

THE WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
**CHRISTMAS**

GERRY BOWLER



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*Beatings at Christmas* Two 19th-century tots are confronted by the switch-bearing side of Santa Claus in this Thomas Nast drawing.

writing materials, paper, etc., and the Christ-rod." The first book in the United States to include a picture of Santa Claus, the 1821 *Children's Friend*, has the gift-giver state that he was happy to reward good girls and boys, but

Where I found the children naughty,  
In manners rude, in temper haughty,  
Thankless to parents, liars, swearers,  
Boxers, or cheats, or base tale-bearers,

I left a long, black birchen rod,  
Such as the dread command of GOD  
Directs a parent's hand to use  
When virtue's path his sons refuse.

The threat of corporal punishment was inherent in the role played by such figures as Black Pete, Krampus, Cert, or Père Fouettard (Father Switch), who accompany the gift-giver.

On CHILDERMAS, December 28, which commemorates the Massacre of the Innocents by King Herod, it was once customary in England to beat children. The explanation given in the 17th century was that the memory of Herod's crime "might stick the closer; and, in a moderate proportion, to act over the cruelty again in kind," but anthropologists have noted that ritual beatings are more likely descended from pagan rituals of good luck than from punishment. An old German custom called "peppering" saw children beating their parents, and servants beating their masters, with sticks while asking in verse form for a treat. An equally venerable tradition in Normandy allowed children to give a thrashing to those

who stayed too long in bed on December 28. In Wales on St. Stephen's Day, the practice was called "HOLMING" or "holly-beating"; the last person to get out of bed was hit with holly sprigs and made to act as servant to the rest of the family. Sometimes the purpose of the holming was to draw blood. In parts of Scotland on New Year's Eve, boys beat each other with holly branches in the belief that for every drop of blood shed, a year of life was saved for the victim. In Sweden it was once customary for the first to rise on Christmas Eve to give other family members small bundles of twigs that they would use to beat each other in the spirit of imparting vitality.

It is worth noting that fruit trees also came in for ritual beatings at Christmas. See WASSAIL.

*Beavis and Butthead Do Christmas* (TV) (1996) These two cartoon characters crawl out from under the rock of American popular culture to give their peculiar twist to Christmas classics. In the first segment, based on Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Beavis encounters the Ghosts on his television set, where he is trying to watch a pornographic movie. They fail in their attempt to get him to change his low-down ways even when he is shown his tombstone, which reads: "Here Lies Beavis. He Never Scored." Butthead is the subject of a parody of *It's a Wonderful Life* in which God sends an angel to convince the boys to commit suicide for the good of the entire human race. Created by Mike Judge.

*La Befana* The principal gift-bringer in Italy. She was asked by the Magi to join them on their journey to worship the newborn king but delayed because she wanted to put her house in order before the journey and consequently missed seeing the Christ Child. Ever since she has wandered the globe seeking him, and on Epiphany ("Befana" is a corruption of "Epiphania") she brings presents to children, though she occasionally leaves a bag of ashes for bad kids. January 6 is also the time of Befana fairs in Italy.



*La Befana* The Italian gift-bringer who slips down chimneys on Epiphany Eve, depicted on a Christmas stamp from Canada.

She has her counterparts in Russia, where the Baboushka's history is almost identical to hers, and in Germany in some manifestations of Frau Berchta, who will steal into bedrooms and rock infants to sleep.

**Begging Visits** Ever since the Middle Ages people have used the Christmas season to go door-to-door soliciting charity in return for a song or good wishes for the coming year. In Alsace in 1462, visitors dressed as the Magi are recorded as having gone about on the eve of Epiphany. Sixteenth-century English sources noted the custom of the WASSAIL WENCHES on TWELFTH NIGHT. In Yorkshire lads used to go "Christmas ceshing," knocking on the door and shouting "Wish you a Merry Christmas, mistress and master." Similar English begging visits were called "gooding," "doling," or "mumping" and often took place on St. Thomas's Day. Plough Boys go begging on PLOUGH MONDAY, while the SILVESTERKLÄUSE tradition in Switzerland takes place on New Year's Eve. *Klopfelnggehen* occurs in south Germany throughout Advent. In North America, BELSNICKLING and Newfoundland MUMMING sought hospitality more than charity. In Brazil the *Reisados* solicit donations for the celebration of Epiphany.

In return for their blessing the visitors always received money or hospitality. In those cases where a gift was not forthcoming, curses were often uttered. In pre-revolutionary Russia, carollers sang *kolyadki*, songs of blessing that could turn into wishes for a bad harvest or sick cattle if little gifts were not handed out. On the Greek island of Chios, groups of children revile the housewife who has run out of treats to pass out on Christmas Eve; they make uncomplimentary remarks and wish her cloven feet. Their remarks would be hard-pressed to surpass the venom of this malediction found on the Scottish island of South Uist:

The curse of God and the New Year be on you  
And the scath of the plaintive buzzard,  
Of the hen-harrier, of the raven, of the eagle,  
And the scath of the sneaking fox.  
The scath of the dog and cat be on you,  
Of the boar, of the badger and of the ghoul,  
Of the hipped bear and of the wild wolf,  
And the scath of the foul polecat.

In central and eastern Europe the STAR BOYS still parade, though now the money collected is often directed toward Third World development. In the Austrian village of Oberndorf, where "Silent Night" was first written, boatmen, who were unable to work during the winter months, used to go about at Christmas soliciting donations to see them through until spring. The custom died for a time when social welfare was adopted by the government, but it was revived in the 20th century in a different form. Now groups of men walk around with their lanterns, bells, and a Christmas crib atop a pole, collecting money for charity. Even though the true begging visit has declined, Christmas is still the season for encouraging charity, as shown by the example of the Salvation Army with its street-corner kettles.

Some social historians distinguish between those visitors who are seeking charity – such as the WASSAIL WENCHES or those doling or MUMMING on ST. THOMAS'S DAY – and those after only a spot of hospitality in return for good wishes. These latter they call "luck visits." Customs such as wassailing (see WASSAIL) or Newfoundland MUMMING would fall into this category.

**Belen** The name, meaning "Bethlehem," for the crèche in Spain. The Italian tradition of making an elaborate manger

scene – often set in an entire village, depicting the inhabitants as well as the adoring angels, shepherds, and Magi – penetrated Spain in the 18th century and flourished there. Spectacular examples from the 18th and 19th centuries are now valuable museum pieces and collectors' items. In many parts of Spain live *Belenes* are presented, with real people representing the Holy Family and the Three Kings.

**Belgium** The first week in December sees the beginning of the Christmas season in Belgium. All across the country Christmas markets are set up in medieval town squares, with booths full of seasonal offerings of food, drink, decorations, and gifts. The markets in the Grand' Place of Brussels, the Place du Marché of Liège, and the cobblestone streets of Bruges are particularly spectacular. Shoppers are entertained by wandering musicians, carollers, or jugglers and visit living Nativity scenes, sip hot punch, or skate on ice rinks. On December 6, St. Nicholas Day, the saintly gift-bringer arrives to deposit his offerings in the shoes children have left out for him to fill.

As Advent proceeds, Nativity plays are staged, Christmas trees erected, and wreaths hung. It is a time for specialty Belgian beers to appear and for baking Christmas goods such as the sweet bread known as *cougnot*, shaped like the baby Jesus, or the spiced *speculoos* cookies shaped like Saint Nicholas, as well as marzipan and the flat hard cakes called *klaasjes*. Belgian carols include "De drie koningen" ("The Three Kings"), "Sing, Good Company," and "De nederige geboorte" ("The Simple Birth").

On Christmas Eve the *réveillon*, common to French-speaking countries, is eaten: turkey is the usual main course, with the traditional BÛCHE DE NOËL for dessert. Children have come to expect additional gifts on the night of December 24, brought by Santa Claus, Père Noël, or Le Petit Jésus and placed under the tree or in their stockings. While they wait for their presents, some of their fellow citizens now make an anti-consumptionist statement. Since 1970 marchers have walked in silence on Christmas Eve from Antwerp to Viessel, where a priest washes their feet and a simple meal of bread and cheese is eaten. Attendance at midnight mass is a must for many Belgians, and a large dinner on Christmas Day is also traditional.

January 6 is Epiphany or *Dreikonigendag*. Bands of children go door-to-door singing songs about the Three Kings in anticipation of treats. The Belgian version of the Twelfth Night Cake or bean cake is the *gâteau des rois*.

In January Belgians exchange New Year's cards, which have become more popular in that country than Christmas cards.

**Belize** Belize celebrates Christmas in a variety of ways, depending on the ethno-linguistic heritage of the people. Roman Catholic Belizeans of mixed Mayan and Spanish blood observe customs much like those in other Latin American countries. These *Mestizo* place manger scenes in their homes and take part in the nine days of the POSADA, neighbourhood families accompanied by musicians going door-to-door searching for a house that will shelter the Holy Family.

For the Garifuna people the high point of Christmas is the Wanaragua or JOHN CANOE celebrations, which involve brightly costumed processions of masked men going from house to house singing, dancing, telling stories, and receiving hospitality in return. The Garifuna, of mixed African and Carib ancestry, were expelled to the Caribbean coast from the island of St. Vincent in the late 18th century and since then have preserved their unique culture in Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala.