

When he died at 37, however, he left an astonishingly varied and vital body of work. The love songs have always been popular, as have poems such as “To a Mouse.” Burns’s bawdier and more directly political poetry, however, was avoided by Victorian editors. Some of it was published anonymously and has only recently been unearthed by modern scholars. This biography refocuses attention on Burns the radical. As Crawford points out, America, not Scotland, is the country first mentioned in Burns’s poetry, in a poem sympathetic to the rebel colonies. In the wake of the French revolution, Burns took risks to express views consonant with the “liberty, equality, and fraternity” of the new republic. Crawford quotes new material from the journal of James Macdonald, one of Burns’s last visitors, who referred to Burns as a “staunch republican.” Burns’s song “For a’ that and a’ that,” anonymously circulated during the Napoleonic wars, has a revolutionary edge when one realizes that the word “brothers” in the last line is, in an earlier version, “equals”:

*Then let us pray that come it may,  
As come it will for a’ that,  
That Sense and Worth, o’er a’ the earth  
Shall bear the gree, and a’ that  
For a’ that, and a’ that,  
It’s comin’ yet for a’ that,  
That Man to Man the warld o’er,  
Shall brothers be for a’ that.*

This song was sung at the opening of the new Scottish parliament in 1999. It’s no accident that *The Bard*, celebrating a subversive, radical, and nationalist Burns, has been published in 2009 when the Scottish National party, which seeks Scottish independence, has for the first time a majority in the new parliament and a referendum on secession seems likely. Crawford’s Burns is the independent national poet of a country looking the possibility of independent political nationhood squarely in the eye.

Even if that’s not your view of Robert Burns, however, this biography is enlightening and entertaining, a good read in a gray month. Whether you follow it with haggis and whiskey is up to you. ♦



*On the way to worship, 1959*



# The Sacred Weekend

*Remember the Sabbath day? To keep it holy was the norm.* **BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON**

**S**tephen Miller lifts his title from a letter by Wallace Stevens. What makes Sunday “peculiar”? If we take our cue from the origin of the word—meaning “of one’s own property”—what belongs to Sunday does not belong to any other day of the week. In the past it has claimed spatio-temporal uniqueness—the intersection of heaven and earth—set apart for religion, rest, and reflection. Miller’s cultural history of Sunday observance in the Christian West becomes relevant reading because

this day is now being subsumed by commercialization and secularization.

The story he tells is from a postsecular viewpoint, neither for nor against the church. Instead, he explores the oddity of Sunday with a mixture of curiosity and nostalgia, much like a visitor who wanders into Chartres Cathedral and stares at the West Rose window, trying to make sense of its biblical narrative.

*The Peculiar Life of Sundays* is a stained-glass window of Sunday lives. The outer circle of the window is lapsed Christians like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Wallace Stevens; the middle circle is nonobservant Christians like

### The Peculiar Life of Sundays

by Stephen Miller  
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John Ruskin and Robert Lowell; and the inner circle—most removed from our own experience—is observant Christians like George Herbert, Hannah More, and Jonathan Edwards. By recounting these Sunday lives, Miller reaches the center of the window: the human need for what the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel describes as “a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”

Antiquity colors the window with its contrast between pagan veneration of the sun god and Christian veneration of the Son of God. When Constantine altered the Roman calendar by decreeing that Sunday, the “day of the Sun,” should be a public holiday for sun-worshippers, Christians rested on what they called the “Lord’s Day.” During a transitional period, early Christians often fused Jesus with the sun god, naming him the Sun of Righteousness. Augustine and Boethius severed this fusion, arguing that worship of the sun god is idolatrous because God made and controls the sun.

Jews regarded the Sabbath as a celebration of the created world, whereas Christians regarded it as a celebration of the resurrected Jesus. Augustine moved the Sabbath from the seventh to the eighth day by noting that the command of circumcision and the event of the resurrection occurred on the eighth day. Thus, he redefined Sunday as the new Sabbath—evacuating its Jewish content.

When their pagan neighbors found Sunday diversion in “gladiatorial contests, obscene plays, and chariot races,” Christians found delight in worship, prayer, almsgiving, confession of sins, and sexual abstinence. Miller claims the calendar is one of the reasons Christianity triumphed over paganism. The church transformed winter solstice into Christmas, “days that venerated pagan gods into days that venerated Christian martyrs,” and *chronos* (clock time) into *kairos* (holy time). With the Christianization of time, Sunday persisted in the West as the “Lord’s Day” for over a millennium, punctuated by spasmodic revivals of pagan thought.

Before the Reformation, the church inveighed against paganism; after the Reformation, Protestants inveighed against the Church of Rome as a variety of paganism. Miller focuses his account on Protestant Sundays in Great Britain and America, where sabbatarian debates prescribed and proscribed nearly every activity under the sun, occasionally to expel “the evils of popery” but mostly to promote sanctification over recreation.

Sabbatarians believed that the health of civilization depended on how it observed Sunday. Serving as associate justice of the Supreme Court from 1830 to 1861, John McLean asserted: “Where there is no Christian Sabbath, there is no Christian morality; and without this free institutions can not long be sustained.” The force of sabbatarianism—faint to contemporary ears—preceded and outlasted the spirited debates over slavery and temperance, waning at the end of the 19th century when figures like John Stuart Mill argued that sabbatarian legislation was an “illegitimate interference with the rightful liberty of the individual.”

While Americans continue to attend church in large numbers, especially compared with Europeans, the “Lord’s Day” has become less a holy day and more a holiday, less a ritual and more a routine. Research from George Barna, a prominent marketing consultant to evangelical megachurches, predicts that “by the year 2010, 10 to 20 percent of Americans will derive all their spiritual input (and output) through the Internet.” If private worship actually detracts from public worship, we should expect sabbatarianism redux, although this time it will not involve secular and religious persons, only religious persons who are inside and outside sanctuary walls.

For Miller, Sunday is not a window on eternity so much as a window on the psyche, revealing conditions that range from piety to pathology. Anti-Catholicism fueled John Northbrook’s campaign against the “dung and filth of idleness.” Mirth motivated George Herbert’s duties as a country parson. “Vain scruples” kept Samuel Johnson

in bed. Sexual fantasies gripped James Boswell during church services. Longing for the sublime brought Thomas Gray to the mountaintop, where he perceived God closer than “under a roof of citrus-wood.”

Enthusiasm drove Hannah More to skip the pleasures of “tea-visiting” for the instruction of Sunday school. Horror at the inanity of evangelicalism compelled John Ruskin to shock Christians by falsely claiming belief in the Greek gods. Gloom from his sabbatarian childhood led Edmund Gosse to sympathize with pantheism. “Vital piety” informed Jonathan Edwards’s sermon that surmised an earthquake in New England was “a token of God’s anger” against profaning the Sabbath. “Egotheism” propelled Ralph Waldo Emerson from the pulpit to the lectern because “every man makes his own religion, his own God.” Purity animated the pagan sun-worship of Henry David Thoreau, who believed Christians were “infidels because they celebrate Sunday as the Lord’s Day rather than the day of the sun.”

*The Peculiar Life of Sundays* succeeds in designing a complex and fascinating stained-glass window with each Sunday life sensitively executed to avoid unfair judgments. Early in the book, the author expresses a hope: “A look at the transformation of Sunday in America may help us to have a more measured conversation about religion and society because we will see that churchgoing and non-churchgoing Americans have a good deal in common.” By the end of the book, the reader may feel that Miller’s window is romantic but not translucent enough to shed much light on what these two groups have in common.

Our post-sabbatarian society shows confusion about the source of light: some still calling it the Son of God, a minority calling it the sun god, and others calling it the sun. Like Wallace Stevens, Miller seems content with his indecision: “It is the belief and not the god that counts.” And yet, we must wonder if anxiety lurks behind indecision. As Nathaniel Hawthorne said of Melville: “He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” ♦