenty-one, and the loss of both parents at such an early age made a great and apparently permanent spiritual impression on one who, as he describes himself, was at this time of "a raw, vain, uncertain, and very unwary inclination, thinking of nothing but the pursuit of vanity and the confused imaginations of young men". In spite, however, of the many temptations and allurements which must have surrounded a well endowed young man, who moved freely amidst the gay, frivolous, and licentious society of his day, Evelyn preserved the simple, pure faith of a true Christian, and a reputation for virtue and integrity all too rare in that corrupt and degenerate age. As G. W. E. Russell said, "not the best Puritan was more consistently and conscientiously a Christian in faith and speech and act". Not only did he always humbly acknowledge God's special providence in preserving him from attacks by pirates and robbers, but each birthday was set apart as a time of solemn self-examination and of re-dedication to the service of his God and Saviour. Thus on his sixtieth birthday he declares, "I participated of the Blessed Communion, finishing and confirming my resolutions of giving up myself more entirely to God, to whom I had now most solemnly devoted the rest of the poor remainder of life in this world", while seventeen years later he tells a friend that he is "every day trussing up to be gone. I hope to a better place".

In his religious views, Evelyn was a staunch and devoted Churchman. He believed the Church of England to be "of all the Christian professions on the earth, the most primitive, apostolical and excellent". His sympathies were with the new High Church school, inaugurated by Archbishop Laud and the Arminians. But he was not intolerant of other opinions, although he had little love for, or sympathy with the English "sectaries", whom he sometimes describes as the "Canters", and still less for Jesuits whom he considered a most dangerous Order and as the chief authors of the horrible persecutions of the French Protestants. He lived in friendly intimacy with men of all persuasions and when travelling on the Continent he attended Presbyterian worship in Holland and a Huguenot service in Charenton, and also the Reformed Church when at Geneva. He was deeply affected by the barbarous persecution of French Protestants owing to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, attributing it largely to the slackness and duplicity of Charles II in failing to uphold and defend the teaching of the Reformed Church of England for the good not only of England but of all the Reformed Churches in Christendom, "now

¹ *Hist. of Eng.* I, 144. Everyman's Edit.

weakened and near ruined through our remissness and suffering them to be supplanted, persecuted and destroyed, as in France, which we took no notice of". He speaks of "the French persecution raging with the utmost barbarity exceeding even what the very heathen use", and he mentions with shame the small encouragement these 'distressed Christians' received in England and prays that such treatment "may not be laid to our charge". On November 3rd, 1685 Evelyn declared that "France was almost dispeopled and everybody there, save the Jesuits, abhorred what was done".

He was naturally greatly distressed at the broken and shattered condition of the Church during the Commonwealth régime and at the sufferings and privations of her clergy. He frequently entertained at his home the ejected and destitute divines, and in 1650 he was present at a secret ordination service in Sir R. Browne's private chapel in Paris, conducted by the Bishop of Galloway, and on his return to England, when the public use of the Liturgy was proscribed, he had all the offices and services of the Church regularly and faithfully performed in his library at Sayes Court. He relates, however, that as late as 1655 the Government connived at the use of the Liturgy at St. Gregory's church in London, although in December of the same year he chronicles the Protector's harshest and final persecuting edict: "I went to London, where Dr. Wild preached the funeral sermon of Preaching, this being the last day, after which Cromwell's proclamation was to take place, that none of the Church of England should dare either to preach, or administer Sacraments, teach schools, etc., on pain of imprisonment or exile. So this was the mournfullest day that in my life I had seen, for the Church of England herself, since the Reformation, to the great rejoicing of both Papist and Presbyter". This Edict does not, however, appear to have been very stringently enforced, since on several future occasions Evelyn records visits to London to attend Church services and to receive the Sacrament ministered secretly in private houses by famous Anglican divines like Archbishop Ussher and Jeremy Taylor. On March 25th, 1649 he records that "he heard the Common Prayer in St. Peter's at Paul's Wharf and in the morning the Archbishop of Armagh, that pious and learned man (Ussher), in Lincoln's Inn Chapel", and on June 10th he received the sacrament at this chapel and his friend Ussher preached the sermon. He also heard Dr. Jeremy Taylor preach more than once. But in 1659 we find the mournful entry in his Diary that "the Nation was now in extreme confusion and unsettled, between the Army and the Sectaries, the poor Church of England breathing as it were her last, so sad a face of things had overspread us". And shortly after he records that a private fast was kept in London by "the Church of England Protestants" to "beg of God the removal of His judgments, with devout prayers for His mercy to our calamitous Church".

His *Diary* furnishes abundant evidence that the High Churchmen of the renowned Caroline period had none of the medieval and pro-Roman sympathies of many of the modern High Anglicans who repudiate the designation of 'Protestant'. In 1688, when the country was flooded with controversial pamphlets in support of the Romish or

Protestant faiths, Evelyn wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury urging him to see that the title and position of the Church of England were safeguarded from the false claims of the Romanists by the insertion of the words 'Reformed and Protestant' before any treatise in defence of the Church of England as by law established; advice which Sancroft both appreciated and acted upon. Evelyn was seriously alarmed at James II's blatant efforts to pervert the Nation to Romanism and he opposed many of his sinister illegal acts to this end. "All the engines," he records in May 1686 "are now at work to bring in Popery, which God in His mercy prevent". He viewed with disgust the numerous preferments of eminent Romish perverts, "God of His infinite mercy open our eyes and turn our hearts. The Lord Jesus defend His little flock and preserve this threatened Church and Nation" is his prayer. In January 1687 he records that "the English clergy everywhere preached boldly against 'Romish superstition and errors'" and that "'the writing of the Protestants' confirmed the doctrine and discipline of the reformed religion". Of Evelyn's loyalty to Protestantism there was no question. He describes the Pope as 'AntiChrist', and refers to Bishop Cosin's son, after his perversion to Rome, as having "been debauched by the priests". He also defends Cosin from a Puritan libel that he was "one of the most popish of Anglican divines" by declaring that "no man was more averse to Rome" and that "he had saved many from apostacy to it". Romish services and ritual he styles as "the fopperies of the Papists". He refused to license the pervert Dr. Obadiah Walker's books after he had become, as he terms him, 'an apostate'.

Although Evelyn records that, at the funeral of the Bishop of Hereford (Monk) on December 20th, 1661, a silver mitre, probably as an insignia of the bishop's office, was borne, with the episcopal robes, before the hearse, he was certainly no advocate for the ritual use of the mitre for Anglican bishops. For when he describes the opening on 29th December, 1686 of a new Popish chapel at Whitehall, he mentions the Bishop in his mitre and rich copes "with several Jesuits often taking off and putting on the Bishop's mitre" and "the divers cringes" made to the altar, and the crozier put into the Bishop's hand "with a world of mysterious ceremony", and he comments, "I could not have believed I should ever have seen such things in the King of England's palace, after it had pleased God to enlighten this Nation; but our great sin has for the present eclipsed the blessing". In the previous year he had regarded James II as a man "of a most sincere and honest nature"! He was loyally attached to the Stuart dynasty and was much in favour at Court until the King's conspiracy to destroy the Church of England. For Evelyn was, above all things, convinced of "the antiquity and purity of the Church of England doctrine".

It is also interesting to notice, in view of recent controversies, that the Confirmation rubric, although at that time lacking the saving clause 'or be ready and desirous to be confirmed', could have by no means been universally or strictly enforced, since a definite High Churchman like Evelyn did not scruple to receive his first Communion

over two years before he was confirmed. He records that on July 2nd, 1637, "I first received the blessed Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the College chapel, and at this time the Church of England was in its greatest splendour". On September 17th and November 5th he again communicated, although it was not till December 16th, 1639 that he speaks of his Confirmation in St. Mary's, Oxford. He also records that as late as 1694 the Holy Communion was only celebrated at his parish church at Wotton four times a year, although apparently in many churches the monthly Communion then prevailed.

From his *Diary* we learn of some of the social and other customs of the day. He first saw coffee drunk in England as a beverage in 1637, but he says it was not a 'custom' till "thirty years later". As late as 1652 women were burned at Smithfield for murder and in May 1654 he "observed how women began to paint themselves, formerly a most ignominious thing used only by prostitutes". In 1650 a journey from Calais to Dover could be made in seven hours 'in a fair wind'. On December 5th 1697 Evelyn tells us that services were for the first time resumed in the new St. Paul's after its destruction by the Great Fire in 1666. In May 1703 he records the death of Samuel Pepys, the Saviour of the Navy, "for near forty years so much my particular friend", and he eulogises him "as a man universally beloved, hospitable, generous and learned in many things".

Although Evelyn had no sympathy with the severe and narrow asceticism of the Puritan domination, his *Diary* abundantly testifies his abhorrence of the license, impiety and immorality so prevalent after the Restoration. The coarse and blatant immorality of the stage received his strongest denunciation, while such brutal and degrading pastimes as cock fighting, dog fighting and bull and bear baiting he turned from with loathing as "butcherly sports and barbarous cruelties".

Living as he did in times of luxury, of war, violence and tumult, and through momentous national upheavals and revolutions, Evelyn succeeded in preserving the calm, even course of the sincere and faithful Christian, conscientiously dedicating his considerable talents and abilities in unostentatious service of his country and his fellow men. Probably Horace Walpole correctly summed up his career when he declared that "his life was a course of inquiry, study, curiosity, instruction and benevolence. The work of the Creator and the minute labour of the creature were all objects of his pursuit". The inscription which Evelyn caused to be put on his tomb at Wotton church gives us the true secret of his character and conduct throughout his long and eventful life. "Living in an age of extraordinary events and revolutions he learnt this truth—that all is vanity which is not honest, and that there is no solid wisdom but in real piety".