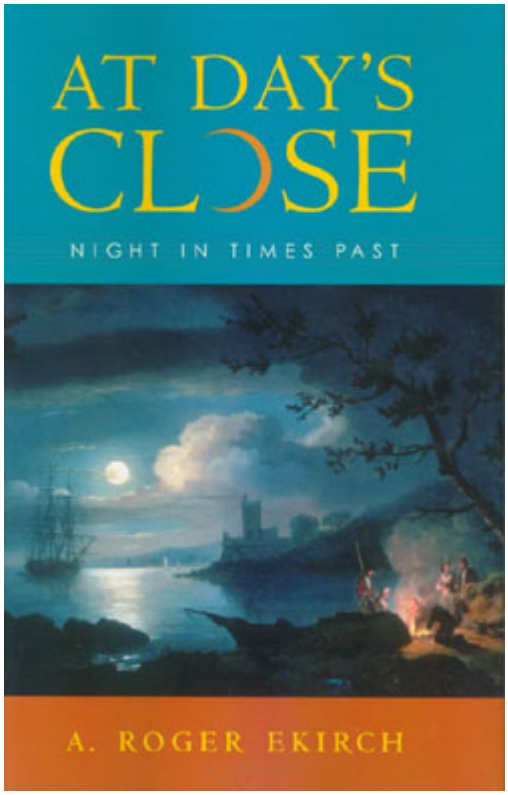
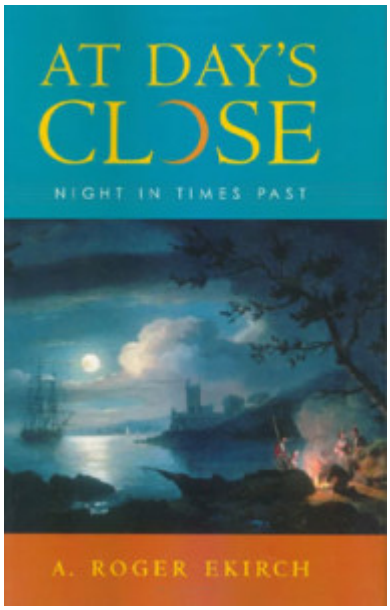
When Night was Dark





At Day's Close: Night in Times Past

The lights go out a lot where I live. Whenever a storm blows through the woods of eastern Connecticut, falling trees knock down power lines—often including the line that reaches my end of a long, dead-end road. There's a stunning moment of darkness and an abrupt halt to the evening routine. I've come to enjoy these little breaks from modern technology, the search for candles, the lighting of a fire in the fireplace. It's like camping but with the pleasure of

ice cream that might otherwise melt if the power failure lasted. A short power failure is, of course, the best. A full night without light and I begin to think about buying a generator.

What would it mean to live an entire life without electricity, in a world where eyesight faltered at each setting of the sun? A lot more than mere inconvenience, as Roger Ekirch reveals in his richly evocative history, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*. Before the Industrial Revolution, Ekirch writes, the experience of darkness was so powerful that night can be said to have had its own "rich and vibrant culture very different from daily reality, an 'alternate reign,' as an English poet put it. More than that, darkness, for the greater part of humankind, afforded a sanctuary from ordinary existence, the chance, as shadows lengthened, for men and women to express inner impulses and realize repressed desires both in their waking hours and in their dreams, however innocent or sinister in nature" (xxvi).

This is an astonishingly ambitious work, based on two decades of research. Ekirch pays closest attention to early modern Britain, from about 1500 to 1750, but his study sprawls across the western world from Russia to the United States, and from antiquity to the nineteenth century. The experience of night, he suggests, has been shaped both by specific human cultures and by universal human physiology. "Such was the impact of this natural cycle that it frequently transcended differences in culture and time" (xxviii).

As differences in culture and time are the usual bread and butter of historians, Ekirch's approach produces an unusual narrative. Sliding easily from country to country and from century to century, he organizes his twelve chapters around different aspects of the nocturnal experience. He illustrates his points with a wealth of evidence drawn from a wide range of diaries, letters, newspapers, memoirs, and other writings; occasionally he dips into the sciences to introduce modern knowledge of astronomy, eyesight, and circadian rhythms. Thus the study seems concerned not so much with a historically specific culture of night (say, seventeenth-century English night as opposed to night somewhere else or at an earlier time) as with how human beings have experienced the darkness. Historical change enters the story mainly at the very end when technology severs humans from the natural world.

But perhaps such comments should be left to the fluorescent glare of the seminar room. This book is best enjoyed under a warm reading lamp in the "dead of night" (midnight to 3:00 a.m., Ekirch explains), when the pleasures of its fascinating details and skillful writing are most seductive.

The opening chapters evoke a time when "night brutally robbed men and women of their vision, the most treasured of human senses" (8) and left them literally groping their way through a world thought to be rife with physical and supernatural menace. Strange noises, ominous lights in the sky, miasmatic vapors, and satanic spirits filled Europeans with terror. There were also many more prosaic dangers, such as stumbling over obstacles in the unlit streets or

being doused by carelessly emptied chamber pots. Robbers, burglars, arsonists, and other nightwalkers were afoot in the dark of the moon, sometimes carrying human fingers as magic charms. It was, as a watchman would cry out, “time for all honest people to be in bed” (32).

Public authorities tried to control the night with curfews, night patrols, and half-hearted attempts at street lighting. Night watchmen patrolled the city, checking doors, looking for fire, and crying the hours (in part to keep people from sleeping too deeply to interrupt burglars). Watchmen were held in low esteem and were of little use against criminals. Families had to barricade themselves inside their homes with weapons in easy reach. Artificial lighting was woefully inadequate. Smoky flames “pulsed amid the shadows,” unable to illuminate corners or ceilings. People relied on memory and touch to help navigate their homes in the dark. Memory, hearing, touch, and even smell made it possible to travel in the countryside on moonless nights. City people would rely on a torch-bearing servant or would take their chances with a hired “linkboy” who might turn out to be in league with robbers.

For a surprising number of people, night was a time of continued work. Bakers, servants, midwives, scavengers, and iron workers were among those who continued to toil while others slept. Still, the work experience was quite different from the shift labor of the industrial age. Even when out of phase with the sun, preindustrial work continued to be shaped by natural rhythms of seasons and moonlight, particularly in the countryside or on the seacoast. Night work differed from day work in its lack of routine and its more playful spirit.

Ekirch’s chapters on the freedoms of night contain fewer surprises. People often had sex at night, it seems. Adolescents enjoyed getting away from parental supervision. Some people spent their evening hours reading, writing, or praying. The wealthy elite threw extravagant parties. Religious minorities, servants, and slaves grew bold and less inhibited in the night. This section of the book goes over some of the same ground previously explored by Bryan Palmer in *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (2000).

The final section is a highly original study of preindustrial sleep, previously published in different form in the *American Historical Review*. In this brilliant piece of scholarship, Ekirch explores the rituals of bedtime, the meanings of communal beds, and most surprisingly, the very different rhythms of sleep. He shows that preindustrial Europeans “experienced two major intervals of sleep bridged by up to an hour or more of wakefulness.” People rose in the middle of the night to take a drink, to talk, to do a little work, to contemplate their dreams, to steal firewood from their neighbors, to make love, pray, or urinate. Whatever they chose to do, they routinely experienced a break between “first sleep” and “second sleep,” which Ekirch believes to be biologically determined. “There is every reason to believe that segmented sleep, such as many wild animals exhibit, had long been the natural pattern of our slumber before the modern age” (303).

In a brief conclusion, Ekrich asserts that the eighteenth century began a "nocturnal revolution." Men and women, influenced by the Enlightenment, discarded the supernatural beliefs that had made the night a time of terror. Night work increased with industrialization. Law enforcement improved. But the most important change seems to have been the dramatic improvement of artificial illumination in the nineteenth century: fueled first by oil and coal gas and then by electricity. Ancient patterns of work, leisure, and sleep were radically disrupted. "It is not difficult to imagine a time when night, for all practical purposes, will have become day—truly a twenty-four/seven society in which traditional phases of time, from morning to midnight, have lost their original identities" (339).

Ekirch thus implies that the history of night can be roughly divided into preindustrial and industrial eras, much as Wolfgang Schivelbusch did in *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (first published in German in 1983). It appears from reading *At Day's Close* that modern technology has cut humans off from the natural world and disrupted behavioral rhythms rooted in part in physiology. The ending reinforces the suggestion throughout the book that people from different countries and different centuries experienced preindustrial night in similar ways. Such a suggestion could be accepted with more complete confidence if the author had not relied so heavily on British evidence, or if he had more explicitly compared the British experience with the nocturnal habits of other cultures. But the book is ambitious enough as it is. Ekirch has done a remarkable job of showing that night in times past was profoundly different from what it has become.

Most effectively, Ekirch has revealed the extent to which natural rhythms once controlled daily life. It's an appealing theme—the human animal in the grip of nature—and one that seems increasingly exotic in the twenty-first century. This story of the forgotten terrors and pleasures of the night reminds us of how much daily life has been transformed by technology. It also helps us appreciate the lamplight on the page, even before the power goes out.

This article originally appeared in issue 6.4 (July, 2006).

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