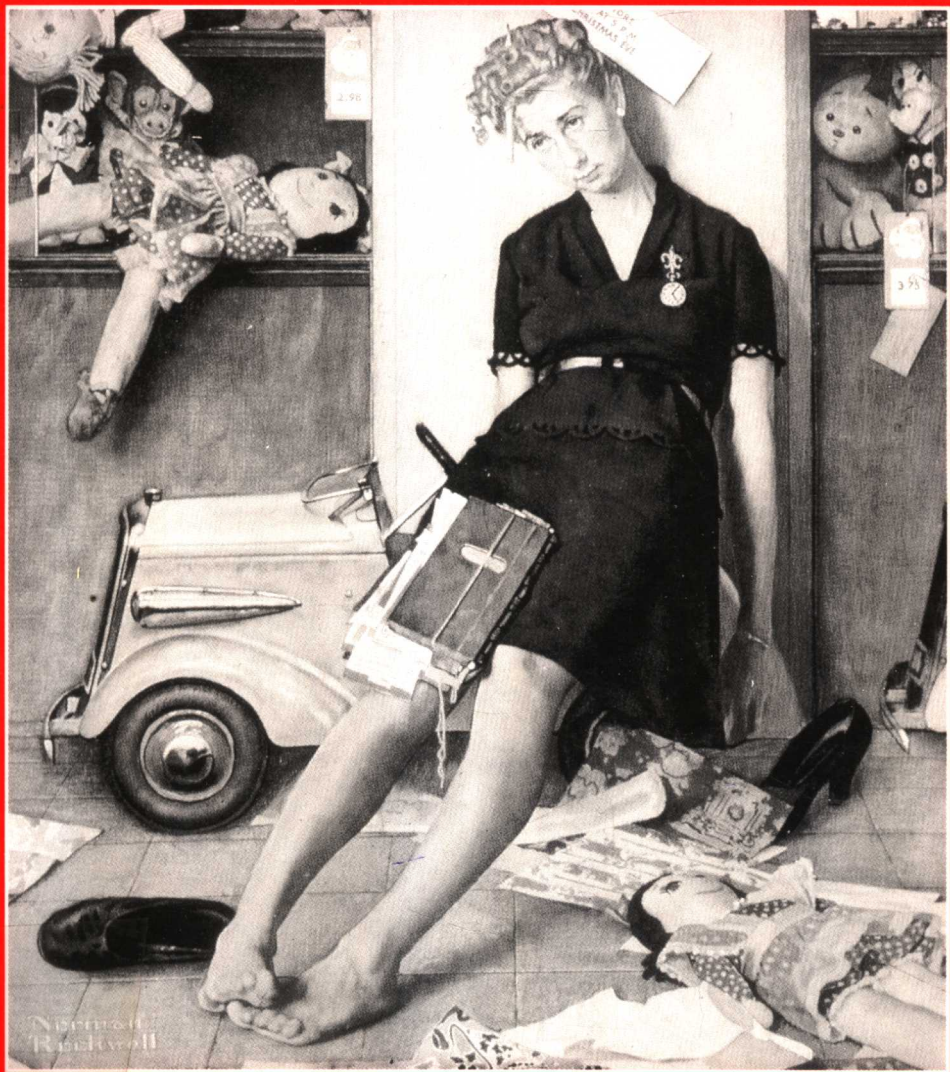


The Modern Christmas in America



William B. Waits

THE MODERN CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA

A Cultural History of Gift Giving

WILLIAM B. WAITS



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Epigraph

Considerable difficulty and bad feeling will be avoided on Christmas morning if the donors of Christmas presents will hereafter mark clearly on the outside of each package just what it contains, how it works and what it is for.

As a result of the present confusion, families are forced to spend endless hours classifying their mysterious gifts and solving the puzzle of what they are meant to be. For example, Mother will be up half the night trying to decide whether that cunning object from Aunt Emma is a chafing dish or a mustard foot bath, and, if so, why it is filled with salted almonds.

Grandma will wear the worsted nightcap which she received from Aunt Ettie for a full week before she discovers that it is really a hot water bottle cover.

Father will swallow half a pint of gasoline under the impression that his new patent cigar lighter is a pocket flask.

As if to add to these difficulties, every Christmas is made even more involved by the artistic relative who makes her own Christmas presents.

In order to aid the harassed student in understanding these Christmas presents, therefore, we have devised a system of tests.

Test 1: The first test is to try to wear it. If you can get your hand into it, it's mittens. If you can get your feet into it, it is probably a pair of bed socks. If, on the other hand, it seems to fit down over your ears, it is a skating cap. If you can pull it down as far as your waist, it is a slip-on

sweater, and if it will not fit over your head at all, it is probably a lettuce bag.

Test 2: If you cannot wear it, then see if you can wind it up. If you wind it up and it runs, it is a clock. If you wind it up and it does not run, it is a pencil sharpener. If it runs without being wound up, it is a Ford. If it does not choose to run, don't you believe it.

Test 3: Next try to drink it. If you can swallow it, it is liquor. If you can swallow it and stay conscious, it is good liquor. If you can't swallow it yourself, try it on your guests.

Test 4: Now put it on the floor and jump up and down on it. If it does not smash, it is a pogo stick. If it does smash, so much the better.

Test 5: If the gift responds to none of these tests, however—if you cannot wear it, drink it, wind it up, ride it, smoke it, or use it in any conceivable way—then it undoubtedly is a Work of Art. Replace it reverently in the box, pack the excelsior around it again, and give it away the following Christmas.

—Corey Ford, "Breaking Even on Christmas," *Collier's*,
80 (17 Dec. 1927): 49

Like this article, this book tries to unravel the mysteries of Christmas gifts.

Preface

Most Americans believe that our way of celebrating Christmas is old, that we have observed the Yule season in essentially the same way for centuries. Although the celebration has become commercialized over time, they say, its core—centered around the Christmas tree, family togetherness, and church services—has always been much as it is today. But in fact we have had no single form of celebration and have enjoyed several types of Christmases during our history. Moreover, our current form of celebrating is not very old, dating only from about 1880.

When Europeans first began to settle the Atlantic seaboard, the English Christmas was the celebration familiar to most of them. It had as its central symbols the Yule log, the boar's head, and the wassail bowl, and was characterized by adult revelry with peers rather than adult gratification of children's desires. However, in North America, responses to this form of celebration diverged sharply. The Southern Atlantic colonies embraced it, thereby becoming the New World locus of the transplanted English Christmas, while Calvinist New England held it in disfavor and even outlawed the celebration of Christmas between 1659 and 1681. The Puritans' antipathy was consistent with their theology as there was no affirmative command in the Bible to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. Moreover, the prospect of unrestrained revelry made them uncomfortable. Although today we are graced every season with nostalgic accounts of sleigh rides over New England hillsides to Grandma's house for Christmas, such accounts are contrary to historical fact: good New England grandmas through the first half of the nineteenth century disliked Christ-

mas. The public sector was in accord; for example, December 25 was not a school holiday in the antebellum Northeast and children were required to attend classes.

Although these two responses to Christmas characterized most of the seaboard settlements before 1800, neither served as the model for the modern celebration. The Christmas of the Middle Atlantic colonies—wedged between New England's suspicions of the revelrous English celebration and the South's embracing of it—was the type of Christmas that became favored. The Dutch in New Amsterdam and the Germans in Pennsylvania introduced a northern European celebration guided by Lutheran rather than Calvinistic doctrine. They needed no affirmative biblical command to engage in the festivities, only an absence of prohibition, so they did not display the Puritan reservations about Christmas. Indeed, Martin Luther himself had participated in, and encouraged, Yule festivities. In tone, the northern European celebration was more child-centered than the English one, and the revelry, although present, was subdued. The Christmas tree, adopted from neighboring Scandinavia, was the central symbol of the festivities rather than the Yule log or crèche. Before 1800 the scale of the celebration, whether in the Southern, Middle Atlantic or New England region, remained small.

After 1800 Americans began to celebrate Christmas on a somewhat larger scale, with the Middle Atlantic region and its northern European style of Christmas, leading the way. As New York rose to economic and cultural predominance in America following the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, its Yule celebration also prospered. Soon the South, and later New England, fell under its sway and adopted the northern European forms. This was the Christmas of Washington Irving and Clement Moore, and even today it is the subject of nostalgic descriptions placed in rural settings. Gifts were usually handmade, and many of them were for children or the poor, with other types of exchanges being less frequent than they are today.

During the nineteenth century, as the United States expanded into Florida, the Louisiana Purchase, and the Southwest, it added yet another form of celebration, the Latin Christmas. Settlers in these parts of North America had brought from Spain and France Yule customs guided by Catholic doctrine. They placed more emphasis on the family, the crèche (manger), and the Epiphany (the adoration of the Magi on January 6) than did the English, and less on adult revelry. Although this Latin Christmas

was overshadowed by the dominant northern European celebration, it contributed to more frequent use of manger scenes and a strengthened emphasis on the family.

During the late nineteenth century, America was transformed economically and socially. Factories expanded their output dramatically and drew millions of rural dwellers into cities as laborers. On the foundation of these startling developments, the nation developed not only a modern culture, but also a modern Christmas. It was during these years that the celebration achieved its present gargantuan scale. Gift giving became pervasive, with new categories of givers and recipients participating in exchanges, and with many new types of items considered suitable as gifts. Although this modern celebration followed northern European forms and came from the Middle Atlantic states—much as the Christmas of the first eighty years of the nineteenth century had—it was urban, not rural, in tone and was typified by the exchange of manufactured rather than handmade gifts. The emergence of this modern celebration and its subsequent history are the focus of this work.

What kinds of sources must one examine to get the best descriptions and representations of the modern Christmas? I relied heavily on the documents of mass culture, in particular on mass-circulation periodicals, because they document the celebration that was most typical of the nation as a whole and expressed core American values. In large part, periodicals expressed these values because of the way in which they were financed. In the late nineteenth century, Frank A. Munsey and Cyrus H. K. Curtis devised a new way of financing periodicals. Unlike earlier magazine publishers, they earned most of their income from sales of advertising space to businesses rather than from newsstand sales of magazines to readers. In order for advertising revenue to support the magazine, they set their advertising rates much higher than was industry custom. Munsey and Curtis justified these higher rates because their magazines had much larger circulations than their competitors. For example, by the early twentieth century, Curtis had achieved the hitherto-unheard-of circulation of one million readers for each of his two major magazines, the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. In contrast, magazines that were financed by newsstand sales and subscriptions—magazines such as *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, and *Atlantic*—had readerships of about 150,000. With Munsey and Curtis, mass circulation periodicals had arrived.

Munsey and Curtis achieved their circulations through two devices. First, they made the selling price very low, about five or ten cents a copy, compared to the thirty or so cents a copy which other magazines cost. This low selling price did not produce a profit, but it defrayed the costs of publication. Second, they made the content of their magazines reflect the most widely held attitudes in the nation. Publishers of mass circulation periodicals were compelled to adopt this policy by the strongest of financial considerations. If they had discussed controversial topics, they would have alienated readers, and that would have required them to lower the all-important advertising rates. In order to prevent the serious economic results of declining readership, publishers and editors made sure their magazines mirrored attitudes already held by the largest possible segment of the public, thus making them a highly valuable source for discovering what these widely held attitudes were.

Recognizing the special reflecting quality of mass-circulation periodicals, I made them my main body of source materials. I analyzed 1,720 articles related to Christmas-gift giving from these periodicals. In addition to articles, I also analyzed Christmas gift advertisements from two of the most widely circulated—and typically American—magazines published during the period: the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. I did a content analysis of 1,270 advertisements, which I selected at random from five three-year periods: 1900–1902, 1911–1913, 1920–1922, 1928–1930, and 1936–1938.

Finally, I analyzed 460 articles from trade journals. These articles, written for the use of businessmen, were very helpful as historical sources. Most contained forthright arguments, supported by good evidence and specific examples. Although the articles almost always encouraged profit-making, they exhibited few other biases or value judgments.

My analysis of these primary sources revealed that the modern Christmas celebration had a significant internal diversity—most importantly, diversity based on the social roles played by individual celebrants such as husbands, wives, parents, children, community members, the poor, employees, and friends. No doubt there were other dimensions of diversity, but I leave those to subsequent scholars.

Scholarly secondary literature on the American Christmas celebration is sparse; historians, for example, have virtually ignored the festival. The general lack of scholarly effort in analyzing the Christmas celebration is ironic when one considers the enormous effort Americans (scholars in-

cluded) have expended in celebrating Christmas since 1880. Each winter the public energetically shops, wraps presents, prepares holiday foods, and performs the multitude of other tasks that are necessary for a proper celebration. Economically, this event usually causes months of financial anxiety. Fortunate, indeed, have been those who are able to meet holiday expenses as they arose; more commonly, however, the holiday season generates sheaves of bills that are paid off over subsequent months. All told, the finances of millions of Americans have operated in the shadow of holiday expenditures for a full quarter of each year.

The sizable effort the public puts into celebrating Christmas has been matched by the efforts of American manufacturers, retailers, and advertisers. As early as 1880, the prescient among the nation's businessmen saw that they could use the emerging custom of Christmas gift giving to increase their sales. Ever since, they have moved purposefully to expand gift giving in America and have enjoyed the rewards of their effort. Indeed, they have been so successful that many businessmen have come to rely on end-of-the-year sales for a substantial percentage of their yearly profits. Remarkably, none of this activity by businessmen and the public attracted much scholarly interest.

Although secondary works on Christmas are sparse, secondary works on various subjects related to Christmas are plentiful and useful. For example, there are histories of periodicals, advertising, the economy, festivals, the family, labor, charity, and urbanization, as well as anthropological and sociological studies of gift giving and festivals. I frequently relied on these works, without which my own study would have been much more difficult.

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I researched this book at the libraries of Rutgers and Princeton universities, at the New-York Historical Society, and at the New Brunswick, Newark, Trenton, New York City, and Philadelphia public libraries. In particular, the Free Library of Philadelphia and the New York Public Library graciously permitted me to photograph from their archives the advertisements that appear in the book. I am grateful for the kind assistance of the staffs of all of these institutions.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book tells the story of the emergence of the modern form of Christmas celebration. How has the Yule festival come to dominate our minds and pocketbooks each winter? Before 1880 the scale of the celebration was small by present-day standards. The volume of commerce generated by the festival was not a significant part of the total national economy, not only because fewer presents were exchanged but also because those presents were usually handmade. The handmaking of the gift items fit well into the yearly cycle of the predominantly agrarian economy. After the harvest of their crops in the fall, farmers had free time in which to handmake Christmas gifts as well as other items. In addition, the nation's industrial capacity was not large enough to allow for the production of many seasonal fripperies.¹

However, during the late nineteenth century, America industrialized and urbanized rapidly. Rural dwellers swarmed into the nation's metropolises from the American and European countrysides in the hope of securing employment in one of the new factories. At the same time, the expanding industrial sector of the American economy achieved sufficient size to make America the world's greatest industrial power. The economic and social transformation of the nation was the basis for a new American culture, a culture we label "modern" and associate with the twentieth century. It is a culture dominated by urban values and symbols, and it is a culture in which consumption values loom large for the first time in the nation's history. High status attaches to the purchase and possession of certain items, rather than to previously esteemed traits such as moral

virtue, thriftiness, and productive capacity. In the twentieth century, Americans have been encouraged to spend rather than to save, and high consumers, such as movie stars and sports figures, have become our cultural heroes.

The modern form of celebrating Christmas emerged as an integral part of this modern culture and soon drew virtually everyone under its influence. Even those sections of the country that had historically resisted the celebration, most notably New England, joined in the festivities. So, to a limited extent, did non-Christian groups such as Jews, even though they had no doctrinal connection to the nativity symbols that were the ostensible core of the festival. By 1912 journalist Margaret Deland observed that "there can be no possible doubt that the Christmas folly which causes 'swearing' is increasing. By the first of December the very air seems to tingle with the mad compulsion of giving. Contrast the number of gifts we feel we must make with the number we made ten or fifteen years ago." No other celebration came close to demanding the level of effort, money, and attention that Christmas did. When we consider the magnitude of the modern celebration, its emergence should be considered one of the significant developments in recent American history.²

The questions raised by this development are many. What were the causes for the rise of the festival at this time? How are developments in the history of Christmas related to developments in American culture generally? Was the modern festival foisted on the public by avaricious businessmen, or did the festival rise on a groundswell of public favor? Did the modern Christmas assume its present form from the beginning of its emergence, or did it change over time? Why did it assume the form it did? How much diversity existed within the festival, and how does it affect our generalizations about Christmas?

Although the characteristics that have typified the modern celebration are challenging to identify, it is still clear that some of the most popular concepts used to describe the modern festival are not very helpful. For example, I have avoided the term "commercialization"—that most popular of all words for describing the development of the celebration—because it is overly vague. Does it mean that there was an increase in the use of money in connection with the celebration, that there were larger sales volumes, that there was more promoting of sales at Christmas, that buying and selling came to assume a larger role in the celebration of the holiday, or that the celebration was related to a surrounding consumption

culture? All of these developments—and more—tend to get subsumed under the label of “commercialization” when it is important for analytical purposes to keep them separate. Hence, the absence of the word “commercialization” in this book, although there is much about matters that are usually subsumed under that term.

This book does not discuss the religious aspects of Christmas. The reason is simple. Religion has not played an important role in the emergence of the modern form of the celebration. This may come as a surprise—even a shock—to those who think of Christmas as being predominantly religious. However, in practice, the secular aspects of the celebration, such as gift giving, the Christmas dinner, and the gathering of family members, have dwarfed its religious aspects in resources spent and in concern given. Although celebrants may have had meaningful Christmas experiences in church or in other religious settings, they have spent much more time during the holiday season on such secular matters as selecting presents, then wrapping and presenting them, and making arrangements for holiday visits and feasts. One cannot escape the conclusion that the secular aspects of the modern celebration have been more central than the religious aspects. The safest way to determine what is most important to people is to look at how they spend their time, money, and effort, and in the case of the modern Christmas celebration, they have spent it on secular matters. One must not confuse the rationale for the celebration (the celebration of the birthday of Jesus) with what is central to the celebration as indicated by the behavior of celebrants.

Because the modern Christmas cannot be adequately described in terms of commercialization or in terms of its religious aspects, two other themes will run through this study: the rapid industrialization and urbanization of America during the late nineteenth century and the effort to reform the celebration during the early twentieth century.

The urban industrial setting provided a new context for prominent social relationships. Americans were struck by the visibility of the urban poor, the presence of a prominent urban working class employed in factories, and their continual observation of strangers in America's cities. At Christmas, their problem was how to express these relationships. Could the new manufactured gift items appropriately symbolize them, and should the same types of items be used to express the more intimate relationships of the family? How wide should one's circle of recipients be in a city that contained mostly strangers?

Celebrants commonly spoke of social roles when they talked about their Christmas gifts. What was the appropriate item to symbolize the relationship with one's husband in modern American society? With one's wife? Children? The poor? With one's employer or employees? Friends? Fellow community members? The role played by a particular recipient was crucial, as givers tended to search for gifts that were appropriate for that role. Consistent with this emphasis on social roles of recipients, when commentators wrote about the appropriateness of items for those in particular social roles they inevitably expressed their view about the meaning of those roles in the culture.

This study emphasizes the rich mosaic of social roles—the diversity—within American society. It is only after one identifies the major roles that one can understand property exchanges in a society. For example, in examining a gift exchange, on the surface one may only see the item passing from person A to person B. Lost are the layers of meaning of the exchange based on the roles that the two parties see themselves playing. To the parties, the gift is not simply a gift from A to B but a gift from a husband to a wife, or from an employer to his or her employee, for example. Therefore, the roles of the two parties—and the relationships between those two roles in the society—not only provide the context for the presentation of the gift, but also account for much of the significance of the exchange for the participants.

Because social roles are very significant in gift exchanges, in this book I examine the most important roles separately. The reader will find separate chapters on gifts between friends, between husbands and wives, from parents to their children, between community members, from the prosperous to the poor, and from employers to their employees. Each of these roles has had its own history and has responded to its own unique combination of historical forces. We must appreciate these separate histories before we can safely generalize about the celebration as a whole. Unfortunately, many recent commentators on Christmas blithely generalize about the celebration “as a whole” without giving sufficient attention to the internal diversity within it.

The second major theme which runs through this book is the reform of the celebration, a theme which was particularly prominent during the Progressive period. The efforts to reform Christmas took many forms: nostalgic, impassioned, and ideological, to name a few. However, the most important and prominent strain in the reform efforts was rationality.