

## Book Notes #123

December 2022

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### *The American Way of Christmas: Part One*

Books “**Noted**” in this issue:

- James Barnett. *The American Christmas*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954).
- Bruce David Forbes. *Christmas: A Candid History*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
- Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983 available at Google Books at [The Invention of Tradition - Google Books](#)).
- Joseph Kelly. *The Origins of Christmas, Rev. Ed.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).
- Stephen Nissenbaum. *The Battle for Christmas*. (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1996).
- Penne L. Restad. *Christmas in America: A History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).



Merry Christmas!

Happy Holidays!

Which is it?

Or is it both?

Before I continue, let me make two things absolutely clear. First, I have no interest in debunking Christmas either as a religious holy day or as a midwinter carnival. Because, second, I love the Christmas season – its spirit of generosity, good feelings and wishing well to all; its pervasive inclusiveness; its festiveness; its music (in fact, I have Christmas music playing in the background as I write this **Note**); its decorations; and even its excesses ranging from tacky sweaters to overeating to overspending to, well, to overdoing just about everything as people reach back deep into either or both their Christian and pagan roots to shove aside their travails and to proclaim to life a joyous **“Yes.”**

In fact, 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.

Still, how did an innocuous question like “Is it Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays?” become a key battleground in America's seemingly interminable culture wars?

Although the heat surrounding the issue rises and falls, former President Donald Trump made it a key message during both of his presidential campaigns saying that when he's president “We'll be saying ‘Merry Christmas’ again.” [1] It bubbled over in 2005 when former President George W. Bush and his wife Laura's Christmas card declared, in a nod to America's religious diversity, “Happy Holidays”. That prompted William Donohue of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights to fulminate “The Bush administration has suffered a loss of will and ... they have capitulated to the worst elements in our culture.” [2] Fox News Channel anchor John Gibson threw gasoline on the fire in his ***The War on Christmas: How Liberals Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought*** in which he “collates examples of how political correctness is ... neutering ‘America's favorite holiday season.’” [3]

Almost on cue, liberals played their role in all of this – I want to say “silliness” but it's not, as it illustrates how the seemingly innocuous becomes fodder for vigilantes of both the right and left. From the left we've seen protests against Nativity Scenes, the use of “Merry Christmas,” Dickens' ***The Christmas Carol***, declaring Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer “problematic,” banning Christmas music in schools, accusing the Christmas carol “Baby, It's Cold Outside” of sexual harassment and dozens of other cultural *faux pas* both major and minor. [4]

So, Christmas is one of the battlegrounds in America's culture wars.

It might, however, surprise culture warriors of both the right and the left to learn that it is an old, old, old issue. One might say it's an ancient issue. For hidden inside the question “Is it Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays?” lurks another much larger question that has bedeviled – I choose the word intentionally – Christians since, well, since the beginning: Is Christmas a religious holiday, or is it, during the year's coldest and darkest period, a nonreligious, midwinter celebration of life, love, and the hope for new beginnings?

And how did the two – a religious holy day celebrating Jesus' birth and ancient, pagan mid-winter festivals – get intertwined?

A thorough and accurate answer to that question is far beyond the scope of a simple **Book Note**, but a highly condensed answer goes something like this.

It might come as a surprise to John Gibson and William Donohue, but the

earliest Christians did not celebrate Christmas at all for the very good reason that to celebrate someone's birthday you need to know when it occurred. Scripture is silent on the issue. Of the four canonical Gospels, only Matthew and Luke have an account of the nativity story. And they differ on key items. Moreover, such evidence as they provide – shepherds tending their flocks in the fields, Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem to be counted in the census – suggest springtime not midwinter.

So, why December 25?

The answer involves two essential concerns: shifting calendars and the Roman Catholic Church's assimilation of pagan practices into Christian ritual as an overt conversion tactic. In brief, early Christian calendar creators struggled with conflicting dates and out-of-sync natural phenomena between ancient lunar calendars and the Julian calendar. They were particularly interested in being able to accurately predict the equinoxes and solstices, of which the spring equinox was most important, for it determined when the new year's planting could begin. The Romans placed it on March 25. Because of its obvious association with fecundity, the early Church established it as the date of the annunciation of Mary – the date the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus Christ. Then doing simple arithmetic, nine months after March 25 is December 25. [5]

Bingo! December 25 is Jesus' birthday.

But the story is more complicated, for December 25 was also the date of the most popular Roman holiday. It honored the Roman god of agriculture, Saturn, who allegedly introduced the people to farming. Called the Saturnalia, it began on December 17 and lasted until the winter solstice on December 25. It was a carnival featuring feasting, role reversals in which slaves and masters switched positions, raucous revelry bordering on orgiastic behavior, and gift giving.

Although not adopted until the 7th century when Pope Gregory I wrote to Augustine of Canterbury telling him it was permissible to adapt the pagans' devilish customs to Christian practice in order to encourage their conversion, assimilation or the Christianization of pagan ritual became a major missionary tactic. [6] Although it is sometimes disputed, in order to combat a decree of the Roman Emperor Aurelian in 274 CE declaring December 25 the birthday of the sun god Sol Invictus, 76 years later in 350 CE Pope Julius I established December 25 as the Feast of the Nativity celebrating the birth of Christ. [7]

Coupled with the earlier calendrical calculations, December 25 was fixed as the date of Christ's birth.

How was the Feast of the Nativity celebrated?

Well, the Popes Julius and Gregory made a tactical decision that worked – they got converts – but at a cost. For many of Christendom's major holidays contain both sacred and profane characteristics. They are spiritual holy days and secular carnivals. Christmas may be the most complicated. There was, of course, a religious service – “Christ's Mass,” hence *Christmas* – but the laity also celebrated it as Saturnalia had been celebrated for centuries. They had a winter carnival complete with feasting, revelry, role reversals, and gift giving. Many of the saturnalian symbols were also adopted, including decorating one's home with evergreen boughs as signifiers of fertility and new life as midwinter turned towards spring.

As Christianity moved northward in Europe it adopted the custom of decorating one's home with mistletoe and holly. Holly signified fertility because it stayed green year-round, bore a red fruit in winter and the Druid's thought its rough edges warded off evil spirits and brought good luck. Because it stayed green all year as it hung from trees' otherwise leafless limbs, mistletoe and its white berries, under which you have probably kissed, became a quasi-religious symbol signifying fertility. Moving still further northward, Christians adapted the ancient Norse custom of burning a Yule log at the winter solstice to ward off the cold and as a symbol of the sun's and life's return as the days grew longer. It was called "Yuletide," as many still call Christmas.

For more than a thousand years, Christmas was both a religious holiday and a secular carnival affirming life amidst the winter's cold; for over a thousand years the Church sought to tone down the carnival and to increase the piety while the people ignored them, co-opted them, and partied hearty.

21st century American culture warriors left and right simply re-enact this history.

In some ways, nothing has really changed. But that is getting ahead of the story.

So, for more than a thousand years, Christmas was a Roman Catholic holiday mixing in some people's eyes the sacred and the profane. That changed with the Protestant Reformation, when many Protestants wanted to cleanse the holiday of its more carnival like aspects. Although its carnival aspects never went entirely away, if they celebrated it at all, reformers emphasized the holiday's religious character. As a result, in early modern Europe, Catholics celebrated Christmas much as they had for a thousand years, but in Protestant cultures, since it had no scriptural basis, Christmas was either ignored or primarily treated as a minor religious holy day.

That over-generalized background is important because it sets the context for how Americans assimilated four or five distinct "immigrant" groups' customs into *The American Way of Christmas*. Two of those immigrant groups were English, one was Dutch, and two were Germans – the earliest German settlers in Pennsylvania and then the early- and mid-19th century German Catholic immigrants.

The earliest English immigrants almost perfectly illustrate the Catholic-Protestant split about how Christmas should be celebrated. In Puritan Massachusetts and New England generally, Christmas was actually banned. The Puritans thought it a Papist blasphemy with its carnival overtones, feasting, drinking, and general revelry. In 1621, Governor William Bradford accepted Christmas as a quiet, homebound observance. But it was still a work day and he "reprimanded several "lusty young men of the colony who maintained it was against their conscience to work on Christmas Day." [8] In 1659, the Massachusetts General Court (the legislature) banned celebrating Christmas by "forebearing labor, feasting or in any other way"; any caught celebrating were to be fined five shillings. [9] However, even in Puritan New England, by the late-17th century, cultural attitudes began to relax and laws banning Christmas were repealed.

"To the southward," as they would have said in the 17th and 18th century, to Puritan eyes the quasi-Papist Anglicans in Virginia and the Carolinas celebrated Christmas as it was celebrated in Old England. Modeled after the customs of the

English gentry and aristocracy, they marked Christmas as the culmination of their autumnal harvest festivals. They feasted, they held dances and revels, they sported at horse racing gatherings, they gambled and drank, and they concluded it on Twelfth Night with gift giving, from which comes the custom of the Twelve Days of Christmas. In the Anglican south, Christmas wasn't a single holiday, but a seasonal celebration.

**Aside:** I've glided over why feasting and "partying" were inherent in Christmas celebrations since the beginning, but in particular in European and northern cultures. The answer is actually simple. These were all agricultural societies. After the hard labor of the farming season and bringing in the harvest, there was little work to do until spring planting. In addition, fresh food was momentarily plentiful. In particular, this was true of fresh meat. It was in late autumn just before the winter freeze when pigs and cattle were slaughtered because there would not be enough forage to get them through the winter. Since the only way to preserve meat was either to salt it or to smoke it, fresh meat was only available after the autumn slaughtering season. So, the combination of leisure time, fresh vegetables, new wine, and fresh meat gave rise to harvest and mid-winter festivals and carnivals characterized by feasting and revelry.

These were the best days of the year; this was carnival time in agricultural societies. The Popes were shrewd to co-opt them, for to attempt to ban them would have halted Christian conversion at the outset.[10 ]

Along the Hudson River Valley and in the Dutch settlements at the tip of Manhattan Island, the Dutch settlers celebrated Christmas as they did in Holland. It was a religious holiday, but it was preceded by gift giving traditions on St. Nicholas Day (December 6) when "Sinter Klaas" made his annual visit, "Sinter Klaas" being a Dutch pronunciation of St. Nicholas and the root origin of "Santa Claus." In the English Middle Colonies of the Jerseys (North and South which became New Jersey), Pennsylvania, and Delaware, Christmas was essentially ignored. In Pennsylvania, however, the earliest German settlers (the Pennsylvania Dutch) treated it as a minor religious holiday, but celebrated its festive components on St. Nicholas' Day, including gift giving and Christmas trees.

So, prior to the American Revolution, there was no consensus concept, no uniform tradition of Christmas in America. American Christmas practice mirrored in miniature early to modern European attitudes towards Christmas. New Englanders reduced it to a minor holiday of no consequence; New Yorkers treated it as the Dutch did, with the focus on St. Nicholas' Day; middle colonists ignored it; and the southern colonies treated it as it had historically been celebrated: the culminating autumn harvest festival celebrated with feasting and revelry.

Given this inconsistent mishmash of Christmas customs, how did *The American Way of Christmas* emerge? It emerged after the American Revolution as perhaps the most successful outcome of an intentional effort to create an *American* national identity distinct from the British. The challenge was how to create an *American* cultural identity unifying the 13 separate colonies with their own distinct cultures. Basically, the 21st century American culture wars are merely an extension of the ongoing effort to create a unified American culture.

In pursuit of creating a common American national identity, two streams converged. One arose organically out of the customs of the people; the other was

a top-down, intentional movement to create common cultural traditions. The creation of *The American Way of Christmas* almost perfectly illustrates Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented tradition," which seems an oxymoron – how can you invent a "tradition" – but isn't. Hobsbawm defines "invented tradition ... to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past." [11]

Which is precisely how *The American Way of Christmas* emerged in a relatively short time in the early- and mid-19th century. Seeking to create a common American culture, Americans looked to their existing "customs" for common cultural values. They noted at least two – the celebration of certain holidays and an emerging concept of *Home* as the bedrock of American society. As America transitioned from a group of British colonies to a unified nation they also traveled the cultural and economic transition from a home-based, agricultural, and handicraft society to a capitalistic, manufacturing based society in which many people worked outside of the home. In order to stabilize society, the notion of *Home* emerged as the focal point of all of society's foundational values. As men left to work outside of the *Home*, women emerged as the keepers of the domestic hearth, as the keepers of society's core values.

In order to inculcate the value of *Home* in American society and to use it as the glue binding society together Americans looked for those "common objects of our love" that St. Augustine says bind a people into a nation. Americans turned to holidays, but in immediate post-Revolutionary America there were few "American holidays." As we've seen, Christmas was celebrated differently, if at all, in different regions of the new nation. Although there were many local holidays, the only national holidays were the Fourth of July, Washington's Birthday, and New Year's Day.

As Americans sought to build a common culture, they looked to two potential unifying holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas. Thanksgiving was at first resisted by most Americans, particularly in the South, because it was identified as a New England holiday with strong Puritan overtones. It wouldn't become a national holiday until 1863 and wouldn't take root in the South until the 20th century. Christmas, however, which by the early-19th century and the loosening Puritan grip on New England culture, was now being celebrated throughout the newly minted states, but in different ways and at different levels of communal involvement.

**A quick point:** there was no committee, no group of national leaders, no federal government commission that sat down and decided to create *The American Way of Christmas*. *The American Way of Christmas* arose, as Hobsbawm says "invented traditions" arise, by the intentional actions of diverse people fusing together different customs practiced by the people with new adaptations of those customs and new practices added to them. The result creates a new package of traditions that when blended together become a new and eventually a traditional expression of the people's values and beliefs.

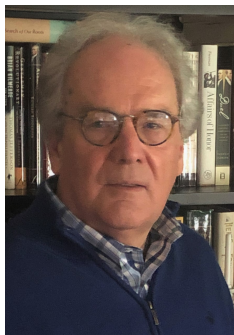
Although no one person "invented" *The American Way of Christmas*, five or six people, working independently but loosely aware of one another, in the early- and mid-19th century created – "invented" – *The American Way of Christmas* by taming its carnival aspects and making it a domestic holiday focused on the *Home* and children. This new holiday was characterized by both domestic and

public charity, the giving of gifts, the Americanization of the German “Tannenbaum” into the Christmas tree, and the creation of both religious and festive (non-religious) Christmas carols. Presiding over all of this as the seasonal avatar, transformed from St. Nicholas, “Ole St. Nick”, Kris Kringle, reigned Santa Claus.

Those six people are John Pintard, Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Charles Dickens, Sarah Josepha Hale, and Thomas Nast. Dickens, although not American, was much read in early America. His *A Christmas Carol* transformed a carnival into a profound expression of human generosity and mutual caring. Irving’s *Old Christmas* with its English Bracebridge family transformed the Christmas carnival into a domestic holiday. John Pintard’s interest in creating an American holiday based on his Hudson River Valley Dutch culture’s celebration of “Sinter Klaas” found its fullest expression in Clement Clarke Moore’s “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” which began St. Nicholas’ transformation into Santa Claus. Sarah Josepha Hale from her position as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most important periodical of the 19th century in determining fashion, cultural tastes and values, made Christmas trees, gift giving, and Santa Claus the focal points of an American Christmas. Thomas Nast, the 19th century’s foremost political cartoonist, completed the creation of Santa Claus as the avatar of a domesticated American Christmas, complete with a North Pole Santa’s workshop, elves, a magnificent white beard, and a gentleman’s long-stemmed pipe.

Not to be too obvious, but you’ll *note* (pun unintentional) nowhere in there is any mention of Christmas as a religious holiday. Since they were not culture warriors but culture inventors, our ancestors did acknowledge Christmas’s spiritual component. To avoid sectarian disagreements, however, they transformed the religious aspect into a private, individual concern. Publicly, *The American Way of Christmas* domesticated the carnival by transforming it into a demonstration of communal generosity bringing it into the *Home* as a mid-winter celebration of family, children, life, and love.

In the next two *Book Notes*, we’ll take a closer look at just how that happened. Next week, Washington Irving, Sarah Josepha Hale, gift giving, and the Christmas tree as Christmas’ new American symbols. A week later, we’ll trace the evolution of Santa Claus from St. Nicholas through Sinter Klaas to Thomas Nast’s creation of Santa Claus to the iconic 20th century image of good ole St. Nick – the Coca Cola Santa Claus.



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## End Notes

1. Schwarz, D. Hunter. “*Is the ‘war on Christmas’ finally over?*” in **Deseret News** (December 23, 2021) available at [War on Christmas: Donald Trump says he won; Joe Biden isn’t fighting - Deseret News](#) accessed December 5, 2022.
2. Davis, Matthew. “*Lines drawn in battle over Christmas*” **BBC NEWS/Americas** (12/10/2005) available at [BBC NEWS | Americas | Lines drawn in battle over Christmas](#) accessed December 5, 2022.
3. Ibid.
4. Examples of these and other ‘anti-Christmas’ instances can easily be found online by simply searching “War on Christmas” and enter the year of your choice. There are too many to list.
5. For a more comprehensive and theologically professional discussion of the issue confer Joseph Kelly, ***The Origins of Christmas, Rev. Ed.*** (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).
6. Forbes, David Bruce. **Christmas: A Candid History**. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 46.
7. This claim is sometimes disputed, but see Weiser, Fr. Francis X., “History and Origin: Feast of the Nativity” at Catholic Culture available at [Library : History & Origin: Feast of the Nativity | Catholic Culture](#) accessed December 5, 2022 and Penne L. Restad, **Christmas In America: A History**. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.4-5.
8. Barnett, James. **The American Christmas**. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), p. 3.
9. Ibid.
10. For a more complete discussion of this issue cf. Stephen Nissenbaum, **The Battle for Christmas** (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 4-8.
11. All of the quotes from Hobsbawm are taken from Eric Hobsbawm, “*Introduction: Inventing Traditions*” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Eds. **The Invention of Tradition**. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983 available
12. at Google Books at [The Invention of Tradition - Google Books](#)).

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