

Some Christmas Musings!



Google the phrase “Has Christmas lost its meaning?” and 4,850,000 hits come back at you. A lot of folks obviously have a lot to say about the topic of Christmas. Today’s complaint appears to be that all Christmas is good for these days is the “purchase of toys and the making of money”. And the fact that this year Christmas goods appeared on store

shelves before Halloween had even taken place.

But what has Christmas ever been, that people have fond memories of quieter times. Talk to older adults and they will gladly reminisce about poorer times where an orange in a stocking hung from the fireplace mantle was a great gift. Talk to their children and they will think back to the Christmases that started off with new skates or a stick. Talk to their children and the conversation turns to new gadgets that will play tunes or games. Such is progress.

But one staple of Christmas through the ages has been the celebration and the traditions that modern people have tried to maintain. From the Victorian mealtimes to the modern restaurant Brunch the theme has been a family gathering. Modern times may be faster and more hectic than those of one hundred and fifty years ago but the essence is unchanged. Christmas is a time that most families try to get together, even for a couple of hours. Whether it’s Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or Boxing Day people will get together. The advantage of Christmas in the second millennium is that as opposed to the Victorians, who could only afford to take one day to celebrate the Christmas season Canadians now make it a week long event.

Modern historians have told us all about the way Victorians used to celebrate. In fact the modern Christmas was a Victorian invention as it wasn’t until the Industrial Revolution, which

enriched the middle class, that most people could afford to take a couple of days off work and have money to spend. Christmas has been celebrated around the end of December for thousands of years. According to Sandra Contenta, who wrote a double page spread for the Toronto Star in 2007, which summed up the history of Christmas and modern attitudes, Christmas began in the Fourth Century when the Roman Church chose December 25th as the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This date coincided with the Roman midwinter festival of Saturnalia - the celebration of abundance. The idea of a festival to finish the year sounded good to most. End of year celebrations soon became associated with the spending of money and feasts.

An interesting twist to the centuries old tradition was the morphing of all pagan traditions, blended with celebratory attitudes into a social movement called "wassailing". Wikipedia defines it as follows - *The practice has its roots in the middle ages as a reciprocal exchange between the feudal lords and their peasants as a form of recipient initiated charitable giving, to be distinguished from begging.* This activity also occurred in the early times of New England and consisted of drunken bands of men who would bang on the doors of the rich and demand entry and sing songs in return for demands for food and alcohol. Professor Nissenbaum, quoted as a reference in Contenta's article explains that the reaction in the early 1800s to wassailing by the rich in New England was to domesticate and tame the celebration. The New York Historical Society launched their campaign and led off with the poem, "The Night Before Christmas". Because this poem describes the images of happy children waiting for presents to be placed in their stocking, which hung on the mantle, and delivered by a reindeer sleigh and St. Nicholas, this fiction soon became practise. "That poem was the basic transformation that produced Santa Claus as we know him and Christmas as we know it.", says Nussenbaum. Merchants were quick to take advantage of the spirit of gift-giving and the commercialism of the season began.

As a celebration Christmas has evolved from a time of angry serfs demanding food from the masters and the type of gatherings that the Victorians used to have to the more casual and frenetic family meals of today. The staples of a British Christmas, that form the roots of a Canadian tradition, were all invented by the Victorians. A two day holiday was made possible by the wealth generated by the newly emerged 'middle class', they introduced: holidays, gifts, Santa Claus/Father Christmas, turkeys, christmas cards, crackers, carol singers and the tree.

The New England Christmas introduced a new wrinkle to the British experience - snow and cold winters. Hence the introduction of eggnog and mulled cider as opposed to sipping sherry.

The food English Victorians served on Christmas Day depended where one lived - the North of England used to serve roast beef and hams, with Yorkshire pudding. The South of England served fowl, meals of Goose, Ducks or Wild fowl - Partridges and Grouse. Turkeys only became popular when they were introduced, from the Americas, and raised in County of Norfolk, North-east of London *“they were driven to London on their own feet, which were shod in fashionable but hardwearing leather the unsuspecting birds would have set out on the 80-mile hike from the Norfolk farms. Arriving obviously a little tired and on the scrawny side they must have thought London hospitality unbeatable as they feasted and fattened on the last few weeks before Christmas.”* - a quote from Answers.com. But the staple of any Victorian Christmas meal was Plum Pudding. This was not only food but a ritual ceremony

that started on Stir-up Sunday which was at the beginning of Advent (four weeks before Christmas). Each member of the family would participate by taking turns to stir the ingredients (beating the pudding), and making a wish whilst stirring in a clockwise direction for good luck. Then a ring, coin, or thimble was tossed into the batter. The pudding was then hung from a sack, and boiled in beef broth for eight hours on the day of the meal. After dinner it was turned out on a platter, topped with a sprig of holly, set alight, and carried into the dining room. When the pudding was served and a family member ate the pudding it was believed that biting into a portion with the ring meant marriage, the coin, wealth, and the thimble, a happy but single life.



Trying to recreate Victorian meals can be a challenge. In 2009, when Cobourg's Victoria Hall Volunteers planned their Fundraiser - "A Victorian Christmas" they wanted to serve a Victorian staple, 'nesselrode pudding' (a mixture of chopped and boiled chestnuts, maraschino cherries, candied fruits, and liqueur or rum, used as a sauce or in puddings, ice cream, or pies.) but soon discovered that it would be too expensive and the forty pounds of roasted chestnuts were unavailable.

However over the years Christmas has come a long way from the Victorian version. Modern day family gatherings depend on hectic schedules of, usually, three generations. Many of the

generations have to eat more than one meal of Turkey within a two day period. Going to grandma's house is great but needs careful scheduling. Some families eat on Christmas Eve, others on Christmas Day and others on Boxing Day. Complicating the issue of the modern family is that now society has scheduled what is essentially a week long holiday break some families have taken to the idea of using the week to get away on vacation. Trips to the sun - to Florida and further South as well as skiing trips in the mountains, are the leisures of choice. Trying to fit visits to church, to complete the celebrations, into the schedule are made easier by the times of the Services. Midnight Mass has been a staple of every Christmas celebration since the Fourth Century. So families that attend church can be accommodated by the fact that Christians hold three masses on Christmas Day. Thus one can say that the idea of the family gathering together to make the walk to church for the morning service, or midnight mass, and then coming back to eat a feast is a practise of yesteryear.

For those of us looking for a meal outside of the home on Christmas Day a survey of local Cobourg and Port Hope restaurants show that choices are slim. The Cat and Fiddle on Covert St. is closed but will host a Season's special meal on Boxing Day and a seasonal menu is available all of December. The Buttermilk Café, in Cobourg, is open and the menu available is on the website. Although most eating establishments will be closed on Christmas Day there will be no lack of seasonal fare around the date. From the most expensive restaurants to the meals supplied by charities they all have two things in common - tasty food and companionship. A Christmas tradition after all!