

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

'Twas the night before Christmas...

What are the origins of American holidays? How did they become embedded in our common culture? During 2021-22, answering those questions will be the focus of a new Jefferson Educational Society Series – *American Holidays* – previewing [Tuesday, Dec. 22](#).

In the next several *Book Notes*, we'll pick up on my [Thanksgiving nod](#) to Sarah Josepha Hale and Lydia Maria Child examining the origins of how American's celebrate Christmas and asking what exactly is meant by "Auld Lang Syne."

In this installment, Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, and Thomas Nast bring Santa home to America; in the next, set for publication on Christmas Eve, we'll ask who wrote "*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*" (and why?); and, on New Year's Eve, we'll ask what did Robert Burns mean when he wrote, "Should old acquaintance be forgot, and auld lang syne?" And why did Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians perform it on New Year's Eve for decades?

Here, however, we'll explore why Americans celebrate Christmas the way they do – oscillating between a religious observance, a commercial carnival and a month of parties flush with food and drink.

And we'll ask why do some of them want to argue about what the season is called and how it is observed?

Well, although "*Tis the season to be jolly*," America's culture warriors can always find something to disagree about, as the current battle for Christmas confirms. Choosing between "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas" can spark jousting. Some in the "Happy Holidays" crowd celebrate America's cultural and religious diversity and some of those wishing one a "Merry Christmas" see themselves as defenders of America's Christian heritage. It might, however, surprise both to discover that the argument is not new. Not the silliness about "Happy Holidays" versus "Merry Christmas" – that is new, and for my part, I

wish you a “Merry Christmas” and a “Happy Holiday” season. No, the older argument is whether to celebrate Christmas at all. In fact, the question is so old it goes back to the very beginning. In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday; the birth of Jesus was not celebrated.

Why? Two reasons: No. 1: Realizing that there are complex theological issues here beyond my scope, simply stated the Resurrection is Christianity’s foundation; and No. 2, no one knows when Jesus was born. Scripture does not give a date for his birth; such evidence as it does provide suggests springtime.

Why, then, December 25 for Christ’s birthday? Because around 350 A.D., Pope Julius I said it was, and when the Pope speaks – well, you know the rest. [1] He called it the Feast of the Nativity.

Why? Shrewd marketers, the early Church Fathers chose as an evangelization strategy co-opting – *Christianizing* – pagan holidays by adopting and absorbing their traditions. December 25 was observed as the birthdate of *Sol Invictus*, the official sun god of the later Roman Empire and a patron of soldiers. In the later empire, it was the culmination of the Roman Saturnalia, a festival and holiday honoring the god Saturn held annually at the winter solstice. Saturnalian celebrations included religious sacrifices, feasting, gift-giving, partying, and a general carnival atmosphere. Social norms were upended; slaves and masters reversed roles. It was a week of merrymaking. [2]

By identifying Christ with the sun god *Sol Invictus* and permitting the people to continue their traditions, Pope Julius I hoped his new Feast of the Nativity would encourage converts and solidify Christianity’s position.

It worked, but at a cost.

People embraced the new religion, but the Church lost control of how it would be celebrated. Early Christians celebrated the Feast of the Nativity in the same festival fashion as they had always celebrated the traditional winter solstice. Like the Romans celebrating the Saturnalia, they attended church then engaged in feasting, drinking, game-playing, gift-giving and a general rowdiness. Social roles were inverted, annually a *lord of misrule* was chosen, and people followed his direction playing pranks on neighbors and family. One byproduct of this was the origin of caroling, in which the poor would go house-to-house singing and demanding food and drink. [3]

So, the next time you are strolling through the mall with its piped-in Christmas carols, storefronts decorated with Christmas cheer exhorting you to “Buy, Buy, Buy”; or you are shopping at your local super-sized grocery emporium with its poinsettias, its 1001 cookies, and its cooler cases packed with hams; or you are watching a football game on TV when you are suddenly confronted by an ad claiming Santa’s sleigh is powered not by reindeer but by nine silver Mercedes-Benz vehicles, all causing you to ask yourself, “What has this to do with the birth in a manger of the Prince of Peace?” – know you are not alone.

Of course, in this time of pandemic, you might only be doing the third of those three activities, but the question remains, “What does all of this commercial and social excess have to do with the *real* spirit of Christmas?” Well, nothing and everything; *everything* in the sense that in the 21st century we seem to have landed back where our pre-Reformation ancestors and their ancestors were –

partying to lift the December gloom.

And *nothing*, as you reflexively ask the same question the Puritans and 17th century religious reformers asked, “What has this to do with the birth in a manger of the Prince of Peace?” To which those reformers and Puritans answered, “Nothing!” And, answering their own question to rid society of decadence and blasphemy, promptly cancelled Christmas.

In England in 1647, with the Puritans in control of Parliament, celebrations were banned, and it was decreed that December 25 should be a day of “fasting and humiliation” to recollect and to account for one’s sins. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1659, the General Court (the colony’s legislature) made publicly celebrating Christmas a crime punishable by a 5-shilling fine. [4]

Why? Well, as remarked earlier, the Puritans also noted that there was no scriptural justification for the date, and they were repelled by the holiday’s pagan roots giving rise to feasting, drinking, gambling, and licentious behavior. Although they opposed publicly celebrating Christmas, the Puritans were comfortable with it as a quiet, private observance. And there the situation remained, even after the Restoration of King Charles II in England in 1660 and Massachusetts’ lifting of the ban in 1681. [5]

Given that brief background, how did we then get to America’s current monthlong, Christmas revel in which Americans spend approximately \$630.7 billion, or almost 10 times the amount spent on Mother’s Day-Father’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Easter, and Halloween combined? [6]

After the American Revolution, the major – using the term loosely - American holidays were the Fourth of July (Independence Day), Washington’s Birthday, an erratically celebrated Thanksgiving Day, and New Year’s Day. The major gift-giving day remained, as in England, Twelfth Night and, to a certain extent, New Year’s Day. Near the end of the 18th century, Valentine’s Day began to be observed more broadly and, by the early 19th century, it was the major gift-giving day. Christmas remained a minor, domestic holiday largely celebrated, if celebrated at all, at home.

Four men changed that and invented the American tradition of Christmas. They are Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Nast. Obviously, Charles Dickens is not an American, but his classic story, *A Christmas Carol*, redefined Christmas as a domestic, home-bound holiday of family and thanksgiving. For Dickens, Christmas was neither a raucous carnival nor a particularly religious holiday, at least not in the sectarian, denominational sense. But in the spiritual sense, yes, for in the resolution of the character Scrooge one sees the power of charity, which is the essence of the Christian notion of love – *agape*: selfless love, care for others, and its redeeming power.

Less ethereal, in his *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty by Diedrich Knickerbocker* and *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, Washington Irving invented the secular American tradition of Christmas. Written while he was in England, in addition to “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Irving’s *Sketch Book* tells the story of his visit with the Bracebridge family. In five sketches – *Christmas, The Stage Coach, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day,* and *The*

Christmas Dinner— Irving describes an “old-fashioned” country Christmas of generosity to the poor, the singing of carols, feasting, dancing, and the hanging of the mistletoe. Irving’s main character, Mr. Bracebridge, is determined to maintain the old ways and Irving determined to bring them to America. [7]

When you gather with your family on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, you are celebrating Christmas as Washington Irving envisioned it: a scene of generosity, kindness and love, with the occasional “nip” of a bit of cheer, sharing of gifts, and a kiss beneath the mistletoe.

Why do we kiss beneath the mistletoe? The tradition is so ancient it can be traced to the Druids. Mistletoe, a vine that grows on trees, is thought to bring good luck and to fend off evil spirits. [8] One of its more common meanings is as a symbol of fertility and life because it stays green all winter. [9]

Irving’s Christmas “Sketches” are now available in a stand-alone version titled *Old Christmas*. [10]

In his satirical history of the Dutch in New York, Irving told tales of St. Nicholas riding over the tops of trees in the same wagon he used to bring presents to children on his feast day of December 6. Smoking his pipe, Irving’s Nicholas puts gifts for children in stockings they have hung by the chimney. [11]

Although there are no historical documents supporting his existence, St. Nicholas was a real person. Now more legend than historical reality, he was the Bishop of Myra in the Fourth century. He attended the first Council of Nicea, the historic meeting called by Constantine that settled the question of Christ’s divinity for the Catholic faith. Nicholas was buried in his church at Myra, and by the Sixth century his grave had become a shrine. In 1087, Italians in the town of Bari, seeking a way to earn money from the crusaders passing through on their way to the Holy Land, stole Nicholas’ alleged remains and moved them to Bari, which became a major pilgrimage site. [12]

Based on his reputation for generosity and the good deeds he did for the poor, Nicholas became a legendary figure throughout Europe. As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states, he is the patron saint of Russia and Greece, of charitable fraternities and guilds, of children, sailors, unmarried girls, merchants, and pawnbrokers. [13] His feast day of December 6 became the major gift-giving day in medieval Europe and is still observed in many countries.

After the Protestant Reformation, only Holland continued to honor him as *Sinterklaas*, which is a Dutch dialect pronunciation of St. Nicholas. [14] The Dutch, who first settled New York and the Hudson River Valley, brought *Sinterklaas* to America, which brings us back to Washington Irving’s *Knickerbocker’s History* and St. Nicholas’ wagon bringing gifts to children.

But who powered Sinterklaas’ wagon? Was it a wagon or a sleigh? Did he smoke a pipe? And was his costume red?

In 1821, two years before Clement Clarke Moore anonymously published the classic, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, William B. Gilley published *The Children’s Friend: A New-Year’s Present, to the Little Ones from Five to Twelve*. [15] Although the poem’s author and illustrator are unknown, *Poets.org* and other sources attribute its composition to Clement Clarke

Moore. [16]

“*Old Santeclaus*,” as it is more commonly known, was the first poem or work of any type to describe Santa Claus, as opposed to Sinterklaas, to connect him with the northern winter, to have him in a sleigh powered by reindeer (in this case only one) and to refer to his clothing as red, the traditional color of a bishop’s robes. Like Sinterklaas, Santa Claus brings presents as rewards to children who have been good, placing them in stockings hung for that purpose. For naughty children, he brings a birch rod for parents to punish them. [17]

Remember, Santa is keeping a list and he knows who has been naughty or nice!

Here is the poem in its entirety:

Old Santeclaus



Old Santeclaus with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night,
O'er chimney-tops, and tracks of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you.

The steady friend of virtuous youth,
The friend of duty, and of truth,
Each Christmas eve he joys to come
Where love and peace have made their home.



Through many houses he has been,

And various beds and stockings seen;
Some, white as snow, and neatly mended,
Others, that seemed for pigs intended.

Where e'er I found good girls or boys,
That hated quarrels, strife and noise,
I left an apple, or a tart,
Or wooden gun, or painted cart.

To some I gave a pretty doll,
To some a peg-top, or a ball;
No crackers, cannons, squibs, or rockets,
To blow their eyes up, or their pockets.

No drums to stun their Mother's ear,
Nor swords to make their sisters fear;
But pretty books to store their mind
With knowledge of each various kind.

But where I found the children naughty,
In manners rude, in temper haughty,
Thankless to parents, liars, swearers,
Boxers, or cheats, or base tale-bearers,



I left a long, black, birchen rod,
Such as the dread command of God
Directs a Parent's hand to use
When virtue's path his sons refuse. [18] [19]

The tradition of a Christmas gift-giver is old and its double history as both a reward for the virtuous and punishment for sinners has deep roots. The gift-giver goes by many names, most of which are some derivation of St. Nicholas. In Germany and Austria, however, the traditional Christmas bringer of gifts is "Christkind," which is German for "Christ child." Sometimes an "l" is added, making it "Christkindl," which then has been Anglicized as "Kris Kringle." [20] In central Europe, St. Nicholas sometimes has a sidekick – Krampus. Krampus is a "half-goat, half-demon monster that punishes misbehaving children at Christmastime." [21]

So, remember – he knows who has been naughty or nice, for as the chorus

to 1934's "Santa Claus is coming to Town!" tells us:

"He's making a list
And checking it twice;
Gonna find out Who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town
He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!" [22]

Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters' timeless recording of "*Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*" can be found [here](#).

The classic American expression of Santa Claus is "'Twas the night before Christmas," which is not the title but the poem's first line. On December 23, 1823, Clement Clarke Moore (or was it Henry Livingston, Jr.?) published anonymously in the Troy, New York Sentinel *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. [23]

A wonderful reading of it can be found [here](#).

Moore originally published it anonymously, only claiming authorship in 1844 in his collection titled *Poems*. After the publication of Moore's *Poems*, the family of Henry Livingston, Jr., who had died in 1828, asserted that he had written the poem. The dispute continues to this day, but contemporary linguistic analysis indicates the poem "shows more similarities to Livingston's poetry than to Moore's." [24]

Regardless, I will go with tradition and attribute *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (with an asterisk!) to Moore. Clement Clarke Moore was a patrician New Yorker born in 1779. He published a number of academic works and taught at the General Theological Seminary in New York City. Although he opposed the expansion of New York City north of Houston Street, he ultimately made a fortune by developing his family farm into what is now known as the Chelsea section of Manhattan.

The poem firmly linked both St. Nicholas and Santa Claus with Christmas. Its description of St. Nicholas established him as "the joyful, plump, toy-bearing Santa Claus of the American Christmas tradition." [25] It was Moore who had reindeer power the sleigh – in fact, it was Moore who gave Santa a sleigh and not a wagon. It was Moore who named the reindeer – Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen. [26] Rudolph, as we will see next week, comes later – much later.

Here is the poem in its entirety:

A Visit from St. Nicholas
by Clement Clarke Moore

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through 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;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds;

While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,
When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer,
With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, *Dasher!* now, *Dancer!* now *Prancer* and *Vixen!*
On, *Come!* on, *Cupid!* on, *Donner* and *Blitzen!*
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"
As leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too—
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a pedler just opening his pack.
His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight—
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"[27]

Close your eyes and picture Santa Claus. I'll wager what you see bears a strong

resemblance to the following images:



[28], [29]

They are the creations of Thomas Nast, “a German-born American caricaturist and editorial cartoonist often considered to be the ‘Father of the American Cartoon.’” [30] Because of his father’s political involvements, Nast was part of the German diaspora that came to America in the late 1840s as a result of the political turbulence in Germany and elsewhere in Europe in the fateful year 1848.

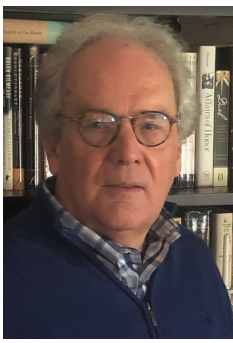
Unlike earlier German immigrants, who were Lutheran and Pietists settling eastern Pennsylvania, Nast, who was born in 1840, and the immigrants of the 1840s were Catholic and brought with them their traditions. Nast, however, converted to Protestantism because he believed Catholicism was antithetical to American values. A fervent abolitionist, a supporter of Native American and Chinese American rights, a fervent anti-racist, anti-Irish, and anti-Catholic, Nast was a complicated man of contradictions. [31]

Along with his development of the elephant as the symbol of the Republican Party and his caricatures of Boss Tweed and the Tammany Hall Democrats, Nast’s most famous work was Santa Claus. He based it on traditional German figures of St. Nicholas and “Weihnachtsmann,” the German bringer of gifts also known as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, St. Nicholas, St. Nick, Kris Kringle, and now, most commonly, Santa. [32]

In less than a century, then, Americans had shed their Puritan reticence, brought Christmas back first as a family affair and, by the mid-19th century, it was challenging Valentine’s Day as the premier gift-giving day. Alas, its Christian foundations were being pushed to the side, if not to the back.

So, as you open your gifts this Christmas Day, sip your wassail or eggnog, feast on beef and ham, watch football and any of the five NBA professional basketball games, ask yourself, “Are the pagans back?” And is it really important if the correct greeting is “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas”? And when you do, remember to thank Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Nast for making your Christmas merry and your holidays happy!

Next week: Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer!



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End Notes

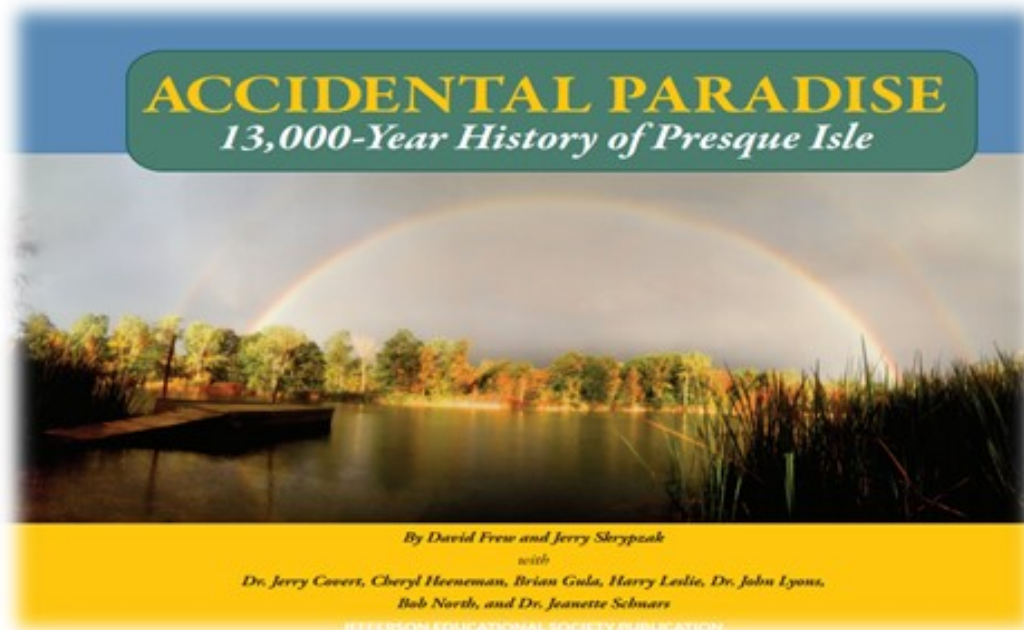
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15. "Old Santeclaus with Much Delight," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Santeclaus_with_Much_Delight accessed December 14, 2020.
16. cf. "Old Santeclaus by Clement Clarke Moore," at **Poets.org** available at <https://poets.org/poem/old-santeclaus> accessed December 14, 2020.
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ACCIDENTAL PARADISE: 13,000-YEAR HISTORY OF PRESQUE ISLE

By: David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The book, published by the Jefferson Educational Society, is the result of a three-year project with co-authors Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak and delves into the natural history, personalities, and major events involving the peninsula over the decades -- and centuries -- combined with photographs, illustrations, charts, and maps. For further information click [here](#).

The book will be available for purchase in the coming days through the TREC Foundation at Presque Isle, co-sponsor of the book. For more information, including how, where, and when to purchase the book, please visit accidentalparadise.com.

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In Case You Missed It

[New Book on Presque Isle Belongs in Every Home](#) written by Jefferson

Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Brenda Pundt Made Mark as City Controller](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Judith Lynch

[Neighborhood Bars and Clubs: *Where Were Our Dads from 3:30 to 6?*](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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