

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Snow-Bound!

Let us pause in the pursuit of the latest electronic gadgetry for Christmas presents and contemplate a calmer, simpler time in America.

Some time ago, while observing classes at Pottstown High School, I sat in on a lesson by a veteran English teacher on John Greenleaf Whittier, in particular his poem, "Snow-Bound."

It seems appropriate, on the first full day of winter, 2016, to consider a poem describing a December snowstorm in rural Massachusetts circa 1866.

Our English teacher is old-school, "stand and deliver," with no smart-board, desks in a row, and nary an iPad in sight.

It was fascinating to watch a class of 20 boys and two girls, many of them black and Hispanic, taking turns reading out loud a long narrative poem by a 19th century white guy. But they all seemed engaged, and I later learned students in this class excelled in the Keystone Literature exam.

Whittier's retrospective poem is particularly instructive in an age when people go bonkers if disconnected for a few minutes from their smart phones or become incapacitated during a power failure.

The poem represents an era when the written word was treasured and people savored lengthy descriptive passages in poetry and prose.

Our teacher set the scene: how to tell a big storm was coming just from looking at the sky or seeing restless animals; the process of gathering water, food and firewood to prepare for being snowed in.

The sun that brief December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray,
And, darkly circled, gave at noon
A sadder light than waning moon.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

As the students read, our teacher would break in from time to time to explain terms

and objects the students were unlikely to know, such as an outdoor cellar or implements for darning and sewing, or how to run a line from the house to the barn so you could find your way in high snow.

The poem describes a family gathered around the fireplace telling stories and playing games while isolated at home by the storm. Published as a small book, it was wildly popular, selling 20,000 copies in its first year. It's interesting to learn people in the 1860s were nostalgic for scenes from their youth, just as we are today for our youth in the 20th century.

At one point, our teacher asked how many students were bored. Most of the hands shot up. "That's because Whittier is describing things we've never experienced, but we want you to remember what he experienced."

Actually, I don't think the kids were bored at all. They didn't want to stop reading, that's for sure.

Christmas is a time when we are especially nostalgic for times and loved ones from the past.

For all the commercialism, it's not the material things we cherish, but people and experiences.

Whittier reflects on his largely departed family in "Snow-Bound":

Who hath not learned,
in hours of faith,
The truth to flesh and
sense unknown,
That Life is ever lord of
Death,
And Love can never
lose its own!



MURAL of poet John Greenleaf Whittier's birthplace in Haverhill, Mass., and setting of his poem, "Snow-Bound." The 1688 home is now a museum.