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Adam Gopnik, *Winter: Five Windows on the Season*, Quercus, 256pages, £18.99

There is something admirable about a clever, witty and broadly read essayist like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik's bold attempt to gather disparate strands of art, literature and cultural commentary to make a statement about the human condition. In *Winter*, Gopnik's subject is that season where humans hold in their minds the contradictory notions of a time that is both scary and sweet. He traces the modern concept of winter from the French Enlightenment, where it was 'bad' and 'dangerous' to its Romantic reinvention as sweet, even seductive. Through his examples that stretch from the polar explorers, to the meaning of Christmas, to ice skating and hockey, we see winter as an imaginative place of natural beauty and natural authority.

If nothing else, modern winter is a product of technological advancement so that as central heating, durable winter clothing, better methods of food preservation and electric lights evolved, so did our sentimentality about something that used to signal peril. 'Once you were truly warm, winter was, more than ever, for watching.' Gopnik illustrates this first redrafting of the Northern European imagination with examples from the painter J.M. W Turner and the art critic John Ruskin, among others, who discovered a new theology in the observed Alpine beauty of mountains and glaciers.

The polar explorers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century took this romantic ideal one step further in their search for a place of natural purity. Gopnik skilfully retells these stories in a chapter on 'radical winter', where he interrogates our enduring fascination with those stoic but perhaps morally dubious men who ventured out to claim a meaningless geographical entity, often leading whole crews to their deaths. But we remember the likes of Scott, Amundsen, Peary and Cook because they were brave in ways that, writes Gopnik, 'still overwhelm our imagination'.

Although squeezing the polar explorers into an overarching category of 'winter' is something of a fudge, *Winter* more comfortably deconstructs the bloated materialistic buying-fest that is now Christmas. He coolly unwraps it as a season marked by the tensions of renewal – the symbolic Christ child, the beginning of another year, the winter solstice all rolled up together – and reversal where the normal rules of order are not just relaxed but reversed. It was intriguing to learn that Christmas long pre-dates Christianity as a pagan festival with Santa appearing as an updated version of Saturn, a white-haired fertility god welcomed home once a year to turn the world upside down.

While all of this provided moments of insight and entertainment, I'm afraid that a whole chapter devoted, rather apologetically to ice hockey, left me yawning by the side of the rink. Neither were Gopnik's arguments wholly consistent with a tendency to generalise and lump together different times periods, nations and even geographies to form a wobbly kind of whole. It's the kind of thing that sets a historian's teeth on edge. How exactly should one decipher the meaning of 'And once actual sex between unmarried people became socially acceptable, sometime in the 1920s, the energy fell away from ice-skating and the skating rink got moved to the periphery of the park'?

Or Gopnik's assertion that in 1871 Christmas became a bank holiday in Britain while, in reality, this didn't include Scotland until 1996. His modern cycle of 'autumn-to-winter season of festivals' includes 'Thanksgiving', but surely this is a wholly American tradition. A bit more care in picking his illustrations and marshalling his evidence would have helped smooth out some of these apparent anomalies.

But if you want a book that will give you enough food for thought to get you through the long nights to come, you could do worse than spend it mulling over the meaning of what lies outside in the dark of a winter's eve.

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