From the Secret Diary of William Byrd (1709)

What follows are selected entries from the diary of William Byrd, a gentleman from Virginia who is representative of the southern landed aristocracy. Byrd's diary was kept in a secret shorthand and discovered only in the twentieth century. It provides insight into the mind of a southern gentleman. Byrd committed to his diary some of his most private thoughts and actions. These entries focus especially on Byrd's relationship with his wife, his treatment of servants, his daily diet, his description of medical practices, and his observations of nature.

[September 1709] . . . About one o'clock this morning my wife was happily delivered of a son, thanks be to God Almighty. I was awake in a blink and rose and my cousin Harrison met me on the stairs and told me it was a boy. We drank some French wine and went to bed again and rose at 7 o'clock. I read a chapter in Hebrew and then drank chocolate with the women for breakfast. I returned God humble thanks for so great a blessing and recommended my young son to His divine protection.

[October 1709] I rose at 6 o'clock and said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. Then I proceeded to Williamsburg, where I found all well. I went to the capitol where I sent for the wench to clean my room and when I came I kissed her and felt her, for which God forgive me. The I went to see the President, whom I found indisposed in his ears. I dined with . . . on beef. Then we went to his house and played at piquet where Mr. Clayton came to us. We had much to do to get a bottle of French wine. About 10 o'clock I went to my lodgings. I had good health but wicked thoughts, God forgive me.

[February 1710] I rose at 8 o'clock and read nothing because of my company. I neglected to say my prayers, for which God forgive me. I ate milk for breakfast. Then we took a walk about the plantation till it was time to go to dinner. I ate fish for dinner. In the afternoon we saw a good battle between a stallion and Robin about the mare, but at last the stallion had the advantage and covered the mare three times. The Captain's bitch killed another lamb for which she was beat very much. We took another walk about the plantation. My maid Anaka was very well again, thank God, and so was Moll at the quarters. My wife was out of humor with us for going to see so filthy a sight as the horse to cover the mare. In the evening we drank a bottle of wine and were very merry till 9 o'clock. I neglected to say my prayers but had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

[March 1710] I rose at 7 o'clock and read some Greek in bed. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. The about 8 o'clock we got a-horseback and rode to Mr. Harrison's and found him very ill but sensible . . . In the morning early I returned home and went to bed. It is remarkable that Mrs. Burwell dreamed this night that she saw a person that with money scales weighed time and declared that there was no more than 18 pennies worth of time to come, which seems to be a dream with some significance either concerning the world or a sick person. In my letters from England I learned that the Bishop of Worcester was of opinion that in the year 1715 the city of Rome would be burned to the ground, that before the year 1745 the popish religion would be
routed out of the world, that before the year 1790 the Jews and Gentiles would be converted to the Christianity and then would begin the millennium.

[From Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinlin (eds.), The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712 (Richmond, Va.: Dietz Press, 1941), pp. 80, 90-91, 146, 159, 197, 210-11, 488, 492, 499.)]