



The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday

By Stephen Nissenbaum

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Anyone who laments the excesses of Christmas might consider the Puritans of colonial Massachusetts: they simply outlawed the holiday. The Puritans had their reasons, since Christmas was once an occasion for drunkenness and riot, when poor "wassailers" extorted food and drink from the well-to-do. In this intriguing and innovative work of social history, Stephen Nissenbaum rediscovers Christmas's carnival origins and shows how it was transformed, during the nineteenth century, into a festival of domesticity and consumerism.

Drawing on a wealth of period documents and illustrations, Nissenbaum charts the invention of our current Yuletide traditions, from St. Nicholas to the Christmas tree and, perhaps most radically, the practice of giving gifts to children. Bursting with detail, filled with subversive readings of such seasonal classics as "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and "A Christmas Carol," *The Battle for Christmas* captures the glorious strangeness of the past even as it helps us better understand our present.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This scholarly analysis of our modern celebration of Christmas pulls together a thoroughly convincing case for the widely accepted notion that it is a 19th-century creation, indeed a deliberate reformation and taming of a holiday with wilder pagan origins. Christmas was set at December 25 in the fourth century, not for any biblical link with Christ's birth, but because the church hoped to annex and Christianize the existing midwinter pagan feast. This latter was based on the seasonal agricultural plenty, with the year's food supply newly in store, and nothing to do in the fields. It was a time of drinking and debauchery from the Roman Saturnalia to the English Mummers. The Victorians hijacked the holiday, and Victorian writers helped turn it into a feast of safe domesticity and a cacophonous chime of retail cash registers.

From Publishers Weekly

Christmas in America hasn't always been the benevolent, family-centered holiday we idealize. The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony so feared the day's association with pagan winter solstice revels, replete with public drunkenness, licentiousness and violence, that they banned Christmas celebrations. In this ever-surprising work, Nissenbaum (*Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America*), a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, conducts a vivid historical tour of the holiday's social evolution. Nissenbaum maintains that not until the 1820s in New York City, among the mercantile Episcopalian Knickerbockers, was Christmas as we know it celebrated. Before Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore ("A Visit from St. Nicholas") popularized the genteel version, he explains, the holiday was more of a raucous festival and included demands for tribute from the wealthy by roaming bands of lower-class extortionists. Peppered with analysis of period literature, art and journalism, Nissenbaum constructs his theory. Taming Christmas, he contends, was a way to contain the chaos of social dislocation in a developing consumer-capitalist culture. Later, under the influence of Unitarian writers, the Christmas season became a living object lesson in familial stability and charity, centering on the ideals of bourgeois childhood. From colonial New England, through 18th- and 19th-century New York's and Philadelphia's urban Yuletide contributions, to Christmas traditions in the antebellum South, Nissenbaum's excursion is fascinating, and will startle even those who thought they knew all there was to know about Christmas. Illustrations.

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From Library Journal

Christmas celebrations as we know them today with trees, gift giving, and Santa Claus are a recent phenomenon. Puritans in New England prohibited Christmas celebrations because they inevitably led to drunken brawls. Temperance groups helped to take celebrations from the streets into the homes while encouraging quiet, sober socializing. Merchants promoted this trend toward domestic celebrations and began the commercialism of Christmas prevalent today. The Christmas tree and Santa Claus were holiday symbols made popular to deal with the rampant materialism of the holiday. Nissenbaum (*Sex, Diet and Debility in Jacksonian America*, 1980) does a thorough job of tracing Christmas in America, emphasizing the recurrent theme of the haves giving to the have-nots. His detailed, unusual history of Christmas in the American social milieu will appeal to academic and large public libraries. —Grant A. Fredericksen, Illinois Prairie Dist. P.L., Metamora

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Aaron Tyler:

As people who live in often the modest era should be upgrade about what going on or information even knowledge to make all of them keep up with the era and that is always change and move forward. Some of you maybe may update themselves by reading books. It is a good choice for yourself but the problems coming to anyone is you don't know what kind you should start with. This The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday is our recommendation to cause you to keep up with the world. Why, because this book serves what you want and want in this era.

Daisy Richardson:

People live in this new morning of lifestyle always attempt to and must have the extra time or they will get large amount of stress from both everyday life and work. So , whenever we ask do people have extra time, we will say absolutely indeed. People is human not only a robot. Then we consult again, what kind of activity have you got when the spare time coming to anyone of course your answer will certainly unlimited right. Then ever try this one, reading ebooks. It can be your alternative throughout spending your spare time, the actual book you have read is definitely The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday.

Timothy Grill:

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