When I was in my early teens the then famous James Agate recommended me to keep a diary. ‘Some day it may keep you,’ he said. I have kept a diary now for over forty years. I began as a nobody, and am still a nobody; but I estimate that more than a million people have read the diaries that I have had published. James Agate was not far out.

In Paraguay there is an elderly coloured lady who was, with her five children, at one time on the verge of starvation; she sold waste paper which she got from dustbins in order to keep herself and her family alive. She lived in a shed in a shanty town on the outskirts of the capital. She taught herself to read and to write. She kept a diary on odd scraps of paper because she couldn't afford to buy even the cheapest paper to write on. Faithfully for years she kept the diary of her very dreary life. One day she met by chance a journalist who begged her to allow him to read her diary. She was very reluctant; it was private and sad. Eventually, after much pleading, the journalist was allowed to read it. After a little editing the diary was published, and within six months it sold over 90,000 copies. It was (and still is) the best-seller of Paraguay! The lady is now a celebrity and lives in a luxury flat.

When I'd been keeping a diary for a number of years Nicolas Bentley came and asked to see it. Like that of the Paraguayan lady it was written on all manner of scraps of paper; they filled a hat-box in which my father once kept a top hat. Nicolas Bentley took away the hat-box and within six weeks he had compiled Fred Bason’s Diary from that curious mixture of recollections, reflections, and memories. The book sold two editions of 5,000 copies; each edition within six months. It is now a rare book, and I, who wrote it, don't even own a copy! My fourth published diary was edited and introduced by Noël Coward—the only book in the world that's introduced and edited by this master.

Alas, the whole four of my diaries have not sold as many copies as the one by the lady in Paraguay. I have not moved into a luxury flat. I have been fifty-two years in the same slum area of London. But I do not envy my fellow diarist; and on the whole I've lived a very happy life—made all the happier because I've been a faithful diarist for over forty years.

Mark you, there are good diaries and bad diaries. Here's an example from what I consider to be a poor diary. It was written by an Irish schoolmaster named John Fitzgerald.

The criminals arrived at the gallows at ten-past-five and they were cut down at six-thirty. It was a charming evening, dry, and the sun was shining, although there had been several showers in the morning. Johnny and I went to Shinnicks and saw the execution.

Not a word about the poor men who got executed, or why they were killed. Not a word about the crowds or even where or what was Shinnicks. Yet John Fitzgerald got this diary published.

One of the greatest faults of budding diarists is to devote far too much space to the weather or what they have eaten. It took me nearly three years to get out of this habit. ‘Yesterday it rained. I had a pair of nice kippers for tea.’ So what? Would it make a ha'porth of difference to anyone in after years if yesterday had been a fine day and I'd had an egg for my tea? The purpose of a diary is to preserve interesting experiences. Of course, the terrible winter of 1962 was a unique experience and should have been recorded. I remember writing that I had no water, no coal, and no gas, and one day I stayed in bed all day simply to avoid the weather. That's a little bit of history. The weather is an inevitable subject of conversation the world over, and there are few diaries that don't mention the weather at all; but good diarists only mention it when it's exceptional. Here's another example of a poor entry—from some other diary:

Mrs Burgess died in childbirth to-day—and the wind is west-north-west—but the sun did shine most of the day—although it was a little chilly for the time of the year.

What we'd like is more about poor Mrs Burgess, and less about the blooming weather!

Apart from the good and the bad, there are genuine diaries
and fake diaries. The genuine diary is written up regularly each day and is not addressed to anyone but the diarist himself (or herself). That superb diarist Samuel Pepys did not address his diary to anyone. He had no immediate reader, and most of it was in a curious shorthand that only Pepys could really understand. The fake diary is compiled with publication in mind.

It is imperative that the genuine diarist has complete sincerity. That's the first essential of every diarist. With hand on heart I can say I've kept a truthful diary since I was fifteen. Wasn't it Dr Johnson who wrote 'No man is a hypocrite in his pleasure'? My diaries are my pleasures. The pure (or genuine) diary is like an intimate letter.

An unpublished diary sent to me by a Saturday Book reader some years ago contained this passage:

Getting out of bed in the middle of the night in the pitch dark in order to pee, I stepped full on a large drawing-pin that went right into my big toe. I swore words that I didn't even know I had in me as I withdrew that pin from my toe. I was in such pain that I hopped right back into bed. Holding my toe, I went to sleep. I quite forgot to make water.

That comes from the pen of a real diarist. He was not writing for an audience, but in an odd simple way he made that unimportant experience very real and vivid—and amusing.

Now here is a passage in a diary written about 1850 by a lady:

I went into market this day. I spent 11 shillings, 9 pence. I was badly robbed. Will not go back to Mr ——. He is a robber.

Surely if you had been writing this passage you would have told what you spent 12s. 9d. on, and why and how you got robbed—any good diarist would have done that. It's significant little details that make an episode like this come to life.

Boswell once said that a good diary is recording for the sake of recording, without any consideration whatsoever for utility. Anyone can compile a diary, and most people will get a great deal of genuine pleasure from a record of their lives—if only they keep Boswell in mind and do not expect some Sunday paper to offer them a fantastic sum for the privilege of printing the diary. I have recently advised the head porter of a famous London hotel to keep a diary; it should be fascinating.

I have read upwards of 350 published diaries in my time, and found about sixty of them to be really good. I must confess that I avoid the journals and diaries of modern politicians and generals. For the most part they seem to be written with an eager eye on serial rights. I have even known some of these modern political and military journals to be 'ghost written' because the politicians didn't have the time and the generals didn't have the intelligence. A 'diary' that is written for you by someone else is a contradiction in terms.

A good diarist must to some degree be an egotist—and yet must not be too self-centred. Whilst he must be extremely interested in himself, he must also be extremely interested in other people as well. James Boswell was perhaps the best example of what I mean. Boswell was an egotist (no one can doubt it), but his journals provide a superb spectacle of life in his times—people, places, and, of course, sex.

The true diarist never has or needs to have a reason for keeping a diary—it's done almost by instinct. Jane Carlyle recommended her journal after a short break by writing: 'I began quite promiscuously without any moral end in view but just as the Scotch professor drank whisky, because I like it, and because it is cheap.'

What better reasons could one have?

I keep a very strict rule to write up my diary around 11 o'clock each night—just before I say my prayers and go to bed. Some days, of course, are not written up as fully as others. The average day is written up in around eighty words—short, concise, and to the point. Don't elaborate; just get the bare facts down. For instance, on January 30, 1965, I put into my diary:

Plum Warner, the cricketer, died today. I never got his autograph. I have a nice book on Cricket by him (and T. Hearne) in spotless fine condition, pub. 1900, and although it's been on my For Sale list for 6 weeks, NO-one will give me 2/- for it . . . Cecil McGivern of Television is dead. When Norman Collins left BBC, Cecil took his place. He gave me just ONE job. Norman had got me 7 TV jobs. I will wear a black tie to-morrow for Cecil. I will wear a black tie for a week when Norman Collins tips the bucket. This has been a lovely day. From Bush House I broadcast to CANADA . . . for 5 minutes. I go to bed this night in a very thankful frame of mind. The W.C. has been frozen since Boxing Day and now even the chain is broken.
That's all I wanted to put on record. I hardly ever buy newspapers now. Had I bought one that day I might have put in a great deal about the breakdown of the Common Market and all that kind of thing. Would it have been of any value?

On my jaunts and journeys I note such things as the prices of items in one district as compared to another: these go down on odd scraps of paper. If from a bus I see a small street market I note it at once, and return to it as soon as I can—for I know more about London street markets than most men—and like to keep up to date. If I go to a first night—with my autograph album—I watch the stars go in, note who they are, and by the time we come out I have thought up some questions to ask them. If they answer my questions (and they usually do) I write down what they said.

A diarist should have the gift of being both spectator and actor. It is this power that makes Pepys and Boswell shine above all other diarists. Pepys the spectator was profoundly interested in Pepys the actor. In a Boswell diary I came on this passage: 'I should live no more than I can record, as one should not have more corn growing than one can get in. There is a waste of good if it is not preserved.'

But what odd and unimportant things are—in the long run—worth preserving! Take the diary entry, for instance, that I wrote yesterday. It mentioned a tape-recording I did for the Australian Broadcasting Commission; the wonderful collection of Boy's Bloods belonging to my old friend, that fine actor, Frank Pettingell; and another actor, James Mason, saying: 'Garbo isn't all that attractive. She often has colds and a red nose.' Quite interesting stuff, you might say. But the Editor of The Saturday Book tells me the bit that appeals to him is this:

I'd been looking at 'Tonight' on TV whilst my housekeeper washed up the tea things. She came into the room just as 'Tonight' finished and Michael Rennie came on in a Harry Lime adventure. 'Oh,' she said, 'Michael Rennie! I must go and tidy my hair.' I said she looked very nice as she was, and Michael Rennie couldn't see her anyway. 'But I couldn't possibly watch Michael with untidy hair,' she said, and out she went. By the time she came back, all spruced up, the programme was nearly over.