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A Nostalgic Season: Nineteenth-Century New England and the Embrace of Indian Summer

By ADAM W. SWEETING

INDIAN SUMMER never fails to remind us how splendid the weather can be. A brief interlude of warmth amid the otherwise cool fall, the season offers a “moment of miraculous restoration,” writes the poet Donald Hall—“summer’s curtain call or triumphant final tour.”¹ As we swap sweaters for shirt-sleeves, we cannot help but notice the beauty that surrounds us, a beauty accentuated by the angular light cast by the low autumnal sun. The visual effect is miraculous. Bathed in such a glow, objects appear sharper, as if contained within clearly defined frames. Occasionally, a soft haze settles over the landscape as the warm air traps atmospheric dust and smoke. We see better on such days. In rural areas, flowers and shrubs return to life, adding new rounds of color to the fall. In cities we walk with an extra bounce in our steps. Nowhere do these feelings resonate more deeply than they do in New England, a region that began to claim Indian summer as part of its special heritage in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. How and why the season and the region became so indelibly linked is the subject of this essay.

Although theories abound, no one can claim with certainty why a warm spell in the fall first received the name Indian summer. Indeed, no amount of sleuthing has elevated the precise history of the term from a matter of speculation into the realm of fact. The ethnographers in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries collected evidence suggesting that Ojibwa and Penobscot Indians may have had oral traditions of a warm autumnal spell that resembles Indian summer.² The surviving Anglo-American written record, however, remains quite sparse. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the oldest reference to Indian summer occurs in an essay describing American agricultural patterns written in the late 1770s by Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, an essay that remained unpublished in English until the 1920s. The season next shows up in accounts of the weather in the Ohio River Valley and regions just

Adam Sweeting, adaptations from “A Nostalgic Season: Nineteenth-Century New England and the Embrace of Indian Summer,” *Under the Second Sun: A Cultural History of Indian Summer*, forthcoming from University Press of New England, Spring 2003.

1. Donald Hall, *Seasons at Eagle Pond* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1987), 86.

2. See Frank G. Speck “Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs,” *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 48 (January-March 1935): 22, 95-96. See also Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Algonquian Researches: Comprising Inquiries Respecting the Mental Characteristics of North American Indians* (New York, 1839), 59-61. Like virtually everything he wrote about Indian culture, Schoolcraft’s assertions regarding Ojibwa tales of Indian summer must be read carefully for his methodological and cultural biases. Richard G. Bremer summarizes criticisms to Schoolcraft’s methodologies in *Indian Agent and Wilderness Scholar: The Life of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft* (Mount Pleasant, Mich.: Central Michigan University, 1987), 250-51. I discuss in detail the possibility that American Indians had legends of Indian summer that predated white contact in chapter 3 of *Beneath the Second Sun: A Cultural History of Indian Summer* (Hanover, N.H.: UP of New England, 2003).

west of the Alleghenies in what is now western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky. Thanks to the efforts of Albert Matthews, an early twentieth-century Boston lexicographer, we know that the term appeared in journals kept by American military leaders in this region during the 1790s. From 1800 to 1820 we find several references to Indian summer weather in reports written by English travelers to the prairie territories of Illinois and Missouri. A small handful of surviving Indian summer references can also be found in early nineteenth-century medical journals in which physicians debated the health effects of warm weather in the fall.³ Without exception, the surviving references reveal a purely descriptive term without the rich metaphoric language that later writers brought to the season. Commentators described what Indian summer weather was and then moved on. By the 1820s, however, celebratory accounts of the season were consistently included in newspapers, novels, and poems. By mid-century, what first appeared as a few scattered references in the old American West emerged as a staple of weather discourse in the country's Northeast.

The earliest statement to link the season's charms explicitly with the region appears in the work of William Tudor, briefly the editor of the Boston-based *North American Review* and author of the under-appreciated *Letters on the Eastern States*. In the 1821 *Letters* Tudor says of his home region, "one of the most agreeable peculiarities in our climate is a period in the autumn called the Indian summer." Its beauty, he insisted, stood in the same relationship to the actual summer as a "vivid recollection of past joys [does] to the reality." A Boston-area contributor to an 1838 number of *The United States Magazine* similarly claimed that "to a resident of New England the very name of Indian summer calls up so many essentially poetic images, that it is difficult to approach the subject without permitting the thoughts to run riot over the fairy scenes which that season presents."⁴ Poets, too, made the connection, as in

3. The Crevecoeur essay, "A Snow as It Affects the American Farmer," was written in America in the late 1770s but was first published in French in the 1787 *More Letters of an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur's follow-up to the landmark *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782). First published in English in the 1920s, the most scholarly modern edition of the essay can be found in *More Letters of an American Farmer*, Dennis D. Moore, ed. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995), 143. For late eighteenth-century military journals mentioning Indian summer weather, see Ebenezer Denny, *The Military Journal of Ebenezer Denny* (Philadelphia, 1860), 402. An example of a British traveler describing Indian summer in the American West can be found in Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journal of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States of America*, reprinted in *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, vol. 12. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 402. For physicians and Indian summer, see Mason Cogswell, "Sketch of the History of the Weather and Disease at Hartford, During the Winter and Spring of 1798," *Medical Repository* ii (1798), 299.

The most comprehensive search for early references to Indian summer remains, Albert Matthews, "The Term Indian Summer," *Monthly Weather Review* 30 (January 1902): 19-28 and (February 1902): 69-78. My summary history of the season prior to its inception in New England weather lore draws from this two-part article. In a remarkable feat of scholarship, Matthews located the few references to the season in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the course of my research I have uncovered others, but I remain heavily indebted to Matthews's work. Anyone who writes on the history of Indian summer owes much to his labor. What Matthews does not do and which I attempt to do in my cultural history of Indian summer, *Beneath the Second Sun*, is to provide the cultural and historical context for the early references. He lists them but does not explain why they appeared when and where they did.

4. William Tudor, *Letter on the Eastern States* (Boston, 1821), 312; *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 3 (1838): 153. Albert Matthews includes these two references in "The Term Indian Summer," *Monthly Weather Review* 30 (1902): 24, 26.

Frances Osgood's thirteen-stanza poem inspired by an Indian summer scene painted by Thomas Doughty, an artist active in Boston in the 1830s. For Osgood, the "wild beauty" of Indian summer belongs to "one sunny region alone." "New England, beloved New England," she writes, "the soul-waking scene is thine own!"⁵

As students of American literature will recognize, these comments were uttered during the same decade that many New England writers consciously worked to establish a literature national in scope. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a lifelong Massachusetts resident, articulated a vision of American writing that took the vastness of the New World as its subject; rather than confining himself to the narrow and small, his ideal scholar would embrace everything that was large. Key figures in literary New England's embrace of Indian summer such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes also assumed that they labored to build a broadly national literature. This is a well-known story, one by which, as Stephen Nissenbaum points out, New England writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau are taught in classes on "American Literature" while their contemporary William Gilmore Simms is presented as "Southern."⁶ But it is a story with implications for the history of New England Indian summer, a history simultaneously told as a regional and national tale.

Nineteenth-century New England's celebration of Indian summer, then, points in two different directions, albeit for the same reason. The embrace began when local authors figuratively brought to the East a season that was first consistently celebrated in the West. But once ensconced in the new terrain, Indian summer could in turn propel the image of New England outward to the nation at large. By the 1830s, New Englanders were quite accustomed to such projections. As Joseph Conforti points out in his study of New England identity, the efforts to foist regional ways on to the nation at large dates to the late eighteenth-century geography books by Connecticut's Jedediah Morse. Issued and revised several times over the years, Morse's geographies imagined the six New England states as a definable cultural entity that served as a collective exemplar of Federalist virtue—a regional model for the nation.⁷ And so it was with nineteenth-century New England Indian summer. Codified and embraced while New England writers worked to create a nation-defining body of letters, the season became a meteorological analogue for a broader cultural and literary campaign—it showed New England at its best.

But when mid-nineteenth-century New Englanders embraced Indian summer, they also used the season to blanket the region beneath layers of nostalgia for moments lost, a blanketing that Indian summer weather is perfectly

5. Frances Osgood, *The Poetry of Flowers* (New York, 1841), 216.

6. Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Region and Nation," in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, Peter Oruf, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 40.

7. Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001), 79-122.

suited to supply. The season “is necessarily sad,” read one 1853 *Harper’s Monthly* article, precisely because “the pilgrim of the year understands that these bright days are the last green points of the pleasant summer along which he has been idly coasting.”⁸ As Keats understood, autumn months in general can leave us watching “the last oozy hours by hours” as we prepare physically and spiritually for the winter that lies ahead. Indian summer, however, condenses that preparation to a brief window in time that focuses our attention on the dead and dying leaves that surround us. The process begins by recognizing the beauty of the day. In the late afternoon, quiet fills the air, even in cities such as the one where I sit in October drafting this paragraph. Throughout the fall, the amount of available sunlight declines noticeably each day, but a visit by Indian summer brings forth a marvelous intensity to those few hours that divide the looming dark. But with that intensity comes a certain melancholic sense born out of our knowledge that the beauty will not last. Though the weather may be glorious for a spell, our ability to hold that glory diminishes with each flip of the calendar page. During Indian summer birds may sing again and crickets may once again chirp, but we know their voices will soon be gone.

Anyone who has been a parent of young children can understand how such weather seems infused with regret. I still recall last fall’s Indian summer trek with my son out of the city and into the country in search of the perfect Halloween pumpkin. The weather was perfect—warm, sunny, and well beyond the first devastating frost. And yet the experience, which I would not replace for a moment, amounted to an emotional mixed bag. As we passed farm stands rife with apples and late corn, my own childhood drives with my father came to mind. Would my son remember this excursion, I wondered? I tried hard to focus on my parental duties, but waves of nostalgia, the most crippling emotion, carried me from the immediacy of the present to remembered Indian summer journeys from my past. Eventually I surrendered to the moment, allowing the smells of dried leaves and hay to evoke, as only aromas can, my more youthful days. Every jack o’ lantern from childhood seemed to once again glow. But then the most difficult moment occurred. As my son bounded out of the car, proclaiming one pumpkin after another the best, I understood perhaps as never before the days I could not have back.

* * *

THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT literary work to specifically link Indian summer with New England is Sarah Josepha Hale’s 1827 novel, *Northwood*. A more perfect beginning would be difficult to find. A farmer’s daughter born in New Hampshire in 1788, Hale in the 1830s and 1840s used her editorial position at *Godey’s Lady’s Book* to campaign for the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday. In *Northwood*, the first of several novels she would eventu-

8. *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 7 (1853): 842.

ally write, she re-creates an idyllic Granite State farm reminiscent of the one she enjoyed as a child. An early example of New England regional writing, the novel was also among the first significant American literary works to address the widening gap between the North and South over the issue of slavery. Indeed, the plot trajectory deliberately establishes a contrast between the regions. Though born in New Hampshire, Hale's protagonist grew up in the South after his parents, believing that their son's prospects would be improved by such a move, consented to allow Southern relatives to raise him in a more luxurious environment south of the Mason-Dixon line. When he returns to the family farm as a young man, he is greeted by a perfect New England Indian summer day, a greeting that assures the hero that he has truly arrived home. "Our autumn," the narrator claims for both New Hampshire and New England, "has a period of peculiar and mysterious loveliness, called the Indian summer."

This brief season, of about twelve days in the whole, though rarely following in consecutive order, is most beautiful and distinctly marked in New England. The softness of atmosphere is then indescribable. The sun looks down as though dreaming of June and its roses; while some tricky spirit throws over the faded earth a veil that, mirage-like, gives a charm beyond the brightness of summer noon. This is most perfect in November.⁹

The beautiful Indian summer day provides compensatory cover for the bitter-sweet emotions of the prodigal's return home. For all the advantages his wealthy Southern upbringing allowed him to accrue, the weather that marks the hero's triumphant journey reminds him of everything he has missed.

Two years later, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow drew on similar sentimental sensibilities in his early prose tale, "Indian Summer." The story emerged during a difficult moment in Longfellow's life. While in Germany in 1829, the 21-year-old Maine native proposed to a Philadelphia publishing house a series of fictional sketches on life in New England, one of which was to be called "Indian Summer." The detailed proposal called for tales on a variety of New England habits and institutions, much as Washington Irving's 1819 *Sketch Book* invoked long-standing customs of England and the Hudson River Valley. At the time, Longfellow was distressed that a promised professorship at Bowdoin College—his alma mater—had been reduced to the rank of instructor. (Bowdoin officials believed he was too young to assume a full professor's chair). Having gone to Europe to prepare for the position, he found himself alone in Dresden, a city he did not like. Confused about his professional prospects, Longfellow began collecting materials for his proposed book of New England tales as a way to resurrect his spirits.¹⁰ The story, which eventually appeared in the 1832 edition of *The Token*, begins with an effusive description of a New England Indian summer:

9. Sarah Josepha Hale, *Northwood, or North and South* (New York, 1970: Johnson Reprint Corporation), 42.

10. Newton Arvin, *Longfellow: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little Brown, 1962), 39-40.

In the melancholy month of October, when the
 variegated tints of the autumnal landscape begin
 to fade away into the pale and sickly hue of death,
 a few soft, delicious days, called the Indian
 summer, steal in upon the close of the year,
 and, like a Second Spring, breathe a balm round
 the departing season, and light up with a smile
 the pallid features of the dying year. They
 resemble those calm and lucid intervals, which
 sometimes precede the last hour of slow decline.¹¹

The tale describes the accidental visit of a traveler to a deathbed scene in New England. Shortly after arriving in the unnamed village, the narrator watches the last rights of a young woman stricken by a mysterious disease. Longfellow rolled out all of the sentimental devices for this short sketch, including a final reunion between the dying young woman and her long lost brother who had fled the idyllic village in fits of intemperance. The pause between one season and the next that Indian summer represents contributes to the sentimental scene. The unusual warmth calls to mind “those calm and lucid intervals, which sometimes precede the last hour or slow decline.” The young woman, who has piously accepted her soon-to-come passing, similarly hovers between life and death.

Longfellow’s interest in Indian summer set the stage for an ongoing fascination for the season among Boston’s Brahmin elite, particularly for those who associated Indian summer imagery with the wisdom that comes with middle age. Indeed, as the century unfolded, more and more writers saw the season as a period of second (and smarter) youth that follows a hard-won maturity. Seasons, of course, lend themselves to literary depictions of the stages that comprise human life. The conventions are well-known. Spring implies youth, while summer ushers in young adulthood; autumn in turn brings maturity, while winter signals old age and death. Indian summer, on the other hand, allows a more nuanced reading of the inevitable advance of years. Because plants and shrubs briefly rebound to life when the temperatures once again soar, the season invites writers to fuse images of youthful exuberance with the seasoned understanding of the mature.

James Russell Lowell offered the most extensive aging-Brahmin version of the season in his 1847 poem “An Indian Summer Reverie.” The poem begins with a depiction of the season’s “visionary tints”; but whereas Longfellow merely described his scene, Lowell draws more explicitly on the tenets of Romanticism to bring the speaker into direct contact with his subject. “No more the landscape holds its wealth apart,” he notes; rather, the Indian summer weather “mingles with my senses and my heart.” Outside meteorological conditions metaphorically seep inside. Emboldened by such a fusion between interior and exterior states, Lowell’s reverie carries him past the plants and

11. *The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, vol. 3 (New York: The Davio Press, 1909), 175.

animals that have emerged for an apparent second spring. As he travels along the riverbank, the surrounding water, land, and air teem with life; everything, his senses included, seems doubly alive. Two stanzas may stand for the rest:

The cock's shrill trump that tells of scattered
corn,
Passed breezily on by all his flapping mates,
Faint and more faint, from barn to barn is borne,
Southward, perhaps to far Magellan's Straits;
Dimly I catch the throb of distant flails;
Silently overhead the hen-hawk sails,
With watchful, measuring eye, and for his quarry
waits.

The sobered robin, hunger-silent now,
Seeks cedar-berries blue, his autumn cheer;
The chipmunk, on the shingly shagbark's bough,
Now saws, now lists with downward eye and ear,
Then drops his nut, and, cheeping, with a bound
Whisks to his winding fastness underground;
The clouds like swans drift down the streaming at-
mosphere.¹²

Toward the end of the poem Lowell switches from detailed nature depiction to mournful recollections of scenes from the past. While looking toward his boyhood home in Cambridge, his seasonal reverie becomes a catalogue of loss. Because the town had grown so quickly in the ensuing years, "the fields famed in boyhood's history" now stand as little more than a "diminished green." Figures from the poet's childhood such as the painter Washington Allston and the village blacksmith—a small-town icon that Longfellow would famously develop—have died, leaving Cambridge poorer for their passing.

Lowell's response suggests why the season proved so popular among the Brahmin class. Not yet thirty when he wrote "An Indian Summer Reverie," the poet seems already to feel old. And in some sense he was. Although they were never quite the picturesque small towns he reverentially recalls in these 1847 lines, the Cambridge and Boston of Lowell's youth had nonetheless by mid-century developed into an international center of commerce, education, and trade, a process hastened, ironically enough, by the Lowell family's lucrative textile mills. At the same time, Ireland's potato famine led thousands of immigrants to scurry toward Boston, forever altering the region's political and ethnic mix. Brahmins remained firmly in charge of the area's cultural and financial institutions, but their numerical grip on the city and region were rapidly giving way. As Lowell wrote in his 1854 essay "Cambridge Thirty Years Ago," the region previously "had a character. Railways and omnibuses had not [yet] rolled flat all the little social prominences and peculiarities."

12. James Russell Lowell, "An Indian Summer Reverie," *The Complete Writings of James Russell Lowell*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, 1878), 192-93. The full poem runs from pages 191-202.

With a population “wholly without foreign mixture,” the Cambridge of his youth represented the calm before a pending storm.¹³

Of all the Brahmins, Oliver Wendell Holmes most consistently drew the connection between premature aging and Indian summer. Age, Holmes believed, was always catching up with him. The son of a minister, he lacked the easy access to wealth enjoyed by Lowell. Still, as a leading Boston doctor and popular essayist, novelist, and poet, he eventually became a pinnacle of the Brahmin elite. Born in 1809, Holmes began writing poetry about growing old before graduating from Harvard. One of his earliest poems, significantly enough entitled “The Last Leaf,” employs the conventional image of a dying leaf to describe an elderly man’s shuffle through the streets. After smiling at his awkward gait, the young speaker hopes that future youngsters will also smile “At the old forsaken bough/where I cling.”¹⁴ Holmes continued to write about aging throughout his long career, often by associating the process with Indian summer. When, for example, he was asked to deliver a poem at an 1856 celebration marking the 27th anniversary of his Harvard commencement, he offered lines to “Our Indian Summer,” a title that no doubt caught the attention of his classmates, most of whom were still in their forties.

But the season was more than a hackneyed metaphor for advancing age. In fact, its hints of passing youth led Holmes literally to wander through the past: “This is,” he wrote in 1866, “the season for old churchyards”—not the burial grounds of Boston, which have been “ruined” by that city’s relentless growth, but the still quiet and unchanged plots of Cambridge and Dorchester which remain “inviolat.” Holmes was especially moved by reminders of early death he encountered during his Indian summer strolls through graveyards. Thus while in Dorchester he stood face to face with the burial stone of a child of three who had been dead for nearly two centuries. The dead child, enigmatically named Submit, obviously wracked the heart of a “Pilgrim mother two hundred years ago and more.” But in the faded epigraph Holmes finds words to counter his own Indian summer mood:

Submit submitted to her heavenly king
Being a flower of that eternal spring
Neare 3 yeares old she dyed in heaven to waite
The yeare was sixteen hundred 48.

Unmoved for two centuries, the dead Pilgrim child still “sleeps in peace.”¹⁵

The emphasis on age in these statements reveals Brahmin anxiety over the changing face of New England, an anxiety shared by Anglo-American writers in the region almost from the moment colonists first set foot on New

13. Lowell, *Complete Writings*, vol. 1: 20, 28. For an overview of Brahmin culture and their hold on cultural and economic power at mid-century, see Paul Goodman, “Ethics and Enterprise, The Values of a Boston Elite, 1800-1860,” *American Quarterly* 16 (fall 1966), 437-51; and Ronald Story, “Class and Culture in Boston: The Athenaeum,” *American Quarterly* 27 (May 1975): 178-99.

14. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Complete Poems* (Boston: 1878), 1-2. Holmes’s early years and initial poetic efforts are discussed in Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Improper Bostonian: Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1979), 17-38.

15. Holmes, “The Seasons,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: 1899), 166.

England soil. Indeed, by the late seventeenth century, regional writers were already claiming that New England was not what it used to be.¹⁶ Of course, the myth that New England had a golden past is precisely that—a myth, one that the Brahmins eagerly embraced. For writers such as Lowell and Holmes, the mist of Indian summer was part of that embrace. While other young men of their generation moved away to seek fortunes further west, they remained home to wander local burial grounds. Like Indian summer itself, which briefly brings life to the late-year landscape, they found youth while rummaging amid the old.¹⁷

No writer with ties to New England did more to solidify the link between Indian summer and advancing age than William Dean Howells. To be sure, Howells was not a New Englander by birth. But his longtime residence in Cambridge and his nineteen-year stint as editor of the Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly* made him an astute observer of the region's mores. The phrase "Indian Summer" does not appear in the novel named for the season, but everything in the story suggests that Howells believed his title carried sufficient metaphoric weight to stand unambiguously for wizened middle age. The novel concerns the forty-one-year-old Theodore Colville, an Indiana newspaper editor visiting Florence, a city he last visited in his early twenties. While walking through the streets he runs into a female friend he knew during his previous visit; now in her late thirties, the friend, a thirty-eight-year-old widow named Lina Bowen, is chaperoning a twenty-year-old American girl named Imogene Graham. (The girl's parents remain in Buffalo). Colville, a lifelong bachelor, is taken aback by the girl's beauty and vitality. At the same time, he finds her youth a cause of regret. Indeed, "the spectacle of that young unjaded capacity for pleasure touched him with a profound sense of loss." Nevertheless, after only a few meetings the two become engaged, although Colville tries to warn her that the twenty years that separate them might some day prove difficult. At first, Imogene dismisses his caution, wanting instead for Colville to know that "I am your youth—the youth you were robbed of—given back to you." Eventually, however, she realizes that a marriage could not work. Colville, who had suspected as much all along, instead quite happily weds the far more appropriately aged Lina Bowen, a woman who throughout the novel displays a maturity and common sense commensurate with her years. In the end, he claims, "I have married a young person," a belatedly gracious statement that Lina nonetheless finds "irresistible."¹⁸

John Updike recently remarked of *Indian Summer*, "A midlife crisis has rarely been sketched in fiction with better humor, with gentler comedy, and more gracious acceptance of life's irrevocability."¹⁹ There is, indeed, an ex-

16. I am thinking here most specifically of Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom*.

17. For discussion of how this dynamic unfolded in the mid-nineteenth century, see George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of the Age of Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 13-53.

18. William Dean Howells, *Indian Summer* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971), 56, 198, 280.

19. *New York Review of Books*, February 1, 1990, 14.

quisite delicacy to the language that we don't always find in Howells, although I confess that the forty-one-year-old Colville does not strike this particular author as especially old. But the hero's eventual recognition that his age calls for a form of serenity not required of his youth certainly hits home. Early in the novel, an expatriated Unitarian minister from Massachusetts, the nineteenth-century home of *Indian Summer*, reminds Colville of just this point. "At forty," the minister claims,

"One still has a great part of youth before him—perhaps the richest and sweetest part." By that time the turmoil of ideas and sensations is over; we see clearly and feel consciously. We are in a sort of quiet in which we peacefully enjoy. We have enlarged our perspective sufficiently to perceive things in their true proportion and relation; we are no longer tormented with the lurking fear of death, which darkens and embitters our earlier years; we have got into the habit of life; we have often been ailing and we have not died. Then we have time enough behind us to supply us with the materials of reverie and reminiscence; the terrible solitude of experience is broken; we have learned to smile at many things besides the fear of death. We ought also to have learned pity and patience.

Forty, the minister concludes, "is a beautiful age."²⁰

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, neither Howells nor his Brahmin predecessors could ignore that for all its implied serenity, *Indian Summer* also implied a loss of vitality. To some observers, New England letters seemed especially drained of such vitality. Van Wyck Brooks famously argued in *The Flowering of New England* (1936) that Emerson, Hawthorne, and the other figures of the American Renaissance created New England's finest literature between 1840 and 1860. This is not the place to challenge such an overly broad statement. It is, however, noteworthy that when Brooks next turned his attention to the years between 1865 and 1914, he entitled his study *New England: Indian Summer*. To be sure, he found occasional moments of brilliance during these later years, particularly in the work of Henry James and Henry Adams. But overall he noted a general drop in literary vigor. Wherever Brooks turned, he found the region stuck in a cultural torpor: "Society had lost its vital interests, and the Boston mind was indolent and flaccid, as if the struggle for existence had passed it by." Such complaints were not exactly new. Nor were they entirely accurate, as Brooks confined himself to the writing of Anglo-descended whites as if they alone constituted New England literature. Nevertheless, when Brooks surveyed the post-Civil War New England literary landscape he noted that "a mood of reminiscence possessed the people, for whom the present offered few excitements." In cities and towns, the men (he says nothing of the women) seemed "torpid and listless," their "ambitions seemed to be atrophied except on the practical plane." By the 1880s the signs were clear: "A haze of Indian Summer hung over New England."²¹

20. Howells, *Indian Summer*, 128.

21. Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer* (New York: E P Dutton & Co.: 1940), 330.

BROOKS'S DEPICTION of New England letters after the Civil War brings me back to the Brahmin depictions of Indian summer, most of which were written in the years *before* the Civil War, when literary New England was supposedly at its peak. Their statements reveal a prescience for which they are not often credited. Powerless to stop the transformation of their region, a transformation that saw New England lose its central place in American cultural and political life, they welcomed the arrival of Indian summer's haze. Nowhere near as talented as Emerson or Hawthorne, the Brahmins may nonetheless have been ahead of their illustrious contemporaries on at least one front: They described the Indian Summer of New England while the literary flowering (to use Brooks's terms) remained in full bloom.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that their colonial-era ancestors celebrated the arrival of Indian summer, nineteenth-century New Englanders assumed that the season enjoyed a long and venerated history, a history at least as old as the earliest white colonists in New England. Indeed, this remains one of the most common misperceptions about the season. The naturalist Susan Cooper, for example, claimed "Our native writers, as soon as we had writers of our own, pointed out very early both the sweetness of the Indian summer, and the magnificence of the autumnal changes."²² She even suggested that writers would have to have been "dull and blind" to have not remarked upon its beauty. An 1855 article in the art journal *Crayon* similarly claimed that "accounts of the New World sent home by the earliest Pilgrims dwelt with especial wonder at delight upon Indian summer."²³ And although he admitted that "we look in vain for any recognition of it in pages not more than half a century old," the naturalist Bela Hubbard in 1887 likewise reported that "early New England writers speak of this serene portion of autumn as peculiar to America, hence the name they gave it."²⁴ A relative newcomer in discussions of American weather, the season nonetheless seemed present when Anglo presence in the Americas began.

The assumption that the earliest English settlers in New England enjoyed Indian summer weather has roots in the same feelings of loss I have been considering in this essay. As several nineteenth-century writers discovered, one way to ameliorate the Brahmin fear that New England had fallen from grace was to backdate the contemporary weather. For many, the glorious nineteenth-century Indian summer represented a natural link to the climates

22. Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours* (1851, reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1968), 229.

23. *Crayon*, 2 (November 21, 1855): 329.

24. Bela Hubbard, *Memorials of a Half-Century: Account of Climate, Plants and History of Michigan* (New York: 1887), 558. Hubbard's quote has been mistakenly used to bolster arguments that seventeenth-century New Englanders routinely spoke of Indian summer. In an otherwise outstanding book on the natural history of autumn, for instance, Peter Marchand attributes this passage to William Hubbard, a seventeenth-century Puritan minister. The quote clearly comes from Bela Hubbard's book, however. Peter J. Marchand, *Autumn: A Season of Change* (Hanover, N.H.: UP of New England, 2000), 122-23.

of the past. As a result, celebrations of a brief period of meteorological bliss often amounted to a rewriting of history. Continuities were established where none existed.²⁵

Claims that New England and Indian summer perfectly suited each other contributed to or paralleled a series of historical reconstructions by which the region re-conceived its past to serve present ends. The hagiography surrounding the Pilgrims makes this point clear. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Pilgrims were newly venerated as the prescient fathers of New England religious and political liberty, a process that only accelerated as the 1820 bicentennial of Plymouth's founding loomed. The *Mayflower* Compact (a phrase unused by the small Separatist community) and Plymouth Rock (on which there is no evidence that the Pilgrims ever set foot) became regional icons to which nineteenth-century New Englanders could point as physical and emotional reminders of the region's first white inhabitants. But as Joseph Conforti points out, the later version of the Pilgrim was almost wholly an invention, one that subsumed the much larger and historically more significant Puritan communities to the north into a mythic story of national origins that began at the tip of Cape Cod. Everyone in seventeenth-century New England became a Pilgrim.²⁶ Indian Summer provided the meteorological cover for this filiopietistic embrace. As the Pilgrims grew in stature, the season's champions backdated their own period's most glorious weather to allow New England's first white settlers to bask in its glow.

We find examples of such a process in several different genres. An 1851 history of Litchfield, Connecticut, for example, asks readers to imagine the landscape that greeted "the first hardy explorers to these pleasant valleys, two hundred years ago." The native inhabitants of this landscape, we are told, looked forward each year to the "golden days of Indian summer," a period when native inhabitants "mused of the Great Spirit, the giver of corn, beans, and tobacco."²⁷ In his 1857 poem "Mabel Martin," John Greenleaf Whittier likewise suggested that during the height of the 1692 Salem Witch trials Indian summer paid a visit. Consciously seeking to "call the old times back," Whittier describes the plight of the title character, who had been convicted and executed for witchcraft. Her daughter, obviously distressed at the disaster that struck the family, was so overcome with grief that "she scarcely felt the soft caress" of "Indian Summer's airs."²⁸

25. In a much-quoted essay, the historian Eric Hobsbawm has labeled this process "the invention of tradition," by which customs develop seemingly overnight. A classic example is the Scotch wearing of kilts, a custom that developed in the late eighteenth century as part of a nationalist campaign aimed toward the construction of a heroic military and cultural past. By century's end, kilts became associated with Scotland's ancient history, even though they were woven first by an English clothier around 1730. Hobsbawm describes how and why such traditions come into being in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983). For kilt wearing, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition in Scotland," 13-41 in the same volume.

26. Conforti, *Imagining New England*, 171-96.

27. *Litchfield Country Centennial Celebration, held at Litchfield, Connecticut, 13th and 14th of August, 1851* (Hartford, 1851), 29.

28. John Greenleaf Whittier, *Poems*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1892), 203.

In some sense, these gestures resemble the desire to preserve the Romanticist desire to inscribe Native Americans within the Vanishing Indian motif, a common mid-century trope that directed nostalgic glances toward Indian culture, often, as in Lydia Sigourney's 1849 poem "Indian Summer," by placing native people within Indian summer settings.²⁹ As the above-quoted contributor to the *Crayon* conceded, we "love to associate it [Indian summer] with the fading memories of that race whose history, alas! is like the vague shadowing of an autumn distance."³⁰ In other words, the hoped-for Pilgrim Indian summer allowed seventeenth-century New Englanders to somehow survive into the nineteenth century. Like Native Americans, Pilgrim settlers and their immediate descendants briefly halted their fade into the distance when Indian summer reigned. The irony, of course, is that Indians and Pilgrims ended up on opposite sides of the historical fence. Nevertheless, the language of Indian summer proved pliable enough to embrace anyone in need of embracing. During a New England Indian summer, both the natives for whom the season is named and the people whose arrival ultimately doomed those same natives could be simultaneously memorialized and preserved.

Once the Pilgrims and Puritans had been covered with Indian summer mist it was only a matter of time before late eighteenth-century New Englanders came in for similar treatment. Thus, in her 1868 novel *Oldtown Folks*, Harriet Beecher Stowe employs the nineteenth-century season to describe an autumnal ritual of a much earlier time.³¹ A Connecticut native whose family bulked large in nineteenth-century New England literary and religious life, Stowe depicts an eighteenth-century New England Indian summer that lends bucolic charm to a fictional village in the years just after the American Revolution. It is a town not unlike the one she lived in as a girl. Whenever the "warm, late days of Indian Summer came in," she writes, "the Deacon began to say to the minister, of a Sunday, 'I suppose it's about time for the Thanksgiving proclamation.'" At such times, there "came over the community a sort of genial repose of spirit," as if the weather helped facilitate cohesion. And cohesion was precisely the point she wished to make. As in her several post-Civil War historical novels, Stowe in *Oldtown Folks* drew on her deep knowledge of local history and customs to present idealized glimpses into New England's past. In the preface, the narrator remarks that the work "endeavors to show you New England in its seed bed, before the hot suns of modern progress had developed its sprouting germs into the great trees of today." Accordingly, when Indian summer arrives just before Thanksgiving the fictionalized pre-modern New England shines as only New England during Indian summer

29. For discussion of the Vanishing Indian motif, see Brian Dipple, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1982), 9-31.

30. *Crayon* 2 (November 21, 1855), 329.

31. My understanding of how Stowe mined the New England past has been greatly influenced by Stephen Nissenbaum's "New England as Region and Nation" in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 43-46. Nissenbaum outlines several areas where early nineteenth-century New England iconography depended upon an assumed connection to the region's past.

can. The community is united, the weather is glorious, and together the town relishes the “sense of something accomplished.”³²

Though describing an era nearly fifty years prior to New England’s wholesale embrace of the season, the arrival of Indian summer in Stowe’s mythic village nonetheless suggests that the annual glowing warmth could help transform the region’s small towns into icons of stability.³³ Lowell, we recall, similarly turned to Indian summer when recollecting the Cambridge of his youth. His “Indian Summer Reverie” led him to recall the apparently cohesive Cambridge of his youth in which a few houses stood clustered around a common. As with Stowe, it was the ideal weather for the ideal town. “There gleams my native village,” he writes in a late stanza:

There, in red brick, which softening time defies
Stand square and stiff the Muses’ factories;—
How with my life knit up is every well-known scene.³⁴

But as several recent studies have shown, the dignified town center of Lowell’s youth did not possess the venerable history he assumed. What we imagine as the traditional New England village—a community around a common, a steepled church, and a few substantial houses—represented a clear and distinct break from colonial-era settlement patterns, which tended to be far more dispersed across the land. While celebrants of the communal ideal (recall Stowe’s invocation of Indian summer cohesion) pointed to small nucleated New England villages as embodiments of virtue, such spaces first sprang into existence in the early nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, the center village emerged in the antebellum decades as a key ideological motif linking the region with its colonial past.³⁵

Historically ideal townscapes and weatherscapes, then, served the same function: The nucleated village had apparently always been there, while the annual turn of the seasons had apparently always produced a moment of beauty and calm called Indian summer. Both linked New England to a romanticized and de-historicized past. A series of conflation, then, defined nineteenth-century New England Indian summer. For just as the urban landscape was imaginatively collapsed into its premodern form, so too did the extremes of New England weather collapse into a celebration of serenity and calm. Summer’s heat and winter’s chill figuratively vanish when Indian summer is held up as the region’s most distinctive meteorological event.

To even speak of New England Indian summer requires us to imagine the region as a cohesive whole. We conflate the distinctions that mark the region, and then we celebrate the weather as if the distinctions did not exist. Yet if we look at the arrival of killing frosts, which most people would say is the most

32. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oldtown Folks* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), xiii, 385-86.

33. Nissenbaum, “New England as Region and Nation,” 43-46.

34. Lowell, “An Indian Summer Reverie,” 200.

35. For the invention of village mythology, see Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 162. Wood’s first chapter and pages 135-50 also provide interesting discussion of how villages emerged as cultural icons.

reliable predictor of an Indian summer, we find great variety across the six states. According to statistics compiled by New Hampshire State climatologist Barry Keim, nearly two months separate the average date for the first killing frosts in different New England locales. Farmington, Maine, can expect one by September 28, while Block Island will not see one, on average, until November 26. Similarly, Concord, New Hampshire, has its first killing frost on or about October 2, while Hartford must wait until October 24.³⁶ Clearly, no one part of New England has a monopoly on the arrival of Indian summer, and yet we continue to speak as if the entire region could be condensed into one definable and containable weather event. What is experienced in quite different ways in quite different places at quite different times becomes a uniform New England Indian summer.

All of which brings me back to nineteenth-century New England and Indian summer. For better or worse, the idea of New England as both a natural and cultural whole has persevered over the years. To think of New England inevitably requires us to collapse distinctions, a process that enables us to think of the region as a place with its own customs, its own habits, its own weather. As Kent Ryden notes, "For many Americans both within and outside the region, New England is popularly defined not by a certain set of geographical boundaries but rather by a cluster of images, icons, historic episodes, character types: the white village, the steepled church, the Revolution, Puritan times, the Yankee."³⁷ To this list I would add Indian summer, a season that came into its own as an emblem of faded glory just as elite New Englanders were beginning to find their own glories in the past. Old and wise but with enough rekindled youth in its belly, the season's momentary gift of beauty suggested that New England might just survive its Indian summer days. It held out the hope of any parent (and New Englanders certainly thought of themselves as national parents) that the beautiful child in one's arms will not lose the sparkle in his or her eyes.

36. Barry Keim, a professor of meteorology at the University of New Hampshire and the New Hampshire state climatologist, collected these statistics as part of his ongoing analysis of historical changes in New England's growing season. He kindly shared them with me in personal conversation.

37. Kent Ryden, *Landscape with Figures: Nature and Culture in New England* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2001), 24.