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WOODFORDE'S DIARY

WOODFORDE—THE DIARY OF A COUNTRY PARSON. Edited by John Beresford.
Oxford University Press. 10s. 6d.

ALL parsons, like all doctors, should keep a diary. They have opportunities of a privileged contact with life, at moments of singular emotional importance, that turn a mere novelist sick with envy. Take *Woodforde*: there is a short story on every page, a novel in every year, a whole saga of English eighteenth-century life between the lines of its 500 pages. Woodforde's own life is a novel, with himself the hero who actually loves and is rejected, and his brother John the drunkard villain. True, the portrait is unconscious. Intent on sketching the lives of those about him, this obscure parson could never have dreamed that he was painting, for the pleasure of a wholly different England, his own portrait, full length, four dimensional, and in permanent and faithful colours. From the day we meet him at Oxford in 1758, in "a superfine blue suit of cloathes, very good cloth" to the day in 1803 when "very weak this morning, scarce able to put on my Cloathes" he leaves the rest of his final page blank, there is never a hint that his diary is anything but a sincere and humble endeavour to record what seemed to him the most significant details of what was really his insignificant life. For there is nothing at all remarkable about Woodforde's life, or even about the way he lived it. He was a country parson among a thousand country parsons, an obscure and tranquil blade of ecclesiastical grass in an immense meadow. It is the truth and clarity and liveliness of his almost scrappy recordings that are important. By means of them we see something more than a young divine at Oxford turning into an old and dying parson in an obscure Norfolk rectory. We see a whole panorama of the eighteenth century.

"Only the great diarists," says Mr. John Beresford in a very good preface to this new and abridged edition, "have this power." I would hesitate to call Woodforde a great diarist. If Pepys, as a great diarist, is comparable with Dickens, then Woodforde is one with Mrs. Gaskell.

"I breakfasted with Mrs. Tompkins and daughter—We played at Quadrille after tea—Much colder than yesterday, coldest day for some years—Sat down and read the life of Lewis 14 of France till after two o'clock—Took a good large dose of Rhubarb last night, as did also Nancy, made her get up at four oclock—I read prayers and Preached and christened a Child of name Joseph this afternoon at Weston Church—I had all my hay carried. It makes but little show but smells like a violet.—Very weak and indifferent again today and all day."

And so on and so on. The trivialities pile up into a life that is Cranfordian in its tranquillity. Except for Brother John, who rollicks in drunken unseemliness across the early pages, and an occasional murder, nothing much happens. Yet a whole life, and with it a whole era, is depicted for us. And if the book itself must stand on a shelf lower than Pepys there is enough evidence in these 500 pages alone to show that at least it will stand as long.

H. E. BATES