



Vintage postcard, ca. 1910



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Merrymaking



Christmas and His Children
from *The Book of Christmas*, 1888
Frontispiece by Robert Seymour

Christmas, through the centuries, has been greatly celebrated especially in England. The engraving of “Vanity Fair,” which is also the name of the festival in the early novel *Pilgrim’s Progress*, by John Bunyan, shows the extremes of the celebration of the times. The festival was described as a scene of frivolity and flamboyance. An entry from a lady’s diary of 1684 describes the scene of the festival from the London Christmas and New Year of 1683-84.

The lady writes:

The frost continuing more and more severe, the Thames before London was still planted with booths in formal streets, all sorts of trades and shops furnished, and full of commodities, even to a printing-press, where the people and ladies took a fancy to have their names printed. This humor took so universally, that twas estimated the printer gained five pounds a

day for a line only at sixpence a name, besides what he got for ballads, etc. Coaches plied from Westminster to the Temple, and from several other stairs to and fro, as in the street, sled, sliding with skates, a bull-baiting, horse and coach races, puppet-plays and interludes, cooks, tipling, and other lewd places, so that it seemed to be a bacchanalian triumph, or carnival on the water.

A bacchanalian celebration refers to Roman times when the Romans had several festivals for their god of wine—Bacchus. In the beginning they were held in secret by women only, later men joined the celebrations. It became a raucous time with orgies everywhere. The Roman Senate eventually banned the practice, but they continued in the south of Italy in private.

Henry VIII was King of England from 1509-1547. It was during his reign when the Christmas masque came into fashion. The illustration of Henry VIII depicts



Vanity Fair—Christmas 1683
from Graphic, *Christmas Number* December 25, 1876

him keeping Christmas and being entertained by a host of guests masked for the affair.

In the book *Christmas and Christmas Lore*, the author T. G. Crippen quotes the description of the masque from *The Masque of Christmas* by Ben Jonson:

First came *Father Christmas* with two or three of his guard, and a drum beaten before him. He wore a close doublet, round hose, long stockings cross-gartered, white shoes, a high-crowned hat with a brooch, and a little ruff; he had a long thin beard, and carried a truncheon. Then came his ten children, led in a string by Cupid, and each with a suitable attendant. *Misrule* wore a velvet cap with a sprig, a short cloak, and a

great yellow ruff: his torch-bearer carried a basket with a cheese and a rope. *Carol* had a red cap and a long tawny coat, with a flute hanging at his girdle: his torch-bearer carried a song book, open. *Minced Pie* was neatly dressed as the cook's wife; her man carried a pie on a dish, and a spoon. *Gambol* appeared as a tumbler, with a hoop and bells; his torch-bearer was armed with a 'colestaff' and a blinding cloth. *Post and Pair* had a pair-royal of aces in his hat; his garment was done over with 'pairs and purs:' his squire carried a box with cards and counters. *New Year's Gift* was like a serving-man, in a blue coat, with an orange, and a sprig of rosemary gilt on his head; his hat is stuck full of brooches, and his collar is made of gingerbread: his



King Henry VIII Keeping Christmas at Greenwich
from *The Illustrated London News*, December 19, 1863
By John Gilbert

torch-bearer carries a 'marchpane' and a bottle of wine on each arm. *Mumming* wears a pied suit with a visor; his torch-bearer carries a box and rings it. *Wassail* is a neatly dressed maiden: her page bears a brown bowl, dressed with ribbons and rosemary, before her. *Offering* wears a short gown and carries a porter's staff; his torch-bearer goes before him with a basin and a wyth. Finally, *Baby-cock* is dressed like a little boy, in a fine long coat and a cap with ear-pieces, with bib, muck-ender, and a little dagger: his usher carries a great cake with a bean and a pea.

A Christmas masque was a sixteenth and seventeenth century intense and exciting bit of entertainment. In the

Christmas masque illustration, "Christmas Masque at the Court of Charles II," the main character is Father Christmas or Old Christmas. Father Christmas is bringing in the steaming wassail bowl of spiced ale, which was used to toast to everyone's good health. All the characters of the masque are trailing behind him. Some of the participants are disguised as grotesque monsters or animals. These kinds of disguises came from the pagan custom of celebrating on the kalends of January. It was a Roman New Year's celebration. One can feel the merriment in this illustration with its characters performing for their king.

The custom of mumming had its roots in the Roman



Christmas Masque at the Court of Charles II
from *The Illustrated London News*, December 24, 1859



Mummers at Christmas in the Olden Time
 from *The Illustrated London News*, December 22, 1866
 By E. N. Corbould

celebration called Saturnalia, which started December 17th and lasted for a week. During this celebration, men and women exchanged clothing and participated in wild merrymaking. The mummers in wild disguises would go from house-to-house or court-to-court, partaking in the Christmas cheer and merriment.

The illustration “Mummers at Christmas in the Olden Time” is a depiction of a scene, during the reign of Henry II in the twelfth century, of a lord being entertained by the mummers in his ancestral hall. The hall is adorned with tapestry, with its story of war; the

mummers are in full glee, with bells and dance, tabor (a small drum) and pipe, and with holly garnish and sounding horn. This depiction is referenced from an article accompanying the illustration in the December 22, 1866 issue of *The Illustrated London News*.

In Miss Baker’s *Glossary*, published in 1854, she describes the mummers, generally six or eight, who, during the Christmas holidays, starting on St. Thomas’s Eve (December 20th), travel into rural areas and perform a burlesque tragedy at houses where they expected to be rewarded with food and drink.



Christmas Mummings

from *The Illustrated London News*, December 21, 1861

By A. Hunt

Minstrels, who added music to the celebrations, sometimes accompanied them.

The following is excerpted from the article in *The Illustrated London News*:

In a beautiful manuscript in the Bodleian Library, written and illuminated in the reign of Edward III, are some spirited figures of mummers wearing the heads of animals among which the stag with branching horns is most prominent. Some of the heads are very grotesque, and remind one of the strange head-masks worn in the opening of pantomimes in the present day

[1866]. The olden performance seems to have consisted chiefly in dancing, and the mummers were usually attended by the minstrels, playing upon different kinds of musical instruments.

The Puritans of England did not celebrate Christmas; after all there was no reference to Christmas celebrations in the Bible. They also believed it to have had too many pagan roots. When the Puritans came to colonize America, they prohibited any form of celebration of the Christmas season. In fact, in Massachusetts in 1659 they passed a law that



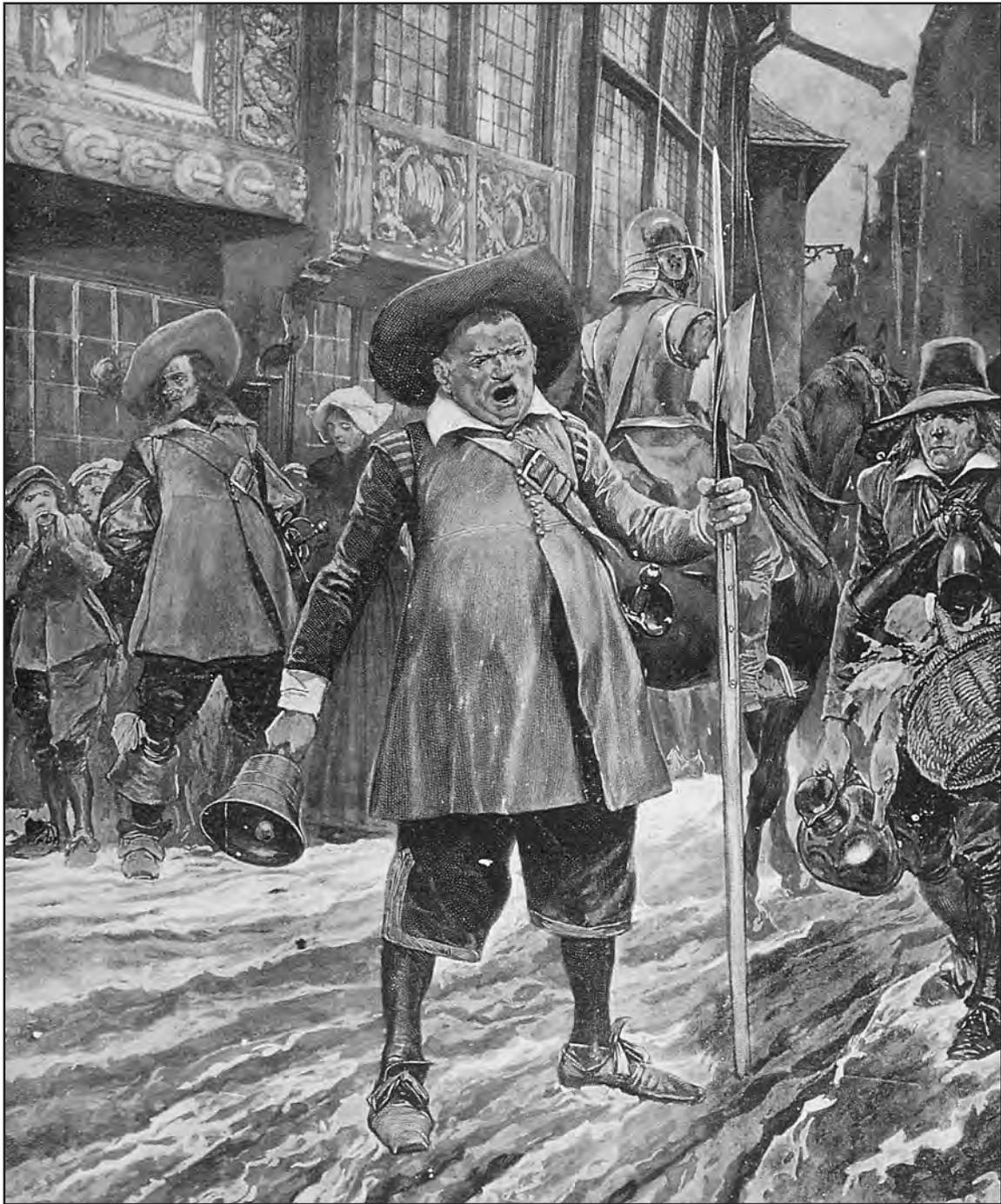
Christmas in New England-Colonial Times
from *Harper's Weekly*, December 25, 1875

fined anyone caught trying to participate in Christmas in any way. However, this law was rescinded twenty-two years later, but it was not until the nineteenth century that New Englanders started celebrating Christmas. Up until then the real seasonal celebration was on New Year's. With the exception, of course, of the German immigrants who celebrated Christmas in America as they did in their native Germany, on December 25th.

The Puritan in the *Harper's Weekly*, December 1875 illustration of "Christmas in New England" is admon-

ishing the children for gathering holly for the pagan Christmas tradition. Gathering holly dates back to the Roman Empire when the Romans gave holly and other evergreens to friends as gifts during the Saturnalia festival. The Druids, high priests of the Celts of northern Europe, also held it as sacred during the winter solstice. It stood for never-ending life.

In *The Illustrated London News* illustration of "No Christmas" the town crier is going through the villages announcing the formal prohibition of Christmas in England.



"No Christmas" A Puritan Prohibition of Junketings
from *The Illustrated London News*, December 29, 1906
By R. Caton Woodville