

The Christmas Diaries



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Introduction



In the hush of a snow-covered morning or the festive hum of a family gathering, Christmas Day has always held a special allure for writers. From the cobbled streets of 17th-century London to the gilded halls of a 19th-century palace, the holiday has been the backdrop to countless personal narratives. "The Christmas Diaries" is a small collection of diary entries written largely on this cherished day.

Among the luminaries featured are Samuel Pepys, Queen Victoria and Kenneth Williams each describing the way that they spend Christmas. Each narrative is accompanied by a short introduction. The illustrations are courtesy of the AI platform Dalle 3 as driven by ChatGPT and myself. They are the state of the art as I write in late 2023

This collection is not just about the famous. Interspersed among these renowned figures are entries from lesser known diarists whose experiences are equally compelling. From soldiers penning their thoughts on battlefields to ordinary citizens reflecting on the simple joys of the season, their stories add depth and dimension to the tapestry of Christmas past and present.

Whether you're nestled by a roaring fire or seeking respite in a quiet corner, let these diaries remind you of the enduring magic of Christmas Day.

David Hill

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John Evelyn

Introduction

John Evelyn, 1620 –1706, studied law, and then, at 22, joined the King's Army - for three days only. Fearing his support for the Royalist cause might prejudice the safety of his brother's estate at Wotton in Surrey, which was then in parliamentary territory, he decided to avoid the Civil War and go travelling.

He ended up in Paris, where he married Mary Browne, daughter of Charles I's French ambassador. He and his wife returned to England in 1652, where they took over his father-in-law's estate at Deptford. After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Evelyn was favoured by Charles II and James II and held various prestigious posts. He was connected with the Royal Mint, improving conditions for prisoners of war and the wounded, colonial affairs, and the Royal Society. Although he wrote many books (including one on trees).

Evelyn is most famous for his long and detailed diary which provides a rich and historically important record for much of the 17th century. Although Evelyn's diary covers over 50 years, and that of his friend Samuel Pepys covers only eight years, Pepys's diary is actually longer; and, unlike Pepys, Evelyn reveals very little about himself. The background to this particular extract was that Christmas celebrations had been banned by Cromwell and this is what ensued...

The Diary Christmas Day 1657

I went with my Wife to London to celebrate Christmas day. Mr. Gunning preaching in Excester Chapell on 7: Micha 2. Sermon Ended, as he was giving us the holy Sacrament, The Chapell was surrounded with Souldiers: All the Communicants and Assembly surpriz'd & kept Prisoners by them, some in the house, others carried away:

It fell to my share to be confined to a roome in the house, where yet were permitted to Dine with the master of it, the Countesse of Dorset, Lady Hatton & some others of quality who invited me: In the afternoone came Collonel Whaly, Goffe & others from Whitehall to examine us one by one, & some they committed to the Martial, some to Prison, some Committed: When I came before them they tooke my name & aboad, examined me, why contrarie to an Ordinance made that none should any longer observe the superstitious time of the Nativity (so esteem'd by them) I durst offend, & particularly be at Common prayers, which they told was but the Masse in English, & particularly pray for Charles stuard, for which we had no Scripture: I told them we did not pray for Cha: Steward but for all Christian Kings, Princes & Governors: The replied, in so doing we praied for the K. of Spaine too, who was their Enemie, & a Papist, with other frivolous & insnaring questions, with much threatenng, & finding no colour to detaine me longer, with much pittie of my Ignorance, they dismiss'd me: These were men of high flight, and above Ordinances: & spake spitefull things of our B: Lords nativity: so I got home late the next day blessed be God: These wretched miscreants, held their muskets against us as we came up to receive the Sacred Elements, as if they would have shot us at the Altar, but yet suffering us to finish the Office of Communion, as perhaps not in their Instructions what they should do in case they found us in that Action.

Pepys

Introduction

Pepys is easily the most famous English diarist of the 17th century. When you review the diaries that are around from this period he is unique in the level of continuous coverage and personal detail which he gives. Finding one entry for a Christmas day has been difficult for many diaries, finding one which is interesting doubly so but 3 days is a joy which is not repeated in the selections I have been able to find

Tuesday 25 December 1660 (Christmas day)

In the morning very much pleased to see my house once more clear of workmen and to be clean, and indeed it is so, far better than it was that I do not repent of my trouble that I have been at.

In the morning to church, where Mr. Mills made a very good sermon. After that home to dinner, where my wife and I and my brother Tom (who this morning came to see my wife's new mantle put on, which do please me very well), to a good shoulder of mutton and a chicken. After dinner to church again, my wife and I, where we had a dull sermon of a stranger, which made me sleep, and so home, and I, before and after supper, to my lute and Fuller's History, at which I staid all alone in my chamber till 12 at night, and so to bed.

Wednesday 25 December 1661

In the morning to church, where at the door of our pew I was fain to stay, because that the sexton had not opened the door. A good sermon of Mr. Mills. Dined at home all alone, and taking occasion from some fault in the meat to complain of my maid's sluttishness, my wife and I fell out, and I up to my chamber in a discontent.

After dinner my wife comes up to me and all friends again, and she and I to walk upon the leads, and there Sir W. Pen called us, and we went to his house and supped with him, but before supper Captain Cock came to us half drunk, and began to talk, but Sir W. Pen knowing his humour and that there was no end of his talking, drinks four great glasses of wine to him, one after another, healths to the king, and by that means made him drunk, and so he went away, and so we sat down to supper, and were merry, and so after supper home and to bed.

Thursday 25 December 1662 (Christmas Day)

Up pretty early, leaving my wife not well in bed, and with my boy walked, it being a most brave cold and dry frosty morning, and had a pleasant walk to White Hall, where I intended to have received the Communion with the family, but I came a little too late. So I walked up into the house and spent my time looking over pictures, particularly the ships in King Henry the VIIIth's Voyage to Bullen marking the great difference between their build then and now.

By and by down to the chappell again where Bishopp Morley preached upon the song of the Angels, "Glory to God on high, on earth peace, and good will towards men." Methought he made but a poor sermon, but long, and reprehending the mistaken jollity of the Court for the true joy that shall and ought to be on these days, he particularized concerning their excess in plays and gaming, saying that he whose office it is to keep the gamesters in order and within bounds, serves but for a second rather in a duell, meaning the groom-porter. Upon which it was worth observing how far they are come from taking the reprehensions of a bishopp seriously, that they all laugh in the chappell when he reflected on their ill actions and courses. He did much press us to joy in these publique days of joy, and to hospitality. But one that stood by whispered in my ear that the Bishopp himself do not spend one groat to the poor himself. The sermon done, a good anthem followed, with vialls, and then the King came down to receive the Sacrament.

Johnathan Swift

Introduction

Although born and educated in Ireland, Jonathan Swift, 1667-1745, spent much of his life in England. He was taken on at Moor Park, Surrey, by Sir William Temple, whose father had been head of the Irish bar and a friend to the Swifts. While at Moor Park, Swift worked as an assistant to Sir William, he also tutored Esther Johnson (or 'Stella'), the daughter of Temple's sister, and developed his poetical and satirical writing.

When Sir William, his patron, died in 1699, Swift returned to Dublin, where he obtained the deanery of St Patrick's Cathedral. He continued, however, to make regular trips to London. Although most famous perhaps for 'Gulliver's Travels', written later in his life, 'Journal to Stella' is also considered an enduring work. It is a collection of letters, written every day, to Esther Johnson who had grown into a beautiful and intelligent woman. At Swift's behest, she and a companion moved to Ireland, and the letters are those he sent to her from London. While full of detail and playfulness, the diary-letters also trace his move away from Whig policies and a growing alliance with the Tory party.

Christmas Day 1710

Pray, young women, if I write so much as this every day, how will this paper hold a fortnight's work, and answer one of yours into the bargain? You never think of this, but let me go on like a simpleton. I wish you a merry Christmas, and many, many a one with poor Presto at some pretty place. I was at church to-day by eight, and received the Sacrament, and came home by ten; then went to Court at two: it was a Collar-day, that is, when the Knights of the Garter wear their collars; but the Queen stayed so late at Sacrament, that I came back, and dined with my neighbour Ford, because all people dine at home on this day.

This is likewise a Collar-day all over England in every house, at least where there is BRAWN: that's very well.—I tell you a good pun; a fellow hard by pretends to cure agues, and has set out a sign, and spells it EGOES; a gentleman and I observing it, he said, "How does that fellow pretend to cure AGUES?" I said I did not know; but I was sure it was not by a SPELL. That is admirable.

And so you asked the Bishop about that pun of Lord Stawel's brother. Bite! Have I caught you, young women? Must you pretend to ask after roguish puns, and Latin ones too? Oh but you smoked me, and did not ask the Bishop. Oh but you are a fool, and you did. I met Vedeau again at Court to-day, and I observed he had a sword on; I fancy he was broke, and has got a commission, but I never asked him. Vedeau I think his name is, yet Parvisol's man is Vedel, that is true. Bank Stock will fall like stock-fish by this bad news, and two days ago I could have got twelve pounds by my bargain; but I do not intend to sell, and in time it will rise.

It is odd that my Lord Peterborow foretold this loss two months ago, one night at Mr. Harley's, when I was there; he bid us count upon it, that Stanhope would lose Spain before Christmas; that he would venture his head upon it, and gave us reasons; and though Mr. Harley argued the contrary, he still held to his opinion. I was telling my Lord Angelsea this at Court this morning; and a gentleman by said he had heard my Lord Peterborow affirm the same thing. I have heard wise folks say, "An ill tongue may do much." And 'tis an odd saying, "Once I guessed right, And I got credit by't; Thrice I guessed wrong, And I kept my credit on." No, it is you are sorry, not I. Pardon all this, for the sake of a poor creature I had so much friendship for.

Walter Scott

Introduction

Scott was born in Edinburgh, trained as a lawyer, but became a legal official, a job which gave him time to write. He began his writing career by translating German Gothic romances. By 1805, though, his ballads, such as 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' had brought him popularity. Many romantic poems - including 'The Lady of the Lake' and 'The Lord of the Isles' - followed; moreover, he worked on new editions of writings by Dryden and Swift.

In the 1810s, he turned to novels, publishing them anonymously, and found a new level of success with 'Waverly', 'Rob Roy' and 'Ivanhoe', among many others. A celebrity of his day, the income from these works gave him the money to build a huge mansion, which he called Abbotsford. In 1820, he was made a baronet. In 1826, when his printer and his publisher, two firms in which he was deeply involved, went bust, he suffered financial ruin. Rather than declaring bankruptcy, he tried, for the rest of his life, to repay the debts. Scott did not start writing a journal until 1825, but he then kept it up until his death. Today, some consider it his greatest work.

Christmas Day 1825

By dint of abstinence and opodeldoc (a patent medicine DBH) I passed a better night than I could have hoped for; but took up my lodging in the chapel room, as it is called, for going upstairs was impossible. To-day I have been a mere wretch. I lay in bed till past eleven, thinking to get rid of the rheumatism; then I walked as far as Turnagain with much pain, and since that time I have just roasted myself like a potato by the fireside in my study, slumbering away my precious time, and unable to keep my eyes open or my mind intent on anything, if I would have given my life for it. I seemed to sleep tolerably, too, last night, but I suppose Nature had not her dues properly paid; neither has she for some time. I saw the filling up of the quarry on the terrace walk, and was pleased. Anne and I dined at Mertoun, as has been my old wont and use as Christmas day comes about. We were late in setting out, and I have rarely seen so dark a night.

Queen Victoria



Introduction

Victoria kept her diary from a young age into old age. It was eventually published after being heavily edited. Here is an extract from Christmas 1832 when she was 13.

Christmas Eve 1832

After dinner...we then went into the drawing-room near the dining-room...There were two large round tables on which were placed two trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed round the trees... Mamma gave me a little lovely pink bag which she had worked with a little sachet likewise done by her; a beautiful little opal brooch and earrings, books, some lovely prints, a pink satin dress and a cloak lined with fur. Aunt Sophia gave me a dress which she worked herself, and Aunt Mary a pair of amethyst earrings...We then went to my room where I had arranged Mamma's table. I gave Mamma a white bag which I had worked, a collar and a steel chain for Flora; Aunt Sophia a pair of turquoise earrings; Lehzen (her governess) a little white and gold pincushion and a pin with two little gold hearts hanging to it... Mamma then took me up into my bedroom with all the ladies. There was my new toilet table with a white muslin cover over pink, and all my silver things standing on it with a fine new looking-glass. I stayed up until half past nine.

Henry David Thoreau

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau 1817-62 was born in Concord, Massachusetts, he graduated from Harvard in 1837, became a teacher in Concord, and lectured. He gave up teaching, and in about 1839 began his walks and studies of nature which became his main occupation. In 1839 he made the voyage described in his *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). In 1845 he built himself a shanty in the woods by Walden Pond, near Concord, where he wrote much of the *Week*, his essay on Thomas Carlyle, and the classic, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854). The remainder of his writings were published after his death. He then had various jobs, lecturing now and then, and writing for magazines, and his 1850 trip to Canada produced *A Yankee in Canada* (1866). He kept a daily journal (from 1835) of his walks and observations, from whose 30 volumes were published *Early Spring in Massachusetts* (1881), *Summer* (1884) and *Winter* (1887). Other publications are *Excursions in Field and Forest*, with a memoir by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson (1863), *Cape Cod* (1865), *Familiar Letters* (1894) and *Poems of Nature* (1896), and a celebrated essay, *Civil Disobedience* (1849), provoked by his opposition to the Mexican War.

Christmas Day 1860

How different are men and women, e.g. in respect to the adornment of their heads ! Do you ever see an old or jammed bonnet on the head of a woman at a public meeting? But look at any assembly of men with their hats on; large a proportion of the hats will be old, weather beaten, and indented, but I think so much the more picturesque and interesting! One farmer rides by my door in a hat which it does me good to see, there is so much character in it, - so much independence to begin with, and then affection for his old friends, etc., etc. I should not wonder if there were lichens on it.

Think of painting a hero in a brand-new hat! The chief recommendation of the Kossuth hat is that it looks old to start with, and almost as good as new to end with. Indeed, it is generally conceded that a man does not look the worse for a somewhat dilapidated hat. But go to a lyceum and look at the bonnets and various other headgear of the women and girls, - who, by the way, keep their hats on, it being too dangerous and expensive to take them off! Why every one looks as fragile as a butterfly's wings, having just come out of a bandbox, - as it will go into a bandbox again when the lyceum is over. Men wear their hats for use; women theirs for ornament. I have seen the greatest philosopher in the town with what the traders would call 'a shocking bad hat' on, but the woman whose bonnet does not come up to the mark is at best a 'bluestocking'.

Rev. Francis Kilvert



Introduction

He was a curate at Clyro in Radnorshire and later vicar of Bredwardine on the Wye. His Diary (1870-79), giving a vivid picture of rural life in the Welsh marches, was discovered in 1937 and published in three volumes (1938-40).

Christmas Day 1870

As I lay awake praying in the early morning I thought I heard a sound of distant bells. It was an intense frost. I sat down in my bath upon a sheet of thick ice which broke in the middle into large pieces whilst sharp points and jagged edges stuck all round the sides of the tub like chevaux de frise, not particularly comforting to the naked thighs and loins, for the keen ice cut like broken glass. The ice water stung and scorched like fire. I had to collect the floating pieces of ice and pile them on a chair before I could use the sponge and then I had to thaw the sponge in my hands for it was a mass of ice. The morning was most brilliant. Walked to the Sunday School and the road sparkled with millions of rainbows, the seven colours gleaming in every glittering point of hoar frost. The Church was very cold in spite of two roaring stove fires.

Henry Wood Nevinson

Introduction

Henry Wood Nevinson (1856-1941) was a war correspondent who was present at the siege of Ladysmith in the Boer war, hence the current extract.

Christmas Day 1899

The Boer guns gave us an early Christmas carol, and at intervals all day they joined in the religious and social festivities. Our north end of the town suffered most, and we beguiled the peaceful hours in digging out the shells that had nearly killed us. They have a marketable value. One perfect specimen of a 96lb. shell from Bulwan fell into a soft flower bed and did not burst or receive a scratch. I suppose it cost the Boers about £35, and it would still fetch £10 as a secondhand article. A brother to it pitched into a boarding house close by us, and blew the whole gable end sky high. Unhappily two of the inmates were wounded, and a horse killed. But such little contretemps as shells did not in the least interfere with the Christmas revels.

About 250 children are still left in the town or river caves (where one or two have recently been born), and it was determined they should not be deprived of their Christmas tree. The scheme was started and organised by Colonel Rhodes and Major "Karri" Davis, of the Imperial Light Horse. Four enormous trees were erected in the auction rooms and decked with traditional magnificence and toys ransacked from every shop. At half-past eight p.m. fairyland opened. A gigantic Father Christmas stalked about with branches of pine and snowy cap (the temperature at noon was 103deg. in the shade). Each child had a ticket for its present, and joy was distributed with military precision. When the children had gone to their dreams the room was cleared for a dance, and round whirled the khaki youths with white-bloused maidens in their arms. It was not exactly the Waterloo Ball with sound of revelry by night, but I think it will have more effect on the future of the race. Other festivities, remote from the unaccustomed feminine charm, were a series of mule races, near the old camp, for soldiers and laughing Kaffir boys. The men's dinner itself was enough to mark the day.

It is true everything was rather skimped, but after the ordinary short rations it was a treat to get any kind of pudding, any pinch of tobacco, and sometimes just a drop of rum. Almost the saddest part of the siege now is the condition of the animals. The oxen are skeletons of hunger, the few cows hardly give a pint of milk apiece, the horses are failing. Nothing is more pitiful than to feel a willing horse like mine try to gallop as he used, and have to give it up simply for want of food. During the siege I have taught him to talk better than most human beings, and his little apologies are really pathetic when he breaks into something like his old speed and stops with a sigh. It is the same with all.

Katherin Luard

Introduction

I have been able to find out nothing about this good lady except the contents of her diary which were published anonymously in 1915 as *Diary of a Nursing Sister on the Western Front 1914-1915*. She is travelling on a train for the wounded which travels from the war front to the coast bearing wounded soldiers as they head home. Fever is rife.

Christmas Day 1914

11 a.m.—On way up again to Béthune, where we have not been before (about ten miles beyond where we were yesterday), a place I've always hoped to see. Sharp white frost, fog becoming denser as we get nearer Belgium. A howling mob of reinforcements stormed the train for smokes. We threw out every cigarette, pipe, pair of socks, mits, hankies, pencils we had left; it was like feeding chickens, but of course we hadn't nearly enough. Every one on the train has had a card from the King and Queen in a special envelope with the Royal Arms in red on it. And this is the message (in writing hand)— "With our best wishes for Christmas, 1914. May God protect you and bring you home safe. Mary R. George R.I." That is something to keep, isn't it?

An officer has just told us that those men haven't had a cigarette since they left S'hampton, hard luck. I wish we'd had enough for them. It is the smokes and the rum ration that has helped the British Army to stick it more than anything, after the conviction that they've each one got that the Germans have got to be "done in" in the end. A Sergt. of the C.G. told me a cheering thing yesterday. He said he had a draft of young soldiers of only four months' service in this week's business. "Talk of old soldiers," he said, "you'd have thought these had had years of it. When they were ordered to advance there was no stopping them."

After all we are not going to Béthune but to Merville again. This is a very slow journey up, with long indefinite stops; we all got bad headaches by lunch time from the intense cold and a short night following a heavy day. At lunch we had hot bricks for our feet, and hot food inside, which improved matters, and I think by the time we get the patients on there will be heating. The orderlies are to have their Xmas dinner to-morrow, but I believe ours is to be to-night, if the patients are settled up in time. Do not think from these details that we are at all miserable; we say "For King and Country" at intervals, and have many jokes over it all, and there is the never-failing game of going over what we'll all do and avoid doing After the War.

7 p.m.—Loaded up at Merville and now on the way back; not many badly wounded but a great many minor medicals, crocked up, nothing much to be done for them. We may have to fill up at Hazebrouck, which will interrupt the very festive Xmas dinner the French Staff are getting ready for us. It takes a man, French or British, to take decorating really seriously. The orderlies have done wonders with theirs. Aeroplanes done in cotton-wool on brown blankets is one feature. This lot of patients had Xmas dinner in their Clearing Hospitals to-day, and the King's Xmas card, and they will get Princess Mary's present. Here they finished up D.'s Xmas cards and had oranges and bananas, and hot chicken broth directly they got in.

12 Midnight.—Still on the road. We had a very festive Xmas dinner, going to the wards which were in charge of nursing orderlies between the courses. Soup, turkey, peas, mince pie, plum pudding, chocolate, champagne, absinthe, and coffee. Absinthe is delicious, like squills. We had many toasts in French and English. The King, the President, Absent Friends, Soldiers and Sailors, and I had the Blessés and the Malades. We got up and clinked glasses with the French Staff at every toast, and finally the little chef came in and sang to us in a very sweet musical tenor. Our great anxiety is to get as many orderlies and N.C.O.'s as possible through the day without being run in for drunk, but it is an uphill job; I don't know where they get it. We are wondering what the chances are of getting to bed to-night.

4 a.m.—Very late getting in to B.; not unloading till morning. Just going to turn in now till breakfast time. End of Xmas Day.

Liane De Pougy

Introduction

In France, where they know a thing or two about courtesans, Liane de Pougy was considered one of the most desirable. Eventually she became a Princess, and lived an elegant life of which most women could only dream. Liane was born Anne-Marie Chassaing, to solid, middle-class parents. Like most parents in those days, they hoped to secure their daughter's future by finding her a suitable husband. When Anne-Marie was sixteen, they succeeded. The groom was a brute and abused her – she wore the scar of his beatings on her breast for the rest of her life. After two years of this, she ran off. Upon her arrival in Paris, the beautiful eighteen year old changed her name to Liane, established a clientele of lovers, and never looked back. Liane had very catholic tastes, in the old sense of the word. She was openly and proudly bisexual, which of course doubled her potential client base.

All Paris adored her. She published a couple of light tales (*L'Insaisissable* and *La Mauvaise part-Myrrhille*). Her lovers showered her with jewels, carriages, and the occasional summer home in the country. In 1899, Liane met the first great love of her life, Natalie Barney. Barney was a wealthy American heiress who was gaining a reputation as a writer. The two women flouted their affair in the face of French society. It was quite a delicious scandal. Sadly, Liane was not destined to be the great love of Natalie's life. Natalie loved variety and soon found other lovers. The betrayed Liane did what any woman in her position would – she wrote a tell all book about their affair. *Idylle Sapphique* was ostensibly a "novel," but everyone knew better. The book was a great success, both financially and as a thumb to the nose. At the height of her career, Liane met her second great love, a Romanian Prince named Georges Ghika. He was quite a few years her junior. They married. Liane changed her name back to Anne-Marie Ghika (that's Princess Ghika, to you). The fairy tale lasted for sixteen years. Then Georges met a much younger woman and ran off with her. Liane, who in her earlier diaries had written of Georges as though he were a demi-god, now decided he was a degenerate. They did not divorce.

Liane took a series of lesbian lovers, as "consolation." He eventually came back, but the rest of their relationship was stormy and punctuated with infidelities. It was after the death of her husband, around 1945, that Liane finally found a lover who never let her down – Jesus. She joined the Order of Saint Dominic as a lay sister, and worked at the Asylum of Saint Agnes in Savoy, a haven for disabled and mentally challenged children who had been abandoned. She repented her notorious life and specifically rejected her lesbian past. Not a few writers have dubbed her a "saint" for this devotion. However, the reader of her diary, published in English as *My Blue Notebooks*, might detect a last minute push to get into her new love's good graces.

Christmas Day 1922

Christmas! All the shoes left in my big granite fireplace were collected this morning by their owners. It was fun to have all these curious, greedy, cheerful, delighted, surprised people jostling round my bed.

We ate the truffle yesterday Exquisite! I had bought a little brown casserole with a tight-fitting lid. When I lifted the lid we were intoxicated by a dizzyingly heady aroma. It smelt of richness, warmth, celebration, elegance, the triumph of gluttony! I had stewed this precious thing from Orangini for two hours over a low heat, shut tightly in with slices of ham, fillet of beef, some good white wine, a vegetable stock and rashers of bacon. My Georges ate it slowly, gravely, silently - and went on thanking me for it all day There's nothing more sincere than the gratitude of a satisfied palate!

Evelyn Waugh

Introduction

Evelyn Arthur St John Waugh 1903-66 was born in Hampstead, London, the younger brother of Alec Waugh. He was educated at Lancing and Hertford College, Oxford, where he read modern history but with little application. He became a schoolmaster (1925-27), and attempted suicide. The experience gave him the material for *Decline and Fall* (1928), his first and immoderately successful novel which had been preceded only by *PRB*; an essay on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (privately printed in 1926) and a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti published earlier in 1928. The novel made him the talk of the town for, its comic genius apart, it was obviously a roman à clef (which means a novel with a key - I didn't know either DBH).

After a brief and unsuccessful marriage, he spent a few years travelling. He contributed variously to newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail*, published the social satire *Vile Bodies* (1930) and two travel books, *Labels* (1930) and *Remote People* (1931). In 1930 he became a Roman Catholic, an event which he regarded as the most important in his life. Between 1932 and 1937 he visited British Guiana (Guyana), Brazil, Morocco and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and he cruised in the Mediterranean.

After he married Laura Herbert (1937) he settled at Piers Court, Stinchcombe, Gloucestershire, and published *Scoop* (1938), a newspaper farce in which the wrong correspondent is sent to cover the civil war in the African Republic of Ishmaelia. Further travels to Hungary and Mexico followed before the outbreak of World War II, which Waugh spent in a variety of postings as a junior officer. During the war he published four books, including *Put Out More Flags* (1942) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), a nostalgic, highly-wrought evocation of halcyon days at Oxford. This period also inspired 'The Sword of Honour' trilogy - *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955) and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961) - in which he described, in parallel to his own experience, the significance to men and women of the ordeal of crisis of civilisation which received its climax in World War II. Other books published during this period include *The Loved One* (1947), *Helena* (1950) and *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), a painfully personal but fictionalised account of a middle-aged writer's mental collapse.

In 1964 he published *A Little Learning*, intended as the first of several volumes of an autobiography he never completed. He was revered as a wit and a stylist and one of the 20th century's greatest comic novelists. The *Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* were published in 1976; his *Letters*, edited by Mark Amory, in 1980. He was the father of Auberon Waugh.

Christmas Day 1924

I have decided to try and grow a moustache because I cannot afford any new clothes for several years and I want to see some changes in myself. Also if I am to be a schoolmaster it will help to impress the urchins with my age. I look so intolerably young now that I have had to give up regular excessive drinking.

Dylan Thomas



Introduction

Dylan Thomas 1914-1953 was a Welsh poet of genius whose most famous work for *Under Milk Wood*. He had a great fondness for booze and self destruction nearly managing to make it to the age of 40.

Christmas Day 1933

Thank you for the cigarettes. The Christmas dinner over, and the memories of it - so far at least - more in the mouth than in the belly. I have been sprawling in an armchair (yes, we possess one), smoking the first of your so very kind and unexpected presents...

My style this grey December evening...is as heavy as the brandied pudding now rising in revolt, deep in the chambers of the intestines, against too much four-and-sixpenny port and vegetables... My gifts are arrayed in front of me: a startlingly yellow tie and a peculiar pair of string gloves from my sister; a cigarette case from my brother-in-law; ten cigars from my father; 50 cigarettes from an uncle; 50 cigarettes from a young woman in Battersea, a knitted thing from the manageress of the hotel near my Little Theatre; the complete Blake from another uncle; a new edition of the Koran from a friend who writes music...two James Joyce pamphlets from myself, while outside hangs a neat but tight black hat from my mother, who has despaired for some time of the curves and angles of a decrepit trilby. That is all...

The wireless is continually re-iterating the fact that Christmas is here, but Christmas, for me, is nearly over. How many more Christmases will these old eyes be blessed to see approach and vanish? Who knows: one far-off day I may gather my children... around my spavined knee, tickle their chops and tell them of the miracle of Christ and the devastating effect of too many nuts upon a young stomach.

Donald Hill

Introduction

Donald Hill 1921-85 wrote a diary about his time in a Hong Kong prisoner of war camp. The diary was written in code. It was only after Hill's death that a mathematician - Andro Linklater at the University of Surrey - decoded it, and published Hill's story as 'The Code of Love'. The book weaves together the story of Hill's romance with Pamela Kirrage who he met months before being stationed in Hong Kong in 1939, the diary itself, and his own efforts to unravel the code. The code was devised by Hill because officers abroad were not allowed to keep diaries or records. When Hong Kong fell, Hill was captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, on his return to Britain, Hill married Kirrage. But, the union was not to be a happy one, since Hill was psychologically damaged by his incarceration. The couple divorced in 1978, but remarried a year before Hill's death.

Christmas Day 1941 Wed twenty fourth and Thursday Xmas day.

The retirement order was a mistake and back we go to Bennetts with guns and equipment. Just as we reach the top the Japs open up on us with mortars. We have no protection and lie flat. The shells land right amongst us. Man next to me hit, also several others. Piece of shrapnel glances off my helmet and am half buried in flying debris. If we stay we shall all be killed so order the men to disperse and dash for cover and miraculously we make it.

During the barrage I had noticed that one of our previous posts was still manned by Canadians who obviously had not received the order to withdraw. Cpl Blueman AC, Canadian, volunteers to go with to try and get them out. We climb on our bellies through the thickest undergrowth but are fired on several times. Finally we get within hailing distance and get them all into a pillbox. We collect all the arms and equipment which we can't carry, pile them into the pillbox, and throw a couple of grenades into the pillbox.

As we start back everything goes off at once and we have to duck flying bullets. Eventually we arrive intact at the AIS. No one seems to know where the Japs are. So back we go to a new position guarding the bridge over Aberdeen reservoir. My party consists of twelve Canadians and ten RAF. Up to midnight all is quiet although every sound indicates Japs to the men. Soon after midnight heavy firing starts just across the bridge. The Japs weird war cry is plainly heard and soon a small party of Canadians retire over the bridge.

They report a heavy attack by Japs who crept up on them and broke through. We open up with everything we have across the bridge. The Canadians are badly rattled, even their officer seems to have lost control of his men. The Japs start shelling us and confusion sets in and the men start leaving their posts. A scene I never wish to see again.

I am in an awkward position as I have no command over the Canadians. Just as they start moving back the road Major Baillie advances down the road waving a revolver and shouting to his men to get back to their posts. Some obey and some don't. The Major is highly excited and his voice rings out through the night calling his men all the names he can think of. The Japs must have a good idea of our positions. He calls his officers and men all the names under the sun and shouts for volunteers to cross the bridge.

The Canadians refuse to budge so I, more of a desire to back the Major than of any thought of heroics, go across with him. We reach the other side safely whereupon he is violently sick and I realise he is drunk. Through overwork he worked himself into a state of complete collapse and should have been relieved of his command earlier. We retire still intact. We can hear the Japs wild animal calls and they appear to have gone another way. Most of the Canadians have disappeared and with the few left we set up a mortar which fires its first shell into a nearby tree, explodes, blowing the operators right arm off and another man nearly loses a leg. Get the wounded into a dugout where there are some others badly wounded and try to stop their bleeding. We only have bandages and several of them are in danger of bleeding to death.

Bill Goodall



Introduction

Bill Goodall -1914 – 2001- volunteered to fight for his country and was shot down over Holland on his way to bomb Germany. He spent almost two years in the famous 'Great Escape' Stalug Luft III Prisoner of War ('PoW') camp and he kept a diary.

Christmas Day 1941

The gloomiest Christmas Day I have ever spent. We were told that all personnel had to stand by on Christmas Day and that open post would cease at 2am. I hardly knew how to tell Louise in view of her journey here and all the arrangements she had made for us. However Louise insisted that we were to go to Auburn and off we went. She drove like the wind for two and a half hours so that we arrived at Auburn at 8.30pm.

First we had supper with Monk, Louise and their three children beside a huge Christmas tree laden with presents for all. Then we went out on a round of visits which was to have gone on all night until 5am when Alec, Charles and I were to have played Santa Claus to the children. Everything ended too quickly and we were back in camp about 2.30am.

I suppose the reason for confinement of everyone to camp was to have all the troops on alert against a possible Japanese invasion but surely that is a remote possibility in Georgia. We listened to the King's speech this morning and it increased my feeling of homesickness.

Joan Wyndham

Introduction

There is limited information about Joan Wyndham available on the internet readily. She was educated at a convent, but went to study theatre at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and ended up in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force for five years. After the war, she opened Oxford's first espresso bar (an achievement which seems to be hung about her neck like a medal); and she also ran a hippy restaurant in London's Portobello Road. She cooked at major pop festivals and catered for actors, and wrote on cookery for women's magazines. She is married and has two daughters.

Her diaries, which have been published in several versions, are considered very lively and colourful. The newspaper 'Scotland on Sunday' called her 'A latter-day Pepys in camiknickers'.

Christmas Day 1942 My first Christmas in Scotland.

I had behaved so well for the last few months, and everyone here thought I was such a nice, quiet intellectual little girl - but not any more! We were up at the men's Mess, and it was fantastic - colossal buffet, unlimited booze. I decided to break out and go on a jag. I can't remember when I got so drunk or felt so exhilarated, except possibly when I went out with my dad.

I have an awful feeling I called the CO a stinker - it was one of those religious arguments about whether the popes had mistresses. 602, our international squadron, flew over for the party and parked their Spitfires practically in our backyard.

I remember waltzing and eating plum pudding simultaneously, and then being sick in the laurels. A very nice pongo drove me home and wanted to kiss me but I said No, and he said God, what a swine I am trying to take advantage of a gel when she's tight!

As an extra I found this From Joan Wyndham,

Love is Blue: A wartime journal (1986):

'I don't know whether it's Hans's fault or mine, but I don't feel a thing. Of course, I just love being in bed with him and kissing him, but apart from that nothing happens.'

'I know a doctor,' Oscar said, 'a friend of mine went to him who had the same problem as us, and it seems we've got a thing called a clitoris, which makes us have an orgasm.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I've heard about that before.' 'Well, Dr Schliemann says they're very often not big enough, and he gives you some kind of ointment to make them grow.'

This thought so inspired us that we looked up Dr S in the phone book, and made an appointment to see him that very afternoon. The consulting room was rather depressing, with a faint smell of antiseptic. A greenish light filtered through the blinds on to the huge mahogany desk. It was like being in an aquarium. A small, balding chap with glasses came in and said cheerily, 'Well, who's the first victim?' Oscar went to sit in the waiting-room, and I was laid out on a couch and examined in a most embarrassing way.

Aha!' said Dr Schliemann, peering through his bifocals, 'I see you haven't got a man in your boat!' He sounded rather pleased at this discovery. Then he went on to explain about the clitoris being a kind of magic trigger, but not to worry if I hadn't got one because he would give me a special cream to rub on every night. It costs thirty bob, and in no time at all he guarantees that I will have a clitoris 'long enough and strong enough to hang a copper kettle on'!

Kenneth Williams



Introduction

Kenneth Williams, 1926-88, was born in London, he made his London debut as Slightly in Peter Pan in 1952, and two years later played the Dauphin in a revival of George Bernard Shaw's St Joan in the West End. He later starred in comedies and in such revues as Share My Lettuce (1957), Pieces of Eight (1959), and One Over the Eight (1961). He became well known in such radio series as Round the Horne, and Stop Messing About, in which his affected style of speech and rich, punctilious enunciation, made him instantly recognisable. He made several films, appearing regularly in the Carry On series of comedies.

Christmas Day 1963

In the evening to Mags [Maggie Smith]. Same as last time. They gave me v. expensive presents & we had the film show & and I left about 11.30 I had to walk all the way home from Kensington to Baker St. All my loathing of Christmas and Public Holidays poured over me during the walk home. All those groups of 'merry people', windows open & awful noise of singing, and daft decorations everywhere & drunks and bad driving and just beneath the surface - the extreme rude bestiality.

I suppose my worst fault is the instinctive desire to run away from a mess. Instead of trying to do something about it. Run. Get away No hope of reform, I cry. Away from responsibility for work or people, away from commitment, away from affection, away from trouble - away from the community And all the time these stinking performances looming ahead of me.

Jeffrey Archer

Introduction

In 1976 Archer published his first novel; it was not appreciated by the critics, but sold extremely well, as have his other novels, from which he has since made a fortune. He has also written a play, 'The Accused', which starred himself. In 1985, he was appointed deputy chairman of the Conservative party. Then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was warned he was "an accident waiting to happen". In 1986 he resigned after it was reported that he paid for sex with a prostitute. However, he sued and was awarded £500,000 in damages. He was awarded a peerage in June 1992. Archer won the Conservative candidacy for London mayor in 1999, but was forced to stand down after reports that he persuaded a former friend to lie to court in the 1987 libel trial. He was suspended from the Tory party and a perjury investigation began. He was arrested in 2000, and committed to stand trial on five counts, including perjury and perverting the course of justice. He was found guilty in July that year.

Christmas Day 2001

Christmas Day for those who are incarcerated can be summed up in one word: dreadful. I have learned during the last 159 days as a prisoner how perverse reality is. I go to work today, as every other day, and am grateful for something to do.

At the seven-thirty surgery, only six prisoners report for sick parade; you have to be really ill to get up at 7.30 am on Christmas morning and troop across to the hospital when the temperature on the east coast is minus two degrees. At eight-fifteen I go to breakfast, and even though it's eggs, bacon and sausage served by the officers (Mr Hocking, Mr Camplin, Mr Baker and Mr Gough), only around forty of the two hundred inmates bother to turn up.

On returning to the hospital, Linda and I unload bags of food from her car so I can hold a tea party for my friends this afternoon. She also gives me a present, which is wrapped in Christmas paper. I open it very slowly, trying to anticipate what it might be. Inside a neat little box is a china mug, with a black cat grinning at me. Now I have my own mug, and will no longer have to decide between a Campbell's Soup giveaway and a plain white object with a chip when I have my morning Bovril.

Linda leaves me in charge of the hospital while she attends the governor's Christmas party. Frankly, if over half the prisoners weren't still in bed asleep, I could arrange for them all to abscond. When the tabloids claim I have privileges that the other prisoners do not have, in one respect they are right; I am lucky to be able to carry on with the job I do on the outside. While everyone else tries to kill time, I settle down to write for a couple of hours.

12 noon Lunch is excellent, and once again served by the officers, and shared with a half dozen old-age pensioners from the local village; tomato soup, followed by turkey, chipolatas, roast potatoes and stuffing, with as much gravy as will go on the plate. I don't allow myself the Christmas pudding - several officers have kindly commented on the fact that I'm putting on weight (nine pounds in nine weeks).

After lunch I walk over to the south block and phone Mary and the boys. All things considered they sound pretty cheerful, but I can't hide the fact that I miss them. My wife is fifty-seven, my boys twenty-nine and twenty-seven, and today I'm surrounded by men sitting in their rooms staring at photographs of young children anywhere from six months to fifteen years old. Yes, they deserve to be incarcerated if they committed a crime, but we should remember it is Christmas Day, and it's not their families who are guilty. As I walk back through the block, I notice that those not in the TV room or on the phone are just lying on their beds willing the day to pass. I have so much food in my fridge that I invite a dozen inmates over to join me in the hospital. They all turn up, without exception. We watch *The Great Escape* (somewhat ironic) and enjoy Linda's feast - pork pies, crisps, sausage rolls, shortbread biscuits, KitKats and, most popular of all with my fellow inmates, a chunk of my Cheddar cheese. This is accompanied not by Krug, but a choice of lemonade, Evian water, tea, coffee or Ribena.



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