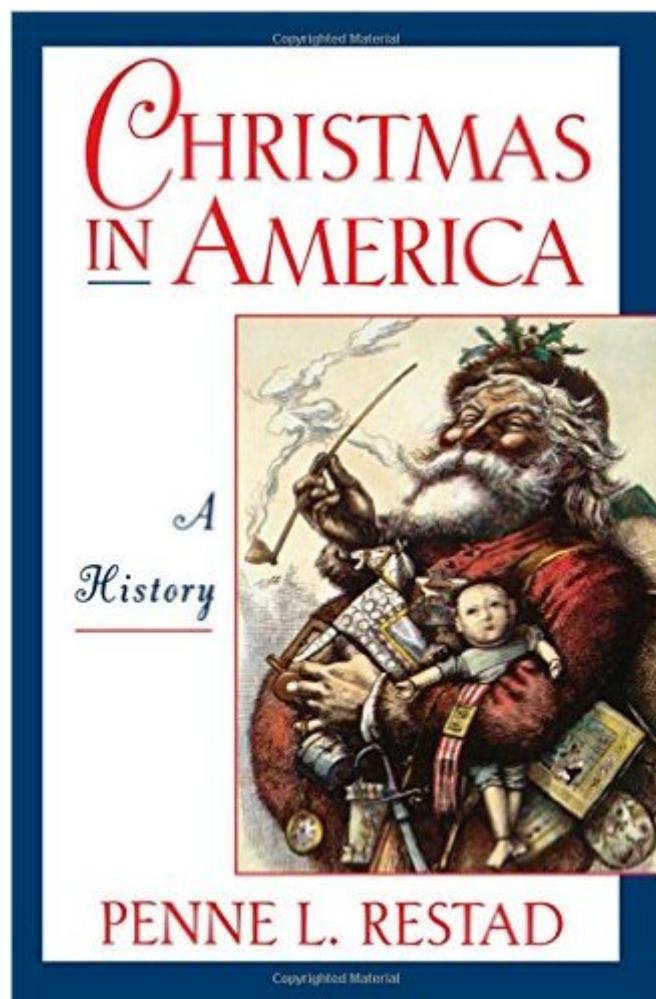


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Christmas In America: A History



Synopsis

The manger or Macy's? Americans might well wonder which is the real shrine of Christmas, as they take part each year in a mix of churchgoing, shopping, and family togetherness. But the history of Christmas cannot be summed up so easily as the commercialization of a sacred day. As Penne Restad reveals in this marvelous new book, it has always been an ambiguous meld of sacred thoughts and worldly actions-- as well as a fascinating reflection of our changing society. In Christmas in America, Restad brilliantly captures the rise and transformation of our most universal national holiday. In colonial times, it was celebrated either as an utterly solemn or a wildly social event--if it was celebrated at all. Virginians hunted, danced, and feasted. City dwellers flooded the streets in raucous demonstrations. Puritan New Englanders denounced the whole affair. Restad shows that as times changed, Christmas changed--and grew in popularity. In the early 1800s, New York served as an epicenter of the newly emerging holiday, drawing on its roots as a Dutch colony (St. Nicholas was particularly popular in the Netherlands, even after the Reformation), and aided by such men as Washington Irving. In 1822, another New Yorker named Clement Clarke Moore penned a poem now known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas," virtually inventing the modern Santa Claus. Well-to-do townspeople displayed a German novelty, the decorated fir tree, in their parlors; an enterprising printer discovered the money to be made from Christmas cards; and a hodgepodge of year-end celebrations began to coalesce around December 25 and the figure of Santa. The homecoming significance of the holiday increased with the Civil War, and by the end of the nineteenth century a full- fledged national holiday had materialized, forged out of borrowed and invented custom alike, and driven by a passion for gift-giving. In the twentieth century, Christmas seeped into every niche of our conscious and unconscious lives to become a festival of epic proportions. Indeed, Restad carries the story through to our own time, unwrapping the messages hidden inside countless movies, books, and television shows, revealing the inescapable presence--and ambiguous meaning--of Christmas in contemporary culture. Filled with colorful detail and shining insight, Christmas in America reveals not only much about the emergence of the holiday, but also what our celebrations tell us about ourselves. From drunken revelry along colonial curbstones to family rituals around the tree, from Thomas Nast drawing the semiofficial portrait of St. Nick to the making of the film Home Alone, Restad's sparkling account offers much to amuse and ponder.

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Customer Reviews

Author Penne Restad has written an excellent historical account of how the evolution of Christmas in America since colonial times parallels the evolution of the American collective mind. Going beyond the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus Christ, America's favorite holiday has been molded in the last 300 years by the idiosyncrasies and anxieties of the American people, these being reflected, for example, in gift-giving customs, the use of evergreen trees, or more poignantly in the nation's portrayal of Santa Claus. I was truly fascinated with the wealth of information Ms. Restad presented in this serious, objective book. Think for a moment that Christmas was not observed universally in America until well into the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War; before then, a rather lukewarm observance of the holiday was not public and basically was determined by religious and ethnic background (a reflection of the days when our country's idea of nationhood was still in its formative stage). The book also covers in detail the changes Christmas brought to the celebrations of Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. Ms. Restad's narrative of our celebration of Christmas brings to light the complexities of the American psyche; we become enmeshed in conflicts between the sacred and profane, the spiritual and material (the celebration of Christmas in the antebellum South could not escape the dichotomy of freedom and slavery as well). Even as it prompts us to confront and come to terms with these conflicts, "Christmas in America: A History" also acknowledges the feeling of generosity, good will, and universal brotherhood the holiday inspires in us as a people; it is a work of great scholarship.

Like much of American History, how we celebrate Christmas today and what we "believe" about its

historical importance to the United States is based on either myth or marketing or both. Penne L. Restad has written an important history of this most sacred holiday over the past 300 years that will set the record straight for anyone who dares to question the status quo. Some of what you will learn from this book includes the fact that 200 plus years ago, most Christians in America did not celebrate Christmas for various reasons from its debauched history in England to the fact that Christ was not born on December 25; the Founding Fathers did not pay much attention to Christmas, even holding Congress on Christmas Day (again, because of its importance in England) though loosely based on centuries of myth and storytelling, the modern Santa Claus is the product of corporate marketing; Christmas in America did not gain national importance until after the Civil War as way to unite a torn nation. Though this book is an important resource on a prominent aspect of American History, and a must read for those who wish to fully understand the Christmas holiday and all of its trappings, be warned that this is a bit of a dry read; not because Restad is a bad writer, but the coupling of her historian's approach to the topic and the shear abundance of information, this book suffers a little in the narrative. >>>>>

This book is, as the title suggests, a history of Christmas in America from colonial times to the 20th Century. A person who wants a good introduction to the history and evolution of Christmas in America will find that in this book. It is well researched, clearly written and sensitive to the economic and social factors that influenced how Americans have viewed Christmas. I particularly liked Professor Restad's discussion of Christmas in the antebellum South and how slaves and slave owners celebrated the holiday. Also, the discussion of the social and economic factors that influenced America's celebration of Christmas in the pivotal 19th century is nuanced and very interesting. Readers who know quite a bit about the evolution of Christmas will find little new here, but persons who want a well-written, comprehensive and thoroughly researched introduction to this topic will find this book to be very informative and interesting.

This is a clear and easy to read book, based on some extensive research. Restad tells readers how the holiday came to be in the United States and contains a lot of information on Santa Claus and his prominence in our culture. It also avoids the extensive tediousness of more academic works. Well worth reading if you have the interest.

Restad is an outstanding social historian and has done an admirable job with her sweeping study of the evolution of the American Christmas. It does seem to have a rushed feel to its ending and is

arguably somewhat less of a tour de force than Stephen Nissenbaum's "The Battle for Christmas" which I would personally recommend. Nissenbaum's exhaustive study of individual diaries, journals and almanacs provides a more satisfying cross section of the rapid change in the perception of Christmas, often within a single lifetime, for a more coherent narrative. However, this book certainly should not be overlooked as a strong source for the inquisitive Christmas keeper.

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