



Sand Springs

Over Coffee: A Conversation with Jane Brox

ESSAY KATHRYN LIEBOWITZ | PHOTOGRAPHS BREMNER BENEDICT

From the caves of Lascaux to Emerson's study, the oil lamp and candle burned bright, clear, and enduring; for some 18,000 years, that is, the single flame served to illumine page, path, and evening meal. True, church and aristocracy burned beeswax, whale oil, or the more expensive spermaceti, while the humble burned household grease and tallow. At the turn of the nineteenth century, gaslight spread from London to Paris to New York and beyond, but still the intimacy of that flame — whether fueled by oil, coal, coke, or kerosene — remained ubiquitous. Far from the clean, efficient, cheap, and fairly universal incandescent (or fluorescent) light of today, light before the 1850s was an expensive, often stinking, and dirty affair — a luxury only the rich could afford, and a matter of hard household labor and meticulous care. Someone had to clean the lamps, make the candles, collect the grease, and render the fat from wild or farm animals.

As Jane Brox relates in *Brilliant, the Evolution of Artificial Light* (Houghton

Mifflin, 2010), the history of light, like so much else, plays out along the edges of the universal divide between rich and poor, urban and rural. Electric light came first to the urban rich, while their impoverished neighbors and isolated country cousins continued to live by the light of candles and oil lanterns — often blown out after dinner to save for the morrow — or with no light at all. “Only with the implementation of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s,” Brox writes, “did rural electrification begin to become a reality.”

Brox's concise, elegantly written book — detailed, compassionate, and lyrical — begins and ends with the caves of Lascaux, reminding us of the road traveled, of the ingenuity of our artist ancestors, and of the continuity between now and then. “I started with the caves of Lascaux,” Brox related in conversation last December, “because they gave me an opportunity to talk about light, not only as something utilitarian but as something essential to making art ... What stunned me was that

the way humans lit their world remained unchanged from [the Pleistocene Age] practically to the end of the nineteenth century. It seemed a good way to begin ... and I wanted to pull that thread through the book.”

We sit at a wooden table in the kitchen of Brox's extraordinarily sunny 1850s home on a quiet side street in Brunswick, Maine, a few blocks from the Bowdoin College campus and halfway between the town and college libraries — key for a writer who researches her subjects with great care, energy, and dedication. Her green-eyed cat weaves around our coffee cups and an unburned candle as we talk about *Brilliant*, which has earned Brox considerable national attention. Her previous three books, whose subjects nestled closer to her heart, she says, received acclaim, but had more regional appeal.

In that trilogy, published between 1995 and 2004, Brox wove the personal story of her family's farm in Dracut, Massachusetts, into the historical context of farming and land use in rural New England over more

than three centuries. To all appearances, *Brilliant* offers a more straightforward historical narrative, and a chronological one at that, yet the same meditative, musing voice prevails. The subject challenged Brox to write in new ways: “I wanted to experiment with having no personal story; I felt I had written out the story of the farm, and this was the next step for me as a writer. Then, I wanted to write something about rural electrification, and as I started researching the back story of light, I became entranced. At that point, I thought, I have two choices — I can take the leap and set rural electrification within the larger research, or I can write about rural electrification while alluding to the history of artificial light. I decided to do the first, even though it was quite scary.”

“But let me tell you the story that really got me started,” Brox leans forward confidentially as she describes a conversation she had with a neighbor over the garden fence, so to speak, after she returned to live, work, and write on the family farm: “He mentioned growing up without electricity. When he first encountered light as a student at UMass School of Agriculture, he said, ‘I just stood there just flicking the switch on and off, on and off; [the other students] must have thought I was simple.’” The conversation echoes with a sentence Brox later wrote in *Brilliant*: “By the 1920s, farmers knew full well that their isolation existed in relation to

another world. Yokels, hayseeds, and cabbage-heads, they were called.”

Faced with the formidable task of writing a readable book on a vast subject, a book with warmth and intimacy that didn’t intone the voice of history, Brox found touchstones she could fasten on, and chose to include personal stories and oral histories. Those touchstones range from the dazzling incandescent illumination of the Court of Honor at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair to the 1939 Blackout in London; from the harnessing of power generated by Niagara Falls, the first step in creating a national grid, to the Manhattan Blackout of 1965. She sprinkles personal stories liberally throughout.

Likewise, Brox discovered what she calls “rhymes in the narrative,” recurring themes that lend the book coherence: “I looked for ways of making little patterns,” Brox told me. “One of the most compelling things was the sheer difficulty of getting light, up until the nineteenth century. It’s hard to imagine how much life was improved, what a privilege light actually is — what a modern convenience. We take it for granted ...”

While honoring the rage for progress that has brought us to the digital age and acknowledging the way light has transformed our lives, Brox pays homage to candlelight and to the shelter and reassurance it affords. “There are dark corners in us that tolerate only a flickering flame,” Brox quotes French

philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *Brilliant*. Today, she mentions another favorite writer, Seamus Heaney, from whose beautiful poem, “Electric Light,” Brox says, she misremembered a line that stayed with her throughout the writing: “I stood in the waste of light.” Such are the beacons that illumine a writer’s way.


Progress, too, brings daily reasons for alarm. Brox explores the hazards — for humans and for the animal world — implicit in extending our waking hours. Diminishing the night has disrupted ancient rhythms of work and rest, costing us our sleep, our privacy, and our dreams. For animals, streetlights create a visual barrier, disrupting and disorienting them in their nocturnal travels.

The very interdependency of the energy grid has made self-sufficiency a rarefied, deliberate experiment in nostalgia. If there’s a solution, it’s not a simplistic one. We can’t go home again, not with light switches, computers, and i-phones close at hand: “There is a resistance to modernity, at the same time I wouldn’t willingly give it up,” Brox acknowledges as the shadows lengthen on her snowy yard. “When I talk about mitigating light pollution, even if we had a city with low light, we have the human interactions, the connections; we have the night life that separates us from the enormous night sky. We wouldn’t have that same awestruck feeling because in our homes we have the reassurance of light all around us.”



Cedar Wash

At the end of our conversation, as Brox describes her childhood growing up in rural America and her distinct sense of difference, I discover the personal thread that runs subliminally through *Brilliant*, the inner tension that endows it with insight and urgency: “I grew up in a world where my parents were older ... in a world of older people from another, older culture. I might be hyperconscious of that divide, but I grew up in a rural world between two cities, in a vestigial world, seeing this ghostly past within the world we all inhabit, and always aware of that.”

Our cups empty, the cat asleep, and the conversation winding down, I ask Brox about her next book. She sidesteps the question with characteristic elegance: “The book took five years to write. I never knew where the story was going the first few years. It involved an enormous amount of research, an enormous amount of work and devotion. It just kept getting bigger. Finally, when I finished, I didn’t know what to think. Like all writers, I always say to myself, ‘If only I had one more year ...’ It’s never entirely finished; it’s only abandoned. I think Archibald McLeish said that about poetry ... It’s a continuum, my writer’s life: You finish one book, and move onto another. The previous books, they couldn’t help me ... I think to myself, with each one, here’s another step forward, another step forward. As you get older, the past falls away faster and faster.” 



Vermillion Cliffs