

British Christmas

Many of our current American ideals about the way Christmas ought to be derive* from the English Victorian Christmas, such as that described in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The caroling, the gifts, the feast, and the wishing of good cheer to all - these ingredients* came together to create that special Christmas atmosphere.

The custom* of gift-giving on Christmas dates only to Victorian times. Before then it was more common to exchange gifts on New Year's Day or Twelfth Night.* Santa Claus is known by British children as Father Christmas. Father Christmas, these days, is quite similar to the American Santa, but his direct ancestor* is a certain pagan spirit* who regularly appeared in medieval plays. The old-fashioned Father Christmas was depicted* wearing long robes with sprigs* of holly* in his long white hair. Children write letters to Father Christmas detailing their requests, but instead of dropping them in the mailbox, the letters are tossed* into the fireplace. The draft* carries the letters up the chimney, and theoretically, Father Christmas reads the smoke. Gifts are opened Christmas afternoon.

From the English we get a story to explain the custom of hanging stockings from the mantelpiece.* Father Christmas once dropped some gold coins while coming down the chimney. The coins would have fallen through the ash grate* and been lost if they hadn't landed in a stocking that had been hung out to dry. Since that time children have continued to hang out stockings in hopes of finding them filled with gifts.

The custom of singing carols at Christmas is also of English origin. During the Middle Ages, groups of serenaders* called "waits" would travel around from house to house singing ancient carols and spreading the holiday spirit. The word "carol" means "song of joy." Most of the popular old carols we sing today were written in the nineteenth century.

The hanging of greens, such as holly and ivy*, is a British winter tradition with origins far before the Christian era.* Greenery was probably used to lift sagging* winter spirits and remind the people that spring was not far away. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe* is descended from ancient Druid rites. The decorating of Christmas trees, though primarily a German custom, has been widely popular in England since 1841 when Prince Albert had a Christmas tree set up in Windsor Castle for his wife Queen Victoria, and their children.

The word "wassail" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon phrase "waes hael", which means "good health." Originally, wassail was a beverage made of mulled ale*, curdled cream,* roasted apples, nuts, eggs, and spices. It was served for the purpose of enhancing the general merriment of the season. Like many of the ancient customs, "wassailing"* has a legend to explain its origin. It seems that a beautiful Saxon maiden named Rowena presented Prince Vortigen with a bowl of wine while toasting* him with the words "Waes hael." Over the centuries a great deal of cere-



stammen von

Inhalte

Brauch

Dreikönigsabend

Vorläufer; heidnisch

*dargestellt; Zweige
Stechpalme
werfen
Luftzug*

*Kaminsims
Rost*

*Personen die ein
Ständchen singen*

*Efeu
Ära, Zeitalter; durch-
hängend
Mistelzweig*

*Glühwein (-bier)
Schlagsahne*

*Weihnachtspunsch
trinken
auf etwas trinken*

mony had developed around the custom of drinking wassail.* The bowl* is carried into a room with great fanfare, a traditional carol about the drink is sung, and finally, the steaming hot beverage is served.

For many years in England, a roasted boar's* head has been associated with Holiday feasting. The custom probably goes back to the Norse* practice of sacrificing a boar at Yuletide in honour of the god Fryer. One story tells of a student at Oxford's Queen College who was attacked on Christmas Day by a wild boar. All he had in his hand to use as a weapon was his copy of Aristotle, so he shoved* the book down the boar's throat. Wanting to retrieve* his book, the student cut off the animal's head and brought it back to the college where it was served for Christmas dinner with much pomp and ceremony.

The celebration of Boxing Day,* which takes place on December 26 - the feast of St. Stephen, is a part of the holiday season unique to Great Britain. Traditionally, it is on this day that the alms box* at every English church is opened and the contents are distributed to the poor. Also, this is the day that servants traditionally got the day off to celebrate with their families. It became traditional for working people to break open their tip boxes* on this day. Boxing Day began in the mid-nineteenth century when the custom of tipping by rich persons to persons in service positions had apparently gotten out of hand. Children and others pretended to be in the trades and solicited* tips. The custom was expanded to giving to anyone and everyone who had less money than you did, and soon the streets at Christmastime were full of aggressive soliciting of tips. To contain* the nuisance* "Boxing Day" was designated as the one day for giving to the less fortunate.

*Weihnachtspunsch,
Schüssel*

*Eber
altnordisch, norwegisch*

*hineinstopfen
zurückbekommen*

zweiter Weihnachtstag

Spendenbüchse

Trinkgeldbüchse

inständig erbitten

*eindämmen, Ärgernis
ernannt*

"It is good to be children sometimes,
and never better than at Christmas,
when its mighty Founder
was a child himself"
A Christmas Carol



holly



mistletoe



ivy

Wassail Bowl



2 or 3 cinnamon sticks
3 blades of mace
4 cloves
1 teaspoon of nutmeg
1 ginger root
4 apples
4 oz. of sugar
1/2 pint of brown ale
1/2 pint of cider

Core the apples and sprinkle with sugar and water. Bake at 375°F/190°C for 30 minutes, or until tender. Mix ale, cider and spices together. Heat but do not boil. Leave for 30 minutes. Strain and pour over roasted apples. Serve in a punch bowl. Of course if you're planning on saluting more than a few wassailers--and they do tend to travel in packs-- you'll want to increase the recipe accordingly.



[My copy of Culpeper's didn't seem to contain any pleasant remedies, and certainly no receipts for wassail cup. This version is taken from The Country Diary Christmas Book by Sarah Hollis, Henry Holt, 1993--but she credits Culpeper with the original. She goes on to say that wassail cup used to be called "Lamb's Wool" in the Middle Ages, due to the floating apples it contained. "Wassail" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning "be whole" which is much the same as "to your health" today.]

Soillse Na Nollag

by Altan

Tá soillse na Nollag ag loinnriú le bua
O Cheart lár na cathrach go huaigneas a' tuath
Tá coinnéal na Nollag san fhuinneog 'na suí
Ag fáiltiú roimh Mhuire, a theacht chun a tí

Curfa

O tar chugainn, a Mhuire, 's beannaigh ár saol
Beidh aoíocht le fail agat féin 's do naoin'
Scríos as ár mbeatha an ghráin 's an fhuath
'S neartaigh an grál inár gcroíthe atá dúr

Tá an Ré is na Réalta ag soillsiú sa spéir
Agus ciúineas na Nollag le mothú san aeir
Tá 'n saibhir 'san daibhir ar aon intinn amháin
Ag fáiltiú roimh Iosa isteach inár saol

Curfa

Go ngealaí na soillse an ród atá romhainn
Is bí thusa a Iosa ár dtreorú go buan
Nó solus is gile dár shoillsí go fóill
Do theachta a Iosa isteach inár saol

The bright lights of Christmas are shining with joy
From the heart of the city to the lonely confines
A lone Christmas candle in the window does shine
Welcoming Mary to come to our home

Chorus

O come to us Mary and bless our lives
There's a welcome and lodging for you and your child
Banish all hatred and scorn from our minds
And fill with your love our hearts that are blind

The moon and the stars illumine the skies
And the serene peace of Christmas is felt on all sides
The rich and the poor are all of one mind
Welcoming Jesus into their lives

Chorus

May the lights shining brightly clear the path that we roam
And let you, O Jesus, be our guide at all times
For the brightest light that ever did shine
Was your coming, O Jesus, into our lives.



Altan, in Ryan's Bar, Queen St, Dublin