

# The People's Christmas: Art, Tradition and Climate Change

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Theme: [History](#)

*COME, bring with a noise,  
My merry, merry boys,  
The Christmas log to the firing ;  
While my good dame, she  
Bids ye all be free ;  
And drink to your heart's desiring.*

*With the last year's brand  
Light the new block, and  
For good success in his spending  
On your psaltries play,  
That sweet luck may  
Come while the log is a-teending.*

*Ceremonies for [Christmas](#) by Robert Herrick  
(1591-1674)  
(Psaltries: a kind of guitar, Teending: kindling)*

No season has so much association with music as the mid-winter, Christmas celebrations. The aural pleasure associated with the tuneful music and carols of Christmas has been reduced in recent years by the over-playing of same in shopping malls, banks, airports etc. yet it is still enjoyed and the popularity of choirs has not diminished.

However, the visual depictions of mid-winter, Christmas celebration have also been popular since the 19th century through books, cinema and television.

The depictions of Christmas range from religious iconography through to the highly commercialised red-suited, rosy-cheeked, rotund Santa Claus.

Yet, between these two extremes of the sombre sacred and the commercialised secular lies a popular iconography best expressed in the realm of fine art and illustration. Down through the centuries the pagan aspects of mid-winter celebration and Christmas such as the Christmas tree, the Yule log, wassailing and carol singing along with winter sports such as ice skating and skiing have been depicted by many different artists. These paintings and illustrations are also beloved for the visual pleasure they afford.

More importantly, they show aspects of Christmas which are becoming more important now in our time of climate change. That is, their depictions of our past respect for nature.

In recent times, as we gradually learned to harness nature for our own ends through

developments in science we also became less and less worried about the vicissitudes of nature. Our forebears, however, knew all too well hunger and cold in the depths of winter and in their own religious and superstitious ways tried to attenuate the worst of winter hardship through traditions and practices which would ensure a bountiful proceeding year.

For example, the Christmas Tree is a descendant of the sacred tree which was respected as a powerful symbol of growth, death and rebirth. Evergreen trees took on meanings associated with symbols of the eternal, immortality or fertility (See my article on Christmas Trees [here](#)). Evergreen boughs and then eventually whole evergreen trees were brought into the house to ward off evil influences. Burning the Yule log was an important rite to help strengthen the weakened sun of midwinter.



The Christmas Tree (1911)  
Albert Chevallier [Taylor](#) (1862-1925)

Wassailing, or blessing of the fruit trees, is also considered a form of tree worship and involves drinking and singing to the health of the trees in the hope that they will provide a bountiful harvest in the autumn. Mumming has also been associated with the spirit of vegetation or the tree-spirit and is believed to have developed into the practice of caroling even though mumming is alive and well in many places in Ireland and England. All these nature-based practices seem to have been banned by the church at different times and then gradually integrated into church rituals (presumably because the church was not able to stop them).

Therefore our relationship with nature was demonstrated through winter activities both inside and outside the home. Outside activities consisted of ice skating, caroling, wassailing, bringing home the Yule log and the Christmas tree. Inside activities consisted of large gatherings of family and friends eating, drinking and parlour games. The indulgence of Christmas activities was balanced by an overriding concern that nature had been propitiated or appeased.

One aspect the many depictions of these activities have in common is the festive gathering of large groups of people. Modern depictions of Christmas tend to emphasise the nuclear family gathered around the Christmas tree with the focus on what Santa brought for the children. Thus Christmas today is experienced as a more isolated experience than in the past. The decline of the nuclear family in recent decades with single parent families, divorce, cohabitation, etc has created extended family gatherings more akin to the past village groupings. Outdoor activities have also declined though one can still hear carollers singing on occasion, though still common in city streets.

Many artists of over the years have tried to depict the essence of Christmas and midwinter traditions (see my article on midwinter traditions [here](#)) and thus helped to keep them in our consciences.

Let's look at some of the illustrations and paintings that depict mid-winter festivities over the centuries.



[Carole](#)

## Carols

Poetry and song are our earliest records of Christmas celebrations. According to Clement Miles the word "‘carol’ had at first a secular or even pagan significance: in twelfth-century France it was used to describe the amorous song-dance which hailed the coming of spring; in Italian it meant a ring- or song-dance; while by English writers from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century it was used chiefly of singing joined with dancing, and had no necessary connection with religion." [1] The word carol itself comes from the Old French word *carole*, a circle dance accompanied by singers (Latin: *choraula*). Carols were very popular as dance songs and processional songs sung during festivals. In medieval times the Church referred to caroling as "sinful traffic" and issued decrees against it in 1209 A.D. and 1435 A.D. [According](#) to Tristram P. Coffin in his *Book of Christmas Folklore*, "For seven centuries a formidable series of denunciations and prohibitions was fired forth by Catholic authorities, warning Everyman to 'flee wicked and lecherous songs, dancings, and leapings'" (p98).



[Banqueting](#) Hall

## Mumming

The processional aspects of caroling are linked to mumming, an ancient tradition which was mentioned in early ecclesiastical condemnations. During the Kalends of January a sermon ascribed to St Augustine of Hippo writes that the heathen reverses the order of things as some of these 'miserable' men "are clothed in the hides of cattle; others put on the heads of beasts, rejoicing and exulting that they have so transformed themselves into the shapes of animals that they no longer appear to be men ... How vile further, it is that those who have been born men are clothed in women's dresses, and by the vilest change effeminate their manly strength by taking on the forms of girls, blushing not to clothe their warlike arms in women's garments; they have bearded faces, and yet they wish to appear women." [2] The original idea of wearing the hides of animals, Miles writes, may have sprung "from the primitive man's belief 'that in order to produce the great phenomena of nature on which his life depended he had only to imitate them'. [3]

Indeed, in Ireland, mumming is a tradition that is still going strong. In a recent article in *The Fingal Independent*, Sean McPhilibin [notes](#) that "In North County Dublin the masking would be traditionally made from straw and would have been big straw hats that cover the face and come down to the shoulders." McPhilibin also states that mumming was "a mid-winter custom that in Ireland and North County Dublin and in parts of England as well, the masking element is accompanied by a play. So there's a play in it with set characters. It's a play where the principal action takes place between two protagonists - a hero and a villain. The hero slays the villain and the villain is revived by a doctor who has a magical cure and after that happens there's a succession of other characters called in, each of whom has a rhyme. So every character has a rhyme, written in rhyming couplets.[...] The other thing to say about it is that you find these same type of characters all across Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, over into Slovenia and elsewhere."

James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, discusses at length many international examples of people being completely covered in straw, branches or leaves as incarnations of the

tree-spirit or the spirit of vegetation, such as Green George, Jack-in-the-Green, the Little Leaf Man, and the Leaf King.[4]



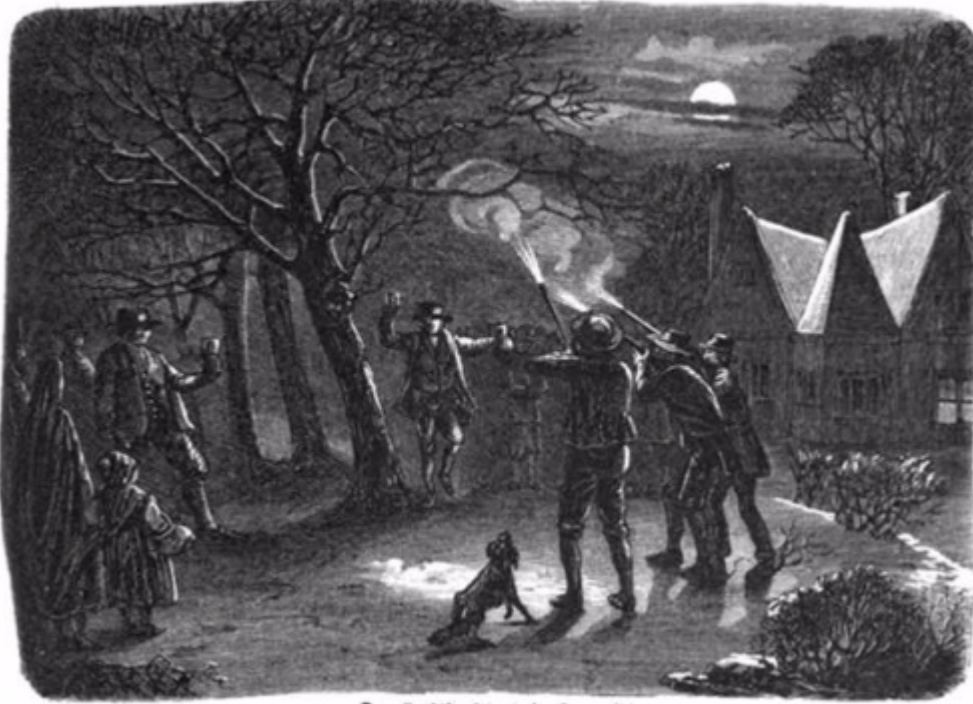
### [Wassail](#)

Wassail

The [word](#) wassail comes from Old English was *hál*, related to the Anglo-Saxon greeting *wes þú hál*, meaning “be you hale”—i.e., “be healthful” or “be healthy”.

There are two variations of wassailing: going from house to house singing and sharing a wassail bowl containing a drink made from mulled cider made with sugar, cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg, topped with slices of toast as sops or going from orchard to orchard blessing the fruit trees, drinking and singing to the health of the trees in the hope that they will provide a bountiful harvest in the autumn. They sing, shout, bang pots and pans and fire shotguns to wake the tree spirits and frighten away evil demons.

The [wassail](#) itself “is a hot, mulled punch often associated with Yuletide, drunk from a ‘wassailing bowl’. The earliest versions were warmed mead into which roasted crab apples were dropped and burst to create a drink called ‘lambswol’ drunk on Lammas day, still known in Shakespeare’s time. Later, the drink evolved to become a mulled cider made with sugar, cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg, topped with slices of toast as sops and drunk from a large communal bowl.” (See traditional wassail recipe [here](#))



[Wassail](#)

### The Lord of Misrule

The [Lord](#) of Misrule was a common tradition that existed up to the early nineteenth century whereby a peasant or sub-deacon appointed to be in charge of Christmas revelries, thus the normal societal roles were reversed temporarily. The Lord of [Misrule](#) “would invite traveling actors to perform Mummer’s plays, he would host elaborate masques, hold large feasts and arrange the procession of the annual Yule Log.”



[Mummers](#) by Robert Seymour, 1836



The Mount Vernon Yule Log  
Jean Leon Gerome [Ferris](#) (1863–1930)

### The Bean King

During the the Twelfth Night [feast](#) a cake or pie would be served which had a bean baked inside. The person who got the slice with the bean would be 'crowned' the Bean King with a paper crown and appointed various court officials. A mock respect would be shown when the king drank and all the party would shout "the king drinks". Robert Herrick mentions this in his [poem](#) *Twelfth Night: or, King and Queen*:

"NOW, now the mirth comes  
With the cake full of plums,  
Where bean's the king of the sport here ;  
Beside we must know,  
The pea also  
Must revel, as queen, in the court here."



Twelfth-night (The King Drinks)  
David [Teniers](#) the Younger (1610-1690)



The King Drinks (c.1640)  
Jacob (Jacques) [Jordaens](#) (1593-1678)





Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall (1838)  
Daniel [Maclise](#) (1806-1870)

### Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall (1838)

Daniel Maclise's painting *Merry Christmas in the Baron's Hall* (1838) contains many aspects of the traditional Christmas festivities. The Lord of Misrule stands in the centre holding his staff and leading the procession of musicians and carolers coming down the stairs. Father Christmas, 'ivy crown'd', sits in front of the wassail bowl and is surrounded by mummers (the Dragon and St George sit side by side) and local people. On the left side of the picture we see a group of people playing a parlour game called Hunt the Slipper.

Maclise was influenced by Sir Walter Scott's poem *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*, published in 1808. *Marmion* is a historical romance in verse of 16th-century Britain, ending with the Battle of Flodden in 1513. [Marmion](#) has a section referring to Christmas festivities:

"The wassel round, in good brown bowls,  
Garnish'd with ribbons, blithely trowls.  
There the huge sirloin reek'd; hard by  
Plum-porridge stood, and Christmas pie:  
Nor fail'd old Scotland to produce,  
At such high tide, her savoury goose.  
Then came the merry maskers in,  
And carols roar'd with blithesome din;  
If unmelodious was the song,  
It was a hearty note, and strong.  
Who lists may in their mumming see  
Traces of ancient mystery;  
White shirts supplied the masquerade,  
And smutt'd cheeks the visors made;  
But, O! what maskers, richly dight,  
Can boast of bosoms half so light!"

(See full text [here](#))

It seems that Maclise was also taken enough by the poem to pen his own poem about his painting which was published in *Fraser's Magazine* for May in 1838. The poem is titled: *Christmas Revels: An Epic Rhapsody in Twelve Duans* and was published under the pseudonym, Alfred Croquis, Esq. The painting includes over one hundred figures covering

many different traditions of Christmas and in his poem Maclise describes most of the activities taking place as some these excerpts from the poem demonstrate:

“Before him, ivied, wand in hand,  
Misrule’s mock lordling takes his stand;  
[...]  
Drummers and pipers next appear,  
And carollers in motley gear;  
Stewards, butlers, cooks, bring up the rear.  
Some sit apart from all the rest,  
And these for merry masque are drest;  
But now they play another part,  
Distinct from any mumming art.  
[...]  
First, Father Christmas, ivy-crown’d,  
With false beard white, and true paunch round,  
Rules o’er the mighty wassail-bowl,  
And brews a flood to stir the soul:  
That bowl’s the source of all their pleasures,  
That bowl supplies their lesser measures”

(See full text [here](#))

## Winter Landscapes



Winter Landscape near a Village  
Hendrick [Avercamp](#) (1585 (bapt.) - 1634 (buried))



The Hunters in the Snow (1565)  
Pieter [Bruegel](#) the Elder (c.1525-1530-1569)



Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap (1565)  
Pieter [Bruegel](#) the Elder (c.1525-1530-1569)

These famous winter landscape paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, such as *The Hunters in the Snow* and *Winter Landscape with Skaters and Bird Trap* are all thought to have been painted in 1565. Hendrick Avercamp also made many snow and ice landscapes coinciding with the Little Ice Age. Three particularly cold intervals have been [described](#) as the Little Ice Age: “one beginning about 1650, another about 1770, and the last in 1850, all separated by intervals of slight warming”.

Outdoor Activities: Skating, Markets and Fairs



Patineurs au bois de Boulogne (1868)  
Pierre-Auguste [Renoir](#) (1841-1919)



Russian Christmas  
Leon Schulman [Gaspard](#) (1882-1964)



The Christmas Market in Berlin (1892)  
Franz [Skarbina](#) (1849-1910)

### Nature-Based vs Anti-Nature

Polydore Vergil (c.1470–1555), the Italian [humanist](#) scholar, historian, priest and diplomat, who spent most of his life in England, wrote this about Christmas: “Dancing, masques, mummeries, stage-plays, and other such Christmas disorders now in use with the Christians, were derived from these Roman Saturnalian and Bacchanalian festivals; which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them.”[5]

However, Clement Miles takes a more positive view of these traditions. He writes: “The heathen folk festivals absorbed by the Nativity feast were essentially life-affirming, they expressed the mind of men who said “yes” to this life, who valued earthly good things. On the other hand Christianity, at all events in its intensest form, the religion of the monks, was at bottom pessimistic as regards this earth, and valued it only as a place of discipline for the life to come; it was essentially a religion of renunciation that said “no” to the world.” [6]

Now we have a religion of consumerism and mass consumption with Santa Claus as its main protagonist. The one extreme of the sacred St Nicholas has flipped over to the other extreme of Santa, the corporate saint. Either way the pious and the consumer pose no threat to the status quo.

### Catharsis

There is no doubt that the Christmas festivities were used by elites as a form of social catharsis. The Lord of Misrule and the Bean King, encouraged by raucous mummers and lively caroling, allowed the lowly to throw off pent-up aggression and feel what it was like to be in a position of power for a very short period of time. This brief social revolution was an important part of midwinter celebrations such as the Roman Kalends and the Feast of Fools. Libanius (c.314–392 or 393), the fourth century Greek philosopher, wrote: “The Kalends festival banishes all that is connected with toil, and allows men to give themselves up to

undisturbed enjoyment. From the minds of young people it removes two kinds of dread: the dread of the schoolmaster and the dread of the stern pedagogue. The slave also it allows, so far as possible, to breathe the air of freedom.” [7]

The survivals of an ancient time when man and nature were at peace (see article [here](#)), and not enslaved and forced to overexploit our natural resources for the benefit of the few, were allowed to resurface briefly at the time of year when the labouring classes were mostly idle and, once sated, posed little threat. Yet, retaining the memory of past respectful attitudes towards nature and old traditions of social upheaval will go a long way towards healing our damaged home into the future.

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#### Notes

[1] Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance*, Dover Publications, 2017, p47.

[2] Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*, p170.

[3] Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*, p163.

[4] James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Wordsworth, 1994. See: The tree-spirit p297, Green George p126, Jack-in-the-Green p128, the Little Leaf Man p128 and the Leaf King p130.

[5] Hazlitt, W. Carew, *Faiths and Folklore of the British Isles*, 2 vols, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1965, p118-19

[6] Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*, p25.

[7] Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*, p168.

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