

# How the secret diary of William Byrd exposes the daily life of an elite Virginian...

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William Byrd of Westover, Virginia, was one of the most elite Virginians of the 18th century. William Byrd was wealthy, educated, successful, and hospitable. The journal *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1709-1712*, edited by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tilling, is composed of the personal diary of collective information of Byrd's everyday life from 1709-1712. The following diary was never intended to be shared or to be seen by anyone, however, it was written as though William Byrd had created an imaginary audience in his head. Though at times Byrd's diary seems repetitive or dull, the following diary may be used to help historians and other scholars understand just how the daily life/routine of an elite Virginian was carried out in the 18th century, and just how these findings support other scholars and their works on its historical significance.

According to Wright and Tilling, William Byrd's diary has helped shed some light on the daily life of Southern colonists in the early 18th century. Byrd's diary contains an immense amount of information about himself and other elite and non-elite members that resided in the early southern colonies. In his diary, Byrd had tediously discussed his daily routine, which contains historical significance to another author's work. An author by the name of Cynthia A. Kierner, who wrote, *Hospitality, Sociability, and Gender in the Southern Colonies*, which discusses greatly how the elites or noble men and women of the 18th century thrived. According to Kierner, "Hospitality rituals were inclusive, sociability rituals were exclusive; but both were intended to promote the gentry's authority." Meaning that, the southern elites would use these tactics to show off their power and status without saying a word. This represents a huge historical significance to William Byrd's diary and what he

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did to show his hospitality. One example of hospitality from Byrd's diary is when the Governor and a hand full of militia officers came to dinner. Byrd explained, " I offered him some of my fine water...We had a good dinner, well served, with which the Governor seemed to be very pleased." These dinner parties were a common occurrence throughout Byrd's diary and a good example of the historical significance of southern hospitality with a Christian virtue undertone.

According to Kierner, elite women also benefitted from these hospitality rituals and broke some of the social hierarchy's for women in the early 18th century. In William Byrd's diary, his wife Lucy was mentioned quite a few times in different diary logs. Byrd's relationship with his wife was an interesting one and can best be described as a companionship but with a dominant control over her, like a master to a servant. Byrd noted that he would take walks with her around the plantation, and that she would even enforce punishment among their servants. In a log from Byrd's diary he stated that, " My wife against my will caused little Jenny to be burned with a hot iron, for which I quarreled with her." Historically speaking, this was not an uncommon thing to do. According to Kierner, " elite women could command the labor of domestic servants and because they knew — about changes in culinary fashion, the products of their labor were more exotic and varied." The way in which elite women could take control of their servants, and manage their households and food preparation, supports the historical significance of the kind of hospitality elite women were expected to show towards their house guests.

William Byrd's diary can also be historically significant to Kierner's findings on the social rituals of elite men and women and how important balls and dancing were to them. These balls were huge social gatherings that allowed the elites to mingle with other elites. Conspicuous consumption can best describe the elite's attitudes and behaviors at these events. In Byrd's diary, he mentions a time in which he, his wife, and her sister attended a ball for the Governor. William Byrd wrote, " About 7 o'clock the company went in coaches from the Governor's house to the capital where the Governor opened the ball with a French dance with my wife...The Governor was very gallant to the ladies and very courteous to the gentlemen." These balls were very important and historically significant to the early southern elites' lifestyle. According to Kierner, " At balls, participants acted out stylized forms of social intercourse in fashionable minuets, and between dances men and women conversed with one another. At formal dinners, conversation was encouraged by sitting around newly fashionable oval-shaped dining tables." Meaning that, these rituals were important, and helped out women by increasing their participation in attendance as well as intellectual conversations. According to both Byrd's diary and Kierner's findings on these social gatherings, these balls aided the transition from sociability to public hospitality.

Based on the collective information from William Byrd's diary, Byrd's daily life/routine of an elite Virginian in the early 18th century really sheds some light on this era and how the elite southern colonists thrived. William Byrd was a man like any other in his class, he was aspiring and active. William

Byrd's diary contains more than enough historical significance to Cynthia A. Kierner's findings, especially when it comes to the hospitality and social rituals in which the elite southern men and women had engaged in.