



Christmas Myths and Christmas
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A history of Christmas sounds like a fairly simple undertaking. From nativity, to church, to family, to commerce – it's a story of solemn beginnings, followed by a cosy, warm middle, and then with the chill of cold cash at the end. But is that the real story? For a start, every Christmas is different. The traditions of Catholic Spain are different from the traditions of Catholic Portugal, and Catholic South America; Protestant Germany is different from Protestant Denmark, much less the differences between Protestant England and Protestant New England.

But religion is only one element – ultimately, and surprisingly, it's a small element – in Christmas as we know it. For there is Christmas – the way it is celebrated in our own culture; and then there is Christmas – the way it is celebrated in our own homes; and then there is Christmas – the way it is celebrated in the mass media, in books and newspaper and magazines, on film and television. All of these Christmases are related to each other, but they are not identical. Because then, of course, there is also Christmas – that wondrous, nostalgically perfect day that is seared into our memories, the day that no Christmas individually ever quite recaptures. The poet C. Day Lewis wrote, 'there are not Christmases, there is only Christmas – a composite day made up from the haunting impression of many Christmas Days, a work of art painted by memory.' And that is the key.

Because each of us is a storehouse of Christmases, a repository of all the happiness – and sometimes the sadness – of seasons past. Christmas is therefore magical: it enables us to be like the White Queen in Alice in Wonderland, who could believe six impossible things before breakfast. We believe dozens of impossible things – often dozens of mutually contradictory impossible things – about Christmas without even trying. Often, without even knowing that we do so.

For the holiday piles legend upon legend. Santa Claus was created in the Netherlands, or maybe his red suit was invented by the Coca-Cola Corporation; Prince Albert brought German Christmas trees to Britain, unless it was the Hessian soldiers who took them to Revolutionary America; the Roman Saturnalia was the origin of Christmas day, or maybe it was the feast of Woden. Except – except, of course, that none of these things are true. At Christmas, and about Christmas, what is true, and what we think is true, is hard to separate from those things that we are simply happy to believe are true.

The two central assumptions about the holiday that are commonly made are that it is religious in origin, and that the traditions of each speaker's country embody the real Christmas, the ones that others only palely imitate.

That Christmas was once religious, and only in our day has it been reduced to its current shabby, market-driven form, is such a common idea that it comes as a surprise when the actual make-up of the day is examined. First and foremost, of course, Christmas is the day established by the Christian church to mark the nativity of Christ. Today, therefore, we generally assume that the old Christmas

– the real Christmas – was a deeply solemn religious event that our own secular, capitalist society has sullied.

The second assumption, that Christmas is native to ‘our’ culture, whichever culture that may be, is equally reflexive. To most people in Britain, in North America, or in Germany, Christmas is really a British, North American, or German holiday. Germans consider their Teutonic solstice myths, their trees, advent wreaths, seasonal markets, roast goose and red cabbage, as the authentic holiday customs that cannot properly be replicated anywhere else. The British and, in particular, the English, think their mince-pies and plum puddings, their ghost stories and Dickens readings, to be the very essence of the day. And in the USA, the birthplace of Santa Claus and of Christmas stockings, of giant outdoor trees, and eggnog, Christmas is, just as obviously, American, and the rest of the world participates in their customs only by imitation.

And yet, even while we consider ‘our’ Christmas customs to be the true ones, we – most people in the west today who celebrate Christmas – in reality we don’t stick solely to ‘our’ customs either, but instead practise an amalgam of traditions drawn primarily from the Anglo-American world and the German-speaking lands. These were then shaken up, mixed together with a couple of centuries of newspapers, magazines and books, not to mention a hundred years of radio, film and television, to end up not with one culture’s Christmas, but with something entirely new, a holiday that is recognized across the globe, but comes from nowhere in particular.

And it is that Christmas, that strange hybrid growth that we all think we know so well – so well that that we possessively refer to it as ‘ours’ – that is the holiday, its history, myths, traditions, stories and symbols, that I want to explore tonight.

The first myth, as I said, is that Christmas was once a time of religious reflection and spirituality. Or, possibly, not. The Bible is reticent on the birth of Christ. The nativity is mentioned only in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Luke was probably written half a century after the death of Christ, Matthew perhaps a decade later, and neither gives a time of year for the birth, probably because birthdays carried little religious importance in the early church: the important day was the day of baptism, the day of religious birth. Two hundred years before the first known Christmas, in the second century, the Eastern churches marked 6 January as Epiphany, a Greek word meaning ‘showing forth’, indicating the day that Christ’s divinity was revealed to man, and, at least among some Egyptian Christians, possibly the day that marked Christ’s baptism, although we have no knowledge of why that date was chosen.

Christianity was established as the religion of the Roman Empire in 312; the establishment of Christmas as a church festival followed not long after, with Julius I, the Bishop of Rome, decreeing that Christ’s nativity was to be observed on 25 December. Even so, from the start Christmas seemed determined to break away from religion: sometime before the year 389, the Archbishop of Constantinople found it necessary to warn his flock against the dancing and ‘feasting to excess’ that were occurring on the holy day. Nobody issues warnings about things that aren’t happening, and it is likely, therefore, that only thirty years or so after it was first mentioned, Christmas was already being spent as a day of secular pleasure.

And so it continued. By the end of the first millennium, we know of great courtly feasting in Germany, Wales and Ireland, and soon the season was a time of feasting for all who could afford it, despite the fact that, from at least the fifth century, Advent had officially been a church-designated period of penitence and fasting, like Lent, with Christmas Eve a major fast day, when meat, cheese and eggs were forbidden. In England, secular rulers too intermittently attempted to curb the excesses of the

period, although with little success, even in their own households. On Christmas day 1213, the king and his guests consumed 27 hogsheads of wine, 400 pigs, 3,000 fowl, 15,000 herring, 10,000 eels, 100 pounds of almonds, and 68 pounds of spices.

That feasting overcame all prohibitions is unsurprising. The European agricultural year almost dictated it. After the autumn harvest, grain was stored, fruit and vegetables preserved. In northern Europe, St Martin's day, 11 November, was the traditional time for slaughtering farm animals, and feasting followed hard behind, with St Martin's geese in Germany and Denmark, St Martin's swine in Germany and Martlemas beef in England. In wine-growing regions, too, St Martin's day was when the new wine was considered to be ready.

In England, this traditional seasonal drinking was retrospectively given a historical tradition to justify it. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* – which one folklorist has dryly referred to as these islands' 'first historical novel' – told the tale of the fifth-century leader Vortigern, who was invited to drink with the toast, *Lauerd king wæs hæil*, or 'your health'. The story was almost entirely fabricated, and the parts that weren't were anachronistic by a mere half a millennium. Nonetheless, this legendary *wæs hæil* was transformed into 'wassail', and became part of the holiday tradition, encompassing not only the toast, but also the associated alcohol, and the bowl it was drunk from, and the singing and partying that went along with it.

By the nineteenth century, contrary to all our images of pious Victorians spending their Christmases in church or in the arms of their loving families in front of roaring fires, drink was in reality ever-present. To celebrate Christmas, said one newspaper, was to celebrate 'Rioting and Drunkenness'. And indeed one London court heard testimony from a murder suspect who could, unfortunately, not say where he had been the night his wife was killed, because, he said, 'he had not the smallest recollection of what passed on Christmas day, he was so much in liquor'. More commonplace was the man brought up on a drunk and disorderly charge in 1831. In his defence, he begged, 'as it was Christmas time, the magistrate would forgive him'. The magistrate was unimpressed: 'every person brought before him during the last three days had made nearly a similar defence,' he said. (Verdict: guilty as charged.) And things didn't change: by the start of the 20th century, one US manufacturer of soft drinks ran a decade-long seasonal campaign showing Santa with a drink – including all through Prohibition.

Another, more sober, element that has symbolized the holiday for centuries is winter greenery. In the early seventh century, Pope Gregory the Great had noted that decorating churches and holy places was a custom of the British Isles, although it was not yet seasonal: midsummer decorations were as common as mid-winter ones. One sixteenth-century historian claimed that in previous centuries every parish had a great pole serving as a maypole in the summer, and then decorated with holly and ivy in the winter, for what he said was the 'disport of Christmas to the people'.

This was not a Christmas tree as we know it, but it might be considered a precursor. For an association between trees and Christmas was emerging, especially in Germany. These initially grew out of a dramatic genre known as paradise plays. Christmas eve was the feast day of Adam and Eve, and these plays opened with a scene set in the Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge represented in midwinter by an evergreen fir with apples tied to its branches. After the plays went out of fashion, paradise trees continued to be erected in public places in German-speaking countries. We know that as early as 1419, a Freiburg city guild erected a tree decorated with apples, tinsel and gingerbread.

The first decorated indoor tree we know of did not arrive until 1605, in Strasbourg, in the region that by then was the centre of the Christmas-tree tradition. Covered in paper roses, apples, gilded sweets and sugar ornaments, it was what, a few years later, would be given a new name – a Weihnachtsbaum, or Christmas tree.

This German tradition travelled to England and North America in the eighteenth century. In 1789, the husband of a lady-in-waiting to Queen Charlotte, the German wife of George III, suggested putting up what he called ‘an illuminated tree, according to the German fashion’, but his wife was doubtful – ‘I thought our children too young to be amused at so much expense and trouble’, she said, and besides, all their friends were away. It sounds as though she and her husband were familiar with such trees, although it was only in 1800, at Windsor, that Queen Charlotte erected the first tree that can be firmly dated in Britain.

Two years earlier, in 1798, the poet Coleridge had visited a north German home on Christmas eve, and had watched as a family ceremoniously lit the candles on their tree, and then exchanged presents, both of which were customs he did not recognize, and which he described in an essay which was, in the 1820s and 1830s, reprinted over and over in the press, popularizing the ceremony in both Britain and the new world. In Philadelphia, if this later image is to be believed, members of the German community were already erecting trees on the holiday by 1809.

The German custom spread more widely when, in 1848, the Illustrated London News magazine published an engraving of Victoria and Albert beside a tabletop tree at Windsor. This single image cemented the Christmas tree in the popular consciousness, so much so that by 1861, the year of Albert’s death, it was firmly reported – and all too often still is – that this German prince had transplanted the custom to England with him when he married.

In the USA, the engraving was rendered more democratic when, two years after its first publication, Godey’s Lady’s Book, at that time the best-selling magazine in the country, reprinted it, after carefully removing Victoria’s jewellery and Albert’s sash and medals (as well as, somewhat oddly, his moustache), and reducing the number of presents under the tree. The illustration was re-titled ‘The Christmas Tree’, with no reference to royalty at all.

So now we’ve got the holiday on the 25th, we’ve got the tree. The gift-giver in Coleridge’s German essay, and in these images of family trees, however, was still very obviously the family members themselves. The seasonal gift-giver who personified the holiday took a more circuitous route.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, a Devonshire clergyman may have written the first English seasonal song to greet Christmas not as a religious festival, nor as a season, or a time of feasting, but as a person, with a refrain that ran, ‘Welcome, my lord, Sir Christmas.’ In these verses, Sir Christmas oversaw eating and drinking, and taught listeners the customs of the feast day, ending, ‘Make good cheer and be right merry.’

Sir Christmas was a jolly innovation. Other seasonal visitors cast a harsher hue. Winter was a time of superstition, of revenants, when the gods, or spirits of the dead, were more easily seen by the living. All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day, 1 and 2 November, may have evolved out of days when the dead were worshipped, or appeased. With the dead came various intercessors, who rewarded, or punished, or blessed, or banished, their earthly followers. On 10 November, St Martin handed out apples and nuts to good Flemish children, while in other places it was a wild man who did so, often the servant of, or travelling with, a visiting saint, especially St Nicholas, whose day was marked

on 6 December, and they might wear animal skins, or carry a whip or switch or crop, to punish the bad children.

Whoever he was, the wild man was ferocious. To draw attention away from these sidekicks to a Catholic saint, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther promoted a gentler idea, the Christkind, or Christ child, who gave fruit and nuts to good children. German-speakers also welcomed the visits of the Weihnachtsmann, the Christmas man, and St Nicholas and his helpers, as did the Dutch, their home-country giving birth to the most famous gift-bringer in the west over the past two centuries, Santa Claus. Or perhaps not.

The standard story of Santa Claus runs as follows. St Nicholas was a fourth-century bishop of the Lycian Greek town of Myra, in what is now Turkey, although it was only in the thirteenth century that his story really became established. In that later telling, the bishop was said to have tossed three bags of gold through an impoverished nobleman's window, to provide dowries for his daughters so that they would not be sold into prostitution. A later legend told of how the saint foiled a wicked innkeeper who planned to murder, cut up, salt and roast the bodies of three schoolboys, to feed travellers at his inn. Still later, he was said to have rescued ships from winter storms. Drawing on these themes, St Nicholas over time became the patron saint of sailors, and, particularly, of children. His saint's day, 6 December, became the day on which schoolchildren were rewarded or punished for their year's work, or were given a holiday, and his attributes included sacks, to represent the bags of gold. By the sixteenth century in the Netherlands, on the eve of his saint's day, figures dressed as St Nicholas went from house to house to examine the children, rewarding those who had been good with sweets, those who had been bad with switches, or lumps of coal.

And from there, the story continues, Dutch emigrants to New Amsterdam, later New York City, took St Nicholas with them, and their version of the saint's name, Sint Nicolaas, was rendered by the city's English-speaking population as Sinterklaas, then corrupted to Santa Claus, to be immortalized in Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem, 'A Visit from St Nicholas', better known by its opening lines:

*"Twas the night before Christmas, when all thro' the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there..."*

Except that here we must stop and rewind, for little in this story actually happened. It is unlikely that the fourth-century Bishop of Myra ever existed: the first mention of him comes two hundred years after he supposedly lived. And then, by the sixteenth century, although he was seen in the Netherlands every December, it is remarkably difficult to get him from there to North America.

From 1624, the North American Dutch colony was governed by a treaty with the Dutch Republic, the seven Dutch provinces that had freed themselves from Habsburg domination. The official church of these new-world territories was the Protestant Reformed Church, which permitted no recognition of saints, nor saints' days. Furthermore, while the territory was politically and legally Dutch, its inhabitants were as ethnically mixed as those of modern-day New York: of the region's approximately 3,500 residents, as many as 2,000 may have been English, and many others were of German or Scandinavian origin. By the end of the seventeenth century, as little as 2 per cent of the population of the city was actually Dutch.

So, no saints' days, and Dutch traditions most likely practised by no more than a tiny minority. Instead of deriving from folklore, therefore, or quaint colonial customs, or religion, the American emergence of Santa Claus was facilitated, and possibly more, by a merchant named John Pintard. In 1804 he was a founder of the New-York Historical Society, which took St Nicholas as its emblem

and held an annual St Nicholas day dinner, possibly as a nod to Pintard's Huguenot heritage: many American Huguenots originated in the Low Countries, especially Wallonia, where the cult of Nicholas was particularly prominent.

In this same period, a young writer named Washington Irving was drawing on New York's Dutch history for political satire, in his 1809 burlesque, *A History of New-York*, contrasting what he presented as the kinder and gentler old world of New Amsterdam with the hustle and bustle of modern New York. The New-York Historical Society members also used New Amsterdam as a contrast to what they viewed as the ills of the present in their rapidly changing city, and the toast at the society's annual dinner ran: 'To the memory of St Nicholas. May the virtuous habits and simple manners of our Dutch ancestors be not lost in the luxuries and refinements of the present time.'

Irving's *History of New-York* was hugely successful, making his name, but also clouding its comic origins. Instead, the book began to be read as though it described real events. Had anyone paused to check, the book could not have passed as history for a moment: he claimed that the Dutch named their first church in New York in honour of St Nicholas, whereas in reality it was the twentieth century before that happened.

Yet the Nicholas legend-building continued. For the Historical Society's St Nicholas dinner in 1810, Pintard produced a broadside bearing an engraving of 'the good holy man' St Nicholas in his bishop's robes. Underneath was a verse, in Dutch and in English:

*"St Nicholas, my dear good friend!
To serve you ever was my end,
If you will, now, me something give,
I'll serve you ever while I live."*

Pintard claimed this verse had been recited to him by 'an ancient lady 87 years of age'. It's possible, of course, that Pintard did hear it from an elderly Dutch lady, although if she had been eighty-seven in 1810, not only had she been born in an English colony, but so had her parents.

Legend, however, easily trumped fact. Two weeks after that dinner, a magazine followed up with a poem about the 'good holy man' – Pintard's phrase – adding: 'whom we Sancte Claus name'. (It is noticeable that these English-speaking authors all used versions of the German Sankt, not the Dutch Sint.) Two years later, knowledge of Sancte Claus had spread widely enough for a censorious volume for children, *False Stories Corrected*, to dismiss 'Old Santaclaw, of whom so often little children hear such foolish stories; and once in the year are encouraged to hang their stockings in the Chimney at night'. And by 1830, a New York bookseller advertised that in his 'Temple' of 'Santa Claus' customers could return to 'the good ways of their fathers': less than twenty-one years after his American birth, Santa was already a piece of nostalgia.

So, it appears Washington Irving, John Pintard, and their friends should be credited with the creation of Santa Claus. Or should they? Almost everything suggests that they were – were it not for two newspaper references to 'Santa Claus' in 1773 and 1774, when John Pintard was just fourteen, and Irving not even born. So once more we need to stop and rewind.

On 23 December 1773, that mention in Rivington's *New-York Gazetteer* noted that 'Last Monday, the anniversary of St. Nicholas, otherwise called Santa Claus, was celebrated at Protestant Hall...' There was a similar mention in 1774, followed by decades of silence. Where did this group, who used the name 'Santa Claus', come from? No explanation, nor even any guess, has ever been put forward. It might be, however, that it was another immigrant group, neither Dutch, nor pseudo-Dutch, which supplies the missing link between St Nicholas and Santa.

By the eighteenth century, European settlers of what would soon be New York state included immigrants from what are today Germany and Austria, from the Czech lands, from Scandinavia and Finland, as well as from Britain. Switzerland, too, had seen a mass migration to the new world, with possibly as many as 25,000 Swiss heading for, predominantly, North Carolina, but also Pennsylvania, and New York in that century alone. Many came from their country's German-speaking regions, a fact which becomes of potential interest to Santa Claus historians when we learn that two Swiss-German names for St Nicholas were Samichlaus or Santi-Chlaus, both of which sound far closer to Santa Claus than the Dutch Sint Nicolaas does. In some regions of Switzerland, Samichlaus made seasonal appearances, travelling through the Swiss mountains on St Nicholas' day from at least the seventeenth century. We cannot, of course, be certain, but there were Swiss immigrants in New York, they came from the part of the world that marked Samichlaus' day, and it is therefore entirely possible that this Swiss-German name is the ancestor of Santa Claus, transmitted via Rivington's Gazetteer. And we can make one further connection. Pintard's own copy of the newspaper survives: we do know he owned it, even if we can't know if he read it.

The elements are now coming together: we have Santa, we have trees, we have feasting. Christmas carols, that venerable music that goes back to the earliest celebrations comes next, right? Well, as always, not so fast.

The earliest Christmas music, dating from the fourth century, had been written by churchmen, for churchmen, and concerned the theological implications of the nativity. These were not known by, or intended for, the general population. Instead, in the twelfth century, a carol was a secular French song accompanied by a dance, to be sung in springtime. (And that history, with carols not restricted to Christmas, can still be seen in today's English usage, where we commonly say Christmas carol, despite it being virtually unknown for the word carol to refer to anything except a Christmas song anymore.)

At any rate, it was only in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that Christmas carols, as opposed to church music, began to be written, first in Latin, and slowly in the local language. While many European carols focused on the nativity, the English began as they meant to go on: the earliest English carol we know is a drinking song.

By the end of the seventeenth century, carols were everywhere: in Germany, 'Vom Himmel hoch' had been written by Martin Luther himself, and parts of 'O Tannenbaum' were known (although most of the words we sing today were written in the nineteenth century). New France had its first indigenous-language carol, written by Jean de Brébeuf in Huron (Wyandot), in which Jesus lies in a birchbark lodge as great chiefs from afar come bearing beaver pelts. Britain, continuing with its generally non-religious songbook, had 'Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly' and 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas', as well as 'While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night', written by Nahum Tate, who is more famous to literature as the man who rewrote King Lear to give it a happy ending.

While not everyone approved of what was considered to be a shocking lack of gravity in the lyrics, carols were widely popular, and soon they were being written across the religious spectrum: in 1739, the Methodist Charles Wesley wrote the words to 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'; the following year, an English Roman Catholic in France produced 'Adeste Fideles', known in English as 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. And in 1742, the London music world was introduced to what has in the twentieth century become a Christmas favourite, Handel's Messiah.

It was unsurprising that this was produced by a German, for in Germany the carol tradition had always been stronger than in English-speaking countries, and now it developed further, with, in 1820, what was later translated into English as 'Silent Night'. And, as with so many popular Christmas events, there's a perfectly charming and entirely fabricated story attached to this carol. The legend goes that the church organ in the small town of Oberndorf, in what is now Austria, fell into disrepair just before the all-important Christmas services, and so the curate and the assistant organist hastily cobbled together a carol to a guitar accompaniment. In reality, we know that the church's organ continued to give good service for some years after the carol was written. Instead, the piece was heard by a visiting folk-music enthusiast who included it in a concert, calling it an 'authentic' Tyrolean folksong – despite Oberndorf being nowhere near the Tyrol – and written by that famous author, 'traditional'.

In England, the carol took longer to gain popularity, for a very English reason, class. Basically, carols had been the songs of the working classes, and thus they just weren't respectable enough for the middle classes of the nineteenth century, written as they were, said one, by 'superstitious and illiterate persons'. In 1826, one of the first popular anthologies introduced carols to middle-class readers as though they were entirely unknown. After giving a complicated (and, as we're now getting used to, entirely fabricated) derivation of the word carol itself, he gestured towards an equally fabricated church history, but, he added hastily, he would confine himself to what he called 'domestic usages' of the form. In reality, of course, he had to, for there was barely any ecclesiastical history. And so instead, the author made one up; he took what was secular, and made it religious; and, most importantly, he took what was working class and of the street, and made it middle-class, and of the hearth and home. He was followed in this by song collectors over the following decades, who rejected popular carols as being 'deficient of interest to a refined ear', 'the veriest trash', and against all 'morality and good taste'. For the same reasons, in the USA the nineteenth-century African-American spirituals, like 'Go Tell it on the Mountain', had to await the twentieth century to be valued by mainstream culture.

By this time, carols were being treated as though they had always existed, and always been popular. A man remembering his childhood in the 1860s recalled that they sang what he called 'the ancient carols of England', including 'O Come All Ye Faithful', which in reality hadn't even been translated into English in his childhood. In 1903, one magazine commended Oxford University for keeping alive its 'ancient' carol service, complete with Christmas tree and selections from the Messiah. So – carols, tree and Messiah – three customs, none of which dated back more than a century, were now all 'ancient'.

In a similar way, in 1880, a bishop in Cornwall created a new Christmas Eve service to incorporate carols. It was copied by many churches, including, in 1918, the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. This new service of Nine Lessons and Carols was extremely popular, and in 1928, the BBC began to broadcast it. Yet just ten years after that first service, it had somehow magically aged, the broadcaster's publicity material now announcing that 'The festival has been held since the chapel was built nearly 500 years ago'.

It is this type of magical transformation that makes Christmas what it is: a holiday that shape-shifts, to become what we – both personally and as a society – need it to be at any one time. Even when we can trace a single line of descent for a tradition, the underpinnings of each detail, or the emotions attached to it, can be dramatically at odds. Santa is benevolent, and, in venturing into our houses, drinking the odd cup of tea or eating a biscuit or two that have been left out for him, he is domesticated.

Yet while we have tamed so much, a little fear always lurks in those ‘winter’s tales’ with their ‘spirits and ghosts...that glide by night’. No one quite knows why winter, and Christmas more specifically, became the time of ghost stories. According to Shakespeare, Christmas is the only time of year when ‘no spirit can walk abroad’ and ‘No fairy...nor witch hath power to charm’. Perhaps ‘So hallowed’ a day allowed people to speak of the things that otherwise frightened them.

For whatever reason, the connection has been strong from at least the seventeenth century, even before the nineteenth-century love of antiquarianism brought ghost-stories back into the mainstream. Walter Scott promised holiday tales of ‘conjurer and ghost, / Goblin and witch’, while the centrepiece of the Dingley Dell Christmas celebrations in Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers* was the retelling of a story of goblins – published, of course, just in time for Christmas.

Perhaps it was the absolute domestication of the holiday that made these stories so popular. Just as living in safe societies makes reading crime fiction pleasurable rather than unnerving, so perhaps sitting comfortably, sipping a hot drink while the children destroy their new toys around you, makes ghostly apparitions enjoyable rather than frightening. The comic writer Jerome K. Jerome did wonder at the fact that ‘Whenever five or six English-speaking people meet round a fire on Christmas Eve, they start telling each other ghost stories...It is a genial, festive season, and [yet] we love to muse upon graves, and dead bodies, and murders, and blood...’ And this continues today, with an entire genre of gory Christmas-themed horror films.

The antithesis of Christmas, whether by slasher films, or simply by complaining of the horrors of the season, had by the end of the nineteenth century become an industry in itself, as those writers and artists who felt so inclined found plenty of commercial outlets for their bile. Much of this was comic. In Weedon and George Grossmith’s *Diary of a Nobody*, that late nineteenth-century satirical masterpiece of suburban life, Mr Pooter’s son declares ‘I hate a family gathering at Christmas. What does it mean? Why, someone says: “Ah! we miss poor Uncle James, who was here last year”, and we all begin to snivel...Then another gloomy relation says: “Ah! I wonder whose turn it will be next?” Then we all snivel again, and proceed to eat and drink too much...’

But just as the clerics of the first millennium condemning drinking and dancing revealed that this was what was occurring, so these modern misanthropes fulminating against the holiday show how much the holiday meant to the majority. If Christmas was as universally disliked as these naysayers suggest, no one would have paid them to say nay.

Because the Christmas for most was a holiday of largely recent traditions, traditions that were somehow thought of as ancient, be they turkey, or a tree, watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*, singing carols or playing Nat King Cole’s ‘Chestnuts Roasting in an Open Fire’, or listening to the queen’s speech or the carol service from King’s. For a great deal of the meaning of Christmas is in repetition, but a very particular form of repetition, a repetition of forgetting and remembering, of remembering and misremembering, its unending cycle allowing us an illusion of stability, of long-established communities, a way to believe in an imagined past, when it was safe for children to play in the street, when no one locked their doors, and everybody knew their neighbours.

In the same way, stories of family holidays of the past are equally misted and softened, the edges smoothed away unconsciously. Over time, and over generations, distressing or embarrassing elements in the retelling of family events vanish; incidents that have no meaning to the next generation are forgotten; old details that are unfamiliar to their audiences are replaced by more familiar ones from their own lives. We can see how this has regularly occurred in Christmas celebrations in every country. When people say they miss the old holiday traditions, few mean that they miss people creeping up on their house and firing guns in the middle of the night. Or that they

miss wearing goat-skeletons on their heads. Or that they miss Christmas being the one day in the year that they can afford to eat meat.

What they mean is that they miss what we understand emotively to be the central core of the holiday, not the lives we have, but the lives we would like to have, in a world where family, religion, personal and social relationships are built on firm foundations. It is not, therefore, surprising that the most profound changes in the celebration of Christmas accompanied the four great revolutions of the modern period in the west: the British Civil War; the American Revolution; the French Revolution; and the Industrial Revolution. These revolutions brought changes that were irreversible. Industrialization, modernization, urbanization, all contributed to a communal desire for the past, for a place and a time that never existed, a place where we are loved, protected and cherished.

The rituals of Christmas allow us to believe, if only for one day a year, that that world exists. And the real magic? By repeating the rituals, we can go back there every year. Christmas nostalgia is not only for the Christmases of our childhoods, or those we have read about, or seen in films and television. It is a conflation of all of those Christmases, a pick-and-mix collection of traditions, emotions and rituals. Some are ours, some our parents', or what we think we remember of what our parents recalled from their own childhood Christmases. Others come from books, from magazines, from how Martha Stewart or Nigella Lawson or the Food Network or Oprah tells us things have 'always' been done, validating our own, or brand-new, customs by claiming that they are long-standing rituals based in historical reality.

Ultimately, we need to believe that Christmas is, as Scrooge's nephew Fred tells him, 'a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!'

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Christmas: A Biography

<https://www.judithflanders.co.uk/bibliography/>

Suggested Reading

For Christmas in Britain:

Mark Connelly, *Christmas: A History* (2012)

Paul Frodsham, *From Stonehenge to Santa Claus: The Evolution of Christmas* (2008)

Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996)

Christmas in the USA:

Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (1995)

Christmas in Germany:

Joe Perry, Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History (2010)