'At Day's Close': The Dark Ages

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus
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AT DAY'S CLOSE Night in Times Past. By A. Roger Ekirch. Illustrated. 447 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. $25.95.

Night "in times past," A. Roger Ekirch believes, has been unjustly neglected as a subject by historians and writers. He quotes, for example, the poet Thomas Middleton, who offered the remark: "No occupation but sleepe, feed" and flatulence. Ekirch aims to rescue night from such cynics, holding that rather than a mere "backdrop to daily existence, or a natural hiatus, nighttime in the early modern age instead embodied a distinct culture, with many of its own customs and rituals."

"At Day's Close," however, is less a history of night than a bizarre sort of elegy for it. In an epilogue, the author expresses deep reservations about modernity's profligate illumination. "With darkness diminished," he warns, "opportunities for privacy, intimacy and self-reflection will grow more scarce." While others blame television or video games for our cultural decay, Ekirch thinks we're on an apocalyptic slide into fluorescence.

Be that as it may, "At Day's Close" begins by exhaustively confirming our suspicions that preindustrial nighttime was not only extraordinarily inconvenient but also rather dangerous. A meticulous historian, Ekirch takes his examples primarily from the British Isles, where he spent years poring over source material -- letters, diaries, official papers, literature, any arcane scrap of paper with a passing reference to night -- in his hunt for information. He frames much of the book around night's various perils: fires and uneven terrain, he notes, were regular hazards, but the greatest threat was crime. Thomas Hobbes "dreaded lying alone at night"; he was not, however, "afrayd of sprights, but afrayd of being knockt on

the head for 5 or 10 pounds." Ekirch documents the (mostly unsuccessful) attempts by authorities in European towns and villages to impose order on the nightly anarchy, with curfews, night watchmen and restrictions on weapons and disguises.

The book presents an oceanic vastness of night-related information, by turns beguiling and maddening. When Ekirch has uncovered some long-lost practice, the book hums along. A wonderful section, for example, describes the practice of segmented sleep: before the industrial age, people often slept for a few hours after dinner, then woke after midnight to engage in restful contemplation and prayer, conversation or sex, and then resumed sleeping until daybreak. "Regenerate man finds no time so fit to raise his soul to Heaven, as when he awakes at mid-night," wrote the author of "Mid-Night Thoughts" in 1682.

At times, however, Ekirch bogs down in detail, and his anecdotes are often perfunctory at best. Here he is on the danger night held in store for livestock: "In Dorset, on a spring evening in 1698, John Richards's dairy cow, Bexington Red, fell into a ditch. Unable to rise, it had to be watched through the night."

More problematic is his insistence on night's exoticism. His transparently anti-daytime agenda has hijacked his historical imagination and led him into a mythical realm in which nighttime is romanticized into unrecognizability. His tender appreciation for "preindustrial folk" feels equally heavy-handed; in his account, they often resemble a drunken brigade of down-at-the-heel hobbits. For illumination and heat, he reminds us, they "relied upon the common medium of fire; not until the 20th century would most Western households turn to a radically different technology in the form of electricity." Such observations often punctuate his stories, mainly reflecting a gift for investing the obvious with melodramatic portent.

When Ekirch extends his sympathy from preindustrial folk to their occult practices, it becomes clear that he's indiscriminately charmed by all varieties of their "rough-hewn resourcefulness." An interesting and worthwhile discussion of practical protections against the dangers of night -- domestic fortifications and such -- descends into a consideration of magical prophylactics, like the practice of

"suspending the heart of a bullock or pig over the hearth, preferably stuck with pins and thorns," to guard against demons coming down the chimney. Practices like this, he maintains, "made ordinary life more susceptible to human control -- especially in the hours after sunset when the world seemed most threatening." Occult charms surely provided some comforting illusion of agency, but it seems doubtful that they made anything at all "more susceptible to human control."

A soft spot for occultism fits in with Ekirch's quasi-primitivist admiration for the "deep reservoir of rural culture." The breezy affection for hearty peasant stock of his opening chapters later becomes unhinged, when he applauds nighttime for its role in the toppling of class hierarchies and the forging of intimate social bonds, arising from forced proximity indoors and the need for shared protection. He proclaims that "despite night's dangers, no other realm of preindustrial existence" -- meaning, presumably, morning or afternoon -- "promised so much autonomy to so many people." From slaves and servants to indigents and thieves, the underclasses indulged in a frenzy of self-realization. Even prostitutes found "a rare measure of autonomy in a trade that defied patriarchal authority."

Heroic prostitutes, however, are just the beginning. It was ill advised to take two steps out of doors after nightfall, but the ample time for self-reflection resulted in an "enhanced self-awareness" among people blessed with "unprecedented freedom to explore their own individuality." Even if, after sunset, "rogues and miscreants, like wild beasts, emerged from their lairs seeking fresh quarry," and roving street gangs raped at will, it wasn't all so bad: "Deflowering young women, at its heart, savagely mocked the established order." Domestic work consumed the wee hours, but no matter, for women cherished the quality time together. Whole families often shared one comfortless bed, but the occasion for closeness handily outweighed the need to turn over or breathe.

Ekirch is too attentive a historian to let himself get away with such a programmatic interpretation of history. There's a palpable tension between his desire to tell a story about our contemporary nocturnal impoverishment, where time for reflection has grown scarce, and his painstaking sense of obligation to the historical record -- a record which strongly suggests that what he celebrates as liberation was more

often delinquency, and awe before the mysterious darkness more like fear. Ekirch frequently embraces the romantic view, only to find himself forced to revise it in short order. At one point, he has masquerades undermining "distinctions between social ranks, with all revelers recreated equal." Two pages later, however, he concedes that "any commitment to social leveling was at best ephemeral."

Had Ekirch's documentary impulse prevailed over his disapproval of our "nonstop culture," where we have lost countless opportunities for "a better understanding of our inner selves," he might have achieved his ambitious promise: to allow the distant, unrelieved darkness to stand for itself.

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