

Samuel Pepys: Plague, Fire, Revolution

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Location: National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

Event web link: [Click here](#)

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Samuel Pepys: Plague, Fire, Revolution, an exhibition at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, has a twofold purpose. Firstly, it claims to be the 'largest ever exhibition' about the life and career of Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), gathering around 200 objects from museums, galleries and private collections. Pepys is best known today, of course, for his private diary covering the decade 1660 to 1669, but the exhibition also presents a more wide-ranging account of his social and professional activities: his formidable connections in the royal court; his work as a naval administrator; and his later roles as a public figure in parliament, a livery company, and the Royal Society. The exhibition is not, however, simply a biographical celebration. It also offers an overview of English history during Pepys's lifetime, beginning with the execution of Charles I in 1649 – witnessed by Pepys as a schoolboy – and ending with the Glorious Revolution in 1688, which saw Pepys's public career collapse along with the reign of his patron James II.

The diaries themselves take centre stage in *Plague, Fire, Revolution*. Touchscreens throughout the exhibition provide automatic translations from the original shorthand and allow visitors to explore the contents at their own pace. This is a significant innovation: under the terms of their bequest the original diaries cannot leave Magdalene College Cambridge, so providing virtual access to the manuscripts represents a unique opportunity for nearly all visitors. Importantly too, the displays discuss not only the famous 1660s diary, but also a lesser-known one from 1683 covering Pepys's administrative work in Tangiers. The city, acquired via Charles II's marriage to Catherine of Braganza in 1661, proved overly expensive to maintain and Pepys's role was to calculate property values and compensation sums ahead of its abandonment. At such moments, the exhibition is at its strongest: it uses Pepys's biography to extrapolate wider points about his contemporary society – in this case the weaknesses of England's dynastic and imperial aspirations. Indeed, this exemplifies the exhibition's general procedure: Pepys's activities introduce wider social themes. His presence at Charles I's execution opens a section on the Civil War and the Commonwealth; his familiarity with Charles II's court leads to some displays about the decadent pleasures of the Restoration (particularly adultery, poetry, and theatres); and his presidency of the Royal Society enables wider discussion of late seventeenth-century science and its key practitioners, especially Isaac Newton, Robert Hooke and Edmond Halley. These sections are especially good at highlighting the popular culture of the period. We see the rival propaganda of royalists and parliamentarians: books, coins, jewellery, and paintings all designed to promote political and religious causes. At such moments it is clear how deeply everyday objects were suffused by ideological debate: even clothes and crockery could be marshalled to partisan purpose. A display case of plague literature – including pamphlets dispensing spiritual and

medical advice – manages to capture both the increasing social panic and the sober attempts at rationalisation which greeted the Great Plague of 1665. And we can better appreciate the public excitement caused by scientific endeavour when we learn that Hooke's book of microscope observations, *Micrographia* (London, 1665), was a bestseller which caused Pepys to read until 2am on the day he purchased it.

For all these strengths, however, the exhibition manages to sustain a very introductory tone throughout. In the section on the Commonwealth, for example, we are told that Richard Cromwell's military and political inexperience, along with unspecified 'difficulties' with the army and the Republic's finances 'caused a political crisis that led to the restoration of the monarchy'. No one could expect an exhaustive analysis of this complex event, but given the centrality of the Restoration to English political culture (and Pepys's career) it is not unreasonable to wish for more sustained discussion. Instead, we continue directly to a display dealing with Pepys's bladder-stone operation in 1658. Similarly, the section on 'War and the Navy' focuses on the cultural representations of naval power – for instance, paintings of admirals and sea-battles. But there is less on the ideological and strategic motivations for naval expansion, or the bureaucratic and financial developments which facilitated it. At such moments, there is a risk of glossing over formative and tumultuous events too quickly. It has become a cliché to speak of the Restoration as a period of feckless decadence and hedonism, and the exhibition seems to confirm this when it talks about social 'opulence, immorality and extravagance'. In fact, the later displays on scientific innovation, imperial aspiration, and political instability complicate popular views of these decades considerably, though this is not a stated purpose of the exhibition even if the outline of such an interpretation is already present in its structure.

A lack of further explanation also affects accounts of Pepys himself. At the beginning of the exhibition we are told that Pepys, like his cousin and mentor Edward Montagu, held 'republican sympathies'. But later he was 'overwhelmed' at the Restoration, recording in his diary that 'it is impossible to relate the glory [of the coronation ceremony]'. Montagu, an arch-pragmatist, had been a parliamentarian initially loyal to Oliver and Richard Cromwell, but who later switched his support to the Stuarts and was instrumental in their return. So is Pepys a political weathervane, quietly acquiescent to the governmental powers of the day? Is he a cunning strategist, emulating the manoeuvres of his mentor – in which case the private thoughts in his diary are, in part, based on the political calculations of another person? The exhibition does not explore these questions. Later on Pepys is described as a 'sociable man who regularly enjoyed fine food and drink in the company of friends' – undoubtedly a true statement, but one which does little to suggest his individuality or unique interest. And other, more complex, attitudes receive limited comment. We are told, for instance, that he disapproved of court debauchery while simultaneously indulging in it – though the capacity for hypocrisy or self-deception which this would suggest is not discussed further. The very best exhibitions – among which I would include the National Maritime Museum's recent [*\[Ships, Clocks and Stars: The Quest for Longitude\]\(#\)*](#) (2014-15) – operate on several levels at once: they offer introductory overviews for visitors unfamiliar with the subject matter, but are also unafraid of complexity and provide historiographical elaboration or technical detail for viewers who want it. Here, however, there is a tendency to smooth out complexities rather to consider them more deeply. Fortunately, curious viewers will be richly rewarded by the excellent accompanying book edited by Margarette Lincoln (details below), which contains essays on Restoration politics, sexual morality, religion, naval administration, and other themes alluded to in the exhibition itself. But it is a pity that the display captions are not always so wide-ranging.

Samuel Pepys: Plague, Fire, Revolution also emphasises very strongly the diarist's role as a 'witness'. The publicity straplines for the exhibition even describe him as 'history's greatest witness' – a curious phrase which implies that observing contemporary events is a competitive exercise and an especial achievement, rather than a near-universal human experience. In fact, Pepys's accomplishments lie in recording and interpreting those events, rather than simply watching them passively. The diaries' very existence tells us that Pepys was never merely a 'witness'; instead he actively constructs history for posterity, and it is therefore important to regard him as an actor and not just an observer. The diaries were written by an exceptionally well-connected establishment figure and this is significant not just because Pepys had access to privileged social spaces and powerful people, but also because those same societal predilections and conventions actively shaped his interpretation of the period. For example, we are told that his chosen shorthand system encouraged him 'to use, and repeat, certain words and phrases that could be easily written using the system'. This is an important point because it shows on a practical level how Pepys's private reflections are mediated through conventional practices which structure both what he comments on and the way he does so. The diaries are not a transparent window to the past, and we need to recognise that their particular perspectives have helped to shape modern understandings of Restoration history. The exhibition's conclusion provides a reception history of the diaries from their first publication in 1825 to the television series and audiobooks of the twenty-first century. In some respects, Pepys's diaries have become synonymous with popular histories of the later Stuart decades – a phenomenon which extends beyond this specific exhibition. This would probably have pleased Pepys himself: after all, here was a man with such a keen eye for his own legacy that he fixed engravings of himself into his books before donating them to Cambridge. He would almost certainly have been gratified with an exhibition that uses his life as the interpretative lens for viewing late seventeenth-century England.

I should end this review by noting the extremely impressive curatorial and design work which has facilitated *Samuel Pepys: Fire, Plague, Revolution*. The exhibition has gathered objects from a very diverse array of museums and galleries, which is testimony both to detailed research and skilled negotiation: the British Library, the National Archives, the Royal Collection Trust, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and Ministry of Defence Art Collection are just a small sample of lenders. There are some real treasures too: beautiful Restoration court dresses, and the original letter inviting William of Orange to take the English crown among them. The exhibition is also spaciously laid out. This might sound like a trivial compliment, but is in fact deeply important for allowing access to the materials: this is an exhibition which, unlike many, is designed to cope with large numbers of visitors. Some of the displays are imaginative and exciting too: particularly the section on the Great Fire which allows one to see the spread of the flames on video panoramas and maps. In one further respect, the exhibition is a bold move by the National Maritime Museum: although Pepys had a significant link with the naval world through his position as Secretary to the Navy Board, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that maritime matters are the exhibition's predominant focus. If *Samuel Pepys* is a concerted attempt to broaden the Museum's jurisdiction then such an endeavour must be both applauded and encouraged.

Samuel Pepys: Plague, Fire, Revolution is at the National Maritime Museum from 20th November 2015 to 28th March 2016.

The exhibition is accompanied by the publication Samuel Pepys: Plague, Fire, Revolution, edited by Margarette Lincoln (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015).