

John Evelyn Biography

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Biography

The English author John Evelyn (1620-1706) is remembered today for his diary. He was known to his contemporaries as the author of a number of treatises on gardening, engraving, pollution, coins, conservation of forests, and navigation.

John Evelyn was born on Oct. 31, 1620, at Wotton in Surrey. He was brought up by his maternal grandmother and attended the Southborough free school. In 1637 he entered the Middle Temple and later, Balliol College, Oxford, where he remained 3 years. He then returned to the Middle Temple, but he seems never to have studied law.

Evelyn spent most of the years after he left Oxford traveling in France and Italy, learning the languages of those countries, and studying art and architecture. Although he was a devout Anglican, during the English civil war he did not join the King's forces for fear that the family estates, which were in parliamentary territory, would be forfeited. In 1647 he married Mary Browne, daughter of the English ambassador at Paris. In 1652 the Evelyns returned to England and acquired the Browne estate at Sayes Court, Deptford.

In the years preceding the Restoration, Evelyn became acquainted with many of the men who eventually constituted the Royal Society. In 1656 he published a verse translation of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*. When the Royal Society was formally constituted in 1660, Evelyn was elected a member.

Most of Evelyn's writing in the next few years was scientific. In 1661 he published *Fumifugium*, a tract offering suggestions for freeing London of smog. The following year he brought out *Sculptura*, an essay on mezzotint engraving. In 1664 the first edition of *Sylva*, his most widely read work, on the conservation of trees, appeared.

Evelyn was also occupied with public service and was appointed by Charles II to a number of commissions. In 1685, shortly after James's accession, Evelyn was appointed one of the commissioners of the privy seal. In 1694 he accepted King William's invitation to serve as treasurer of Greenwich Hospital. In 1699 Evelyn inherited the family estate at Wotton. He spent his last days there, dying on Feb. 3, 1706.

Evelyn's diary was published in 1818, although the first complete and accurate edition did not appear until 1955. It is not a record of daily life but a transcription of notes made of various historical events from the time Evelyn was 11.