



John Evelyn: Britain's First Environmentalist
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[Preamble. While in the Manuscript Room of the British Library I often coincided with Douglas Chambers as I worked on my biography of John Evelyn, he on Evelyn's letterbooks. These, co-edited with David Galbraith, were published in 2014. Preparing this talk, I learned of Douglas's recent death, following a long period of bad health. I remember him fondly for scholarly generosity and congenial company.]

In late 1651 John Evelyn wrote to his wife's uncle, William Prettyman, from Paris. He was ready to return to England. 'I shall therefore bring over with me no ambitions at all to be a statesman, or meddle with the unlucky Interests of Kingdomes ... A Friend, a Booke, and a Garden shall for the future, perfectly circumscribe my utmost designes'.

As planned, he was back in England in early 1652. He never left again. As he put it, he'd 'run about the World, most part out of my owne country neere 10 years.' In 1647 he'd married the twelve-year-old Mary Browne in Paris, where her father Richard Browne (created a baronet in 1649) still represented the waning royalist cause. Now she was of age and together they settled at Sayes Court, her family's house since the late 16th century but desperately run down. Mary, altogether French by upbringing, and her husband, strongly Francophile, found themselves pitched into the unknown, living discreetly against the walls of the naval dockyard, now in Commonwealth hands.

Mary Evelyn's first child, Richard, was born that August and her mother was there to help her settle into this new and testing life. Hardly six weeks after her grandson's birth, Lady Browne caught scarlet fever and was buried at St Nicholas in Deptford. In Paris her husband was left 'disconsolate' while her death was felt deeply by the fluctuating expatriate community that knew their home, 'not onely [as] an Hospital but the Asylum to all our persecuted & afflicted Countrymen during her 11 yeares residence there.'

On the eve of his 32nd birthday that year, Evelyn made his will. The poor condition of the sequestered house, to which he soon gained a lease, the desolate gardens and unfavourable setting, downwind of the City of London thus in the path of the 'Hellish and dismal Cloud of Sea-Coale' as it blew east, made the couple's marital home remarkably unattractive. They couldn't even glimpse the river. Yet, in improving the immediate setting and fabric of Sayes Court, starting with a French-style oval garden to replace the existing 'rude' orchard, Evelyn was helping his father-in-law endure what became a cruel, long, exile. He had enormous affection for Browne and they shared many enthusiasms – above all gardening.

His father-in-law's unremunerated service to the crown haunted Evelyn and weighed down the already uncertain family finances. Wotton, his treasured Surrey birthplace, was in his brother's hands, the family gunpowder mills now given to brass and wire smelting. Living thirty miles away, he could only visit and advise on planting. On every front, he waited patiently for change, since what

else could he do 'in this madd & estranged country' but busy himself 'building, planting, buying, felling & c.'. as he wrote to Browne in 1657.

In person John Evelyn may have lived overlooking a working stretch of the Thames, but his mind was in France, its architecture and gardening, the manners and elegance of the Parisians, the beauty of the Seine and the clarity of the air. Comparing London and Paris he unfailingly favoured the latter. The Commonwealth (having made the English 'the most miserable of slaves') was set against an 'active and illustrious' monarchy, that of the young King Louis XIV. His first original work, in 1652, was titled *The State of France*. He toiled on, veering between translations and ambitious projects on many topics, while the garden took shape (and money, as Mary who was to prove his equal, observed), both outside the windows and on the page with his massive *Elysium Britannicum* project. More children were born. But in 1658 their glorious boy, Richard, died.

They entered a tunnel of intense, shared, misery – never underestimate the death of a child, even at times when so many died - and the tone of Evelyn's writing darkened and, on occasion, sharpened. *The Character of England*, 1659 purported to be a 'translation' of observations by an appalled French visitor arriving in the country. This was an outright attack and he soon removed it from his publications – perhaps because it was a rehearsal of material used elsewhere, sometimes to the very word. He'd laid into the capital as 'a wooden, northern, and inartificiall congestion of Houses', with narrow irregular streets and walled-off fountains. There was no order, 'no care to make them build with uniformity'. Only the portico of St. Paul's Cathedral and the Banqueting House (both by Inigo Jones) escaped his censure. Then Evelyn unleashed a tirade. London was 'a very ugly Town, pestred with Hackney-coaches, and insolent Carre-men, Shops and Taverns, Noys, and such a cloud of Sea-coal, as if there be a resemblance of Hell upon Earth, it is in this Vulcano in a foggy day: this pestilent Smoak which corrodes the very yron, and spoils all the moveables, leaving a soot upon all things that it lights; and so fatally seizing on the Lungs of the Inhabitants, that the Cough, and the Consumption spare no man.....'

Evelyn used a mere pamphlet, *Fumifugium* (1661) to muster his arguments for the immediate attention of the reinstated monarch and, better still, parliament 'now Assembled'. Only vivid language could evoke the deadly predicament of the capital. Divided into three sections, the two latter parts in particular offered solutions, dealing with the essentials of public health, urban planning and strategies for improvement. As it was, London was unfit to be 'the imperial seat of our incomparable monarch.'

And, he signalled, *Fumifugium* was not all. His dedication refers to another larger work in progress which 'I am preparing to present to Your Majesty, as God shall afford me Leisure to finish it.' Evelyn was naïve and not well attuned to court manners, let alone the monarch. 'A man who will rise at Court must begin by creeping on all-fours' as Lord Halifax, 'the Trimmer' put it. But for an instant, the king seemed to have engaged with the topic (and the author). His interest in *Fumifugium* and its topics, discussed over breakfast and dinner on the royal yacht as it raced from Greenwich to Gravesend and back, allowed Evelyn to entertain high hopes. He dreamed of royal patronage, for himself and his wife and the settling of Sir Richard's immense debts.

By his standards, the message and the measures proposed in these pages are clear and to the point, tailored to Charles II's notoriously brief attention span. Evelyn believed he had caught his interest out on the Thames that day: 'Commanding me to prepare a Bill ... being resolved to have something done in it' as he noted exultantly in the diary entry for 1st October 1661. Evelyn remembered that promise of action. The king did not, for an instant.

Sylva, that larger work, began life as a presentation to the Royal Society (of which Evelyn was an early Fellow) in October 1662. The handsome book published in 1664 was the first to appear under

the imprimatur of the Royal Society. Evelyn included contributions from many Fellows and correspondents. Over time it grew considerably but remained steadfastly practical, surveying and discussing trees in all their variety and uses.

But the capital was not dependent on wood for fuel. London's tortuous relationship with supplies of sea coal from Newcastle-upon-Tyne mirrors our own troubled relationship with oil, hinging on supply, cost and taxation. Scarcity and high prices presaged political volatility. During the winter of 1643-4 royalist supporting Newcastle would not ship coal to parliamentary London. The embargo cleared the atmosphere, but manufacturing was on its knees and artisans and the urban poor were always the losers in these ructions. The parallels with lockdown London in spring 2020 are inescapable. When the uppity Dutch sailed up the Medway in June 1667, the coal fleet (which constituted a third of all English merchant shipping) was as vulnerable as its naval counterparts.

Evelyn believed that domestic coal was hardly responsible for pollution since 'culinary fires [were] weak and less often fed below'. His outrage was directed at noxious trades such as 'brewers, dyers, soap and salt-boilers, lime burners and the like' which were, without exception, in the wrong place. There had been attempts at zoning, such as the removal of some urban breweries and a bill (1657) which ordered brick and lime kilns to be located five or six miles outside the city. Evelyn was confident that would be enough to deal with the problem, once the sources of the offending smoke, which he enjoyed comparing to 'Mount Aetna, the Court of Vulcan, Stromboli, or the Suburbs of Hell' were diverted well beyond (royal) Greenwich, possibly somewhere around Woolwich.

It has been argued that Evelyn's smoke in *Fumifugium* is figurative. On that reading, cleansing the smoke-filled corridors of Whitehall marked the end of the Commonwealth and the reinstatement of the monarchy. But his animated, angry, text is surely one of urgently required strategy rather than royalist metaphor – hence its numerous reprints and continual applicability. Rather, William Cavert writes, it can be seen 'as a Restoration attempt to re-establish order through innovation and transformation.' How ironic that London, vulnerable, filthy and unhealthy as it was when Evelyn wrote his fierce little tract, was turned to smouldering rubble by flame, rather than fiery words.

In *Fumifugium* Evelyn recommends the relocation of industry, the control of city expansion and the greening of the surroundings – all of which talk to our own concerns. The regular town encircled by thick plantings of trees and fragrant shrubs was a prototype green belt, for delight, to help feed the people there and replenish stock for woodland. The emphasis on utility, underscored with beauty (scent) and orderliness is echoed by John Claudius Loudon's *Hints for Breathing Places for the Metropolis* (1829), in Octavia Hill's writings and campaigns to increase the area of urban parks (including her 'outdoor sitting rooms') and in Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), quickly reissued as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. The control of urban growth by designated open space drove Green Belt legislation in the mid twentieth century. Evelyn's long and benevolent shadow falls over all of these.

On publication, he pressed his 'trifle' on close associates and influential friends such as the leading scientist Robert Boyle. The subtitle, 'the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoake of London Dissipated' was followed by 'some Remedies humbly proposed.' Twenty years later, tellingly, he (mis)remembered that subtitle. Writing to Dr Robert Plot, Fellow of the Royal Society and keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, he called it '*Fumifugium*, or a Prophetic invective against the Aire and Smoke of London, with its Remedies'. His humble proposals had turned to prophetic invective, surely forged in frustration. In 1688 he assured his friend Samuel Pepys that he had sent 'the old smoky Pamphlet you desir'd, which had it taken Effect, might have sav'd the burning of a Great City.' They were discussing relevant laws but Evelyn couldn't remember any statutes that had been applied to London.

After the 1666 fire the message in *Fumifugium* was restated and refined for a third time in his (unpublished) *Londinium Redivivum* which accompanied his plan for the City of London. A cleared site for a new City would allow for the recycling of 'useless and cumbersome' rubbish, maybe even the building of a new quay with waste material. He suggests 'necessary evils', slaughter-houses and fishmongers, brewers, bakers, dyers and soap-makers, be moved out, perhaps to the waterside at Bow or Wandsworth or beyond City boundaries, in Islington or Spitalfields. Reused brick could serve for paving, while waste pipes should be 'immured' in plaster of Paris for cleanliness. Evelyn's planned London was perhaps informed by his role, since 1662, as one of twenty-one distinguished commissioners for London streets – although the Commission itself had been overtaken by events.

In 1664 Evelyn was swept into a prestigious and purposeful official role as one of four Commissioners for the Sick and Wounded and Prisoners of War, a role in public service which required efficiency and action. It played to different and active strengths in Evelyn's character and experience and led to his major involvement in the establishment of both Chelsea and Greenwich Hospitals over the coming decades.

At home in the garden atmospheric pollution found optimum conditions in a succession of harsh winters, none worse than that of 1683/4. Evelyn's precious Sayes Court was laid waste. Over London 'the excessive coldness of the aire, hindring the ascent of the smoke, was so filld with the fuliginous steam of the Sea-Coale, that hardly could one cross the streete...' He described the fate of his garden in a letter to the Royal Society, published in full in the *Philosophical Transactions*, and offered advice about tending injured plants much as if they were sick patients. The account ended with the poignant discovery of his tortoise, self-buried as usual for winter hibernation, but now dead.

The subsequent history of *Fumifugium* is telling. In 1772, the Rev. Samuel Pegge the elder, an obscure antiquarian, reissued it, perhaps prompted by a major financial crisis that year. Downturns tend to favour radical ideas and fresh starts. It had been Evelyn's misfortune to suggest 'a work of such consequence to so negligent and dissipated a Patron' and the Rev Pegge further pointed to the enormous growth of industry in the intervening period, coal-fired, centrally located, even including the 'fire-engines of the water-works' which were perhaps more dangerous than useful in supplying water. The terrible evidence of Bills of Mortality for infants and children pointed to a toll from atrocious air quality. Again, it seemed, Evelyn's still timely ideas might mitigate the horror.

As the decades passed, the situation merely worsened. William Upcott's edition of Evelyn's *Miscellaneous Writings* (1825) brought him back to attention. *The Monthly Review* noticed *Fumifugium*'s emphasis on 'the purification of the London atmosphere, and the great panacea for that purpose was planting.' Perhaps that prompted Loudon's diagram for urban growth bound by 'breathing spaces', surely a leaf out of Evelyn's book as were his important proposals for garden cemeteries beyond city boundaries.

The 1706 edition of *Silva* proposed a mile-long gated single burial ground to the north of the city and reminded readers of the author's *Fumifugium*. Soon after, Wren promoted ideas for extra-mural burial grounds. In the 1680s statistician Sir William Petty had painted a hellish vision of the exponential growth of the capital, leading to a continual series of plagues. Calculating that the population would be nearly 11 million in 1840, Petty guessed that only some two hundred thousand would live elsewhere. Evelyn's admiration for Petty knew few bounds. 'If I were a Prince, I should make him my second Counsellor, at least. There is nothing difficult to him ... there is nothing impenetrable to him.' How ironic, then, that Evelyn's writings so long outlasted Petty's.

In 1930, *Fumifugium* re-emerged into print to support the case against the siting of Chelsea (Lots Road) Power station on the Thames. It received a thoughtful review in *Nature* by 'R.R.'. At intervals, more editions followed, under the aegis of the National Society for Clean Air, the successor to the

Coal Smoke Abatement Society, and founded in 1898 by the painter Sir William Blake Richmond. The Clean Air Act was passed in 1956 (and another in 1968) following the deadly Great Smog of 1952. In a further twist, it was found that lack of light and direct sun led to rickets. The impact of 'dark smoke' was profound and its effects as real as the swirling smoke in the corridors of Whitehall that Evelyn descried.

He was 80 when his birthplace Wotton became his last home by rights. In 1703 a massive hurricane wreaked havoc on the standing timber his forebears planted (and begun to cut down, recently, to meet debts) but as usual, he dealt with disaster by writing. He added valuable new (and old) material to *Silva* and wrote *Memoires for my Grand-son* (1704) which Geoffrey Keynes published in a Nonesuch Press edition in 1926. This covered every conceivable topic, indoors and out, from securing the safe to clearing the gutters, but always with strict economy in mind. Evelyn's family jewels were in his head, in his library and in the grounds beyond the windows. He pressed young John (soon Sir John) as the heir to an unentailed estate to consider 'the timely and most continual planting of woods and Timber to which the soile is so inclin'd.' In old age, Evelyn had become ever more alert to enlightened, conservation-minded management of woodland, shamed by his family's careless exploitation of timber for industrial charcoal along the fast-running Tillingbourne. Fortunately, his grandson was everything Evelyn could have wished in his care of Wotton, his modest demeanour and his life of the mind. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society and added a new library to the house. He died in 1763 aged eighty-one.

John Evelyn's encyclopaedic tendencies and prolix style worked against his zeal to be a reformer, let alone an intellectual powerhouse. But two books, the brief *Fumifugium* and the ever-expanding *Sylva* had enduring and purposeful afterlives. On the 400th anniversary of his birth, they are undoubtedly his most effective memorial.

We must share Evelyn's burning sense of urgency yet, like the feckless King Charles II, our leaders don't bother to keep their promises even when they make them. Surrounded now by mostly unseen, but deadly, hazards we are reaping the whirlwind. Surprisingly enough Evelyn's voice is of the moment.

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Further Reading

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