

Mike Collins,1 Sports Development, University of Gloucester.

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Here we have two social/cultural histories, each proclaiming as their own, differing nationalistic origins of Christmas as a festivity. Connelly (University of Kent) looks at England from 1780 (when celebrations seemed to be at a low ebb) to 1953 (the Coronation and the beginning of the TV age). He says that the concept that the Victorians “invented” Christmas around Dickens’s Christmas Carol (1843) is mythical, quoting events in the courts of Henry VII and Elizabeth I (chapter 1), and rehearsing the tradition of the Harlequinade and the pantomime, linked to the persona of John Bull (chapter 2). In chapter 3 he shows the folk-song origins of carols, revived in the 1840s when Anglican hymnody was in the doldrums, and again at the turn of the century, when the English Folk Song Society was formed (in 1898).

Chapter 4 examines Christmas in the Empire: tradition could be maintained in snowy Canada, but in South Africa, India (except up-country), Ceylon and the antipodes it was hot, and so mainly an outdoors celebration. The union flag, Harrods and Waitrose Christmas hampers, airmail, carols from King’s College, Cambridge, and the King’s radio message, held the Empire together, as recorded in chapter 5 (radio licences grew from 38,000 in 1922 to 18 million in the 1930s). Chapter 6 shows how cinema represented Christmas, with films like A Christmas Carol (1906, 1914), Scrooge (1913, and with sound in 1935), Christmas Under Fire in World War II, and, maintaining the middle class images, The Holly & the Ivy (1950).

Louis MacNeice recorded people “spending beyond their income on gifts for Christmas” (chapter 7: what’s new?). Sales in the market and department stores boomed from the overriding Christian calendar with consumer pressure stoked by Waitrose and the Draper’s Record, urging people to shop early to help the staff (and not be disappointed), and boosted by the Christmas card boom, all following American leads.

1. Please refer to the note on page 139.
A brief epilogue outlines the impact of television, still transmitting the carol service, the Queen’s speech, and traditional Christmassy films, but also larded with Christmas specials in variety shows, comedies, and blockbuster films, topping off an annual consumption orgy that now starts in the shops in late September.

Perry (Georgia State University) produces a somewhat more heavyweight version but from Germany’s viewpoint, seeking to unpack “the close ties between domestic celebration, popular piety and consumerist desire” (8). Chapter 1 outlines how the Christmas tree, the gift bringer and the Christmas mood, epitomized Prussian middle class families: allegedly Mrs Von Humboldt put the first trees in her Berlin parlour in 1815, but various pagan/Nordic parties and feasts were celebrated and incorporated from Advent to Epiphany; the Weihnachtsmann (Father Christmas, who appeared in a Bavarian picture in 1847) visited central and north German families on Christmas Eve, while St Nicholas looked after rural Catholic households in the south and in Austria.

Some Catholics also adopted the Lutheran Christ child. Carols reinforced the mood (Silent Night from Austria in 1818, O Christmas Tree in 1824), while pedagogic Christmas books appeared for children. From 1860 society’s intellectuals fostered the Germanisation of Christmas, so that by the turn of the century it could be referred to as deutsche Christfest. For some Jews Hanukkah and Christmas became elided into Chanukka. Meanwhile the Social Democrats railed against the bourgeois consumerist celebration, proposing more austere holidays with efforts to help the poor, and swayed modest numbers to withdraw from the churches. Proletarian holidays were more modest, but some were helped by employers’ Christmas gifts, and by 24–26th December being days off, celebrated in taverns, dance halls and clubs, rather than in their cramped homes. However, middle class outrage at excessive drinking and carousing led to sumptuary local laws, banning public noise and dances. So there were several different Christmases.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Christmas in the army. The myth of carols, football and fraternisation on 24th December 1914 in Flanders, was grossly outweighed by the “grinding work, bad food and violence” of most infantry. The officers, needless to say, had it much better! Families and civilian organizations, however, sent Christmas cards, food and gifts to alleviate matters.

Chapter 4 recounts the commercialization of Christmas, in the 1890s: newspapers were stuffed with advertisements, and the department stores
held sales to assuage the *kauflust*, the “urge to buy.” These spawned Christmas markets, which declined but survived their vicissitudes and in the 1980s were exported to Britain—even to Corporation Street, Birmingham. By 1930 Germany had 3 million radio sets which helped to shape the festivities for the better off.

During the Third Reich (Chapter 5), the National Socialists vituperated against the conventional Christmas, and invented Labor Front communal meals, but idealizing the emotions to do with family and *volk* (Nation). Chapter 6 covers the post-war revival of the re-Christianised holiday in the Cold War during reconstruction and shortages, but before long West Berlin’s *Kurfürstendamm* returned to the extravagance of a bazaar, and consumerism was crystallized again, this time by TV…. Christian observance shrank in the West generally, but even more under the governments of East Germany. By the time of union, “cultures of consumption coexisted in an uneasy but mutually sustaining relationship with religion” (285).

This is a deeply-researched, solid but readable text. So you “pays your pound” or euro as to which version you accept, or both, because clearly Christmas is a product of shared cultural-historical practices, contingent on national history as well as class preferences. It is indeed both an explicit and implicit religious festival in these two nations.