Widening the Frame

The Right to Fire: A Review of Bonfire Night

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The story of Prometheus is one of the most told of Greek mythology. A Titan and a trickster, Prometheus made humans out of clay, before stealing fire from Mount Olympus, hidden in a fennel stalk, in order to give it to them. In the process he endowed humanity with the capacity to cook their food and forge their tools, make medicines, and develop the arts. Upon discovery, Zeus' punishment was double. First, he ordered Prometheus to be chained to the side of a cliff, where his ever-regenerating liver would be ripped from his flesh daily by an eagle. Secondly, he gifted his brother with Pandora, who upon opening a locked box unleashed a panoply of human miseries into the world.

Its retelling can have a negative inflection. Seen through the filter of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, it became a parable of the monstrosity of human creation. For others, however, Prometheus has been characterised as a friend of humanity, revolting against the tyranny of Zeus and enduring unconscionable suffering as a result. Yet in all of its retellings, which persist into the present, the fire that is central to the story can be sidelined. The subaltern seizure of fire is the core transgressive act—one symbolically equated with the seed—as within this transgression lay the possibility, not just for biological and cultural life, but for its transformation. Fire held transformative power, which was why the punishment for its possession was so severe. Do we as humans then have a right to fire, both narrowly and broadly conceived?

Bonfire Night, taking place in Britain on 5 November each year, is an unusual festival for two reasons. The first is the way it has bucked the trend of modernity, which has led to the extinguishing of many ritual fires across the world. James George Frazer documented the immense variety of bonfire festivals that once took place across Europe several times a year: at Lent, on May Day, in Midsummer, and at Christmas, with Bonfire Night being the enduring expression of the fires kindled in October at Hallow E'en (1998: 246–277). It thus occupies an important activistic spot alongside other seasonal fire rituals across the world—Nowruz in Iran, Walpurgisnacht in mainland Europe, Diwali across South Asia—as a phenomenon that has survived the modernising process. The second is its contradictory politics. David Cressy argues that in the absence of any day of independence or constitution, it is the closest thing Britain has to a national anniversary (1992). But it is a strange kind of anniversary. Having been instituted in 1606 to celebrate

The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology
Volume 44, Number 1, 2026: 150–152
doi:10.3167/cja.2026.440111b © The Author(s)

the foiling of a Catholic plot led by Guy Fawkes to assassinate the Protestant king, in the centuries thereafter it has come to stand both for the celebration of hegemonic power and resistance to it. Most recently, as I examined in my ethnography of Anonymous in the 2010s (Peacock 2025), the night became an opportunity to voice criticisms of austerity and government in general. Rather than being ritually burned in effigy, Guy Fawkes became an icon around which crowds could gather.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on many forms of ritual life in Britain, and Bonfire Night is among them. Traditionally, City Councils have hosted large 5 November bonfires on public greens. Yet in 2020, due to the concerns over the spread of the disease, the largest of these were cancelled. In some cities however, such as Glasgow, Manchester, and Nottingham, this cancellation became permanent, providing a precedent that prompted others, such as Sheffield and Cambridge, to subsequently follow suit. A panoply of functional explanations for the change have been given. Public safety and rising costs are cited often, alongside more bizarre explanations such as 'pressure from the local equine community' in Colchester. A councillor in Nottingham went as far as to announce that due to the fact that it takes place in the dark, Bonfire Night was less viable as a council event because it 'offers little opportunities [*sic*] for a sponsor to activate their brand' (Pridmore 2023). When taken as a whole these explanations contradict each other. For instance, in Cambridge, as well as elsewhere, the comparatively inexpensive bonfire has been substituted with a more costly fireworks display. Here the reasoning is not pressure on council budgets, but pollution and the climate crisis. Given this bewildering array of justifications, could there be something else at stake?

Gaston Bachelard offers among the most persuasive analyses of the symbolic significance of fire (1987). Like Bonfire Night itself, fire embodies contradictions, occupying the whole spectrum between Eros and Thanatos. Its kindling can be associated with fertility and germination, while for those who gaze upon it, it simultaneously sounds 'the call of the funeral pyre', signalling the ultimate annihilation (ibid.: 20). Like organic growth, it stands for change, yet it is a rapid form of change, a combustion, in which something is destroyed that allows something else to take its place. Ultimately, for Bachelard the main element of the Promethean story holds, as his conclusion is that it is synonymous with creation. How then should we understand this mass conciliar snuffing out?

Bonfire Night still took place in 2025; fires were lit across the country. However, public tax-funded space as a venue for these immolations has been significantly diminished. Instead, smaller fires were kindled in cricket clubs and community centres, in fields and private gardens. In the process, the public citizen as a subject renewed before the heat of the fire was depleted, and other kinds of subject position grew. The ever-mutating history of Bonfire Night opens a new chapter.

Vita Peacock
King's College London
vita.peacock@kcl.ac.uk

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the European Research Council for supporting the writing of this essay, ERC SAMCOM (grant no. 947867). Thank you to Timothy Cooper for the suggestion to widen the frame.

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