A Seasonal History: Christmas Through the Ages [B2]

Le tradizioni natalizie del mondo anglofono sono familiari a tutti: tacchino al forno, canti natalizi, alberi riccamente decorati, auguri natalizi e vischio, tra le altre cose. Ma, qual è il loro vero significato? Sono originarie della cultura inglese? Per scoprirlo, diamo un'occhiata a come si è evoluto il Natale nel tempo.

First recorded in writing in 1038, the word 'Christmas' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'Cristesmæsse', meaning 'festival of Christ'. However, during most of its early history, the celebration we associate with the nativity of Jesus Christ was a pagan ritual. Introduced into Britain by the **Angles**, the Saxons and the **Jutes** that began invading the isles in the 5th and 6th centuries, the festivities around the 25 December celebrated the winter solstice that welcomed the New Year. They formed a twelve-day festival known as Yule, a word derived from one of the many names of the god Odin in **Norse** mytho**log**y.

PAGANS

According to historical **accounts**, the Yule festival was associated with fertility and birth, and the celebrations even involved ritual copulation! **Greenery** such as **holly** and **ivy** were brought into homes **to frighten off** **evil** spirits, and a large trunk, called the Yule **log**, was slowly burnt over the Christmas period. This is the origin of the **log**-shaped chocolate cake Britons eat at Christmastime today.

CHRISTIANS

It is commonly believed that Christianity **spread** around the British isles through the mission of Saint Augustine, who arrived in Britain in 597 AD. As the Yule festival coincided with the birth and adoration of Jesus, it made sense for the early Roman Church to keep some kind of continuity when converting the pagans. The pagan festival was simply **rebranded**, becoming Christmas. However, there wasn't **a great deal** of celebrating **back then**: converted Anglo-Saxon Christians spent most of the Christmas period **fasting** and praying, and giving **alms** to monasteries and the common poor.

MEDIEVAL TIMES

By the High Middle Ages (from the 11th to the 14th century) things had **livened up**. Christmas had become the most important event in the medieval Christian calendar, and was celebrated for forty days prior to Christmas Day, a period we now know as Advent. The festive season was characterised by excessive eating and drinking, dancing, singing and general **indulgence**. Today, **carol-singers** usually sing outside or go from door to door. The reason is that they were **banned** from church in medieval times. Originally, the verb 'to carol' meant to sing and dance in a circle. Some singers took this literally and the resulting confusion was considered inappropriate for the more serious church **masses**. **Unashamed**, the carollers continued to sing out in the cold, and the tradition **flourished on** through the Tudor period.

PURITANS

Fun and **feasting** continued until the Puritans **came along** in the 15th century. The Puritans were English Protestants who wanted to purify the Church of England of Roman Catholic practices. They executed King Charles I in 1649, and **banned** all festivities, including Christmas. This continued for the brief period when England was governed as a republic under Oliver Cromwell, and the festivities didn't get started again until the monarchy was **restored** in 1660.

GEORGIANS

By the Georgian period (1714 to 1830), Christmas was once again a very popular celebration, with families getting together for dinners, parties and **balls**. Homes were decorated with festive **holly** and **evergreens**. By the late 18th century a new type of decoration became popular. Known as 'kissing **boughs**' or simply '**balls**', they had a circular wooden **frame** and were decorated with **holly**, **ivy**, **mistletoe** and **rosemary**, as well as apples, oranges and **candles**. Also at this time the tradition of kissing under the **mistletoe** was incorporated into Christmas celebrations. According to the custom, if a woman was found standing under the **mistletoe**, any man was allowed to kiss her, and it was considered bad luck for her to refuse. The **mistletoe** was often omitted in very religious **households**.

VICTORIANS

The Victorian era introduced many of the Christmas traditions that are familiar today. Carol singing, practically silent since the Puritan age, was revived, as were a lot of the old carols. One Victorian addition to the tradition was Christmas cards. The Penny Post, a system which allowed people to send cards or letters anywhere in Britain for the cost of a **penny stamp**, had been introduced in Britain in 1840. A couple of years later, an inventor named Henry Cole **spotted** a great commercial opportunity: he printed a thousand Christmas-themed cards and sold them in his London art shop. The idea was a huge success, with people sending greetings to all their friends and family.

The trend **spread** further in 1870 when the new railways improved the efficiency of the post, so that the price of a stamp could be reduced to a halfpenny. It was George III's wife, Queen Charlotte, who first imported the German tradition of bringing a Christmas tree into the home in 1800. Queen Victoria's German husband Prince Albert revived the custom and, when in 1848 the Illustrated London News printed an **engraving** of Victoria, Albert and their family around their Christmas tree, the tradition moved out of the court and into British homes.

FATHER CHRISTMAS

Until the 19th century, Father Christmas and Santa Claus were completely separate characters. Father Christmas originally appeared in an old English midwinter festival, normally dressed in green to signify the return of spring. Santa Claus, on the other hand, is based on the historical figure of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children. Known as Sinterklaas in the Netherlands, stories were brought to America by Dutch **settlers** in the 17th century. From the 1870s on, he was a popular figure in Britain too, together with his **reindeer** and **sleigh**. From then on, the characters began to **merge**, and their names became interchangeable. Until the 1930s, Santa Claus was **depicted** in many different ways. He was a tall thin man, or a strange-looking elf wearing green. Sometimes he was dressed as a **bishop** and sometimes as a **Norse** **huntsman**. In 1931 the Coca-Cola company began **placing ads** in popular magazines. In their Christmas ads they styled Santa Claus as fat, friendly and very human, wearing a red coat that conveniently **matched** the colour of the Coca-Cola brand.

A CHRISTMAS FEAST

Much of the food traditionally eaten at Christmas time in Britain originates in Victorian times. Take the Christmas pudding, for example. In its first incarnation, in the 14th century, the pudding was more like **porridge**. Known as 'frumenty', it was made of **oats** and **almond** milk or **meat broth**. At Christmas it was enriched with **beef**, **mutton**, **raisins**, **spices** and wine. By the end of the 16th century, dried fruit had become more easily available

and the recipe became sweeter. **Mince pies** also originate from this period, although they were originally rectangular to represent Jesus's **crib**. It was considered lucky to eat one mince pie on each of the twelve days of Christmas. As the name suggests, the original recipe included **shredded meat** along with **spices** and fruit. Meat is no longer an ingredient in either Christmas pudding or mince pies, but the traditional recipe does include the animal fat, **suet**. The protagonist of a Tudor Christmas banquet was the Christmas pie. This elaborate dish consisted of a **turkey** **stuffed** with a **goose** **stuffed** with a chicken **stuffed** with a **partridge** **stuffed** with a **pigeon**. All of this was encased in a **coffin-shaped** **pie crust** and served with **jointed hare** and small **game birds**. Turkeys had already been introduced into Britain from the Americas in the 16th century and Henry VIII was one of the first people to eat **turkey** as part of the Christmas feast. When Victoria came to the throne, only the richest families could afford this exotic bird, but by the end of the century most families feasted on roast **turkey** for their Christmas dinner. Large **flocks** of **turkey**s could be seen walking to London from Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, their **feet** protected by **hard-wearing** leather shoes. After their long journey, they must have been impressed with London hospitality, **little knowing** they were being **fattened** for the Christmas table!

CHRISTMAS OR XMAS?

Many people believe that 'Xmas' is a modern abbreviation of Christmas. However the X **stands for** the Greek letter chi, an early abbreviation for Christ or the Greek 'Khristos'. It also symbolised the cross on which Christ was crucified.

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

Today, we take Christmas holidays for granted, but they weren't always guaranteed. In Tudor times most people worked on the land. At Christmas they got a welcome twelve-day holiday when all work, except that of looking after the animals, stopped. They went back to work on **Plough Monday**, the first Monday after **Twelfth Night**. With the arrival of the Industrial

Revolution, the break from work was drastically shortened as employers needed workers to keep the factories going throughout the festive period. Later in the Victorian age, however, the wealth generated by these new industries meant that middle class families in England and Wales could take two days off work and celebrate Christmas Day and Boxing Day. The new railways also allowed people who had moved into the towns and cities for work to return home for a family Christmas.

Glossary

- **Greenery** = vegetazione
- **alms** = elemosine
- **flourished on** = continuare a fiorire
- **frame** = cornice
- **ivy** = edera
- **log** = tronco
- **engraving** = incisione
- **beef** = manzo
- **partridge** = pernice
- **feet** = zampe
- **evil** = malvagi
- **masses** = messe
- **reindeer** = renna
- **bishop** = vescovo
- **little knowing** = all'insaputa, ignorando
- **to frighten off** = spaventare
- **Unashamed** = svergognati
- **placing ads** = fare pubblicità
- **raisins** = uva passa
- **crib** = culla
- **turkey** = tacchino
- **stuffed** = ripieno
- **holly** = agrifoglio
- **restored** = ristabilire
- **households** = case, famiglie
- **sleigh** = slitta
- **huntsman** = cacciatore
- **Twelfth Night** = Epifania (letteralmente dodicesima notte)
- **jointed hare** = spezzatino di lepre
- **Angles** = anglosassoni
- **banned** = proibire
- **feasting** = festeggiare
- **came along** = apparire

- **Mince pies** = pasticci di carne, tortine natalizie (dolci)
- **suet** = sugna
- **pigeon** = piccione
- **hard-wearing** = resistente
- **fasting** = digiunare
- **oats** = avena
- **indulgence** = appagamento, soddisfazione, indulgenza
- **balls** = balli
- **fattened** = ingrassare
- **stands for** = simboleggiare
- **penny stamp** = francobollo da un penny
- **mutton** = carne di montone
- **goose** = oca
- **game birds** = selvaggina (volatili)
- **livened up** = ravvivare
- **evergreens** = sempre verdi
- **settlers** = coloni
- **merge** = fondersi
- **shredded meat** = carne tritata
- **porridge** = pappa d'avena
- **Norse** = norvegese
- **a great deal** = molta
- **carol-singers** = cantanti di canti natalizi
- **boughs** = rami
- **rosemary** = rosmarino
- **candles** = candele
- **matched** = abbinare
- **meat broth** = brodo di carne
- **spices** = spezie
- **Jutes** = Juti
- **spread** = espandersi
- **back then** = allora
- **almond** = mandorla
- **accounts** = narrative
- **spotted** = identificare

- **pie crust** = pasta frolla
- **rebranded** = rinnovare l'immagine
- **mistletoe** = vischio
- **depicted** = rappresentare
- **Plough Monday** = lunedì dell'aratro
- **coffin-shaped** = a forma di feretro
- **flocks** = stormi