

Christmas in history

Ria Noome

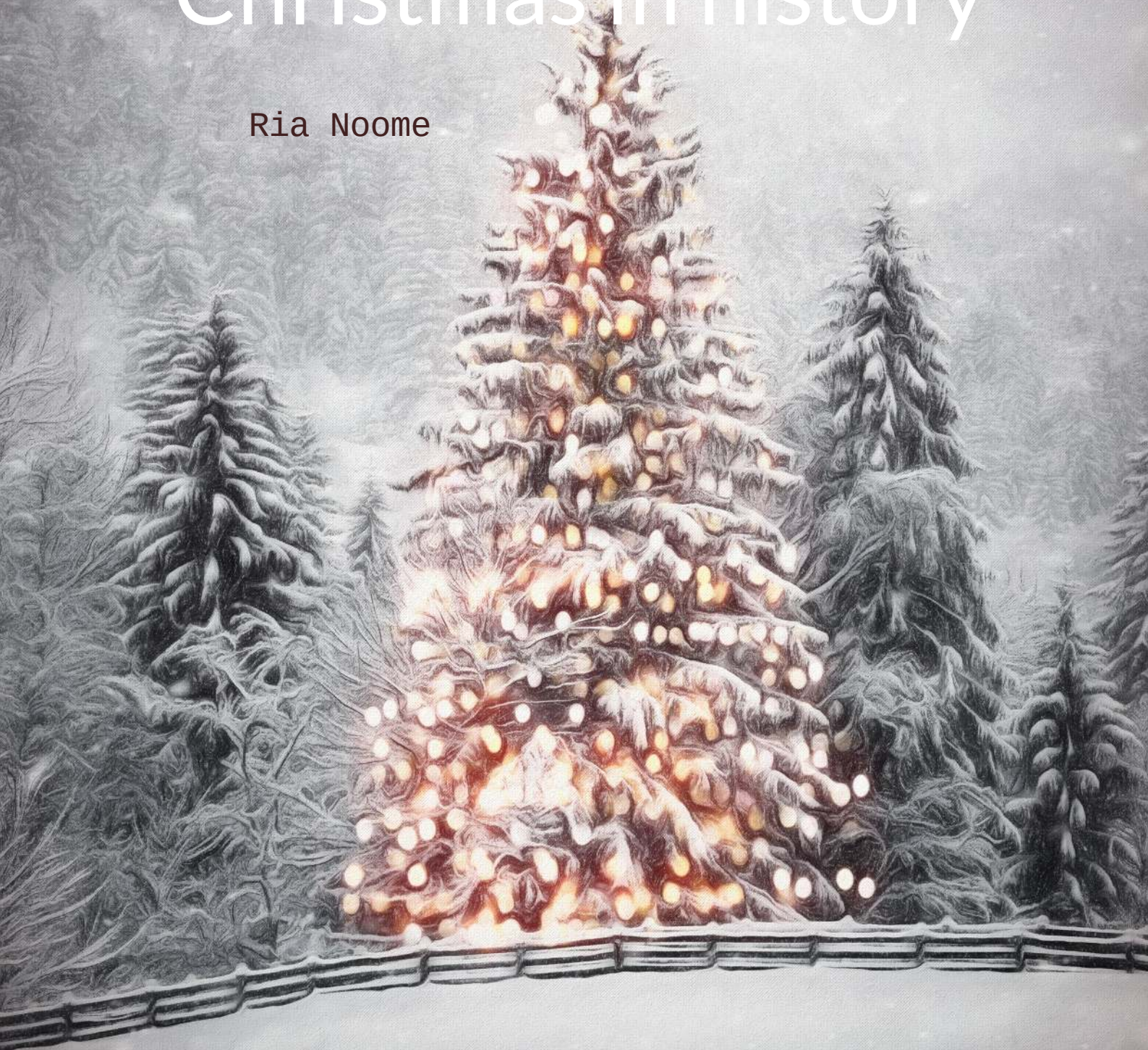


Table Of Contents

CHRISTMAS IN HISTORY	2
What is Christmas	3
Christmas in other places	5
England	7
Scandinavia.	7
Germany	8
Belgium and The Netherlands	8
France	9
Italy and Spain	9
Mexico	9
South of the Equator	10
The Holy Land.	10
Christmas in History	11
The Origin of Christmas Customs	13



CHRISTMAS IN HISTORY

Copyright © 2022 Ria Noome

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the writer except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

First release - 2022. South Africa.

What is Christmas

Kris'mas or krist'mas, the festival celebrating the birth of Christ. In most countries it is observed on December 25. Christmas is sometimes called Yule (from the Anglo-Saxon) or Noël (from the French). Christian churches throughout the world hold special services on Christmas Day to give thanks for the birth of Christ.

In addition to religious observances, Christmas is a time of merrymaking and feasting. Wherever Christmas is celebrated, there is a spirit of kindness and giving, in keeping with the Biblical message: "Glory be to God in the highest; and on earth peace, good will toward men".

Originally Cristes masse ("the mass or church-festival of Christ') is the English name for the season in which the birth of Christ is commemorated. In 15th-centuray Scotland tha holy days of Yule began on the seventh day before Yule, or Christmas Day, and continued until the day after Epiphany, being January 7, which was styled Up-halie Day, as signifying that the holy days were ended. Indeed, "Up-hellaya" as it is locally called, is sill celbratedin Shetland, with many antique ceremonies. On December 18th, the beginning of this sacred season. Yule Girth, or Sanctuary, was proclaimed throughout Scotland; and from that date until Up-halie Day no courd had power to prosecute or panish even the worst of criminals.

It is nevertheless, apparent that the sanctity of this season was recognized in times long antecedent to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. 'The Roman winter-solstice festival, as celebrated on December 25, observes Professor Tylor (Primitive Culture, 1871, ii. 270), in connection with the worship of the sun-god Mithra, appears to have been instituted in this special form by Aurelian about A.D 273, and to this festival the day owes its apposite name of Birthday of the Unconquered Sun (*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*).

With full symbolic appropriateness, though not with historical justification, the day was adopted in the Western Church, where it appears to have been generally introduced by the 4th century, and whence in time it passed to the Eastern Church, as the solemn anniversary of the birth of Christ, the Christian *Dies Natalis* (Christmas Day).

Christmas in history

A study of the customs associated with this period also reveals a heathen, if not invariably a solar, origin. The lighting of the Yule log (*la bûche de Noël*) on Christmas Eve, once a widespread European custom, is or was a function of such predominant importance amongst the Lithuanians and Letts that their words for Christmas Eve literally signify "Log Evening". Among the heathen English, what is now called Christmas Eve, was known as 'Mothers Night', when the woman followed certain 'vain practices' which the higher religion of later times frowned upon and suppressed. Further, Dr J.G. Frazer sees a probable inheritance from the Saturnalia in the lately existing practice of carrying mistletoe to the high altar of York Minster on Christmas Eve, and there proclaiming 'a public and universal liberty' pardon, and freedom to all sorts of inferior and even wicked people' - and freedom to all sorts of inferior and even wicked people' - an indulgence only differing in duration from the Yule Girth mentioned above. The decoration of churches with the once-sacred mistletoe and holly is indeed itself a pagan survival.

Other illustrations might be cited, such as the sending of Christmas presents, analogues of which are found in the Yule gifts of N. Europe and ancient Rome.

Boxing-time, during which Christmas boxes, or gratuities, are given to servants and dependants, is no doubt an outcome of the ancient Rome gifts or *strenu*. The term *box* has been so used in England since 1611, and it owes its origin to the earthenware box, having a slit in its lid, into which these vails were dropped. Boxing-time begins on the first week-day after Christmas Day, and continues until Epiphany. The first of these days is pre-eminently the servants' Christmas holiday; and the popular London theatres are crowded on Boxing Night. Domestic and public servants formerly expected gifts; but the custom grew oppressive, tradesmen revolted, and government in 1836 requested that gifts to Foreign Office servants be discontinued. Postmen and municipal servants are still allowed to solicit Christmas boxes. In Scotland and in the north of England, Handsel or Hansel Monday, the first Monday of the year, is the equivalent of Boxing Day.

The *Christmas tree*, which is a young spruce tree placed in a room, with its branches gaily illuminated with coloured candles, and hung with ornaments and little gifts for children, was introduced into the British Isles from Germany in the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria. Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, a shaggy, bearded old man, who is supposed to come from the far north in his reindeer sledge, laden with children's toys, on Christmas Eve, is identified with St. Nicholas, and also with Knecht Ruprecht and Robin Goodfellow. Grimm notes that in some parts of Germany Knecht Nicolas is merely the attendant on the real gift-giver, who is sometimes the infant Christan sometimes Dame Bertha, though he is often represented as a ugly hunchbacked dwarf, called Krampus, who carries off naughty children.

Christmas in history

The *Christmas card*, now an almost universal vehicle for the conveyance of seasonable wishes, dates from 1846, when J.C. Horsley, R.A. designed a card at the suggestion of Sir Henry Cole. The Christmas card industry has now attained gigantic dimensions and many well-known artists have supplied designs. Private Christmas cards are also a popular institution.

Most of the ancient customs associated with the winter solstice are now obsolete; but a sentimental interest in them was revived during the 19th century, chiefly by the writings of Washington Irving (*Sketch-book*, 1819) and Charles Dickens (*Christmas Carol*, 1846). See the exhaustive *Yule and Christmas*, 1809, by A. Tille; Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, 1870; also *Carol and Waits*.

Christmas in other places

Christmas customs in Canada and the United States are a combination of those of the various European countries from which the original settlers came. Many of the festivities center in the home. Bright decorations add cheer to the atmosphere of hospitality.

On Christmas Even children hang their stockings for Santa Claus to fill. The Christmas tree, topped with a star or spire and decorated with colored lights and shiny ornaments, has an important part in the celebration. Around the tree, the members of the family gather to open their presents. The Christmas dinner may include turkey with cranberry sauce and mincemeat or pumpkin pie.



Christmas in history

Many cities and towns have community Christmas trees. On countless lawns living trees and shrubs are trimmed with lights, and sparkling lights, outline doorways, windows, porches, and roofs. Long before Christmas day, stores and store windows are decorated in keeping with the season. Schools celebrate with pageants, plays, and songs.

Ways of celebrating differ somewhat with the locality. People in the French parts of Canada make it a point to feed the cat well, as it is thought that if a cat meows in the house on Christmas Eve it is a sign of bad luck. In the Northern states and in Canada the people hope for a "white" Christmas; fresh snow seems to add to the season. In the Southern states, the explosion of firecrackers marks the yuletide. Instead of a fir, the Christmas tree may be a cedar or a pine, which are native to the South.

Many churches display the manger scene, or crèche, showing the Wise Men visiting the infant Jesus. Some churches present pageants. Outstanding among many Christmas hymns and songs are "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" and "Joy to the World".



The sending of greeting cards is a popular custom. The first Christmas card, printed in England, was sent in 1843. Some cards are gay with holly or Santa Claus; others have religious themes. Most convey a message of good cheer, remembrance, and friendship.

The singing of Christmas carols is a custom that came from England. The kindness and goodwill of the season is shown in the distribution of baskets of food, clothing, and toys to the needy.

England

Here the festivities begin on Christmas Eve, when the Yule log is lit and presents are exchanged. They continue until January 6 - Epiphany, or Twelfth day. According to the church calendar, the day after Christmas is Saint Stephen's Day, but in England it is commonly called "Boxing Day". It is so called because of the custom of giving boxed presents to employees and tradesmen.



Father Christmas is the British version of Santa Claus. Wandering carol singers are typical of an English Christmas. So are roast goose, blazing plum pudding, mincemeat pie, and the wassail bowl. The wassail bowl contains a mixture of hot ale, spices, and toasted apples. It was introduced into England from Scandinavia in the 1400's, by King Henry VII. The spirit of the traditional English Christmas is pictured in *A Christmas Carol*, the familiar story by Charles Dickens.

Scandinavia.

In Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, the celebration also extends from Christmas Eve to Twelfth-day. People prepare for Christmas, or *Jul* (Yule), weeks ahead of time. Favorite Christmas foods are *julegrot* (a rice pudding seasoned with cinnamon) and *lutfisk* (dried cod, which has been soaked in lye water or buried in ashes to prepare it for cooking). Special food is put out for animals and birds.

Gifts are distributed on Christmas Eve. Sometimes this is traditionally done by the *Tomte*, or *Tomtar*, kindly gnomes, or elves. One is a little man with a white beard who wears a red cowl and rings a bell. The other is a little old woman, carrying a basket of gifts. After church services on Christmas Day, country people rush home, for it is said that the first to arrive will be first to reap his grain in the next harvest.

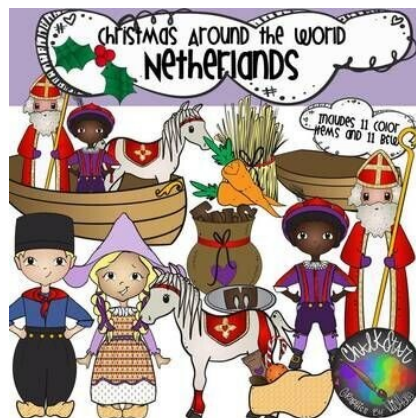
Germany

The Christmas tree, or *tannenbaum*, is the center of festivities in the German home. Where old customs are followed, a man dressed as Saint Nicholas visits each home on December 5 and asks about the children's behaviour. On the next day, the feast of Saint Nicholas, the good children get gifts; the bad ones, switches. A treat is gingerbread baked in many shapes. On Christmas Eve the family gathers around the tree and sings carols.



Belgium and The Netherlands

Here Christmas Day is devoted to church services or quiet gatherings at home. The day of gift-giving is Saint Nicholas Day – December 6. On the night before, the children set their shoes by the chimney or hang up their stockings. In the morning they are filled with gifts and sweets.



France

Nearly every French home has a crèche. Christmas trees are rare. For weeks before Christmas Day, gifts are shown in street booths. On Christmas Eve the children set out their shoes for *Petit Noël* (the Christ Child) or *Bonhomme Noël* (Father Christmas) to fill with toys and candy. In the south-eastern part of France, known as Provence, the *yule log* is an important part of the Christmas celebration. The entire family helps to bring it in. If possible the log is large enough to last from Christmas Eve to the New Year.

Italy and Spain

Here, as in other Roman Catholic countries, nearly every home has a reproduction of the Nativity scene. In Italy it is called the *presipio*; In Spain, the *nacimiento*. Italian children recite poems or short speeches before the *presipio* on Christmas Eve. Spanish children dance about the nacimiento to the music of tambourines and sing joyous songs. Children may receive small gifts on Christmas Day and relatives may give them money on New Year's Day. However, it is on January 5 that children put out their shoes in the hope they will be filled with gifts the next morning. In Italy the gifts are brought by an ugly old woman, *La Befana*, whose name comes from the Italian word for Epiphany. In Spain the gifts are brought by the three Kings, or Wise Men.

Mexico

Here, Christmas is observed mostly as a religious festival. People hold *posados*, pilgrimages recalling the experience of Joseph and Mary seeking shelter at Bethlehem. These festivities begin on December 16 and last through Christmas Eve. There are groups of nine families, each family making a *posado* on a different night.

A family, carrying images of Joseph and Mary, goes from house to house in each of which there is a festival. The family is refused admittance until it comes to the house where there is a special altar. The altar is in a different house each night. After the family enters the house having the special altar, a Mass is said.

The mother of the family making the *posado* on Christmas Eve, the last night, becomes the godmother. She places an image of the Christ Child on the altar between Joseph and Mary. All the families attend midnight Mass, going afterward to the home of the godmother for a feast.

The children of Mexico and Central America receive their gifts on January 6. An earthenware jar, called a *piñata*, or *pañata*, is filled with candy, nuts, and gifts and hung from the ceiling or a branch of a tree. Each child, in turn, is blindfolded and tries to break the jar with a stick. When one succeeds, there is a gay scramble for the scattered contents.

South of the Equator

In Australia and New Zealand, the usual English customs are followed as nearly as possible, even though Christmas comes in midsummer. Picnics and excursions form a part of the celebration.

In South America there is summer weather also. In Peru the people hold carnivals and there is guitar music and the clicking of castanets. The Christmas celebration in Buenos Aires centers on a giant electrically lighted tree in the Plaza.

The Holy Land.

At Bethlehem, all-denominational services are held on the day before Christmas in the Field of the Shepherds and in the courtyard of the Church of the Nativity. On Christmas Eve there is a religious procession headed by church dignitaries, priests, and acolytes, all dressed in splendid robes. It passes into the Roman Catholic chapel in the Church of the Nativity, where midnight Mass is celebrated.



Christmas in History

Christians began to celebrate Christmas about 200. But they observed it on varying dates, because the exact date of Christ's birth was unknown. In 354, December 25 was declared to be the birthday of Christ and in 440 the pope at Rome decreed that Christmas should be celebrated on that date. The church at Constantinople observed it for some years on January 6.

December 25 comes only a few days after the winter solstice (about December 22), the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. This season had long been a period of celebration among pagans in many parts of the world because it symbolized the beginning of a new year in nature. Christmas thus replaced a pagan holiday with a Christian one, while keeping the same symbolism - the birthday of Christ corresponds to the birth of a new year. Many of the customs of the pagan midwinter festivals became part of the Christmas celebration.

Christmas has been a popular festival in Christian countries since the Middle Ages. In England, however, the Puritans were so opposed to merrymaking that in 1644 they banned the observance of Christmas. The Puritans of New England also forbade the celebration in 1659. In both countries, these restrictions were later lifted.





The Origin of Christmas Customs

Nearly all Americans customs can be traced to other countries - the homelands of the many nationalities represented in the United States. For instance, the Christmas tree, usually an evergreen, was first used in Germany. The mistletoe was sacred to the Druids, priests of ancient Britain and Gaul. The Norse used holly and the *yule log* to keep away evil spirits.

Gifts were exchanged during the Roman celebration of the Saturnalia, a fest to the god Saturn, held December 17-23. However, gift-giving came to symbolize the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought to the Christ Child by the Gree Wise Men, or Magi. The crécje was given to the church by Saint Francis, who also is said to have begun the custom of singing carols.

Christmas in history

The most popular Christmas legend is that of Santa Claus, whose name came from Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children. Many of the qualities for which Santa Claus is known originated in Clement C. Moor's poem. "A visit from St. Nicholas", beginning "was the night before Christmas".



RESOURCES

1. New Standard Encyclopaedia, "C", (Volume 3), pC-305 – C-308.
2. Nelsons Encyclopaedia, "Che-Com", (Volume VI), p133-134

The End

