

3 January 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

My step-grandmother came from the village of Abernethy, near Perth in Scotland. I remember her every New Year's Day because her birthday fell on that day. From her I learned the bit of 'folklore' that says horses, too, add another year to their age on New Year's Day.

Holy Hogmanay, Batman!

The Scots are big on belittling things (including themselves – so, *that's* to their credit, as they're quick to point out). After the Reformation, the Scottish Nation belittled Christmas rather harshly. They could be rude about it too; or rather, as they would say, they were 'plain spoken' about it, not circling around the point, as the English do, but landing directly upon it with a loud thwack. "Doun wi' Yule an' aw thy Papal abominations an' Pisky ways!"

In 1640, the Scottish Parliament proclaimed a new law: "The Kirk within this Kingdom is now purged of all Superstitious Observation of Days, Yule, and all Observation thereof." Christmas did not regain its standing as a *legal* public holiday in Scotland until 1958. To this day, Scottish Presbyterianism sports a scowl at festivity, frivolity, and foolishly frolicking fun – *if* this fun is in any way tied to the Kirk and its Religion. Do the Scots take to Covid Lockdowns with a grim and knowing satisfaction, I wonder?

Maybe it's no accident that the definitive Scrooge was played by a gifted Scottish actor, Alastair Sim. Remember Cratchit petitioning him for a 'day off' at Christmas? "'A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!' said Scrooge, buttoning his great coat to the chin. 'If you *must* have the whole day, be here all the earlier the next morning!'"

Alastair Sim had a 'day job' too. He admonished would-be Presbyterian Ministers to get the marbles out of their mouths. New College, at Edinburgh University, employed him to tutor its Divinity Students in elocution. Perhaps he did it by making them enunciate "Bah Humbug!" as severely as a Calvinist giving the 'Call to Worship'.

And yet, repress one kind of fun and you'll only provoke another. When 'cap guns' were banned in the Lord-of-the-Flies playground of my antediluvian school, the boys brandished 'stick guns' instead. (Was our Principal a Scotsman?

Something tells me he may have been.) In similar fashion, Yuletide fun, repressed every Christmas, returned with a vengeance every New Year's Eve in Scotland. 'Hogmanay' they call it. It's rowdy and rollicking.

The Scottish comedian, 'Rikki' Fulton, used to play The Reverend I.M. Jolly, a despondent Presbyterian Minister on a T.V. comedy show called 'Scotch and Wry'. Every New Year's Eve, he'd pretend he was giving one of those 'Thought for the Day' segments before the evening 'sign off', the way the more popular clergy used to do. In the one I remember best, he's slumped in an overstuffed armchair stationed by an ailing house plant, dressed in the dour, dark clothing and white clerical collar that signify his profession. Some insipid music plays and then the lights come up. He stares bleakly into the camera, heaves a heavy sigh, and mumbles, "Well. That's another year gone..."

This is Scottish for 'fun'. For the Scots are big on 'the making of fun', beginning with the fun they make on themselves. Their wry sense of fun appears in many Hogmanay traditions, too, like 'first-footing', a 'wee dram' (or maybe not so 'wee'), and a rousing rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne' while holding each other's hands with arms crossed, which is about as close to a hug as they're liable to get. These traditions made their way to Canada too. They were packed into steamer trunks, along with oatmeal and tartan cloth and a penchant for belittling things, by boat loads of Scots who came to these shores to live.

They're fixtures in my memory too. For I must needs confess, Gentle Reader, that my ancestors, on both sides, and all the sides before those, all came from Scotland. Pray for me.

New Year Hopes

Do people still hang a new wall calendar on New Year's Day? The picture that accompanies each new month waits its turn to be seen with the passage of time. Those blank boxes marking the days, weeks, and months are yet unspoiled and clean. They await their marking-up with doctors' appointments, birthdays, anniversaries, meetings, parties, and vacation days. They wait to be *lived out*.

My inner cynic suspects that, like The Reverend I.M. Jolly, when we come to the end of this year, I'll sigh and groan as heavily as my ancestors did. "Well. That's another year gone."

I eschew the making of 'New Year's resolutions', having lived long enough to know they'll become 'disillusions' by March, if not February. In her poem, "on new year's eve", Evie Shockley, a young American poet, describes "*a long aching*

quiet in which we will hear nothing but the clean crack of our promises breaking.” I think I know what she’s talking about.

But my inner idealist counters, and says, “No, maybe, by the time of our next celebration of Hogmanay, I’ll feel renewed and glad. I’ll have marked the boxes of those blank days by filling them with meaning and good purpose. I’ll have kept the promises that I must keep. For I have miles to go before I sleep.” In other words, I have a life I’ve yet to live before I die, and I will live it out.

There is a new vaccine coming. A new President will soon be installed in that elephantine nation that is directly beneath us. Spring will come, and so will summer. And although all is not right with the world, God is still in his heaven. And more. God is with us through our every weal and woe.

So, let me close with some famous lines from Lord Tennyson’s most celebrated poem, *In Memoriam*. I know, too bad he’s not Scottish. He probably wished he could have been, poor fellow. Tennyson had to put up with being an English aristocrat instead. Still, he belonged to the same college in Cambridge that I do (so did that rascal Lord Byron). I have to like him for that, I guess.

You’re probably thinking, “I know what he has up his sleeve. He’s going to quote Tennyson’s easy words of Victorian optimism. ‘*Oh yet we trust that somehow good will be the final goal of ill.*’” But you’d be wrong. These are the lines I had in mind. They make reference to an English tradition of ringing the Church bells on New Year’s Eve:

*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 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.*

Along with material for you to use as our worship service tomorrow, I'm attaching, just for fun, a photo of Tennyson's statue in the antechapel of Trinity College, Cambridge. Also a photo of The Reverend I.M. Jolly. Can you tell which is which?

Yours in the faith,
Andrew



(More Below....)

