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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

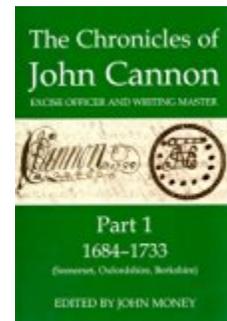
**John Cannon.** *The Chronicles of John Cannon, Excise Officer and Writing Master, Part 1: 1684-1733.* Edited by John Money. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 420 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-726454-6.

**John Money.** *The Chronicles of John Cannon, Excise Officer and Writing Master, Part 2: 1734-1743.* Edited by John Money. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 520 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-726455-3.

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## A Frustrating Life

Hitherto, John Cannon's memoirs are one of those sources known about but very little used by specialists of the eighteenth century. And who could blame them? Rich in promise they may have been—of a largely self-educated and financially precarious provincial life—but their length alone is forbidding, containing over six hundred thousand words of details and varied incidents, now and then interspersed with markedly eclectic other materials. Moreover, the physical arrangement of the memoirs is far from linear. Cannon may have hoped that his carefully crafted memoirs would be read, but what he produced was almost unreadable. Now, through the enormous efforts of John Money, the challenge is less daunting and we can all much more easily gain some sense of a varied, quarrelsome, and rather frustrated life.

Cannon was born into modest, agricultural, circumstances in Somerset in 1684. At age four, he got some schooling locally, perhaps lighting the spark of autodidacticism that was such an important feature of his life. He relished books, both to read and to buy. Indeed, his acquisitiveness put great strain on his limited resources and much of his life was caught up in webs of petty debts from which he rarely extricated himself. But his literacy and numeracy were both vital to his life's course, initially in allowing him to move from agricultural labor into the

excise service. There he worked, in Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Somerset, apparently successfully, for fourteen years, until he was dismissed, supposedly for malpractice. This was a defining moment in his life. Hitherto, it appeared to be one of achievement and recognition, both professional and personal. The commonplace challenges involved in establishing heterosexual relations had been endured and enjoyed, and in the middle of his years in the excise he had married and begun a family. In the excise, he had been on the rise. Now, in 1721 he was at a loss, soon failing as a maltster and struggling with poverty, his marriage, and his self-esteem for the rest of the decade. Eventually, he began to find niches into which he could more or less fit, often in Glastonbury and apart from his family. For the last ten or so years of his life, Cannon provided the writing and the arithmetic essential to making local society function, especially by schooling, keeping accounts (for parishes and commissioners of sewers), and drawing up petitions and wills. In those ways he became a pivotal figure, if plainly not always a well-liked one.

There is, however, another pivot to Cannon's memoirs, a practical one. In 1737, at age fifty-three, he caught up with transcribing the memoirs of his life hitherto. In this edition, those years take up a bit over half of the text, the last six years of Cannon's life the other half. That

is, there is a change in the nature of the memoirs at the point at which they were being kept more or less contemporaneously. In some measure this may reflect the complexities of juggling his various work commitments in the last years of his life. Certainly the memoirs become more richly detailed, especially in terms of how his life intersected with others. But he also began to record some events for the first time. One notable one is dreams, describing over twenty in some detail. But many other types of events also got more space: the weather, the ins and outs of local office holding, petty squabbles, and sermons. What fell off in this last phase of his life were details of his bookishness, though it is glimpsed here and there.

Detail is plentiful in these memoirs. But there is not as much besides as one might wish. Cannon did not often comment on national affairs, or even on notable local affairs. Nor did he reflect much on his own experiences, save beyond some brief ruminations on morality and religion. He did not tell us what he thought about his dreams, just that he had them. He rarely told us what he thought of his family, just what they did. In fact, he barely mentioned his wife or his feelings toward her except for the period leading up to their marriage. He wrote about the sorts of things he did as an excise officer, not what he thought about the social, cultural, economic, and political implications of the excise. Why Cannon was so unreflective is unclear, and he did not explain why he kept his memoirs, but obviously that reason will significantly affect how historians will use his memoirs. They can be mined for details, presented from a position in society rarely to be found in other records—though in fact the memoirs have very few surprises. Doubtless, some will be prepared to try to reconstruct a sense of self from this document. But the puzzling silences and barely heard whispers will limit what can reasonably be attempted. Even an issue seemingly so important to Cannon, his books, cannot be studied with any thoroughness. There are some scattered references to what he had read or owned, but the changing extent of his “library” or the nature of his reading practices are impossible to grasp with any thoroughness.

What are set out most clearly in Cannon’s memoirs are the personal contacts of his life, often within a fairly narrow geographical compass. In this way one gets a sense of the links between his life and those of others, reminding us that in a period when England and Britain were expanding, most people lived lives within counties, not between continents. The strengths of those links are difficult to assess, but it appears that Cannon rubbed an

unusual number of people the wrong way. Squabbles and antagonisms often crop up in the memoirs. Here perhaps we get some sense of him as a person. And as Money states, there is much to dislike about him, including belligerence, arrogance, and truculence. It might be guessed that those with whom he argued had the same view, that to them he had too high an opinion of himself, and was humorless and thin-skinned.

Perhaps Cannon has had a more generous editor than he deserved. Certainly Money has done an extraordinary amount of work, notably in selecting half of Cannon’s text, and calendaring the rest. Then there has been a lot of further work, from expanding numerous contractions, to chasing up relevant documents in The National Archives. Nor did Money stop there, for his 150-page introduction summarizes Cannon’s life and memoirs. He also provides not only notes, but also biographies, a glossary, and five different indexes. There is no questioning the effort and intelligence involved in all of this. But sometimes the apparatus seems to reflect Cannon’s method more than the needs of readers. Little editorial matter is provided in footnotes at the bottom of the page of text, requiring readers to turn elsewhere for help. Different indexes are provided at the end of both parts. The “topics” index is oddly done, arranged thematically not alphabetically, arranged more or less in the order in which topics are considered in the introduction. Few readers will find this approach helpful. Few will pick up these volumes expecting to read them from start to finish—or even the very long introduction. Rather they will look up particular dates, places, names, and subject. But the distinction between the indexes is not immediately apparent. Thus, a reader wanting to find references to Cannon’s description of dreams should not use the topics index, which seems their intuitive home, but the list of Cannon and his immediate family.

It will be interesting to see how historians come to use this important edition of Cannon’s memoirs, for it sheds patchy and often rather faint light on conventional topics, such as the history of the excise or the self. My abiding impression of Cannon’s representation of his life is of its particularities and silences. Those silences ultimately limit what can be done with the particularities, despite Money’s painstaking efforts. Perhaps Cannon’s memoirs will only begin to resonate if other sources related to his life and abodes can be pieced together, possibly as a piece of microcosmic history. Money has provided a wonderful starting point for historians. But, assuming the materials are there, there is still a lot to do to make historical sense of Cannon.

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