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Editor's Notebook

Andrew C. Holman

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Mon pays ce n’est pas un pays, c’est l’hiver. Mon jardin ce n’est pas un jardin, c’est la plaine. Mon chemin ce n’est pas un chemin, c’est la neige. Mon pays ce n’est pas un pays, c’est l’hiver.

“My country it’s not a country, it’s winter.” So sayeth French–Canadian poet and icon Gilles Vigneault in his anthemic song, Mon Pays (1965). The song is an old favorite in Canada, but it’s one of those that people know mostly for its catchy tune. Its words are not often pondered. I think Vigneault was trying to relate a mood, a feeling among people in the Sixties generation; a mood that they could find an identity in the immediate mood, a feeling among people in the Sixties generation pondered. I think Vigneault was trying to relate a mood, a feeling among people in the Sixties generation pondered. I think Vigneault was trying to relate a mood, a feeling among people in the Sixties generation pondered. I think Vigneault was trying to relate a mood, a feeling among people in the Sixties generation pondered.

But scholars tell us that the ways we deal with bad weather can tell us a great deal about who we are, or, more accurately, who we think we are.

We should pay close attention to the meanings we attach to bad weather, and especially to its “exceptional” events—such as tornadoes, hurricanes, floods and, yes, blizzards—because, as much as we like to see them as sometimes cataclysmic phenomena naturally and unavoidably imposed from without or (for those who prefer the old term “act of God”) from above, they are all inherently human events. Anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith states this idea plainly in an oft-quoted passage from his 1986 book Natural Disasters and Human Responses: “Human groups and institutions play a far more active role in the creation of destructive agencies and circumstances than is usually imagined or portrayed.” In other words, the causes and effects of bad weather are not random or “natural.” As Pulitzer-prize-winning historian Alan Taylor puts it in a 1999 essay on the Blizzard of 1888, or the Great White Hurricane, was unpredicted and dumped up to 50 inches of snow between March 11 and 12 across the Northeast.

But scholars tell us that the ways we deal with bad weather can tell us a great deal about who we are, or, more accurately, who we think we are. And the storm, like all storms, produced its own heroes. But the 1888 storm also produced its own heroes. But the 1888 storm also produced its own heroes. But the 1888 storm also produced its own heroes.

By the time this issue appears, the awful winter of 2012–13 will have its measure of hardship, and it will have its own meanings. On February 8 and 9, more than two feet of snow fell on most of eastern Massachusetts which, combined with fierce winds (up to 63 mph), caused tremendous physical damage to property and enterprise: about 400,000 homes and businesses lost power, some for up to four days. The Governor instituted a driving ban and public transportation was closed for 24 hours. On the South Shore, pounding surf and high winds worked in concert to cause the storm’s worst physical damage. It took several days to repair homes, businesses, and power lines, but, happily, unlike the blizzards of 1888 and 1978, no one died, and we now lightheartedly remember it as the “snowpocalypse,” or “snowmageddon”.

So what does the Blizzard of 2013 tell us about who we are? The event is too close for historians like me to look at with any certainty; anecdote still reigns, and we haven’t gained much perspective yet. But I suspect that our experiences parallel those who suffered through the Great White Hurricane of 1888, in meaning if not in degree. In time, I think we’ll remember that our blizzard laid bare our communities’ best traits and, perhaps, some of which we are not so proud.
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Here, in Massachusetts, as I write these lines, we are experiencing yet another one of the fourth season’s messy storms. Right now, winter seems a perennial state and stormy weather more normal than not. Our country—our normal, that is—these past months, has been exceptionally white and cold and wet. Not surprisingly, it seems to have produced among us a grim fatalism; the “delirium of winter,” as one NPR commentator called it. By the time this issue appears in print, the awful winter of 2012–13 may have faded into a dim memory, but scholars tell us that the ways we deal with bad weather can tell us a great deal about who we are, or, more accurately, who we think we are.

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When New Englanders of a certain age contemplate the word “blizzard,” their minds race automatically to personal memories of February 1978, when a three-day Nor’easter delivered 27 inches of snow, wrought $520 million worth of damage, and killed 100 people. But that event pales in comparison to a storm that blew in 90 years earlier. The Blizzard of 1888, or the Great White Hurricane, was unpredicted and dumped up to 50 inches of snow between March 11 and 12 across the Northeast. In Boston, wind gusts reached 50 mph. Across the entire region, more than 400 people died. Like most blizzards, this one generated plenty of narratives of how ordinary people coped with and explained the snow. The effects of the Blizzard of 1888 were met with determination, resolve, hard work, charity and sympathy, all traits that we would like to think of as our own. And the storm, like all storms, produced its own heroes. But the 1888 storm also manifested some less laudable human traits, among them greed, pride, fear and commitment to hidebound social convention, all of which had regrettable consequences. In New York, profit-seeking coal merchants raised the price of that critical fuel from 10 cents to one dollar per bucket. Scores of factory workers were injured or killed attempting to make it to their jobs, fearing dismissal if they didn’t. In Connecticut, two young unmarried female office workers froze to death when Victorian

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