



Christmas: A Candid History

Bruce David Forbes

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Written for everyone who loves and is simultaneously driven crazy by the holiday season, *Christmas: A Candid History* provides an enlightening, entertaining perspective on how the annual Yuletide celebration got to be what it is today. In a fascinating, concise tour through history, the book tells the story of Christmas—from its pre-Christian roots, through the birth of Jesus, to the holiday's spread across Europe into the Americas and beyond, and to its mind-boggling transformation through modern consumerism. Packed with intriguing stories, based on research into myriad sources, full of insights, the book explores the historical origins of traditions including Santa, the reindeer, gift giving, the Christmas tree, Christmas songs and movies, and more. The book also offers some provocative ideas for reclaiming the joy and meaning of this beloved, yet often frustrating, season amid the pressures of our fast-paced consumer culture.

DID YOU KNOW

For three centuries Christians did not celebrate Christmas?

Puritans in England and New England made Christmas observances illegal?

St. Nicholas is an *elf* in the famous poem "The Night Before Christmas"?

President Franklin Roosevelt changed the date of Thanksgiving in order to lengthen the Christmas shopping season?

Coca-Cola helped fashion Santa Claus's look in an advertising campaign?

Christmas: A Candid History Details

Date : Published October 10th 2007 by University of California Press (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9780520251045

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Format : Hardcover 196 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Holiday, Christmas, Historical, Religion

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From Reader Review Christmas: A Candid History for online ebook

Jenn "JR" says

Fantastic quick little read - great background, whetting my appetite for another book called the Battle for Christmas!

Actually makes me feel like celebrating a mid-winter return of sunlight instead of avoiding it altogether! I think I'm celebrating Sol Invictus this year!

Planning to re-read this one on vacation this week!

Paige says

3.5

Emily says

It was fascinating to learn that the early Christian church did not celebrate Jesus' birth. Early Christianity was, according to Mr. Forbes, "an Easter-centered religion" which focused on the death and resurrection of Christ. In fact, Origen, an influential early Christian writer, roundly condemned the recognition of birthdays. After all, the Bible records that both Pharaoh and Herod, hardly paragons of virtue, celebrated their birthdays in nefarious ways – the Pharaoh killed his chief baker while Herod had John the Baptist beheaded. Jeremiah, Job, and David, on the other hand, all cursed the day they were born. What self-respecting, God-fearing Christian would rather be associated with heathens and murderers than prophets and saints?

Mr. Forbes concludes with a remarkably insightful final chapter that considers three issues surrounding our modern Christmas. First, how can we make Christmas more spiritually meaningful for ourselves and our families? Second, how can we simplify Christmas and escape from the materialism and stress of the season? And finally, what's the best way to be inclusive of those who don't share our Christian faith, and may feel like "outsiders" at this time of the year? For each topic, he presents thoughtful suggestions designed to provoke individual introspection and lead to conscious, intentional decisions about how to celebrate the Christmas season.

For more book reviews, come visit my blog, Build Enough Bookshelves.

Brian says

I saw this book at the bookstore and thought it looked interesting. Forbes is a theology professor. This is not an in-depth history of Christmas, but rather a general taste of how our Christmas customs and traditions came to be--especially in England and the United States.

This was a fascinating read. I knew that many of our traditions stemmed from pagan rituals, however I didn't realize how recent the enormous popularity of Christmas came to be. It really did not become an important religious or civic holiday until the 19th century during Industrialization period in both countries. Some people who contributed to the traditions of Christmas include: Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Washington Irving, Clement Moore, and many others.

I strongly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the origins of Christmas traditions.

Alissa says

Great sociological study of Christmas, solid Krampus-related research

Min says

I would like to subtitle this book, A Concise Christmas History. I enjoy reading about the history of Christmas, and its many, many traditions, from around the world. This book covers, very quickly, yet with precision, key points of the history, particularly, how it is celebrated in the United States, today.

First, the author explores the various Winter celebrations of the ancient world, then slips into the fourth century appearance of a festival for the Nativity, and how that date shifted, and eventually landed at the 25th of December. Next, the development of Santa Claus, from Saint to Gift-Giver, and how the Industrialization of the West lead directly into the prominence of gift-giving, that spawned its own marketing, advertising, and the "whole package" that we know of as Christmas from the movies, the music, the gift wrapping, decorations (inside, and outside of the home), and the cards, to name a few items we buy for the holiday.

His last chapter is unique in the books I have read about the holiday in that it covers how various groups of people wrestle with Christmas season; those that want a more quiet, religious celebration, and for those that are non-religious, or another faith that doesn't include their own Christmas so, how do those that do celebrate, keep in mind to be polite to them, and perhaps, include them in parties.

Lastly, he includes an annotated bibliography for those that want to read further. I especially enjoyed this part because I can always learn more about my favorite time of the year. The books range from religious, to secular, to cultural examinations of this celebration. Whichever realm one wants to study more deeply, there is a book for that.

Brittany says

I didn't think I would like this book at first with the introduction of the author's love/dislike for the holiday. My views on the holiday are vastly different. I love it and there is very little I don't enjoy about it (aside for some people telling you how they think you should celebrate it). However, the author has a very balanced, well-researched take on the history of the holiday and I enjoyed his opinions in the ending chapter. The author is a professor of religious studies and he markets the book as a brief history of the Christmas holiday. I've read most of the books he references and he ends up summarizing. There isn't much new here, aside for his personal take on current celebrations of the holiday, given his profession. I am glad he highlighted how

Christmas was never a pure spiritual holiday and the differences of a spiritual versus a secular holiday. I know it's a bigger secular holiday than anything with most people getting in on some aspect of it, but that isn't a bad thing like some people like to say. One thing I didn't know is that the vast majority of Japanese homes have a Christmas tree when less than 2% are Christian. Anyway, the book definitely has some interesting tidbits even for those that have read many Christmas history books and maybe it would change how you view or celebrate the holiday.

Deborah Markus says

This is a wonderfully readable and succinct history of a most misunderstood holiday. The author is a Christian who understands that people have been throwing late-December parties for much more than two thousand years. As he puts it, "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." Early Christians, however, did **not** celebrate Christmas; and when they did, the holiday looked nothing like it does now.

None of this is news to admirers of Stephen Nissenbaum's outstanding "The Battle For Christmas," which Forbes respectfully cites. But Forbes manages to gather a great deal of information in his little book, much of which **was** new to me. I didn't know before I read this book that:

--Norman Rockwell's parents decided to send him to art school after seeing a drawing he did of Ebenezer Scrooge.

--One of the earliest legends told about Saint Nicholas insisted that as an infant, he refused to breast-feed on Wednesdays and Fridays, the traditional days of fasting.

--"Kris Kringle" is an American mutilation of the German word "Christkindel," which means "Christ-child."

--The author of the famous "Yes, Virginia" letter wasn't given a byline, so his identity wasn't revealed to the public until after his death.

--The founder of Hallmark was a woman, Joyce Hall.

This book isn't a collection of Christmas trivia, though. Forbes does an excellent job of mapping the evolution of the holiday. He also keeps a cheerfully level tone, though his affection for the holiday shines through. He urges tolerance toward those people who "really enjoy Christmas [but] are not especially interested in its religious aspects," and brings up an unusual example of the holiday's secular appeal: Christmas is **huge** in Japan.

"There never was a pure spiritual Christmas," Forbes points out in his last chapter, "Wrestling With Christmas":

"We human beings have a tendency to create golden ages of the past, when all was supposedly wonderful before complicating factors intruded and ruined everything. In most cases, the golden age is an idealized dream: the actual Christmas that early Christians experienced was both a boisterous seasonal party and a religiously meaningful observance. Both."

This book is an excellent resource for anyone who'd like to learn the real story behind Christmas. Forbes also offers some moving (but not mawkish) ideas for those who want the holiday to be more meaningful and less commercial. All this *and* an annotated biography, yet the book weighs in at under 200 pages. It's a perfect read for a busy month.

Erika RS says

This short book gives a fairly thorough overview of the history of Christmas. If you have read any of the annual articles about Christmas and its history, you'll likely have heard some (but not all!) of what Forbes mentions. Forbes does a good job of showing how Christmas, even though a Christian holiday, has always co-existed, often uneasily, with non-religious celebrations.

Perhaps the most surprising thing I learned was that Christmas as we know it is just as manufactured a holiday as modern Valentine's day. Before the mid-19th century, Christmas was a religious holiday that some people observed and others did not -- Forbes compared it to Epiphany. In the US, many Protestants intentionally deemphasized Christmas. As a secular holiday, Christmas was, in large part, a big party for adults with only minor emphasis on gifts and family. Most of the trappings of a "traditional" Christmas were missing or much smaller scale.

However, between the mid-19th century a movement started to intentionally transform the holiday into a family and gift oriented one, and by the early 20th century, the holiday had taken on more or less the form we recognize today. But even that transformation was not that radical -- Christmas has been, like a snowball rolling down a hill, picking up and shedding traditions throughout its whole history.

Definitely an interesting read for those interested in the history of Christmas.

Kerith says

I really enjoyed this book. This is a quick overview to a social history of Christmas celebrations, mostly in America but not limited to that. The author's attitude is lighthearted yet fascinated, and his Christian outlook does not negate the fact that other faiths can read this and find it helpful and interesting.

He has a great bibliography for anyone wanting to go further. He recommends, as I do, Nissenbaum's *BATTLE FOR CHRISTMAS*, among others.

I really appreciated his chapter on "Wrestling With Christmas" which brings up the age-old argument of how to add more spirituality to a season that is increasingly secularized -- indeed, has always been secularized and commercial. Bringing in the knowledge that the human race has always created a winter festival at this time of year gives a much-needed perspective to the everlasting "war on Christmas" argument.

Victoria says

This is truly more of a 3.5 star rating. I loved it. The book told a grand history about origins of so many Christmas traditions both Christian and pagan. The author is a Christian, but you really can't tell until the last chapter of the book. It was a pretty unbiased and excellent documentation of things such as Saturnalia, St. Nicholas, and the birth of Christ. It was something I wanted everyone to know about. If only they knew

about Christmas trees and the commercialization of the holiday. It is a must read for people who don't know much about Christmas at all, but celebrate it in full force.

PickyReader says

I intended to enjoy this book but I was bored nonetheless. I liked learning interesting fun facts about America's favorite holiday. If there is a Christmas category on Jeopardy!, I would definitely get every question right.

Anyway.....

I found this book to be super repetitive and not really all that enthralling. I wish the author could have gone into more details instead of skimming over a lot of the information. I found myself googling topics for further information.

Didn't really put me in the holiday spirit, but it was interesting anyway

Reid McCormick says

I will be completely honest: I love Christmas. That's not really a controversial statement in America. So here's where I am really honest: I love Christmas but almost for every secular reason imaginable. I am a church-going, Jesus believing American and I definitely celebrate the birth of Jesus during Christmas, but I really love the lights, sounds, music, smell, music, and gifts of Christmas. Watching Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer is a lot more fun than lighting an Advent candle. Now, let me be clear, I revere these moments in the Church calendar. They are humbling reminders of my humanness. Unfortunately, my humanness also really loves Christmas chocolate.

Christmas: A Candid History reminds us that Christmas is not a celebration created by Christians. In fact, celebrations around the winter solstice have been around for centuries. Over the years, different cultures and religions have added their traditions. In fact, for a period of time Christians were opposed to all winter celebrations including Christ-oriented celebrations.

I found this book enjoyable, though there was nothing in it I didn't really know already. It is an easy and compact.

Diana says

Great history and insights in this book. It can definitely help calm your personal Christmas anxiety to know that it started back in Roman times and therefore predates its ties to the nativity story by 200 years.

Starting in late December, the Romans held the party of the year, called Saturnalia, to celebrate the harvest.

It was a week-long time of merriment with no work but much drinking, feasting, decorating with greens and gifting of candles and wax fruit. Sound familiar?

The book further recognizes Christmas as a time to appreciate love, home, family and friends outside of the boundaries of personal religion. It analyzes the New Testament accounts (there are only 2 and there were know donkeys or royals) of Jesus birth. It points out the evolution of Santa from elf to Coke drinker. And the whole retail thing.

After reading, I came away with less guilt knowing our tradition of Christmas comes from more than the dichotomy of religion and commercialism.

Jo says

Really informative! Christmas never was what we think it was.

This book gives a very readable overview of the history of Christmas, from the pre-Christian to the biblical, on to the way traditions snowballed across Europe, the way St Nicholas morphed into Santa Claus, a history of the modern Christmas in America, and the commercialization of the holidays (which the author shows developed along with our modern Christmas). He talks briefly about ways we might "recapture" the joy of the season, although his book convinced me that there never was a "pure" Christmas, either religious or secular - it has always been a mishmash of cultural and commercial and religious influences. As a professor of religious studies he included a religious point of view, but it didn't bother me as an atheist because he didn't agree with the idea that society should put Christ back into Christmas - he puts the responsibility of the spiritual aspect onto individuals and their churches, and suggests that people who want a quiet spiritual holiday put their focus on the 12 days of Christmas (Dec 25-Jan 6) and let early December have the midwinter festival/commercial/cultural part of the holiday. I'm not a great lover of Christmas, but this book made me feel a lot better about the whole thing somehow.
