

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
**CHRISTMAS**

GERRY BOWLER



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of that has been shifted to Christmas Eve, St. Nicholas's visit is still looked forward to by German children. The saint will often appear in person, clad in his bishop's robes, and ask how the little ones have behaved during the previous year. The children may also be called upon to perform a little song or say a prayer before being given their small gift. Nicholas will often be accompanied by a menacing figure, often called *KNECHT RUPRECHT*, but who also might go by the name of Hans Muff, Pelzebock, Krampus, or countless regional variations. His job is to threaten the children with a switch or the possibility of being stuffed into his sack and spirited away to wherever it is that bad children go. Those children who do not get to meet St. Nicholas by day will leave out their shoes at night to be filled with treats.

In Catholic parts of Germany, the nine days before Christmas is a time to honour the Virgin Mary and the search of the Holy Family for lodging. In the *Frauentragen* ("Carrying the Virgin"), the torch-bearing faithful carry an image of Mary through the village to the home of a family who will host it for that night. The *Herbergsuche* ("Searching for Lodging") re-enacts the story of Mary and Joseph seeking a room at the inn in Bethlehem as statues of the holy couple are carried from house to house. In some places children dress up as Joseph and Mary or carry a Nativity scene and go from door to door collecting money for charity.

Germans have produced some of the most beautiful Christmas music ever written, and visitors to the country can hear such masterpieces as J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* or sing such German-language carols as "Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen," "Von Himmel Hoch," "Wie schön Leuchtet der Morgenstern," or "Stille Nacht" (written in Austria). Groups of carollers still go door-to-door in various parts of the country, and where the custom was once a *BEGGING VISIT* they now raise money for charity.

Christmas Eve is traditionally when the family's Christmas tree is set up and decorated away from the prying eyes of the children. Though other countries lay claim to the invention of the Christmas tree, it is generally accepted that it was in Germany that the custom took hold and then spread to the rest of the world. The idea that the 16th-century reformer

Martin Luther was the first to put lights on the tree is not now given much credence, but there is no doubt that Germans still love to decorate their trees with real candles. When all is ready a bell is rung and the tree and the presents under it are revealed to the young ones, who are told that the gift-bringer has just come. (Protestant areas tend to be visited by the *Weihnachtsmann*, a Santa Claus figure, while Catholic families are served by the *Christkind*, the Christ Child, who is envisaged as a white-clad maiden.) In addition to the gifts under the tree, each family member receives a plate of goodies. A church service, carol singing, and a feast are also on the Christmas Eve agenda. The large meal is centred on goose or turkey, with many regional variations such as sausage, red cabbage, noodles, and carp. Desserts are legion: the most famous ones are *stollen*, a rich Christmas bread; *lebkuchen*, gingerbread; *marzipan*; cinnamon stars; and *springerle* cookies. Eating to excess is encouraged; a nickname for Christmas Eve is *Dickbauch*, or fat stomach, because of the tradition that those who do not eat their fill on Christmas Eve will be haunted by demons in the night.

Many Germans spend part of Christmas Eve visiting family graves and placing candles over the resting places of the dead.

December 25 and 26 are both holidays in Germany and are spent in more feasting, relaxing, and visiting friends. This is also the beginning of the *Rauhnächte*, smoke nights or rough nights, a time to combat the forces of evil and cleanse the home of their influence. The house is smoked with incense, and numerous ceremonies take place in the streets with wildly costumed characters shouting and making noise.

Festivities in Germany continue through *Silvester*, New Year's Eve, which folk celebrate with great gusto, throwing parties and enjoying fireworks, to Epiphany. While some Germans are taking down their Christmas trees, others celebrate January 6 with parades of *STAR BOYS* imitating the Magi and collecting money for charity or safeguarding the house and farm for the coming year by chalking each home with the initials of the Wise Men. They might also attend Three Kings parties, where the Bean King and Queen are chosen by lot.



Germany A medieval representation of the Adoration of the Magi is depicted on this German Christmas stamp.

**Gift-bringers** Though North Americans are familiar with the figure of Santa Claus, he is just one of a number of gift-bringers around the world, and Christmas Eve, the night of his descent down the chimney, is just one of a number of days on which the gift-bringer arrives during the Christmas season.

The original gift-bringer, the founder of the feast, was ST. NICHOLAS. Though displaced from many of the countries he used to visit, he is still a welcome sight in the Netherlands and other parts of Europe on December 5 and 6. He can be recognized by his bishop's attire, and he tends to travel by white horse or mule accompanied by such helpers as Black Peter.

Secularized descendants of St. Nicholas, who for the most part appeared first in the 19th century, include Santa Claus (who was a North American manifestation before his franchise went global), Father Christmas (popular in Great Britain and parts of the British Commonwealth), Père Noël (francophone lands), the *Weihnachtsmann* of parts of Germany, Baba Noel in the Middle East, and the Scandinavian gift-bringers, such as Joulupukki, Julemand, and Jultomten. The appearance of these gentlemen is rather similar – red-clad, fur-trimmed, bearded fellows of a portly build – and they all tend to work on the night of December 24-25. Most secular of all is Grandfather Frost, a Communist version of Santa Claus, who was offered by Soviet authorities as a New Year's replacement for the Christmas givers the state wished to suppress. He has been

evicted from most of Eastern Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain, but maintains a presence in Russia.

The notion that the baby Jesus himself brings gifts is a widespread one. He is called El Niño in Spanish America, the Christkind in Germany, or Le Petit Noël in France, and has other names in Central Europe. In some places he is depicted as a small child, in others as a kind of teenage, female angel or fairy. Christmas Eve is the usual time of gift-bringing for this figure, but his saints appear on various days during the season; saints Basil, Barbara, Peter, Martin, and Lucia all have their own regions to service.

In Spanish-speaking lands, the Magi or Three Kings make their appearance on the night of January 5; as they journey to Bethlehem they stop off and deliver gifts to children. In Syria the legend of the Magi's youngest camel has made the Gentle Camel of Jesus into the local gift-bringer. In parts of Lebanon another legendary animal, the Mule, carries out these duties.

There are a number of female gift-bringers around the globe, though most of them work other times than Christmas Eve. In Italy the Befana, who has been searching for the Christ Child ever since that night she refused to join the Magi on their trek, comes down the chimney on the night of January 5. (Her Russian counterpart is the Baboushka.) In eastern Canada Mother Goody (also known as Aunt Nancy or Mother New Year) distributes small gifts to children on New Year's Eve, while in the Dominican Republic the Vieja Belén, the Old Lady of Bethlehem, gives presents to poor children at Epiphany. Tante Arie, of the Franche-Comté area of France, is the only female gift-bringer who is active on the night of December 24.

**Gifts** Gift-giving has been associated with Christmas ever since the Magi arrived to worship the baby Jesus and present him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but the practice has not always been so universal or all-consuming as it has become.

The midwinter festivals in Rome, which preceded the establishment of Christmas on December 25, were marked by gift-giving. During the celebration of Saturnalia and the Kalends, friends presented each other with *strenae*, small tokens of goodwill and best wishes for the coming year (echoes of this custom linger in the French name for Christmas gifts, *étrennes*). At what point Christians decided to mark the Nativity with gift-giving is unclear, but a sermon from around the year 400 complains that the practice was making children selfish and that gifts were too often exchanged out of base sentiments rather than real friendship.

For much of the Middle Ages it seems gift-giving was confined to the upper classes and particularly the monarchy. Kings expected to be given Christmas gifts and could be quite testy if these were not forthcoming. Henry III ordered London shops closed until the city's merchants came up with £2,000 for his Christmas present. The value of gifts to English royalty was meticulously recorded so that the worth of a suitable return gift could be calculated. These gift exchanges often occurred at the New Year but were always referred to as "Christmas presents."

By the 13th century we begin to see evidence of gifts to children, often given on St. Nicholas's Day as the cult of that saint rose in popularity. A medieval French song says:

Nicholas patron of good children,  
I kneel for you to intercede.  
Hear my voice through the clouds  
And this night give me some toys.  
I want most of all a playhouse  
With some flowers and little birds.

Nuns in Italian convents left out gifts for poor children in imitation of Nicholas's gifts to the three daughters of the poor man (see ST. NICHOLAS). In Germany in 1531 Martin Luther noted that children put out their stockings in hope that St. Nicholas would fill them with good things. A 16th-century list of Christmas presents for German children included money, sweets, fruit, dolls, clothes, books, Bibles, and writing paper – little wonder that at this time the Nuremberg Christmas fair was called the Children's Market. In England children were told that St. Nicholas brought them gifts on his feast day by coming in through the window,

In the 18th century Christmas had yet to become commercially driven, but we begin to see for the first time advertisements for Christmas gifts. They seem to suggest that gifts were bought largely for children and dependents (including servants) but that as the century progressed adult gift-exchanges were a growing part of Christmas spending. In the 19th century the Industrial Revolution and changing attitudes toward children accelerated gift-giving and hastened the commercialization of the holiday. It was considered increasingly intolerable that poorer children should be deprived of gifts, and numerous charities in Europe and North America sprang up to remedy this.

People now began to wrestle with the problem of to whom to give presents and the cost of these gifts. For a time GIMCRACKS were the answer, but they were replaced early in the 20th century by Christmas cards as a way to acknowledge a relationship that was not so intimate as to demand a gift. As prosperity increased throughout the century, gift-giving spread to countries (for example, Central America) that had hitherto not made it a part of Christmas celebrations. The amount that families in industrialized countries spend on Christmas gifts has become a moral issue and the subject of public debate. (See SOCIETY TO CURTAIL RIDICULOUS, OUTRAGEOUS AND OSTENTATIOUS GIFT EXCHANGES and OPPOSITION TO CHRISTMAS.)

**"The Gifts of the Magi"** In probably the most famous of modern Christmas short stories, American author O. Henry (1862-1910; real name William Sydney Porter) tells the tale of the young married couple Jim and Della. Money is short for presents and economies have to be made, but the love each bears for the other produces willing sacrifices. Della sells her gorgeous hair to buy Jim a watch fob while, in sad irony, Jim sells his watch to buy combs for his wife.

It is said that O. Henry's love of alcohol often made him late in submitting his stories, and that in 1906 his Christmas story was badly behind schedule. In desperation the artist whose job it was to illustrate O. Henry's work went to the author to be given at least an idea of what to draw. O. Henry replied that he had not got a word of the story written, let alone completed it, but that he did have a vision of a poorly furnished room with a man and a woman talking about Christmas. The man had a watch in his hand while the woman's principal feature was long beautiful hair. The illustrator began to draw, and within a few hours O. Henry had produced a classic.

In the 1990s Mark St. Germain and Randy Curtis produced a Christmas musical combining the plots of two O. Henry stories, "The Gifts of the Magi" and "The Cop and the Anthem."

**Gigantes** These huge wood and cardboard figures, representing kings, queens, and historical or mythological characters, are part of street processions after midnight mass on Christmas Eve in the Catalonian area of Spain.