

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #126

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### The American Way of Christmas (Part Four): *Twelfth Night and a Few Concluding Comments*

*Editor's note: Following is the last of a four-part series on "The American Way of Christmas" by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. The Jefferson first published it as Book Notes #126 in January 2023.*



Whew!

The holiday season is finally over.

Or is it?

Valentine's Day gifts and candy are already on display. Super Bowl Sunday, America's fastest rising, purely secular, holiday looms just around the corner on February 12.

More importantly, today is Twelfth Night, tomorrow is Epiphany and Saturday is the Orthodox Christian Christmas celebration. (For those reading this at some future date, this **Book Note** first appeared on Thursday, January 5, 2023. January 5 is Twelfth Night).

As we saw in the first three installments of *The American Way of Christmas*, calendar questions played a large role in placing Christmas on December 25. So, too, Twelfth Night.

When does the Christmas season begin and end?

Well, it depends.

If you say it begins on Christmas Day itself, then according to the Council of Tours in 567 CE the Christmas season ends on January 5, but if you begin counting on December 26, it ends on January 6, which is Epiphany.

Confusing?

Yes, it's a bit like asking how many steps there are from the street to the porch – do we count both the sidewalk and porch as steps, or do we count only one of them, or do we count neither?

It gets more confusing, because one could say the Christmas season begins on the first Advent Sunday in December and goes until – well, we'll get to that in a moment. Of course, in America's increasingly commercial celebration of the season, one could argue that Christmas begins when the first decoration pops up for sale in the big box store of one's choice, which could be as early as October!

The Council of Tours I mentioned above proclaimed that the 12 days of Christmas ran from Christmas to Epiphany. It became known as *Christmastide*. It was both a spiritual and a festive season. Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ to the world through the visitation of the three wise men (The Magi) as related in the Gospel of St. Matthew 2:9-1. Twelfth Night is the eve of Epiphany. Epiphany begins the Epiphany season, which ends on Candlemas, February 2, which marks both the purification of Mary and the presentation of the infant Jesus at the Temple. So, some say the Christmas season spans the interval between the first Advent Sunday in December until Candlemas on February 2.

Still confused?

A bit of clarity is in order.

In the English-speaking world, the Christmas season consists of the 12 days of Christmas between Christmas Day itself and Twelfth Night. It was a period of spiritual renewal, feasting, revelry, role reversal, and celebration. It gave us the tradition of gift giving, as in the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

“The Twelve Days of Christmas” almost perfectly encapsulates the Christmas season’s combination of the sacred and the profane. For each of the gifts has a literal meaning and a symbolic spiritual meaning. Tradition suggests that during England’s 16th and 17th centuries’ suppression of Roman Catholicism the song provided a coded way for Catholics to express their faith.

What are the gifts and their religious symbolism?

A partridge in a pear tree represents Jesus.

Two turtledoves represent the Old and New Testament.

Three French Hens represent faith, hope, and love.

Four calling birds are the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Five Gold Rings are the first five books of the Old Testament.

Six Geese-a-Laying represent the six days of Creation in Genesis.

Seven Swans-a-Swimming are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, ministry, teaching,

exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion.

Eight Maids-a-Milking represent those who accepted Christ’s gift of grace. Since being a

milkmaid was a lowly job, it symbolizes Christ’s care for the least among us.

Nine ladies dancing represent the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Ten Lords-a-leaping connotes the Ten Commandments.

Eleven Pipers Piping describes Jesus’ twelve disciples less the traitorous Judas.

Twelve Drummers Drumming are the 12 points of doctrine in the Apostles’ Creed. [1]

*Christmastide* and Twelfth Night also gave us Shakespeare’s ***Twelfth Night; or, What You Will*** which has its own calendrical confusion. Legend has it that it was performed before Elizabeth I on Twelfth Night in 1601, but there is no proof of that. What is known is that it was performed on Candlemas, February 2, in 1602 at the Hall of the Middle Temple, one of London’s four Inns of Court, the seat of English legal training. Shakespeare’s play about the convoluted wooing of Orsino, Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian speaks to the reveling, feasting, partying aspect of the season. [2]

Beginning with the line “If music be the food of love, play on ...” (I, i, 1) [3] Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* dazzles with confused lovers, gender reversals, nobles pretending to be commoners and commoners nobles, feasting, singing, dancing, and, in general, celebrating merriment and love, both carnal and divine, with a heavy accent on the carnal. In the lithograph at the beginning of this *Book Note* from Act II, Scene 3, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew listen as the clown sings a song encouraging a maiden to, well, to say “Yes”:

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter,  
Present mirth hath present laughter;  
What's to come is still unsure.  
In delay there lies no plenty,  
Then come kiss me sweet and twenty;  
Youth's a stuff will not endure. (III, ii, 47-52) [3]

All of the confusion is resolved as the play ends while the clown sings “our play is done/And we’ll strive to please you every day.” (V, i, 407-408) [4]

So, *Twelfth Night* – the holy day, the holiday, and the play – all illustrate the Christmas season’s spiritual and carnival characteristics, aspects which have been present since literally the beginning.

With the holidays still fresh in our mind, let’s conclude this four-part series on *The American Way of Christmas* by noting its connections to *The American Tapestry*. And, as we conclude, let’s see if we can help our culture warriors of the left and the right see the errors of their ways and find, if not peace, at least a truce enabling them to experience the season’s joy.

*The American Way of Christmas* touches directly on the tension between the American Tapestry’s two major threads: the **essentialist** story that sees America as an unchanging, in fact, “immune to change” story of white, Christian, patriarchal ethno-nationalism, and the **protean** story that sees America as an ever evolving, ever expanding story about perfecting self-government and the increasing inclusiveness of the “We” in our founding documents – “We the People ...”

The so-called battle over Christmas is an exact miniature of the confrontation between those two stories. Right-wing essentialists want it to be an explicitly religious celebration drained of its ancient carnival aspects while left-wing progressives espousing an extreme version of the protean story want Christmas purged of all of its spiritual characteristics.

They’re both wrong.

One of the triumphs of American culture is that you don't even have to be Christian to celebrate and to enjoy the festive Christmas season. Our 21st century culture warriors need to *note* that our 19th century ancestors who invented *The American Way of Christmas* did not seek to create a narrow-minded, exclusionary, sectarian holiday bathed in righteousness. Nor did they seek to create a purely secular holiday celebrating feasting, revelry, and gift giving.

They sought to create a holiday celebrating generosity and a unifying spirit of inclusiveness.

Not culture warriors but culture inventors, our ancestors did acknowledge Christmas' spiritual origin. To avoid divisive and culturally fractious sectarian disagreements, they transformed the religious aspect into a private, individual, and denominational concern. They wanted Americans to be free to celebrate Christmas' religious spirit however their creed decreed while leaving the freedom for each to celebrate it (or not) as they chose.

Publicly, however, rooted in both its Christian and folk origins, they tamed Christmas' carnival aspects and transformed *The American Way of Christmas* into a nondenominational, domesticated, communal mid-winter celebration of family, children, life, and love.

And that is where it resides today.

Contemporary arguments about Christmas' commercialism or its carnival aspects miss the point – the holiday has always included an uneasy marriage of the sacred and the profane. The introduction to my copy of Charles Dickens' ***A Christmas Carol*** states the issue succinctly:

“Christmas has always been celebrated with a peculiar combination of Christian, Pagan, and folk traditions.” [6] Although Dickens makes fleeting religious references, ***A Christmas Carol*** is essentially a secular sermon against selfishness and in praise of brotherhood and benevolence. Scrooge's nephew Fred defines it:

I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come around, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable 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. [7]

From its roots in ancient folk practices celebrating the winter solstice through the adoption by the Christian Church of those ancient customs down to today Christmas has always been an idiosyncratic combination of Christian holy day,

pagan mid-winter carnival, and a folkloric celebration of the life-force at the winter solstice.

So, sing Christmas carols in public schools, celebrate the Yule season on the public square with a flaming Yule log, go to Midnight Mass, share gifts with one another, feast on turkey and ham on Christmas Day, leave cookies and milk for Santa Claus on the hearth, decorate a Christmas Tree on the town square and in your family room, and kiss beneath the mistletoe as Druid's did.

There is no battle over Christmas. Unless it is between narrow-minded devotees of the essentialist, exclusionary American story who want the freedom to tell you and me how to live and the equally narrow-minded scolds of the progressive left who, seeking some utterly neutral sociological *mean*, forget that *mean* also means small and shriveled. They unwittingly drain the season of its joy.

No, we can't let our 21st century culture warriors divide us causing us to forget that *The American Way of Christmas* is the archetypal protean American holiday. At its best, it draws everyone into its welcoming embrace as "**We** the People ..." grow more and more accepting of one another. Not always, not everywhere, but I'm with Scrooge's nephew Fred and choose to see the season's hope, for isn't that the essence of the Nativity Story's "good news"?

So, on this Twelfth Night recall the spirit that brought it, give a loved one a gift, if only a hug and maybe a kiss beneath the mistletoe, drink, as Robert Burns exhorts, "a cup of kindness" for Auld Lang Syne and friendship, and, as you quaff your wassail, with Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim say – "God bless us everyone!"



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"Lithograph from 'Twelfth Night,' Act II, Scene 3" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at <File:Twelfth Night Lithograph.jpg> - [Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed January 1, 2023.

“Peasants Celebrating Twelfth Night (1635) by David Teniers the Younger” at **The Earl of Manchester’s Regiment of Foote** (an English Civil War site) available at [The Twelve Days of Christmas No.12: Celebrating Twelfth Night the 17th Century way! – The Earl of Manchester's Regiment of Foote \(earlofmanchesters.co.uk\)](#) accessed January 1, 2023.

### End Notes

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