

BLKE

No. 6

A

# DISCOURSE,

*Delivered on the 26th of November, 1795;*

BEING THE DAY RECOMMENDED BY THE GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF NEW-YORK TO BE OBSERVED AS A DAY OF

THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER,

ON ACCOUNT OF THE REMOVAL OF AN

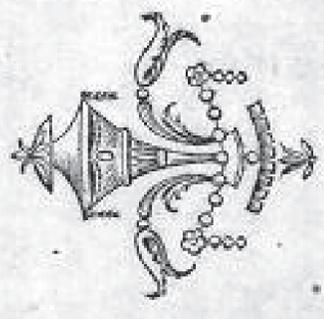
EPIDEMIC FEVER,

AND FOR OTHER

NATIONAL BLESSINGS.

By *WILLIAM LINN, D. D.*

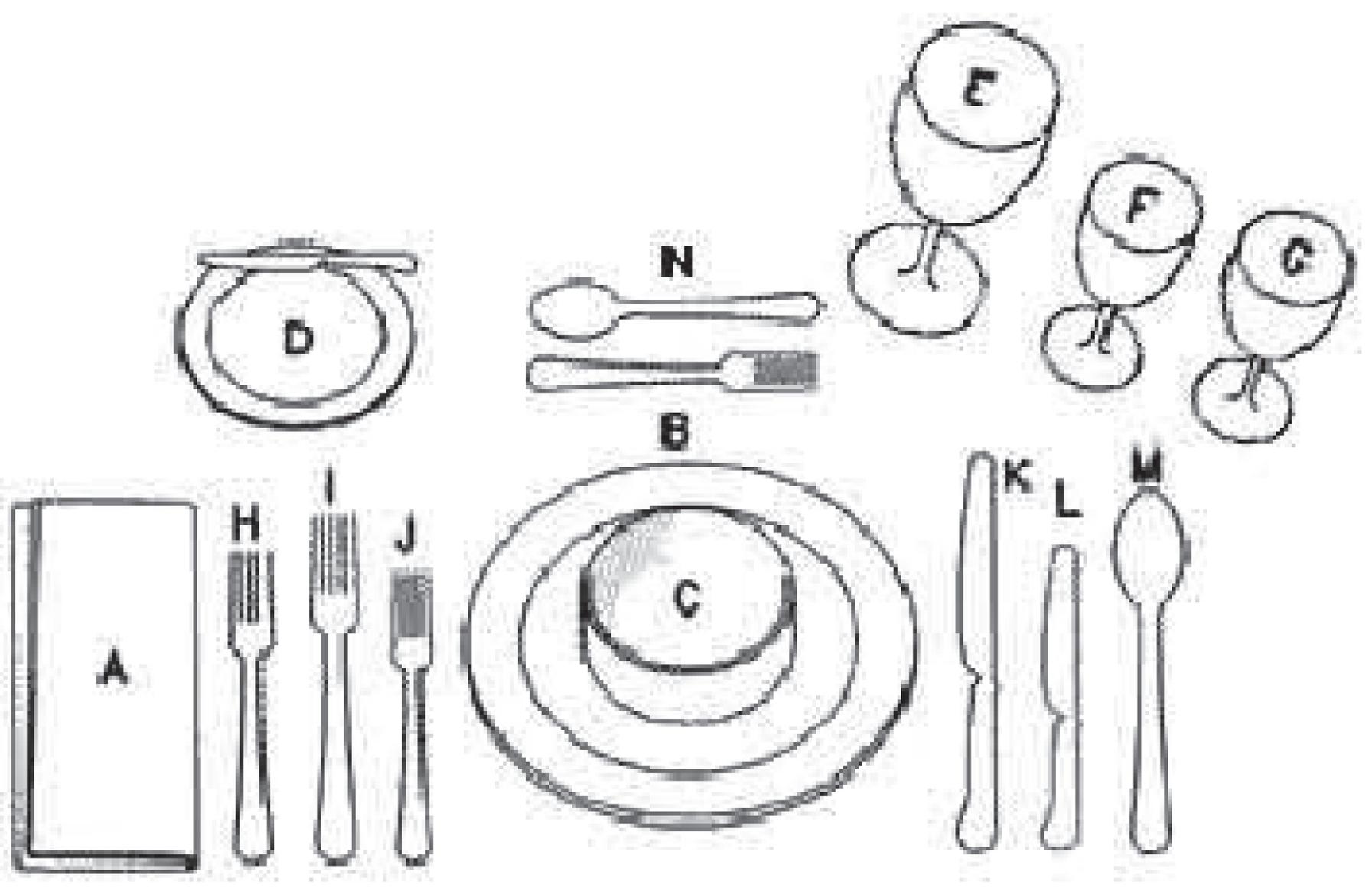
ONE OF THE MINISTERS OF THE REFORMED DUTCH CHURCH IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK.



NEW-YORK:

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—1795.—



**Today**, mostly sunny, a chilly breeze, high 56. **Tonight**, clear, not as cold as last night, low 46. **Tomorrow**, sun and patchy clouds, milder, high 62.



ANDREVIEW  
ISSUE 5: THANKSGIVING

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2011

A plate at the Thanksgiving table is a study in conflict. The color palette should tip you off immediately: bland beiges and off-whites striving against brilliant oranges, greens and crimsons. As American meals go, it sits near the garish end of the spectrum, yet we still hold it up as archetypal. It's the meal we describe to visitors from other countries when they ask about "American food"; our seat at the culinary UN, next to Japan manifesting as a plate of sushi and Spain as a pile of paella. But the clash of colors is really only hinting at the turmoil beneath.

In my late teens I took a few Urban Studies classes as part of the small attempt at well-roundedness my university's Engineering program required us to make. The first of these explained, at excruciating length, the agricultural developments that impacted urban society over the last few thousands of years, the most recent being the introduction of Western Hemisphere crops to the Eastern, and vice versa. The New World, it turns out, was a panacea for the Old in several ways, filling not just the coffers of colonial conquerors with precious metals, but the bellies of their subjects with an expanded repertoire of foodstuffs. The potatoes of Ireland and Poland, the chilies of India and Thailand, and even the tomatoes so fundamental to Italian and North African cuisine are all imports from the Americas. The majority of Thanksgiving necessities come from the Western Hemisphere, and there the conflict begins.

There's the turkey at the center, of course: a bird that stuffed the Aztecs' tamales long before the Spanish showed up with pigs and chickens. But the Americas brought plenty more to the party. The cranberries, squash and sweet potatoes that line the table's periphery are local, as are the pumpkins and pecans in the pies. Even the humble potatoes in the mash come from Peru, although the yams do not: they originate from Africa -- perhaps a nod to its vast contributions of involuntary labor to North America's fortunes. If you're of a pan-American mindset, the modern Thanksgiving plate is at

least as patriotic an emblem as the Stars and Stripes.

It was not always so. The Thanksgiving myth may go back to Plymouth, where there was certainly a harvest feast featuring a strictly local menu -- shellfish, venison and corn were highlights. But the Thanksgiving that was celebrated as a national holiday in 19th century America clung much more closely to the European roots of its celebrators. A roast pig was the common centerpiece in those days, and many of the "traditional" regional dishes that still crop up today show the indelible stamp of the Mother- or Fatherland. Sprouts and chestnuts are both imports; stuffing traces its heritage back to the Roman Empire; most family-recipe pickles and relishes are direct Euro-descendants. Occasional Thanksgiving tables feature unapologetic English dishes like Yorkshire Pudding or mincemeat pie, which would feel absurdly out of place at an All-American feast if we thought about it for a second.

The transformation of Thanksgiving from a nostalgic re-enactment of a European feast to a culinary declaration of independence was gradual, but closely follows America's rise to global power after World War One. This new America, suddenly on equal footing with a ravaged Europe, was also an America that started celebrating with turkey and cranberries, not pork and roast potatoes (and certainly not goose and pudding). It's hard to say whether newfound national pride was responsible for this culinary localism, but the association is undeniable: it's an American holiday, and we eat American food. Depending on your politics, switching out your turkey for, say, a big terrine of boeuf bourguignon might be seen as quirky, irreverent, sophisticated or blasphemous, but never innocuous. It's one of the few meals of the year where we feel compelled to justify any straying from the standard menu. That menu, after all, was hard won -- the victory proclamation in a battle with Europe over who gets to define what's civilized.

The history of the US is also one of ever-expanding abundance, at least as far as food goes. One of the great

triumphs of our agricultural policy in the post-WWI era was the end of expensive food. "A chicken in every pot" went the slogan, and that grew into a turkey on every platter as the years progressed. Compared to a Europe that was still scrimping to get enough on the table in the 1950s, America certainly looked like a promised land. The subsidies and mechanization that would later lead us into obesity and bizarre politics started out with noble intentions: a US family in the 1960s spent less of its income on food than a family in any other large nation.

But where does this leave the feast?

Feast days go back thousands of years -- as far as agrarian society, really. They were celebrations, but also respite from a typically meager and unvaried diet. When you're a subsistence farmer living on gruel and eggs, the prospect of a table laden with a dozen different dishes and a belly as full as you like is genuinely thrilling; almost spiritual. It's one thing to talk about working on an empty stomach, but something else entirely to experience it. Deeper than a conscious understanding, the repeated inability to eat until satisfied can wear you down emotionally and physically, to a degree that's impossible to explain in words. Food becomes an emblem of salvation, prosperity, virtue and divine grace. It's no accident that the withholding and bestowing of food features in every monotheistic religion's observances, from the breaking of bread at Mass to the breaking of fasts during Ramadan or Yom Kippur. Royalty and priesthood may have experienced God through art and music, but for the average peasant, only food was truly divine. Food sustains us physically as God does spiritually: take and eat, this is my body, given freely unto you.

In this light, a feast's full impact depends on prior deprivation. When meals are scant, monotonous and uncertain, a feast is intensely joyful; when they're not, it's just a larger than average meal with a larger than average number of dishes. In fact, for all the fuss we make over the food, most people who truly love Thanksgiving as a holiday are thinking of the social opportunity, not the dietary one. It's

common today to eat your fill, but rare to see so many people you know in one place. In previous centuries, it was the other way around. Holidays are there to remind us that we're as rich in calories as we are poor in community.

This is by design. The greatest technological achievements of the 20th century sought to feed us abundantly, move us around quickly, and allow us to accomplish tasks remotely. Their success is apparent in much of the developed world, with its highly mobile, dispersed and fragmented societies of well-fed individuals. We got what we wanted, and are slowly acknowledging what we lost. That tension between satisfaction and fulfillment plays out in many venues, but Thanksgiving casts them into especially sharp relief. Rarely are we surrounded by so much to eat, yet distracted by so much human interaction.

In the end, that's what makes it such a magnificent plate of food. The Thanksgiving meal is an edible manifestation of modern America's triumphs and tragedies. In abundance, variety and geographic pride it's unsurpassed, yet in the wrong company it tastes like a tray of ash. When we remember the holiday fondly, it's the human element we recall, not the excellence of what we ate. We're fortunate enough to live in an era that gives us that luxury. Perhaps we'd value the feast more if we deprived ourselves a little in the days leading up to it, or spent some time reading up on agricultural history, but I doubt it. Deprivation loses most of its sting when self-imposed, and knowing the unique American origins of the cranberries you're eating only gives a visceral thrill to the nerdy few (I suppose I'm one of them).

For the rest of us, the best way to treat that that plate is to appreciate the history that brought it there, briefly, and then look up from it, toward the people who prepared it. Despite our luxuries and disconnections, one experience still remains that can hit us at the primal level: the joy of being cooked for by someone we care about.

By **CARL ALVIANI**  
Portland, Oregon  
2011



A sermon preached upon September the 9th, 1683 : being a Thanksgiving Day for a late deliverance from a fanatick-conspiracy

Author: Edward Pelling  
Publisher: London : Printed for Will Abington ..., 1683.

