

When bonfires were the work of “rascals”

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The bonfire of St. Anthony is not an institutional tradition that has always involved the authorities. On the contrary, this tradition is the result of mischief: for hundreds of years, the tradition of the bonfire was linked to thieving by young people, and to pyres that infuriated the “grownups”. In preparation for the big bonfire, which, this year, will be lit on Thursday 16 January, let's have a little review of history.

WHEN THE BONFIRE WAS MADE OF STOLEN WOOD

In 1619, **Giovanni Antonio Adamollo** already spoke of the rascals in the neighbourhood, who had helped, with their bare hands, to dig up rocks from the Motta to bring them to San Vittore (which was being built at the time). Three hundred years later, on 17 January 1914, a reporter who was very critical of the Motta children wrote of what had happened the previous night. “The habit of the children is to go and gather all of the used wood they can find, and bring it to the square to stoke the bonfire, around which we saw a crowd of idlers also yesterday evening, having fun watching the result of this vandalism. Because it's not customary here, as it is in other countries, for everyone to bring a log from their fireplace to stoke the bonfire; here it is acts of vandalism by children that provides the fuel. They go around picking up wood, where they can reach it; and when they can't find any, which is often the case, they go to houses and steal broken tools, ladders, doors, rickety chairs, tables without legs, and bring them to the fire...”

In the early 1940's, when sanctions had made Italy poor, wood was a primary source of heating, so it could not be “wasted” on an ordinary bonfire. But the Rascals did not hesitate, in order to continue the tradition, to steal the precious wood in the most original ways. Reports tell of a woman who, on looking out of her window on the ground floor of a house in Via Carrobbio, found only one to be there; the other was already on its way to the pyre. And of a farmer who was pushing a wooden wheelbarrow full of earth down the hill in Villa Mirabello. He stopped to say hello to someone, and on turning back, found the barrow was gone.

But the rascals took the greatest risk, and had most fun when they decided to steal the door of the toilet of the inn in Via Vetera. On being seen, discovered and chased by the owner, they took off along the streets in the centre, and managed to throw the door onto the fire. They were subsequently taken to the police station (which, at the time, was in Via Luini), but they managed to stick together during the interrogation. The Marshal, who despaired at the band's silence, could think of nothing better than just to kick them out.

A BONFIRE OF PALLETS AND CHRISTMAS TREES

Today, the proud descendants of those rascals take on the job of repeating the tradition, under the watchful eyes of those, like **Angelo Monti**, the honorary chairman, who have been “rascals” all their lives. Fortunately, time has softened the opinions of reporters. Back then, “the bonfire burned tools that were brought from everywhere, without the permission of the owners, and no policeman ever thought to intervene to stop the excessive zeal of the little

rascals.” Today the pile is made especially of pallets, but also of old furniture brought by the people of Varese, with the dried up Christmas trees on top.

It is no accident that, **for some years now, the “master bonfire-man” is a young engineer**, the son of rascals, whose basic duty is to build a pyre of pallets, furniture and firewood that will burn to perfection. A great development compared to 1914! **Aided by a team of engineers, surveyors and ordinary workmen, the rascals are going to start building the bonfire on Thursday morning**. The result of their efforts will be ash by 1 a.m. on Friday morning. In the meantime, other rascals will be in charge of the kitchens, preparing sausages, from the middle of the morning, until the dead of night.

FROM “VANDALS” TO INSTITUTION

Currently, the Rascals are an organised group that supervises all stages of the celebration, from gathering the firewood, to the food stalls, where the famous “salamelle” (grilled sausages) are cooked (this year, there will also be the notorious pesitt), to the blessing of the animals and the throwing of the balloons. This is all the result of the hard work (and we should say this, as many of them take one or two days off work, for the festival) of the neighbourhood rascals.

The oldest is over eighty, and the youngest ... just born. There are some families, with two or three generations, where the “elders”, in trying to pass the tradition down the generations, leave space (and the effort) to the younger people.

It could once be said that, “A man going back home, found four rascals in his house stealing wood,” and “We called the attention of the authorities to this case last year, but they clearly didn't take any notice.” Today, it is the authorities (first and foremost, the Mayor and the Parish Priest, representing temporal and religious power) who set the bonfire alight, and are the first fans of this magnificent, age-old tradition.

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