

The Secret Diary of William Byrd

What follows are selected entries from the diary of William Byrd, a gentleman from Virginia who is representative of the southern landed aristocracy. Byrd's diary was kept in a secret shorthand and discovered only in the twentieth century. It provides insight into the mind of a southern gentleman. Byrd's diary also lets us see the daily schedule and the thoughts of a gentleman. Byrd committed to his diary some of his most private thoughts and actions. These entries focus especially on Byrd's relationship with his wife, his treatment of servants, his daily diet, his description of medical practices, and his observations of nature.

[February 1709] I rose at 5 o'clock this morning and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Homer's Odyssey. I ate milk for breakfast. I said my prayers. Jenny and Eugene were whipped. I danced my dance. I read law in the morning and Italian in the afternoon. . . .

[February 1709] I rose at 7 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Homer's Odyssey. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I threatened Anaka with a whipping if she did not confess the intrigues between Daniel and Nurse, but she prevented by a confession. I chided Nurse severely about it, but she denied, with an impudent face, protesting that Daniel only lay on the bed for the sake of the child. I ate nothing but beef for dinner. . . .

[June 1709] I rose at 5 o'clock this morning but could not read anything because of Captain Keeling, but I played at billiards with him and won half a crown of him and the Doctor. George B-th brought home my boy Eugene. . . . In the evening I took a walk about the plantation. Eugene was whipped for running away and had the [bit] put on him. I said my prayers and had good health, good thought, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

[September 1709] . . . About one o'clock this morning my wife was happily delivered of a son, thanks be to God Almighty. I was awake in a blink and rose and my cousin Harrison met me on the stairs and told me it was a boy. We drank some French wine and went to bed again and rose at 7 o'clock. I read a chapter in Hebrew and then drank chocolate with the women for breakfast. I returned God humble thanks for so great a blessing and recommended my young son to His divine protection.

[October 1709] I rose at 6 o'clock and said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. Then I proceeded to Williamsburg, where I found all well. I went to the capitol where I sent for the wench to clean my room and when she came I kissed her and felt her, for which God forgive me. Then I went to see the President, whom I found indisposed in his ears. I dined with . . . on beef. Then we went to his house and played at piquet where Mr. Clayton came to us. We had much to do to get a bottle of French wine. About 10 o'clock I went to my lodgings. I had good health but wicked thoughts, God forgive me.

[December 1709] I rose at 4 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Cassius. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. Eugene was whipped

again for pissing in bed and Jenny for concealing it. . . .

[December 1709] I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Cassius. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. Eugene pissed abed again for which I made him drink a pint of piss. I settled some accounts and read some news. . .

[February 1710] I rose at 8 o'clock and read nothing because of my company. I neglected to say my prayers, for which God forgive me. I ate milk for breakfast. Then we took a walk about the plantation till it was time to go to dinner. I ate fish for dinner. In the afternoon we saw a good battle between a stallion and Robin about the mare, but at last the stallion had the advantage and covered the mare three times. The Captain's bitch killed another lamb for which she was beat very much. We took another walk about the plantation. My maid Anaka was very well again, thank God, and so was Moll at the quarters. My wife was out of humor with us for going to see so filthy a sight as the horse to cover the mare. In the evening we drank a bottle of wine and were very merry till 9 o'clock. I neglected to say my prayers but had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

[March 1710] I rose at 7 o'clock and read some Greek in bed. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. Then about 8 o'clock we got a-horseback and rode to Mr. Harrison's and found him very ill but sensible . . . In the morning early I returned home and went to bed. It is remarkable that Mrs. Burwell dreamed this night that she saw a person that with money scales weighed time and declared that there was no more than 18 pennies worth of time to come, which seems to be a dream with some significance either concerning the world or a sick person. In my letters from England I learned that the Bishop of Worcester was of opinion that in the year 1715 the city of Rome would be burned to the ground, that before the year 1745 the popish religion would be routed out of the world, that before the year 1790 the Jews and Gentiles would be converted to the Christianity and then would begin the millennium.

[June 1710] . . . I set my closet right. I ate tongue and chicken for dinner. In the afternoon I caused L-s-n to be whipped for beating his wife and Jenny was whipped for being his whore. In the evening the sloop came from Appomattox with tobacco. I took a walk about the plantation. I said my prayers and drank some new milk from the cow. . . .

[February 1711] I rose at 6 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Lucian. I said my prayers and ate boiled milk for breakfast. I danced my dance and then went to the brick house to see my people pile the planks and found them all idle for which I threatened them soundly but did not whip them. . . . In the afternoon Mr. Dunn and I played at billiards. Then we took a long walk about the plantation and looked over all my business. In the evening my wife and little Jenny had a great quarrel in which my wife got the worst but at last by the help of the family Jenny was overcome and soundly whipped. At night I ate some bread and cheese. I said my prayers and had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thank God Almighty.

Deconstructing the Diaries

William Byrd's diaries document at least thirty-two years of almost invariable routine with equally constant terseness. An entry generally began "I rose at 5 o'clock [6 o'clock when he grew older] and read a chapter in Hebrew..." to be concluded (except when otherwise warranted) "I had good thoughts, good health, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty." Despite this invariant and impenetrable form, Byrd's diaries are brimming with personality in subtle but pointed editorials about temperance, health, women, and other sundry matters.

To start with women, Byrd's remarks on this point were so disrespectful as to be dehumanizing. He depicted most women as pestilant to some degree. Even the exceptions were telling, for he lavished notable praise when a woman was just being aimiable or, more simply still, merely seemed to enjoy his company -- August 18, 1709 for instance. He was at his most generous when recommending some wife for her curteous entertainment, but in general, women were either the objects of his desire (as on October 6th or November 2nd, 1709 -- his wife's protestations notwithstanding) or "whores." (See May 19th of the same year.) In either case, any lavished detail regarded sexual function. The notable exception to this was his relationship with his own wife, with whom he usually fought, but when he did not (as on August 14, 1709) it was significant enough to warrant special mention. He was not entirely insensitive to her. He often worried about her health, as she seemed often to be ill. (Though this may reflect his preoccupation with illness more than with his wife.) But ultimately, regardless of periodic displays of concern, Byrd's attitude toward her was as one would regard a petulant child. His paternalism was no more no less than one would otherwise expect for his age and station. With regard to women, at least his position remained consistent.

In contrast, regarding moral indices like temperance and religion, Byrd was muddled. He frequently remarked on the drinking habits of others, but demonstrated in other entries that he freely enjoyed libations himself. Sometimes, as on August 27, 1709, his moral inconsistency was even encapsulated within a single entry. In his remarks from that day he explained that he wouldn't permit his "man" (can we assume his slave?) "to go to a horse race because there was nothing but swearing and drinking there." But then he told in the next breath of cheating his wife in piquet. This entry suggested two possibilities. Either Byrd had a different moral imperative when dealing with women, or else he used the "drinking and swearing" taboos to his own ends.

The March 2nd and 3rd entries make plain his morally superior stance on temperance and drunkenness. It was a perspective that ignored his own periodic dalliance with spirits and that, at least on March 3rd, benefited his own purse. Further, he often wrote of the ill-health that results from too much drink, a puritanical system of logic that equated illness with individual sin -- though not exclusively. Health and illness are rampant in Byrd's diaries, cropping up almost daily. In February 1709, for instance, he mentioned acquaintances who were sick or who he

feared would become sick on the 16th, 23rd, 25th, 26th, 28th. (This was relatively soon after Byrd first returned from England following his father's death, so this constant concern may have been a part of Byrd's reacclimation to the wilds of the Colonies.) But at the same time, he constantly affirmed a degree of faith that "God of his excessive goodness" will "deliver one" from illness. (January 3, 1710). His actions of May 18th, 1709 suggested a similar faithfulness. But ultimately, his piety and his moralizing stood awkwardly next to the casual mentions of his own inpropriety exploits.

Byrd's unbending tone, routine, and even physical words on the page all belied the self-imposed (and self-defined) rigidity of his character. Almost militaristic slash marks punctuated the diary's pages, like the one that appears at left. Where that conflicted with his human tendencies to be wanton, self-interested or irreligious, glaringly contradictory entries resulted. In these, there was the sound of Byrd trying to convince himself of his own virtuousness, despite evidence to the contrary. (Lockridge has drawn similar conclusions in his book *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744*.) This is not to suggest that Byrd was particularly bad or hypocritical -- just that for powerful white men in colonial Virginia, one's notion of self-mastery was essential to peace of mind. Above all, that may have been because of the real relations of mastery (and slavery) played out by and around Byrd every day.

In fact, William Byrd's references to slavery were subtle. April 19th, 1709, he briefly noted a ship from Barbados. In general, his frequent observations on his "people" were inconspicuous. What was protrusive was the periodic mention in his entries of violence and abject torture -- which seemed only to occur in relation to punishing said "people." On December 3rd, to mention one glaring example, "Eugene pissed abed again for which I made him drink a pint of piss."