

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

The Diary of a Nobody

GEORGE & WEEDON GROSSMITH



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY

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George & Weedon Grossmith

Introduction and Notes by
MICHAEL IRWIN
University of Kent at Canterbury



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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The Diary of a Nobody
originally appeared in *Punch* and
is republished by permission of the publishers,
Messrs Bradbury and Agnew. The diary has
been considerably added to. The excellent
title was suggested by our mutual friend

F. C. BURNAND
to whom we have the pleasure of
dedicating this volume.

GEORGE GROSSMITH
WEEDON GROSSMITH
London, June 1892

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

General Adviser

KEITH CARABINE

Rutherford College

University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

The Diary of a Nobody is that peculiar achievement, an accidental masterpiece. Generations of talented authors have striven to produce a work of fiction that will survive them; but even a much-praised novel, frequently reprinted, is more likely than not to recede after the author's death, washed away to unexplored shelves in remote second-hand bookshops. George Grossmith was not an author at all, in the accepted sense, but a professional performer, a writer only of songs and sketches. Yet in contributing an occasional series to a comic magazine he somehow sketched out a miniature classic which is still in print, still distinctive and delightful, over a century later. The *Diary* has had a spirited after-life, being adapted for the stage more than once and turned into a musical. One of the dramatisations was by Keith Waterhouse, who also produced a

companion volume for the original, *Mrs Pooter's Diary* (Michael Joseph, 1983). There have been a number of popular works very much in the Pooter mould, including E. M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, a hit in the 1930s, and the more recent diaries of Adrian Mole and Bridget Jones

The original *Diary* first appeared in *Punch* in May 1888, introduced solely by a footnote: 'As everybody who is anybody is publishing Reminiscences, Diaries, Notes, Autobiographies, and Recollections, we are sincerely grateful to "A Nobody" for permitting us to add to the historic collection. — ED.' It is unlikely that readers would have paid the work particular attention. 'Diaries' of roughly that kind were common in *Punch* at the time. Most amounted to merely a single episode. The 'Diary of a Pessimist', published on 7 April 1888, was fairly typical of such productions. It began:

Down to breakfast. Tea and dry toast. Couldn't manage egg. Afraid of indigestion.

There's a joke of sorts there, but it has barely the stamina to sustain the one instalment. At first sight it might not have been obvious that 'a Nobody's' diary had more potentiality than the Pessimist's, but so it proved. Serialisation continued, irregularly, till the May of the following year.

Tracing its progress in bound copies of the magazine is not a straightforward task. In the *Punch* of that period it is the cartoons and the verses that take the eye; prose is a poor relation. For Grossmith's story there were no illustrations (beyond occasional irrelevant vignettes), and the journal entries were not spaced out. Characteristically an instalment was compressed into less than a column of a large two-column page of cramped print. On occasion the *Diary* might fail to feature at all, perhaps for weeks at a time. When Pooter begins his entry for October 30th with the words, 'I should like very much to know who has wilfully torn the last five or six weeks out of my diary', it is not only the first move in a domestic drama, but an acknowledgement of the fact that the column had been absent from the magazine from mid-September to mid-November.

The serialisation concluded in May 1889, with the current Chapter 17, in which the dream of Mr Pooter's life is realised,

Lupin securing a post alongside him in Mr Perkupp's office. When *The Diary* appeared in book form, in the summer of 1892, the text originally featured in *Punch* had been very little altered, but there were some notable amplifications. In particular the current Chapter 11, featuring 'a dose of Irving imitations', had been inserted, and six further chapters had been added at the end. There was a brief foreword, in the shape of Mr Pooter's statement of intent: 'Why should I not publish my diary? . . . ' The narrative was divided into short but lengthily-titled chapters, and was bulked out with copious illustrations by Weedon Grossmith, George's brother. Now fully equipped, *The Diary* was ready to take off.

I

George Grossmith was born in 1847, his brother seven years later. Their father, also George Grossmith, was a police-court reporter, for *The Times* and other journals, and a public lecturer, particularly on literary topics. Both boys attended North London Collegiate School. Weedon showed an aptitude for art, and went on to study at the Royal Academy. George became a Bow Street reporter like his father. From boyhood, however, he had acquired something of a reputation as a singer of comic songs to his own piano-playing. In 1864 he began to perform at 'penny readings' – entertainments held characteristically in church halls, at which, for the modest fee indicated, audiences were regaled with songs and dramatised recitations. George's performances were largely of his own composition. Within a few years he graduated to the theatre proper, and was soon touring the country, sometimes with others, sometimes as a solo artist.

The big turning-point in his performing career came in 1877, when he was engaged by Richard D'Oyly Carte to play the part of John Wellington Wells in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer*. A master of the patter song, he was to become the star performer in the Savoy Operas, creating the leading male roles in the major works from *Pinafore* to *The Yeomen of the Guard*. Subsequently he returned to his eminently successful career as a performer of 'single-handed Humorous and Musical Recitals', which he pursued until his retirement. He died in Folkestone in 1912. Although he claimed to have written over six hundred humorous and satirical songs and sketches

his only books, apart from *The Diary*, were two volumes of light memoirs, *A Society Clown* (1888) and *Piano and I* (1910).

Weedon Grossmith achieved reasonable success as a painter, exhibiting frequently at the Royal Academy, but later became better known as an actor and theatre manager. He was also the author of a novel, several plays and a memoir, *From Studio to Stage* (1913). It does not appear that he contributed to the text of *The Diary of a Nobody*, though his illustrations had a transforming effect upon it. He died in 1919.

Tony Joseph, biographer of George Grossmith, surprisingly reveals that 'in the context of [the brothers'] lives as a whole, the *Diary* was very much an incidental' (*George Grossmith*, p. 172). There seems to be no record of either of them so much as mentioning the name of the book in public. Somehow they failed to realise the magnitude of their idiosyncratic achievement.

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Even those who most enjoyed *The Diary* when it first appeared would hardly have seen it as a potential classic. Two of its characteristics, in particular, must have seemed to promise perishability. One was that it was very much a product of its time. In 1988 the Geffrye Museum mounted an excellent centenary exhibition, 'Mr Pooter's London'; based on this very fact. The brochure remarked: 'As well as being a minor comic masterpiece, *The Diary* is an extremely accurate account of lower-middle-class life, attitudes and aspirations in the late 1880s.' It was in its very grain a topical work, not merely in the sense of reflecting the period at which it was written, but in actively making play with small distinctions of taste and fashion, whether in relation to clothes, social forms, furnishings and décor, shops, slang, transport or popular song. So much of this detail is lost on a modern audience that a comprehensively annotated edition would probably need to feature more explanatory material than original text. Such an attempt, interesting though it could prove, would in any case be doomed to ultimate failure. Even if all the usages and allusions concerned were retrievable – which is unlikely – the context which gave them significance has gone. It is possible to decode Lupin's slang expressions, for example, but quite impossible

to gauge to a nicety (and the Grossmiths specialised in such niceties) how shocking any given one of them might have seemed to his father. Similarly with Mr Pooter's own social gaffes: they can be recognised in outline but not assessed in detail. In such cases, and many like them, we can see where the jokes were, and can judge what sort of jokes they might have been, but their full effect is irrecoverable.

The other obvious limiting factor in *The Diary* is the character of the diarist. Upright though he strives to be, Mr Pooter is a Nobody even in his own eyes: this fact is the very *raison d'être* of his journal. Such aspirations as he has actually lead him into trouble. Every small impulse of self-congratulation is likely to be undercut by a small embarrassment. The typical parabola, in its briefest form, becomes: 'I left the room with silent dignity, but caught my foot in the mat.'

The two factors together – an ultra-topical comedy that is centred on a nonentity – ought indeed to have guaranteed a short shelf-life. Yet here is *The Diary*, republished yet again, over a century later, as fresh and as funny as ever. The intriguing question is: what went right?

The explanation has a lot to do with an unobtrusive but by no means common virtue: authorial good manners. In many ways Pooter is a figure of fun, staid, nervously respectable, sometimes priggish or pompous, and regularly subject to petty mortifications, which he painstakingly records. It would have been easy for Grossmith to settle into collusion with the reader, inviting us to join him in patronising the hapless clerk – but he resists that temptation. In doing so he stands out against a British tradition so powerful that, by association, it can probably still induce a misreading of Grossmith today. Much British writing has been fuelled by snobbery. From Fanny Burney and Jane Austen through to Evelyn Waugh and beyond we have been invited to look out for small social gaffes and laugh or even sneer, with a self-gratifying sense of superiority, at the fictional characters who perpetrate them.

Grossmith, to his immense credit, is less facile. Pooter's failings and come-uppances are not mocked from without, but experienced, and probably enlarged, through the response of the character himself. 'I left the room with silent dignity, but caught my foot in the mat.' In film or television form this would probably be depicted

as a pratfall, or at least a lurching stagger. In the text all that need be implied is a minor lapse in Pooter's attempted coolness of deportment. What matters is that he is ruffled. Throughout he is allowed sufficient dignity and decency to ensure that it is the reader who patronises him too readily who will be guilty of a gaffe. An underlying assumption in the book is that Mr Pooter's small failures in social know-how or aesthetic taste can be replicated at any point on the social scale. In that sense we are all Pooters. We may not make Pooter's mistakes, but we make our own.

To read Grossmith's first memoir, *A Society Clown*, is to realise just how close he is, in many ways, to his characters in *The Diary*. In his youth he was, by his own admission, a keen cyclist like Cummings, riding a machine with a front wheel thirty-six inches high. Like Lupin he called his father 'the Guv'nor'. His taste in puns isn't markedly different from Pooter's. When he was working in the police-court as a young man one of his reports was headed 'The Tale of a Shirt'. He quotes with approval a fruity specimen from a punster friend: 'I don't like *cockroaches* because they *encroaches*'. On occasion he can be sententious or platitudinous in a Pooteresque vein: 'All's well that ends well'; 'In accordance with its usual custom, time rolled on.' Like Burwin-Fosselton he ventures the Gallic flourish, '*Revenons à nos moutons*' (p. 101). He is even more excited by the chance to appear in Gilbert and Sullivan than is Pooter by the invitation from the Lord Mayor: 'I think I read the letter over twenty times'. He records several Pooter-like social victories or defeats. One in particular will immediately strike a chord with admirers of the *Diary*:

... a wealthy hatter of slight acquaintance, meeting me at a 'Mansion House' ball, said: 'Hulloa! Mr Grossmith, what are you doing here? Are you going to give us any of your little funniments - eh?' 'No,' I replied. 'Are you going to sell any of your hats?'

Pooteresque sensitivities are very much in play there. Grossmith even concludes his memoir with just the sort of courtesy for which his hero strives:

DEAR READERS - If I have succeeded in amusing or interesting you, I shall feel myself more than repaid for my trouble. If I have