

Appropriating Thanksgiving

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For most people, the word ‘Thanksgiving’ immediately conjures up images of pumpkins and turkeys, of Pilgrim Fathers and Indians, of families and friends from afar coming together on the fourth Thursday in November. For Thanksgiving is thought of as an American holiday—indeed, *the* American holiday. In fact, however, American Thanksgiving as we know it is only one of the many thanksgivings that have existed and that continue to exist. In June 2002, to give only one example, when Elizabeth II went in solemn procession to St Paul’s Cathedral in the climactic event marking the fiftieth anniversary of her reign, it was to participate in what was officially termed the *Golden Jubilee Service of Celebration and Thanksgiving*. Thanksgiving, then, is a flexible and protean term, a term that has served many functions, one that has been appropriated and reappropriated in the name of one cause or another. This has made of it the most ideological of festivals.

The ideological quality of thanksgiving seems deeply rooted in the word itself. ‘Giving thanks’ can be done in private or in public, but from almost the very beginning, ‘thanksgiving’ in English has had a social dimension. With thanksgiving, the arena of thanks is shifted from private to public, to the sphere of the community or the nation. This is caught particularly clearly in *The Book of Common Prayer*.¹ In the second edition, of 1552, we find laid down the proper procedure to be followed for the first form of thanks to be explicitly termed a thanksgiving—‘The Thankes geving of women after childe birth, commonly called the churchying of women,’ which enjoins the new mother ‘forasmuch as it hath pleased almightie God of his goodnes to geve you safe deliveraunce [...] and hath preserved you in the great daunger of Childe birth: ye shall therefore geve harty thankes unto god, and praye.’ What one might have assumed would most naturally be a private expression of thanks is thus brought into the public realm. Rather surprisingly, for more than a hundred years this is the only form of thanksgiving given official sanction and expression by the Church of England. In 1662, however, with the publication of the fourth edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*, the section on ‘Prayers and Thanksgivings upon Several Occasions’ offers a plethora of thanksgivings—an all-purpose ‘General Thanksgiving’ for the blessings of life in general, followed by special thanksgivings ‘For Rain’, ‘For Fair Weather’, ‘For Plenty’, ‘For Peace, and Deliverance from our Enemies’, ‘For restoring Publick Peace at Home’ and ‘For Deliverance from the Plague, or other common Sickness’. Thanksgiving has gone public with a vengeance, and just to drive home the point that God’s bounty is identified with the public good, there are also ‘Forms of Prayer with Thanks to Almighty God’ to be used on the anniversary of the day of accession of the reigning sovereign.

By the second half of the seventeenth century, then, the ideological nature of thanksgiving has been clearly established. And thanksgiving has long ceased to be merely a special form of prayer, as a quote from 1641 indicates: ‘It was resolved that there shalbe on y^e 7th of September next a publique thanksgiving for this good accord between y^e 2 nacions’

(*Oxford English Dictionary* entry on ‘Thanksgiving’). So thanksgiving also becomes a special public celebration with religious services whose purpose is to acknowledge divine favours, and soon a term for the day set aside for this. These thanksgivings were proclaimed by Parliament, and were used to mark events of great public import, in particular victories of arms. As such, these national thanksgivings would also have been celebrated in the territories under the British crown.

This, of course, included the American colonies, but there the tradition of thanksgiving also took on another form. In effect, thanksgiving was democratized and decentralized, with each colonial government, and indeed each community and even each individual church, feeling itself free to declare its own thanksgivings to mark local events. In 1676, for example, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts voted unanimously to proclaim June 29 a day of thanksgiving to express their thanks for seeing their community successfully established (Wilson). Or a thanksgiving might be proclaimed to celebrate the end of an epidemic, the arrival of a supply ship in difficult times, special ‘dispensations’ of all kinds (for example, victory in the war with the ‘heathen natives’). These were usually ‘one-off’ events, since the Puritans

objected to fixed dates for festivals on the basis that fixed dates do not exist in nature, and that the Providence of God was likely to be made manifest at unlikely times. One could not comfortably predict them and so should not presume to set calendrical dates to express thanks for them. (Santino 1994: 170)

Nevertheless, in time a debate arose in the Puritan community as to whether ‘only the unique of impressive acts of Providence could be acknowledged with thanksgivings, or should the “generals”—God’s continuing care for His people in providing them with the necessities of life—be celebrated as well’ (‘Thanksgiving in American History’). The eventual victory of the latter view led to the tradition of regular annual Thanksgivings being established, whether within each colony or at the local level, though even these might vary as to actual date. At the Hamptons on Long Island, for instance, Thanksgiving Day was fixed as the first Thursday after the cattle were driven home from the common pasture at Montauk Point. But as the return of the cattle was determined annually by the town fathers on the basis of that particular year’s weather conditions, this resulted in Thanksgiving Day varying from year to year (Finley: 195).

Owing to these differing religious and secular factors, and the influence of convenience and tradition, Thanksgiving varied from colony to colony and community to community. When Governor John Jay of New York tried to establish a statewide Thanksgiving Day in 1795, for example, he was met with opposition from communities wanting to keep the day that had been established by local tradition, and had to withdraw his proposal (Finley: 195). Nevertheless, what is clear is that the concept of a Thanksgiving Day had taken firm root. From the late seventeenth century on there are many references to Thanksgiving Day, with regular Thanksgiving Days usually situated sometime in October or November: on 25 November 1714, for example, Samuel Sewall of Boston writes in his diary that it is ‘Thanks-giving day; very cold’ (*OED* entry on ‘Thanksgiving’). What is also clear is that this Thanksgiving Day tradition was centred in New England, and that the day itself was associated with feasting; indeed, ‘Thanksgiving remained the primary holiday celebration of New England for two centuries’ (Santino 1994: 170). The term ‘Thanksgiving dinner’ is first found in 1779, though more specific terms only appear in the next century—‘Thanksgiving turkey’ in 1853 and ‘Thanksgiving [i.e. pumpkin] pie’ in 1878 (entries in *A Dictionary of American English*). Equally clear is that this Thanksgiving Day festive tradition was not linked with the first celebrations of the Pilgrims in Plymouth. Rather, these festive

Thanksgivings were a continuation of older harvest home traditions; their popular association with the Pilgrims dates from the late nineteenth century, and came at the very end of a general movement that effected a mythologizing of the New England past. This focused on what was termed Forefathers' Day (21 December, marking the landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620), with its 'Anniversary Orations'—what have been termed 'acts of communal autohypnosis' (Buell 1986: 211) that aimed at both fusing the separate beginnings of Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay into 'one glorious origin of Puritan New England' (Hebel 1999: 33) and, ultimately, transforming the local and regional past of New England, with its peculiar history and specific set of religious and cultural values, into a national one. These events included parades, songs, poems (some commissioned) and plays, conflating many local stories into one usable history. These efforts were crowned by the Massachusetts antiquarian and Unitarian Minister Alexander Young's critical reprinting of source material in the 1840s. His *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers from 1602 to 1625* appeared in 1841 and *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay from 1623 to 1636* in 1846. Young himself was among those who linked the first celebration of the Pilgrims in 1621 with Thanksgiving as it was being celebrated in the first half of the nineteenth century. The irony here is a double one: the famous first feast with the Indians in 1621 was not, in the sense the Puritans themselves used the word, a Thanksgiving, and the kind of harvest home festival that it most closely resembled was something they in theory abhorred. This irony was not lost on Terry Coleman, the author of a historical novel entitled *Thanksgiving: A Novel in Celebration of America*, which depicts this first feast. It seems that Thanksgiving was the brainchild of the heroine of the novel, Wolsey, who makes a request to Francis Wheaton (her future husband) for a festival day to be appointed in celebration of the harvest. Wheaton is adamant in recalling 'God's stated will that there should be no festivals, which are idolatrous' (Coleman: 70). Wolsey shrewdly counters with a quote from Ephesians, where the apostle Paul, writing to his followers and addressing them as children of God, abjures them 'there shall not be foolish talking, nor jesting, but rather the giving of thanks.'

'The giving of thanks, then,' she said. 'Thanksgiving becometh saints.'

'The word of God is against all festivals,' said Wheaton.

Wolsey replied, 'Say what you like of festivals. Let it not be a *festival*. Call it what you like. But a day of thanksgiving is proper. Let it be called Thanksgiving.' (Coleman 1981: 72)

In fact, the first Thanksgiving in the strict religious sense of the term, as acknowledged by the Puritans, was actually celebrated two years later, in the summer of 1623, when there was severe drought, and the people of Plymouth Colony gathered for a prayer service that was followed the next day by bountiful rain, which led Governor Bradford to appoint an official day of thanksgiving and prayer for 30 July.

It was against this background of widespread but quite uncoordinated thanksgiving celebrations that George Washington proclaimed the first national thanksgiving holiday for Thursday, November 26, 1789. In this he was not linking up with the essentially folk tradition of the harvest home festive celebration that lay behind the current Thanksgiving celebrated in the country, nor with the practice of proclaiming days of thanksgiving in the strict Puritan sense, but rather following in the tradition of days of thanksgiving as official public holidays celebrating events of importance to the state that had developed in Britain and as such been reflected in the colonies.² During the War of Independence, the Continental Congress had carried on this tradition—in 1777 by declaring a thanksgiving that among other things commemorated the patriots' victory over the British at Saratoga, and by recommending days of thanksgiving annually (they were celebrated in December) as well as one in 1784 for the

return of the peace. Now, on this first national Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer, Americans were called upon to express thanks that were purely civic and political, thanking God for

his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation—[for] the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted. (Washington 1993: 132)

The proclamation was issued in the first year of the existence of the new nation, a mere seven months after the new Constitution had come into force, and its aim is clearly to press this Thanksgiving into the service of the new nation, legitimizing its existence and adding lustre to the country's brand-new Constitution.

Again, however, this was a one-off gesture. Six years later, Washington proclaimed another Day of Thanksgiving for the general benefits and welfare of the nation. But no new tradition had been established. Thomas Jefferson, for example, rejected the idea of having a day of national thanksgiving, feeling this might undermine the doctrine of separation of church and state. During his Presidency, on the other hand, James Madison declared three thanksgivings, the last, in 1815, to mark the end of the war with Britain. In their practice, both Presidents were following generally in the old British tradition, but at the state level the situation reflected that American specificity—annual thanksgivings. These were declared by the state governors, each for his own state; they had their roots in the folk tradition of harvest celebration more than the official tradition of giving thanks, and gradually it became common for most states to have some kind of annual state-wide thanksgiving, though the date might differ from year to year, and certainly differed from state to state.

This ramshackle thanksgiving tradition might well have proceeded unchanged had it not been for one of nineteenth-century America's most extraordinary figures, Sarah Josepha Hale. Hale was a one-woman reform party, devoting extraordinary dynamism and determination to a wide range of causes. Her central interest was the advancement of women—'female improvement', as she called it—and this led her into such fields as education for women (she worked closely with the founder of Vassar College and played a key role in having women hired as professors there, and was involved with the establishment of several 'female seminaries' [private schools for girls]), the establishment of employment and housing cooperatives for women as well as libraries and job-training centers, the admission of women to the professions, the need for physical exercise and fresh air, sensible dress and an end to tight lacing, and the introduction of labour-saving devices into the household. Hale also had a deeply patriotic spirit: she spearheaded the fundraising effort necessary to complete the Bunker Hill monument, and worked to preserve the then-deteriorating Mount Vernon as a national shrine (it was saved for the nation through purchase by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union). These two seemingly different concerns—women's advancement and patriotism—came together in one of the major crusades of her life, the campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday.

Hale's powerbase was *Godey's Lady's Book*, which, during her forty years of association with the magazine from 1837 to 1877, first as literary editor and then as editor-in-chief, she made into the leading women's periodical in nineteenth-century America. Aiming always to improve the 'moral and intellectual excellence' of women, she employed hard-hitting editorials that took a strong line on issues that were of particular importance to them as individuals and as a group. At the same time, she was not a radical: *Godey's* was notable for

its elegant fashion plates, Hale did not support women's suffrage, and from the first she appealed to men, pointing out that her magazine would not offend but would make women better wives and mothers because they would be better informed. This combination of the progressive and the conventionally feminine captured the popular mind, and made hers a peculiarly effective voice.

As early as 1827, in her novel *Northwood*, Hale had presented a succulent description of a Thanksgiving Day feast. Even today it is a recognizable Thanksgiving dinner. There is the roast turkey, which 'took precedence on this occasion, being placed at the head of the table and well did it become its lordly station, sending forth the rich odour of its savoury stuffing and finely covered with the froth of basting.' Though the 'large chicken pie, three kinds of meat, a goose, and a pair of ducklings' depart from (current) Thanksgiving tradition, the 'innumerable bowls of gravy and plates of vegetables', pickles and preserves still remain part of the standard trimmings. And while the 'huge plum pudding' strikes today's reader as an odd interloper from Christmas, the climax of the meal is reassuringly familiar: there are 'custards and pies of every name and description ever known in Yankee land; yet the pumpkin occupied the most distinguished niche' (all quotes from Rogers 1985: 97).³ Hale sees this Thanksgiving Day dinner as more than a mere feast; just as her characters thank the 'Great Provider' at a morning church service, so there is a lengthy grace before the meal that gives the Day its deeper significance. The Thanksgiving dinner becomes a symbol of America itself, the bounteous plenty clear evidence that God's favour has been granted to its people as individuals and to the nation they have created as a whole. And already Hale is caught up with the goal that she was to pursue to success for the next forty years and more: as one of the characters declares, 'Thanksgiving like the Fourth of July should be considered a national festival and observed by all our people [...] as an exponent of our Republican institutions' (quoted in Finley: 196).

In the following years Hale continued to speak and write in favour of a national Thanksgiving—that is, one celebrated in all states on the same day—but her concerted campaign to this end only took off in 1847, when she announced her plan quite forthrightly to the public in *Godey's*. Her approach to everything she undertook was summed up a few years later when, in an editorial headed by quotations from Shakespeare and Herrick, she stated: 'The plain meaning of our mottoes is, have an aim, and pursue it—a work to do, and do it. Thus hoping and working, success is sure' (*Godey's* LVIII [1859]: 368). From 1847 on, at least two editorials devoted to her pet project appeared annually, one early in the year urging cooperation from all state and territorial governors, and a second in November evaluating the measure of her success and calling on more states to join in the project by the following November (Rogers 1985: 98). Like a schoolmarm handing out a report card, she would chide, congratulate and encourage, her tone by turns tart, enthusiastic and confident. 1852: 'Last year twenty-nine States and all Territories united in the festival. This year we trust that Virginia and Vermont will come into this arrangement' (Rogers 1985: 98). 1853: 'If the State Governors will this year unite on *this day*, there is little doubt but a precedent will be established, and become a fixed custom forevermore. Then our nation will have a holiday worthy of republican Christians' (*Godey's* XLVII: 369). 1854: '[a]ll are prepared to enjoy a day of Thanksgiving. The unanimity was nearly perfect last November; still it would be better to have the *day* so fixed by the expression of public sentiment that no discord would be possible' (*Godey's* XLVIII: 176). 1858: 'We are most happy to agree with the large majority of the governors of the different States—as shown in their unanimity of action for several past years, and which, we hope, will this year be adopted by all—that THE LAST THURSDAY IN NOVEMBER shall be the DAY OF NATIONAL THANKSGIVING for the American people' (*Godey's* LVII: 463). 1859: '*Virginia*, as a State, did not, we regret to say, participate in Thanksgiving' (*Godey's* LX: 369). In addition, she wrote ceaselessly to Presidents, state Governors,

congressmen and other influential individuals across the country asking them to support her plan, and urged her readers to do their bit to support the cause.

What exactly was it about Thanksgiving that aroused such unflagging zeal in Hale? The answer lies in what would now be termed her position on gender and, in the most literal sense, gender politics. Despite her total devotion to the advancement of women, Hale saw the world as divided into two spheres, the public and the private, the male and the female. As she put it, ‘God has given to man authority, to woman influence; she inspires and persuades, he convinces and compels’ (*Godey’s* LVIII [1859]: 175). In this scheme, the world of politics was the preeminently public realm, and so out of question as a forum where women might exercise their influence. The home, on the other hand, was the preeminently private realm, and here women reigned supreme. Between the two lay the broad realm of gender-neutral civic action; here both men and women should be able to find equal, though differing, fulfillment—in their careers, in their commitment to social causes. At that time, the United States had two national holidays, Independence Day and George Washington’s birthday. Hale’s aim was to add Thanksgiving Day, which would create a trinity corresponding to the threefold pattern just outlined. She explained her scheme in an editorial in 1864 (*Godey’s* LXIX: 440). Washington, for her, was in the public sphere what in Emersonian terms would be called the ‘representative man’, or as she put it, ‘the example of the patriot hero and the Christian man’. Independence Day ‘reminds us of the free principles upon which our Government was founded’—principles that potentially ensured men and women the kinds of equal opportunities Hale was striving to realize in practice. Thanksgiving Day—as she phrased it the following year, ‘the focus, as it were, of the private life and virtues of the people’ (quoted in Santino 1994: 172)—would emphasize the female element: ‘It belongs to the altar and the hearth, at which *woman* should ever be present; and the women of our country should take this day under their peculiar charge, and sanctify it to acts of piety, charity, and domestic love.’

Hale’s campaign finally attained success in 1863, when President Lincoln issued a National Thanksgiving Proclamation, setting the last Thursday in November as the official day. The timing—occasioned as it was by a national war—recalls Washington’s declaration, and the similarities do not end here. Despite Hale’s view of the day as focused on the home, Lincoln’s proclamation sits firmly in the tradition of civic and political Thanksgivings, at times reading like a State of the Union Address:

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than before [...] (Lincoln 1989: 520)

The proclamation is devised to show that, despite the Civil War, God has dealt mercifully with the nation, and so there is cause for thanksgiving, and that part of the thanks should be as it were provisional thanks for the future, in the form of a polite request that the Almighty Hand ‘heal the wounds of the nation and [...] restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union’ (Lincoln 1989: 521).

The overtly political nature of the declaration might be seen as being at odds with Hale’s aims. Indeed, commenting on the new festival a year later in an editorial in *Godey’s* entitled ‘Our National Thanksgiving—A Domestic Festival’, she passes over in silence the clear political message of the proclamation, and accords to Thanksgiving Day what were to her words of high praise: ‘It is the peculiar happiness of Thanksgiving Day that nothing

political mingles in its observance' (*Godey's* LXIX: 440). But this is to ignore or forget the very real political agenda which she herself had begun to link to the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day in the latter half of the 1850s. As the dissension between North and South grew, she came more and more to believe that Thanksgiving could serve the function of uniting an increasingly fractious society. So in 1858 she wrote:

Let this day, from this time forth, as long as our Banner of Stars floats on the breeze, be the grand THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY of our nation, when the noise and tumult of worldliness may be exchanged for the laugh of happy children, the glad greetings of family reunion, and the humble gratitude of the Christian heart. [...] These seasons of refreshing are of inestimable advantage to the popular heart; and, if rightly managed [!], will greatly aid and strengthen public harmony of feeling. Let the people of all the States and Territories sit down together to the 'feast of fat things', and drink, in the sweet draught of joy and gratitude to the Divine giver of all our blessings, the pledge of renewed love to the Union. (*Godey's* LVII: 463)

The elision between individual families and the family that is the American people is made smoothly and with persuasive confidence. Her view seems to be that the family that gives thanks together keeps ranks together, and the following year she repeated the message, granting an almost magic efficacy to Thanksgiving. 'If every state would join in Union Thanksgiving on the 24th of this month, would it not be a renewed pledge of love and loyalty to the Constitution of the United States which guarantees the peace, prosperity, progress and perpetuity of our great Republic?' (quoted in Finley 1931: 199). And even at the height of the war, in 1864, she held to her vision of the powerful binding force of Thanksgiving.

Who can estimate the benefits and blessings which may flow from the faithful observance of this happy Festival? For one day the strife of parties will be hushed, the cares of business will be put aside, and all hearts will join in common emotions of gratitude and good-will. We may even hope that for one day war itself will cease by common consent [...] and it is not impossible that sentiments may then be awakened which will aid in bringing on that return of true union [sic] and peace which is so earnestly desired. (*Godey's* LXIX: 440)

There was also another political aspect to Hale's promotion of Thanksgiving Day in the 1840s and 1850s, an American universalism that verged on imperialism. Not only did she wish everyone in the United States to celebrate the day together; wherever they were round the globe on that day, Americans should celebrate the day together, creating a powerful and positive image of America and setting an example that the world might, and indeed should, follow. In 1859 Hale spoke of this eventuality in almost visionary terms:

Then, on *that* day, our citizens, whether in their own pleasant homes, or in the distant regions of Oriental despotism, would observe it—on board every ship where our flag floats there would be a day of gladness—wherever our missionaries preach the Gospel of 'good-will to men', the *day* would exemplify the joy of Christians; and in our Great Republic, from the St. John's to the Rio Grande, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, all our people, as one Brotherhood, will rejoice together and give thanks to God for our National, State, and Family blessings. (*Godey's* LVIII [1859]: 175)

Some years earlier, Hale had quoted approvingly a Swedish writer who praised the American Thanksgiving and regretted its absence in her country; the lesson Hale drew was that if a national Thanksgiving Day ‘could once be established in our own land, Americans would soon introduce its observance and cheerful festivities into every part of the world where they are found, and thus, our American Thanksgiving would be the example for all people’ (*Godey’s XLVIII* [1854]: 175). This reflects the deeply embedded myth, going back to the Puritans, of America as the City on the Hill, America as the forerunner of humanity, the example to be followed. ‘As other nations attain to the political and religious privileges we enjoy, their people would adopt the same day for a public thanksgiving, till the tide of rejoicing rolls round the globe’ (*Godey’s XLVII* [1853]: 369). Even when her country was being torn apart by what was up until then the most violent war in Western history, she did not lose the vision; in 1862 she argued that

as all nations are members of one brotherhood, under the fostering care of one Beneficent Father of Humanity, it would be of much effect in promoting the kindly feelings which should be cultivated among Christian people if the universal observance of one General Festival of Thanksgiving for the bounties of Divine Providence could be established *on the same day of the year throughout Christendom.*

And her ambition did not stop at the Christian world.

All sects and creeds who take the Bible as their rule of faith and morals could unite in such a Festival. The Jews, who find the direct command for a Feast at the ingathering of harvest, would gladly [!] join in this Thanksgiving, and in every country in Europe it would become, as we trust it soon will be in our beloved country, an universal holiday. (*Godey’s LXV*: 506)

Lincoln proclaimed the first national thanksgiving in 1863, and repeated this in 1864; the practice was followed by his successors. Like the nation, then, Thanksgiving was now united: the motto of the country, *e pluribus unum*, was mirrored in the many Thanksgivings that had existed up till then, and were now one. The practice spread; in 1868 Hale noted happily that on the last Thursday of November ‘There were Thanksgiving dinners in London, Paris, Liverpool, Frankfort, Berlin, Florence, and Rome. The traditional roast turkey was served up under the American flag in Japan at the mouth of the Amoor River, in St Petersburg, and in Rio de Janeiro’ (quoted in Rogers 1985: 101) To adapt the traditional saying, not only does trade follow the flag—so does the turkey. And the expansion of the American empire was marked by the arrival of the turkey: the previous year Seward had made his audacious purchase, and ‘Of course [Thanksgiving] was kept in Alaska—the first Thanksgiving day ever known in that boreal region’ (quoted in Rogers 1985: 101). But though she expressed great satisfaction at her achievements, Hale did not feel she was at the end of her campaign, for the day was still not a holiday sanctioned by law, depending as it did on Presidential favour. Ever vigilant, she pointed this out in 1871.

As things now stand, our Thanksgiving is exposed to the chances of the time. Unless the President or the Governor of the State in office happens to see fit, no day is appointed for its observance. Is this not a state of things which calls out for instant remedy? Should not our festival be assured to us by law? (*Godey’s LXXXIII*: 471)

Reiterating her determination to continue agitating for this, she went on to adduce an additional argument favouring her cause.

The influx into our country is prodigious. Not only by the natural increase of population, but by immigration, our numbers are growing, and our Western wilderness is fast shrinking before the pioneers of civilization. To bind together the discordant nationalities into one American brotherhood, what strand so potent as Thanksgiving?

And the trauma of the Civil War can still be heard in her impassioned plea: ‘Let every one who claims the name of American, wherever he may be—in the old world or the new, on the land or the sea—unite to commemorate the day. It will be stronger than laws or armies to make our nation one.’

Though it would be seventy years till Thanksgiving became law, it continued to be proclaimed regularly by succeeding Presidents, and once it had become fixed by practice, a regular part of the calendar, it was ripe for its next appropriation, by the forces of commerce. The peculiar feature of the holiday being that it was fixed for a Thursday, the momentum towards incorporating the Friday, though unofficially, into the holiday, was overwhelming. With an extended weekend stretching out ahead, the day became an occasion for various forms of public entertainment. Around sport in particular a whole series of Thanksgiving traditions emerged—the first major football game on the day goes back to the 1870s, and for years the principal game was the one between the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, though now the tradition has spread across the country. Within the National Football League, an odd ritual developed on the day—sending rookie players to collect a (nonexistent) free turkey (Santino 1994: 175). Thanksgiving Day parades also go back to the latter part of the nineteenth century; in the beginning (it should be recalled that the first proclamation of the day by Lincoln came during the Civil War) these parades were strong on the presence of military men marching to the strains of their brass bands, but they have long since been replaced by elaborate floats, all kinds of musical groups and the presence of show business personalities. By far the most famous is that of Macy’s, in New York, going back to 1927 and attracting up to a million spectators in the streets of the city and countless millions more via the three-hour television broadcast. The parade even has spin-off traditions of its own, among them the ‘Balloon Inflation’ on the evening before, when people are invited to be present as spectators while the giant helium balloons that distinguish the parade are being filled. So much a part of Thanksgiving has the parade become that not even the events of September 11 prevented the 75th parade from being held as scheduled two months later.

From the point of view of the business community, of course, the point of Thanksgiving parades is not so much to celebrate the holiday itself as to usher in Christmas. Hence Macy’s parade, like so many others across the country, ends with a float carrying Santa Claus. This offers a smooth transition to ‘Black Friday’, which marks the beginning of the shopping orgy that characterizes the American Christmas season: people move out of the Thanksgiving tranquility of their homes into the Christmas frenzy of the shops. From a business point of view, the only problem is that Thanksgiving is so close to Christmas that it rather limits the shopping season. The day fixed by Lincoln, and followed most of his successors, was the last Thursday in November, but in 1939 and 1940, President Roosevelt bowed to pressures from businessmen and fixed the holiday earlier, on the third Thursday in November, thus extending the Christmas shopping season. However, by this time the “traditional” Thanksgiving had become such a sacrosanct part of American life that there was spontaneous mass protest. In what was almost an act of civil disobedience, twenty-three states refused to acknowledge the change and proclaimed instead the by now traditional date. The

President was forced to back down, Congress decided to act, and in 1941 it finally passed a law making Thanksgiving a legal holiday, to be celebrated—here a minor compromise was made—on the fourth (rather than last) Thursday of November. The final battle in Sarah Hale’s campaign had been won, sixty-two years after her death.

This passionate identification of Americans with the ‘traditional’ date for the holiday furnished convincing evidence of just how successful the century-long promotion of the myth of the American Thanksgiving had been. Thanksgiving Day was now as American as mom and apple pie—was in fact, to be precise, mom and pumpkin pie. Of course the identification of the holiday with home predated Hale, who was only responding consciously and programmatically to a feature of the day that was already strongly present. It was this same feature that, around the middle of the nineteenth century, became fixed in innumerable texts and visual images. For Harriet Beecher Stowe this was ‘the king and high priest of all festivals’ (Stowe 1982 [1869]: 1208), a celebration of deep social and familial solidarity. John Greenleaf Whittier (in ‘The Pumpkin’) portrayed it as a time

When the gray-haired New Englander sees round his board
The old broken links of affection restored;

When the care-wearied man seeks his mother once more
and the worn matron smiles where the girl smiled before,

an occasion offering the chance to journey back to, to recapture, the past: ‘What moistens the lip and what brightens the eye? / What calls back the past, like the rich Pumpkin pie?’ (Whittier 1969 [1844]: 425). And this almost relentless focus on home has continued to the present—witness Truman Capote’s charming tear-jerker ‘The Thanksgiving Visitor’ (1967). One startling exception to this endless celebration is Emily Dickinson. In a typically miniscule and intricate 16-line poem entitled simply ‘Thanksgiving Day’ (Dickinson 1998 [c1865]: 967), she suggests that Thanksgiving has become bogged down with a whole series of clichés and stereotypes—she refers to it as ‘reflex holiday’, both a day for reflection, and one that people respond do with reflex actions—and that a real reason for Thanksgiving would have been if the Puritans had not separated themselves off from the whole community, and indeed, most audaciously, if Europeans had not changed the ‘room’ that was once America into a place of measured off acres and ‘captions’ proclaiming the rights of property.

But Dickinson is very much the exception. Thanksgiving is here to stay as an essential part of every American, so essential that it is reinvented and reappropriated to fit the spirit of the times and the particular ideology of the individual. So, for instance, Macy’s now, in the age of multiculturalism, claims that the origin of its parade goes back to the spontaneous wish of employees of the department store in the 1920s, many of them first-generation immigrants. ‘Proud of their new American heritage, they wanted to celebrate the American holiday with the type of festival they loved in Europe’ (‘Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade’).⁴ What is more remarkable, for a holiday that centres on consuming large amounts of turkey, is the appropriation of Thanksgiving by a group of vegetarians in Los Angeles whose festive evening features a live turkey strutting proudly round the room. As one participant put it, ‘I was impressed by the genuine feeling of the participants, for the love, concern, respect, sanctity, wonder of life—including turkeys’ (Santino 1994: 174). In a neat reversal, the turkey has been raised to the status of a symbol of the animal rights movement.

The point here is that no American can not feel part of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving means going home, home literally to one’s family, home to the beginnings of America and the heroic venture of the Pilgrims. Home above all to the past, to a space that is beyond the fractious reality of the present, a space that rolls back the passage and the tribulations of time.

As such, it reverses the expulsion from Eden, reinhabiting a space where all is still in order (and where, unlike Eden, there are no restrictions on what to eat). At another level, that of the dinner itself, it is a replaying of what has come to be regarded as one of the founding myths of American society, that first (no matter how badly misunderstood) Thanksgiving, with the Pilgrims and the Indians in innocent harmony. A parody of the Christian mass, it reenacts the original event but—for most—in an utterly secular form. It is also utterly democratic: the only criterion for the participants at the Thanksgiving dinner is that they be American, be part of the American family where, like a child in a loving mother's eyes, all are equal.

And so we are back where we began with *The Book of Common Prayer*, with Thanksgiving rooted in the world of the mother. Curiously enough, however, there seem to be no female symbols associated with the holiday: the traditional images are all male—the Pilgrim Fathers, King Massasoit and his band of ninety men. In the only detailed surviving account of the 'first Thanksgiving'—Edward Winslow's 'Letter' in *Mourt's Relation* (1622)—we are told about how the colony gathered the fruit of its labours, how the governor 'sent four men on fowling', how the Indians were 'entertained and feasted' for three days and how they 'went out and killed five deer' (Winslow 1963 [1622]: 82). But—not surprisingly, perhaps—there is no mention of women. Yet one asks who did all the cooking and washing up at this primal American feast. The very question suggests the next appropriation of Thanksgiving, this time by the feminists. Surely the time has come to celebrate Thanksgiving and the Pilgrim Mothers.

Endnotes

¹ The quotations from *The Book of Common Prayer* are taken from <<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp>>.

² This is reflected in the objection made by one of the members of the House of Representatives, Aedanus Burke of South Carolina, that he 'did not like this mimicking of European customs, where they made a mere mockery of thanksgivings' (quoted in Washington 1993: 129).

³ I have not been able to find a copy of *Northwood*; hence the need to resort to passages quoted elsewhere. Nor is it easy to find complete runs of *Godey's Lady's Book* in Europe. Where possible I have quoted from the original magazine; elsewhere I have had to rely on quotations from other sources.

⁴ One can perhaps be forgiven for regarding this claim with a certain scepticism. Leaving aside the inherent improbability of a "grassroots" movement among Macy's first-generation immigrant employees in the 1920s, this version of the parade's origin ignores the existence of Thanksgiving parades long before this period, elides any vestigial memory of a military presence in them and, somewhat anachronistically, makes the firm seem a pioneer in the currently fashionable promotion of ethnic roots.

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