

Who Put That Partridge in My Pear Tree?

Christmas through the Eyes of Saturn and the Lens of the Carol

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In mid to late December the Roman festival of Saturnalia, a celebration of the God Saturn occurred, eventually extending over seven days. Saturn was the Roman god of agriculture, and thus god of fertility. Saturnalia was a festival of light, with candles everywhere, leading to the winter solstice, which in the Roman calendar was December 25. Roman emperors dedicated this winter solstice to *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquerable Sun. Saturnalia was a time of gift giving, role reversal of master and slave, feasting and drinking, and public sacrifice to Saturn. All work and business was suspended, moral restrictions were eased and the streets were thronged with revelers. Some of this joyful mentality, often lubricated with a variety of "spirits," began to merge with the early celebrations of Christmas. The Nativity of Jesus was celebrated on several different dates in the first few centuries after His birth, both in the spring and fall as well as in December, but thanks to the 339 C.E. decree of Pope Julius I, the date was definitively placed on December 25.

The over layering of the sacred and the profane made some clergy uncomfortable over many centuries, but this joyous affirmation of the birth of the Christian Savior of mankind, while simultaneously celebrating the universal belief in the renewal of the earth's bounty, seemed to answer the spiritual and physical needs of believers. Religious observance, plus feasting to excess, dancing, and decorating homes with greenery forged an enduring Christmas reality on December 25. "The overlapping of Saturnalia and the Feast of the Nativity set the terms of all future debate over the Christmas Festival," which could sometimes be quite vigorous" ³.

One ancient way to celebrate a festival was to perform carols. The word "carol" is derived from the Old French and Middle English "*carole*", to dance, but also could possibly be related to the

late Latin *choraula*, a choral song.... or perhaps both! Christmas carols may originally have been pagan round dances, popular before 1020 C.E. In this rejoicing at the time of the Feast of the Nativity, the caroler would dance in the center of a group of friends who would provide the music for the performance. These groups of carolers would go house to house, expecting some sort of reward for their efforts, usually food and drink. The inhabitants of such a serenaded home, often a larger, dominant, feudal residence in the countryside, understood their obligation to the carolers. Their homes could be invaded if treats were not given, with the carolers occupying the mansion and refusing to leave until satisfied. We hear an echo of this in the carol "We Wish you a Merry Christmas," wherein the demand, "Now bring us some figgy pudding, and a cup of good cheer" is followed by a determined, if not threatening, "*We won't go until we get some, so bring it right here!*" The occupiers, poor country folk, perhaps a bit envious of the Lord's domicile, could cause significant damage if that figgy pudding wasn't ready in time!

"Here we come a-wassailing, among the leaves so green..." had origins possibly leading to the Anglo-Saxon conquest of the Celtic speaking Romano-Britons during the fifth and early sixth century C.E. According to a 12th century historian, the King of the Britons, named Vortigern, became enamored of the fair damsel Rowena, young daughter of a visiting Germanic mercenary. She carried a golden goblet of wine to the King and curtsied low as she handed this to him, saying in her Germanic dialect, "Royal King *was hail*." A courtier explained to the King that she had done him honor by drinking to his health, and that he should respond "*drinc hail*." British toasts today still include this exchange. This story does not end well, as Rowena seduced the King, or vice versa, leading to Angles and Saxons and Jutes (O my!) slaughtering the hosting Britons and initiating the bloody conquest of the Island over the next century by these Germanic tribes.

Was hail became a medieval English greeting, a wish that your host might enjoy good health, but by the 12th century also describing an important event in the community. The wassail became a sort of festival in the tradition of Saturnalia, where people would meet, imbibe considerable amounts of ale, beer or cider, and pledge each other's health. Soon thereafter

arose the tradition of the wassail bowl, which held a large quantity of ale, beer or cider into which fine white bread and cakes were communally dipped. In the season of Christmas people would travel door-to-door giving away, or selling, these alcoholic drinks, the vendors thus cleverly avoiding the local sales tax. By 1550 there is documentation that this now one-thousand-year old tradition featured a wassail bowl decorated with ribbons, evergreens and sprigs of rosemary and holding up to ten alcoholic gallons, carried by young girls singing as they went. Another wassail tradition dating from pre-Christian times was to drink from the wassail bowl to the health of the apple, plum, and pear trees in local orchards, cajoling the trees to produce even more fermentable juice.

Wassail! Wassail! All over the town.

Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown;

Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;

With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee.

This carol contains wishes of good health for "the master", the animals, and then asks for pies, beef, and corn "that may we all see." And finally comes a blessing and, as with figgy pudding, a threat:"

Come butler, come fill us a bowl of the best

Then we hope that your soul in heaven may rest,

But if you do draw us a bowl of the small,

Then down shall go butler, bowl and all."

"Here we come a –wassailing" was first published in 1871 but is hundreds of years older. While the song and tradition have been associated with Christmas time, the echoes of Saturnalia, one of the roots of Christmas, ring in our ears.

The carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas" has a long history. It appears to have been written for the Twelfth Night celebration, the evening of January fifth, for on January 6, Epiphany,

Christmas merriment ceases. The carol probably began as a memory and forfeit game, i.e. forget a line and you forfeit something, like a kiss, to the opponent. But the rhymes don't seem to be interrelated at all, unless they are, as some have hypothesized, a coded catechism song written at a time when the Catholic catechism was outlawed. For example, four calling birds would remind the student of the four Gospels, five golden rings would represent the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, six geese a-laying would reference the six days of Creation, etc. By the coded catechistic theory, the single bird represents Jesus. But what about that pesky partridge who keeps ending up in a pear tree? The English partridge just doesn't perch in trees very often. But the French partridge is apparently more of a percher. The lyric's origin could be Gallic, as the French word for partridge is "perdrix", and that pronunciation makes the line sound like "A partridge, une perdree," a partridge in a pear tree. Why not? A scholarly consensus dates the origin of the carol to the sixteenth century and is not so sure about the hidden catechism theory.

Slightly later in the 16th century the Reformation came to England, breeding problematic societal conflict. The lyrics for "Adeste fidelis" ("Come All Ye Faithful") was composed by a Catholic layman, John Francis Wade, about 1740 but was said to have become "intermingled with persecution, injustice and intrigue from the Middle Ages,"³ because the words of "Adeste fidelis" have also been characterized as a coded heartfelt plea for France to invade England, ("Come, all ye faithful!", i.e. the Catholic Jacobites), come and restore the suppressed Catholic traditions, and end the persecution of Catholics.

The Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries viewed with displeasure exuberant, sometimes riotous Christmas celebrations, the apparent offspring of Saturnalian medieval feasting, as an unwanted by-product, allegedly, of the Roman Catholic Church. Philip Stubbes, a Puritan pamphleteer who died in 1610, wrote: "that more mischief is at that time committed than in all the year besides," listing "robbery, whoredom, and murder alongside dicing and carding, acting, and other sins like eating and drinking, banqueting and feasting" as evils committed by Catholics, "to the great dishonor of God."

What strange, tragic, ferocity occurs at this time and in this Season!

In America the 17th century attitudes toward Christmas and its carols ranged from *Mayflower* Pilgrims trying to ignore the Holiday to the suppression of Christmas in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by Governor John Winthrop, to celebratory observances as one traveled further south.

But the harsh Protestant abolitionists could never be successful in this endeavor, and there was always the worshipful and festive minority reacting to the suppression of their beloved Christmas, even in the 17th century. The British Act of Toleration *actually* restored some civil rights in 1689. Slowly carols and hymns returned to the churches, the pubs, the market place and the English home. However, the widespread celebration of Christmas, with hymns and songs, took over a century to "properly reappear."³

By the eighteenth century Britain had begun to reduce somewhat the prejudiced atmosphere of the early Reformation. Prime Minister Robert Walpole discouraged the Church of England from being very active, to avoid clashes with his government. The result was Anglican inaction and neglect, with a resultant diminution in religious practice, until the Brothers Wesley appeared on the scene. John Wesley's (1703-1791) preaching awoke much religious feeling. His younger brother, Charles (1707-1788,) wrote over 6000 hymns which inspired multitudes; there are historians who have suggested that Methodism might never have separated from the Church of England without his reflective, beautiful compositions. He gave the world "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", although the tune we know was lifted from Felix Mendelsohn's 1840 cantata commemorating the 300th anniversary of the printing press, slightly altered so words and music fit together. The joyous tenor of the carol, "Joy to the World," was written by Isaac Watts in anticipation of the Second Coming in 1719; however, it did not come to life until 1839 when Lowell Mason, borrowing liberally from Handel, finally set it to music.

But the future of the Christmas carol remained uncertain. Englishman William Hone predicted in 1822 that in a few more years carols would be heard no more. The Christmas Festival, he wrote, "was not kept with anything like the vigor, perseverance and elegance of our ancestors."² Some blamed the Puritans for taking the fun (the Saturnalia effect, perhaps) out of Christmas. In America after the War of 1812 any hearty celebration of Christmas was downplayed, because it was a tradition inherited from an old enemy. Washington Irving

bemoaned in the 1820's that Christmas customs "are daily growing more and more faint" and that Christmas had become quite dull, as compared to the old English Christmas which witnessed a complete abandonment to mirth and good fellowship with which this festival was celebrated. Too many were looking back at the storied Christmas revels of the Anglo-Saxons and Elizabethans and finding contemporary practice not attaining the festive glory which persisted in their imagination, and in carols.

However, as the Industrial Revolution began to produce considerable societal dislocation, there arose a concern that the ancient folk culture of England would be lost, and therefore the songs and carols of olden times needed to be sought out and preserved. This concept was prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, accelerated by Victorian nostalgia. The most comprehensive and successful effort of that century, *Christmas Carols New and Old*, authored by Rev. Henry. Bramley and Dr. John Steiner, in three editions, preserved seventy carols which otherwise might have disappeared. To these gentlemen do we owe the very existence today of such carols as "The First Nowell" (sic), "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen" and even our old friend "The Wassail Song."

Ironically, and stimulated perhaps by this nostalgic effort to recover the beauty and reverence of Christmas in song, the second half of the nineteenth century also gifted us with a treasury of new carols: Unitarian minister Edward H. Sears' "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" in 1850; Pennsylvania rector John H. Hopkins, Jr. gave us, in 1857, "We Three Kings of Orient Are;" in 1863 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow composed "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" as a poem, and then set it to existing music. On his way to Bethlehem, Episcopal rector Phillips Brooks wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem" in 1865, but organist Lewis Render, took three years to write the music. "Away in a Manger," was published in 1885. With a sixteenth century Welsh melody and English lyrics by Thomas Oliphant from 1862, "Deck the Halls" celebrates trolling "the ancient Yule-tide carol" and the Yule log, not mentioning Christmas.

Secular 19th century carols evoke a delightful, mythic image of Christmas in such songs as "Jingle Bells," (originally associated with Thanksgiving), "Jolly Old Saint Nicholas" and "Up on the House Top." In our own lifetime has appeared the world's best-selling single Christmastime

recording, Irving Berlin's and Bing Crosby's American carol from 1942, "White Christmas." And in the last few decades a new playful, irreverent humor has entered the music surrounding Christmas. We have been introduced to holiday favorites Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman, the Mommy Who Kissed Santa Claus, the Grandma who got run over by a reindeer, Santa Baby, a kid who badly needs his two front teeth, and many more.

Is the temporary "madness" and festivity of Saturnalia sneaking back in? Did it ever disappear entirely?

Saturn smiles and winks!

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