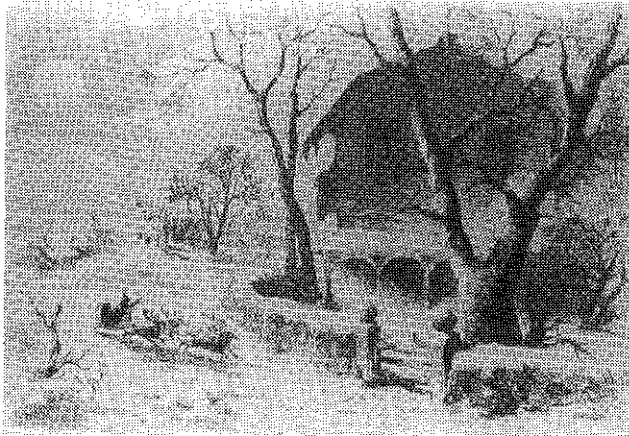


8.

Mr. Dickens, The Victorians, and Christmas



For many of us, Christmas, as it is celebrated in *A Christmas Carol*, is the “real” Christmas—a time for mistletoe and holly, for family gatherings and parties, roaring fires and hot punch, good spirits, “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” and, of course, the wintry snow. We imagine that the Victorians, like us, found this a deeply traditional celebration.

In fact, Charles Dickens and his Victorian contemporaries actually invented or rediscovered most of the traditions that characterize the Christmas celebration as we know it. It was necessary for them to do so because the celebration of Christmas had been outlawed in England just over 200 years before Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*.

In the Renaissance and the early 17th century, the English kings and queens and their subjects celebrated Christmas lavishly—too lavishly for the austere tastes of the increasingly powerful Puritans. For them the Christmas festivities gave rein to too many earthly delights. Furthermore, they objected to some elements of the Christmas celebration that has pagan origins. The practice of bringing mistletoe indoors at the end of December, for example, dated from midwinter festivals that had been celebrated in Britain long before the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

In the mid-17th century, the Puritan parliament banned the celebration of the holiday, and the ban lasted until the Restoration of the Monarchy, when the newly crowned Charles II lifted it. But the damage had been done, and the Christmases that followed were pale imitations of the robust festivals of pre-Puritan days. So it remained for more than 150 years. The Industrial Revolution, with its emphasis on hard work, did little to restore the Christmas spirit.

At the beginning of the 19th century, many people (unlike Bob Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol*) were *not* given a holiday on Christmas; it was work as usual, unless the 25th fell on a Sunday. An American woman visiting London in

1843, wrote that the British celebrated Christmas only by eating a heavier-than-usual meal.

But 1843, in fact, was also the year in which *A Christmas Carol* was published, and by that time the Victorians were rapidly changing the nature of the holiday. Led by the royal family and by artists like Dickens, they were busily rediscovering or inventing most of the traditions that are associated with Christmas today. Here are a few examples:

Caroling, an ancient tradition in Britain, had almost completely died out in the larger cities by the beginning of the 18th century. The first compilation of carols in Dickens’ century was published in 1822, and Dickens added his own endorsement of the tradition with the title of *A Christmas Carol*.

The Christmas tree, imported from Germany by a German member of the British royal family, captured the British imagination in 1841 when pictures were published of the tree put up by Queen Victoria’s Consort, Prince Albert. Dickens himself wrote an enthusiastic description of the Christmas tree, and one picture of the royal Christmas gathering (with Albert’s beard removed to make him look less European) was widely printed in America the following year.

Santa Claus, on the other hand, came to England from America. The Dutch settlers in New York had brought with them St. Nicholas, a 4th-century Turkish bishop known for throwing bags of gold down the chimneys of destitute families. *Sinter Klaes*, as the Dutch called him, was mispronounced (and misprinted) as “Santa Claus” by non-Dutch-speaking citizens of the New World; and in 1818, Dr. Clement Moore wrote his poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (also known as “The Night Before Christmas”), which was printed all over America. The poem soon found its way to England, as did the jolly image of Santa Claus created by the American political cartoonist Thomas Nast.

The commercial *Christmas card* was a Victorian invention. The first was printed in London in 1843, just a few weeks before the publication of *A Christmas Carol*. Within ten or fifteen years, hundreds of different cards were on sale each December in both England and America.

Most important, the Victorians made the family—especially the children—the focus of the Christmas season. And they defined Christmas as a time of year when men and women should acknowledge their responsibilities to others, particularly to the poor. That vision of Christmas is described by Dickens through the words of Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, when he calls it:

... a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.... and I say, God bless it!