

Review: Christopher Winn, *The Book of Christmas: The Hidden Stories Behind Our Festive Traditions*, Hardie Grant Books, London, UK, 2018

Pages: 161

Truth About Christmas

This is a relatively unbiased history of the Christmas holiday.

Each tradition contributes to a network of information about different people groups and their pagan backgrounds: Saturnalian Romans; druidic Britons; and Thor-worshipping Norsemen.

The true significance of Christmas accoutrements comes alive and one can see nothing much has changed in centuries. Behind a veneer of commercialism and religiosity lies the same tree, feasting, and revelries.

Contrary to some Christians, there is no evidence for it as an historical Biblical holiday and little in Church history (first celebrated in the 4th C AD). This knowledge is of great benefit as honouring the Lord means not celebrating vain traditions of pagans. The reasonable conclusion is nothing can be ‘salvaged’ by dressing it up with hymns and well-meaning sentiment.

A note on the bibliography: it is not extensive and relies on encyclopedias, and so leaves open the question of how scholarly the book is.

Introduction (pp. 4-9)

I) A Question of Christmas (pp. 10-18)

People who are *not* Christian celebrate Christmas because Christians absorbed, adapted, and replaced pagan festivals. [p. 14]

“Christmas has come to mean whatever you want it to mean”. [‘’]

The Sun god Odin, also Jul, visited the Earth in his chariot for twelve days in December, called *Yuletide*.

The first Christmas was recorded in AD 336 as taking place in AD 354: “25 Dec: natus Christmas in Betleem Judeae”.

Chris erroneously states in AD 597, Pope Gregory had to send Augustine to convert the heathen Anglo-Saxons, when in fact Christianity had been in the British isles since the second century according to Tertullian.

II) Odds and Ends (pp. 19-21)

December 25 fits well with the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25, which is nine months earlier.

Saturn is derived from *satus* (Lt. “sowing”).

Cynic Lucian of Samosata has “Saturn” describe his festival:

“During my week the serious is barred: no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games and dice, appointing kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping of tremulous hands, an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy water – such are the functions over which I preside.” [p. 20]

After *Saturnalia* and *Sol Invictus* came *Kalends* (“calendar”), the first day of the month. Libanius on the Kalends of January:

“The impulse to spend seizes everyone...a stream of presents pours itself out on all sides.” [p. 21]

Christmas had clearly borrowed from Saturnalia, Kalends, and other midwinter festivals with pagan roots.

III) The Tree (pp. 22-37)

Adventus is “coming”, and the Catholic Advent is the fourth Sunday before Christmas. The first two weeks are about the Second Coming, the third a transition between contemplation and merriment (“**Gaudete** Sunday”).

John Paul II called the Christmas tree a symbol of Christ, also reminding people of the Tree of Life.

Ancient Egyptians adorned homes with palm leaves and green rushes to celebrate the winter solstice, when Ra would begin to regain his power.

Druids brought evergreen tree branches into temples to signify resurgent life, and hung nuts and fruit on pine branches for winter gods.

The medieval Tree of Knowledge was depicted as a large pine with red apples in “Paradise Plays”. These were discouraged after the Reformation.

Per Catholic folklore, in the 8thC, St Boniface stopped a young boy being sacrificed under the Thunder Oak to Thor by chopping down the tree. The villagers waited for Thor to strike him down with his hammer.

Luther is said to have been struck by the beauty of stars in a pine forest, so cut one down and put candles on it to honour Jesus as the Light of the World. However, the first tree is said to have been put up in Freiburg, 1419.

Germans called the Christmas tree *der Tannenbaum*.

Another tree appears in Riga Town Hall square, Latvia, 1510. There is a House of Blackheads there named after the black patron Saint Maurice. The Blackheads danced round the tree having paper roses for Mary. Afterwards, the tree was burnt in the Yuletide tradition.

Queen Charlotte, wife of George II put up Britain’s first tree in Windsor, 1800. Charlotte was from the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

However, in 1603, John Snow wrote: “In 1444 ... the morning of Candlemas day, a standard tree being set up in the midst of the pavement fast in the ground, nailed full of Holme and Juie, for disport of Christmas to the people...

Prince Albert was from Coburg in Bavaria.

8M trees are sold in Britain p.a. Each year a tree from Norway is cut and put in Trafalgar Square.

300M trees p.a. are grown to satisfy tree demand.

The Rockefeller Centre Christmas tree in NY was first erected in 1933.

Franklin Pierce put up the first White House tree in the 1850s.

6M trees are sold in France p.a.

Christmas in Japan is a huge commercial occasion.

IV) Christmas Decorations (pp. 37-61)

Pagans used evergreens to ward off evil spirits.

The druids believed holly (Old English “holiness”: *holegn*) was sacred for its ability to thrive in winter. Prickly leaves deterred witches and demons.

Catholics changed the prickles into the crown of thorns and the berries into Christ’s blood.

Pagans saw the prickly as the male plant and ivy the female.

Wroeth (Anglo-Saxon) was “writhe” or “twist”.

The Advent wreath was a circle of evergreen plants, set with four candles for the Advent weeks: three purple and one pink.

The walnut was the nut of the gods for the Romans.

Tinsel is *lametta* in German, from the Italian *lama*.

In the 19th C, Hans Greiner invented a technique to line the inside of baubles with AgNO₃. After Prince Albert sponsored Hans, demand in Britain rose. After WWII, the Iron Curtain trapped Hans’s village in East Germany, so firms in Japan, the U.S., and Czech Republic took up the slack. Hans’ foundry place is *Huttenplatz*.

Tradition says the wise men visited Jesus January 6, on Epiphany.

An Advent calendar has a Christmas scene with doors and windows numbered 1 to 24. This took off in the U.S. selling millions. However, these ceased to be religious by the 60s with Cadbury, then LEGO, and now alcohol, beauty products, movies, etc.

By 1880, 12M Christmas cards had been sold in Britain. Today, an estimated 700-900M are, and in the U.S. 2B.

V) Christmas Markets (pp. 62-66)

In 1310, 6 December, Munich, a *Nikolausdult* (Christmas Market) was held. This is St. Nicholas' Day.

The first *official* market was the *Striezelmarkt* in Dresden, 1434.

Christollen is fruit bread of nuts, spices and dried fruit sprinkled with icing sugar.

Luther replaced St Nicholas with the Christkind ("Christ child") as gift giver, and changed the day from 6 Dec to Christmas Eve. Thus, Christmas markets became *Christkindlesmarkte*.

The Nuremberg *Christkindlesmarkt* dates to 1628 and is the most celebrated of all. There are *Zwetschgenmannle* prune figures, *Nurnberger Rostbratwurst* sausages with sauerkraut, and *Lebkuchen* gingerbread.

VI) Nativity Plays (pp. 67-69)

St Francis of Assisi put on the first nativity play in Greccio, 1223, who held a Midnight Mass.

The *Presepe* [crib] *Cuciniello* is the largest Nativity scene with 160 characters, 28 angels, 80 animals, and over 40 objects.

VII) Christmas Music (pp. 70-87)

Wassailing (Saxon: *weas hael*, "be of good health") is the pagan practice of offering up midwinter songs and sacrifices for good health and a good future harvest.

The Saxon lord would give a New Year wassail toast to his upon, who would rejoinder with, “drink hael”.

The wassail drink was ale, wine, honey, spices, eggs, and cream.

On the 5th of January, wassailers would go about orchards singing and banging drums to frighten away evil spirits.

Wassailing songs became **carols**.

Χορος is “dancing in a circle” and *choraula* (Latin) “a choral song”.

The first carols were winter solstice songs sung about stone circles.

In AD 129, it is claimed that Pope Telesphorus ordained that all sing the Angel’s Hymn.

Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans banned Christmas from 1649-1660, but they returned with the crypto-Catholic King Charles II.

J.P. Morgan’s uncle James Lord Pierpont wrote “Jingle Bells”.

Germany’s famous carol is “O Tannenbaum” (“Oh Christmas Tree”).

“Silent Night” was sung first at a midnight mass in Oberndorf in 1818. Frederick William IV of Prussia ordered it sung by his cathedral choir every Christmas Eve.

A good Christmas song may only sell at Christmas-time, *but will sell every Christmas year after year.*

Irving Berlin wrote “White Christmas” in 1940.

VIII) The Twelve Days of Christmas (pp. 88-93)

This festival echoes the Norse Yule on the winter solstice, in which a Yule log was doused in ale, decorated, set alight and left to smoulder for twelve days.

Ephrem the Syriac of Eastern Catholicism first mentions this festival in the 4th C.

IX) Christmas Eve (pp. 94-99)

Cecil Frances Alexander was a prolific Victorian hymn writer, with over 400 titles, including, “All Things Bright and Beautiful”.

The first midnight mass was held in the Basilica of St Maria Maggiore in Rome, AD 432 under Pope Sixtus III. He had an underground chapel built to replicate the cave [sic] in Bethlehem where Jesus is thought to have been born. [p. 99]

X) Father Christmas (pp. 100-109)

The Green Man embodies rebirth and fertility.

Father Time, Father Frost, Father Snow, and Father Winter are all similar gods. Winter wore green robes with white fur representing ice and snow.

Odin visited earth for twelve days in December, often as a man “Jul” (thus, “Yule”), on an eight-legged horse Sleipnir. He would give gifts to the good and punish the bad.

Pawnbrokers use three gold balls as a sign for St Nicholas who gave them to his neighbour’s daughters so they could marry.

St Nicholas died AD 343 on 6 December.

In England, the Lord of Misrule would take charge of Christmas revelries; in Scotland it was the Abbot of Unreason.

The Church had a Boy Bishop chorister elected on St Nicholas’ Day to be the Bishop on 28 December.

Mummers’ plays began as pagan winter ceremonies, since Christianised with St George and the Dragon being slain by an evil Turkish knight, then resurrected by a cosmic figure.

XI) Santa Claus (pp. 110-132)

Santa Claus first appears in print in 1773 in the *New York Gazette*.

Santa's coat is red as St Nicholas wore red robes.

Thor rode in the sky in a chariot drawn by two horned goats Gnasher and Snarler.

In 1821, Clement Moore compiled America's first Greek and Hebrew Lexicon. He is said to have written "Twas the Night Before Christmas". He describes Santa as a "right jolly old elf".

On Santa the smoker's pipe: "The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth, And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath."

Norse elf figures would decide one's fate whether he was good or bad. If you were bad an elf would sit on your head and give you nightmares.

"Elf" is from Old English "oelf" and Old Germanic "alb", nightmare.

Knecht Ruprecht in Germany, the half-goat, half-demon Krampus in Austria, and Zwarte Piet in Netherlands were St Nicholas' helpers to punish bad children.

In 1879, the world's first Santa's Christmas Grotto opened in Liverpool.

XII) Christmas Day (pp. 133-150)

Feasting is a *sine qua non* on Christmas day.

In Britain, 11M turkeys are eaten.

Sir Walter Raleigh introduced the potato to Ireland from South America in the 16th C.

In the mid-16th C, the Roman Catholic Church issued a decree that "pudding should be made on the 25th Sunday after Trinity, and be prepared with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and the 12 apostles, and every family member stir it in turn east to west in honour of the Magi."

This 25th Sunday became known as "Stir Up Sunday".

"Mince" derives from *minuo* (Lt: "to make small").

The Queen's Christmas Message has been given every year at 1500 GMT since 1932.

XIII) Boxing Day (pp. 151-282)

Some Boxing Day collection boxes were shaped like a pig, thus the term "piggy bank".

St Stephen's Day is December 26.