

William Byrd II

The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712

Byrd (1674-1744) was a Virginia elite who had inherited his wealth and status. He received an education abroad and published the well-received History of the Dividing Line. During his late thirties, he also kept this “secret journal,” which wouldn’t be published until the 1940s. The diary gives an excellent glimpse into the worldview and habits of the slaveholding gentry of the eighteenth century. It also illustrates Byrd’s attitude and treatment toward the slaves he exploited to expand his (already-considerable) fortune.

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February 8, 1709. I rose at 5 o'clock this morning and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Homer's Odyssey. I ate milk for breakfast. I said my prayers. Jenny and Eugene were whipped. I danced my dance.¹ I read law in the morning and Italian in the afternoon. ...

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June 9, 1709. I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Josephus. I neglected to say my prayers, for which God forgive me. I ate milk for breakfast. I received a very foolish letter from Robin Bolling which contained many ridiculous arguments to justify his late foolish proceedings, to which I sent him a full answer. I ate mutton and sallet for dinner.

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My Eugene ran away this morning for no reason but because he had not done anything yesterday. I sent my people after him but in vain. The sloop came from Falling Creek with copper, timber, and planks. In the evening Captain Keeling came to see us to account with me for the quitrents of New Kent.² I ate some supper with him, contrary to custom. I neglected to say my prayers, for which God forgive me. I had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty. I danced my dance.

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June 10, 1709. I rose at 5 o'clock this morning but could not read anything because of Captain Keeling, but I played at billiards with him and won half a crown of him and the Doctor. George B-th brought home my boy Eugene. ... In the evening I took a walk about the plantation. Eugene was whipped for running away and had the [bit] put on him. I said my prayers and had good health, good thought, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

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September 3, 1709. ... I read some geometry. We had no court this day. My wife was indisposed again but not to much purpose. I ate roast chicken for dinner. In the afternoon I beat Jenny for throwing water on the couch. ...

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December 1, 1709. I rose at 4 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Cassius. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. Eugene was whipped again for pissing in bed and Jenny for concealing it. ...

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December 3, 1709. I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Cassius. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. Eugene pissed abed again for which I made him drink a pint of piss. I settled some accounts and read some news. About 12 o'clock I went to court where I found little good company. However I persuaded Mr.

¹ Probably referring to calisthenics.

² Probably a “quit-rent,” a small tax levied on services.

45 Anderson and Colonel Eppes to come and dine with me. I ate a venison pasty for dinner. In the evening Mr. Anderson and I walked to Mr. Harrison's where we found Frank W-l-s and James Burwell and Isham Randolph. Here I ate custard and was merry. I stayed till 9 o'clock and when I came home my wife was in bed. I neglected to say my prayers and had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

50 June 17, 1710. ... I set my closet right. I ate tongue and chicken for dinner. In the afternoon I caused L-s-n to be whipped for beating his wife and Jenny was whipped for being his whore. In the evening the sloop came from Appomattox with tobacco. I took a walk about the plantation. I said my prayers and drank some new milk from the cow. ...

55 February 27, 1711. I rose at 6 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Lucian. I said my prayers and ate boiled milk for breakfast. I danced my dance and then went to the brick house to see my people pile the plants and found them all idle for which I threatened them soundly but did not whip them. The weather was cold and the wind at northeast. I wrote a letter to England. Then I read some English till 12 o'clock when Mr. Dunn and his wife came. I
60 ate boiled beef for dinner. In the afternoon Mr. Dunn and I played at billiards. Then we took a long walk about the plantation and looked over all my business. In the evening my wife and little Jenny had a great quarrel in which my wife got the worst but at last by the help of the family Jenny was overcome and soundly whipped. At night I ate some bread and cheese. I said
65 my prayers and good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thank God Almighty.

Sources:

<http://www.indiana.edu/~kdhist/H105-documents-web/week05/Byrd1709.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h283t.html>

(both accessed 7/24/16)

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