

Comment by the Editor

THE UTILITY OF DIARIES

Why do people write diaries? Children, like "Plupy" Shute and Queen Victoria, are sometimes encouraged to keep a daily record for disciplinary reasons; a few never break the habit. Others, like Samuel Pepys and James M. Willis, do not begin until they are twenty-seven. At that age diary writing is a form of self-expression probably induced by interesting experiences or consciousness of self-importance. In either case, it is a revelation of personality. One who confines his observations and opinions to the pages of a private notebook, however, is probably less egotistical than an autobiographer, and far more accurate. Diarists are not much concerned with readers and their entries are not adulterated with second thoughts or modified by subsequent experience.

For a regular diarist such topics as health, the weather, domestic problems, religion, and extraordinary incidents form the substance of life. His chronicle is a microscopic view of ordinary circumstances — "and so to bed". The daily newspaper is a kind of generalized impersonal diary.

But the inspiration of the occasional diarist is derived from unusual conditions. War is so exciting and of such crucial importance that soldiers can not resist keeping a record of what they see and do and think. Travel gives such carefree vagrants as Jack London an itch to describe unfamiliar scenes. Explorers usually record their observations in the form of a daily journal. In the gold rushes to California, Pike's Peak, and Alaska, many a farmer and schoolmaster, like James M. Willis, emulated Lewis and Clark by keeping a log of the journey. The true story of those American argonauts is to be found in their private journals, never meant for publication. A. B. Hulbert used two hundred and fifty diaries to write his chronicle of the "Forty-niners". Of such material is authentic history and biography made.

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