

Literature helps to create and sustain Christmas customs

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from generation to generation."

Such traditions, Barnett observed, blend the sacred with the pagan, producing the "distinctive national Christmas that developed in the United States during the nineteenth century" and continues to this day.

The literature that helped convey these traditions emerged at the dawn of the Christian era; many of its basic themes and topics were set forth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Among those images are the infant, the animals, the stable, the shepherds, the Magi and the star. The dominant themes are new life, gift giving, and a sense of celebration for the great and wise (the Magi) and the small and humble (the shepherds).

Christmas literature began with poems and songs and sermons, and continued through the Middle Ages in such mystery plays as the 15th-century *The Second Shepherd's Play*, and on through the years in such religiously-tinged works as: John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629); Robert Southwell's "The Burning Babe" (1602); Thomas Hardy's "The Oxen" (1915), T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" (1928); and Richard Wilbur's "A Christmas Hymn" (1961).

But while the feast of Christmas remained rooted in religion, its celebration began to absorb such pagan influences as dancing and theatrical performances. In his 1712 essay, "Sir Roger on Christmas," Joseph Addison described a fictional nobleman who provided 12 days worth of meat, mince pies and beer for his tenants. The 12 nights were filled with game playing and practical jokes.

Some church leaders, however, were not at ease with these types of Christmas tradition, Barnett said, especially since some of the traditions were pagan in origin. In some cases, he said, objections arose because secular

Christmas reveling in England interfered with religious devotion.

The Puritans were the most vocal opponents of Christmas celebrations, both in England and in the New England colonies. In 1647, the English Puritans in Parliament outlawed celebrations on Christmas. The General Court of Massachusetts followed suit in 1659. These laws were later repealed, but their lingering effects muted the celebration of Christmas in the United States and England for the next two centuries.

In fact, Father Francis Weiser, SJ, observed in *The Christmas Book*, these laws actually had the unintended effect of removing a sense of the religious in subsequent celebrations of the feast.

December 25 became a common workday, Father Weiser noted. Christmas celebrations moved from the public arena to meals and merriment at home. Meanwhile, he observed, "The fine old traditions of religious observance so close to the heart of all Christians today had disappeared from the homes of England. What was left was a worldly, shallow feast, of amusements and reveling."

It was in this climate that Dickens emerged.

"Dickens was an ideal narrator for a time when the ceremonies of Christmas, many of German origin and only recently imported, were expanding among the middle and lower classes in England and America," Jack Newcombe wrote in his introduction to *A Christmas Treasury*.

Queen Victoria, with her German husband, helped to introduce some of that nation's customs to her English subjects. The first Christmas tree in Windsor Castle was set up in 1841, for example. And each year the royal family gathered for a Christmas celebration and to exchange gifts.

Dickens first wrote briefly about



Christmas in *Sketches by Boz* (1836), then at length the same year in *The Pickwick Papers*.

But it was with the 1843 publication of *A Christmas Carol* that Dickens became clearly identified with Christmas. He followed that story with several others, including *The Chimes* (1845) and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846). He also read these works — especially *A Christmas Carol* — during his public performances, reaching even wider audiences.

"Dickens, writing profusely about Christmas and reciting his popular works before audiences in England in America, became the author who seemed to embody the very spirit of the season," Newcombe wrote.

The message Dickens conveyed, Barnett observed, could be described as a "carol philosophy." This philosophy, he said, "combined certain religious and secular attitudes toward the celebration into a humanitarian pattern. It excoriated individual selfishness and extolled the virtues of brotherhood, kindness and generosity at Christmas. ... Dickens preached that at Christmas men should forget self and think of others, especially the poor and the unfortunate."

In addition to his own Christmas stories, Dickens annually published the Christmas works of other writers in magazines he edited. In his *The Book of Christmas Folklore*, Tristram Coffin suggested that Dickens' success with his own stories — both in publication and in public readings — helped to encourage a ready and steady supply of Christmas writings from numerous authors.

Further, Dickens helped to set the pattern for periodicals publishing annual Christmas issues, or at least carrying Christmas-related stories. O'Henry's "Gifts of the Magi," for example was written for the Christmas Issue of the *New York World* in 1905.

Across the Atlantic, the first significant author to write about Christmas was Washington Irving in the *Knickerbocker History of New York* (1809) and *The Sketch Book* (1819). The latter — written while Irving lived in England — described English Christmas customs for American readers.

In the 1809 book, Irving described St. Nicholas, who had been brought to the United States by Dutch settlers. The St. Nicholas legend had existed since the early years of Christianity, E. Willis Jones noted in *The Santa Claus Book*. The saint was a bishop noted for his miracles and, eventually, for giving gifts. He gradually evolved through legend into a kindly gent who watched over children's behavior, rewarding those who had been good.

Irving's description includes some of the characteristics that became part of the contemporary Santa Claus legend: smoking a pipe, flying through the air (although, in this case, in a wagon not a sleigh), climbing down chimneys, filling stockings with gifts.

In 1822, Clement Moore used Irving's descriptions, as well as those in other popular works, to write his poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." That poem helped to solidify the further details of the legend: reindeer, a fur coat (rather than bishop's robes), and the description of Santa as "plump, a right jolly old elf."

Moore's poem, intended at first only for his family, was reprinted countless times and became well-known in the United States, Jones observed. Meanwhile, political cartoonist Thomas Nast began in the 1860s to draw a series of Santa Claus illustrations, based in part on Moore's descriptions. Santa's suit took on its red coloration thanks to Nast's color illustrations for the 1886 book *Santa and His Works*.

Through their literary efforts, Dickens, Irving and Moore helped to popularize many aspects that have become part of current Christmas celebrations, Coffin noted. They also helped to create a genre and to popularize themes that have been repeated in Christmas stories and tradition ever since.

Santa Claus has evolved from a saint revered by the Dutch to a symbol of the season. Christmas ritual now often includes writing letters to Santa and leaving out snacks on Christmas Eve for the reindeer.

Dickens helped set a pattern of looking back to the Christmas celebrations of one's youth. Thomas continued this pattern in "Child's Christmas in Wales." Capote did likewise in "A Christmas Memory." Ironically, Newcombe noted, these two authors are probably better known for their Christmas stories than they are for more serious works.

The staging of plays and theatrics once again has become an important part of the Christmas celebration. One need think only of the number of living nativity scenes and children's Christmas plays staged in diocesan many parishes and schools to see this.

Dickens also fostered a sense of responsibility for the poor, Coffin observed. The chastened Scrooge became a model of generosity, contributing food, gifts and money to the poor. Many newspapers began to run annual campaigns to solicit donations for the poor — such as the *Catholic Courier*/Social Ministry Christmas Appeal.

Meanwhile, parishes and church groups annually set up "Giving Trees," or collect food and gifts for Christmas baskets — traditions that stretch back through the centuries, but have gained new popularity in the past century. And the Salvation Army bell ringers are regular sights on city streets.

Thus the contemporary Christmas celebration has become a mix of traditions — national, religious and secular — many sustained and promoted by the literature that has grown up around the season, Barnett observed.

In the United States, Barnett said, the "Christmas Carol" philosophy put forth by Dickens and authors who followed him has helped to preserve a balance between fraternalism and self-centeredness. Thus, he explained, Christmas is a celebration that involves an awareness of and a concern for the entire community.

Or, as Dickens expressed the thought in the final line of *A Christmas Carol*, "God bless us, every one."

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