CLAIRE TOMALIN

An encounter with the acclaimed biographer of Samuel Pepys.

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If you were to draw a Venn diagram of London's literary circles, the shaded area would be Claire Tomalin. As an author she has won Whitbread and Hawthornden and James Tait Black Memorial prizes; as a former literary editor she counts Julian Barnes, Timothy Mo and Clive James among her protégés; as a sitter on committees she has graced the British Library, the Royal Society of Literature and PEN; as a wife she enjoys the tea-making expertise of Michael Frayn. Among the big cheeses of the book world, she is up there with Samuel Pepys's Parmesan, which he buried in his garden for safekeeping as the Great Fire of London raged on 4th September 1666.

Pepys happens to be the subject of her latest biography, *The Unequalled Self*. It seems unlikely that there should be anything more to say about a man whose diary runs to one and a quarter million words, and with whom we are arguably better acquainted than any figure in history. But the diary covers only ten of his 63 years – before he took charge of the Admiralty, stood trial for 'Piracy, Popery, and Treachery', or set up house with his mistress Mrs Skinner. Tomalin skilfully fills in the gaps, explains the historical background (the restoration of the monarchy is 'the equivalent of the Berlin Wall coming down'), and captures the texture of life in the seventeenth century – its smells, its pleasures, its fragility.

Fragility is something that she knows plenty about. Her first husband, the journalist Nicholas Tomalin, was killed reporting on the Yom Kippur

war; of their five children, one died in infancy, one took her own life at the age of 22, and one was born with spina bifida. Not that Claire Tomalin wants people's sympathy: 'Terrible things *have* happened to me,' she says, 'but I don't want to appear tragic. Max Hastings introduced me at a literary lunch and went on about the tragedy in my life, but that's not how you see yourself. I could have biffed him.'

She chooses to be interviewed at St Olave's Church in the City of London, where Pepys and his wife Elizabeth are buried. It stands at the top of Seething Lane, in which Pepys lived and worked – at the Navy Office – for most of the diary years. At the far end of the street is another church, All Hallows, whose steeple he climbed during the Fire of London to witness 'the saddest sight of desolation that ever I saw: everywhere great fires, oil-cellars and brimstone, and other things burning'. A little way beyond it lies the Tower of London, where he was briefly imprisoned after William of Orange's invasion.

In her youth, Claire Tomalin had a reputation as a bluestocking glamourpuss (her conquests included Martin Amis), and at 69 she is still a handsome woman, with a touch of chic that is not quite English. This may derive from her French father – a D.H. Lawrence scholar who spent the War in London working for the BBC – as, perhaps, does her disconcertingly donnish manner. No sooner have we met than she is leading me on a tour of the church, pointing out a bust of Elizabeth Pepys, a tiny pair of carved lions, and a plaster angel on the vestry ceiling ('Isn't it beautiful? It's amazing how much leg you're allowed to see.')

Some people find her scary: 'She's very severe,' says one fellow committee member, 'though she's mellowed slightly.' But friends claim that her Senior Academic mode is actually a mask for shyness, and she certainly becomes less intimidating on acquaintance. (It helps when she removes her spectacles, which – daunting in scale and Seventies and style

– are eyewear's answer to the Barbican Centre.) 'I like and admire her tremendously,' says her fellow biographer Selina Hastings. 'She's a brave, forthright, good woman and I wish there were more people like her.'

Claire Tomalin first discovered Pepys in the Sixties, when she was ill with mumps and her husband brought an abridged version home for her (she remembers feeling 'this tremendous shock of intimacy' with the author). The idea of writing about him came much later, in 1995, when she reviewed the paperback edition of the diary, and received an effusive letter from an earlier biographer, Richard Ollard. Her previous subjects – Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Katharine Mansfield, the actress Mrs Jordan, Charles Dickens's mistress Ellen Ternan – had belonged to a later period, and at first it seemed 'an act of madness' to tackle a figure from the seventeenth century, which she had not studied since school. But she found the politics of the period enthralling ('It was the century in which we got rid of the monarchy, the bishops, the Lords – and then brought them all back again'), and was astonished by the records available: 'You can go into Hoare's bank in Fleet Street and look at Pepys's bank account; you can go into the Bodleian, where there are boxes and boxes of Pepys papers, which include his brother's tobacco bills – things as absurd as that.'

What attracted her most was Pepys's energy, and his delight in the things around him. He rose from humble beginnings (as the son of a tailor and a washerwoman) to the world of court and government, and at the beginning of the diary is enjoying a new lease of life, having survived an operation to remove a gallstone which caused him severe pain for years. (He kept the stone afterwards in a specially made case, and always observed the anniversary of the operation.) 'When I kept a diary I realised that it was all moanings and depression,' says Tomalin, 'and I think that

is quite common. Pepys is very rarely depressed – he's often angry, but he's so busy that he doesn't have time to indulge his fears or his worries. Robert Louis Stevenson talked about Pepys being in love with himself, and I think that's absolutely right. He's in love with himself and he's in love with the world.'

The most controversial aspect of *The Unequalled Self* is the claim that Pepys was not simply an inquisitive man who found himself in the right place at a fascinating time, but a literary genius who bears comparison with Dickens and Proust. As she worked, Tomalin says, 'The view of him as a rather quaint, comic character disappeared. He *is* [itals] a great writer, and you feel reverence for a man who can stand aside and present himself as if he were a character in a play or a novel. If I kept a diary, I would want to present myself in a good light – and he is simply not concerned to do that.'

Reading her book, there are half a dozen passages which leap out at you, because they clearly say as much about her as they do about Pepys. They are all to do with sexual politics – about how marriages work, and about how men and women differ in their outlook. The diary, she claims, 'is as good an account of the married state as has ever been written', chronicling 'the tidal waters of marriage, where the waves of feeling ebb and flow from hour to hour and month to month'. To read Pepys is, moreover, for a woman, 'the nearest thing to experiencing what it is like to be a man.'

A good proportion of the male population may consider this a libel: Pepys, after all, was a habitual philanderer. Discussing one of his affairs, Tomalin writes that 'What he expressed in his Diary was what many – most? all? – men experience at some point in their lives, when success is within their grasp and their energies are running high: that they would like to possess every pretty girl in the world, or at least make love to

every girl who catches their eye as she passes by in the street.' Tomalin claims that she has come across 'quite a lot' of men of whom this is true – including her first husband.

But unfaithful though Pepys was to his young wife (she was 14 when they married), Tomalin believes that Elizabeth was very much his muse, and that the diary was inspired by 'the condition of marriage itself'. Pepys stopped keeping it in 1669 because he feared that he was going blind, and though this proved a false alarm, he never resumed the journal – largely, Tomalin argues, because Elizabeth had died in the meantime. Mary Skinner, his next love, simply did not inspire him in the same way, despite the fact that they spent 33 years together and eventually cohabited openly.

Such unconventional arrangements are a recurring theme of Tomalin's biographies. Mary Wollstonecraft caused a scandal in the 1790s by shamelessly having an illegitimate child; Charles Dickens, the embodiment of Victorian family values, set up Ellen Ternan as his mistress in a house in Slough; Mrs Jordan bore the future George IV ten children in a twenty-year relationship. And yet, in her collection of reviews and memoirs *Several Strangers*, Tomalin writes of having kept 'a dream of family life'. So where – to biograph the biographer – does this preoccupation with marriage and its alternatives come from?

An obvious starting point is that her parents divorced when she was very young. She was brought up by her Christian Scientist mother – a musician and composer – and shuttled between a variety of schools; but, she remarks, as a wartime child she was not alone in this, and she does not consider her upbringing particularly unhappy. At 9 she was evacuated with the French Lyceé to Lake Ullswater for 'an amazing year', roaming the countryside and happening upon Wordsworth's daffodils – 'an unforgettable experience for a child'. (She already had a

passion for writing poetry, which she describes as 'probably the most exciting thing in life', though she gave it up as a student, deciding that she was not good enough.)

She later progressed to Dartington Hall, which she loved, and to Cambridge, where she got a First. Her contemporaries included Jonathan Miller, Peter Hall and Joan Bakewell; she met Nick Tomalin when he leant out of his window and asked her if she had any poems for *Granta*.

They married at 22, and had their first child within a year. Claire Tomalin attributes her hurry to the fact that she came from a small, female-dominated family: 'Essentially I spent most of my childhood with my mother and my older sister, and I suppose I had rather a romantic vision of how things might be if there were men around: I saw myself in a country house with six children and a garden. That has never been achieved – but I still regret it.'

She took a job as an editorial assistant at Heinemann, but Britain in the mid-Fifties was a chauvinistic world, and there was no doubt about whose aspirations took precedence. 'Men are more fortunate,' she says: 'they drive their careers forward. Nick had a very clear ambition – he wanted to be editor of the *Observer* – and I didn't. I wanted to have a career – I think I should probably have become a don – but I rather dreamily waited for it to happen.' A few years ago, in an article on Sylvia Plath, she described herself at this time crying into a washbasin of baby clothes while her 'handsome and adored' husband was out playing football with his friends: 'I *had* [itals] wanted to do something with my life – I thought I had *some* [itals] capacities, and here they were going down the plughole with the soapsuds.'

By 28, she had borne four children, and frustration had given way to 'disaster and sorrow'. Her third child had died at four weeks, and Nick had embarked on the first of many affairs. Reduced to a state of hopeless

misery, she was saved by a friend of her mother's who told her, 'You didn't go to Cambridge to spend your life crying. Find yourself proper work.' She turned to journalism, and at 35 finally found a job she loved, as deputy literary editor of the *New Statesman*. 'I think I was probably hardly ever so happy in my life,' she says. 'It was completely absorbing.' In 1971, after writing an article on Mary Wollstonecraft, she received her first commission as a biographer.

But as her career found wings, the disaster and sorrow returned. Nick was by turns unfaithful and repentant; they had a fifth child, Tom, who was born with spina bifida, leaving him paralysed from the waist down and in need of constant care. ('He's very brave, he's very independent, he's extraordinary,' she says of him today. 'I'm very, very proud of him.') And then, in September 1973, Nick Tomalin was killed by a Syrian missile while reporting from the Golan Heights.

His death left Clare deeply confused. 'I *grieved* [itals] for him,' she says. Her voice is strained, and she pauses, searching for words. 'I still wish he were alive, though I wouldn't wish to be married to him. But some people play the widow, and I felt uneasy about that – because our marriage was in a parlous state and I didn't feel I ought to pretend. The tragic feelings were not for myself – they were for him and for his children and for his parents. It was such a dreadful thing for a young man who was only 42 to be blown out of life like that, and I felt they needed an enormous amount of support. I suppose one can say that in the long run it did have a pretty devastating effect on all my children.'

The Tomalins' second daughter, Susanna, was 15 at the time. Seven years later, as an undergraduate at Oxford, she committed suicide, after twelve months of deep depression. She was a popular and brilliant student – John Bayley said that he wanted to stand up and cheer after reading one of her essays – and her death is something her mother has

clearly never come to terms with. 'It's a difficult thing to lose a child – a grown-up child,' she says, tracing absently on the table in front of her with the blunt end of a pencil. 'I don't really want to talk about it.'

For Claire, widowhood was a kind of liberation, and she says now that she thinks of her forties as her youth. A few months after Nick's death, she became literary editor of the *New Statesman*, with V.S. Naipaul, Jonathan Raban and Alison Lurie among her contributors. Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Timothy Mo acted as her assistants: looking back, she says, it seems like a golden age. She went on to take the same job at the *Sunday Times*, but argued with Andrew Neil over his enthusiasm for reviewers who were famous rather than able to write. In 1986, encouraged by the success of *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, she embraced full-time biography.

Her career could be seen as a kind of feminist pilgrimage, from downtrodden wife to successful career woman to equal partner with another highly respected writer. (She and Michael Frayn married in 1993.) She is worried, however, that her sisters may consider her soft on Pepys – and she is indeed remarkably uncritical of his infidelity, considering her own experience. (She writes of his affair with his wife's friend Deb Willet, 'I know of no other account of marital rage and jealousy to match this one. Anyone who has lived through anything similar, in whichever position in the triangle, will recognize its truth and force.') But, she says, 'You become more tolerant when you become older. You're not interested in rapping people over the knuckle, you're interested in understanding them.' The fact that Michael Frayn was married to someone else when their relationship started has no doubt added to that understanding.

She and Frayn live in North London, near Regent's Park. He also keeps an immaculate flat nearby, where he does his writing, while she

works from home in less orderly conditions ('My husband says I would fill the whole house with books if I were allowed to'). Another difference, according to Frayn, is that Tomalin loves research and hates writing, whereas with him it is the other way round. (She says that this is an exaggeration, but admits that writing can be a painful process.) She is more sociable than he is, which partly explains her enthusiasm for committees.

They show each other their work, though only when it is finished, and appear at literary festivals together. Occasionally her views on marriage have proved embarrassing: 'Michael says that once I was giving a talk and I said, "You know how it is, one day you love your husband and one day you hate him" – and everyone turned and looked at him. But in a sense it's true – and he probably hates me on some days. If your feelings are alive, they change all the time.' It is this 'fluidity' that she so admires in Pepys's account of marriage.

She believes that there is a price to be paid for high achievement, and that those who strive for it 'are probably going to make other people suffer – or suffer themselves.' She takes her daughter Emily's decision to abandon a successful career as an engineer for full-time motherhood to be a comment on her own absences as a working parent. 'I adored my children and I certainly felt that I was deeply attentive to them; but I suspect that one never gets it right, the balancing of work and children.'

How has she coped with all that life has thrown at her? Her answer is simple: 'Work, really. I sometimes think that's what I've been doing – working dementedly to fill up…' She doesn't finish the sentence, but goes on, 'You have to watch it a bit. I got very low when I finished the Pepys book, because I think I do sustain myself by having a totally absorbing job in hand – and when it stops you can feel extremely blank and empty. I've had the good fortune to have interesting work, and to be

able to spend my time escaping into the past. I think some children escape from life into the books they read – and then when they grow up they escape into the books they write.’