

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #193

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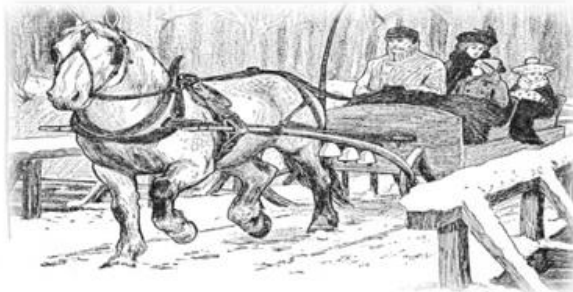
'Over the River and Through the Wood'

Happy
Thanksgiving

THE NEW-ENGLAND BOY'S SONG
ABOUT THANKSGIVING DAY.

Over the river, and through the
wood,
To grandfather's house we go:
The horse knows the way,
To carry the sleigh,
Through the white and drifted snow.

Over the river, and through the wood,
To grandfather's house away!
We will not stop
For dull as nap,
For 't is Thanksgiving day.



There are more, *hmmm*, 'great' is probably not the word, but well-known Thanksgiving poems than one might suspect. Many a poet has sung of the season's

charms – ranging from Felicia Dorothea Heman’s “The Landing of the Pilgrims” to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Whitcomb Riley, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s simply named “Thanksgiving” to Langston Hughes’ “Thanksgiving Time,” all breathing the cold winter air.

But by almost any account, the most famous is Lydia Maria Child’s “The New-England Boy’s Song about Thanksgiving Day.” You likely know it as “Over the River and Through the Wood to Grandfather’s House We Go” from her 1844 collection of poems and stories for children ***Flowers for Children: For Children from Four to Six Years Old***. [1]

The child of a loveless marriage and distant parents, Child, according to her biographer Carolyn Karcher, loved Thanksgiving Day at her grandparents with its warmth and communal sharing of food and love. Karcher says it was “the one memory of her youth that she liked to recall,” the picture of which she would immortalize as “a traditional New England Thanksgiving in her poem ‘Over the river and through the wood, / To grandfather’s house we go,’ which generations of American children have sung without knowing the author’s name.” [2]

BTW – “Grandfather’s House” still exists. Known as the “Paul Curtis House,” named after a subsequent owner, it is in Medford, Massachusetts. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Readers of these **Book Notes** have met Child before. In **[Book Note #36: “Happy Thanksgiving! Be Grateful for Hale, and Child, too”](#)** we

discovered that the way we celebrate Thanksgiving is largely the creation of two 19th-century women most Americans do not know. In **[Book Note #94: “Lydia Maria Child: First Woman of the Republic”](#)** reviewing Karcher’s biography, we discovered that Lydia Maria Child was one of the first women to earn her living as a professional writer.

A novelist, journalist, and prolific author of children’s literature and of the early 19th century’s most important domestic guide, ***The Frugal Housewife***, Child was also a proto-feminist who helped begin the American women’s rights movement with her ***History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Nations***. She was also a powerful abolitionist as she edited the American Anti-Slavery Society’s newspaper the ***National Anti-Slavery Standard***.

It is safe to say that Lydia Maria Child is one of the two (Hale is the other) most important 19th-century women most Americans have never heard of. I have spoken about them at length in my *The American Tapestry Project* itself, in its series on *American Holidays, Sports and the Quest for Women's Rights*, and *The Birth of the Women's Movement*.

But all of that is for another time.

Today is Thanksgiving Day, and here is Lydia Maria Child's definitive "take" on this most American of all American holidays:

The New-England Boy's Song about Thanksgiving Day

Over the river, and through the wood,
To grandfather's house we go;
The horse knows the way,
To carry the sleigh,
Through the white and drifted snow.

Over the river, and through the wood,
To grandfather's house away!
We would not stop
For doll or top,
For 't is Thanksgiving day.

Over the river, and through the wood,
Oh, how the wind does blow!
It stings the toes,
And bites the nose,
As over the ground we go.

Over the river, and through the wood,
With a clear blue winter sky,
The dogs do bark,
And children hark,
As we go jingling by.

Over the river, and through the wood,
To have a first-rate play —
Hear the bells ring
Ting a ling ding,
Hurra for Thanksgiving day!

Over the river, and through the wood —
No matter for winds that blow;
Or if we get
The sleigh upset,
Into a bank of snow.

Over the river, and through the wood,
To see little John and Ann;
We will kiss them all,
And play snow-ball,
And stay as long as we can.

Over the river, and through the wood,
Trot fast, my dapple grey!
Spring over the ground,
Like a hunting hound,
For 't is Thanksgiving day!

Over the river, and through the wood,
And straight through the barn-yard gate;
We seem to go
Extremely slow,
It is so hard to wait.

Over the river, and through the wood,
Old Jowler hears our bells;
He shakes his pow,
With a loud bow wow,
And thus the news he tells.

Over the river, and through the wood —
When grandmother sees us come,
She will say, Oh dear,
The children are here,
Bring a pie for every one.

Over the river, and through the wood —
Now grandmother's cap I spy!
Hurra for the fun!
Is the pudding done?
Hurra for the pumpkin pie! [3]

An excellent recitation of the poem can be found [here](#).

Set to music by an unknown composer, the poem as song has been recorded numerous times. There are dozens on YouTube, but this one seems to [capture the proper spirit](#).

Happy Thanksgiving!



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End Notes

1. Karcher, Carolyn L. **The First Woman of the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child**. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 620.
 2. Ibid., p. 6.
 3. This poem is in the public domain.
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