

# A Brief History of Christmas

## Part Two: Nineteenth Century Renaissance and Twentieth Century Flourishing

### The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance

- In the span of time between the English Civil War and the War of 1812, Christmas was on a decided decline, celebrated among Tories in the English countryside (and celebrated more like modern Mardi Gras than like 21st-century-style Christmas) but considered too Catholic in London and too English in America.
- Between 1820 and 1843, three English-language publications started Christmas's meteoric comeback: *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon* by Washington Irving (1820), "A Visit from St. Nicholas," an poem published anonymously (1823), and "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens (1843). All three works brought the Christmas customs of the landed English aristocracy to the people of the cities (and to America, where English books were very popular) by means of publication in magazines.
- That two of the world's first purpose-built shopping malls, the Burlington Arcade in London and the Arcade in Providence, Rhode Island, appeared in 1819 and 1828, respectively, is no coincidence.
- By 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe (of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fame) had published a short story lamenting the commercialization of the Christmas season.

### The Earliest Christmas Movies

- As early as 1897 (that is to say, 10 years before programmed radio broadcasting began), people were watching silent movies about Santa Claus.
- The first Nativity movie hit the silver screen in 1898 in Paris.
- In 1901 the first "A Christmas Carol" adaptation hit the silent screen.
- The Great Depression, which did not slow down movie production and did not slow down ticket sales much, saw releases like *The Shanty where Santy Claus Lives* and "Mickey's Orphans," in which Walt Disney's famous mouse provides presents for poor kittens. The Depression also provided the occasion for the beginning of the Radio City Christmas Spectacular, the famous annual Rockettes show.

### Christmas Musicals, the Famous Christmas Films, and Christmas TV Specials

- When Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire starred in their 1942 movie adaptation of Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn*, the Christmas movie hit a new level of popularity. You might have heard the film's signature song, "White Christmas." (No, the song did not debut in 1954's *White Christmas*. You can win some Trivial Pursuit games knowing that.)
- 1944 saw the rise of the Christmas animated movie with "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." (Gene Autry recorded the song in 1949, and the longer version that still airs on TV hit the airwaves in 1964.) Charlie Brown's Christmas special came out in 1965.
- *It's a Wonderful Life* hit cinemas in 1946.
- In 1951, *Dragnet*, according to imdb.com, released the first television Christmas special with "A Big .22 Rifle for Christmas." *Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Honeymooners* soon followed suit.
- Alastair Sim's version of Scrooge came out in 1951. It remained the definitive version until George C. Scott's 1984 version. (Some, of course, still prefer the 1983 Disney version and the 1992 Muppet Christmas Carol.)
- *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* came out in 1955.
- 1966 was the television musical debut of the Grinch. Boris Karloff did the narration and the Grinch's voice but not the famous song "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch."

### Implications, Now that I've Run out of Room

- Much of what we think of as American Christmas came about in a two-way relationship with novels, movies, and radio—there was not a clean, one-way road from traditions to movies about the traditions or vice versa.
- Just about all of our modern Christmas images flow from the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival of Christmas more than from textual records of ancient or medieval traditions.
- As we noted last time, Christmas is a complex thing—there's not really much of a "pure Christmas to which we can return so much as the potential, in the midst of all this mess, of inventing good ways of doing Christmas.