

## Book Notes:

### *Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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## Reflections on a New Year, Worry, and Great Poetry

### American Holidays: From Candlemas And Punxsutawney Phil To Presidents Day And Valentine's Day

Join Jefferson Educational Society Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth for the first installment of his new series *American Holidays*. An extension of his *The American Tapestry Project*, in *American Holidays* Roth explores how Americans tell their story through the people, places, and things they celebrate.

In February, he'll ask – and hopefully answer – what is Candlemas, who are Buckeye Chuck and Punxsutawney Phil, what is Presidents Day, whatever happened to Washington's birthday, and what did Esther Howland and Joyce Hall have to do with 'won't you be my Valentine'?

*American Holidays* – their history and origins – a window into the American story examining America's most favored celebrations. Future episodes will explore how Americans celebrate freedom, ethnic holidays, state holidays and other curiosities, Sporting-Days, Thanksgiving and Christmas. *The American Tapestry*, the American Story seen through the window of those things Americans celebrate!

This event will be broadcast digitally on the Jefferson's [Facebook page](#) and made available on our [website](#).

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'The only thing I knew how to do  
Was to keep on keeping on ...'

-- Bob Dylan  
*Tangled Up in Blue*

A scant week into the new year, in these politics-soaked days, I grow increasingly less interested in the bloviations of politicians and pundits. The pretentious prattling of pop culture icons and wannabes grows more and more annoying.

In times like these, trying “to keep on keeping on,” I turn to poetry.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s rhetorical question notwithstanding, (“What can be said in New Year rhymes, That’s not been said a thousand times?” [1]), the sliding of one year into the next inspires us to nostalgic nattering about *auld lang syne* while trying to discern in the yule log’s glow the shape of the future.

Which phrase, by the way, was coined by communications and political theorist Harold Lasswell in 1965 as he tried to determine *the shape of the future* by applying *McLuhanesque* content analysis to the utterings of politicians, pundits, and pop culture stars. [2]

Awaiting the Inauguration – one eye on the Lear-like figure (or is it Captain Queeg-like?) in the White House surrounded by his *fools* (none cunning enough like Lear’s to give honest advice) – I hope our incoming President-elect is aware enough to share Walt Whitman’s vision:

#### For You O Democracy

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along  
the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,  
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,  
By the love of comrades,  
By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!  
For you, for you I am trilling these songs. [3]

With echoes of old Walt trilling his songs to democracy and our democratic (small “d”) future echoing, I ask what have the poets had to say about bidding one-year adieu and welcoming a new?

As it turns out, quite a bit.

Many like Robert Burns in “*Auld Lang Syne*” will “... tak a cup o’ kindness yet,/For auld lang syne” vowing to remember both the times long ago and those with whom they were shared. Although I suspect few will rue 2020’s passing, like Alfred, Lord Tennyson in “The Death of the Old Year,” many will recall with regret some other, better year’s departure:

*from* The Death of the Old Year (1842)

Old year you must not die;  
You came to us so readily,  
You lived with us so steadily,  
Old year you shall not die. [4]

But thinking of 2020's demise, I suspect many will agree with Thomas Hardy's 1906 "*New Year's Eve's*" mordant agnosticism as the poet chides God for finishing another year mixed more with pain than joy."

from New Year's Eve (1906)

"And what's the good of it?" I said,  
"What reasons made you call  
From formless void this earth we tread,  
When nine-and-ninety can be read  
Why nought should be at all?" [5]

Along with Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope, Hardy was one of the late-Victorian master novelists. In works such as *Jude the Obscure*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, all set in his mythical Wessex county in the southwest of England, Hardy criticized Victorian social conventions' frustrating impact on people's lives, which through marriage laws, lack of education, and religious intolerance suffocated their pneuma, their spirit seeking to breathe free. To free that primal energy, if only metaphorically, Hardy went back beyond Christian England to its ancient Saxon and Celtic origins to liberate what Dylan Thomas would later call the "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. ..."

In a *Book Notes* on "*Auld Lang Syne*," I mentioned the ancient pre-Christian tradition of torchlight parades, ringing of bells, and lighting of bonfires to celebrate the arrival of a New Year. Celebrating the winter solstice, breaking the mid-winter gloom, the bonfires venerate the sun – the source of primal energy, the source of life. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy evokes one of the most powerful images in English literature of that custom. As she stands silhouetted against a raging bonfire atop a Wessex hill in the dark night of an expiring year, the doomed Eustacia Vye exudes the life force's erotic energy – "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. ..."

Hardy wrote poetry all of his life, but at the turn of the 20th century he gave up writing novels to write poetry full time. He wrote several poems explicitly about the arrival of a new year: "New Year's Eve" (1906), "The Darkling Thrush," and "A New Year's Eve in War Time" (1915-1916). Its edgy uncertainty also true in a time of pandemic, in the latter he ominously writes:

from A New Year's Eve in War Time

The twelfth hour nears  
Hand-hid, as in shame;  
I undo the lock,  
And listen, and wait  
For the Young Unknown. [6]

But amid the gloom, Hardy looked to the future with a note of hope, as in:

from The Darkling Thrush

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware. [7]

Looking for hope, a recurring theme in New Year's poetry, has not often been said better than by Charles Bukowski in:

### The Laughing Heart

your life is your life  
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.  
be on the watch.  
there are ways out.  
there is light somewhere.  
it may not be much light but  
it beats the darkness.  
be on the watch.  
the gods will offer you chances.  
know them.  
take them.  
you can't beat death but  
you can beat death in life, sometimes.  
and the more often you learn to do it,  
the more light there will be.  
your life is your life.  
know it while you have it.  
you are marvelous  
the gods wait to delight  
in you. [8]

Other than that they both wrote in English, Charles Bukowski could not be more different than Thomas Hardy. Born in Germany, Bukowski spent most of his life in Los Angeles. Neither a beatnik nor a hippie, transcending both, Bukowski was the ultimate bohemian. For a flavor of his life, see the Mickey O'Rourke, Faye Dunaway film *Barfly*, a taste of which can be seen [here](#). Bukowski does a cameo in this clip. He is at the bar and watches as O'Rourke moves to chat up Dunaway.

Bukowski wrote thousands of poems and battled alcoholism to a draw, dying at 73 in 1994. Like Faulkner, who famously quipped he became a writer in order to "... quit the post office because I was sick and tired of being at the beck and call of every son-of-a-bitch with three cents for a stamp," Bukowski worked in the post office until at age 49 in 1969 he escaped to a life of writing. As he said in a letter, "I had one of two choices – stay in the post office and go crazy ... or stay out here and play at writer and starve. I ... decided to starve." [9]

Mingling Hardy's fire and eros with "*Bukowskian*" explicitness, in "*New Year's Eve*" D.H. Lawrence channels his inner Eustacia Vye:

### New Year's Eve

There are only two things now,  
The great black night scooped out  
And this fireglow.

This fireglow, the core,  
And we the two ripe pips  
That are held in store.

Listen, the darkness rings  
As it circulates round our fire.  
Take off your things.

Your shoulders, your bruised throat!  
You breasts, your nakedness!  
This fiery coat!

As the darkness flickers and dips,  
As the firelight falls and leaps  
From your feet to your lips! [10]

In its companion piece, "*New Year's Night*," Lawrence goes full *Lawrentian*, offering himself and his lover as an orgasmic sacrifice on the altar of love. It can be found here.

What did Shakespeare have to say about the New Year? Less than you might think; he only once explicitly mentioned celebrating it in his plays – in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. [11] Why? Because in Elizabethan England the Gregorian calendar had not yet been adopted. The year changed after Lady Day on March 25. Lady Day is the traditional name in English-speaking countries for the Feast of the Annunciation of Mary. In Shakespeare's time, New Year's Day, January 1, was simply the eighth day of Christmas. His romantic comedy *Twelfth Night*, although written as entertainment to close the Christmas season, celebrates neither Christmas nor New Year's. It captures perfectly, however, the spirit of the season as celebrated in Elizabethan times with its musical interludes, mistaken identities, and boisterous turmoil upending the social order.

The Bard did have some advice for those of you chiding yourself for not keeping your New Year's resolutions. He offers consolation from Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. "In the meantime, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me." [12]

If there is a continuing theme in New Year's poetry it is the oscillation back and forth between a nostalgic yearning for *auld lang syne*— times gone by — and a hope for a better future mingled with a dash of unease about the shape that future might take. Not many will think of 2020 as John Clare did:

from The Old Year

The Old Year's gone away  
To nothingness and night;  
We cannot find him all the day  
Nor hear him in the night:  
He left no footstep, mark or place  
In either shade or sun:  
The last year he'd a neighbour's face,  
In this he's known to none. [13]

Regarding 2020, most would agree with WCLV, Cleveland's fine arts radio station's "Good Riddance to a Bad Year in Haiku Form" contest submission "Stink, stank, stunk," which isn't much of a haiku, but you get the point. [14] Folks probably also find the **Wall Street Journal's** suggestion to burn your planner (date book) a good idea. [15] Or they share the spirit of Captain Morgan rum's recasting of "Twas the night before Christmas" which begins "'Twas the end of 2020, we're locked in the house, mandatory quarantine has stuck us with our spouse" and ends "Good riddance, 2020, there's more fun to be had – next year!" [16]

Well, next year is here. How did you "ring it in"?

Ring in the New Year is an ancient custom, but no one captured its ambivalence, its wavering between good riddance, or if not good riddance, a firm begone and be done with the old while welcoming the new with hope for a better future than did Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his "*Ring out, wild bells.*" From his *In Memoriam*, "*Ring out, wild bells*" is the 106th canto of Tennyson's 133 canto poem mourning the sudden death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, who died at 22 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

I suspect many will agree with Tennyson that the only thing to do with 2020 was to "let him die" and in doing so to "ring out the false" and "Ring out the feud of rich and poor/Ring in redress to all mankind." Who in our fractious times cannot join with Tennyson in wishing to ring out "ancient forms of party strife," "false pride," and "civic slander" and to "Ring in the valiant man and free,/The larger heart, the kindlier hand":

Ring out, wild bells

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind  
For those that here we see no more;  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,  
The faithless coldness of the times;  
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,  
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be. [17]

In many ways, Tennyson is preaching. Preaching can, for some, be vexing.

So, in this first full week of 2021, as we try “to keep on keeping on,” as we “worriedly” await the playing out of the political game, as we await the inauguration of a new era and before we return in future *Book Notes* to “worrying” about politics, history, the search for our common story and the center binding us together as a people, let us end these New Year’s thoughts with the quiet wisdom of Mary Oliver, who mastered the art of “keeping on.”

### I Worried

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the Earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not, how shall  
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang. [18]



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## In Case You Missed It

[‘Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot, And Auld Lang Syne!’](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[How Ozzie and Harriet Became My Academic Advisers](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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