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Classic Book Notes #36

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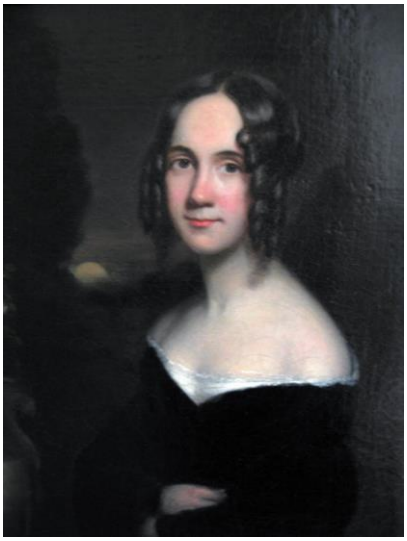
Be Grateful for Hale, Child, too

Editor's note: Happy Thanksgiving, Jefferson readers! Following is a classic Thanksgiving book note from Dr. Andrew Roth. It was first published by the Jefferson in November 2020.



Sarah Josepha Hale

What could be controversial about Thanksgiving Day?

How about this – Americans celebrate Thanksgiving Day not because of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag feasting – at least according to legend – at Plymouth in 1621, but because of two 19th century American women of whom I am all but certain you have never heard. Who is the *"Mother of Thanksgiving"*?

Who wrote *"Over the river, and through the wood,/To grandfather's house we go"*?

Well, regarding "controversial," in 2020, as we have learned, just about anything can elicit multiple opinions. Splitting along political lines, wearing masks to protect one's neighbors and oneself from a raging pandemic is either an infringement upon personal liberty or an expression of social solidarity.

Thanksgiving Day can also elicit varied reactions. Most people enjoy it as a communal taking-pause to reflect upon one's good fortune, to overindulge eating beyond one's fill and then, in a tryptophan-induced torpor, to nod off glaze-eyed watching football awaiting the next act of excess – Black Friday's kick-off to the Christmas shopping spree – only to discover that it began online in October or was it September?

Others, however, have taken to quibbling about that first Thanksgiving. Was it the traditional Pilgrim date in November 1621 or did it occur earlier? For example, with an eye for the trivial, some scholars note that, in 1565, a Spanish explorer invited members of a local tribe to a dinner in St. Augustine, Florida to thank God for his crew's safe arrival, while others point to December 4, 1619 when British settlers along Virginia's James River issued "a proclamation

designating the date as 'a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.'" For some Native Americans, it is not a day of thanks at all, but a "National Day of Mourning" celebrated at different locales across the country and, since 1970, at Cole's Hill overlooking Plymouth Rock. [1]

Still others – perhaps yourself – wonder why some years it seems to come sooner and other years later. That is a byproduct of the vagaries of the calendar, but ever since 1941 it has been celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November.

Why?

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln responded to Sarah Josepha Hale's 36-year campaign to establish Thanksgiving as a national holiday by issuing a proclamation asking all Americans to thank God "for his tender care" and scheduling the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving. It remained that way until 1939 when President Franklin Roosevelt moved it back to the third Thursday in November to add an additional week of Christmas shopping. He met such passionate resistance to the change that, in 1941, he "reluctantly signed a bill making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday in November." [2]

Sarah Josepha Hale is the "Mother of Thanksgiving." On September 28, 1863, she wrote a letter to President Lincoln asking him to have "the day of our annual Thanksgiving made a National and a fixed Union Festival." [3]

Lincoln did.

So, who was Sarah Josepha Hale?

Born in 1788, the daughter of a Revolutionary War veteran, her parents believed in equal education for both genders. She became a schoolteacher. After the death of her husband, David Hale, in 1822, she made two decisions. One, she wore black for the rest of her life as a sign of perpetual mourning and, two, to support herself she became a writer. Her 1827 novel ***Northwood: Life North and South*** was one of the first written about slavery. Not yet an abolitionist, she supported the colonization movement to relocate slaves to Liberia and elsewhere.

Her success as a novelist led to a position as "editress" of the *Ladies' Magazine*. In 1837, she became editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most influential women's magazine of the mid- to late-19th century. Hale was considered the most important arbiter of American taste for middle-class women in matters of fashion, cooking, literature, and morality. [4] In a sense, she was the Martha Stewart of mid-19th century America.

More importantly, she strongly advocated for the 19th century notion of *Home* as the foundation of American life and woman's role as the cornerstone upon which *Home* rested. Think of Currier and Ives prints and other examples of

19th century sentimentalism idealizing home and hearth. While an advocate for women's rights, Hale believed that women were "the true conservators of peace and goodwill." She did not support women's suffrage. She believed in women's "secret, silent influence" upon male voters. [5]

Contradictorily, Hale was a founder of Vassar College and a powerful advocate for women's education. She wanted to open the professions to women. She was an adamant opponent of slavery. She worked to preserve George Washington's estate at Mount Vernon and raised funds for the construction of the Bunker Hill Monument. And, of course, she advocated for 36 years for Thanksgiving as a national holiday before finally prevailing upon President Lincoln in the year of the pivotal Civil War Battle of Gettysburg (1863). [6]

Her most famous composition, at least in the sense that it is still read, was a poem she published in her 1830 collection ***Poems for Our Children*** – *"Mary Had a Little Lamb,"* originally titled *"Mary's Lamb":*

Mary Had a Little Lamb

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day,
Which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play
To see a lamb at school.

And so the teacher turned it out,
But still it lingered near,
And waited patiently about
Till Mary did appear.

Why does the lamb love Mary so?
The eager children cry;
Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know,
The teacher did reply. [7]

Who wrote "Over the river, and through the wood,/To grandfather's house we go"?

Published in 1844 as *"The New-England Boy's Song about Thanksgiving Day,"* it was written by Lydia Maria Child for inclusion in her book ***Flowers for Children***. She wrote it celebrating her "childhood memories of visiting her grandparents." Although sometimes sung as through the woods and going to

grandmother's house, it was originally written going to grandfather's house. The composer who set it to music is unknown. [8] Known variously as *"The New-England Boy's Song"* or its first line – "Over the river...," its title is now simply listed as *Thanksgiving Day*. Here it is in its entirety:

Thanksgiving Day

Over the river, and through the wood,
To grandfather's house we go;
The horse knows the way
To carry the sleigh
Through the white and drifted snow.

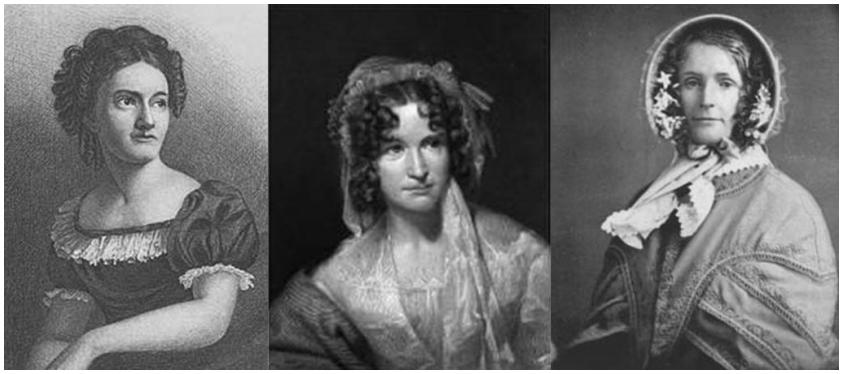
Over the river, and through the wood—
Oh, how the wind does blow!
It stings the toes
And bites the nose
As over the ground we go.

Over the river, and through the wood,
To have a first-rate play.
Hear the bells ring
"Ting-a-ling-ding,"
Hurrah for Thanksgiving Day!

Over the river, and through the wood
Trot fast, my dapple-gray!
Spring over the ground,
Like a hunting-hound!
For this is Thanksgiving Day.

Over the river, and through the wood,
And straight through the barn-yard gate.
We seem to go
Extremely slow,
It is so hard to wait!

Over the river and through the wood
Now grandmother's cap I spy!
Hurrah for the fun!
Is the pudding done?
Hurrah for the pumpkin pie! [9]



Lydia Maria Child

So, who was Lydia Maria Child? Well, she was no shrinking violet and, I suspect, she was someone who irritated Sarah Josepha Hale. Although she had started to write before she married and her husband did not die, his inability to earn a sustained income drove Child to follow Samuel Johnson's famous dictum – "No one but a blockhead ever wrote for anything but money." Child became one of the most successful American writers of the 19th century.

She was also an abolitionist, a women's rights activist, a Native American rights activist, novelist, journalist, and opponent of American expansionism. Speaking openly and critically of issues like male dominance and white supremacy, she unsettled her audiences and sparked backlash. She opposed the Mexican War and "manifest destiny" as inevitably leading to civil war over slavery's expansion.

She was right.

Like Hale, she became famous for helping women learn to manage their homes. Her ***The American Frugal Housewife*** went through 33 printings in 25 years. Containing mostly recipes, Child said her book was "written for the poor" and advised young homemakers to "begin humbly." [10] The most comprehensive cookbook of its day, it can be still be found here. Eventually, Child's politics worked against her and sales of ***The American Frugal Housewife*** declined.

Beginning with her novel ***Hobomuk*****,** Child challenged the conventions of her time. Set in 17th century Puritan Massachusetts, its main character, Mary Conant, is forbidden by her father to marry her Episcopalian lover. She rebels and marries a native Pequod – one of the first interracial marriages in American literature. The book was not a success for its championing miscegenation caused a scandal. She also wrote a historical novel about the Boston Tea Party. [11]

In 1831, Child became an active supporter of William Lloyd Garrison and the anti-slavery cause. She saw the cause of African Americans and women intertwined. She believed both were suppressed by white men. Although a women's rights activist, she thought the anti-slavery cause needed to take precedence. In

1833, she published ***An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans***, which argued for the immediate emancipation of slaves. She became a major figure in the abolitionist movement and was elected to the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society and editor of its newspaper, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. [12] A founding member of the "Massachusetts Women's Suffrage Association," Child also wrote ***The History of the Conditions of Women in Various Ages and Nations***. [13] Working with Lucretia Mott and others, she inspired future generations of women's advocates.

So, as you nosh your Thanksgiving feast, hopefully, even in this year of pandemic, recall, if nothing else, that it could always be worse but be thankful for what you have. As you do, remember that the American holiday of Thanksgiving owes a debt to two 19th century women. One, balancing her own contradictions, was the apostle of conventionality who began to weaken conventionality's bonds by the example of her own success. The other, right from the beginning, rejected conventionality as she fought injustice wherever she saw it, whether in supporting Native Americans or opposing the horror of slavery or seeking equality for women.

As you ponder what to be thankful for, add to your list a note of thanks to Sarah Josepha Hale and Lydia Maria Child.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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Lydia Maria Child: Here
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End Notes

1. *"Thanksgiving 2020,"* **History.com** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
2. Ibid.

3. Hale, Sarah Josepha, *"Letter to President Abraham Lincoln September 28, 1863,"* **Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
4. *"Sarah Josepha Hale,"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
5. Ibid.
6. *"Sarah Josepha Hale,"* **National Women's History Museum** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
7. Hale, Sarah Josepha, *"Mary Had a Little Lamb,"* at **Poetry Foundation** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
8. *"Over the River and Through the Wood with Lydia Maria Child",* in **Recollections** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
9. Child, Lydia Maria, *"Thanksgiving Day"* at **Poets.org** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
10. *"Lydia Maria Child,"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
11. *"Over the River and Through the Wood with Lydia Maria Child,"* in **Recollections** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
12. *"Lydia Maria Child,"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.
13. *"Lydia Maria Child,"* **National Women's Hall of Fame** available at here accessed November 16, 2020.

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