

THE COMMONWEALTH OF BELLS

Like a medieval apprentice residing snugly in the shadow of his church, I spent my fifth, sixth, and seventh years living within a similar circle of well being. My family and our German governess, of course, had a lot to do with the structured serenity I enjoyed, but I realize now that I also owed much to the bells of Heidelberg's churches. Most had escaped damage during the war though some had contributed their bells to the Nazi war effort; those not volunteered were confiscated. By the end of the forties, however, many in the German campanological armory that had not been sent to the furnace were returned to their rightful ecclesiastical and civic owners. Annelore, a self-confessed "bells and smells Catholic" and our family's nanny, filled my head with much of the bell lore that still chimes there. Walking, biking, or taking the trolley through Heidelberg on one of our many excursions, she would point out bells that had lost their voices following some perfidy or regained them pursuant to the proper reparations. I'm sure she was the one who tried to convince me that the chocolate I'd received one Easter had come from a bell recently returned from the Vatican, not the Easter Bunny as I'd been led to believe. This may have been the birth of my rational faith as I challenged eighteen-year-old Annelore's notion of a wingless brass bell flying back across the Alps with enough chocolate for every Christian child on earth. It wasn't long before I began to question, among other things, the possibility of an extravagantly generous rabbit as well.

When I misbehaved, Annelore would remind me of the great *Glockenspiel* in Strasbourg and its skeleton bell-jack that struck the hour with a human femur! From time to time, the bone splintered, she said, and the bell-jack would go in search of bad boys with plump thighs just like mine. On another occasion when I was caught escorting the family cat into the living room to see if it could get a rise out of my sister's aging canary, Annelore told me of a similar malicious lad. This jokester cut the bell from a cat's collar to give his lord's feline a decided edge on some recently hatched chickens. The lord's cook caught the boy and strung him up feet first inside a bell where he served as the clapper until his skull burst! That was the last time I exposed any defenseless creature to our unbelled cat.

John Idol, a close friend who grew up in tiny Deep Gap, North Carolina in the 1930s, came to respect bells in a decidedly different way than I did. As a callow youth after mowing the church's lawn and cemetery, John would sneak into the belfry of his clapboard church, briefly ring the bell, and light out for the safety of the woods much the way urban children screw up their courage to ring the doorbell of someone they fear. After John was confirmed, however, the deacons often would ask him to ring the bell calling the faithful to church services. Proud of his new role and responsibility, he became a defender of the church bell against any upstarts who might sneak a tug at the bell rope. Like my friend, I too became a defender of the bells.

The Nazis, however, were not so protective. It has been estimated that the Nazis seized over 100,000 of Europe's bells mostly for the tin, not the copper. (To achieve maximum resonance, incidentally, most bells are between one quarter and one fifth tin; the rest is copper.) Germany has no tin mines to speak of, and late in the war, cut off from her peacetime sources, her war lords desperately needed this soft, silvery metal for soldering electrical connections. Yet in some ways, it's surprising that the Nazis commandeered any continental bells at all because many like Annelore still believed that ringing them provided a roof certified against everything from the plague to falling bombs. After Oxford had been targeted for a Luftwaffe bombing raid and the town escaped virtually unscathed, the Nazi "Occult Unit" attributed the lack of

success to the university's secret weapon: the seven-and-a-half-ton "Great Tom" bell which had complained furiously during the attack. Believers say that Gerard Manley Hopkins' "bell-swarmed" village was saved by its bell. After all, it was St. Thomas Aquinas who said, "The tones of the consecrated metal repel the demon and avert storm and lightning." Realists argue that if the Germans had flown a little lower and opened their cockpits they might have heard the audible "bull's eye" Great Tom painted on Oxford. And skeptics claim that poor visibility had more to do with the campus's salvation than the bell's "umbrella."

Annelore probably knew nothing of Oxford's good fortune since she spent much of the war with her head between her knees in dimly-lit bomb shelters. Nevertheless, she still believed in the protective aura afforded by ringing bells, especially those that had been baptized. Roman Catholics had consecrated new bells for centuries—bestowing blessings complete with holy water, hymns, a sermon, a starched baptismal gown, and the assignment of a godparent. Afterwards, indulgences were granted to those who needed them. If an unbaptized bell was rung in a farmer's field during a hail storm, for example, and this bell ringer's crop happened to miss the brunt of the storm, the bell was considered blessed. Sensing the erosion of the church's power, Charlemagne issued a proclamation in 789 banning the private use of bells whether they were blessed or baptized, but many of the folk defiantly rang them right through the plague years. Belief in bell efficacy was so strong in many communities that some victims, who had died at the ends of their bell ropes, were replaced by volunteers without missing a beat.

Luther and Calvin were the next to tackle the bell issue. The Northern European Protestants banned the baptism of bells and did their best to banish their "magic" even as their cohorts were smashing stained glass windows and "pillar people" in the old Catholic structures they came to occupy. In many instances, the belfry bells were just too difficult to pull down without damaging the church's infrastructure, so many Protestants continued to worship under bells covered with Catholic iconography. Since few ever saw the bells high in their towers, it seldom became an issue. If there were several bells in a Roman belfry, often only one was used as a concession to Protestant austerity. In the early Congregational churches of America, it was rare to find any bell at all, but that may have had more to do with the absence of a foundry and the expense of importing something that weighed tons.

When a new bell was required, the time-honored method of acquiring one was to pass a bucket through a community asking for contributions in the form of money or metal scraps. At the foundry, the scraps were sorted before the furnace was lit, but not before greedy churchmen and mayors pocketed the gold and silver. Contrary to public opinion, these precious metals lowered bell resonance, but the unscrupulous didn't want that information to circulate since fewer widows would contribute their husband's wedding bands to the pot. Riding the trolley to Heidelberg's university museum once, Annelore told me what became of Judas's thirty pieces of silver. I imagine that she'd heard the medieval legend from some anti-Semite in the Nuremberg school she attended. It seems that after Judas's suicide, the silver coins in his purse were contributed to some church trying to gather enough metal for a bell, but the result was a "mongrel pitch." Of course, the Nazis attributed the tenor's failures to Judas's Jewishness, not the brittle alloy achieved when copper, tin, and silver are combined. Over the centuries, many a misbegotten bell became another reason to persecute the Jews.

Though bells have occasionally been used as an excuse to harm, more often than not they've been regarded as benevolent creations. Doubtless, tales of bell generosity, such as the Catholic Easter bells mentioned earlier, can be traced to the music which is undamped,

freely given, and once broadcast, independent of its maker. Imagine a sexton striking the wrong bell and trying to retrieve the sound! Such is the independence of the bell. And a bell's ability to fly can surely be traced to the way its tones "wing" their way to every quadrant of a town. The instrument's most common form has given rise to the belief among some Asians that the bell's body represents the womb and the clapper a phallus. The fact that bells call the faithful to worship but do not enter the sanctuary has made the bell a symbol of hypocrisy for a few Englishmen and Americans. In Africa, a widespread belief exists that if stuttering children drink from an inverted hand bell their speech will become clear as a crystal bell. And in the American South, the bell is sometimes given the attributes of eloquence and piety because it speaks from the church without ambiguity. One exception might have been the result of an earthquake in New Madrid, Missouri which shook that frontier town to its foundations in 1811 and 1812. The quake was so powerful that bells in Charleston, South Carolina, a thousand miles away spontaneously began to toll.

While our family was living in Europe in the 1960s, my parents took several opportunities to stretch my intellectual horizons. I recall visiting the Uffizi once and overhearing a tour guide's lecture on Michelangelo's *David*. It seems that as a young man the precocious sculptor was ordered by one of the Medicis to sculpt a statue in snow. The result was the *Madonna of the Centaurs*, a glittering success that inevitably melted in a Tuscan courtyard when the weather turned warm. Art's loss, however, was nature's gain when a bubbling spring was discovered where the Madonna once stood. Several years later, the guide said, Michelangelo was commissioned by some French lord to make a bronze *David*, similar but smaller than his marble colossus. Michelangelo did as he was instructed and shipped the bronze off to France. Unfortunately, war broke out, and *David* was melted down for the lord's ordnance. Not even a sketch remains.

In a poem, "Molecular Memory," I speculate optimistically on the possibility of the snow and the brass spontaneously reconstituting the form the master once gave them. At the resurrection of Michelangelo's bones, the snows of yesteryear, I imagine, will take the form of his *Madonna*. And shrapnel from all over Europe will rise up from ancient battlefields to be rejoined in the lost *David*. This scenario reflects not so much my rational faith as my reasonable hope.

Some have speculated that most of the bells of Europe have been melted more than once to make ordnance, which was then recast following the war into bells, reduced to artillery in the next war, and so on in a monotonous and deadly cycle of war and peace. In an epigram titled "In a Monastery Belfry," I begin by quoting a gunnery sergeant I met once who joined the Dominican order when the war ended:

"Most bells were bells
before they were cannon,"
said the ex-Nazi
who now is canon.

For the poet, the irony of the same substance and in this case the same person, being used to protect on one hand and destroy on the other is irresistible. Bell metal is a little like the fugu, a fish whose preparation the Japanese have raised to an art as well as a science. Cleaned and cooked properly, the meat is reported to be delicious, but carelessly prepared, it contains a potent poison. For centuries, I imagine, monarchs have mused the calling bells of their fiefdoms as the brass reverberated between heaven and earth. And as their bones have vibrated in unison with the carillon, some apparently wondered, "Shall I permit these bells to continue, or should

I have them melted down and declare war?" It seems there are two kinds of ruler: one who looks at a bell and hears a cannon explode, and another who looks at a cannon and hears a bell chime. Perhaps the church should do for bells what the Scots once did for the bagpipe: issue a license to operate only after the owner and user understood the instrument's potential.

Though Pope Pius III in 1503 abolished a society doing meteorological research because, "It is well known that God and witches alone cause the weather," the Catholic church for nearly three hundred years continued to sanction the ringing of bells to avert storm damage. If St. Anthony could banish demons by jingling his bells, surely a baptized bell could disperse a few dark clouds. But if lightning struck despite the pealing, the usual response was, "Imagine how much worse it would have been without the bells' interference." The Campanile of San Marco was struck at least nine times between 1388 and 1762. In 1766, the new Franklin rods were installed, and ever since, the famed bell tower has not been damaged by lightning (though it did collapse when its foundation crumbled in 1902, but then Franklin never claimed his invention was effective against dry rot). When the Parlement of Paris discovered that over a thirty-three year period 103 sextons had been electrocuted by lightning, the French passed the first law forbidding the ringing of church bells in thunder storms. Yet just a few years earlier, the Roman church had tried to ban lightning rods because they interfered with God's vengeance. Despite the progress of the Enlightenment, for many years into the more theistic nineteenth century, a church steeple protected by Franklin's rods and insulators was said to show a lack of faith. Most churches today are discreetly grounded in recognition of the fact that there's just so much the Creator can do to control lightning and arson after setting the universe in motion and issuing humans free will.

Incidentally, the ex-Nazi priest referred to above is a man I met touring The Church of Our Lady in Munich. Following his retirement forced by arthritis, he generously agreed to lead tourists around the church and up the double belfry. "Belfries," he said, "originally had nothing to do with bells. In old German, the word literally means 'peace tower.' Despite the ironic name, these war machines were actually siege towers which, when gunpowder rendered them obsolete around 1400, were rolled into walled cities, equipped with warning bells, turned around, and used as watch towers." I asked him if anyone had ever measured how far the pealing of Our Lady's bells carried, and he said approximately four miles though some bells in the Alps were reputed to have a range of thirty miles. Because the church was situated on a low promontory, it was visible on some days though not audible from a distance of twenty miles. He then volunteered that while on retreat in Belgium recently he'd learned some interesting local history: three times Antwerp had torn down its walls, circummured new ones further out, and then cast larger bells to insure that each new house was protected by the invisible umbrella of its bell tones. Stone walls and oak gates were a physical barrier between the inhabitants and anyone who wished them harm; the bells, however, offered defenses less concrete but more vital to the spirit.

As proof of this contention, I would add that in the six years I have spent within the commonwealth of bells (I returned to Germany for three more years in the 1960s), I have never heard anyone so jaded as to express anything more than a passing annoyance with the laughter emanating from the belfries. No one ever seems to grow weary of this minimalist music any more than they tire of the lark's song. Indeed, how could anyone, whether atheist or pantheist, object to an instrument whose pure sound is free and useful. "I sing for joy," "I cry for the dead," "I console the living," "I dispel the storm," "I torment demons," "I repel the enemy," "I call to worship," "I mark the hours," and, "I celebrate the festival." These are just a handful of benevolent claims

engraved or embossed on bells around the world; not one seeks to harm those living within the commonwealth of their appeal. Indeed in Northern Ireland, the Catholic and Protestant bells harmonize beautifully setting an ecumenical example for their human audience.

The music, of course, is the important thing, not the instrument which produces it. On several military bases where my father was stationed while I was growing up, a bugle that was played into a microphone and broadcast from speakers on the post-chapel steeple often substituted for big brass bells. For years I rose with reveille and was tucked into bed with taps along with hundreds of others within the gates of the garrison. There was something pleasantly reassuring and grown up about knowing others much older than I were doing the same thing at the same time. As John Huizinga says in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, a town's bells "lifted all things into a sphere of order and serenity. . . ." The post bugle did likewise for me.

Alma Bennett, a widely traveled colleague who now lives a short distance from the Southern Railroad's "grand funk line," as she calls it, and who misses Europe's bells as much as I do, feels like the trains passing her home have an "engaging effect" on her emotions. "Trains make a charming clattering rhythm which draws you out of your cocoon. The tattered but homey racket is a very different sound than the bells I've known, but I've lived with the trains long enough now that I would mourn their passing if they stopped." As her bed starts to vibrate even before the whistle is heard, she feels connected to the world beyond her bedroom. She rejoices when the trains run on time and is worried when they run late as they did for weeks following September 9, 2001. I don't live quite as close to the tracks as my colleague does, but I have often felt like Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward, Angel* that the haunting rhythm of a train's "music" is as evocative and poignant as anything composed by Beethoven or Big Ben. Just as the curfew bell once was a warning to "cover the fire" and go to bed, so is the 9:55 departure of the Southern Crescent a communal reminder to put out the cat and turn down the covers, for it's time to catch that Pullman to dream land.

As a rational human who is unabashedly moved by the intangibles of life, I am proud to say that my spirit is often lifted by pealing brass, train whistles, and the wind in the willows. Lest I forget the transformational power of bells, I bought a recording of Cologne's famed church bells joyfully tolling the advent of Christmas. A dozen or more bells, high and low, near and far, fat and thin, ring the changes across the Rhineland for all to enjoy gratis. In America, a young land that is largely and sadly without bells, Christmas would be seriously diminished for me without our recording playing near the *Weihnachtsbaum*.

I should add that Clemson, South Carolina, where I have lived and taught for over thirty years, has never been entirely without bells. When I arrived in 1968, I discovered the E-flat bell, nicknamed "Pitchfork Ben," in the bell tower of Tillman Hall marking the hours, but its range was only a few hundred yards; it did not extend to the suburbs where we lived just two miles away. But even this small bell had what I called a "dominion of appeal," a phrase I used to title a poem about the school bell that once hung in the landmark named for the state's former governor, Benjamin "Pitchfork" Tillman.

This place is not Oxford,
nor is Tillman's tenor "Great Tom"—
that brazen dome a shield
against the German bombs.

“Pitchfork Ben” does not grieve
or shout at peace—
he chimes forth the hour
beneath the tower eaves.

Of gentle blood,
its rim sows crystal “E’s”
over cool, trim lawns
and streets lined with trees.

Beyond its appeal,
oak turns to beetled pine,
red clay manges the rye,
and mill whistles whine.

In 1987, “Pitchfork Ben” was replaced by a carillon courtesy of the Clemson Alumni Association and hundreds of generous contributors. But before the carillon’s installation, it certainly seemed as if the area within “Pitchfork Ben’s” circle, the university and the close-by, more-established neighborhoods, drew sustenance from the bell while the area beyond looked forlorn and impoverished.

As much as I miss my German bells, I was amply consoled a few years ago when a member of Clemson’s class of 1943 telephoned to ask a favor. Would I write a few verses to be embossed on a bell his class was donating to the university as a part of the new carillon? Of course, I agreed and eventually produced the following ditty:

I sing for those
 who now soar with the bird.
I speak for those
 who have given me words.
I sound for those
 who have yet to be heard.

The bell committee voted to accept what I’d submitted, and about a year later I was called to see the completed work before it was raised into Tillman’s bell tower. My wife grabbed our daughter and a camera, and the three of us rushed to catch a glimpse of “my bell.” There it stood, \$55,000 worth of copper and tin, the largest bell of all forty-four, the “C” bell that would strike the hour, when it wasn’t carrying the bass in the carillon, for tens of thousands of students and faculty for years to come. Though I had signed my verses, “Class of 1943,” the committee had kindly placed my name under the poem. A reporter who was covering the carillon’s installation spoke with me briefly about the unique way I’d been honored, and the next day, her article had the following headline: “Local Poet and Clemson Professor Achieves Immortality in Tillman’s Bell Tower.” It was all I ever wanted.