How useful is the Diary of Samuel Pepys to a Historian studying Restoration England?

1,962 words

1 http://www.mylearning.org/learning/samuel-pepys-and-the-great-fire-of-london/pepys.jpg
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Introduction

This essay will analyse the usefulness of the Diary of Samuel Pepys to a historian studying the history of Restoration England. I chose this particular question because this particular time, which saw struggles between the King and Parliament as well as between Catholics and Protestants, directly caused the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which in turn defined the future of British politics and role of the monarch. The tensions between Catholics and Protestants are still relevant today as it emphasises how religion can deeply divide areas most notably in the Middle East.

I will argue that the diary is one of the most valuable source available to a historian studying this time period namely because it offers an almost unbiased eyewitness account of some of the key events of the early reign of Charles II. One the other hand I will take into consideration some of the limitations of the diary, which includes most notably the fact that it only covers the early part of the Restoration period.

The carefully selected sources I have chosen to use are ‘The Concise Pepys’ edited by Lord Braybrooke, ‘A Pepys Anthology’ Edited by Robert and Linnet Latham, ‘Samuel Pepys and his world’ by Geoffrey Trease and ‘Samuel Pepys: the Unequalled Self’ by Claire Tomalin.
Summary of Evidence

Samuel Pepys was born in 1633 and died in 1703, being most famous for keeping his daily diary for nine years between the years of 1660 to 1669. This diary was kept on a daily basis, providing key insight into this turbulent time period and has become one on the main primary sources on the Great Plague, the Great Fire of London and the Second Anglo-Dutch War, when the Dutch sailed up the Thames to destroy the English fleet docked in Medway. However, as Pepys kept his diary every day, it also contains his day to day activities and his often frank opinions such as when he went to see A Midsummer Night's Dream, "which [he has] never seen before, nor shall ever again," going on to call it the most "ridiculous play [he has] ever seen." This gives a great personal insight into the man himself as well as providing an image of the way of life for someone living during the times of the restoration. Pepys was also involved in the Navy from the early days of Charles II’s reign in 1660 until eventually becoming Secretary to the Lord High Admiral and being elected to the houses of parliament in 1673. He was arrested twice during his life and sent to the Tower of London on both occasions, first in 1676 when he was accused of selling naval secrets to the French and again in 1690 when he was arrested on suspicion of trying to restore the Catholic James II back to the English throne; both arrests ended with the case being dropped against him. But none of this was documented because Pepys stopped keeping his diary in 1669 because he was losing his eyesight and feared that continuing to keep the diary would potentially cause blindness. In total he kept his diary for nine years and five months. It was this period that was characterized by the disagreements between Charles II and his parliament. Prior to the restoration of Charles to the throne, England had been a republic after the defeat and execution of Charles I, which ended the English Civil War in 1649.

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9 It lasted for about 11 years and was known as the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland, ruled by Oliver Cromwell and later his son Richard Cromwell who held the title Lord Protector.
Evaluation of Sources

Source 1 - BBC Drama, Charles II: The Power and the Passion.

One source I used was the BBC TV series, 'Charles II: The Power and the Passion,' which follows the story of the King during his twenty seven year reign. As it focuses primarily on Charles, the most prominent aspect of the series were his feuds with parliament and covers the major events of that era. It accurately shows his attitude towards parliamentary decisions such as the Test Acts and their attempts to remove the Duke of York, later James II, as heir to the throne; this is shown with the King constantly reminding his advisors that “my brother, the Duke of York, is my heir.” Following the restoration of the monarchy, the King and Parliament regularly clashed however one limitation with this TV series is that in the final episode when Parliament were attempting to pass the Exclusion Act, which would have meant that James, who was Catholic, would have be excluded from the line of succession. In the series Charles dissolves parliament and it seems that parliament ceases to exist after this, but in reality, he was forced to dissolve parliament three more times in order to eventually defeat this bill. It also does not greatly focus on the colonial policies of England at the time and suggests that Charles was very friendly towards Louis XIV and only took an aggressive stance towards the Netherlands. Although he did take an anti-Dutch position, he was also part of the Triple Alliance, which opposed Louis XIV during his war with Spain in 1668. But these discrepancies are understandable as it compresses almost thirty years into four, one hour episodes and overall it gives a very good overview of the period. One major strong point is the evolution of fashion during this time period starting when the Periwig was introduced at the start of Charles's Reign through to the different style of clothing and the different style of makeup worn by the women. With regard to origin, it was made and produced by the BBC which is a respectable broadcasting organization and is not produced by anyone who had a clear political agenda. Again, its purpose is more to entertain rather than persuade its audience and the opposing two sides, Charles and Parliament, explain their points of view and reasons behind their actions allowing the audience to make their own choice over who was right.

Source 2 - A Pepys Anthology by Robert and Linnet Latham

Another source I will analyze is the book 'A Pepys Anthology,' which is a version of the full diary edited down by Robert and Linnet Latham. The strongest point of this source is that it compresses the entire diary into just under three hundred pages, which makes it a much more accessible text as it only has the extracts of the most value and interest to the reader. What sets this apart from other compressed versions of Pepy's Diary is that instead of listing the extracts in chronological order, it categorizes each extract under

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10 In the final episode Charles declares “…I declare parliament dissolved, go home gentlemen I will not trouble you anymore.” Parliament is not seen meeting again so it would imply that it was completely dissolved. This is reinforced when the Duke of Buckingham says, “he has dissolved Parliament and will rule in his own right, exclusion and Parliament are finished with.” In reality Parliament was dissolved four times between 1679-81.

12 The fact that the story is not just told from one person’s perspective is particularly useful as Parliament’s point of view is to increase the stability of England by ensuring that a protestant becomes king after Charles, their primary candidate is Charles’s illegitimate son James, Duke of Monmouth, because he is a protestant. While on the other hand Charles wants his brother James to become king because, as it is put in the TV show, “…it is his right, ordained by God.” However as Charles converted to Catholicism on his death bed, it is much more likely that he wanted England to be converted back into a Catholic nation.
different themes. But, even though this style allows the reader to read in "continuous narrative," the major limitation is that often months and sometimes years elapse between each extract, meaning that it is not as continuous as it may have originally seemed\textsuperscript{13}. The anthology was created by Robert Latham, who was a member of the Magdalene College at Cambridge and wrote many books on Samuel Pepys. So obvious he is one of the leading experts on Pepys which would imply that the exerts chosen for each theme would be the most appropriate.\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{14}With the book only being 284 pages while the full original diary had about 1,500,000 words, a possible criticism could be that this Anthology is too short, but because the people who edited it down are very knowledge on the subject of Samuel Pepys, they clearly would be able to compress the diary in such a way that it contained the key points it originally expressed. The blurb of the book also states that “For anyone unfamiliar with Pepys, this Anthology serves as a delightful introduction,” therefore one of its main purposes it to act as an introduction to Pepys which would then allow the reader to read a more in depth edition of the diary.
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Analysis

Many historians argue that the Diary of Samuel Pepys is the most important source for any historian studying the Restoration and has been described as "History, on the whole reliable history." This is because it is one of only a handful of primary sources from this time period and depicts not only some of the most important events of the 1660s but also how they lived. One of the most useful account Pepys made was on the 2nd September, when the Great Fire of London broke out, which he described as an "Infinite great fire." He was also involved in the attempts to contain the fire along with King Charles II, who was coordinating the operation. One this particular day it tells of how they did not have enough people to pull down the houses necessary to halt the progress of the fire, "Lord Mayor [said]... 'People will not obey me; I have been pulling down houses, but the fire overtakes us faster than we can do it' ". This tells a historian how the officials reacted, but another aspect that Pepys documented was the way that the people of London reacted to this catastrophe, many of them gathered together their valuables and moved them to a safer part of London and it took Pepys himself the best part of three days to move all his possessions just north of the River Thames to "Bednall-Green" which is now part of London Borough of Tower Hamlets. People's reactions to various events are seldom captured in official documentation, but it is something that Pepys always notes, such as when the Dutch completed the attack on Medway in 1667, he, along with many other members of the court, "feared what disorders [England] may fall into." As well as capturing this, he shows their lifestyles too, regularly noting items of clothing that are in fashion and emphasizing the cost of keeping up with the fashion, this is shown in 1663 when he chose to "labour to get more [money]...for want of clothes." This shows the importance of keep up to date with the trends for a man of statue such as Pepys.

On the other hand, the diary is not the perfect source that many historians make it out to be. The most obvious flaw with the diary is the fact that Pepys only kept it between 1660 to 1669 while the Restoration period ended in 1685 with the death of Charles II. So as a result the final fifteen years of this period is not included and it was during this time that King Charles and Parliament clashed the most. Therefore it does not include some of the most important aspects of Charles's reign, that being who would succeed him as well as

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Titus Oates supposed 'Popish Plot,' which saw Pepys briefly imprisoned.\textsuperscript{21} Of course, what it does cover during the years of 1660 to 1669 are very important, but what Pepys writes does not always tell the whole story. The most notable example is that Pepys hardly ever mentions beggars and the poverty that was around in Restoration London.\textsuperscript{22} This means that certain aspects of Restoration English society are not documented by Pepys, meaning that it does not always give the whole picture.


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Conclusion

In conclusion the diary of Samuel Pepys is a very important to any historian who is studying this time period simply because he provides an eye witness account to some of the major events of the early years of Charles's reign. But of course many will argue that it does not show the whole period which means it does not show the struggles between the King and Parliament. This time period and the events in England shows just how much the Protestants and Catholics resented each other as well as highlighting the conflicts between the Divine Right of Kings and the right of an elected parliament. It was these tensions that ultimately resulted in James II being deposed and the Bill of Rights being introduced which secured not only a Protestant England, but also a strong elected government. As mentioned previously, the diary does exclude some aspects of life in this time, such as the lack of poverty. This raising an interesting point, that being who writes the sources. The American author Henry Miller once wrote, “The History of the world is the history of the privileged few,” this is appropriate because Pepys was a well off man, he would have a drastically different life to that of a beggar, so most of the sources documenting people’s lifestyles are only by those who could document their lives making them not applicable to the majority of the population.
List of Sources

Books and Articles


Other Sources
