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Book Notes #130

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Happy Groundhog Day!



Today is Groundhog Day!

Since this was written a week or so ago, I have no idea if Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow to forecast six more weeks of winter, or not. Not to worry, Phil is not much of a prognosticator. According to LiveScience, Phil gets it right about 39 percent of the time; in short, Phil is less accurate than simply flipping a coin. [1]

It would seem that Phil's full name – "Punxsutawney Phil, Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators, and Weather Prophet Extraordinary"

[2] – smacks of – *ahhh* – more than a wee bit of what P.T. Barnum, who would have loved Phil and all his cousins, called that “ole time hokum.”

Trivia Alert: Where did Punxsutawney Phil get his name?

British Royal Family and Netflix’s *The Crown* devotees will be delighted (or maybe dismayed) to learn that Phil might be named after Queen Elizabeth II’s husband Prince Philip. The urban legend, which has enough plausibility to it to make it *maybe* true, goes like this:

In 1953, to honor the recently crowned Queen, “Punxsutawney sent two baby groundhogs to Los Angeles’s Griffith Park Zoo. The critters had been named after Britain’s new reigning couple. ...” [3]

The zoo welcomed them, but California’s Department of Agriculture considered them “pests” and had them destroyed. The folks in Punxsutawney were insulted. They brought the dead critters back to Pennsylvania for a proper burial.

In 1961, eight years later, the name “Punxsutawney Phil” first appeared in newspapers. Prior to that he had been known as “Br’er Groundhog” or “The Punxsutawney Groundhog.” [4]

Accurate? No other explanation has been offered; it does make a cute story.

Where did this custom of a rodent predicting Winter’s end begin? As you’ll see, answering that question involves moving back and forth from the profound – dates and calendars and religious rituals – to the whimsical – groundhogs and woollybear caterpillars, civic boosters touting their hometown, doggerel poetry, and even roast groundhog!

Trivia Alert #2: Technically, a groundhog is a woodchuck, as in the old rhyme “How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood.”

The seer of Gobbler’s Knob’s origin only dates to 1886, but the custom of trying to predict spring’s beginning on February 2 has deep roots in ancient European folk customs. As we have seen in previous *Book Notes* about other holidays’ sources, Groundhog Day also evolved from, first, calendar confusion around predicting the solstices and the equinoxes and, second, the early Christian missionary strategy of intertwining Christian and pagan rituals.

But why February 2?

The answer to that takes us into the snarl of coordinating at least five calendars seeking to accurately predict the solstices and equinoxes, in particular the spring equinox and the beginning of the new year's planting season. [5] Added to the challenge was the simultaneous need to synchronize those calendars with newly evolving Christian feast days and days of religious observance.

To understand how February 2 became Groundhog Day, we need to glance at the ancient Celtic calendar, the Roman Julian calendar, and the Christian liturgical calendar. In ancient agricultural societies, the first two were concerned with accurately predicting the changing seasons. The Christian liturgical calendar sought to coordinate its feast days with those mentioned in scripture according to the ancient Hebrew calendar while at the same time subsuming pagan customs into Christian ritual.

Among the Christian church's oldest feast days are the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ and the Purification of Mary. The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple is based upon Luke 2:22-40. Every newborn male Hebrew child was to be purified eight days after birth through the ritual of circumcision. After he had been purified, he was then to be presented at the temple in Jerusalem to the Lord. As Luke says, "Then, after the purification had been completed in accordance with the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord..." [6]

Although Luke omits it, as mandated in Leviticus 12, a Hebrew woman who had given birth was to be purified by bringing an offering to the temple 33 days after a boy's circumcision. [7] Centuries later this became recognized as the Purification of Mary. Celebrated on February 2, the combined feast day became known as Candlemas – a celebration of light. Candlemas' origins can be traced back as far as the fourth century in Greece as both a purification holiday and a holiday celebrating light's return after winter's darkness. [8] On Candlemas Christians bring their candles to the church to be blessed as a celebration of Jesus Christ who brought hope and light to the world. [9]

Why February 2?

Some simple arithmetic is in order. You'll recall from the *Book Notes* series on Christmas, in the absence of any scriptural date, the early church established the date of Christ's birth as December 25. If one adds the eight days from birth to circumcision to the 33 days from circumcision until the woman must present herself at the temple to be purified before resuming marital relations with her husband, you get 41 days. Allowing for an overlap on that eighth day, you get 40 days, and 40 days after December 25 is February 2. It marks the end of the Christmas/Epiphany season.

Thus, the two feast days are celebrated on February 2 as Candlemas – a celebration of light and purity.

But it's more complicated. February 2 is also the exact mid-point between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox. For the Romans and other ancient pagan cultures, it had immense importance for gauging the changing of the seasons.

Since the Roman lunar calendar had gotten out of sync with the moon's cycles and could no longer accurately predict the seasons, Julius Caesar's revision, the Julian calendar, placed the winter solstice on December 25 and the vernal equinox on March 25. The Romans believed the seasons actually began six weeks before the equinox or solstice, so February 2, for them, signaled the start of the spring season. Being able to predict the weather on February 2 was critical to determining when planting could begin.

This was also true in many pagan cultures. As the early Christian church spread northward in Europe, it adopted the missionary strategy of assimilating pagan customs and ritual into the celebration of Christian feast days. [10] Nowhere was this more important than in the conversion of the ancient Celts. Although primarily associated with Ireland and Scotland, with their origins in central Europe the Celts were the largest group in ancient Europe. Their cultural importance cannot be overstated, in particular their sense of time and the calendar they developed to express it. As Don Yoder says in his book ***Groundhog Day***, "The Celtic culture had a profound influence on the calendar of Europe, and through migration ... the European colonies of America." [11]

Their celebrations of it with fire as the sign of the lifegiving sun still echo in Americans' sense of seasonal time. The Celts divided the year into four periods or turning points. November 1 was the Celtic New Year celebrated as Samhain and the beginning of the dark season; Christians converted it into All Souls Day, and its eve became Halloween. February 1-2 was the celebration of Imbolc marking the halfway point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox and the return of the sun; it became Candlemas and Groundhog Day.

May 1 was Beltaine celebrating spring, fertility, and new life; it became May Day celebrating the Virgin Mary and later the secular May Day spring festival with a maypole and a May Queen. Lastly, August 1 was Lughnasa celebrating the beginning of the harvest season. In Britain it became Loaf Mass Day or Lammas when farmers' wives brought the first loaves of bread baked from the new harvest's grain to church to be blessed. [12] Although no longer explicitly celebrated in America, its local echoes can be felt in such traditions as September's North East, Pennsylvania's wine festival and other autumnal pumpkin farm festivities.

If one thinks about it just a bit, one realizes that to this day, despite the blurring effect of more contemporary holidays' inclusion, the Celtic sense of time defines how we experience the changing of the seasons. For the ancients, however, it was a matter of life and death. In an agricultural society being able to predict the return of the sun and begin spring planting was one of life's essential mysteries. For the Celts, that centered around the February holiday of Imbolc. Imbolc celebrated Brigid, the goddess of fertility. Christians converted her to St. Bridget, one of the three patron saints of Ireland.

So, Imbolc connects to Groundhog Day through the Christian absorption of this ancient Celtic spring ritual into Candlemas as missionaries converted first Britain, then Ireland, and, finally, Scotland.

Trivia Alert #3: Who are the patron saints of Ireland?

Since there supposedly only three, should be easy to answer. But there are a lot of Irish saints.

The three most important are St. Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland, St. Bridget of Kildare among whose talents was the not inconsequential ability to turn water into beer, and St. Columba, who in addition to solidifying Christianity in Ireland also converted the Scots.

Brigid and her holiday's ancient roots, however, reach back deep into prehistory. Some speculate they are connected to the breeding cycle of sheep and the beginning of lactation, which necessitated purification rituals. For the ancients, purification came through fire. The most powerful of the Celtic gods, Brigid, was said to have been born with a flame in her head drinking the milk of a sacred cow. She was celebrated by burning lamps and lighting bonfires. [13]

Bonfires are an ancient Celtic and Nordic symbol of the sun and the life force. Whether the local boosters understand its ancient pedigree, in Punxsutawney in the pre-dawn hours before Phil's appearance, to the side of the stage "a huge brush and log fire" burns warming and illuminating the night. The fire reminded one observer of the ancients Celts' "great festal fires lighted on the hills" to symbolize the sun bringing light back to the world. [14]

So, February 2 celebrates purity, life, and light. In fact, the word February means to purify. [15] In the Christian tradition, Candlemas merges two Christian feast days, one celebrating Jesus Christ as the Light of the World and the other the purification of the Virgin Mary. In the pagan world, specifically the ancient Celtic world, it marks the feast of Imbolc celebrating life's renewal and purification at the sun's returning after winter's darkness. The modern understanding of Candlemas and its folk culture cousin Groundhog Day fuses all three.

But where does the *Groundhog* come in?

During the Middle Ages, in both the British Isles and Germanic Europe, a number of folk legends accumulated around Candlemas. In particular, given the existential importance of understanding when spring planting could begin, these folk legends centered on predicting the weather. As a result, the tradition – superstition – belief – arose that if the sun shone and the weather was fair on Candlemas, there would be an additional six weeks of winter.

Why?

No one knows, but it probably was a folk custom that grew out of trying to understand the weather's wild variability between Candlemas and the spring equinox, which is almost exactly six weeks later. Remember, if Phil sees his shadow, that means six more weeks of winter. As Robert Chambers says in his 1863 *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar*: "Considering the importance attached to Candlemass day for so many ages it is scarcely surprising that there is a universal superstition throughout Christendom, that good weather on this day indicates a long continuation of winter and a bad crop, and that its being foul is, on the contrary, a good omen." [16]

But, still what about the groundhog?

Where did he come from?

In the ancient, pre-literate world, while embracing Christianity people still maintained some of their ancient beliefs and customs. In Germanic culture, which also has Celtic roots, there was a saying that "A dark Candlemas brings plentiful food on the table, a bright Candlemas brings want." [17] More to the point, in Germanic culture there was the of custom of celebrating Candlemas as *Dachstag* – Badger Day. Sometimes it could be a bear or a fox. Most frequently, however, it was a badger. If the badger emerged from his den on Candlemas and saw his shadow, "he crawled back into his hole to stay for four more weeks..." [18]

When the earliest German settlers came to Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Dutch, they brought their Candlemas tradition of *Dachstag* with them. Except that in Pennsylvania badgers are comparatively rare, but woodchucks are common. So, being early American pragmatists, they adopted the woodchuck.

When did this begin?

No one knows exactly. Mentions of Groundhog Day begin to be common in the early 19th century. There are several Groundhog Day celebrations in

Pennsylvania Dutch country – southeastern Pennsylvania. But the definitive version of Groundhog Day is a western Pennsylvania creation. It began in 1886 in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

Trivia Alert #4: What does ‘Punxsutawney’ mean?

It has several Native American derivations, but they all have in common a distaste for the gnats and mosquitos or sand-flies that plagued the area, its people, and their animals. In the Lenape language, *punkwsutenay* means “town of the sandflies” or “town of the mosquitoes.” [19]

The first reported Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney was in 1886, but it really took off after 1887 and the first Groundhog Picnic at which the main course was roast groundhog and groundhog stew. [20] The earliest members of the Groundhog Club were more interested in feasting on Phil’s ancestors than worrying about the weather.

It was the promotional ardor of Clymer Freas, city editor of the Punxsutawney *Spirit*, who made Groundhog Day first a regional, then a state, and then a national phenomenon. Freas, who northwest Pennsylvania readers will be interested to know attended PennWest Edinboro when it was known as the Edinboro Normal School, gave Punxsutawney its name as “Weather Capital,” made it known as the “home” of the Groundhog, chose Gobbler’s Knob as the site of Phil’s prognostications, and even with creating a language known as “Groundhogese.” [21]

Throughout the 20th century Phil’s fame spread, from newspaper accounts tracking his predictions, to a radio production in a 1928 broadcast by Pittsburgh’s KDKA, to 1940s first Groundhog Queen, to a Today Show appearance with Dave Garroway in 1952 on NBC, to 1958’s “Chucknik” spacecraft preparing to blast-off into space, to a second Today Show appearance in 1962, to a 1986 state visit to President Reagan at the White House, to 1987 and his 100th anniversary, to 1993’s Bill Murray comic film ***Groundhog Day*** securing Phil’s place in American popular culture, to 2000 when he saw his shadow at 7:28AM and “announced the dawn of a new Phillenium,” and to 2001 when Phil accompanied Erie’s own Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge to New York City and Times Square on Groundhog Day. [22]

From a badger in the primeval German forests to Hollywood and now social media celebrity, (Phil has his own [Facebook page](#)), Punxsutawney’s lovable rodent is an A-List celebrity!

But he is not the only one.

Phil has competition.



From left: Shubenacadie Sam, Staten Island Chuck, home of General Beauregard Lee, Weirton Willie, and the WoollyBear Festival.

In Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, resides Shubenacadie Sam, who, because Nova Scotia lies further east, is the first to predict the weather on February 2. The Staten Island Zoo sports Staten Island Chuck, who in 2009 gained notoriety by biting New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. General Beauregard Lee lives a life of luxury in a faux southern plantation mansion in Atlanta, Georgia. The University of Dallas sports the groundhog as its school mascot.

Since the early 1970s, Marion, Ohio's Buckeye Chuck has been forecasting the weather on February 2. In 1979, the Ohio General Assembly made Chuck the state's official groundhog. Not to be out done, Canada has Wiarton Willie in Wiarton, Ontario. Wiarton Willie's fame rests on his claim to be the only albino groundhog. Concocted by longtime Cleveland-area weatherman Dick Goddard, since 1973 around October 1 Vermilion, Ohio has an annual Woollybear Festival. The folk legend asserts that more and darker black rings on an orange woollybear caterpillar portend winter will be harsh.

Although Punxsutawney Phil's and his competitive cousins' fame continues to grow, it seems badgers, woodchucks, and groundhogs have left the poets uninspired. The most famous poem about a groundhog is Richard Eberhardt's "The Groundhog," which is a meditation upon death and life's decay. Talk about dark weather and seeing your shadow! It begins:

from The Groundhog

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty. [23]

So, let's end with some Groundhog Day doggerel.

*from I Heard the Word from Gobbler's Knob
To the tune of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"*

I heard the word from Gobbler's Knob,
The call came loud and clear.
How spring would soon spread its joyful warmth,
'Cause no shadow did appear! [24]

Or, not from Punxsutawney but from Quarryville, Pennsylvania which has its own groundhog tradition, comes “February Second” sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body”:

from February Second

Let the scientific fakirs gnash their teeth and stomp with rage –
Let astrologers with crystals wipe such nonsense from the page –
We hail the King of Prophets, who’s the world’s outstanding Sage –
Today the Groundhog comes!

Chorus

Glory! Glory! to the Groundhog,
Glory! Glory! to the Groundhog,
Glory! Glory! to the Groundhog,
Today the Prophet comes! [25]

I’m not sure what Brigid, she of flames shooting from her head, would say about that, but it might be exciting to learn.

Happy Groundhog Day!



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End Notes

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