

The Ghosts of Christmas Past

by Wayne Allensworth

The Battle for Christmas
by Stephen Nissenbaum
New York: Alfred A. Knopf;
319 pp., \$30.00



“Now in history,” wrote Chesterton, “there is no Revolution that is not a Restoration.” A collective memory, a vague but compelling collection of shadows that bind us to the past, seems to whisper a perennial, bittersweet hymn to the numbed ear of man, particularly modern man. Every nation, tribe, or clan has passed on tales of a golden past to its children, transmitted by priests, village elders, and prophets of restoration. But in the modern age, as Chesterton warned us, we are forced “to ask for new things because we are not allowed to ask for old things.” Nevertheless, whatever new things we come up with, artificial though they may be, are manifestations of the perennial longing for a restoration of a harmony sensed, but never clearly perceived, since the Fall. It is the desire for such a restoration that drives the “battle for Christmas.”

As Stephen Nissenbaum relates in this study of the evolution of the Christmas holiday, “It was only in the fourth century that the Church officially decided to observe Christmas on December 25.” The Church, it appears, chose the date “not for religious reasons” but because it marked the “approximate arrival of the winter solstice”; an event, as Mr. Nissenbaum notes, “that was celebrated long before the advent of Christianity.” The first “battle for Christmas” was on.

The Church’s goal was to harmonize the Church calendar with a natural rhythm of existence that made the period of late fall through the new year a time of feasting and rest in an agricultural society. The harvest was in, the libations that would quench the thirst of the feasters ready, and the yeoman farmer, peasant, serf, or slave indulged in the

consumption of a rare festive meal of fresh meat. While rejecting the pagan Saturnalia, the Church wisely adapted itself to a seasonal, rhythmic existence of work and rest, feast and worship that was, after all, ordained by the Creator of the seasons (and of the Sabbath) Himself.

The adaptation of the Christian calendar to the winter festival was an effort to absorb and transform the pagan carnival, itself a reflection (though a distorted one in the eyes of these early Christians) of man’s natural role within a created world that God had deemed worth saving. The Puritans outlawed the “keeping of Christmas” because of its “un-Scriptural” nature, its association with paganism, and the lingering insistence by many common folk on an extended festive bout of heavy drinking and what were once known as “sins of the flesh.” But even the austere tribe of Increase Mather adapted the seasonal feast (Thanksgiving) to their dignified, if grim, version of Christianity.

Elements of the carnival lingered on as they do to this day (the New Year’s Eve party, for instance), despite the efforts of Christians to coopt the Saturnalia; but certain of its aspects, as Mr. Nissenbaum points out, served social purposes that the Church Fathers probably saw as necessary, and unrelated to paganism. Wassailing, the European and early American tradition of a face-to-face exchange of gifts (a song for the best that could be offered in beer, whiskey, or food) between the rich and the poor, artisan and apprentice, or master and slave, appears to have satisfied some urgent need within the participants to demonstrate mutual good will and reciprocity, to affirm status (often by reversing it, with the servant taking on the role of the landlord, the apprentice that of the artisan, or the slave that of the master), while confirming function and purpose.

Mr. Nissenbaum is inclined to highlight the role that the winter carnival gift exchange played in cementing an exploitive feudal social order which prevented social upheaval. The lower orders, it appears, were constantly attempting to extend the “Holyday” into or beyond the “twelve days of Christmas” and push the limits of acceptable rowdiness and misrule, even as landlords and

priests attempted to rein in their sometimes aggressive and destructive behavior. Still, he does recognize that something valuable was lost in the transition made by the Western world from feudalism to industrial capitalism and centralized, bureaucratic government.

The modern, “domestic” Christmas centers on Dutch and German practices borrowed and promoted by the aristocratic Knickerbocker set of early 19th-century New York: an example of what historians call “invented traditions.” Mr. Nissenbaum convincingly demonstrates that the Christmas festival of Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and a transformed gift exchange (from parents to dependent children, later among friends and extended family) developed as a countermeasure to modernity’s erosion of community. The industrialization of the Northeast had transformed social relations by eliminating seasonal rhythm, the uncertainty of status, and the loss of opportunities for “face-to-face” expressions of good will in a rapidly urbanizing environment. Members of the “lonely crowd” simply did not know who or what they were, or what purpose they served in a society that was beginning to regard its citizens as expendable cogs in a perpetual motion machine called “the economy.” The wassailing of the seasonal festival had degenerated into mob behavior by a displaced proletariat, the gift exchange being marked by aggressive begging that bordered on mugging.

The industrialist or mass-scale merchant was not the head of a community bound by reciprocity and a sense of place. He did not claim—as the head of the household, the landlord, the master, or the artisan did—that his dependents enjoyed the entitlements of an extended family that promised mutual aid and assured function and status for all its members. During the 19th century, demands that the state mandate and enforce vacation days, working hours, and holidays were strongest in New England, at that time the most heavily industrialized region of the United States. “In other words, Washington’s birthday was not afforded legal recognition simply for ‘patriotic’ reasons, nor was Christmas afforded that recognition simply out of ‘religious’ considerations.” The “battle for Christ-

mas" was being fought in union halls and in state legislatures.

Ironically, efforts by reformers to "domesticate" Christmas, to make "keeping Christmas" something one did at home in the company of a few close friends and family members, or to accentuate the Nativity of Christ as the center of the festival (eventually displacing Easter as the central event of the Christian calendar and giving consumerism an advantage over Christianity), were themselves coopted by the new socioeconomic order. The emerging consumerism of the era undermined the exchange of good will and the affirmation of status through role reversal in the exchange between Santa Claus and child (gift and affection for good behavior, gratitude, and reciprocal love). As production was separated from the household, and goods, services, and a variety of foodstuffs became readily available to the expanding urban middle class in 19th-century America, the "specialness" of the Christmas gift was transformed into the frustrating search for the "right gift." The problem of what to give the man, woman, or child who "has everything"—and often appreciates nothing—was built into capitalism and the "domestic Christmas" from the beginning. "Affection's gift" had become a commercial present, aggressively marketed by commercial interests promoting the "domestic Christmas." "Christmas," writes Mr. Nissenbaum, "was consciously used by entrepreneurs as an agent of commercialization, an instrument with which to enmesh Americans in a web of consumer capitalism."

In this way the yearning for an unfulfilled domesticity, for the genuine affection and warmth so often subtly tied to mutual aid and reciprocity, contributed to the "accumulative, competitive" ideology that produces the familiar "Blue Christmas" mood. "The problems we associate with Christmas, in particular—the loss of authenticity, the decline of pure domestic felicity into an exhausting and often frustrating round of shopping for the perfect gifts—are the very problems we most easily associate with the facts of modern economic life, with advanced technologies of production and marketing." The intensity of feeling for the domestic Christmas traditions was itself indicative of the need to "keep hidden from view" the relationship between an eroded sense of community and commercialism, "to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding some-

thing troublesome about the world they were making." The secularized anti-Christian bias was present in embryonic form at the creation of industrial America, owing in part to consumerism and the rise of telescopic philanthropy, both of which are part of liberal capitalism's genetic code. In an era marked by the collapse of family life and community, such "protection [from the truth] may be an indulgence we can no longer afford." Putting Christ back into this Christmas may be the biggest battle of all.

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A Life in Themes *by Frank Brownlow*

**W.B. Yeats: A Life. Vol. I:
The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914**
by R.F. Foster
Oxford and New York:
Oxford University Press;
704 pp., \$35.00



By any assessment, W.B. Yeats was an extraordinary man who led a more active and varied life than most poets. As R.F. Foster says, he was "a poetic genius who was also, both serially and simultaneously, a playwright, journalist, occultist, apprentice politician, revolutionary, stage-manager, diner-out, dedicated

friend, confidant and lover of some of the most interesting people of his day." He was also a gifted self-publicist who thrived on opposition and defiance. Such a life leaves behind a mass of material for a biographer to manage. There is a large cast of characters to be depicted. There are many settings to be described and understood, and many journeys to be traced. There are issues to be explained and quarrels to be adjudicated. Above all, there is justice to be done to the man himself, and to his achievement. Otherwise, why write another biography?—not a trivial question, as it turns out.

R.F. Foster is a successful Irish professor of history now teaching at Oxford, where he is Carroll Professor of Irish History and a fellow of Hertford College. This is the first volume of his biography of Yeats, taking Yeats from birth to the verge of World War I, when he was nearly 50 years old. Foster tells us in his introduction that he has written a historian's biography, not a literary critic's. The difference, as he explains it, is that a literary biographer would begin from Yeats's poetry and devote himself to looking for its causes and reflections in the poet's life, while the historian would simply begin at the beginning and work forward, treating the poetry as one of the many things Yeats did. Chronology is everything; and, as things turn out, the beauty of that principle from a critically-minded biographer's point of view is that it so effectively dismantles the poet's own carefully spliced and edited accounts of his life. To give an example everyone familiar with Yeats's poetry will recognize: Maud Gonne, as she appears in Yeats's

The Sage Hen *(for Katherine V. Murphy)*

by Timothy Murphy

To slake her fledglings' thirst
she dowsed her downy breast
and flew through blowing dust
from the river to her nest.

Now she is distressed,
always dreading the worst
for the flighty brood she nursed
because we do not nest.