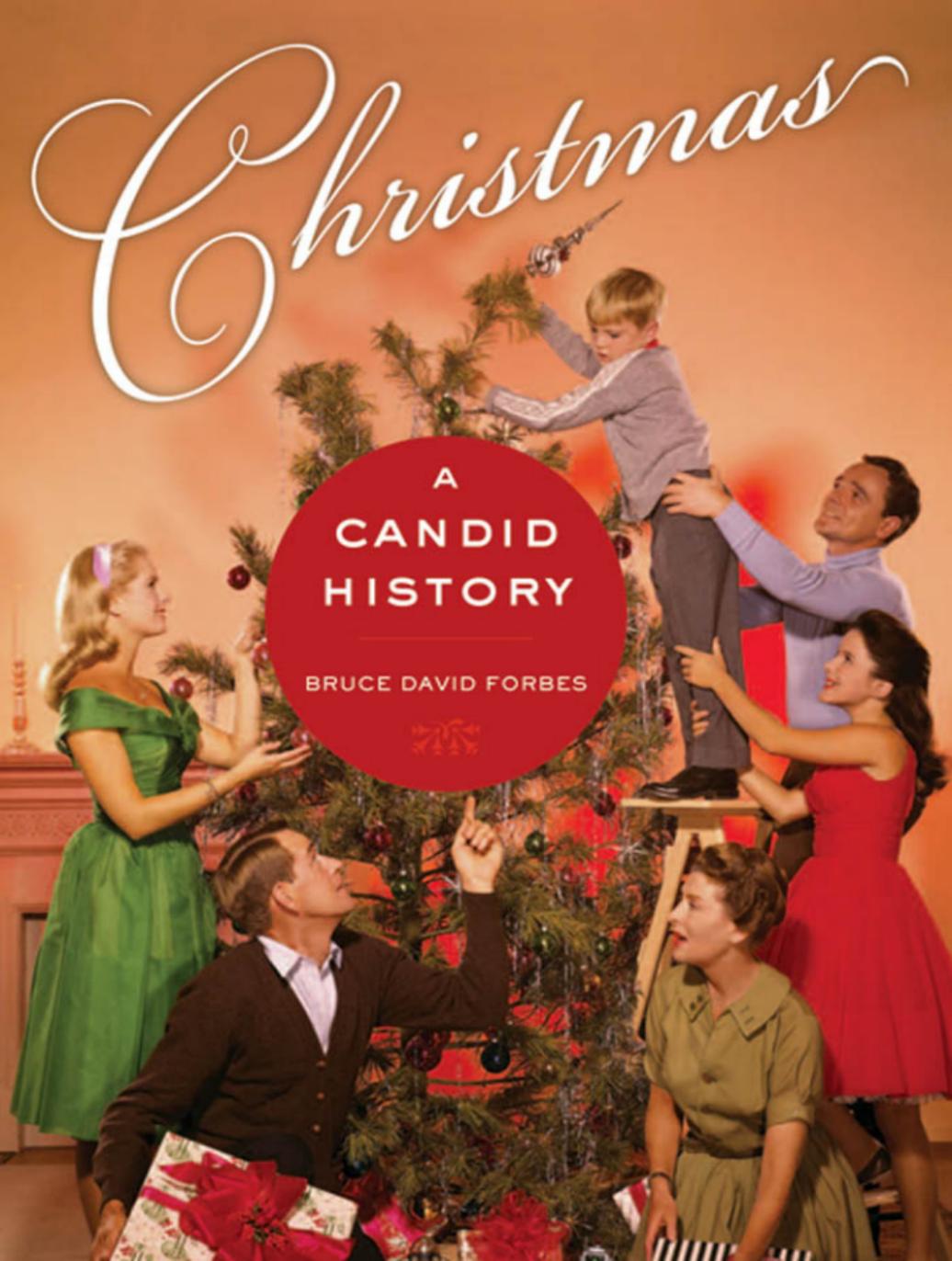


Christmas



A
CANDID
HISTORY

BRUCE DAVID FORBES

Christmas

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A CANDID HISTORY



BRUCE DAVID FORBES



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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Forbes, Bruce David.

Christmas : a candid history / Bruce David Forbes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-25104-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Christmas—History. I. Title.

GT4985.F67 2007

394.2663—dc22

2007000366

Manufactured in the United States of America

16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

This book is printed on New Leaf EcoBook 50, a 100% recycled fiber of which 50% is de-inked post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free. EcoBook 50 is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/ASTM D5634-01 (*Permanence of Paper*).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am overwhelmed by the interest, support, and assistance offered by so many colleagues, family members, and friends as I have worked on this project, and no words of gratitude say enough. I want to thank editor Reed Malcolm in particular, for his guidance, his patience, and his enthusiastic interest in the book from the very beginning. Gene Gallagher also has been especially helpful, with specific suggestions and supportive friendship. Morningside College President John Reynders and Dean William Deeds granted me a sabbatical during which I was able to write most of this book. Many others have assisted me in so many ways: Calvin Roetzel, Robert Jewett, Mark Reasoner, Philip Anderson, Ann Pflaum, Dell deChant, Randy Maddox, Ted Campbell, Mark Seeley, Ann-Marie Andreasson-Hogg, Jim Fisk, Kate Warne, Edith Gladstone, Stephen Leida, Jan Carrier, Kimberly Nelson-Finch, Linda Miller, Corinne Schuster, Rusty Brace, Tammy Huf, Melissa Dreyer, and Stacey Baldus. One person who makes all of these efforts worthwhile is my son Matthew, a great dialogue partner of whom I am so proud.

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INTRODUCTION

I love Christmas. And Christmas drives me crazy.

Based upon reactions from family, friends, and colleagues, I am not alone in both responses to the Christmas season. On one hand, I love the music, lights, and family gatherings, along with the story of the Christ child, shepherds, and wise men, and the messages of generosity, love, joy, and peace. On the other hand, I am frustrated by how hectic and commercialized the season has become, and worried that all of the cultural trappings can overwhelm spiritual aspects of Christmas. At times the reality of my Christmas experiences fails to live up to my idealized expectations. In addition, I have questions about the impact that this culturally dominant holiday has upon my friends who are Jewish, or Muslim, or secular. So Christmas is my favorite season of the year, but it is also a very mixed bag.

After wrestling with various reactions to Christmas, I decided to find out how Christmas got to be the way it is today. Tracing the history of this annual celebration has changed the way I look at many Christmas-related

issues. And once I started down that road, seeking a brief, candid history of Christmas, curiosity took over. Simple curiosity may be the best motivation for learning about all kinds of things, because it helps us avoid being captured by heavy-handed agendas from whatever direction. Part of the fascination comes when we encounter surprises along the way, commenting to ourselves, “I didn’t know that.” Here are several interesting examples.

- early Christians in the first two or three centuries did not celebrate Christmas
- Puritans in England and in New England made Christmas observances illegal
- Saint Nicholas is an *elf* in the famous poem “The Night Before Christmas”
- the United States Congress regularly met on Christmas Day into the 1850s
- President Franklin Roosevelt changed the date of Thanksgiving in order to lengthen the Christmas shopping season

This book seeks to provide a brief, candid history of Christmas, for general audiences, for people who, like me, wonder how the Christmas celebration got to be the way it is. The word “candid” highlights one of my intentions. Many acquaintances have told me they want to hear the “real” story of Christmas, something more than sugar-coated or romanticized versions. And when I hear explanations of certain Christmas traditions, I too think, is this just a great story that tugs at my heart strings, or is it also historical? How did it really happen? Do we even know?

To find some answers, it seems sensible to consult the good academic Christmas books available these days, books I really appreciate. But many are long, or technical and full of jargon, and usually specialized. Several books focus on the American Christmas but say very little about earlier

developments, and other books concentrate only on the first few centuries, or on Saint Nicholas, or on Christmas carols. One friend told me he was interested in an overall story of how Christmas developed, but not a 400-page volume or, even worse, a list of ten books. As he remarked, “I’m curious, not obsessed.”

I have written this little volume in an attempt to answer that request. I claim no major new breakthrough thesis. Much of the content of this book is a distillation of information scattered throughout many books, although I also have consulted some of the original sources myself. My contributions may come in analogies and examples, and in the way I structure the overview to try to make sense of it all.

For several years I have given short presentations on the history of Christmas, and audiences tend to offer two responses. First, they comment that they knew some of the information and tidbits, simply from newspaper articles or television programs in the Christmas season, but that many other details came as a surprise. The surprise varies from person to person. Second, they say that the presentation helped them put the miscellaneous details together into an overall picture of how Christmas developed. There is no shortage of Christmas information out there. For example, at least two excellent, reliable Christmas encyclopedias are available, and some other books answer Christmas questions in short little chunks, a page or two at a time. As I tie the pieces together, I often leave out exceptions and variations. Keeping in mind the danger of oversimplifying, I hope the broad overview will be helpful.

The opening chapter, “First There Was Winter,” argues that many of our favorite aspects of the Christmas season, such as lights and evergreen decorations, are predictable features of midwinter festivals that existed long before Christianity. This is what people are referring to when they talk about the “pagan” roots of Christmas traditions. My emphasis is simply to recognize that a midwinter carnival is a very understandable way for human beings to cope with winter, and yes, the widespread human impulse to party

in the face of winter has influenced the development of Christmas, then and now.

“Christmas Comes Late,” the second chapter, explains why the Christian church did not celebrate the birth of Jesus in its earliest years. Two or three centuries passed before Christians created Epiphany observances or selected December 25 as Jesus’ birthday. In fact, Christian scriptures say very little about the birth of the Christ child, and over time Christians have had to fill in the story with many additional, beloved traditions.

Christmas became a major Christian celebration at the same time that Christianity began to spread from the Mediterranean region into central and northern Europe, and when it did, Christianity picked up aspects of various European winter festivals. The title of the third chapter provides an image that summarizes the process, at least for me: “Christmas Is Like a Snowball.” Christmas rolled through Europe, and later into the Americas and elsewhere, picking up some features and dropping others, with the Christmas tree as one example. Though Puritans in England and America tried to suppress Christmas, the influence of people like Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria, and Prince Albert eventually revived it, but in an altered form.

The fourth chapter offers a case study of the snowball process, the fascinating story of how Saint Nicholas traditions arose, spread throughout Europe, eventually morphed into Santa Claus in the United States, and then found their way to other parts of the world. The process involved a significant shift from a legendary bishop and saint (Nicholas) to a jolly gift giver (Santa Claus), which leads to the topic of the next chapter, “And Then There Was Money.” For most of us, the commercialization of Christmas refers to an overwhelming preoccupation with gifts. The fifth chapter explains that the emphasis on gifts is recent, arising especially in the last three centuries. Yet it is about more than gifts. The business possibilities of Christmas have extended to many other products as well: Christmas cards, wrapping paper, decorations, movies, and even music.

Following this historical overview, the final chapter discusses some of the personal issues the holiday season raises. One of my professors in graduate school said that history involved two questions: What? and So What? My comments in “Wrestling with Christmas” are only a beginning, but I believe it is worthwhile to reflect on the implications of this historical summary for our own holiday celebrations.

Along the way throughout the book, in an attempt to tell the “real” story, I occasionally refer to topics where scholars disagree. I try not to get too mired in the technicalities, and sometimes I offer no solutions, but I want to alert readers to subject areas where questions have been raised. I use backnotes sparingly, but they are included, to give proper credit for quotations and to point interested readers to further sources. I also try to say some things plainly, when other academic discussions may delicately allude to them.

Even though I have written this book to satisfy the curiosity of those who would like to read a brief, accessible overview, I hope that many readers will become so fascinated that they just *have* to read more. Thus for each source in the bibliography I include the page count and the presence or absence of notes, bibliography, and index. Each entry has annotations on the author’s perspective, the book’s subject matter, and sometimes its level of difficulty. I trust this will be a genuinely useful list for those who want to learn more.



Finally, a note about the word *Christmas*: In the English-speaking world it began as “Christ’s Mass,” referring to a special midnight mass, the worship service that marked the beginning of Christmas Day. The word *Christmas* dates back perhaps as far as the eleventh century. As we English-speaking people have come to employ the term it is a little confusing, when you think about it, because we use it in at least two different ways. Sometimes when

we speak of Christmas, we are referring to the story of Jesus' birth and the various events surrounding it. That, we often say, was the real Christmas or the first Christmas. According to this usage or definition, when I say that "I want to learn about Christmas," what I mean is that I would like to know more about the details of when, where, and how Jesus was born, and what it means. At other times we refer not to the events surrounding Jesus' birth but to the annual celebration of his birth. For instance, when we talk about Christmas in medieval Europe, or when we complain about what Christmas has become, we are using the term in this second sense. So sometimes we use the term *Christmas* to refer to the events surrounding Jesus' birth, and sometimes we use it to refer to the later annual celebrations.

During the Christmas season when I began to write this book, two American commercial television networks aired specials about the history of Christmas. I watched each one, and what I expected was an account of the way Christmas celebrations have changed over the years, because I had the second definition of Christmas in mind. Instead, both television specials dealt with the question of how much of the nativity story was literally true. They interviewed scholars with contrasting views, and it was all very interesting, but they were using the other definition, focusing on the story of Jesus' birth.

The fact is that the general public, including me, uses the term *Christmas* in *both* ways, and that is likely to continue. When I use the word in this book, I have tried to assure that the context makes clear which sense I have in mind.

one

**FIRST THERE
WAS WINTER**

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❧ SURVIVING WINTER ❧

To understand what Christmas has become, first we should consider winter.

For the moment, set aside everything you have heard about the baby Jesus in a manger, and shepherds and wise men, and think instead about winter. Of course, the characteristics of winter vary with location because, depending upon where you live, winter is a more dramatic reality for some people than for others. I assume that most readers of this book are North American, and thus I will emphasize the Northern Hemisphere, but an emphasis on the Northern Hemisphere also reflects the early and medieval history of Christianity. The Christian church was born in the Mediterranean region, but within a few centuries its headquarters became centered in Rome and Constantinople, a northward shift from its Jerusalem beginnings. Then Christianity began to spread throughout Europe, and the further north it moved, the more winter became a factor.

So, what is winter like? The answer is not difficult: basically, it is cold and it is dark. The further north you move, the rain turns to sleet and snow, and the temperatures drop low enough to discourage much of the outdoor work and play that human beings enjoy the rest of the year. And the days are shorter, with so many more hours of darkness.

Several years ago I led a group of college students on a May interim trip to Alaska, and my experience there caused me to think a lot about winter. We were based in the little village of Willow, Alaska, about an hour and a half's drive north of Anchorage, still in the southern half of that

enormous state. May is a beautiful time in Alaska, essentially spring, when both leaves and tourists begin to appear. What caused me to think about winter was a conversation with the minister of a little mission church in Willow who mentioned that he brought seminary interns to Alaska not in May but in January, when they could work with people who were in the midst of their greatest struggles. He said that the temperatures could get down to 50 degrees below zero, *before* calculating wind chill, with little more than five hours of daylight per day. That is the season of the year in Alaska when depression settles in, when alcoholism and other forms of chemical dependency are at their worst, and when incidents of domestic violence soar. That, he said, is when people really need help.

My imagination began to wander to people in the medieval and Renaissance-Reformation eras in central and northern Europe. Without the modern conveniences I take for granted, what must it have been like for them to keep their homes warm, or to get work done, or simply to cope with so much darkness? Even now, when we have thermostats and electric lights, we still talk about seasonal affective disorder and cabin fever, indications of our continuing battle with winter.

Especially in northern regions, winter remains a challenge for human beings to survive. In a way, the approach of winter is a little like walking into death, hoping we will emerge on the other side. The natural world accents that feeling, as the trees and other plants appear to die, and animals hibernate, and blizzards threaten. Survivors look forward to the new life and exhilaration that spring will bring.

Even before studying the history and anthropology of early cultures, we could guess what human beings might do to cope with these realities of winter. A great idea would be to organize a big, blowout, midwinter party. It would be perfect. People could have something to look forward to for the first half of winter, the preparations could be a welcome distraction, and the party itself would be a blast. Then, once it was over, the remainder of

winter would be that much shorter, until spring finally brought liberation from the cold and darkness.

Also, again before studying early cultures, we could guess what the party would be like. When should it happen? The ideal time would be when the days stop getting shorter and are poised to begin lengthening again, in mid to late December. And we can guess other features of the party. First of all, it would have to be a festival of lights, pushing back the oppressive darkness, featuring candles and torches and burning logs. It would also make sense to highlight evergreens as symbols or decorations, because the greenery could serve as signs of life in the midst of apparent death. We might look for other plants that stay green and, against the norm, even bear fruit in the middle of winter, like holly, or mistletoe. Of course, there would be feasting and drinking, probably to excess, as there is at almost any party. Obviously, a midwinter celebration would involve gatherings of people, perhaps the whole village, or selected neighbors, friends, and family; an individual might sponsor or attend several such gatherings throughout the festivity period. As the midwinter festivities go on year after year, special music would undoubtedly develop for the season. And, of course, many parties involve gifts.

All of this is not just speculation. This kind of midwinter celebration is indeed what human beings did throughout Europe, in many different cultures, before Christianity, and we will look at two specific examples in a moment. Mulling over the commonsense appeal of midwinter celebrations, as sketched out here, many persons today are surprised to realize that much of what they love about the Christmas season is not really Christmas at all. We love the lights, the evergreen decorations, the music and the food, the chance to get together with family and friends, and the special feeling of warmth that comes with the festivities. Yet all of these features have no necessary connection with a story of a baby Jesus in a manger. Instead they are the predictable characteristics of midwinter festivities.