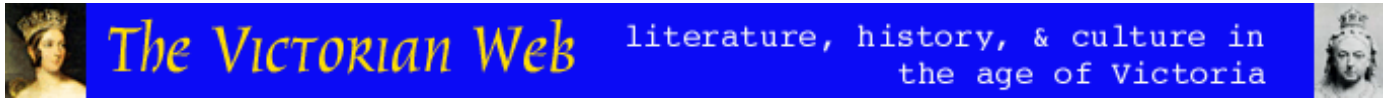


FATHERING CHRISTMAS: CHARLES DICKENS AND THE (RE)BIRTH OF CHRISTMAS

Tom Pold



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Christmas, with its apparently timeless customs and traditions, often seems to have been around forever. However, as late as the 1820s, the writer Leigh Hunt labeled it an event “scarcely worth mention,” (Qtd in Pimlott, 85), and it was widely believed that the holiday, both in England and throughout Europe and North America, was destined to die out. Banned under Oliver Cromwell, Christmas in England was restored with the monarchy in 1660, where it appears to have flourished as an increasingly less and less religious event. Nonetheless, by the 1800s, it had shrunk almost beyond recognition. In the 1840s, holidays observed by governmental departments had decreased from roughly a week in 1797 to just Christmas day itself (Pimlott, 77). But in a remarkable turn of events, under the Victorians Christmas flourished to an extent unprecedented in earlier centuries. This reemergence during the nineteenth-century gave birth to many of the traditions that are today indistinguishable from the holiday itself. Christmas trees, cards, dinners, presents, and carols are all either products of, or were revived during, the Victorian period.

To gain an understanding of how this change came to pass, I shall look at the era’s preeminent literary figure, Charles Dickens. The Dickensian Christmas, with its cozy homes, hearty dinners, and festive pleasures, is the embodiment of the Victorian Christmas, and indeed the present-day incarnation of the holiday, as well. In order to understand Dickens’ contribution to the development of a Christmas, I shall begin by looking at the ways in which he helped to encourage the emergence, and reemergence, of a number of distinctive Yuletide cultures, such as the nostalgic, child-centric, and charitable aspects of the holiday that became increasingly important during the nineteenth-century. I shall then examine the traditions that were being adopted in England around the time of Dickens’ writing — particularly those introduced by Prince Albert — and the ways in which the author used his literary influence to get these customs into virtually every house in the land. Finally, I shall turn to look at Dickens’ own contributions, his Christmas books and periodicals and their impact on seasonal media. This three-pronged approach, of enshrining cultures, old and new traditions, and his own contributions to festive custom, I suggest, shows just how central Dickens was to the establishment of Christmas as we, and our Victorian forebears, understand it. He may not have created the holiday, or even its nineteenth-century incarnation, but through his tireless efforts to enshrine it and all he understood it to mean, in the public consciousness, Dickens is undoubtedly the Father of Christmas.

Charles Dickens and Christmas Past

One of the reasons that holiday, both for the Victorians and for modern-day observers, seems so timeless is because of its strong connections with the past, and its evocation of strong feelings of childhood nostalgia. This enthusiasm for looking backwards is one of the fundamental features of Christmas that Dickens was deeply involved in propagating. In his pioneering study of *The Englishman’s Christmas*, J.A.R Pimlott remarks that “Customs that were old and picturesque came to have an added value,” (Pimlott, 85) and tradition, real or fabricated, became increasingly important. This interest in resurrecting the past, in not only rediscovering and reshaping traditions for contemporary purposes (Pimlott, 85), but also of idealizing the Yuletide of yesteryear, is something that Dickens was keen to foster. “People will always tell you that Christmas is not to them what it used to be,” (Qtd in Gillis, 102) he once remarked, reflecting the increasing importance of nostalgia to the way in which the holiday was viewed. G.K. Chesterton, in his critical study of Dickens’ life, suggests that the author had an enduring interest in romanticizing the past.

In fighting for Christmas he was fighting for the old European festival, Pagan and Christian, for that trinity of

eating, drinking and praying which to moderns appears irreverent, for the holy day which is really a holiday (Chesterton, 163)

This statement perfectly encapsulates the way in which Dickens came to view Christmas, both in his personal life and in his writings. His belief in the holiday as something from the past that should be treasured, his emphasis on looking backwards, both mirrors the interests of his contemporaries and, as Chesterton notes, becomes for Dickens a truly epic struggle.

An inherent result of this strong sense of nostalgia is an increased interest in childhood and, more particularly, of Christmas as a time for children. As lost and forgotten Christmas pastimes were revived, the family emerged as the centre of Christmas celebration during the Victorian era, replacing what had formerly been a community-oriented event (Gillis, 98), with children ultimately becoming the very heart of the holiday (Pimlott, 85). The Victorian Christmas marks the beginning of the holiday as a distinctly child-centric event, and where evocations of childhood are found, Dickens is sure to follow. From *Oliver Twist* to [Great Expectations](#), his writings are saturated with children, endlessly concerned with both the trials and the joys of youth. The centrality of the child to the celebration of Christmas is one of the most striking and significant changes that the Victorians made to the holiday, and one that Dickens was most strongly involved with. His interest in Christmas as a time for children is clearly evinced by the fact that the first of Scrooge's journeys in [A Christmas Carol](#) is a revisit of winter holidays from his own childhood. Sitting alone at school when all his friends have gone home for Christmas is surely one of the most pathetic images in the story, and the sense of childhood abandonment is essential for creating this mood. Likewise, the narrator's intrusion into his story signified by his declaration, "What would I not have given to one of them!" (Charles Dickens, 41), upon seeing a room filled with merry children, further presses the association between children and Christmas.

The importance placed on the child as the consumer of the holiday is something that Dickens also espoused in his personal life. In her biography of her father's life, Mamie Dickens recalls that "In our childish days my father used to take us, every twenty-fourth day of December, to a toy shop in Holborn," to buy their Christmas presents, as well as those for their friends. The fact that "[a]s we grew older, present giving was confined to our several birthdays, and this annual visit to the Holborn toy shop ceased" (Mamie Dickens, 26), reinforces just how seriously Dickens had come to consider the holiday as one centered around children, something that he stresses at work and home, alike.

Dickens' concern for the poor is perhaps even better known than his fascination with childhood, and his Christmas books therefore not only advance Christmas as a time for remembering one's past, but also for remembering the present circumstances of the impoverished masses, a notion that continues to be popular to this day (consider, for instance, the sustained popularity of the Salvation Army — another Victorian creation — as a Christmas staple). Employers in emerging industrial centers, like Manchester, had begun to treat Christmas as an opportunity for reducing class tensions before Dickens began writing his annual holiday stories (Gillis, 99). As John R. Gillis remarks in his *A World of Their Own Making*, however, the failure of social and religious movements to promote class harmony throughout the year led Dickens, as a social idealist, to turn to "family myths and rituals to achieve what could not be accomplished by other means" (Gillis, 100). Such an effort can be clearly seen throughout Dickens' Christmas books, not least in the *Carol*, which is at heart the story of a money-loving employer coming to see the importance of helping the poor. Indeed, Scrooge's transformation seems almost exclusively to take the form of giving money to and taking an interest in the poor, most notably his promise to Bob Cratchit to "raise your salary, and endeavor to assist your struggling family," but also in his new interest in "question[ing] beggars" (Charles Dickens, 85) and making charitable donations.

Dickens' enthusiasm for transforming Christmas into a time for remembering the poor is well documented. During the six weeks in October and November 1843 during which he was writing the *Carol*, he was also advising a certain Miss Coutts, a woman of wealth, to direct her charitable endeavors towards impoverished children, while in September of the same year, he wrote a scathing review of the conditions at a "Ragged School" he had recently visited (Butt, 132). These experiences were very much at the forefront of Dickens' mind as he wrote this first of his Christmas stories, a fact that John Butt, in his essay "Dickens's Christmas Books," sees most clearly in the fact that Scrooge is explicitly blamed for the (potential) death of

Tiny Tim (Butt, 137). Laying such responsibility as life and death at the feet of the wealthy must certainly have been a shocking claim for the period, and it is one that gives testament to the way in which Dickens was transforming Christmas into a time for helping the poor. Such enthusiasm is evident not only from his writings, but also from his personal example. Mamie Dickens recalls a large party that Dickens organized at his home for the entertainment of the local poor. “Despite the general prejudice of the neighbors against the undertaking” (Mamie Dickens, 42) of such a display of cross-class interaction, Dickens arranged games, drinking, and “[n]ot to seem to dictate or distrust, [É] gave all the prizes in money” (Mamie Dickens, 42). That Dickens would eschew popular sentiment in his desire to assist the needy during the festive period demonstrates just how strongly he believed in charity as a central facet of the remodeled Christmas.

The Culture of Christmas

Moving now to look at the Christmas traditions that Dickens enshrined, I shall strive to demonstrate just how essential Dickens was to propagating not only the broad strokes of a Yuletide identity, but also the smaller details. A useful way to begin this analysis is to look at Dickens in comparison with a man who is widely considered to be the “other” father of Christmas, Albert, the Prince Consort (Pimlott, 85). By considering Albert’s contributions to the holiday, I shall show just how instrumental, and how unique, Dickens was in encouraging the adoption of a Christmas culture. Although Albert may have been an essential factor in introducing a number of distinct Yuletide traditions to England, it is Dickens’ enshrinement of these customs that grafts them into the Christmas consciousness.

In particular, Albert is credited with introducing the Christmas tree to England in 1840, following an older custom from his native Germany. This particular custom had developed in Germany by 1521 (Pimlott, 97), and remained an exclusively Germanic tradition until the nineteenth-century. But although he may have pioneered the introduction of new and foreign Christmas traditions to the royal family in the middle-part of the nineteenth century, there is little evidence that he either hoped or expected that these customs should be adopted by the general populace (Pimlott, 88). His introduction of traditional German festive activities had little to do with a desire to reformulate the holiday in England, but rather a desire to enjoy the customs of his own youth (Pimlott, 88). Indeed, in his correspondence with his brother and father in Germany, Albert clearly defines “the German Christmas tree and its radiant candles” (Qtd in Pimlott, 99), as something alien to Britain, consciously maintaining its status as a foreign, not an incorporated activity. The fact that it inspired imitation was inevitable, but not premeditated (Pimlott, 88).

In 1850, just a decade after Prince Albert first introduced the Christmas tree into his Windsor residence for the amusement of his children, Dickens drew upon the symbol for the heart of the first of his *Household Words* Christmas stories. Drawing upon the themes of the child’s Christmas, complete with gifts and pantomimes, “A Christmas Tree” firmly situates the decorated tree in the festive world that Dickens was helping to create. In inspired fashion, he employs the distinctive shape of the tree as a metaphor for the narrator’s life (Glancy, 59). Employing the Christmas tree in this way, not only as a literal image of Christmas, but also as a structural device, firmly ties the custom into the Yuletide landscape. Dickens implicitly links the Christmas image with the Christmas spirit, strongly reinforcing the tree as something central to the identity of Christmas.

Likewise, there is significant evidence to suggest that the prince was instrumental in the development of a culture of gift-giving. New Year had been the traditional time for giving and receiving presents, but Albert, at least by 1841, had demarcated Christmas as “a day for the exchange of presents, as marks of mutual affection and good-will” (Pimlott, 123). Gift-giving, if it did happen, was exclusively the domain of grandparents (Pimlott, 122). Nonetheless, in the *Carol* we see in the figure of a father “attended by a man laden with Christmas toys and presents” (Charles Dickens, 42) an early example of the practice of gift-giving. Again, we see Dickens picking up on an emerging custom — that of parents giving presents to their children at Christmas — and inserting it into his work in a way that makes the new seem like it has always been there. There is no special commentary on the act of giving demonstrated in *The Carol*, it is simply presented as a perfectly normal, and therefore inherently acceptable and emulable, activity.

Another major custom which Dickens contributed to reviving and renewing, although one that had little connection with the Prince Consort, is that of carol singing. Once again, caroling was a custom that had undergone some degree of revival prior to Dickens. In 1822, a collection of Ancient Christmas Carols was published included the previously unrecorded musical scores that the author remembered from his childhood (Rowell, 22). This practice of collecting but also updating almost forgotten festive music from both Britain and abroad became increasingly common during the century (Rowell, 22). Like many others, Dickens was drawn to the old fashioned tradition of stirring festive music (Pimlott, 108). Geoffrey Rowell, in his “Dickens and the Construction of Christmas” points to the significance of Dickens’ naming the first, and most influential of his Christmas books, “*A Christmas Carol*,” (Rowell, 22) (my emphasis). As with the image of the Christmas tree, Dickens is once again ingraining the language of new and re-emerging customs into the discourse about the holiday. At the same time, carols also play a significant role in the narrative itself, Dickens further writing them into the public consciousness. “God bless you, merry gentlemen! May nothing you dismay!” (Charles Dickens, 16), a caroler sings through Scrooge’s letterbox at the very beginning of the *Carol*, only to be scared away by miser. This brief instance implicitly argues that caroling, which was not a common custom at the time, is a normal seasonal activity. The seemingly minor incident is also referenced later in the story, when Scrooge, as one of the very first signs of his reformation, wishes that he had acted more kindly to the singer (Charles Dickens, 34). This reintroduction of the caroling scene subtly suggests to the reader that singing songs of Christmas, like kindness, is something that goes intrinsically associated with the twenty-fifth of December.

Writing Christmas

Thus far, I have focused on the ways in which Dickens worked to inscribe ideas of Christmas, both new and old, into the public consciousness. Although it is fair to say that these endeavors are his most significant contributions to the creation of the Victorian Christmas, they are certainly not the most obvious. As such, it would be remiss of me not to look also at the several customs that he himself initiated in the form of his annual Christmas publications.

Beginning in 1843 with his first and most famous, *A Christmas Carol*, which sold 15,000 copies within a year (Pimlott, 88) and continuing with [The Chimes](#), [The Cricket on the Hearth](#), [The Battle of Life](#), and [The Haunted Man](#), Dickens published a festive story each year until 1848. At this point, he stopped writing stand-alone works, and instead turned his attentions to publishing special Christmas editions of his periodical, *Household Words*, (which was replaced by *All the Year Round* in 1859). After publishing a Christmas-themed edition in 1850, the practice became so popular that Dickens began publishing an “Extra Number for Christmas” that was separate from the usual weekly installments (Glancy, 59). These issues often contained Dickens’ reflections on the meaning of Christmas, such as his “What Christmas is, as we Grow Older,” which helped further establish and expand the Christmas myth that his stories proposed. But more than reinforcing Christmas culture, these publications also became festive traditions in their own right. Dickens frequently called upon the aid of his literary friends, including [Elizabeth Gaskell](#) and [Wilkie Collins](#), to help create story collections linked by a central framework. By doing so, Dickens subtly moved the sphere of the Christmas story away from himself exclusively, expanding it to include a range of other writers. Although these contributors were rarely able to fully conform to the style of Christmas story that Dickens had created and popularized (Glancy, 62) a fact that in itself demonstrates just how central a figure he was in the creation of the Victorian Christmas, the Christmas issues of Dickens’ periodicals remained hugely popular (Glancy, 66). In fact, by the 1860s, the format of these editions had attracted a huge number of imitators who both copied and subverted the genre (Glancy, 66). Both responses give testament to the enormous value of Dickens’ yearly gift to the culture of Christmas. While this tradition has not survived in the original literary form that Dickens developed, it can be clearly seen in the plethora of “special” Christmas editions of magazines, as well as the themed, seasonal television programming that constitutes December schedules.

More directly, but arguably with less long-term importance, Dickens also helped to define Christmas-time art and media by introducing his works as a distinctive holiday tradition for readers around the world. In particular, the *Carol* became a Christmas ritual, read aloud by families, including Franklin Roosevelt’s, on Christmas Eve each year, becoming itself a fixed tradition (Pimlott, 89). Likewise, adaptations, which continue to be popular today (as good example is the thoroughly improbable *The Muppet Christmas Carol*), first opened

to enormous popularity within a year of the story's first being published. By 1844 nine different productions could be found across London (Pimlott, 88). The enormous and enduring success of the *Carol*, as well as Dickens' other Christmas writings, therefore contributed to the re-emergence of Christmas during the nineteenth-century not only by promoting new or re-imagined holiday customs, but also by creating new and distinctive traditions that enshrined the author's emphasis on family, charity, and the like.

As should be clear from the evidence I've presented, Dickens is certainly not responsible for the creation of Christmas, Victorian or otherwise. The contributions of others in introducing customs old and new, as well as the importance of a history of Christmas from long before the nineteenth-century makes it impossible to believe that any one man could have produced such a vast institution as the winter holiday. But while Dickens may not have created Christmas, his contributions, most notably his propagation of what the festival should mean, are essential to the establishment of the culture of Christmas. As [G.K. Chesterton](#) remarks, "[w]hether the Christmas visions would or would not convert Scrooge, they convert us" (Chesterton, 173), a sentiment that perfectly encapsulates the author's role in the history of the holiday. Taking already-emerging cultures of Christmas, such as a new interest in childhood and charity, building on new traditions, and adding his own unique gifts to the developmental process, Dickens propagated the celebration of Christmas to an extent unmatched by anyone else.

Related Material

- Dickens "the man who invented Christmas"

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