

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

William Cronon

THE BEST WORKS OF HISTORY OFTEN ENCOURAGE US TO REVISIT familiar times, places, people, and things in ways that help us see the past and even the world today with entirely new eyes. Edmund Morgan's classic *American Slavery, American Freedom* directed our attention to the paradox that the Declaration of Independence—which has served as a symbolic beacon of freedom and democracy from the moment Thomas Jefferson first drafted it—was in large measure the creation of wealthy Virginians whose lives were utterly dependent on the profoundly unfree and undemocratic institution of slavery. In Morgan's hands, this surprising fact became a means for understanding not just the American Revolution, but the contradictions of race and class that have bedeviled the United States since before its founding. In a very different but no less revelatory way, Dava Sobel's little volume on *Longitude* asked readers to take a closer look at the north-south east-west lines we see every time we encounter a map or a globe in an effort to help us recognize the practical and mathematical challenges those lines have historically posed for navigation. From that small beginning, she tells an unforgettable tale about mariners on the high seas who found it nearly impossible to determine their east-west position until an eighteenth-century English inventor finally devised a clock that didn't lose time even after many weeks at sea. The world we inhabit is filled with things like these that we typically take utterly for granted. Only when we ask how they came to be—only when we inquire about their histories—do we recognize how strange and wondrous they truly are.

In the book you now hold in your hands, Cindy Ott performs just such a minor historical miracle with a plant you've probably known your entire

life without giving it a second thought. *Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon* takes a long, close look at this colorful American vegetable—though, in truth, those misshapen orange globes with stems are really fruits—and by so doing reveals just what a quirky and surprising role it has played in the cultural history of the United States.

Pause for a minute to reflect on the moments in a typical year when your own life intersects with that of the pumpkin. Sometime in October, especially if there are children in your household, someone will likely make a trip to the local grocery store or perhaps to a farm in the surrounding countryside to purchase some of these large orange vegetables. Back at home, the family will cut them open, scoop out their seeds, and with varying degrees of artistry carve faces on their sides which, come Halloween, will welcome trick-or-treaters to the front door by flickering candlelight. Then, a few weeks later, someone will purchase cans of pumpkin from a large display at the local supermarket—which barely stocks the stuff during the rest of the year—in order to serve pumpkin pie at the traditional Thanksgiving feast. The same ritual might possibly be repeated at Christmas if your family is especially fond of this seasonal dessert, but in most households, no one will see or eat such a pie until another year has passed.

For millions of American families, these seasonal appearances of the pumpkin are so familiar that they seem almost natural, which is no doubt why we rarely give them much thought. It takes a scholar of unusual wit and insight to step back from these seemingly timeless American rituals to ask, “But . . . isn’t this *strange*? Why would such an attractive and productive vegetable—a plant that in other parts of the world is often consumed year round—be relegated to just two annual appearances in American households, one of them not culinary at all? When did people in this country start doing this, and how did this plant come to play such a peculiar role in American popular culture?” Once she poses these questions—and once the reader has grasped their full oddity—it’s hard not to keep reading in spite of oneself. Pumpkin stories begin pouring forth so abundantly from Ott’s pages that they rival the plant itself in their fecundity. Read this book, and you’ll never see pumpkins in quite the same way again.

Let me offer just a few hors d’oeuvres for the intellectual feast that lies ahead. We all know that the reason pumpkin pie plays such an important role at Thanksgiving is that the Pilgrims and their Wampanoag neighbors dined on it when they gathered in Plymouth, Massachusetts, for a harvest

celebration that has ever since been ritually reenacted on the fourth Thursday in November. Unfortunately, what we all “know” turns out to be wrong in most of its particulars. Harvest celebrations like this one have ancient antecedents on both sides of the Atlantic, so this kind of gathering hardly originated at Plymouth. Furthermore, the idea of a special meal for the purpose of giving thanks emerged during the sixteenth century as a feature of the English Reformation, in which Days of Feasting and Days of Thanksgiving were meant to honor special acts of divine providence—and also to replace what Protestants saw as the too-frequent celebrations that typified the ritual calendar of the Catholic Church.

As for the Pilgrims, we have no idea of the date on which they held their feast, only that it took place sometime during the autumn of 1621. Thanksgiving celebrations began to be a regular feature of the New England calendar later in the seventeenth century, but not on any predictable date. By the early nineteenth century, different states chose different dates for these feasts, and not until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, did Abraham Lincoln regularize the holiday as the final Thursday in November—a date that in 1941 Congress redefined as the *fourth* Thursday in November to anticipate those rare occasions when the month contains five Thursdays. (Canada celebrates its own version of Thanksgiving—which obviously has nothing to do with the Pilgrims—on the second Monday in October, though that particular date wasn’t finally resolved until 1957.)

Just as it took quite a while for Thanksgiving to migrate to its present place on the U.S. national calendar, so too did pumpkins take rather more time than we might imagine to find their way onto Thanksgiving menus. There are only two documents from Plymouth that make any mention at all of that first Thanksgiving celebration, and neither of them says a word about pumpkins. Although the pumpkin itself originated in the western hemisphere, it had made its way to Europe within three decades of Columbus’s first voyage—a full century before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts—and its distinctive appearance had already been depicted on a fresco in Rome by 1518. Ott notes that, much like the early American colonists, Europeans were quicker to recognize the visual appeal of this vegetable than they were its culinary possibilities, and her playful discussions of the diverse and changing roles pumpkins have played in European and American art are among the unexpected treats readers will discover in this book.

Although we can be pretty sure that American colonists were eating pumpkin soon after they arrived here—it was too easy to grow and too prolific a source of food for them not to have done so—their failure to distinguish it from other gourds, squashes, and melons makes it hard for us to know for sure just how they prepared it. One thing we do know is that the dessert with which Americans now end their Thanksgiving meals would have been unrecognizable to the Pilgrims, whose ovens simply weren't up to the task of making a modern pie crust. The first recipes we have for something akin to what we would today call pumpkin pie appear in French and English cookbooks during the second half of the seventeenth century, and probably migrated to the American colonies in the eighteenth century. Not until 1796, when Amelia Simmons wrote *American Cookery*, the first cookbook published in the new United States, did recipes for sweetened “pompkin” baked in a pastry crust appear in print on this side of the Atlantic. Even then, as Ott persuasively argues, it would not be until well into the nineteenth century that pumpkin pie would take its canonical place at the end of the Thanksgiving meal. Before then, pumpkin was more likely to appear on the table in beer than for dessert.

Unexpected details like these are among the special pleasures of Cindy Ott's book, but they serve a much deeper and more important purpose for her larger argument. Pumpkins contribute to modern American culture not just as pies but as jack-o'-lanterns. I will leave to Ott the strange tale of how Washington Irving's famous *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* helped the pumpkin become as canonical to American Halloween as it is to American Thanksgiving—even though the pumpkin hurled at Ichabod Crane by the headless horseman in that story was just an ordinary vegetable with no carved face on it at all. But the jack-o'-lantern is an especially striking example of a lesson that Ott wants us to remember not just about pumpkins, but about all the other nonhuman organisms that touch our lives, whether the primary uses we make of them are for food or fiber or fuel or anything else. Such organisms, she insists, are not just material objects but cultural icons. They are freighted with human meanings. If we think of them only as food, and if we imagine that the value of such food consists solely of the profits it earns or the nutrients it supplies, we'll miss much of what is most interesting about it, for it nourishes our minds and hearts as much as it does our bodies.

Today, American farmers grow more than a billion pounds of pumpkin worth more than a hundred million dollars each year. Since so much of that crop is devoted to the ritual celebrations associated with just two national holidays, it would be hard to find more striking proof that culture is just as important as ecology or economics if we truly wish to understand changing human relationships with the natural environment. In their very different ways, both the jack-o'-lantern and the pumpkin pie serve in the modern United States as symbols of the pastoral harvest, of food that, despite all the industrialization and technological manipulation it has endured, still has deep roots in the farm fields to which so many American families make pilgrimages when they purchase pumpkins each October. The desire to sustain such rituals has equally deep roots in American popular culture. This outsized orange vegetable is now a symbol of America's rural past—even if what we believe it says about that past has as much to do with myth as with history. *Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon* shows how a plant that we ignore for most of the year is all the more important to the popular culture of the United States and to the imaginations of its citizens precisely because we pay attention to it so occasionally. By reencountering it at harvest time, we remind ourselves of where we come from—though, as Cindy Ott so playfully reveals, the story of where we come from, like that of the pumpkin itself, is a good deal more complicated than we think.