

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
CHRISTMAS

GERRY BOWLER



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the cave is pointed out where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the rumor is in those places and among foreigners of the Faith that indeed Jesus was born in this cave."

The first Church of the Nativity was built over the cave by Saint Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine. This church was later damaged in an uprising and was rebuilt in the sixth century at the command of the Byzantine emperor Justinian. When the area was overrun by Persian invaders in 614, legend claims that the Church of the Nativity was spared because of depictions in a mosaic of Magi in Persian dress.

The cross-shaped Church of St. Mary of the Nativity, 170 feet long and 80 feet wide, stands above a small grotto where a silver star marks the spot where Jesus was born; the inscription reads *Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est*, "Here Jesus Christ was Born of the Virgin Mary." Nearby is a chapel where the manger stood in which the infant was placed. Surrounding the Church of the Nativity are other chapels and convents of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Armenian churches; these three denominations share the administration of various parts of the complex. Quarrels between the denominations in the 19th century took on dangerous overtones. The Russian government supported the Orthodox claims, while the French government backed the Catholics; these hard feelings were one of the reasons for the outbreak of the Crimean War in the 1850s.

See BETHLEHEM, GROTTTO OF THE MILK, and SHEPHERDS' FIELD.

Nativity Scene All around the world, an essential part of Christmas celebrations is the erection of a replica of the original birth site of Jesus. In miniature form in homes or churches, this is known as a *crèche*, *presipio*, *pesebre*, *nacimiento*, *portal*, *jeslicky*, *belen*, *szopka*, or *Krippe*. The carving of the figures and the preparation of the backgrounds and landscape have produced wonderful folk art. There are several vast collections of these Nativity scenes in palaces and museums, but the honour for the world's largest must go to a Swiss production, the Diorama Bethlehem in Einsiedeln, which reproduces the topography of Bethlehem and stocks it with hundreds of carved figures, illustrating not just the birth of Jesus, but also the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight into Egypt.

Credit for the first live re-enactment of the Nativity outside of a church is given to St. Francis of Assisi for the scene he staged in Greccio, Italy, in 1223. Since then, the practice has spread around the world in neighbourhood rituals such as the *posada*, the school Christmas pageant, or the professionally staged equivalents of the Easter Passion Play, where huge casts, including animals, are marshalled. In a number of U.S. cities, thanks to churches and community groups, it is possible to experience the Nativity in a drive-through setting. Visitors can walk or ride through acres of scenery populated by camels, Roman centurions, Magi, shepherds, harlots, innkeepers, and the Holy Family. In Edmond, Oklahoma, for example, the Boys Ranch Town home for children annually stages 10 scenes from the life of Christ, with the kids as actors and a taped narration. Visitors need not leave the comfort of their cars to experience the Nativity anew.

Social historians have charted the rise of the school Nativity play from the 1920s, and see it as an indicator of the growing importance of Christmas and its link to the family. Its increasing popularity, they say, is due not to growing religious sentiment but rather to the use of the Christian Holy Family as a means to buttress the institution of the human family and give it spiritual legitimacy. In recent years in North America



John Mason Neale English carol collector and author of "Good King Wenceslas."

and Britain, school productions of the Nativity story have been attacked as insensitive to the feelings of non-Christian students; lawsuits and disruptions of the plays have resulted.

Neale, John Mason (1818–66) English clergyman, antiquarian, and influential translator and popularizer of Christmas carols. Among the carols he is responsible for are "Good King Wenceslas," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," "Good Christian Men Rejoice," "Our Master Hath a Garden," and "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

Netherlands In late November a vessel docks in a Dutch port and a stately bishop comes ashore accompanied by a dark-skinned Moorish servant. Christmas in the Netherlands has begun. The white-bearded Sinterklaas, as the locals call St. Nicholas, mounts a white horse and begins his round of appointments. He will be received by government dignitaries, greet television audiences, visit schools, take part in numerous parades, but most importantly he will meet the children of the Netherlands and quiz them on their behaviour in the past year. His companion ZWARTE PIET, Black Peter, hands out candy and treats but also threatens to stuff bad kids into his bag and take them back to Spain for the year. Those who receive a gift from Sinterklaas are often called upon to recite a poem or sing a little song. On the eve of his saint's day, December 5, Sinterklaas flies over Dutch rooftops on his horse and with Piet's assistance drops presents down chimneys into the shoes of children. His duty done, Sinterklaas then disappears until next year – but Christmas continues.

Advent in the Netherlands is the time to buy a Christmas tree (or rent a live one that can be planted after the holiday is over), put an Advent star in the window, and begin to clean and decorate the house. Among the noisier Advent ceremonies in the Netherlands is the *midwinterhoorn blazen*, in which horns are sounded to announce the beginning of the holy season. In Oldenzaal, trumpeters blow in Advent from the four corners of a medieval tower; elsewhere, horns carved