

Hidden Treasure-Historical Truth  
Christmas Traditions Round the World  
By Katherine Bone

Christmas, according to The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories is from the old English *Cristes maesse*, Christ's Mass. In early history, December was typically the month to decorate temples with offerings of greens at the feast of Saturn. This practice was adopted by Christians after Christ was born in Bethlehem. In Germany and Scandinavia, holly and holly-trees were called Christ's-thorn. W.C.T. Dobson, R.A., an English painter, designed the first known Christmas card in 1844. Decorating trees with candles and placing presents beneath them became popular after Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 1840. It was, also, during this time that the patron saint of Germany, St. Nikolaus was first introduced.

As new and old traditions merge, just as they have throughout time, the month of December generates great expectation. Here is an overview of traditions celebrated around the world.

**Africa:** In the Congo, carolers sing and gifts are laid on a platform of the Communion table. In South Africa, Christmas is a summer holiday. Revelers go to the beach and hang stockings on Christmas Eve for Father Christmas to fill. In Ghana, churches and homes are decorated the first week in Advent to coincide with the cocoa harvest. Carols are sung and churches are decorated with evergreens or palm trees. A feast of rice and yam paste, *fufu*, is enjoyed. In Liberia, homes are filled with oil palms decorated with bells. On Christmas morning, families are awakened by carols and presents of cotton cloth, soap, sweets, pencils and books are exchanged.

**Australia:** Christmas is celebrated during Summer Holiday. Many old English traditions survive but cook-outs, glazed ham, cold chicken, duck, cold deli meats, pasta, salads, pavlovas, and ice-cream are the norm. Swag Man, wearing a brown Akubra, a blue singlet and long baggy shorts, spends the winter with his dingoes then hops into his four-wheel drive and leaves a trail of red dust while out and about delivering presents.

**British Isles:** English traditions date back to Victorian times and Charles Dickens. Until Victorian times, gifts were exchanged on Twelfth Night or New Year's Day. Father Christmas arose from a pagan spirit who made appearances at Medieval Mummer's plays. Wearing long robes and sporting sprigs of holly in his long white hair, he reads the smoke from children's letters, which have been thrown into the fireplace. It is said that stockings were initially hung to catch gold coins dropped from Father Christmas's pockets while he labored to enter through the chimney. Another tradition, singing carols, dates back to the middle ages. Serenaders called *waits* traveled from house to house singing *carols*, songs of joy. Greens were used as decorations to lift sagging winter spirits. Kissing beneath the mistletoe stems from an ancient Druid rite. Wassail, meaning good health, is made up of mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, nuts, eggs, and spices. Wassailing hails from the old tale of a beautiful Saxon maiden named Rowena who presented Prince Vortigen with a bowl of wine and toasted him with the words *Waes hael*. Great fanfare is used when transporting the Wassail bowl into the room. To accompany the Christmas feast, a wild boar's head was served, stemming from an Old Norse practice of sacrificing a boar at Yuletide in honor of the god Freyr. The

feast of St. Stephen is unique to Britain. On this day, the alms box is opened at every church and the contents distributed to the poor.

Canada: For Anglophones and the upper middle class since 1875, Christmas is celebrated with Christmas tree, *crèche*, nativity scene, with *santons*, little saints, and plaster figures, gifts and a Christmas *reveillon*, 'waking up' or banquet. For Francophones, new celebrations came after WWI. Turkey is the norm but in the old days people ate *Tourtiere*, pork pie, or *Boulettes*, small meatballs. Christmas dinner is eaten after Midnight Mass.

China: Paper lanterns and trees, called Trees of Light, are decorated with paper chains, flowers, and lanterns. Muslin stockings are hung and a visit from Santa Claus, *Dun Che Lao Ren*, Christmas Old Man, is eagerly anticipated.

France: Nativity scenes and crèches are displayed with santons crafted from the south of France. Added to the scenes are figurines of local dignitaries and characters. Yule log-shaped cakes, *buche de Nol*, Christmas Log, are served during the great feast of *le reveillon*, a late supper held after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Pere Noel travels with his companion Pre Fouettard, bringing children gifts, and in some places, *le petit Jsus* brings the gifts.

Greece: St. Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors. Drenched from head to foot with brine, his sweaty face expresses how hard he has fought to reach sinking ships and rescue sailors from violent seas. Children travel from house to house singing *kalanda*, carols, with metal triangles and clay drums. Pigs are slaughtered and served with *christopsomo*, Christ Bread, sweet bread embossed with the family's profession.

Japan: Houses are decorated with evergreen and mistletoe. Carols are sung and a Japanese god or priest, Hoteiosho, closely resembles Santa Claus. Hoteiosho has eyes in the back of his head so children know they must be good when he is near.

Iraq: After a reading of the Christmas story, a bonfire of thorn bushes is started. If the thorns burn to ashes, good luck will follow in the coming new year. Each person jumps over the ashes 3 times and makes a wish. After a special service, blessings are passed from one person to another.

Italy: Inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, Giovanni Vellita created the first manger scene in the village of Greccio. Cannon are fired in Rome from Castel St. Angelo on Christmas Eve. Small presents are drawn from the Urn of Fate and children eagerly anticipate a visit from La Befana who brings gifts for those who are good and punishment for those who are bad. Usually La Befana is depicted as a fairy queen, a crone, or a witch, because she is the one who refused to give the Magi food and shelter.

Netherlands: Here St. Nicholas is known as Sinterklaas. He sails from Spain on his feast day, December 5<sup>th</sup>, and children prepare for his visit by putting hay and sugar in their stockings so he, in turn, will fill their stockings with gifts like nuts and candy. Special horns are blown to ward away evil spirits and to announce the birth of the Christ child. Three to four feet long, the one year-old sapling horns sound like foghorns.

Mexico: Market stalls, *puestos*, offering crafts, foods, and flowers, are decorated in every town. Poinsettias are native to Mexico and are believed to have been used, for the first time, during Christmas in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when Franciscans included the flowers in their celebration. According to legend, a boy named Pablo was visiting a Nativity scene and realized he had nothing to offer the Christ child. Seeing some green branches nearby, he gathered them. Though ridiculed by the other children, he laid them

by the manger. Suddenly, before everyone's awed eyes, a red star-shaped flower appeared on the branch. *Las posadas* is the main celebration in Mexico and is a reenactment of Joseph and Mary's search for a place to stay in Bethlehem. It begins 9 days before Christmas to symbolize Mary and Joseph's nine day journey.

Norway: Celebrated by a gift bearing gnome or elf, *Julebuk*, Christmas Buck, appears as a goat-like creature. This tradition dates back to Viking times when pagans worshiped Thor and his goat. *Julenissen*, Santa Claus, brings the children gifts.

Poland: Wigilia begins on Christmas Eve when everyone participates in a strict 24 hour fast that ends in a large feast. Officially known as *Bozz Narodzenie*, this tradition is referred to as *Gwiazdka*, little star. When the star appears, a blessed *oplatek*, rice wafer, is broken into pieces and passed around. The feast, itself, consists of 12 courses, one for each Apostle, and the table is always set with an extra setting just in case a stranger or the Holy Spirit should appear.

Russia: Legend has it that in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Prince Vladimir traveled to Constantinople to be baptized. He returned spreading stories of the miracles he witnessed by St. Nicholas of Myra. Since that time, Nicholas has been the most popular name for Russian boys. Before the revolution, *Babouschka* brought gifts to children. Like La Befana in Italy, Babouschka refused to help the wise men on their journey to visit the Christ Child and is forced to roam the countryside. During communist years St. Nicholas was transformed into Grandfather Frost.

Spain: Celebration begins with the feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8<sup>th</sup> in front of the Gothic cathedral in Seville in a ceremony called *los Seises*, dance of the six, performed by ten costumed boys. Christmas Eve, *Nochebuena*, the Good Night, and the Magi are greatly revered. In Spain, Balthazar rides a donkey and leaves gifts for the children.

Sweden: 1,000 years ago King Canute declared Christmas would last a month, from December 13<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Lucia, to January 13<sup>th</sup>, *Tjugondag Knut*, St. Canute's Day. Lucia carried food to Christians hiding in underground tunnels during the days of persecution. To light her way, she wore a wreath of candles on her head until she was arrested and martyred. On feast day, the eldest daughter in a Swedish family dresses in a white dress with a red sash and puts an evergreen wreath with 7 lighted candles on her head, then she passes out coffee and buns to family members. On Christmas Eve, a gnome, *tomte*, emerges from under the floor of the house or barn carrying a sack over his shoulder and then leaves gifts for all.