

# The Anniversary Mystique

*One good celebration deserves another.*

*by Cullen Murphy*

Some years ago in these pages, a little-known, and indeed imaginary, historian named Sybil Schwartz published an essay under the rubric “Reflections” on the subject of a discipline called Decalogy—the study of the “inner rhythms” of history as reflected in the recurring patterns of the decades. The conceit of the essay, which appeared as the 1980s began, was not only that “the decade” was a scientifically legitimate unit of history but also that the character of decades—the ’20s, the ’30s, and so on—was predictable from century to century. The ’60s, for instance, are always a tumultuous decade, whenever they occur, whereas the ’80s always tend to be dull. During a ’90s decade things generally pick up somewhat. I’m not aware that Decalogy ever became the focus of a provocative session at Aspen or Davos, but neither have I heard that its basic tenets have ever been disputed.

Vast amounts of intellectual effort have been wasted on (or channeled harmlessly into) a quest for the predictable patterns and reliable rules of history. The bright exception of Decalogy aside, that enterprise has little to show for itself. The ambitious systems of the Toynbees and the Spenglers lie in ruins. Leopold von Ranke proclaimed the goal of history to be ascertaining “what really happened,” but the wisest historians of our own age regard even that modest quest as a pathetic delusion. They scoff at the idea that we can objectively “know” the past, much less figure out what history means or discover the rules by which it proceeds.

Within this chaotic postmodern jungle thrives a hardy and abundant weed—mundane, nearly useless, adaptable to almost any context, and possessing an inherent ability to repli-

cate forever. I am referring to that hoary benchmark of journalism and scholarship, the anniversary. In celebrating anniversaries we celebrate the one element of history that can be predicted with dead-on certainty. Mention some event from the past—anything at all—and its anniversary dates can be discerned unto the end of days. Nothing in the news will change the fact that the year 2002 brings the thousandth anniversary of the birth of England’s Edward the Confessor; the 65th anniversary of the abdication of Edward VIII; and the 50th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth to the throne. Nothing can sidetrack the 300th anniversary next year of the abolition of serfdom in Denmark. The Vatican in coming months may choose to ignore it, but no power in heaven or on earth can forestall the 700th anniversary of the papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, issued in 1302, which advanced the papacy’s most expansive (and ultimately most disastrous) claim to supremacy over temporal kings.

Admittedly, anniversaries like these don’t represent the kind of predictable pattern that great historical minds have vainly sought. But you sure can count on them.

It would be wrong to say that a major sector of modern scholarship is devoted to the study of anniversaries, but a small cottage industry does concern itself with the sociology of time. The practitioners of this subdiscipline over the years have included such distinguished thinkers as Émile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski. St. Augustine commented upon time’s slippery conceptual character: “What is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain what it is to him who asks, I do not know.” But sociologists of time



The Parisians Waiting for the Famous Comet (1857), by Honoré Daumier

have not been deterred, and have constructed sensible taxonomies—“clock time” and “social time,” “linear time” and “circular time.”

Anniversaries arise, of course, out of circular time. The first anniversaries that people took note of were the ones Nature provided—the cycles of the heavens and the seasons of the year. Whatever else they signify, seasonal anniversaries and the effort that goes into them (think of Stonehenge) suggest a certain confidence that the universe is not entirely capricious—that the basic pattern will enjoy a long run. As time passed, the calendar became crowded with a very different kind of annual occurrence: birthdays, first of the gods, then of cities, temples, and rulers. By the Hellenistic period, the birthdays of ordinary people had become occasions of note; Epicurus gave a banquet on his birthday every year. One of the key texts in the annals of women’s history—the first Latin document known to come from a female hand—is an invitation to a birthday party written in about A.D. 100. (It was unearthed several years ago near Hadrian’s Wall.) The awareness of personal birthdays is one of those civilizational signposts marking the emergence of a sense of self, a sense of individual distinctiveness. Instilled as

a child, birthday consciousness may survive childishly into old age. In 1984 General William Westmoreland, when asked to state his age before testifying during his much-publicized libel suit against CBS, sounded like someone in kindergarten. He responded, “I’m seventy-and-a-half.”

Every human being has an obvious origin; time itself has not been so fortunate. But calendars need to start somewhere, and an anniversary usually provides a beginning, transforming the arbitrary into the sacral. The Hebrew calendar numbers the years starting from the creation of Adam, which is reckoned to have occurred in 3761 B.C. The Romans numbered the years starting with the mythical date of the founding of Rome—753 B.C. The Muslim calendar starts counting with the Hegira, Mohammed’s flight from Mecca to Medina, in A.D. 622. The events in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World* (1932), which conjures a grimly seductive technological dystopia, take place in the year 632 A.F., the initials standing for “After Ford.” (“Ford” refers to Henry Ford, whose industrial methods Huxley saw as a progenitor of the world his novel imagined.)

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The fortunes of anniversary keeping are bound up with those of time keeping. “In the medieval period,” says Kendrick Oliver, a historian at the University of Southampton, in England, “*death days* were much more likely to be celebrated than *birth days*, in part because not that many people knew exactly when they had been born. Advances in record keeping, literacy, and the time-management requirements of industrial society have all contributed to our current culture of recording the passing of days and years.” Those commemorative days, as Oliver pointed out in a recent article titled “The Memory of Catastrophe,” are as important to entire nations as they are to mere individuals. At some point in the 18th century, he notes, “the experience of seismic political change” came to be regarded as something to be marked with anniversaries. The United States has observed the Fourth of July from the outset. The first recorded example of a “centenary” celebration was the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, in 1788, celebrating the overthrow of King James II by William and Mary. The leaders of the French Revolution did not succeed in having the year 1792 accepted as the new Year One by the rest of the world (or even France), as they had hoped, but Bastille Day itself has taken firm hold.

From time to time, the odd stick-in-the-mud seeks to discount the significance or utility of annual commemorations. Alexander Pope was both dismissive and melancholy: “Is that a birthday? ‘Tis alas! too clear; / ‘Tis but the funeral of the former year.” Ryan Bingham, the protagonist of Walter Kim’s recent novel *Up in the Air*, calls into question the very reliability of our dates. “Factoring in leap years and cosmic wobble,” he observes, “our anniversaries aren’t our anniversaries, our birthdays are someone else’s, and the Three Kings would ride right past Bethlehem if they left today and they steered by the old stars.”

And yet, for all the skepticism, something in the human psyche responds naturally and without demurrer to the idea of anniversaries. One type of evidence for this, though it might be dismissed as “anecdotal” by critics, is the evidence of our eyes and ears: the

crowds that gather with candles in Central Park every December 8 to mark the death of John Lennon; the restiveness among Serb nationalists every June 15, the anniversary of Serbia’s devastating defeat by the Turks at the battle of Kosovo, in 1389.

If quantitative proof is needed, then what about the phenomenon known as the “death dip”? The term refers to the fact that death rates respond to the gravitational influence of birthdays, holidays, and other significant anniversaries, usually by diminishing somewhat in the period leading up to the occasion being celebrated. The reason, presumably, is that mortality responds to sheer force of will. Thus, could the “coincidence” that both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence plausibly be explained by the profound desire of both men to survive until that momentous day? The sociologist David P. Phillips, of the University of California, has found a death dip among Jewish males in the days before Jewish holidays; for instance, mortality declines by 35 percent in the week before Passover. (It increases by 35 percent in the week afterwards, a phenomenon for which no one has yet coined a name. Perhaps “croak crescendo”?) Phillips notes: “It is not uncommon for people to bargain with God for an extension of life until a significant occasion has arrived.”

Along similar lines, a study of records from Ohio documented a sharp rise in mortality in the days immediately following Christmas. A researcher in Australia, Simon Jolly, of the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, recently examined local coroners’ records and determined that, insofar as natural deaths are concerned, people tend to cling to life until their birthdays arrive, with the likelihood of death rising on the birthday itself and in the days immediately afterward. (The chance of *accidental* death on one’s birthday is particularly high. Jolly writes: “It is not difficult to imagine how judgment may be impaired on this special day.”) The statistical data, in sum, may not point to any single conclusion about the influence of anniversaries on mortality—but they do show that anniversaries exert an influence.

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*There's always time for another anniversary.*

Will the power of anniversaries persist indefinitely? One cause for concern involves the impact of “anniversary inflation”—too many anniversaries chasing a finite supply of significance. The devaluation of anniversaries is apparent everywhere. In Congress, legislators introduce so-called “members’ bills” by the hundreds to place a national imprimatur on banal commemorations. The commemorable timespan of teenage relationships seems to get shorter and shorter; a “one-month anniversary” can be an epochal event, the stuff of Abelard and Héloïse. In newspapers, the “Today in History” and “Today’s Birthdays” columns venture into increasingly trivial terrain. One recent morning the *New York Times’s* online “On This Day” feature alerted readers to the fourth anniversary of the indictment of former agriculture secretary Mike Espy and to the birthdays of the actress Tuesday Weld and the rap musician Bobo. The use of anniversaries as marketing tools becomes only more prevalent. In Germany, anniversaries may still play a part in the restraint of trade (according to the *Wall Street Journal*, clearance sales in Germany are limited to twice a year “plus anniversaries of a business’s birth that are evenly divisible by 25”),

but in the United States commemorative holidays are an occasion mostly for shopping.

The editors of the *Wilson Quarterly*, it is fair to say, have not been averse to capitalizing on anniversaries. Has it been a century since the death of some widely known but woefully misunderstood literary eminence? Has it been exactly 50 years since some vital nation had the misfortune to discover oil or to experiment prematurely with democracy? Was it only two decades ago that some promising social reform perversely planted the seeds of unforeseen catastrophe? Opportunities like these have always proved irresistible to the *WQ*.

But the more elemental anniversaries celebrated by the *WQ* are the ones it implicitly honors through its publication schedule: winter, spring, summer, and fall. With the current number, the *WQ* marks 25 of these annual cycles. I have all the issues on a shelf, a reminder that something enduring did indeed emerge from the 1970s. They’re not quite as heavy as Stonehenge, but they embody a similar sort of faith: that the universe is not entirely capricious—that the basic pattern will enjoy a long run. □