

**MWA - Home & Overseas Paper - December 2017/January 2018**

**The Oxen by Thomas Hardy (2015)**



Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.  
“Now they are all on their knees,”  
An elder said as we sat in a flock  
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where  
They dwelt in their strawy pen,  
Nor did it occur to one of us there  
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave  
In these years! Yet, I feel,  
If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
“Come; see the oxen kneel,

“In the lonely barton\* by yonder coomb\*  
Our childhood used to know,”  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.

*\*barton is a dialect word for a barn*

*\*coomb is a small valley*

With apologies to those Circles who meet in January, here is a very well known and much loved Christmas poem. At midnight on Christmas Eve, Hardy sits with other people by the fire, and they picture the oxen kneeling down in their stable, paying homage to the birth of Christ, according to old legend. Back then, Hardy says, neither he nor any of the other people present (in an inn, perhaps, to

see in Christmas Day with a few ales?) doubted the idea that oxen knelt in homage to Christ.

But then, in the third verse, Hardy reflects that, nowadays, most people wouldn't believe in such a thing: this magical sense of the oxen somehow knowing that it is Christmas, and kneeling to Jesus, has been lost. Yet, he goes on to say, if one Christmas Eve he was invited to see the oxen kneeling, he would happily go to see them, hoping that such a thing might indeed happen.

The poem reflects a yearning for childhood beliefs which the adult Hardy can no longer hold, and highlights the longing to believe, even – or perhaps especially – when we know that we cannot bring ourselves to believe. The specific example of the oxen kneeling references Christianity. Hardy had lost his religious faith early in life, but kept an affection for the Anglican Church.

The poem was written in 1915, during the First World War. The terrible losses of that war meant that many people questioned their beliefs for the first time.

The hopeful note of the final line implies a longing for that lost belief.

**How do you interpret 'The Oxen' – as a hopeful poem? as nostalgic longing for childish beliefs? or as full of disillusionment?**

Best wishes to all for Christmas and the New Year!

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