

*Christmas in Early New England,
1620–1820: Puritanism, Popular Culture,
and the Printed Word*

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As I was completing my book manuscript, *The Battle for Christmas*, published in late 1996 by Knopf, I was struck by the number of ways that print culture was enmeshed in an ongoing struggle over the significance of December 25 for early New Englanders. Should the occasion be observed at all? Was it sacred, secular, or even profane? Which elements of the holiday, if any, could be permitted? and which ones, if not all, had to be rooted out?

The Puritans' eagerness to suppress the celebration of Christmas stemmed in large part, as I knew, from their desire to avoid the rowdy disorder that traditionally accompanied the rituals of carnival at this season of the year, rituals that involved role inversions, heavy drinking, and sexual license. So harshly did the Puritans think of Christmas that in Massachusetts it was actually illegal for several decades to celebrate the holiday. And by standard scholarly reckoning, Christmas did not become a real part of New England life until the middle of the nineteenth century.

This essay is doubly indebted to the American Antiquarian Society. Virtually all the research on which it is based was done at AAS—and it was done with time provided by an AAS-NEH fellowship for the year 1991–92. I was helped, as always, by AAS staff, a group whose bibliographic and social skills are just as extraordinary as the library's holdings. In addition to the staff, I would like to thank Robert Arner of the University of Cincinnati, whose own AAS fellowship chanced happily to converge with the first five months of mine, and who kept telling me about bits of evidence—the 1688 Tulley almanac, for example—which challenged my easy assumption that Christmas went unacknowledged in early New England. Once I was on to the scent, other AAS fellows offered help: Cornelia Dayton, Catherine Brekus, and Charles Hanson by passing along further pieces of evidence; Nym Cooke by vetting what I wrote about church music; and Ann Fairfax Withington by reading an early version of my prose with her unerring ear for jargon and junk—and by offering me the special gift of her friendship.

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What I did not expect to find, therefore, was that the success of the Puritans in suppressing the holiday was neither complete nor long-lasting. But that is just what I found. From the earliest years, Christmas reinserted itself into New England society, at first at its margins but then—well before the end of the seventeenth century and with a great upsurge in the middle of the eighteenth—in its very mainstream. By the beginning of the nineteenth century an influential segment of the Congregational ministry itself was prepared to call publicly for the formal, ceremonial observance of Christmas in the region's established churches.

The stories I unearthed told of a set of complex and overlapping—and sometimes antagonistic—relationships: between popular and elite culture, and between the oral and written worlds. In each of these relationships, a key role was played by the printed word. Much of my evidence comes from three particular literary genres: almanacs, hymnals, and children's primers. Significantly, these may have been the three most widely read genres of all—the very places at which official and unofficial culture were most closely intertwined.

The printed word provided me with evidence of the way Christmas emerged in early New England—often the only evidence available, or at least the best. Thus, for example, the printing (and reprinting) in late-eighteenth-century New England of Christmas church music, or of broadsides (known as 'carriers' addresses') in which newsboys wished their patrons a merry Christmas—and asked for money in return—made it clear to me that by this time Christmas was an assumed element in the seasonal lives of many New Englanders.

But I also knew that neither the church music nor the carriers' addresses emerged out of thin air. Christmas music had long involved a powerful oral tradition, the tradition of rowdy wassailing, in which roaming bands of young people went around town singing for drinks. And the carriers' addresses, too, with their promise of good will in exchange for a small gift, were part of a longstanding tradition of begging (often aggressive begging) at Christmastime. Both these older popular traditions, I was persuaded, had taken early root on the fringes of New England's official culture. In each case, the transformation of the old tradition into printed form seemed to suggest both a continuity with older rituals and a transformation of those same rituals. What was especially striking was that in both cases, the rituals had now—for the first time—come under the partial control of a more respectable, even 'official' culture: a culture represented by music-masters and clergymen in the one instance, and by newspaper editors and printers in the other. In both

cases, too, it was access to the printing press that allowed the change to take place.

So it turned out that the printed word (or, on occasion, the printed score) acted not simply as *evidence* of the story of Christmas in early New England but also, more problematically and also more intriguingly, as an active participant, a *player* in that story. Print *produced* change as well as reflecting it. More accurately put, it was not print itself that was an agent of change; it was those individuals and groups who held the power to use it. Over the two centuries between 1620 and 1820 the battle for Christmas was both reflected and waged in a series of episodes in which the printing press played a central role.

I have traced almost all of these episodes from the rich collections of broadsides, almanacs, hymnals and tunebooks, children's primers, tracts, sermons, and newspapers in the American Antiquarian Society. As I worked to understand these printed sources, some of them rare and hard to find, I was struck by how the lively interdisciplinary study of the history of the book offers a new way to piece together the fascinating and often turbulent story of Christmas in early New England.

THE PURITAN WAR ON MISRULE

IN New England, for the first two centuries of white settlement, most people did not celebrate Christmas. In fact, the holiday was systematically suppressed by Puritans in the colonial period, and largely ignored by their descendants. It was actually *illegal* to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 (the fine was five shillings). Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did Christmas gain legal recognition as an official public holiday in New England. Writing near the end of that century, one New Englander (he had been born in 1822) recalled going to school as a boy on Christmas day, adding that even as late as 1850, in Worcester, Massachusetts, 'The courts were in session on that day, the markets were open, and I doubt if there had ever been a religious service on Christmas Day, unless it were Sunday, in that town.' As late as 1952, one writer recalled being told by his grandparents that New England mill-workers risked losing their jobs if they arrived late at work on December 25, and that sometimes 'factory owners would change the starting hours

on Christmas day to five o'clock or some equally early hour in order that workers who wanted to attend a church service would have to forego, or be dismissed for being late for work.¹

As we shall see, much of this is misleading or exaggerated. The New England states did grant legal recognition to Christmas only in the middle of the nineteenth century—but that was when most of the other states did, too. There *were* Christmas-day religious services in Worcester before 1850. And nineteenth-century factory owners had their own reasons for treating Christmas as a regular working day, reasons that had to do more with industrial capitalism than with Puritan theology. Still, the fact remains that those factory owners were indeed operating within a long New England tradition of opposition to Christmas. As early as 1621, just one year after the 'Pilgrims' landed on Plymouth Rock, their governor, William Bradford, found that some of the colony's new residents tried to take the day off. Bradford ordered them right back to work. And in 1659 the Massachusetts General Court did in fact declare the celebration of Christmas to be a criminal offense.

Why? What accounts for this strange hostility? As it happens, the Puritans themselves had a plain reason for what they tried to do, and it happens to be a perfectly good one: There is no Biblical or historical reason to place the birth of Jesus on December 25. True, the Gospel of Luke tells the familiar story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth—how the shepherds were living with their flocks in the fields of Judea, and how, one night, an angel appeared

1. James H. Barnett, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 19–20; Edward Everett Hale, 'Christmas in Boston,' *The New England Magazine* n.s., 1 (1889): 356–57; Francis X. Weiser, *The Christmas Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), 48–49. See also Hale's autobiography, *A New England Boyhood* (New York, 1893), 117. The idea that Christmas was universally rejected by the Puritans, and that it was not practiced in New England until the nineteenth century, has been casually accepted in virtually all the relevant scholarship. This is even true of the best article on the subject: Ivor Debenham Spencer, 'Christmas, the Upstart,' in *New England Quarterly* 8 (1935), 356–83. See also Katherine van Etten Lyford, 'The Victory of the Christmas Keepers,' *Yankee* (Dec. 1964), 76–77, 102–105; and Katherine Lambert Richards, *How Christmas Came to the Sunday-Schools: The Observance of Christmas in the Protestant Church Schools of the United States* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1934). A recent and notable exception is Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, and the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679–1749* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

to them and said, 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.' But nowhere in this account is there any indication of the exact date, or even the general season, on which 'this day' fell. Puritans were fond of saying that if God had intended for the anniversary of Christ's nativity to be observed, He would surely have given some indication when that anniversary fell. (Puritans were also fond of arguing that the weather in Judea during late December was simply too cold for shepherds to be living outdoors with their flocks.)

It was only in the fourth century that the Church officially decided to observe Christmas on December 25. And the December 25 date was chosen not for any religious reasons, but simply because it happened to mark the approximate arrival of the winter solstice, an event celebrated long before Christianity. The Puritans were correct when they pointed out—and they pointed it out often—that Christmas was nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer. The Reverend Increase Mather of Boston, for example, accurately observed in 1687 that the early Christians who first observed the nativity on December 25 did not do so 'thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian [ones].'²

Most cultures (outside the tropics) have long marked with rituals involving light and greenery those dark weeks of December when the daylight wanes, all culminating in the winter solstice—the return of sun and light and life itself. Thus Chanukah, the 'feast of lights.' And thus the Yule log, the candles, the holly, the mistletoe, even the Christmas tree—pagan traditions all, with no direct connection to the birth of Jesus.³

2. Increase Mather, *A Testimony against Several Prophane and Superstitious Customs, Now Practiced by Some in New-England* (London, 1687), 35.

3. An Anglican minister in northern England, writing as early as 1725, acknowledged the pagan origins of these practices. Yule logs and candles, for example, were for pagans 'an Emblem of the Sun, and the lengthening of Days,' and they originated in an effort 'to Illuminate the House, and turn the Night into Day.' But he speculated that it became associated with the nativity of Jesus for Christian reasons—'a Symbol of that Light which was that Night born into the World.' He argued that 'Light' has been associated with many things, and that one of these is that it has become 'an emblem . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

But the Puritans had another reason for suppressing Christmas. The holiday they suppressed was not what *we* probably mean when we think of a 'traditional' Christmas. As we shall see, it involved behavior that most of us would find offensive and even shocking today—rowdy public displays of excessive eating and drinking, the mockery of established authority, aggressive begging (often combined with the threat of doing harm), even the boisterous invasion of wealthy homes.

It may seem odd that Christmas was ever celebrated in such a fashion. But there was a good reason. December was the major 'punctuation mark' in the rhythmic cycle of work in northern agricultural societies, a time when there was a minimum of work to be performed. The deep freeze of midwinter had not yet set in; the work of gathering the harvest and preparing it for winter was done; and there was plenty of newly-fermented beer or wine as well as meat from freshly slaughtered animals—meat that had to be consumed before it spoiled. St. Nicholas, for example, is associated with the Christmas season chiefly because his 'name-day,' December 6, coincided in many European countries with the end of the harvest and slaughter season.⁴

In our own day, the Christmas season begins for many people as early as the day after Thanksgiving, and continues to January 1. But our culture is by no means the first in which 'Christmas' has meant an entire *season*, rather than a single day. In early modern Europe, the Christmas season might begin as early as late November, and continue well past New Year's. (We still sing about 'the twelve days of Christmas,' and the British still celebrate 'Twelfth Night.') In England, the season might open as early as mid-December, and last until the first Monday after January 6

Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares* (Newcastle, 1725), 127, 128, 130, 134. The best account of the non-Christian origins of Christmas rituals remains Clement A. Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan* (London, 1912); reissued as *Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), 159–360 *passim*.

4. *Ibid.*, 173–4. According to the Reverend Henry Bourne, many in England and Scotland continued the season as late as Candlemas (Feb. 2). Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares*, 156.

(dubbed 'Plough Monday,' the return to work), or later still.⁵ But it isn't very useful, finally, to try to pin down the exact boundaries of a 'real' Christmas in times past, or the precise rituals of some 'traditional' holiday season. Those boundaries and rituals changed over time and varied from one place to another. What is more useful, in any one setting, is to look for the dynamics of an ongoing contest, a push and a pull—sometimes a real 'battle'—between those who wished to expand the season and those who wished to contract and restrict it. (Nowadays, the contest may pit merchants on one side—with children as their allies—against those grown-ups who resent seeing Christmas displays that seem to go up earlier and earlier with each passing year.)

In early modern Europe, roughly the years between 1500 and 1800, the Christmas season was a time to let off steam—and to gorge on food and drink. It is difficult today to understand what this seasonal feasting was like. For most of the readers of this essay, good food is available in sufficient quantity, and it can be found the year round. But early modern Europe was above all a world of scarcity. Few people ate much good food at all, and for everyone the availability of fresh food was seasonally determined. Late summer and early fall would have been the time of fresh vegetables, but December was the season—the only season—for fresh meat. Animals could not be slaughtered until the weather was cold enough to insure that the meat would not go bad; and any meat saved for the rest of the year would have to be preserved (and rendered less palatable) by salting. December was also the month when the year's supply of beer or wine was ready to drink. And for farmers, too, this period marked the start of a season of leisure. Little wonder, then, that this was a time of celebratory excess.

Excess took many forms. Revelling could easily become rowdiness; making merry could edge into making trouble. Christmas was a season of 'misrule,' a time when ordinary behavioral re-

5. See, for example, John Ashton, *A Right Merrie Christmase!!!: The Story of Christ-Tide* (London and New York, 1894), 6–8, 45, 246–50. The situation was similar in colonial America: see Barnett, *The American Christmas*, 9, 11.

straints could be violated with impunity. It was part of what one historian has called 'the world of carnival.' (The term *carnival* is rooted in the Latin *carne* and *vale*—'farewell to flesh.' And 'flesh' refers here not only to meat but also to sex, to activities both carnivorous and carnal.) Christmas 'misrule' meant that not only hunger but also anger and lust could be expressed in public. (It was no accident, wrote Increase Mather, that 'December was called *Mensis Genialis*, the Voluptuous Month.'⁶) Often people blackened their faces, or disguised themselves as animals, or cross-dressed, thus operating under a protective cloak of anonymity. The late nineteenth-century historian John Ashton reports one episode from Lincolnshire in 1637, in which the man selected by a crowd of revelers as 'Lord of Misrule' was publicly given a 'wife,' in a ceremony led by a man dressed as a minister (he read the entire marriage service from the Book of Common Prayer). Thereupon, as Ashton noted in proper Victorian language, 'the affair was carried to its utmost extent.'⁷

Episodes like these offered another reason, and a deeper one, for the Puritans' objection to Christmas. Here is how the Reverend Increase Mather of Boston put it in 1687:

The generality of Christmas-keepers observe that festival after such a manner as is highly dishonourable to the name of Christ. How few are there comparatively that spend those holidays (as they are called) after an holy manner. But they are consumed in Compotations, in Interludes, in playing at Cards, in Revellings, in excess of Wine, in mad Mirth. . . .

And Increase Mather's son Cotton Mather put it this way in 1712: 'the Feast of Christ's Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty . . . by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling. . . .'⁸

6. I. Mather, *Testimony*, 25. For perspectives on the world of carnival, see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 199-203; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968); and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 171-90.

7. Ashton, *Right Merrie Christmasse*, 125-26.

8. I. Mather, *Testimony*, 36; Cotton Mather, *Grace Defended; A Censure on the Ungodliness*,

Even an Anglican minister, a man who *approved* of 'keeping' Christmas (as the term had it), acknowledged the truth of the Puritans' charges. Writing in 1725, the Reverend Henry Bourne of Newcastle, England, called the way most people commonly behaved at the Christmas season 'a Scandal to Religion, and an encouraging of Wickedness.' Bourne admitted that for Englishmen of the lower orders the Christmas season was merely 'a pretense for Drunkenness, and Rioting, and Wantonness.' And the season went on far too long: Bourne claimed that most Englishmen chose to celebrate it well past the official period of twelve days, right up to 'Candlemas' Day on February 2. For that entire forty-day period, it was common 'for Men to rise early in the Morning, that they may follow strong Drink, and continue untill Night, till Wine inflame them.'

Bourne singled out two particularly dangerous seasonal practices. The first was mumming; the second (strange to modern readers) was the singing of Christmas carols. Mumming usually involved 'a changing of Clothes between Men and Women; who when dressed in each others habits, go from one Neighbor's house to another . . . and make merry with them in disguise.' Bourne proposed that 'this Custom, which is still so Common among us at this Season of the Year, [be] laid aside; as it is the Occasion of much Uncleaness and Debauchery.' As for singing Christmas carols, that practice was a 'disgrace,' since it was 'generally done, in the midst of Rioting and Chambering, and Wantonness.'⁹ ('Chambering' was a common euphemism for fornication.) It was another Anglican cleric, the sixteenth-century

By which the Glorious Grace of God, is too commonly Abused (Boston, 1712), 20. Increase Mather cited earlier authorities to confirm his point: "the Feast of Christ's nativity is attended with such profaneness, as that it deserves the name of Saturn's Mass, or of Bacchus his Mass, or if you will, the Devil's Mass, rather than to have the holy name of Christ put upon it." William Perkins argued that 'the Feast of Christ's Nativity (commonly so called) is not spent in praising God, but in Revelling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, Mumming, and in all licentious Liberty for the most part, as though it were some Heathenish Feast of Ceres or Bacchus' (I. Mather, *Testimony*, 36). For the Puritan war on Christmas in England, see Chris Durston, 'Lords of Misrule: The Puritan War on Christmas, 1642-60,' *History Today* 35 (Dec. 1985), 7-14; and David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603-1660* (1985), 256-68. See also Gavin Weightman and Steve Humphries, *Christmas Past* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), 38-53.

9. Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares*, x ('scandal'), 153-54, 156 (forty days of Christmas drinking), 147-49 (mumming), 139-41 (carolling).

bishop Hugh Latimer, who put the matter most succinctly: 'Men dishonour Christ more in the twelve days of Christmas, than in all the twelve months besides.'

The Puritans knew what subsequent generations would forget: that when the Roman Catholic Church, a millennium earlier, had chosen to place Christmas day in late December, the decision was part of what amounted to a compromise, and the price the Church paid for this compromise was a high one. Late-December festivities were deeply rooted in popular culture, both in observance of the winter solstice and in celebration of the one brief period of leisure and plenty in the agricultural year. In return for insuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior's birth by placing it on this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been. From the beginning, the Church's hold over Christmas was (as it remains still) rather tenuous. It may not be going too far to say that Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to *Christianize*. Little wonder that the Puritans were willing to save themselves the trouble.

The Puritans understood another thing, too: much of the seasonal excess that took place at Christmas was not merely chaotic 'disorder,' but behavior that took a profoundly ritualized form. Most fundamentally, Christmas was an occasion when the social hierarchy itself was symbolically turned upside down, in a gesture that inverted designated roles of gender, age, and class. During the Christmas season those near the bottom of society acted high and mighty. Men might dress like women; and women might dress (and act!) like men. Young people might imitate and mock their elders (for example, a boy might be chosen 'bishop' and take on for a brief time some of a real bishop's authority). A peasant or an apprentice might become 'Lord of Misrule,' and mimic the authority of a *real* 'gentleman.'¹⁰ Increase Mather explained with an

10. For various inversion rituals, see John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, rev. by Sir Henry Ellis, 3 vols. (London, 1849), I: 7-28, 415-531 *passim*; Ashton, *Right Mervie Christmase*; W. Carew Hazlitt, *Faiths and Folklore of the British Isles, A Descriptive and Historical Dictionary*, 2 vols. (1905), I: 68-71, 119-25; II: 392-93, 437-38, 619-20.

anthropologist's clarity what he believed to be the origins of the practice: 'In the Saturnalian Days, Masters did wait upon their Servants. . . . The Gentiles called Saturns time the Golden Age, because in it there was no servitude, in Commemoration whereof on his Festival, Servants must be Masters.' This practice, like so many others, was simply picked up and transposed to Christmas, when those who were low in station became '*Masters of Misrule*.'¹¹ To this day, in the British army, on December 25 the officers are obliged at meals to wait upon the enlisted men.

The most common ritual of social inversion during the Christmas season involved something associated still with Christ-mas in our own day—we would call it 'charity.' Prosperous and powerful people were expected to offer the fruits of their harvest bounty to their poorer neighbors and dependents. A Frenchman travelling in late seventeenth-century England noted that 'they are not so much presents from friend to friend, or from equal to equal . . . , as from superior to inferior.'¹² That may sound familiar enough. But the modern notion of charity does not really convey a picture of how this transaction worked. For it was usually the poor themselves who initiated the exchange, and it was enacted face-to-face, in rituals that would strike many of us today as an invasion of privacy.

At other times of the year, it was the poor who owed goods, labor, and deference to the rich. But on this occasion the tables were turned—literally. The poor—most often bands of boys and young men—claimed the right to march to the houses of the well-to-do, to enter their halls, and to receive gifts of food, drink, sometimes money as well. And the rich had to let them in—essentially, to hold 'open house.' Christmas was a time when peasants, servants, and apprentices exercised the right to demand that their wealthier neighbors and patrons treat them as if *they* were wealthy

11. I. Mather, *Testimony*, 35.

12. Francois Maximilien Misson, *Travels in England*, trans. Ozell, quoted in Hazlitt, *Faiths and Folklore*, 120–21, and in Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, 1: 495. Misson added: 'In the taverns the landlord gives [i.e., gives away, for free] part of what is eaten and drank in his house that and the next two days: for instance, they reckon [charge] you for the wine, and tell you there is nothing to pay for bread, nor for your slice of Westphalia [ham].' See also a 1570 account in Barnabe Googe, 'The Popish Kingdom,' quoted *ibid.*, 1: 13.

and powerful. The Lord of the Manor let the peasants in and feasted them. In return, the peasants offered something of real value in a paternalistic society—their *good will*. Just when and how this actually happened each year—whether it was a gracious offering or the forced concession to a hostile confrontation—probably depended on the particular individuals involved as well as the local customs that had been established in years past (and which were being constantly ‘renegotiated’ through just such ritualized practices as these).

This exchange of gifts for good will often included the ‘performance’ of songs, often drinking songs, that articulated the structure of the exchange. These songs (and the ritual as a whole) bore a variety of names. One name that is still known in our culture is that of *wassailing*, and I shall take the liberty of using this word to refer to a whole set of similar rituals that may have carried other names. Wassailers—roving bands of young men—toasted the patron’s well-being while drinking the beer he had been kind enough to supply them. Robert Herrick included this wassail in his 1648 poem ‘Ceremonies for Christmasse’:

Come bring, with a noise,
My merry, merrie boys,
The Christmas log to the firing;
While my good dame she
Bids ye all be free [i.e., with the alcohol]
And drink to your heart’s desiring. . . .¹³

The ‘wassail’ usually contained an aggressive edge—often it was an explicit threat—if the beggars’ demands were not met. (Such threats were not ordinarily recorded in print, and certainly not by defenders of Christmas like Herrick. Instead, whatever vestigial remnants survived into the nineteenth century were recorded at that time by folklorists who found them to be quaint; and it is chiefly to their efforts that we owe our knowledge of this tradition.) One surviving wassail song contains this blunt demand and threat:

We’ve come here to claim our right. . . .

13. Robert Herrick, *Hesperides* (London, 1648); quoted in Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, 1: 71–471; also Ashton, *Right Merrie Christmasse*, 75.

And if you don't open up your door,
We will lay you flat upon the floor.

And *Poor Robin's Almanac* for 1695 offered a verse that began by observing 'how the chimneys do smoak all about'—offering evidence of all the 'Minc'd pies and plumb-porridge, Good ale and strong beer' that most people were 'providing For dinner'—but that continued with what amounted to a curse on those who failed to provide:

But those on whose tables
No victuals appear,
O may they keep Lent
All the rest of the year!¹⁴

But there was also the promise of 'good will' if the wassailers were treated well—toasts to the patron's health and prosperity. (It is the promise of good will, alone from this ritualized exchange, that has been retained in the modern revival of 'old' Christmas songs.) The following wassail was sung on the Isle of Man by bands of young men who marched from house to house, begging for food:

Again we assemble, a merry New Year
To wish to each one of the family here. . . .
May they of potatoes and herrings have plenty,
With butter and cheese, and each other dainty. . . .

One song that has recently been revived by modern performers, the 'Gloucestershire Wassail,' shows the drinkers going from one well-to-do house to another ('Wassail! Wassail! all over the town'). At each stop they wish their patron a successful harvest, the fruits of which are to be shared with them ('God send our master a cup of good beer. . . . God send our mistress a good Christmas pie. . . .'). Each verse amounts to a toast that ends in a fresh round of drinks ('With my wassailing bowl I drink to thee')—to the master and mistress, to their horse, to their cow, to anything at all that can be toasted.¹⁵

14. Quoted in Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, 1: 490.

15. To add a touch of sexual banter, the song opens with a demand that the 'prettiest maid' [i.e., maiden] in the house 'roll back the pin . . . [and] let us all in.' One version of

It was not enough for the landlord to let the peasants in and feed them. On this one occasion he had to share with them his choicest food and drink, his private stock. Robert Herrick included a couplet to this effect in the poem quoted above: 'Drink now the strong beere, / Cut the white loaf here.' (The emphasis is on the 'strong beere,' the 'white loaf.') When the Isle of Man wassailers had sung their verses, they were, in the words of the folklorist who recorded their ritual, 'invited into the house to partake of *the best the family can afford*.' The final verse of the 'Gloucestershire Wassail' opens with just such a demand for choice beer ('Come, butler, draw us a bowl of the best / Then we hope your soul in heaven shall rest')—but the threat follows quickly: 'But if you draw us a bowl of the small [i.e., weak beer], / Then down will come butler, bowl, and all.'¹⁶

In an agricultural economy, the kind of 'misrule' I have been describing did not really challenge the authority of the gentry. The historian E. P. Thompson has noted that landed gentlemen could always try to use a generous handout at Christmas as a way of making up for a year's accumulation of small injustices, regaining in the process their tenants' good will. In fact, episodes of misrule were widely tolerated by the elite. Some historians argue that 'role inversions' actually functioned as a kind of safety valve which contained class resentments within clearly defined limits, and that by *inverting* the established hierarchy (rather than simply ignoring it), those role inversions actually served as a reaffirmation of the existing social order.¹⁷ It was all a little like Halloween to-

the 'Gloucestershire Wassail' is in Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, 1: 7–8. A recorded version of this song, performed in the appropriate spirit, can be found on the album 'The Second Nowell: A Pageant of Mid-Winter Carols,' vol. 2 (John Roberts, Tony Barrand *et al.*), Front Hall Records.

16. Ashton, *Right Merrie Christmase*, 225 ('invited into the house'). For the Scottish version of wassailing, called 'Hagmena' (or 'Hogomany'), see Ashton, *Right Merrie Christmase*, 217.

17. See Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 199–203; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France,' in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97–123.

day—when, for a single evening, children ‘assume’ the right to enter the houses of neighbors and even strangers, to *demand* of their elders a gift (or ‘treat’) and to threaten them, should they fail to provide one, with punishment (or ‘trick’).

This kind of trick-or-treat ritual is mostly gone today at Christmas, but vestiges of it remain. Take, for instance, a December 1991 article in *Money* magazine, which warns its readers to ‘Tip Defensively’ at Christmas: “At holiday time you must show people who work for you that you appreciate good service.” . . . Translation: if you don’t, you’ll suffer the consequences all next year (Day-Glo hair tinting or sprinkler-soaked newspapers). . . . Keep in mind a kind of reverse Marxism: to each according to *your* need. That is, tip most generously those who can do you the most damage.’¹⁸

In early modern Europe, all this post-harvest behavior operated within (though at the boundaries of) the ‘normal’ social order. It was part of a cultural world that went back thousands of years and involved the yearly agricultural cycle that defined and integrated work and play, with times of intense labor followed by times of equally intense celebration. This seasonal cycle, perhaps more than anything else, had determined the texture of people’s lives. It had even been appropriated by the church (as the Christmas season itself had been) and given a religious gloss, whereby times of celebration were associated with any number of official ‘saints’ days’ that were generally observed with more revelry than piety.

This was exactly what the Puritans tried to suppress when they came to power in England, and New England, in the middle of the seventeenth century. One unhappy Englishman referred to the rituals of Christmas as nothing more than ‘liberty and harmless sports . . . [by] which the toiling plowswain and labourer were wont to be recreated, and their spirits and hopes revived for a whole twelve month.’ But the Puritans had made these innocent

18. *Money*, Dec. 1991, 82.

customs 'extinct and put out of use . . . as if they never had been. . . . Thus are the merry lords of misrule suppressed by the mad lords of bad rule at Westminster [i.e., the Parliament].' (fig. 1)¹⁹

It was this entire cultural world, with its periodic seasons of labor and festivity—and not just Christmas itself—that the Puritans felt was corrupt and 'pagan' and evil. It was this world that they systematically attempted to abolish, to 'purify.' They wished to replace it with a simpler, more orderly culture in which people were more disciplined and self-regulated, in which ornate churches and cathedrals were replaced by plain 'meetinghouses,' in which lavish periodic celebrations—the seasonal cycle itself—were replaced by an orderly and regular succession of days, punctuated only by a weekly day of rest and self-examination, the Sabbath.

Christmas was an important (and symbolically charged) expression of this cultural world, and the Puritans attacked it with particular intensity. In England, the Puritan Parliament made a point of holding regular session each December 25 from 1644 through 1656, and it did what it could to suppress the traditional observance of the date. (In 1644 Parliament actually decreed that December 25 was to be observed as a day of fasting and repentance—for the sinful way the occasion had been made into a time of 'giving liberty to carnall and sensual delights.')

²⁰

In England the success of the Puritans was limited and temporary. Legislation banning the celebration of Christmas was contested in many places even during the 1640s and '50s, when Puritans controlled the government (there were riots in several towns), and the policy was quickly reversed in 1660 upon the restoration of the English monarchy.²¹

But in New England the Puritans did largely succeed in eliminating Christmas, and many of the other practices of English popular culture. David D. Hall has succinctly described the 'trans-

19. John Taylor, *The Complaint of Christmas*, quoted in Durston, 'Lords of Misrule,' 11.

20. Ashton, *Right Merrie Christmase*, 34-35.

21. *Ibid.*, 27 (1644 law), 34-37 (popular resistance to the suppression).



Behold the majestic and grace
of lucerna. Cheerfull, Christmas face
Whome merris thronimus with, one breath:
Cry, out let just be put to death.
Who madee can never die:
So long as man hath memory.

6^d.

THE
EXAMINATION
AND
TRIAL

OF OLD
Father CHRISTMAS;
Together with his Clearing by
the JURY,

At the Assizes held at the Town
of Difference, in the County
of Discontent.

Written according to Legal Proceeding,
by Josiah King.

LONDON.

Printed for Charles Brome, at the Gun
at the West End of S. Pauls. 1686.

Fig. 1. *The Examination and Tryal of Father Christmas*, the title page and frontispiece of a 1686 British book mocking the Puritans who had suppressed Christmas—and who had been out of power in England for some twenty-five years when this book was published. The Puritan jurors in this trial bore such names as Mr. Cold-kitchen, Mr. Give-little, and Mr. Hate-good. (Repr. G. K. Hall and Co., 1971).

formed culture’ of what he aptly terms a ‘new Protestant vernacular’: ‘Psalm-singing replaced ballads. Ritual was reorganized around the celebration of the Sabbath and of fast days. No town in New England had a Maypole; no group celebrated Christmas or St. Valentine’s Day, or staged a pre-Lenten carnival!’²²

Take the example of almanacs, to which I shall return on several occasions in this essay. Almanacs constituted a rare printed genre in that they often incorporated significant elements from

22. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 10.

the world of popular culture. Almanacs were widespread in England by the seventeenth century, and they remained popular in New England as well. English almanacs generally listed Christmas, along with the bevy of 'saints' days' that showed the ongoing commitment of the Church of England to the old seasonally-based calendar. (These saints' days were also known as 'red letter days,' so called because in English almanacs and church calendars they were printed in red ink.) But in seventeenth-century New England, almanacs were 'purified' of all these old associations. (Indeed, for a time even the common names for the days of the week were purged from the almanacs on account of *their* pagan origins—after all, Thursday meant 'Thor's day,' and Saturday was 'Saturn's day.') The Puritans knew that the power to *name* time—and to do so in print—was also the power to *control* it.

So it should be no surprise that seventeenth-century Massachusetts almanacs did not refer to December 25 as Christmas day. Instead, the date December 25 would be left without comment, or it would contain a notice that one of the county courts was due to sit that day—an implicit reminder that in New England December 25 was just another workday (fig. 2).

The success of the New England Puritans was impressive and long-lasting. Christmas was kept on the margins of early New England society. Still, it was never suppressed completely. Take, for instance, two instances that are sometimes cited to show simply that the Puritan authorities succeeded in abolishing Christmas. We have already encountered the first of these: it is the entry for Christmas day, 1621, in the journal of Governor William Bradford of Plymouth Colony. Governor Bradford encountered a group of people who were taking the day off, and he promptly sent them back to work. Here, in the first full year of the 'Pilgrims' life in the New World, were a group of Christmas-keepers. Nor did this group observe Christmas in a devout fashion, or even by simply staying in their houses—Bradford indicated that he would have allowed them that. What bothered the gover-

nor was that these Christmas-keepers were, in his own words, out 'gaming [and] reveling in the streets.'²³

The second instance is the 1659 law passed by the Massachusetts-Bay Colony, the law that levied a five-shilling fine on anyone who was 'found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way.'

Laws are not made, of course, unless there are people who are engaging in the forbidden activity. And the Massachusetts-Bay law of 1659, like Governor Bradford's earlier report, suggests that there were indeed people in Massachusetts who were 'observing' Christmas in the late 1650s. The law was clear on this point: it was designed 'for preventing disorders arising in several places within this jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such Festivals as were superstitiously kept in other countries.' The wording of the law also implied that the authorities were concerned chiefly (as Governor Bradford had been) not with private devotion but with what the law termed 'disorders.' That point was reinforced by a provision in the law that threatened to impose a second five-shilling fine for gambling 'with cards or dice,' a practice, the Court noted, that was 'frequent in many places . . . at such times [as Christmas].'

This is not to argue that Christmas was widely 'kept' in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. (For example, I have found no records of prosecutions under the 1659 law, which remained in force until 1681, when it was repealed under pressure from London.) But it is to argue that a festival with such old and deep roots in English culture could not simply be erased by fiat, and that it always hovered just beneath the surface of New England culture, emerging occasionally into plain sight.²⁴ When that happened, it was in ways that confirmed the Puritan nightmares of excess, disorder, and 'misrule.'

23. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 97.

24. For examples of occasional instances of the emergence of popular customs (including a citation to the first instance of Christmas disorder to be examined below), see Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 210-11.

Who were the people that practiced Christmas misrule in seventeenth-century New England? Not surprisingly, the evidence suggests that they were mostly on the margins of official New England culture (or altogether outside it). It is difficult to know for sure. There is no Christmas episode so notorious as the 1627/8 confrontation in which the 'Pilgrims' of Plymouth Colony forcibly destroyed the Maypole that had been defiantly set up on nearby Mount Wollaston by Thomas Morton and his merry men. (May-day, like Christmas, marked a seasonal celebration that resonated deeply in English popular culture.) But that is only because Thomas Morton was almost the sole New England representative of popular culture who was literate, and even literary, and who actually published a satirical account of the episode. Because New England's early Christmas-keepers were at most barely literate, they left no records.

It was fishermen and mariners who had the reputation of being the most incorrigible sinners in New England, the region's least 'reformed' inhabitants. Maritime communities such as Nantucket, the Isles of Shoals, and (especially) the town of Marblehead were notorious for irreligion, heavy drinking, and loose sexual practices; they were also repositories of enduring English folk practices—places that ignored or resisted orthodox New England culture. It is no coincidence that Marblehead was also a site of ongoing Christmas-keeping.²⁵

In 1662, for example, a fisherman named William Hoar, a thirty-three-year-old resident of Beverly, Massachusetts, 'was presented for suffering tippling [i.e., drinking] in his house by those who came to keep Christmas there.'²⁶ That is all we know about this event, but the Hoar family itself is another story. Hoar's wife and children became notorious for their brazen defiance of

25. For a fine account of Marblehead maritime culture, including a subsequent conflict over the celebration of Christmas, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690-1750* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 205-414.

26. *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County*, 8 vols. (Salem, 1911-21), II: 433. For William Hoar's occupation as a fisherman, see, VI: 401.

Puritan authority. They carried on a long-term vendetta against the local minister, the Rev. John Hale, even to the point of regularly invading his house while he was away in order to consume his food and loot his goods. Hoar's wife, Dorcas, was a fortune-teller (she specialized in palmistry), and she also cultivated the rumor that she was a practicing witch. Indeed, Dorcas Hoar's reputation finally brought her down. In the dark year of 1692, she was convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to hang on Gallows Hill, a victim of the Salem witchcraft outbreak.²⁷ Such instances are wonderfully revealing of the persistence of English popular culture on the margins of Puritan New England.

Or take an incident that took place on Christmas night, 1679, when four young men from Salem Village invaded the house of seventy-two-year-old John Rowden, a man who had no interest in Christmas—but who was known to have prepared a stock of pear wine, commonly known as 'perry.' It was for the perry that these young men came to visit Rowden. They sang two songs for him and then one of them asked, "How do you like this, father? Is this not worth a cup of perry?" Rowden answered them, "I do not like it so well, pray be gone." But the men would not leave, telling Rowden 'it was Christmas day at night and they came to be merry and to drink perry, which was not to be had anywhere else but here, and perry they would have before they went.' A series of negotiations ensued, punctuated by taunts. When the old man still would not give them the perry, the four visitors left the house. But they remained standing just outside, continuing to taunt the old man. Then their taunts turned into physical violence, as they started to pelt the house with 'stones, bones, and other things.' The assault continued for a full hour and a half. Finally, the visitors departed for good.

It was an ugly scene. But one that is wholly recognizable from the English and European sources: for this was a 'wassail' gone

27. The Hoar clan's activities are reported in *ibid.*, vii: 43–55, 81, 181–83. For a modern account, see Barbara Ritter Dailey, "Where Thieves Break Through and Steal": John Hale versus Dorcas Hoar, 1672–1692," in *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 128 (1992): 255–69.

bad, turning finally into what the French would have called a 'charivari'—complete with loud clamor, mocking taunts, and stone-throwing. There was no gift, and so no good will—no 'treat,' but only a 'trick' in turn.²⁸

This was an extreme case, surely—that is why it reached the courts and was recorded in such considerable and fascinating detail. But the records are also scattered with other references to the celebration of Christmas, and these references suggest a similar pattern. The 'Salem wassail' was mirrored, to take just one example, in an episode that took place more than a century later in the western Massachusetts town of Deerfield. There, on the night of December 22, 1794, the house of a local shopkeeper, John Birge, was attacked by an anonymous band of roving wassailers, and Birge refused to oblige them. The next day Birge recorded the episode in his account book. 'Just before two of the Clock in the morning,' he wrote, 'my house was assaulted by sum Nightwalkers—or rather blockheads.' These wassailers demanded entry: they 'assaulted the house very bould by knocking or pounding as if they meant to force the house.' When Birge refused to let them in, the intruders shattered one of his windowpanes 'all to slivers.'

28. *Essex Quarterly Courts*, vii: 331–32. Typically, all four of the wassailers were young men (one was seventeen, another was about twenty-one; only one of the four was married). All of them stood near the low end of the economic hierarchy in 1679, and none achieved any great degree of prosperity in later life. Braybrooke, a weaver, was taxed in the lowest 15 percent of Salem Village rate-payers in 1681, and in 1700 he was renting a small parcel of land from a local landowner, Thomas Putnam, Jr. Fuller was the son of a bricklayer; in 1690 he was taxed in the lowest quartile. Flint, who was the younger son of a sturdy farmer, would later inherit the less desirable portion of his parents' estate and did not flourish. And Foster was assessed the minimum for the 1683 county rate. (Data are from *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 51 [1915]: 190–91; *ibid.* 53 [1917]: 336; Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993], 321–22, 353–55; *Essex Quarterly Courts*, vii, 424; Sidney Perley, *The History of Salem, Massachusetts*, 3 vols. [Salem, 1924], iii: 422.) Finally, thirteen years later, three of the four men were peripherally involved in the events surrounding the Salem witch trials of 1692. Two of them (Braybrooke and Flint) were among the signers of a 1695 petition urging the dismissal of the Rev. Samuel Parris, the Salem Village minister who played a central role as a supporter of the trials and an accuser of the witches. And a third, Benjamin Fuller, was one of thirty-six Salem Village residents who refused to pay their taxes in support of Samuel Parris's ministerial salary when Parris first arrived (amid controversy) in Salem Village in 1689. See Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, 262 (anti-Parris petition) and 350 (list of Villagers withholding taxes).

They may even have broken in and carried something away—the shop sold foodstuffs and clothing—because Birge ended his account with the comment, ‘I cannot see why it was much better than Burglary.’²⁹

Finally, there were the Boston Anticks. These were organized bands of wassailing mummers, masked troupes who went around town each Christmas for some thirty years beginning in the 1760s. Their routine was to enter the houses of the wealthy, there to perform bawdy skits, performances that would always conclude with the demand for money. One wealthy Bostonian, Samuel Breck, later recalled that they behaved ‘with great insolence’:

I have seen them at my father’s, when his assembled friends were at cards, take possession of a table, seat themselves on rich furniture and proceed to handle the cards, to the great annoyance of the company. The only way to get rid of them was to give them money, and listen patiently to a foolish dialogue between two or more of them. One of them would cry out, ‘Ladies and gentlemen sitting by the fire, put your hands in your pockets and give us our desire.’³⁰

Breck concluded by recalling an especially significant cultural point, that the victims of such visitations did not feel entitled to expel the Anticks from their houses: ‘Custom had licensed these vagabonds to enter even by force any place they chose.’

Another report about the Boston Anticks reveals that at the century’s end the customary ‘license’ to which Breck referred was coming under challenge. On December 20, 1793, a Boston newspaper printed an anonymous letter to the Boston Police Inspector, warning of the Anticks’ imminent annual appearance and demanding that something be done to stop them. The letter

29. John Birge manuscript Daybook, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association Library, Deerfield, Mass., 62. This document was unearthed by Carrie Giard, an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

30. *Recollections of Samuel Breck, with Passages from his Note-Books (1771-1862)*, ed. H. E. Scudder (Philadelphia, 1877), 37. Breck was raised as an upper-class Bostonian. From 1780 to 1792 (when he moved to Philadelphia) his family lived in a ‘remarkably fine’ house at the corner of Winter and Common (now Tremont) streets, with an acre of land. The house was sold for \$8,000 in 1792. (*Ibid.*, 37-38.) This was presumably where Breck saw the Anticks.

specified in outraged detail the threat these mummers posed to respectable Bostonians:

The disadvantages, interruptions, and injuries which the inhabitants sustain from these gangs, are too many for enumeration, a few only must suffice. When different clubs of them meet in the street, noise and fighting immediately commences. Their demands for entrance in house, are insolent and clamorous; and should the peaceful citizen (not choosing to have the tranquillity of his family interrupted) persevere in refusing them admittance, his windows are broke, or the latches and knockers wrenched from his door as the penalty: Or should they gain admittance, the delicate ear is oftentimes offended, children affrighted, or catch the phrases of their senseless ribaldry. [In other words, the Anticks used bawdy language].³¹

The Police Inspector responded with a letter of his own. Such gangs had been performing for years, he noted, though he agreed that they caused 'inconveniency and frights' by 'disturbing families and *begging a Copper*.' But it was difficult to identify the participants, because they went around in disguise. The Inspector also implied that they came from the town's poorest classes (the kind of people who 'seldom if ever read the public papers'). In conclusion, the Police Inspector urged Boston's respectable citizens to take into custody any Anticks who harassed them, promising that such persons would be prosecuted as criminals.³²

A final note about this episode. The exchange of letters about the 'Anticks' never once mentioned Christmas *by name*, even though the connection would have been clear enough to anyone. But the same issue of the newspaper that contained the Police

31. *The [Boston] Mercury*, Dec. 20, 1793. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'antic' originally meant 'a grotesque gesture, posture, or trick'; the word was commonly used to refer to 'a grotesque pageant or theatrical representation . . . ; hence, a grotesque or motley company.'

32. *The [Boston] Mercury*, Dec. 24, 1793 and the *Columbian Centinel* [Boston], Dec. 25, 1793. When William Bentley of Salem read this item, he considered it worth noting in his diary that '[t]he inspector of Police in Boston has forbidden the "Anticks," as they are called, by which the resemblance of this Christian feast to the Saturnalia has been so admirably maintained.' *The Diary of William Bentley, Pastor of the East Church, Salem*, 4 vols. (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1905-14), II: 78. The 'Anticks' were not the only perpetrators of Christmas violence in Boston in 1793: on Christmas eve *another* mob had disrupted religious services in the local Roman Catholic church (*Columbian Centinel* [Boston], Dec. 25, 1793).

Inspector's notice also contained a pious poem about the mystery of the nativity—and it took 'Christmas' as its title. The presence of this word in the poem, and its complete absence in the discussion of the 'Anticks,' suggest something of a rhetorical contest over the meaning of the word itself—whether it signified pious devotion or disruptive misrule. Back at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the people who 'spoke for' New England culture associated the idea of Christmas so profoundly with misrule that they needed to suppress it altogether. By the end of the eighteenth century, as we shall see, the descendants of those same people had discovered an alternative (and more acceptable) meaning of 'Christmas.' Now they could wrest the word (though not the thing itself) away from the 'Anticks' and their ilk, to redefine (and reclaim) it as their own.

CHRISTMAS IN PRINT

The first Christmas poem to be printed in New England had appeared as early as 1722. It had been placed on the front page of the *New-England Courant*, the newspaper published by James Franklin (older brother of Benjamin and a perennial thorn in the side of the Massachusetts establishment). More than three decades would pass before another such poem appeared. But between 1756 and 1783 twenty-two Christmas poems were printed in New England newspapers. ('Good Christians that do Christmas keep,' opened one, published in 1770.) Eleven of these poems, exactly half, were printed in Rhode Island, always a haven for heterodox beliefs (James Franklin himself moved there in 1727). But the other eleven appeared in Boston, Hartford, New Haven, Newburyport, and—the very first two to be printed—Portsmouth, New Hampshire.³³

The attempt to reclaim Christmas from popular culture was generally led by the official sources of New England culture, and

33. These data are compiled from 'The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783,' a CD-ROM scheduled for publication in 1997. I am grateful to Kate Van Winkle Keller for offering me this material in advance of publication.

it often involved the use of print. With the single exception of the exchange of letters in the newspaper over the Boston Anticks, all the examples of Christmas misrule I have cited were recorded in manuscript form—in court records or private account books—and not intended for public circulation. As for the Anticks, their behavior was notorious to begin with, and the two printed letters were written by individuals who wished to suppress it. The Anticks themselves were the kind of people who 'seldom if ever read the public papers.' It was a telling point. The struggle between official and popular culture was in part waged by the representatives of the former through their ready access to the production—and the consumption—of the printed word.

CARRIERS' ADDRESSES: WASSAILING WITH PRINT

But the matter is more complicated than that. For on occasion the two cultures did converge in print, and their convergence was itself an arena of conflict, one that will form the subject of the next portion of this essay. Let me begin with an example that involves a ritual that is still familiar to us today, a ritual to which I have already alluded: giving Christmas tips to the newspaper carrier.

Newspapers were delivered door-to-door in eighteenth-century Boston and other large towns. It appears that during the Christmas season these newspaper carriers, like their modern descendants, expected a tip from their patrons. But unlike those modern descendants, the colonial carriers were not members of prosperous families who took on a paper route to earn a little extra spending money; instead, they were the sons, very likely the teen-age sons, of the poor—in other words, the very demographic group that was most commonly associated with Christmas misrule.

Paper carriers did in fact go around town during the Christmas season, begging their patrons for money gifts. At first, in the old wassailing tradition, they may have performed a song in return for (and as a way of demanding) those gifts. We cannot know. But we do know that by the 1760s the Boston carriers were going on their

rounds armed with printed broadsides containing wassail-like begging verses. Such 'carriers' addresses' were probably written and printed by the editor of the newspaper. (The custom originated in Philadelphia during the 1730s and was picked up in Boston no later than 1760.) Most of the surviving Boston carriers' addresses referred only to New Year's. But at least four of them, printed between 1764 and 1784, named Christmas, too. The 1764 verses in the *Boston Evening-Post*, for example, were headed 'The News-Boy's Christmas and New Year's Verses.' It begins:

The Boy who Weekly Pads the Streets,
With all the freshest News he meets,
His Mistresses and Masters greets.

And it goes on:

Christmas and New-Year, Days of Joy,
The Harvest of your Carrier Boy,
He hopes you'll not his Hopes destroy. . . .

[That] His generous Patrons may inspire,
By filling up his Pockets higher!³⁴

Three other carriers' addresses wished their recipients 'a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,' and asked, respectively, for a 'few shillings,' 'some pence,' and a 'lib'ral hand' (fig. 3).

Here was a form of door-to-door begging in which poor and youthful clients approached older and more prosperous patrons. It involved the exchange of gifts for expressions of good will, and the exchange was mediated by a 'performance'—the token gift of a verse that expressed the essence of the exchange. (And if the news-boy was not tipped, he was always capable, like his modern descendants, of leaving water-soaked newspapers at his patrons' doors.)

The ritual's roots in wassailing are clear. It would be good to know just how this ritual was ordinarily transacted. Did the carrier actually read (or sing) the verses? Or did he merely, in modern fashion, hand the broadside (fig. 4) over to his patron, along

34. 'The News-Boy's Christmas and New Year's Verses' (broadside, Boston, 1770).



The LAD who carries

The MASSACHUSETTS SPY,

Wishes all his kind Customers

A Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year!

And presents the following:

MAY grateful omens now appear,
To make the New a happy Year,
And bless th' ensuing days :
May future peace in every mind,
Like odours wafted by the wind,
Its sweetest incense raise.

May GEORGE in his extensive reign,
Subdue the pride of haughty SPAIN
Submissive to his feet.
Thy princely smiles our ills appease ;
Then grant that harmony and peace
The dawning year may greet.

Kind Sirs ! your gen'rous bounty show,
Few shillings on your Lad bestow,
Which will reward his pains,
Who piercing Winter's cold endures,
And to your hands the SPY secures,
And still his task maintains.

Boston, January 1, 1771.

Fig. 3. A Christmas begging broadside. This Boston 'Carrier's Address' was delivered during the 1770 Christmas season. The final verse asks patrons to bestow 'a few shillings on your lad.' 'The Lad who Carries the Massachusetts Spy, Wishes all his kind Customers a Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year,' Boston, January 1, 1771. American Antiquarian Society.

with the regular newspaper? We cannot know for sure, but it is worth noting that the price of paper was high during the eighteenth century—too high, perhaps, to suggest a general distribution. It may be more likely that the carrier did actually perform his piece on the spot. (The high literacy rate in colonial Massachusetts makes this entirely possible.)

In any case, this ritual was a far cry from the boisterous begging we have encountered in European popular culture (and in Boston itself). The paper carrier approached his patrons individually, not as part of a gang. As far as we know, he did not demand entry into his patrons' houses, or threaten damage if refused a gift. Above all, the verses that the carrier handed to his patrons were almost certainly written by his employer. This was a ritual that was largely controlled and regulated from above—a wassail that had been tamed. And that change depended in part on the printing press.

THE BATTLE FOR CHRISTMAS IN NEW ENGLAND ALMANACS

Almanacs and Misrule

But the best single place in which printed and oral forms—official and popular culture—merged with each other is in the genre of the almanac. Almanacs were printed each year in Massachusetts beginning in 1646 (and later in other New England colonies). For the first few decades these almanacs were very much in control of the official culture: they were printed on a press that belonged to Harvard College (the first and for several decades the only press in America), and they were written by recent graduates of the College.

The situation changed dramatically in the late 1680s, when, for a few strange years, the curtain of Puritan suppression was lifted—by force. In 1684 the Restoration government in London formally abrogated the charter under which Massachusetts had been governed since 1630, and in 1686 that government was itself replaced. During the three years from 1686 to 1689 Massachusetts was governed directly from London, as part of a short-

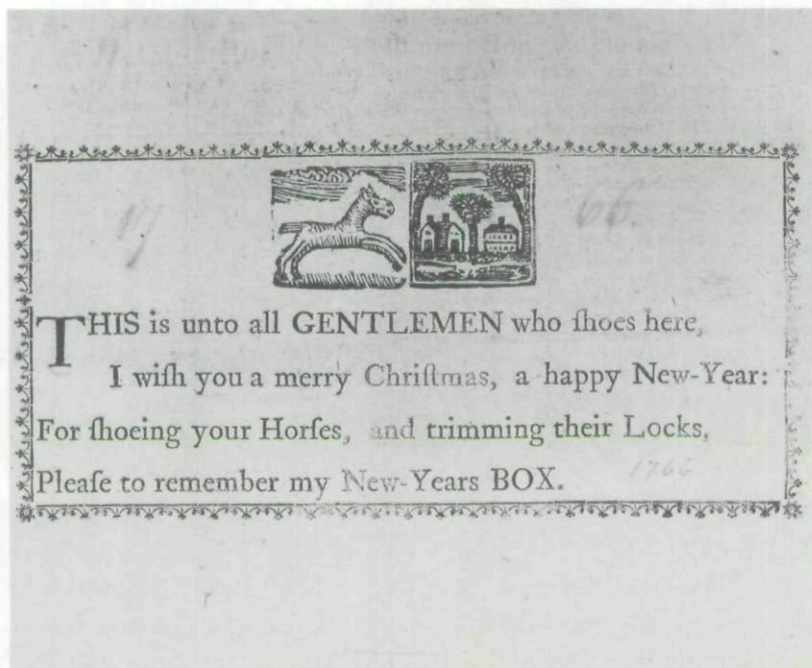


Fig. 4. More Christmas begging. The use of print in Christmas begging ritual was not restricted to Boston's newsboys; it was apparently practiced as well by other youthful males who occupied subservient positions in the community, as shown by this broadside composed by a blacksmith's apprentice, dating from 1765 or 1766 and probably printed in Boston. The 'box' referred to here (usually termed a 'Christmas box') was a kind of piggy bank in which patrons would insert money; it was broken open after the holidays, and the contents were divided up evenly among the apprentices. This ritual developed in seventeenth-century British cities as an urban version of rural wassailing. Boston[?], c. 1765 or 1766. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

lived entity known as the 'Dominion of New England.' This period came to an end shortly after the overthrow of King James II in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution.'

What happened during these three years was deeply humiliating to the Puritans. The hated governor of the 'Dominion,' Sir Edmund Andros, ruled most of New England (along with New York). From his headquarters at Boston, Gov. Andros attempted

to impose English law and custom in the very seat of Puritan power. In June 1686, with Andros in attendance, an Episcopal clergyman publicly read the Anglican service in the Boston Town House, which had been forcibly appropriated for the purpose. That was only the beginning.³⁵ Andros knew well the significance of subverting the Puritan Sabbath and reimposing the old seasonal calendar—Christmas very much included. So it should be no surprise that on Christmas Day, 1686, two religious services were performed at the Boston Town House, and Andros attended both of them, with 'a Red-Coat [soldier] going on his right hand and Capt. George on the left.'

Andros encouraged the residents of the colony to keep Christmas and other seasonal holidays. A few Bostonians celebrated Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras) by dancing in the streets, and a Maypole was erected in Charlestown.³⁶ Christmas-keeping apparently began even in advance of the Andros regime. On December 25, 1685, the magistrate Samuel Sewall noted that 'Some somehow observe the day,' and this practice continued over the next several years.³⁷

Andros also permitted Christmas and the other seasonal holidays to enter the almanacs. During each of the three years of the Dominion government, the annual almanacs printed in Boston

35. Viola Barnes, *The Dominion of New England: A Study in British Colonial Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923); see also Thomas James Holmes, *Increase Mather: A Bibliography of his Works* (1931), 568. Andros also publicly observed another saint's day, St. Paul's Day (Jan. 25), 1687, again taking over the Town House and ordering its bell to be tolled. And he used the South Meeting house for Anglican Sabbath services, one on Easter Sunday. His redcoats sometimes harassed the Puritans' own Sabbath services by firing large guns, and it was probably they who on one occasion in 1687 'greatly prophaned' one Sunday night 'by bonfires, fireworks &c. under pretense of honor to the King's Coronation.' See Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 1: 131 (St. Paul's Day); 'Diary of Increase Mather,' March 16, 1687; Samuel A. Green (ed.), *Diary by Increase Mather, . . . 1674-1687* (Cambridge, 1900), 53 (Sabbaths); Green, *Diary by Increase Mather*, April 23, 1687, 53. Viola Barnes maintains that apart from Governor Andros and his entourage (half a dozen men, plus the two companies of redcoats who had come over with Andros from England), there were virtually no Anglicans in Boston: Barnes, *Dominion*, 127-28, 219 (on the two companies).

36. Sewall, 1: 133 (Shrove Tuesday); *ibid.*, 1: 140 and Samuel A. Green (ed.), *Diary by Increase Mather*, May 1, 1687, 54 (maypole). Both rituals were performed by Congregationalist inhabitants of the colony, not Anglicans.

37. Sewall, *Diary*, 1: 90 (Dec. 25 and 28, 1685); 1: 128 (Dec. 25, 1686).

were written by a resident of Saybrook, Connecticut, named John Tulley. We have already seen that the Puritans purged New England's almanacs of all reference to Christmas and the various 'saints' days' of the English church calendar, and Tulley's earlier almanacs had observed this policy. But in his 1687 almanac Tulley boldly labeled December 25 in capital letters, as 'CHRISTMAS-DAY,' and he also added every one of the Red Letter days recognized by the Church of England. December 21 thereby became 's. THOMAS,' December 26 was 's. STEPHEN,' and December 27 was 'INNOCENTS.' (In all likelihood, Tulley used capital letters simply because his Boston printer did not have any red ink.) The following year, Tulley's almanac was published with the official imprimatur of Andros's deputy, Edwin Randolph, on the title page (figs. 5 and 6).³⁸ It was a dramatic assertion of authority over the printed word.

There may have been an additional reason for this imprimatur. For that same almanac contained an even more dramatic incorporation of English popular culture. At the end of the almanac Tulley added a series of monthly 'prognostications,' all of them satirical and most of them quite bawdy. For example, he concluded his prognostication for the month of March by announcing that if it failed to come true, the readers should 'light tobacco, or make bum-fodder with our Observations' (in other words, use the pages of his almanac to wipe their asses). For February, Tulley wrote:

The Nights are still cold and long, which may cause great Conjunction betwixt the Male and Female Planets of our sublunary Orb, the effects whereof may be seen about nine months after, and portend great charges of Midwife, Nurse, and Naming the Bantling.

Tulley's prognostication for December was a verse that opened by referring to the feasting that would take place during the Christmas season:

38. John Tulley, 'Tulley 1687. An Almanac' (Boston, 1687); John Tulley, 'Tulley 1688. An Almanac . . . Imprimatur Edw. Randolph, Secr.' (Boston, 1688).

DECEMBER hath 21 Days										
Last quar. 4 day 55 min. past 10 morn										
New moon 12 day 10 min. past 2 aftern.										
First quart. 19 day 30 min. past 7. night										
Full moon 26 day 7 min. past 3 aftern										
M. VV. Courts Spring tides &c. R ☉ S ☽ pl. D place. full sea										
1			7	31	5	20	Leo	02	39	
2	G		7	32	5	21	42	03	26	
3	2	In dry sign	7	32	5	22	44	Virgo	04	13
4	3		7	33	5	23	45	05	00	
5	4		7	33	5	24	46	Libra	05	45
6	5	Lun Apog	7	33	5	25	47	06	30	
7	6	wet sign	7	34	5	26	49	07	16	
8	7		7	34	5	27	50	Scorpio	08	02
9	G	snow or Rain near the	7	34	5	28	51	08	48	
10		change	7	34	5	29	53	Sagit.	09	34
11	3		7	34	5	30	54	10	20	
12	4		7	34	5	01	55	Capric.	11	06
13		Windy weather clear-	7	34	5	02	56	11	57	
14	6	ing the air	7	34	5	03	58	12	48	
15	7		7	34	5	04	59	Aquar.	01	39
16	G		7	34	5	06	00	02	31	
17	2		7	33	5	07	02	Pisces	03	23
18	3	Super. Co. Charltown	7	33	5	08	03	04	15	
19	4	Spring Tides rise	7	33	5	09	04	Aries	05	07
20	5	Perigl	7	32	5	10	05	05	58	
21	6	S. THOMAS	7	32	5	11	07	Taurus	06	49
22	7	cold & cloudy.	7	31	5	12	08	07	40	
23	G	snow or Rain	7	31	5	13	10	Gemini	08	31
24	2		7	30	5	14	11	09	22	
25	3	CHRISTMAS- DAY.	7	29	5	15	12	Cancer	10	13
26	4	S. STEVEN.	7	29	5	16	14	11	04	
27	5	S. JOHN EVANG	7	28	5	17	15	11	52	
28	6	S. INNOCENTS.	7	28	5	18	16	Leo	01	40
29	7		7	27	5	19	18	02	28	
30	G		7	27	5	20	19	Virgo	03	16
31	2		7	26	5	21	20	04	04	

Fig. 5. The December page from John Tulley's notorious 1688 Boston almanac. Along with weather predictions, Tulley brazenly—and in capital letters—named Christmas and the Anglican saints' days. John Tulley, *An Almanack For the Year of Our Lord MDCLXXXVII* (Boston: Samuel Green, 1688). American Antiquarian Society.

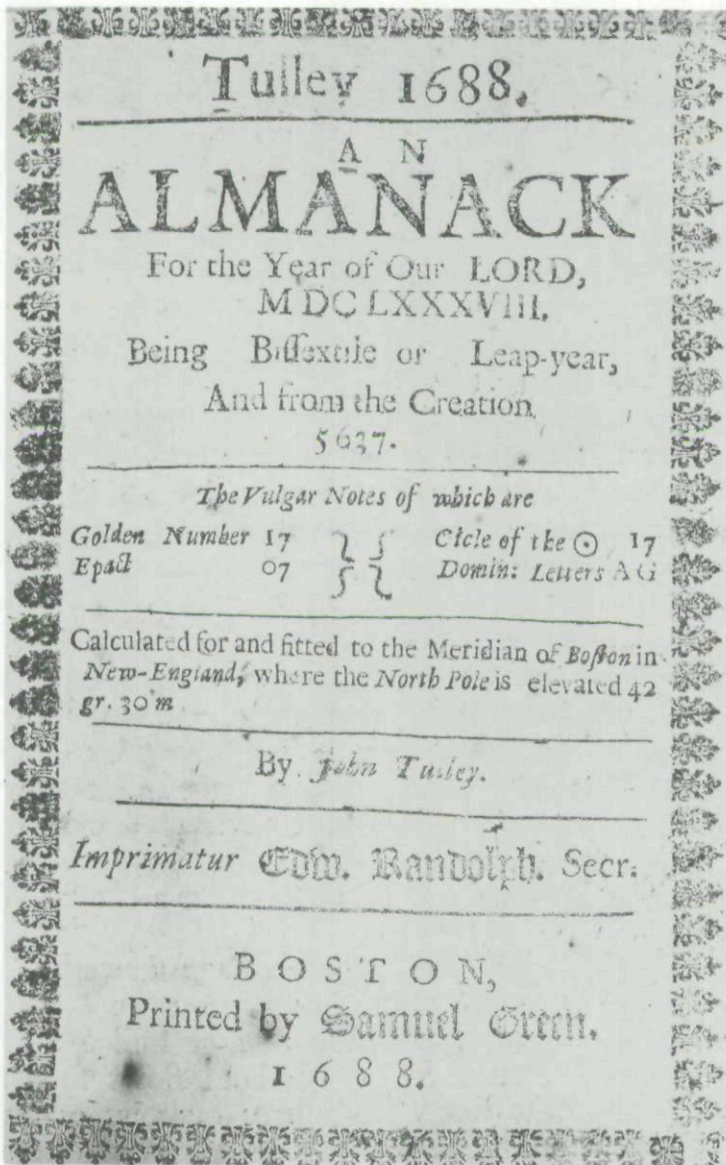


Fig. 6. Little wonder that the title page of Tulley's 1688 almanac with its Anglican references included the official imprimatur of the royal government, the name of Edwin Randolph, deputy of Sir Edward Andros.

This month the Cooks do very early rise,
To roast their meat, & make their Christmas pies.

And it went on to associate this feasting with the social inversion of rich and poor.

Poor men at rich men's tables their guts forrage
With roast beef, mince-pies, pudding & plum porridge.

Tulley added, in prose: 'This month, Money & Rum will be in great request; and he that hath the first shall not need fear wanting the latter.'³⁹

Never again, after the overthrow of Andros in 1689, would a New England almanac as bawdy as Tulley's be printed. Still, references can be found in other early regional almanacs to activities associated with Christmas in popular culture. These appeared in the verses that almanacs sometimes contained at the top of the December page, or in the aphorisms in prose or verse that were often interlineated at particular dates during the month, along with the astronomical and astrological data, and the tides and weather observations. The December page sometimes contained references to eating and drinking. As early as 1682, five years before Tulley's prognostications, a Boston almanac written by the thoroughly orthodox William Brattle contained a verse on the December page which referred to all the drinking that went on in that month ('sack' refers here to *sherry*, and 'tubs' to *kegs*):

This month, 'twill rain such store of sack (each night)
That any man that tubs doth empty quite,
And leave abroad [i.e., outdoors], and then the next day view,
He'll find them full of pure good sack: It's true.⁴⁰

39. *Ibid.*, 15-22. Selections from these prognostications are reprinted in Harrison T. Meserole ed., *Seventeenth-Century American Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 512-15. The copy of this almanac I have used (from the 'Early American Imprints' series on microfilm) was purchased and used by Samuel Sewall himself. Other copies lack the 'Prognostications,' which may have been copied from an English almanac. There is a good discussion of early New England almanacs, and Tulley's in particular, in Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 54-61. See also Bernard Capp, *English Almanacs, 1500-1800: Astrology and the Popular Press* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

40. William Brattle, 'An Ephemeris . . . for . . . 1682' (Cambridge, 1682). The verse actually concluded with a couplet that ridiculed those who believed its message.

(In other words, if people drink up all their wine each day and leave the cask outside overnight, the next morning it will be magically full.) Brattle's verse may have referred to a popular belief about magical rebirth and renewal at the time of both solstice and Christmas; but what matters more is that he seems to have assumed that December was indeed a month of heavy drinking. The same double allusion to intoxication and solstice can be found in an almanac printed in Boston in 1714, placed by the dates December 28-31: 'By strong Liquor and Play / They turn night into day.' And here, from that same almanac, is the verse that heads the month of December:

Strong-Beer Stout Syder and a good fire
Are things this season doth require.
Now some with feasts do crown the day,
Whilst others loose their coyn in play . . . ⁴¹

In 1702 the Boston almanac-maker Samuel Clough reported (disapprovingly, to be sure) that December was a time when men of the lower orders—'Coasters and Boat-men'—gathered in taverns to gossip and drink:

Some ask a Dram when first come in,
Others with Flip or Bounce begin;
Tho' some do only call for Beer,
And that i' th' morn is but mean chear.

And in 1729 Nathaniel Whittemore warned simply: 'Extravagancies brings Sickness.'⁴²

New England almanacs occasionally addressed the sexual barriers that were breached by the license (and the cold temperatures) of the Christmas season. Thus in 1749 Nathanael Ames wrote (at December 15-17):

This cold uncomfortable Weather,
makes Jack and Jill lie close together.

41. Titan Leeds, 'The American Almanac for . . . 1714' (Boston, 1714). This was a Boston reprint of a Philadelphia imprint.

42. Samuel Clough, 'The New-England Almanack' (Boston, 1702); Nathaniel Whittemore, 'An Almanac' (Boston, 1719).

On a similar note, George Wheten's almanac for 1753 noted in a quadruple rhyme that 'The weather that is cold[:] that makes the maid that is old for to scold for the want of a Bed-fellow bold.'⁴³

But most often of all there were the references to interclass eating and drinking—the familiar social inversion in which the low changed places with the high. At one extreme there was John Tully's 1688 verse that Christmas was a season when 'poor men at rich men's tables their guts forrage.' Six decades later, Nathanael Ames's almanac for 1746 put at the dates December 20–23 a concise but rather cynical description of interclass merriment:

The Miser and the Sot
together they have got,
to drink a Pot.⁴⁴

Finally, another Boston almanac, this one by Nathaniel Whittemore for the year 1719, contains an interesting piece of advice interlineated at the dates December 18–21. It warns householders about a practice we can recognize as another familiar element of the wassail ritual (once again, 'abroad' means *outside*): 'Do not let your Children and Servants run too much abroad at Nights.'⁴⁵ (fig. 7)

A Temperate Christmas, 1730–75

But by this time Christmas was beginning to become respectable. Even orthodox Congregationalists were beginning to concede that the observance of Christmas would be rendered less obnoxious if the holiday were celebrated with piety and moderation, purged of its seasonal excesses. The first New England clergyman to make such a concession, at least implicitly, may have been Cotton Mather himself. In his 1712 anti-Christmas sermon Mather paid only token attention to the purely theological arguments against the holiday, that it was man-made and not divinely

43. Nathanael Ames, 'An Astronomical Almanac for . . . 1749' (Boston, [1748]); George Wheten, 'An Almanac for . . . 1754' (Boston, [1753]).

44. Nathanael Ames, 'An Almanac for . . . 1746' (Boston, 1746).

45. Nathaniel Whittemore, 'Almanac' (Boston, 1719).

DECEMBER hath XXXI Days.								
First Quart. 7 day 16 min. past 11 before Noon.								
Full-Moon 15 day 21 min. past 2 Afternoon.								
Last Quart. 22 day 24 min. past 8 Night.								
New-Moon 29 day 21 min. past 3 Afternoon.								
T hus ends the Year with an Winters Blast, But Spiritual Wisdom from it let's never part.								
M.W.	C.Sp.	Tid.	Air.	Weather.	R	S R	S	P.Sea.
13	Inf. C.	N. Hamp.	7 32 5	Setting				12 12
24		Tides fall.	7 33 56	28				12 59
35	Inf. Co.	Portsmouth.	7 33 57	30				1 46
46		Snow or Rain about	7 33 58	28				2 30
57		these Days. Cold.	7 33 59	29				3 26
68		Upright Dealing is best.	7 33 50	15	☾			4 7
72			7 34 51	21				4 54
83	Inf. C.	Charlstown.	7 34 52	23	☽			5 41
94		Wind West. 8 ♃ ☾	7 34 51	27				6 28
105	♃ ☾	● Agoge.	7 34 52	18	☽			7 15
116		Stormy.	7 34 53	25				8 3
127		8 ♃ ☾	7 34 54	13	☽			8 51
138		Snow or Rain.	7 34 55	10				9 39
142		Stormy.	7 34 56	8	☽			10 27
153	Inf. C.	Plym. Windy.	7 34 5	Moons				11 15
164	♃ ♀	Snow.	7 34 5	Rising				12 6
175			7 33 57	18	☽			12 57
186		Do not let your Child. ☽ ☽	7 33 58	24				1 48
197		and Servants run Rain.	7 33 59	37	☽			2 39
208		too much abroad at Tides	7 33 511	0				3 30
212		Nights. a little swell.	7 32 512	20	☽			4 21
223			7 32 51	30				5 12
234	♃ ☾	● Perige.	7 31 52	41				6 3
245	♃ ☾	Windy.	7 31 53	45	☽			6 54
256		Stormy, Snow ☽ ♃ ☾	7 30 54	51				7 45
267		Cold. or Windy.	7 29 55	48	☽			8 36
278		Rain.	7 29 56	42				9 26
282			7 28 57	39	☽			10 16
293	Inf. C.	Salem.	7 28 5	The				11 5
304		Blustering Weather ☽ ☽	7 27 5	Moons				11 48
315		ends the Year.	7 27 5	Setting				12 32

Fig. 7. A warning for late December. Christmas is not named in this December page from Nathaniel Whittemore's 1719 Boston almanac, but between the dates of December 18 and 21 can be found in italics an intriguing admonition to householders: 'Do not let your Children and Servants run too much abroad at Nights.' It is hard to know how many young people and apprentices were actually roaming the streets at night during the Christmas season, but it is interesting that Whittemore's admonition does not challenge the legitimacy of the ritual; by warning his readers not to let their dependents 'run too much abroad at Nights,' he seems only to be urging them not to stay out *all night*, or to go out *every night*. American Antiquarian Society.

ordained.⁴⁶ 'I do not now dispute,' Mather went on, 'whether People do well to Observe such an *Uninstituted Festival* at all, or no.' And he continued with a statement that shows how far he had moved from a position of strident Puritanism: 'Good Men may love one another, and may treat one another with a most Candid Charity, while he *that Regardeth a Day, Regardeth it unto the Lord*, and he that *Regardeth not the Day*, also shows his *Regard unto the Lord*, in his *not Regarding* of it. . . .'⁴⁷ In other words, live and let live: on the issue of observing Christmas, there was room for legitimate difference between people of good will.

What Mather went on to emphasize was the *manner* in which Christmas was commonly observed—as a time of drunken revels and lascivious behavior (*that* was 'a thing, that there can be *no doubt* about'). Cotton Mather's father, Increase Mather, would have readily agreed with his son's angry warning about the bad things that went on at Christmas. But he never would have accepted Cotton Mather's willingness to accept the idea that it was possible for good Christians to differ in 'candid charity' about observing the holiday at all. For Increase Mather, as for other seventeenth-century Puritans, the licentious fashion in which Christmas was commonly practiced was just an intrinsic expression of its pre-Christian origin as a seasonal celebration; the holiday was 'riotous' *at its very core*. For Cotton Mather, writing a generation later in the early eighteenth century, the essence of the holiday could be distinguished, at least in principle, from its historical origins and the ordinary manner of its celebration.

From a modern perspective, the difference between Mather *père* and Mather *fils* may seem trivial. The young people whom Cotton Mather was addressing in 1712 may not have noticed the difference themselves. But it mattered nonetheless. Cotton Mather's concession, small as it was, left little room to contest the legitimacy of any movement that managed to purify Christmas of its

46. Mather relegated to a footnote in the published text of this sermon his demonstration that Jesus could not have been born in December—an indication that he did not deliver it orally.

47. Mather, 'Grace Defended,' 19.

seasonal excesses. And such a movement was not long in coming about.

Signs of change began to emerge after 1730. In December 1737 a Christmas sermon was published in Boston (it had earlier appeared in England). Originally preached during the previous century by an Anglican minister from Scotland named Henry Scougal, this sermon urged that Christ's nativity was a fitting occasion for 'cheerfulness and joy.' But Scougal's sermon also went to lengths to distinguish between appropriate mirth and 'dissolution,' arguing that 'many men . . . make this solemn anniversary, an opportunity of sinning and debauchery, as if it were indeed a drunken Bacchus, and not a holy Jesus, whom they worshipped.'⁴⁸

Scougal sarcastically asked such ill-behaved Christmas-keepers whether, simply 'because God became man, must we therefore become beasts'? He pointed out that 'a morning's sermon will never compensate [for] an afternoon's debauch,' and warned that it was such behavior 'that gives many men a prejudice against the festival [of Christmas] itself.'⁴⁹ Scougal's sermon apparently found a receptive Boston audience, since another edition was advertised the following December, and still another in December 1740.⁵⁰

And in 1739 a pamphlet was published in Boston that took an opposing perspective but ended by coming to much the same conclusion. Published under the title *Christmas Well-Kept, And the Twelve Days Well Spent*, this pamphlet consisted of extracts from the private journal of the Rev. George Whitefield, a journal that recorded that clergyman's activities from late 1738 to early 1739—in fact, precisely over the twelve days of Christmas. Needless to say, Whitefield spent every one of the twelve days hard at work,

48. Henry Scougal, *A Sermon Preach't on the 25th of December, being the Nativity of Our Saviour* (Boston, 1737), 160.

49. Scougal, 27–28.

50. The advertisements can be found in the *New England Weekly Journal*, Dec. 20, 1737; Dec. 19, 1738; and Dec. 16, 1740. The bookseller who sold the sermon was an Anglican: Thomas Coxe, a London bookseller with a Boston agent from 1733 to 1744. The first item printed by this firm was a sermon on the 'excellency and usefulness of the [Book of] Common Prayer,' and a printed catalogue of Coxe's wares from 1733 contains much Anglican material.

preaching the gospel. That, of course, was the point. The publication of this booklet in 1739 may have amounted to a rejoinder to the reprinting of the Scougal sermon in the preceding year. But the two items shared a common concern for appropriate behavior at Christmas. Henry Scougal had tempered his pro-Christmas position with an admonition about good behavior. And the publisher of the Whitefield journal ended his anti-Christmas plea with a similar admonition, in the form of a brief 'reflection' added as a postscript to the Whitefield text: 'Would to God that Christmas, *if it must be observed*, were kept something after this manner thro' all Christendom.'⁵¹ The italicized phrase gives away the concession.

Once more, some of the best evidence comes from almanacs. The change again begins in the 1730s. In 1733 James Franklin printed the following couplet on the December page of his Rhode Island almanac: 'Now drink good Liquor, but not so, / That thou canst neither stand nor go.' Of course, the most famous of all eighteenth-century American almanac-makers was James Franklin's younger brother Benjamin. Raised in New England (and trained as a printer by James himself), Benjamin Franklin became the century's preeminent exponent of moderation, sobriety, and self-control. In 1734, in the second number of his almanac, *Poor Richard*, Franklin applied that philosophy to the Christmas season. The December verse, written in the voice of 'Poor' Richard Saunders's wife Bridget, chastised a husband who 'for sake of Drink neglects his Trade, / And spends each Night in Taverns till 'tis late.'⁵² But on the same page, in an interlineation placed at the

51. [George Whitefield,] *Christmas Well-Kept, And the Twelve Days Well Spent* (Boston, 1739), quotation from 11. Another edition of this booklet was published in Boston more than 30 years later, in 1772. See also Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares* (Newcastle, 1725), quoted above p. 87. For later attacks on Christmas misbehavior levied by Episcopalian clergymen, see 'Christmas; or, The Right Way of Rejoicing at the Event of Our Savior's Birth,' in *New York Missionary Magazine*, II (1801): 333-42 [later reprinted as a pamphlet of the same title (New York, 1813)]. See also John Henry Hobart, *A Companion for the Fasts and Festivals of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York, 1804), 122-38.

52. *Poor Richard*, 1734. *An Almanac . . . by Richard Saunders* (Philadelphia, 1734). See also the weather prediction for Dec. 28-30 in *Poor Richard*, 1737. *An Almanack . . . by Richard*

dates December 23–29, Franklin made it clear enough (in a rhymed but characteristically Franklinesque piece of advice) that he was no hater of Christmas: ‘If you wou’d have Guests merry with your Cheer, / Be so yourself, or so at least appear.’ And similarly in 1739: ‘O blessed Season! lov’d by Saints and Sinners, / For long Devotions, or for longer Dinners.’

The emphasis on *temperate* mirth intensified at mid-century, when Nathanael Ames (New England’s most popular almanac-maker) began to mix calls for charity and cheer with admonitions against excess. In 1752 Ames offered a warning: ‘Bad times, Dull-Drink and clouded Minds make heavy, listless, idle bodies.’ In the 1760s similar warnings came thick and fast. Ames’s verse for December 1760 urged readers not to get drunk that month. His 1761 almanac included a similar piece of advice: ‘The temperate man enjoys the most delight, / For riot dulls and palls the appetite.’ And in 1763: ‘The temperate Man nor ever over feeds / His cramm’d Desires with more than Nature needs.’ In 1764 a set of dietary strictures actually took over Ames’s entire almanac, constituting the literary accompaniment for every month of the year.⁵³

Of course, what seemed like temperance and moderation to some struck others as miserly behavior—even, more broadly, as the betrayal of paternalist obligations. The actual conflict between these two positions is difficult to pin down. But there exists a single, striking episode that displays the conflict in vivid clarity. It involves the experience of a Connecticut almanac-maker named Roger Sherman. Sherman was a self-made man who got his start

Saunders (Philadelphia, 1737): ‘Fair light ev’nings about for Christmas visits.’ As early as 1706, Daniel Leeds warned in an almanac published in New York that ‘More health is gotten by observing diet / Than pleasure found in vain excess and Riot.’ (Lines at Dec. 26–29; in Daniel Leeds, *Leeds, 1706. The American Almanack* [New York, 1706].) Twenty years later, in a Philadelphia almanac, Daniel’s son Titan Leeds attacked both gambling and ‘surfeiting’ (Titan Leeds, *The American Almanack for . . . 1726* [Philadelphia, (1705)]).

53. Other New England almanacs, while not sounding the dietary urgency of Nathanael Ames, typically combined notes of moderation with those of mirth, as when the ‘Bickerstaff’ almanac for 1777 assured its readers that ‘to keep your stomach warm / A moderate glass can do no harm’ (Ezra Gleason, *Bickerstaffe Almanack* [Boston, 1777]).

in the almanac business, but who later (much like his fellow almanac-maker Benjamin Franklin) became politically active and prominent, first locally and then, at the time of the American Revolution, on a national stage. Roger Sherman is remembered today as the one Founding Father who signed not only the 1774 Articles of Association and the Declaration of Independence (he served on its drafting committee) but also the Articles of Confederation *and* the federal Constitution of 1787—a Founding Father, indeed.

In 1750, when Sherman was twenty-nine, his first almanac appeared; it was printed in two places, Boston and New York. The Boston edition contained a couplet that made it plain where Sherman stood on the issue of temperance: 'To be easy all night, / Let your supper be light.' But the New York edition ended up quite differently.

Sherman needed to submit manuscript copy to his New York printer before he was able to determine some of the purely local political and economic data, so he authorized the New York printer to do that himself, and 'to put in whatsoever else he should think proper.'⁵⁴ What the printer actually 'put in' startled and dismayed Roger Sherman. The additions to the New York edition of Sherman's almanac included a series of monthly and seasonal 'Observations' that were as bawdy as those that John Tulley had written in 1688. The notes about the winter quarter offer a typical example of their overall flavor:

Now days are very short, and Nights premontriposterous [sic] long; consequently, now is the properest Time for the tearing of sheets, and the begetting of Bantlings; by reason lazy Lubbers have an Opportunity to lie long in Bed.

But the printer used this ribaldry to introduce a more serious point—a lament, really, about the way the Christmas season had lost its paternalist social core, whereby prosperous folk were obliged to welcome the poor into their homes. The printer

54. *New York Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1750, quoted in Victor Hugo Paltsits, 'The Almanacs of Roger Sherman 1750-1761,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s. 18 (1907), 213-58 (quotation on 222).

termed this decayed custom 'good Housekeeping':

This Quarter [of the year] used to be welcome to poor People, when good Housekeeping was in fashion, because it always brings Christmas along with it; but now Pride, Gaming, and Whoring, have turn'd good Housekeeping out of Doors.

At this point, the printer added a conundrum:

Every thing hath a beginning, as the boy told his master, who said, [that] he took his boy to be no liar, and [yet] had found the contrary. If I should predict of great feastings this *Christmas* you may think me no liar, but I fear you'll find the contrary.

In other words, there would not be any 'great feastings'—any paternalist open houses—during the coming Christmas season. Even so, the printer mused, there could still be found a scattered few who remembered the old ways and practiced them:

Yet here and there remaineth some, that will
Uphold good Orders, and keep Christmas still.

Shortly after this almanac was published, a New York newspaper printed a letter from an outraged Roger Sherman, informing the citizenry of that city that it was his printer and not he himself who had penned the 'Prognostiferous Observations' published under his name; a similar disclaimer appeared in the New York edition of Sherman's almanac for 1751.⁵⁵ Sherman's subsequent almanacs would be filled with December attacks on such seasonal practices as 'excess,' 'prophaness' [sic], 'intemperance,' and 'gaming.' His Franklinesque perspective was epitomized in aphorisms like this: 'Reason's whole Pleasure, all the Joys of Sense, / Lie in three Words,—Health, Peace, and Competence.' Or this: 'Improve your Season while you may, / to gather in your Grain & Hay; for soon there'll be a rainy Day.'⁵⁶ (In other words: 'Make hay while the sun shines.')

What Roger Sherman's almanacs make clear (especially so in

55. The story I have just told is taken from *ibid.*, 217–23.

56. 1758, New Haven (excess); 1753, New London (prophaness); 1753, New London (gaming); 1754, N.Y. (gaming); 1750, Boston ('Reason's whole pleasure'); 1761, Boston ('Improve your season').

conjunction with the more eminently successful almanacs of Benjamin Franklin and Nathanael Ames) is that by mid-century there were New Englanders who were willing to accept Christmas if it could be purged of its seasonal 'excess.' Sherman, Ames, and Franklin were all shopkeepers—versatile, thrifty, and self-made men.⁵⁷ And they were addressing a constituency of men who wished to develop values (and perhaps careers as well) that resembled their own. These almanac-makers were trying, much as the Puritans had done a century earlier, to restructure people's work habits by having them do away with old rhythms based on seasonal periods of intense leisure. (John Adams later called Roger Sherman 'an old Puritan.') But unlike the Puritans, their strategy did not entail the elimination of Christmas. Instead, they were willing to believe that Christmas could be a time of cheer without also being a time of excess.

The rhetoric of moderation at Christmas merged in the 1770s with broader political and cultural issues, issues that were generated by the intensifying conflict between the American colonies and England. These were the years in which Americans were being urged to forego (and even to boycott) imported luxuries—and 'luxuries' themselves were coming to be associated with the decadence of European aristocratic culture. In this newly-charged setting, some New England almanacs began to argue for what might be termed a 'Republican Christmas.' The December verse in the *Essex Almanac* [Salem] for 1771 (authored by 'Philo Freeman') attacks the 'Excess' of the 'Sons of Luxury,' those who 'spread the various proud voluptuous Board,' while they ignore 'how little thrifty Nature craves.' (The 1773 number of the same almanac reminded its readers, at the dates December 22–24: 'No plenty should tempt us to be wasteful.') Perhaps the most succinct state-

57. As Eric Foner has pointed out, Franklin urged men like himself 'to remember that "time is money," and condemned [the old] practice of observing the traditional pre-industrial "holiday" of "Saint Monday" and spending the day "at the alehouse"' (Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* [New York: Oxford, 1976], 35). In contrast to Franklin and Roger Sherman, Nathanael Ames never became politically prominent (he died in 1765), but his son Fisher Ames did—as a notoriously high Tory.

ment of all, combining the rhetoric of moderation with that of piety, appeared in Joseph Perry's Connecticut almanac for 1774, at the dates December 25–28: 'Whoe'er would keep this festival sincere, / must not indulge himself in beastly cheer.'

Naming Christmas in New England Almanacs, 1669–1761

As far back as the seventeenth century, and even among devout Puritans, there had never been complete unanimity about the need to deny that Christmas could be an occasion for legitimate religious observance. In England no less prominent a Puritan than John Milton wrote a Christmas poem in 1629, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity.' The poem began by announcing (almost defiantly, given the political context in which it appeared) that 'This is the month, and this the happy morn. . . .'⁵⁸ In Boston itself, on December 18, 1664, the young minister Increase Mather felt it necessary to deliver a sermon reinforcing the colony's official policy. The day after Mather delivered it, he was confronted by three of the wealthiest members of his own church, who demanded that he discuss the subject further with them. In his diary Mather recorded the argument with tantalizing brevity: 'Discoursed much about Christmas, I Con, they Pro.'⁵⁹

Such evidence is scarce. But there is another kind of record that is much easier to come by—again, for one last time, the printed almanac. As we have seen, seventeenth-century almanacs were purged of all the traditional 'red-letter days' that marked the seasonal calendar in English society (except, of course, for the

⁵⁸ Milton wrote this poem in 1629, as a young man, but he remained sufficiently proud of it to place it first in a later collection of his poetry.

⁵⁹ Increase Mather, manuscript diary, Dec. 19, 1664 (Mather Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Diary Typescript: Box 3, Folder 1, 48–49). I have inferred the subject of Mather's sermon from circumstantial evidence: much of his reading the previous week (as recorded in his diary) dealt historically and critically with Christmas: it included Rudolf Hospinian, *De Festiis* (Tiguri, 1592), William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix* (London, 1633), and two references I have not been able to trace: —Stuckins' [?] *De Antiq.* and Caudrey, *De Christmass* (the reading is recorded in the entries for Dec. 12–14, 1664). This episode is alluded to in Michael G. Hall, *The Last American Puritan: the Life of Increase Mather, 1639–1723* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 66.

counter-cultural almanacs that John Tulley produced in the period of direct English rule from 1687 to 1689).

But there was a pair of exceptions to the ordinary rule. In the almanac for 1669, quietly placed at December 25, in small italic letters, can be found the Latin phrase '*Christus Natus*' [i.e., Christ born]. And exactly ten years later, the 1679 almanac indicated, in English, '*Our Savior born*.'⁶⁰

These two aberrant almanacs, like every book published in New England in the period, were printed on a press owned and controlled by Harvard College. The Harvard authorities must have noticed—and let them go in. And the two almanacs—like almost every New England almanac from 1646 to 1687—were compiled by recent Harvard graduates, promising young men who had shown a special flair for mathematics and science.⁶¹ The two young Harvard graduates who wrote these two almanacs, twenty-one-year-old Joseph Browne and eighteen-year-old John Danforth, each went on to become a clergyman in the Boston area. Neither displayed any indications of heterodoxy in their subsequent careers. Presumably, what Joseph Browne and John Danforth had in mind for December 25 was a pious, devotional remembrance of the nativity (the kind of observance John Milton intended in *his* nativity poem), and not the disorderly behavior of the Hoar family or the Salem 'wassailers.' Nevertheless, their actions, and Harvard College's willingness to look the other way, were another indication that even within the heart of Puritan culture there was never complete unanimity on the Christmas question.⁶² A small notation in an almanac may not seem like very

60. J. B. [Joseph Browne], 'An Almanac . . . for . . . 1669' (Cambridge, 1669); J. D. [John Danforth], 'An Almanac . . . for . . . 1679' (Cambridge, 1679).

61. For the 'Harvard' almanacs, see Marion Barber Stowell, *Early American Almanacs: The Colonial Weekday Bible* (N.Y., 1977), 40–53; for Harvard's printing press, see George Parker Winship, *The Cambridge Press, 1638–1692* (Philadelphia, 1945).

62. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe speculates that the 'annualization' of Thanksgivings in late seventeenth-century New England—they had earlier been 'occasional' holidays—represented the 'reconstruction' of the old seasonal calendar 'through the use of Biblical imagery and Old Testament cultus.' See *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 1010–103. For a quantitative analysis of this change, see Richard P. Gildrie, 'The

much today. But in the context of seventeenth-century New England, this gesture would have been charged with meaning. It was such small things that signaled to contemporaries the shifting lines between what was open for public debate and what was not.

Those lines shifted more clearly after 1700. In the summer of 1708, the sitting Governor of Massachusetts asked the respected Bostonian Samuel Sewall to look at a manuscript almanac for 1709 that had been prepared for the press by another nineteen-year-old Harvard graduate, Edward Holyoke. (Holyoke would go on to a distinguished and reputable career as the president of Harvard.⁶³) Sewall quickly realized why the Governor had given him Holyoke's manuscript almanac: it contained notations for several of the Anglican holidays, including Christmas. Sewall proceeded to strike out these offending references (he 'blotted against' them, as he put it), and Holyoke's almanac was printed with all of them gone. Because Sewall recorded this episode in his diary, it is possible for us to glimpse the kind of negotiations that were being carried on at the highest level concerning this question. Probably the Governor himself had been given Holyoke's manuscript by the printer, Bartholomew Green, who had previously published other almanacs, including some of John Tulley's, and who did not wish to get into unnecessary trouble. The Governor himself, an Anglican who had been appointed to his post in England, could have authorized the printer to go ahead with the almanac as it stood, but instead he discreetly chose to let Samuel Sewall have the final say. Christmas still remained too offensive to

Ceremonial Puritan: Days of Humiliation and 'Thanksgiving,' *NEHGR*, 136 (Jan. 1982): 3-16.

63. For Holyoke's career, see Sibley, v: 265-72. After serving as the librarian, tutor, and corporation fellow at Harvard College (these were the years in which he produced his almanacs), Holyoke became minister to the Second Congregational Church at Marblehead, Mass. (more about that later), where he served for twenty-one years, until being called, in 1737, to return to Harvard as its President. Holyoke remained in that post for another thirty-two years until his death in 1769. On the other hand, Holyoke was always clearly on the liberal edge of the Congregational establishment. He was known for being tolerant of 'Anglican forms,' and even permitted those Harvard students who so desired to attend Boston's Christ Church. Given all that, and the fact that he was explicitly regarded as less orthodox than his rival candidates for the Harvard presidency in 1737, it is significant that Holyoke was selected for the post.

the Massachusetts political elite for it to be worth the Governor's while to make an issue of it.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Sewall's victory was short-lived. Edward Holyoke continued to produce his almanac in acceptable fashion in the three years from 1710 through 1712. But in 1713 Christmas was back, printed in fancy bold letters as '**Christmas Day**,' and accompanied by the saints' days of the Church of England, as well as by a verse for December that concluded with the line, 'Behold at Bethlehem **Born the Prince of Peace**.' (Holyoke's printer, once again, was Bartholomew Green, who carefully indicated on the title page that this almanac had been 'Licensed by His Excellency the Governour.')

This time it is impossible to know what had happened. Nor is it possible to learn the reason for what happened next: by 1715 Christmas was gone once again (no copy of the 1714 almanac survives). But in 1714, *another* almanac was printed in Boston with December 25 marked as Christmas Day—and still another one appeared in 1715. By now, the anomalies were beginning to accumulate. It was beginning to look as if things were on the verge of a change.

But this flurry, too, came to an end. Over the thirteen-year period from 1716 through 1728, only a single 'Christmas' almanac was published in Massachusetts. And the man who printed it was James Franklin, whom we have already encountered as the man whose newspaper printed the first Christmas poem in New England, in 1722. In 1725 Franklin printed a Boston almanac that not only *listed* Christmas and the saints' days, but even provided a two-page explanation of what each of them meant. While James Franklin probably did not write this almanac himself, there can be no doubt that he approved of its sentiments. And three years later, after moving out of Massachusetts into the freer atmosphere of Newport, Rhode Island, Franklin published (and wrote) *The*

64. Sewall, *Diary*, I: 599. Thirteen years later, in 1722, another Massachusetts governor would get into a fight with Sewall (and with other members of the General Court) over 'adjourning the Genl. Court [for several days] because of Christmas.' See *ibid.*, II: 100-1.

Rhode Island Almanac (authored by 'Poor Robin') which he put out there each year from 1728 until his death in 1735. Every number of *The Rhode Island Almanac* took note of Christmas and the saints' days. In 1728 James Franklin noted sarcastically that he was including those listings 'for the sake of some who keep Days holy, and others who keep Holy-Days [i.e., holidays],' but he added an equally invidious comparison between those New Englanders who observed Christmas and those who celebrated only the pale Puritan substitute of Thanksgiving: 'Some Christmas keep, and eat good cheer, / And some thanks give but once a year.'⁶⁵

Actually, James Franklin left Massachusetts at just about the time when the situation there was about to change in earnest. By 1730 the hegemony of the government of Massachusetts in the matter of almanacs was fading. From that point on, the dominant role in determining whether or not the holiday was named was played not by official preferences but by the forces of the market, in concert with the personal predilections of the individual almanac-maker.

Almanacs were arguably the most widely-read imprints produced in colonial America. If few of them survive today, that is

65. James Franklin's widow, Ann, took over preparation of the almanac after his death and continued it to the end of her own life, when it was taken over by their son James Franklin, Jr. In 1729 James Franklin showed another side of Christmas, this time by including a somewhat cryptic commentary for December that dealt with a set of Christmas beliefs that originated deep in popular lore—the belief that Christmas Eve was a time when witches and evil spirits could do no harm, when bad spells would be ineffective: 'This month is a great Enemy to *evil Spirits*, and a great Dissolver of *Witchcraft*, without the help of *Pimpernal*, or *Quicksilver* and *Yellow Wax* [these were supposed to be counter-spells that would protect against witchcraft]. And therefore if Goody *Stiffendorff*, who now lies Bedrid, should be suspected by her Neighbors of killing their Geese, they will do her much Wrong. Some Astrologers indeed confine this Power over evil Spirits to *Christmas Eve* only; but I know the whole Month has as much Power as any Eve in it: Not but that there may be some wandering Spirits here and there, but I am certain they can do no Mischief, nor can they be seen without a Telescope' (*The Rhode Island Almanac*, by 'Poor Robin' [James Franklin], Newport, 1729). In fact, William Shakespeare reported a similar belief in *Hamlet* (Act I, Scene 1), where a minor character speaks the following lines upon hearing a cock crow: 'Some say that ever 'gainst that Season comes / Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, / This bird of dawning [i.e., the cock] singeth all night long; / And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad, / The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike, / No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm, / So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.' (To this, Hamlet's friend Horatio responds rather noncommittally, 'So have I heard and do in part believe it.')

simply because almanacs were by definition ephemeral (in fact, the word 'ephemera' was synonymous with 'almanac'), and at the end of the year they were generally thrown away or otherwise discarded—probably used, as John Tulley bawdily acknowledged in his 1688 almanac, as 'bum-fodder.' One historian has called almanacs 'the colonial weekday Bible' (though Bibles were hardly used in the fashion mentioned by Tulley).⁶⁶

Almanacs thus offer a simple and useful way to gauge how acceptable it was in eighteenth-century New England to refer publicly to Christmas. The pattern is clear. Before 1730 or so it was not wholly safe, in a legal sense, to publish an almanac that named Christmas or the Anglican saints' days. After 1730 it *was* safe: over the next thirty years, from 1730 to 1760, as we shall see, some almanac-makers chose to name Christmas, and others chose not to. And after 1760, it was exceptional *not* to name Christmas. By then, there was no longer any market demand for almanacs that refused to acknowledge Christmas. In the 1760s, there were usually half a dozen almanacs printed each year in Massachusetts alone. If any constituency remained for the old-style 'Puritan' almanacs, one would surely have been printed. But after 1761, not a single one ever was.

There is a more refined way to explore this change during the key decades of transition between 1730 and 1760. It is to examine carefully those long-running almanacs which changed practice in the middle of their run—almanacs that did not initially name Christmas but that began to do so at some point along the way. There are two of these transitional almanacs. One was produced by Nathan Bowen from 1721 to 1737 and began to note Christmas and the saints' days in 1731. (Bowen may also have been the author of the 1725 almanac that was printed by James Franklin.) The other was produced from 1726 to 1764 by Nathanael Ames,

66. In 1795 the poet Philip Freneau published a poem called 'The Almanac Maker,' a poem that includes the lines: 'His book, in vogue with great and small, / Is sought, admir'd, and read by all.' Philip Freneau, 'The Almanac Maker,' in *Poems* (1795), 90. Also quoted in 'The Almanacs of Roger Sherman,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 18 (1907), 216.

who mentioned Christmas sporadically and tentatively in the years between 1729 and 1750, and then, after a ten-year hiatus that lasted until 1760, did so more consistently and firmly. Here, in these two cases, we can observe actual changes in individual practice.

There is strong circumstantial evidence that Nathan Bowen introduced Christmas into his almanac in 1731 chiefly because of his own personal views—that he was ‘pushing the envelope’ and writing for a special, limited market niche. Sometime before 1730 Bowen moved from Boston to Marblehead, where he joined the Second Congregational Church, the more elite and liberal of the town’s two established churches. (The minister of the Second Church was none other than Edward Holyoke, the one-time almanac-maker and future Harvard president.) As Christine Heyrman has shown, Marblehead was a fishing town with an Anglican Church as well as many inhabitants who were simply unchurched (the town had no church at all for the first forty years after its incorporation). The community was also one of the ‘oases’ in New England in which Christmas could be publicly kept with impunity.⁶⁷

It is possible to trace the event that may have precipitated Bowen into undertaking his innovation in 1731. In 1729 and 1730, there had been a public pulpit debate about Christmas between Marblehead’s Anglican rector and the orthodox minister of its First Congregational Church. On December 25, 1729, the Reverend John Barnard of the First Church preached a sermon attacking Christmas. Nine days later a counter-sermon defending Christmas was preached by the rector of Anglican St. Michael’s Church. (Both sermons were printed in 1731.) Christmas was a subject of heated public confrontation in the streets of Marblehead early in 1730; some of Barnard’s Congregationalist congregants began to confront the town’s Anglicans in the streets with heavy ridicule about their Christmas-keeping.

Nathan Bowen would have needed to prepare his 1731 almanac by the middle of the previous year. On a purely local level, that

67. Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture*, 209–313, *passim*.

1731 almanac (the first in his decade-old series to name Christmas and the saints' days) can be considered Bowen's tacit 'answer' to John Barnard's critique. But more generally, and more importantly, by 1731 Bowen felt it was possible to introduce Christmas without jeopardizing the sales of what was apparently a popular regional almanac.⁶⁸

Nathan Bowen's was the only Massachusetts almanac that consistently named Christmas and the saints' days during the decade of the 1730s. In the 1740s no almanac did so, and none would until 1750, when Connecticut almanac-maker Roger Sherman began his series, which lasted until 1761. (This decade-long lull during the 1740s suggests that the 'Christmas market' was still quite lim-

68. 'Extracts from Interleaved Almanacs of Nathan Bowen, Marblehead, 1742-1799,' *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 91 (1955): 164; see also Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture*, 319-20. Two local historians claim, without citing evidence, that Bowen's almanacs 'led the field . . . for eighteen years' (Lord and Gamage, *Marblehead* [1972], 73). Christine Heyrman explains why men like Bowen initially joined Holyoke's Second Congregational Church rather than the Anglican church—and there is an interesting story here. As late as 1730 the Anglican community in Marblehead did not for the most part represent staid aristocratic respectability but rather disorder and deviance. Most Marblehead Anglicans were not merchants but fishermen and their families, a group that collectively had resisted assimilation into provincial New England society (*Commerce and Culture*, 297-99). There were large numbers of fishermen in John Barnard's congregation, too, but they were fishermen who had chosen (or who had been born into) orthodox Congregational culture. Thus it was only natural that Nathan Bowen would join Edward Holyoke's church, which, as Heyrman has shown, was the home of most of Marblehead's recently-arrived wealthy families—families headed by men, like Bowen himself, who had no roots in or loyalty to the local community. Nathan Bowen arrived in Marblehead from Boston by 1730, the scion of an important merchant family (*ibid.*, 260). He ranked in the top decile of local rate-payers in 1748 (*ibid.*, 314; the tax list is in *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 43 [1907], 209-22). Shortly after Edward Holyoke left Marblehead in 1737 to assume the presidency of Harvard College, Nathan Bowen himself left the Second Church, passing outside the limits of orthodoxy altogether: Bowen became an Anglican, joining St. Michael's and privately hoping for 'the Destruction of their [Congregational] Kingdom & a more general and happy Introduction of our Mother Church of England.' When Bowen joined Marblehead's Anglican church in 1738, that church was beginning to gain respectability; equally important, when Holyoke left Marblehead in 1737 to assume the presidency of Harvard, his replacement turned out to be an avid New Light. Heyrman shows that by early 1742 the Awakening in Marblehead's Second Church had become radical and middle-and-lower class, dominated by women and enthusiasts (*Commerce and Culture*, 375-76). This caused the elite to withdraw its support. Nathan Bowen was the most vehement of those who left the Second Church: he ridiculed the sight of "silly women in Great Multitudes . . . thrown into Swounds," and lamented the fact that "women and even Common Negroes take upon them to exhort their betters even in the pulpit before large assemblies" (*ibid.*, 377). But Bowen was the only Marblehead Congregationalist who actually became an Episcopalian in reaction to the revival (*ibid.*, 392).

ited.) During the 1750s several other almanac-makers began to mark Christmas and the saints' days.⁶⁹ And in 1760 they were finally joined by a man who had been publishing almanacs every year since 1726, and who was easily the most successful and popular of all New England almanac-makers. This was Nathanael Ames of Dedham, Massachusetts, whose almanacs seem to have sold almost as well in New England as those of Benjamin Franklin did in the Middle Colonies. (In addition to preparing his almanacs, Ames was a tavern-keeper, physician, lawyer, and Justice of the Peace, and a gentleman farmer to boot.) Ames's almanacs were so popular that by the late 1750s booksellers and printers were publicly arguing over just which edition bearing Ames's name was 'authentic' and which were only 'counterfeits.'⁷⁰

Ames published his first almanac in 1726. Three years later, in 1729, he noted (at the date December 21) that 'Christmas is nigh.' And in 1731 he included a verse couplet (at December 30-31): 'Good Christmas cheer / Concludes the year.'⁷¹ But Ames then fell silent on the subject for more than a decade, until 1742, when the 'C'-word appeared as part of a weather prediction for December 25 ('A warm but windy *Christmas*'), and again the following year ('This Year there will be a right Christmas.') In 1744 Ames drew back once more (the lines at December 24-25 that year read: '*A strange story that few believe, — He's as free to give, as you to receive.*') The 'C'-word would make another quick appearance in 1750 ('This Christmas commences with a storm'). And in 1752

69. Other Massachusetts almanacs that named Christmas and the saints' days before 1760 include George Wheten (1753-57), 'Poor Job' (1752), and 'Poor Joseph' [Joseph Stewart] (1759). Massachusetts almanacs that did not mention Christmas before 1760 include Thomas Robie (1710-20), Daniel Travis (1707-23), Nathaniel Whittemore (1705-40), Joseph Stafford (1739-44), 'William Nadir' [William Douglas] (1743-47), James Davis (1758), and John Eddy (1759 and '61; in 1760 Eddy did name Christmas, but no saints' days).

70. See advertisements, for example, in the *Boston Weekly-Advertiser*, Dec. 26, 1757; *Boston News-Letter*, Dec. 21 and 28, 1758; *Boston Post-Boy*, Dec. 10, 17, and 25, 1759; and a 1759 broadside 'To the Publick [from] The Booksellers of the Town of Boston.'

71. Ames's and Bowen's were the only two Massachusetts almanacs to be printed in 1731, which meant that the province's almanac-readers had no choice but to encounter the word 'Christmas' that year.

the dates December 27–29 were marked with a coy couplet that sounds as if Ames was testing the waters: ‘Such Tydings come, / As are pleasing to some.’ But then there would be seven more years of silence.

Finally, in 1760, came the big change: Ames named Christmas once more, and he added an explicitly religious verse (‘This is a Time for Joy and Mirth when we consider our Saviour’s Birth!’). Indeed, Ames went further still, by incorporating all the saints’ days in the Anglican church calendar. It was a dramatic change, and the newspaper advertisements for the 1760 Ames almanac made a point of noting that it contained, ‘besides what is usual, *The Feasts and Fasts of the Church of England*.’⁷² The year 1760 was also when Ames began his systematic campaign—described earlier—to take the gorging and drunkenness out of the Christmas holiday. Ames’s decision to name Christmas thus provides still another indication that the holiday was accepted into mainstream New England culture only as it was purged of seasonal excess.

In any event, except for a single imprint in 1761, Nathanael Ames’s was the last Massachusetts almanac to hold out against naming Christmas and the saints’ days. If Nathan Bowen of Marblehead probably made this innovation in the 1730s on the basis of his own preferences, Nathanael Ames just as probably did so after 1760 in response to market demand. Not that Ames was an old-fashioned Puritan (apparently he never took communion in the Congregational church he attended in Dedham).⁷³ But he *was* a highly-respected member of the Dedham community, and his tavern ‘at the sign of the sun’ was a local social center as well as a celebrated stop-over point for people travelling between Boston and Connecticut or Rhode Island.⁷⁴ Like his fellow al-

72. Nathanael Ames, ‘An Almanac for . . . 1760’ (Boston, [1759]). The ads are in the *Boston Post-Boy*, Dec. 3, 1759, and the *Boston News-Letter*, Dec. 6, 1759.

73. One historian terms him ‘a son of the Enlightenment’ who rejected theological ‘interpretations based on revelation and a literal view of the Bible.’ Winfred E. A. Bernhard, *Fisher Ames, Federalist and Statesman, 1758–1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 12.

74. Sam. Briggs, *The Essays, Humor, and Poems of Nathanael Ames, Father and Son, . . . from Their Almanacks, 1726–1775* (Cleveland, 1891), 41–44 and map facing 44. See also John F.

manac-maker Benjamin Franklin—to whose *Poor Richard* his own almanacs bear a striking resemblance—Ames was not the kind of writer to get far from the sensibilities of his readers. Ames's almanacs were probably the best-selling almanacs in New England from the 1730s to the 1760s. Moses Coit Tyler noted that Ames presented his material entertainingly but 'with infallible tact.'⁷⁵ It seems clear that Ames was highly responsive to the requirements of his reading market. In 1760, then, when he finally and permanently reintroduced the word Christmas (and chose to advertise what he had done), there could no longer have been any significant reader resistance.

The point is confirmed by one last incident, another episode in the market career of Connecticut almanac-maker Roger Sherman, a man we have already met on the occasion of his run-in with that bawdy New York printer. Sherman published a series of almanacs (in Massachusetts and Connecticut) from 1750 to 1761, and every one listed Christmas and the saints' days. But in 1758 Sherman felt obliged to publicly defend his practice. He had learned, as he conceded in the preface to that year's almanac, 'that some good People in the Country, dislike my Almanack, because the observable Days of the Church of England are inserted in it.' Sherman, a good Congregationalist, denied that he had Anglican leanings. He insisted that his almanac was not intended as an expression of personal belief; rather, 'my Design in this Performance is to serve the Publick.' Everybody was free to observe such days or not, and no harm would be done as long as the physical space in the almanac used by naming the Red Letter Days 'does not crowd out any Thing that might be more serviceable.'⁷⁶

Sherman's words concealed his real point. After all, the 'good

Whiting, 'Diary of John Whiting of Dedham, Mass., 1743-1784,' in *NEHGR*, 63 [1909], 188.

75. One writer claims that in the years 1762-64 they reached 'an annual circulation of 60,000 copies': Briggs, *Essays, Humor, and Poems of Nathanael Ames*, 20. Moses Coit Tyler actually believed that Ames's almanac was 'in most respects, better than Franklin's.' For Moses Coit Tyler's telling description of the virtues of Ames's almanacs, see *ibid.*, 20-21.

76. Roger Sherman, *An Astronomical Diary . . . for . . . 1758* (New Haven, 1758), 1.

People in the Country' who 'disliked' the practice were themselves members of the 'Publick.' What Sherman was really alluding to was not religious freedom but market demand. His words suggest that the old Puritan preference for a 'reformed' almanac remained just important enough to warrant a rhetorical response, just as his actual practice reveals that such an old-fashioned preference was no longer widespread enough to require anything *but* a rhetorical response. There were still 'reformed' almanacs published in 1758, but only four years after that they would be gone, gone for good. By the 1760s, the naming of Christmas and the saints' days seems to have offended such a tiny group that it would not pay to produce even a single almanac for them. The 'Puritan' buying market seems simply to have evaporated.

CHRISTIANIZING CHRISTMAS THROUGH PRINT

Christmas Hymns, 1729-80

Almanacs were probably the single most popular genre of adult reading matter printed in colonial New England. Their only real rival (to judge by the number of titles printed and reprinted over the years) were hymnals. Indeed, the very first book printed in New England was a hymnal—a rhymed version of the Old Testament Book of Psalms, meant to be sung as well as spoken. This famous volume is commonly known as the 'Bay Psalm Book.' First published in 1640, a revised edition appeared eleven years later; appended to this new edition were a series of additional 'hymns and spiritual songs'—all of them versifications of lyrical texts from the Bible. It should come as no surprise that not a single one of these hymns dealt with the Christmas story.

The Bay Psalm Book was used by most of the Congregational churches in New England, and it held its popularity well into the eighteenth century (some fifteen editions appeared in the peak years between 1695 and 1730). But by the middle of that century the book's preference for textual fidelity over aesthetic power had made it seem old-fashioned to a majority of New Englanders.

(One minister explained in 1751 that 'the Flux of Language has rendered several Phrases in it obsolete, and the Mode of Expression in various Places less acceptable'; another, writing in 1758, referred to its 'Flatnesses in diverse Places.')

After 1744 the Bay Psalm Book would be reprinted only twice more; by the 1750s it was being used by only a minority of churches in Massachusetts.⁷⁷

What replaced the Bay Psalm Book—and finally infiltrated Christmas into New England's orthodox churches—were a pair of new verse translations of the psalms, both of them freer and livelier than the older version, emphasizing force of expression over accuracy of translation. The first of these had been written late in the seventeenth century by the English poets Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate. (Tate was England's Poet Laureate; he is best remembered today as the librettist of Henry Purcell's opera 'Dido and Aeneas'.)⁷⁸ Beginning with a revised edition that first appeared in England in 1702, Brady and Tate's *New Version of the Psalms* contained a group of additional hymns—and one of these new hymns told the story of the nativity. Written by Nahum Tate, the hymn has remained popular to this day. It begins with the lines, 'While Shepards watch'd their Flocks by Night, / All seated on the Ground, / The Angel of the Lord came down / and Glory shone around.' The *New Version*, with its nativity hymn, was first printed in Boston in 1713. It was reprinted in New England three times between 1720 and 1740, and some forty times more in the twenty-two-year period from 1754 to 1775.⁷⁹

Brady and Tate were themselves Anglicans. But the other version of rhymed psalms and hymns that replaced the old Bay Psalm

77. John Barnard, *A New Version of the Psalms of David* (Boston, 1752), preface (dated 1751), 1; 'S' [Thomas Prince,] *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, of the Old and New Testament, Faithfully Translated into English Metre* (Boston, 1758), preface, ii.

78. Purcell set many of Tate's poems to music, including what may be his greatest vocal solo, 'The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation.' Nicholas Brady wrote the libretto to Purcell's 1692 'Ode for St. Cecilia's Day.'

79. Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate, *A New Version of the Psalms of David, Fitted to the Tunes Used in the Churches* (Boston, 1720). The printing history of this collection can be traced most easily through Clifford K. Shipton and James E. Mooney, *National Index of American Imprints through 1800: the Short-Title Evans*, 2 vols. (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1969).

Book was written by a steadfast Congregationalist, the great English religious poet Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Watts may have been a Congregationalist, but his occasional hymns, along with his psalm translations, were designed to evoke powerful emotions rather than to offer plain and accurate translations of the original Biblical texts. Watts wrote not one but *two* Christmas hymns; both were rhapsodic accounts of the nativity scene. Each was titled 'The Nativity of Christ,' and each placed the nativity 'to-day'—which would have made it awkward to sing either of them at any other time than the Christmas season.⁸⁰ The first of Watts's two Christmas hymns was initially published in New England in 1720, and the second in 1748. Only after 1760 was either of them reprinted with any frequency.⁸¹ But from that point on, Watts's religious verse became the steadiest of what David D. Hall has termed 'steady sellers.' One New Englander who grew up toward the end of the century later recalled that as a youth 'I could recite Watts' version of the Psalms from beginning to end, together with many of his Hymns and Lyric Poems.'⁸²

The folklorist Peter Benes has estimated that by 1780 almost half the New England churches were singing the Watts version; another 25 per cent were using Tate and Brady; most of the remaining churches were singing from the old Bay Psalm Book—chiefly in its original form, but also in one of the several revised versions.⁸³

The traditional version of the Bay Psalm Book—the backbone of Congregational religious verse and song for a full century—was

80. Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Boston, 1720). One of these nativity hymns was placed third in this lengthy collection (it opens: 'Behold, the grace appears, / The promise is fulfilled; / Mary the wond'rous virgin bears, / And Jesus is the child.' This hymn also reports that the 'promis'd infant' is 'born to day'). The second hymn, from *Horae Lyricae* [Lyric Poems] (Boston, 1748), begins 'Shepards rejoice, lift up your eyes.'

81. By 1760, too, to confuse matters, Watts's second hymn—'Shepherds, rejoice'—was being regularly reprinted not only on its own but also among the hymns appended to Brady and Tate's *New Version of the Psalms*, which were now labelled as 'taken chiefly from Dr. Watts.'

82. Joseph T. Buckingham, *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life* (2 vols., Boston, 1852), 1, 19; quoted in Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 37.

83. Peter Benes, 'Psalmody in Coastal Massachusetts and the Connecticut River Valley,' in *The Bay and the River, 1600–1900 (Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, vol. 6 [Boston: Boston University, 1982])*, 117–31, esp. 125.

finished.⁸⁴ It was printed one last time in 1762, but then it disappeared for good, replaced by Brady and Tate and (especially) by Watts. For present purposes, the change is startling: it meant that after 1762 not a single Congregationalist hymnal published in New England failed to include a hymn for Christmas. Notably, on December 20 of that same year a Boston newspaper printed a notice that 'Christmas Hymns may be had at the Heart and Crown [Bookshop] in Cornhill.'⁸⁵

Christmas in the Singing Schools

All these New England hymns were printed without music, so that the texts could be sung to any of the available tunes that happened to fit the meter. Only in the 1720s did religious 'tunebooks' begin to appear in New England, part of a systematic effort to en-

84. Two Congregational clergymen tried to keep the Bay Psalm Book alive (in name at least) by producing revised versions during the 1750s. *Ibid.* One of these revisions was prepared by the Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston; the other, by the Rev. John Barnard of Marblehead, the same minister who had preached an anti-Christmas sermon back in 1729. But unlike the original version of the Bay Psalm Book, each of these revised versions (Barnard's included), contained a nativity hymn: Thomas Prince used Watts's 'Behold the Grace appears,' while John Barnard made his own translation of the text from the Book of Luke. (Barnard's effort shows how good the Tate version really was. His first verse goes like this: 'Whilst Shepherds, in the open Field, / Watch'd o'er their Flocks by Night; / God's Angel shone in Glory round, / And all their Minds affright: / But the kind Angel to them said: / Let nought disturb your Mind; / Good news I bring you, which shall be / Great Joy to all Mankind.') [Thomas Prince,] *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, of the Old and New Testament, Faithfully Translated into English Metre* (Boston, 1758), 331-32; John Barnard, *A New Version of the Psalms of David* (Boston, 1752), 269-70. Prince, a fervent supporter of the Great Awakening during the 1740s, published his revised hymnal in 1758 because he knew that the Bay Psalm Book had been almost wholly 'laid aside,' and this revision was a deliberate effort to revive it in the market. Prince acknowledged that the old version suffered from 'flatnesses,' but he also thought that its accuracy was important and ought to be preserved. What he strove for were translations that were simultaneously accurate *and* expressive; he wished to capture 'all the sentiments' expressed in the original. Prince appended to the psalms a series of hymns that read like statements of New Light theology (he gave them such titles as 'Difficulty of Sincere Conversion' and 'Justification by Faith, not by Works'). And, true to his emphasis on evoking 'sentiments,' Prince included Watts's Hymn on The Nativity of Christ ('Behold the Grace appears'). Prince's version of the New England hymnal did not sell very well: it was reprinted only once, in 1773. Barnard's version was never reprinted.

85. *Boston Evening Post*, Dec. 20, 1762. I was informed of this advertisement by Kate Van Winkle Keller. The hymns may have been printed in England. The changeover from the Bay Psalm Book was not always trouble-free: when the church of Dorchester, Mass., sang Brady and Tate for the first time in 1765, 'som people [were] much offended.' Diary of Samuel Pierce, Nov. 10, 1765, in *History of the Town of Dorchester, Mass.* (Boston, 1859), 360. (I am indebted to Charles Hanson for this reference.)

hance the quality of congregational singing by training churchgoers to read music.⁸⁶ (Phrased differently, this was part of a contest between oral and written culture.) Before 1760, none of those collections contained any texts that referred to the nativity. But in 1760 (that year, again!) a tunebook printed in Boston included the music and words to a 'Hymn on the Nativity,' composed by an Englishman named William Knapp and set to the familiar text of Nahum Tate.⁸⁷ And in 1761 the Newburyport tradesman and musician Daniel Bayley included 'An Anthem for Christmas-Day,' for solo voice with organ (the music composed by another Englishman, William Tans'ur), in his edition of pieces by that composer.⁸⁸ In 1764 Daniel Bayley published another English song, 'An Hymn for Christmas Day,' in his book *A New and Complete Introduction to the Grounds and Rules of Musick*.

Then, in 1766, Boston publisher Josiah Flagg brought out an important new collection of English religious music titled *Sixteen Anthems*. No fewer than three of these sixteen were Christmas songs, including the piece with which the volume opened, 'An Anthem for Christmas Day' (words from the Book of Luke, music by William Knapp). Finally, in 1769 the ubiquitous Daniel Bayley published a two-volume compendium of music by Tans'ur

86. Most of the music in these collections were simply three-part harmonizations without words—they could be sung to the texts of any hymns written in an appropriate meter, and indeed, copies of the tunebooks were often bound in at the end of the new hymnals. The major such collection was Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick*, first published in 1721 and reprinted twice during the 1740s. Walter (1696–1725) was a Boston minister who, with the support of other ministers from that town, attempted to reform the older New England practice—dubbed 'the usual way'—of having hymns 'lined out' (i.e., each line or two first read aloud by a deacon, so as to prompt the congregation) by teaching congregations how to read music—dubbed the 'regular way.' (David McKay and Richard Crawford note in their excellent discussion of the reform that this was essentially a contest between written and oral traditions.) It is interesting to note that one vocal defender of the new 'regular way' was James Franklin, who was also the printer of Walter's *Grounds and Rules of Musick*. See David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 9–19, also 19–24.

87. The tune book in which this nativity hymn appeared was a revised edition of the single most important of the old tune books, Thomas Walter's *Grounds and Rules of Musick* (first published in 1721). Another edition of this work appeared in or about 1764.

88. The 1761 date comes from a newspaper advertisement; no copy is extant. I have used the third (1767) edition.

and another English composer, Aaron Williams. This volume, which Bayley titled *The American Harmony*, contained six different Christmas songs. (Bayley's collection was reprinted seven or eight times between 1770 and 1774.) In all, during the 1760s nine different Christmas songs were published in New England.

The popularity of all these collections—some of which included the complex and relatively contrapuntal form known as 'fuging tunes'—was a function of the growth of 'singing schools' in communities throughout New England during the 1760s. These singing schools amounted to short-term evening courses in music reading and vocal production, taught by part-time professional musicians known as 'singing masters.' The music itself was used both in social singing and also as material for the church choirs that were beginning to form in many rural New England communities during these years.

Beginning in 1770, with the singing schools now well established, a new set of Christmas songs began to appear—songs written by native New England composers (indeed, the same semi-professional musicians who also ran the singing schools). The most famous of these Yankee composers, William Billings of Boston, composed Christmas music for each of the tunebooks he published between 1770 and 1794—there were eight such Christmas pieces in all, several of them extended contrapuntal 'anthems.'⁸⁹ Three of Billings's pieces (and part of a fourth) were settings of the hymns by Isaac Watts and Nahum Tate; a fourth used the words from an old Christmas carol. All the others were based on texts that Billings wrote himself—in one case, the anthem 'Shiloh,' the text was accompanied by an elaborate set of

89. In chronological order of publication, these were: 'An Hymn for Christmas or Charlston [sic]' and 'Boston, for Christmas,' both published in *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770); 'Boston' (same music as 'Boston, for Christmas,' but with a different text), 'Judea,' and 'Bethlehem' (all in *The Singing-Master's Assistant* [1778]); 'Emmanuel for Christmas' (in *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* [1781]); 'Shiloh, for Christmas' (in *The Suffolk Harmony* [1786]); and 'An Anthem for Christmas' (in *The Continental Harmony* [1794]). In addition, Billings may have been asked in 1782 to compose an elaborate Christmas hymn (also on a Watts text, but for soloist, chorus, and organ) for Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston. See McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, 132–33. A discussion of Billings's Christmas songs can be found *ibid.*, 141–46.

Biblical citations appended as footnotes and presumably intended to justify the singing of Christmas music. 'Shiloh' was Billings's most extended and complex Christmas piece, and he decided to use it as the opening piece of the collection in which it was published. It seems fair to say that William Billings was committed to the celebration of Christmas.

Two of Billings's eight Christmas pieces attained substantial popularity, as evidenced by their republication in one or more of the musical collections compiled by other New England singing masters during the late eighteenth century. One of these Billings pieces, 'Bethlehem' (a setting of Tate's 'While Sheperds watch'd their Flocks by Night,' first published in 1778) appeared in at least five such collections published between 1779 and 1786, in addition to two reprintings by Billings himself.⁹⁰ In fact, during that period 'Bethlehem' seems to have been reprinted more than any other Billings song.

But Billings's 'Bethlehem' was soon surpassed in popularity by another Christmas song, also a setting of Nahum Tate's hymn 'While Sheperds watch'd their Flocks by Night.' This song, 'Sherburne,' was composed by another New England singing master, Daniel Read of New Haven, and first published in 1785. In the five years that followed that initial publication, between 1786 and 1790, 'Sherburne' was reprinted in six different New England tunebooks, and by 1810 it had appeared in fully seventy-nine different collections nationwide (placing it among the top thirty pieces of sacred music published in America up to that time).⁹¹

90. 'Bethlehem' was reprinted in Andrew Law, *Select Harmony* (Cheshire, 1779), Simeon Jocelyn, *Chorister's Companion* (New Haven, 1782; reprinted 1783), *The Massachusetts Harmony* (Boston, 1784), Daniel Bayley, *Select Harmony* (Newburyport, 1784), and Isaiah Thomas, *Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony* (Worcester, 1786). Billings's 1770 setting of Watts's 'Shepards, Rejoice' ('Boston, for Christmas') was reprinted in Jocelyn's *Chorister's Companion* (Part III) and Langdon's *Beauties of Psalmody* (New Haven, 1786).

91. Daniel Read, 'Sherburne,' in *The American Singing-Book* (New Haven, 1785), 56. For the printing history of this song, see Richard A. Crawford (ed.), *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody* (in *Recent Researches in American Music*, Vols. XI and XII, Madison, 1984), lviii-lix; see also Allen Perdue Britton and Irving Lowens (completed by Richard Crawford), *American Sacred Music Imprints 1698-1810: A Bibliography* (Worcester, 1990). I have compiled the comparative popularity ratings from Appendix 4 of the *Bibliography*, 'The Core Repertory,' 683-89.

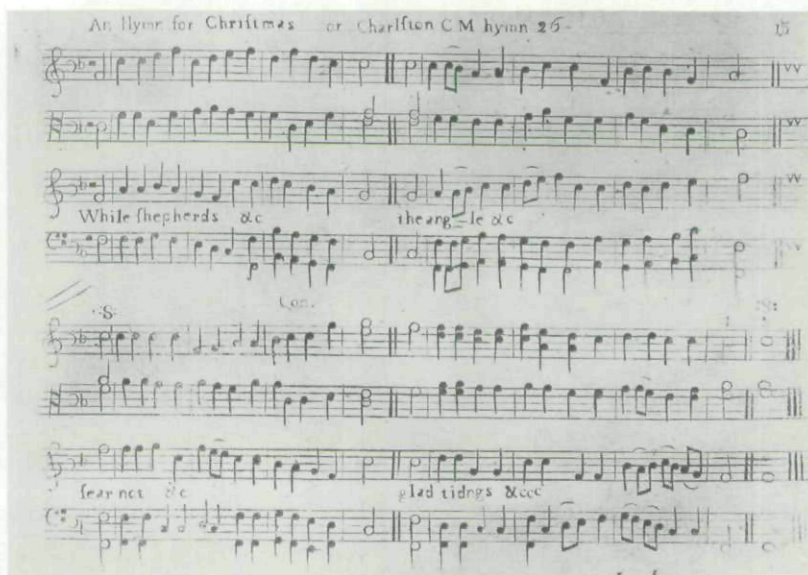


Fig. 8. William Billings, 'A Hymn for Christmas' (1770). The first of Billings's eight Christmas pieces. The words taken from Isaac Watts's hymn, 'While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night,' are indicated only by the opening phrase of each line suggesting that the singers were already acquainted with the text. The hymn's subtitle, 'Charlton' (i.e. Charlestown), probably names the congregation for which Billings first wrote the hymn. American Antiquarian Society.

At least one other New England composer of the period, Supply Belcher of Farmington, Maine, wrote his own setting of the same Tate text (his title for it was, simply, 'Carol'). And two other New England composers—Oliver Holden of Charlestown, Massachusetts, and Isaac Lane—composed fusing tunes to the text of Isaac Watts's hymn 'Behold the Grace appears.'⁹² Taken together, during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, seven different native New England composers published origi-

92. Supply Belcher, *The Harmony of Maine* (Boston, 1794), 38; Oliver Holden, *American Harmony: Containing a Variety of Airs, Suitable for Divine Worship, on Thanksgivings, Ordinations, Christmas, Fasts, Funerals, and Other Occasions* (Boston, 1792), 5-7. Also Isaac Lane, *Christmas Anthem* (Worcester, 1795). All three of these works were printed by Isaiah Thomas, as was Amos Bull, 'Anthem for Christmas Day,' *The Responsary* (Worcester, 1795), 82-85.

nal Christmas music. One piece, a large-scale Christmas cantata of sorts, was written for performance in the Yale College Chapel in 1786. This 'Ode for Christmas' (possibly composed by Daniel Read of New Haven) was sung by three separate four-part choirs, each representing one of the shepherds, and an additional three-part choir that took on the role of the angel Gabriel. Its performance was received with 'universal applause,' and the 'Ode' was soon printed in a New Haven musical magazine.⁹³

All this while, Christmas pieces by English composers continued to be routinely included in the anthologies of sacred music that were appearing with accelerated frequency in the 1780s and '90s. A rough count shows that at least one such piece appeared in four of the five collections in which Billings's own 'Bethlehem' was reprinted between 1779 and 1786; indeed, each one of these four collections contained a total of five different Christmas pieces.⁹⁴ One of the most important of the new tunebooks, Isaiah Thomas's 1786 *Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony*, even included the 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's *Messiah*! And Daniel Read—the composer of 'Sherburne'—published an unattributed arrangement of another chorus from *Messiah*, 'Glory to God in the Highest,' together with his own version of the several recitatives that precede this chorus (beginning with 'There were angels abiding in the fields').⁹⁵ All told, between 1760 and 1799 at least thirty different Christmas songs were published in New

93. *American Musical Magazine* (New Haven, 1787), 1, 27–30.

94. Two of these, Martin Madan's 'Christmas' and Joseph Stephenson's 'Milford' joined Read's 'Sherburne' among the 100 most-frequently-reprinted sacred songs of the period (*American Sacred Music Bibliography*, 683–89). Madan's 'Christmas' was first published in America in 1783; it received fifty-two printings through 1810 (Madan was a Methodist, and his style of composition—elaborate triple meter with lots of appoggiaturas and the melody in the top voice—reflected a new musical taste). Stephenson's 'Milford' was first published in America in 1779 and was printed sixty-eight times to 1810. A caveat is in order, however: even though the first verse of 'Milford' refers to Christ's nativity, this was not actually a Christmas song (its real subject was the Resurrection).

95. Isaiah Thomas, *Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony* (Worcester, 1786), 188–94; Daniel Read, 'A Christmas Anthem,' *The Columbian Harmonist No. III* (New Haven, 1785), 9–13. Technically, the 'Hallelujah Chorus' is not a Christmas song, and *Messiah* itself was not written or initially performed in the 1740s as a Christmas oratorio. In 1795 Thomas would publish, as a separate imprint, a 'Christmas Anthem,' with music by Isaac Lane—to a text by Isaac Watts. (See Isaac Lane, 'Christmas Anthem' [Worcester, 1785]).

England, and seven of these were reprinted eight times or more. It is safe to say that the decades after 1760 saw a veritable explosion of Christmas music in the region.

Liberal Christmas, Evangelical Christmas

That explosion did not penetrate the whole of New England society, but it extended further than one might expect. What patterns did the diffusion of Christmas music take? Before I probe for those patterns, let me offer a brief overview of the divisions within New England Congregational culture. In the mid-eighteenth century that culture had separated out, roughly speaking, into three different strains. One of these strains appealed to people who by ideology, temperament, and (often) genteel social position were inclined to imitate the ways of fashionable English society—liberals, or 'Anglicizing' types, as they have been dubbed by historians. A second strain appealed to those New Englanders who were attracted by the evangelical impulse that swept much of the region in the early 1740s in the form of the Great Awakening (such people were commonly known as 'New Lights'). The third and oldest strain appealed to those who chose to remain loyal to the traditional New England way of the Puritans; such people were commonly referred to as 'Old Lights' (or Old Calvinists), to distinguish them from evangelical 'New Lights.' Of these three groups, only the Old Calvinists appear to have successfully resisted the lure of Christmas during the middle and latter parts of the eighteenth century.

Some good evidence for this can be found by examining the actual process by which both 'Christmas' hymnals and the new tunebooks were diffused through the region. First, the hymnals. As we have seen, nativity hymns appeared in both Brady and Tate's and Watts's versions of the Psalms—only the old Bay Psalm Book, the Old Calvinists' hymnal of choice, continued to exclude them. Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate were Anglicans (indeed, the initial New England printing of their *New Version of the Psalms* in 1713 was apparently prepared for the benefit of Boston's

Anglican church). We might therefore expect their hymnal to have been used by Anglicizing New Englanders. Similarly, we would expect Isaac Watts's hymnals to have been used by more evangelical-minded New Englanders.

This indeed appears to have been the case. According to Peter Benes, who has made a careful study of the subject, there was both a geographic and an ideological pattern to those churches that abandoned the old Bay Psalm Book and chose to replace it either with Brady and Tate on the one hand or with Watts on the other. Churches that opted for Brady and Tate were generally located in 'the older towns in coastal Massachusetts,' communities of a more liberal, Anglicizing bent, while the Watts version (at least in the period up to 1760) was adopted primarily by churches in the Connecticut River Valley—and especially by those churches that supported the Great Awakening.⁹⁶ What about the congregations that stayed with the Bay Psalm Book? Benes does not deal with those churches explicitly, but the inference seems unavoidable: churches that continued using the Bay Psalm Book (and therefore had no easy access to Christmas hymns) tended to be Old Light institutions that opposed both liberalism *and* evangelicalism.

It is hardly a surprise to learn that those New England Congregationalists who looked to England for their cultural model would have been attracted to an Anglican-style liturgy. It is the evangelical side of this equation that is more surprising. But the evidence is powerful. We know, for example, that the British Methodist revivalist George Whitefield used Isaac Watts's hymns in his New England tours of 1741 and 1745. Watts's verses were emotionally affecting and eminently singable—sometimes Whitefield even had his audience sing them to the tunes of tavern songs. The singing of psalms and hymns for purposes of arousing strong

96. Benes, 'Psalmody,' 117–31; see esp. 120–30. Benes suggests that the first printing of Brady and Tate in 1713 was made especially for Boston's King's Chapel (Anglican), which began to sing the *New Version* that year. The first Congregational church in Massachusetts to adopt the *New Version* was the new Third Church (the Old South), which did so in 1722. At least 52 Congregational churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut switched to the *New Version* between 1751 and 1779.

emotion was in fact a new development in the 1740s. Stephen Marini has emphasized that Whitefield used 'hymns as a strategic element in revivalism,' and he even argues that 'more than any other medium, hymnody constructed a common symbolic language for Evangelicalism.'⁹⁷

Such an interpretation is borne out by the social history of the music of William Billings and the other New England singing masters. While this is an area that needs further exploration by historians of early American religious music, scholarship suggests that singing-school music was used at least as much in rural areas as in urban ones. In eighteenth-century England, at least, choral anthems and fusing tunes developed in the countryside (England's urban churches, on the other hand, 'acquired organs and choirs of school-children to provide decorous music'—as the eminent musicologist Nicholas Temperly has put it.) In New England this music was embraced by the evangelical movement, for whom its forceful rhythms and independence of voice-leading offered a more exuberant alternative to the relatively stodgy, lockstep arrangements of earlier tunebooks. Nym Cooke has suggested that Billings may have been associated with an evangelical revival in southeastern Maine in the early 1780s. Stephen Marini has shown that the musical style of the singing masters was eagerly adopted by both the Freewill Baptists and the Universalists, and his point is corroborated by an 1829 book, *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir*, which reports the special appeal of Universalist evangelicalism to the most musically-active members of one congregation. ('A visit of Mr. Murray, the Universalist preacher, to the neighborhood, was certain to draw three quarters of the choir away.'⁹⁸) Billings himself composed as many as nineteen pieces to

97. Stephen Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 157–58. For Whitefield's use of Watts's hymns, see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 79.

98. Nicholas Temperly, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, 2 vols. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1: chs. 5–7 (on the split between rural and urban churches—the quoted passage is taken from the dust jacket—and on evangelical music), and esp. 170–76 (on the rural origins of anthems and fusing tunes); Nym Cooke,

texts written by the founder of Universalism, John Relly, and he ended his first book, *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770), with the words to a hymn in memory of George Whitefield.⁹⁹

Indeed, it was the rural and evangelical appeal of this music that proved responsible for its survival into the present day. Early in the nineteenth century the musical style of the singing schools drifted south from New England down through the Appalachian mountains, where it re-emerged in the Southern back-country as 'shape-note' music, identified with the hymnody of the 'Sacred Harp' tradition. (And when interest in early New England religious music revived among musicologists in the 1970s and '80s, it was to the remaining Sacred Harp choral groups in the South that they turned in order to retrieve something of the original style of vocal production: a style that was nasal, rhythmically insistent, and devoid of vibrato. The melody line in this music was placed not in the soprano part but in the tenor, and it was sung by both men and women.¹⁰⁰)

'William Billings in the District of Maine, 1780,' in *American Music*, 9 (1991), 243-59; Marini, *Radical Sects*, 158; [Samuel Gilman,] *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir* (Boston, 1829), 142-46 (quotation from 146). In 1793 there was a special Christmas service at the Universalist meetinghouse in Boston at which 'the choir of singers sung several Anthems with much effect.' (*Massachusetts Centinel* [Boston], Dec. 26, 1793.)

99. Billings was a member of the moderately evangelical Hollis Street Congregational church in Boston (McKay and Crawford, 57), presided over by his friend Mather Byles; and on one occasion he may have been asked to compose a Christmas song for Boston's Trinity Episcopal Church—though nothing came of it (*ibid.*, 132-33). All nineteen of the pieces Billings wrote to texts by John Relly were printed in his 1786 volume *The Suffolk Harmony*. See James and John Relly, *Christian Hymns, Poems, and Spiritual Songs* (Burlington, Vt., 1776). Billings subscribed for two copies of this book when it was published in Vermont (Relly, 238; cited in McKay and Crawford, 147). See Cooke, 'William Billings,' 243-59, esp. 249-51.

100. Billings's biographers, writing in 1975, put the matter like this: 'The nineteenth-century Italianate resonance that results from modern vocal training is clearly out of place in performing Billings. Perhaps the best guide for the conductor to consult here is the recorded repertory of Southern shape-note singers. . . . [T]he Sacred Harp singers . . . sing in a way almost entirely unfamiliar to ears accustomed to Brahms or the microphone-gearred voices of popular musicians. . . . Their tone is straight—or vibrato is at least involuntary rather than cultivated—and nasal, their dynamic range small, and they carry a sense of flexibility and ease' (McKay and Crawford, 237). More recently a number of New England groups (such as the Bayley-Hazen Singers of northern Vermont and Stephen Marini's 'Norumbega Harmony') have been using this style of vocal production. The historical point here—a point reinforced by the relationship between this and Sacred Harp singing—is that this music was rural and evangelical. See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989), 146-61.

None of this shows that evangelical New Englanders actually sang the Christmas hymns. But it is worth noting a curious misattribution in Billings's most popular Christmas piece, 'Bethlehem.' This piece was a setting of a poem by Nahum Tate, the Anglican poet whose hymns were adopted largely by the older, more liberal eastern churches. But when Billings published his setting of Tate's poem in 1779 (and, indeed, each time this setting was reprinted elsewhere), the poem was attributed not to the Anglican Tate but to Isaac Watts, the evangelicals' favorite. (And in Daniel Read's setting of the same text in his extremely popular fusing tune 'Sherburne,' the poem is attributed to 'an unknown author.')

To be sure, these errors might have stemmed merely from ignorance of Tate's authorship (surely a possibility, given the confused state of the bibliography of hymnody). But the errors just might have been deliberate—stemming from a prudent reluctance to offend the largely evangelical market for these Christmas songs.

There was still another group of evangelical New Englanders who sang about Christmas: those who left the orthodox Congregational fold altogether by joining one of the radical new sects that was spawned by the Great Awakening. The three best-known of those rural-based sects were the Freewill Baptists, Universalists, and Shakers. An examination of the first hymnals issued by each of these three sects reveals that all of them contain original Christmas hymns, written specially for their respective denominations. The first hymnal put out by the Freewill Baptists, Henry Alline's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* of 1786, contains four hymns on 'the birth of Christ.'¹⁰¹ The Universalists' first hymnal, Silas Ballou's *New Hymns on Various Subjects*, published in Worcester in 1785, contains only a single Christmas hymn—but its 1808 successor has three.¹⁰² And the first Shaker hymnal, Seth Wells's

101. Henry Alline, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Boston, 1786), 117-18, 264-5, 332-3, and 343-4. The last of these opens: 'Hark! glad tidings to the shepherds, / Joyful news the angels bring; / God himself in flesh has enter'd, / Jesus is the new-born King.' For a discussion of the hymnody of each of these three sects, see Marini, *Radical Sects*, 158-70.

102. Silas Ballou, *New Hymns on Various Subjects* (Worcester, 1785), 19-21 ('The Birth of Christ'); [Hosea Ballou, Abner Kneeland, and Edward Turner,] *Hymns Composed by*

Millennial Praises (printed in Hancock, Massachusetts, in 1813), contains two. (One of these opens: 'This day of december, we meet to remember / Our blessed redeemer's appearing on earth.')103 Stephen Marini, referring to the early hymns of these three sects, writes that '[t]he creation of a public hymnody was a crucial step in the shaping of New England folk religion.'104 Apparently, Christmas was a part of that folk religion.

This is not to suggest that other New Englanders resisted singing about Christmas—there were Christmas hymns in Brady and Tate's *New Version of the Psalms* as well as in Watts, after all. But it does suggest that the slow penetration of Christmas into New England had an evangelical side as well as a 'liberal' one. The evidence provided by eighteenth-century hymnals suggests that the erosion of anti-Christmas hegemony within the churches was two-pronged: it came from 'Anglicizing' liberals on the one hand and New Light evangelicals on the other. In a way, that should not be too surprising. After all, the two sides shared a similar aesthetic. What liberals had in common with evangelicals was exactly what Brady and Tate had in common with Isaac Watts: a shared emphasis on religious verse that was characterized not by plainness of diction or accuracy of translation but by lyrical and emotional effectiveness.

There was a demographic side to this as well as a religious one. The two elements were linked by the new social role of religious singing in New England communities: that is, by the formation of singing schools and church choirs, most of them in rural communities. What seems to have happened was that a self-selected group of people chose to take a course of study under the direction of a trained 'singing master' (Billings and other semi-professional musicians often performed this job themselves). Once the

Different Authors (Walpole, N.H., 1808), 32–34. (One of these hymns, 'The Message of the Angels to the Shepherd,' states explicitly, 'Today is born in Bethlehem / The long-expected light. . .')

103. Seth Wells, *Millennial Praises* (Hancock, Mass., 1813), 6–8, 141–42.

104. Marini, *Radical Sects*, 171.

students had completed the course, it became their task to lead the regular congregational singing; and for this purpose they were seated separately, in a group of 'singing pews.' Essentially, this group functioned as a church choir—and, indeed, that is how such choirs were first formed in New England congregations.

According to Harriet Beecher Stowe, it was largely young people—young people of both sexes—who joined the 'singing schools,' and who then were appointed to lead their elders in singing the hymns that generally opened each religious meeting. Stowe recalled that the sessions at which these young people assembled to train and rehearse were treated as social events, occasions for courtship.¹⁰⁵ (In this they resembled other kinds of occasions that were ostensibly altogether different—such as corn-huskings and seasonal 'frolics.')

Stowe's recollections are backed by other evidence. Nicholas Temperly has shown that in eighteenth-century Britain the rehearsal meetings of the newly-formed church choirs were sometimes criticized as being occasions for uncouth and flirtatious behavior. One English critic charged that the gatherings were 'rude and profane' events; another, that 'the practice creates disturbances and causes people to behave indecently and disorderly. . . . People spend too much time learning it, they tarry out nights disorderly . . . and some of them are lewd and loose persons.' An 1823 tract, *The Singing Gallery* (written by the wife of a rural curate), observed that 'the young men and women show disrespect towards the clergyman, argue about what tune is to be sung . . . and indulge in flirtations and horseplay during the sermon.' Temperly sums up the situation like this: 'There is no question that much of the opposition to country choirs . . . was due to the irreverent behavior of the singers and the clergy's inability to control them.'¹⁰⁶

105. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oldtown Folks* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869). See also Gilman, *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir*.

106. Nicholas Temperly, *Music of the English Parish Church*, 144–62. The quotation ending 'lewd and loose persons' is from Thomas Symmes, *Utile Dulci; Or, A Joco-Serious Dialogue, Concerning Regular Singing* (1723), quoted by Edwin M. Good, 'The Bible and American Music,' in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles Gunn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 135–36.

But the defenders of these choirs believed that religious singing would act as a reforming influence on just this sort of unruly behavior. In New England, as early as the 1730s, Jonathan Edwards boasted about how he had converted the 'frolics' of the young people of Northampton into religious meetings, and how these religious meetings—which, as far as we know, may well have remained opportunities for courtship—actually led to the local religious revival that helped unleash the 'Great Awakening.'¹⁰⁷ It is possible that the same dynamic was at work in the singing schools of the late eighteenth century: that shrewd ministers used them to harness youthful energies into religious channels. One Englishman defended singing schools in 1796 against the charge that they led to 'obscene discourse [and] profane songs' by insisting that they actually served to *reform* such behavior. And early in the nineteenth century, Theodore Dwight, Jr., insisted that singing schools ('when judiciously conducted') could provide a mechanism for channeling precisely 'those evil tendencies . . . which are found in [other] assemblies of the young.' Dwight continued: 'Instances might be mentioned, in which it [singing instruction] has seemed to be the only bond of restraint to persons prone to vice or frivolity. . . .'¹⁰⁸

As we have seen, the singing of Christmas songs was very much a part of this movement. And we know, too, that Christmas had traditionally been a special time for just such disorder as these writers were describing, especially among young people. If that was the case, then the singing of Christmas hymns by evangelical choirs amounted in part to the transformation of older forms of seasonal 'disorder' into newer and arguably more acceptable forms. And it was through the use of *printed* music that the change was accomplished. Just as in the case of the carriers' addresses, the printing press acted as an agent that helped contain (and co-opt)

107. Jonathan Edwards, *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, in *The Works of President Edwards* (8 vols., Worcester, 1808), vol. 3, 12–13. See also Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

108. Theodore Dwight, Jr., *The Father's Book; or Suggestions for the Government and Instruction of Young Children* (1834; 2nd ed., Springfield, 1835), 171–76.

the energies that had previously flowed through the oral channels of popular culture.

Children's Nativity Literature, 1740-90

Harriet Beecher Stowe also wrote about the way Christmas had entered New England culture. In her 1878 historical novel *Poganuc People*, Stowe suggested that Christmas had taken hold in the region early in the nineteenth century through the influence of the Episcopal church, which lured New Englanders away from orthodoxy by the practice of decorating their churches at Christmas-time. Stowe also suggested that it was *children* who were the most susceptible to that lure.¹⁰⁹

On the last count, at least, Stowe may have been right on target. But it was not the Episcopal church that was responsible so much as it was the printed word, written and published by orthodox Congregationalists. By examining one last genre of printed literature—children's books—we may be able to glean some sense of the actual process, and the timing, by which Christmas entered the New England cultural mainstream. And the key date here is not the early nineteenth century but the mid-1740s.

Before the 1740s few New England children received positive associations about Christmas from their elders. In 1712 Cotton Mather preached an anti-Christmas sermon to the young people in his congregation after he learned that many of them had attended a Christmas dance. Fifteen years earlier, in 1697, Samuel Sewall discovered that several young people of his acquaintance had attended Christmas service at Boston's Huguenot church that year, and his own children admitted that they had been tempted to go, too. (One of them, nine-year-old Joseph Sewall, may even have done so.) Sewall reported in his diary that he was forced to 'dehort [them] from Christmas-keeping, and charged them to forbear.' The exact nature of Sewall's scolding is not clear, but we do know that as its 'text' he used a rather scary verse from the Sixteenth Psalm: 'Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after an-

109. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Poganuc People* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, c. 1878), chs. 3-4.

other god: their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.¹¹⁰

But by the middle of the eighteenth century many New England children were getting a different message. It came in the form of a pair of children's poems, each of them first published in New England in 1746. While neither of these poems dealt explicitly with the celebration of Christmas, both of them employed lyrical language to describe the nativity.

The first of these 1746 poems took the form of a little children's book printed in Boston with the title *The History of the Holy Jesus*. Anonymously written (the title page attributed the poem to 'a lover of their precious souls'), this booklet recounted the life of Jesus in simple, human terms, and it humanized his career still further by including a full-page picture that accompanied each page of the text. *The History of the Holy Jesus* opened with a brief but clear account of the nativity, accompanied on the facing page by a picture (fig. 9) of the three wise men travelling to Bethlehem:

The glorious blessed Time being come,
The Father had decreed,
Jesus of Mary then was born,
And in a Manger laid. . . .

The wise Men from the East do come,
Led by a shining Star,
And offer to the new-born King,
Frankincense, Gold, and Myrrh.¹¹¹

The History of the Holy Jesus was printed four times in New England (possibly five) between 1746 and 1754, and during the 1760s it was printed at least seven times more, possibly as many as twelve; another sixteen editions appeared by century's end. Several of these later editions were issued in Worcester by Isaiah Thomas. And Thomas—who ran what amounted to a one-man Christmas industry out of his Worcester printing house—appended to the original text a 'Cradle Hymn' to the infant Jesus.

110. Cotton Mather, 'Grace Defended' (Boston, 1713); Sewall, *Diary*, 1, 384.

111. *The History of the Holy Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1746), [5-6].

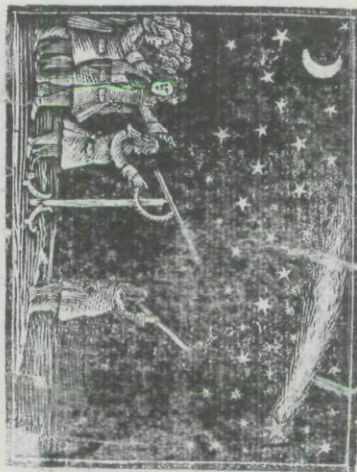
The glorious bleſſed Time being come,
 The Father had decreed,
 JESUS of *Mary* then was born,
 And in a Manger laid.

According to the moral Law,
 In eight Days Time he came,
 And circumciſed was he then,
 And JESUS was his Name.

The wiſe Men from the Eaſt do come
 Led by a ſhining Star,
 And offer to the new-born King,
 Frankincenſe, Gold, and Myrrh.

Which *Herod* hears, and wrathful grows,
 And now by Heav'n's Decree,
Joſeph with *Mary* and her Son,
 Do into *Egypt* flee.

The bloody Wretch, enrag'd to ſee
 Chriſt's Death he could not bear
 Commands that Infants all about
Bethlehem ſhould be ſlain.



Wise Men come from the East, &c.

Fig. 9. 'Wise Men Come from the East.' This illustration of the three Magi on the way to Bethlehem is taken from *The History of the Holy Jesus*, 3rd. ed. (Boston: 1746), a little children's book that went through approximately fifteen editions in New England before 1770. The children who read this book would probably have been susceptible to observing Christmas when they grew up. American Antiquarian Society.

It is useful to understand *The History of the Holy Jesus* as a book that nurtured an interest in Christmas. Its initial publication in the late 1740s—a time when the holiday was already beginning to be named in New England's almanacs and celebrated in its hymnals—was of course the work of adults, adults who may not even have wished the poem to have such an effect. (The nativity scene in the poem is brief; the event is not placed on December 25; and the word 'Christmas' does not appear.) But those who first read this account of the infant Jesus would have been young children at the time. And by the time they had grown into adulthood, they might have been readier than their parents to embrace Christmas. If the members of this age-cohort had been, say, six or seven years old in 1746 and 1747 (the years when *The History of the Holy Jesus* went through its first two printings), they would have turned twenty-

one by 1760—the very year that marked the general introduction of Christmas into New England almanacs and hymnals. And this same cohort would have begun to raise its own children just a few years later—a fact that might help explain the explosion of reprintings of this verse biography during the 1760s.

Such a speculation is reinforced by the *other* poem that made its initial New England appearance in 1746: a verse called ‘The Cradle Hymn.’ Written by Isaac Watts himself, ‘The Cradle Hymn’ was a lullaby, a religious lullaby that juxtaposed the physical comfort of the privileged ‘modern’ child, secure in its food and housing (‘Food and Raiment, / House and Home thy Friends provide; / All without thy Care or Payment / All thy Wants are well supply’d’), with the harsh environs of the infant Jesus:

Soft and easy is thy Cradle,
Coarse and hard thy Saviour lay,
When his birth-place was a Stable
And his softest bed was Hay. . . .
Was there nothing but a Manger
Cursed Sinners could afford,
To receive this heav’nly Stranger
Must they thus affront their Lord? . . .

But Watts’s lullaby went on to emphasize the emotional security of baby Jesus, secure in his mother’s love:

See the kinder Shepherds round him,
Telling Wonders from the Sky;
There they sought him, there they found him,
With his Virgin Mother by.
See the lovely Babe a dressing;
Lovely Infant how he smil’d;
When he wept, his Mother’s Blessing
Hush’d and sooth’d the holy Child.

And the lullaby ended by shifting suddenly, at the semicolon in the middle of the final verse, from evoking the infant Jesus to reassuring the baby or young child to whom the lullaby would actually be read or sung:

Lo! He slumbers in a Manger,
Where the horned Oxen fed;
Peace, my Darling, here's no Danger,
Here's no Ox a-near *thy* Bed.¹¹²

'The Cradle Hymn' was initially published in England in 1715 as part of a collection of hymns for children, but it was deleted from all the early New England editions of this collection, presumably because of its implicit associations with Christmas.¹¹³ When 'The Cradle Hymn' was finally printed in New England, in 1746, it was retitled 'Dr. Watts Cradle Hymn,' presumably to assert its orthodox credentials. And it was included as part of another great regional 'steady seller'—that famous reading-manual known as *The New-England Primer*.

The New-England Primer was as widely read by eighteenth-century American children as almanacs or hymnals were by their parents. First published in the 1680s, over the next half-century this how-to-read book went through some nine printings (under the title *The New-England Primer Enlarged*); not one of these contained 'The Cradle Hymn.' The poem appeared in New England for the first time in 1746, in a new and rival version of the *Primer* that was distinguished from the older one by its slightly different title, *The New-England Primer Improved*. This rival version quickly began to outsell the older *Primer Enlarged*: it was printed twice in the 1740s, four times in the 1750s, eight times in the 1760s, twenty-one times in the 1770s (a dozen of these in the years 1770–73 alone), and thirty times in the 1780s. In contrast, the *Primer Enlarged*, the version without 'The Cradle Hymn,' was reprinted only four times between 1740 and 1769. When it next appeared, in 1770, 'The Cradle Song' had been added—and it continued to appear in every subsequent printing.¹¹⁴

112. [Isaac Watts,] 'The Cradle Hymn,' in *The New-England Primer Improved* (Boston, 1746), 2–3.

113. 'The Cradle Hymn' appeared only in the fifteenth American edition of Watts's *Divine Songs . . . for the Use of Children* (Boston, 1765).

114. The printing history of the *New England Primer* in its variant editions can most efficiently be traced through Shipton and Mooney, *The Short-title Evans*.

Once again, the market pressures are revealing. The printing history of 'The Cradle Hymn' and its mate *The History of the Holy Jesus* suggests that something important was happening in New England culture in the years just after the Great Awakening. These two poems not only represent the first narrative accounts of the nativity and the infant Jesus to appear in the region, they also suggested something new in the history of New England's child-rearing practices—the tacit association of childhood with divinity. Both developments are further indications of the fashion as well as the timing by which Christmas eased its way into the New England mainstream.

CHRISTMAS AS A RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY

By the middle of the eighteenth century, even some members of the Congregational clergy were privately expressing the desire to observe Christmas. In 1747 the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman of Westborough, Massachusetts, a thoroughly orthodox Congregationalist, confided to his diary the fervent wish that 'I and mine may be happy partakers this Day who Sincerely celebrate the Nativity of Jesus Christ!' And he repeated the wish eight years later. In 1749 New Light minister David Hall of Sutton, Massachusetts, expressed a similar desire in *his* diary: '[T]his day, as tis apprehended, the Saviour was born[,] w[hic]h was to be glad tidings of Great Joy to all People'; and he added, 'I'll join to sing a Saviour's love for there's a Saviour Born.' As it happens, both Parkman and Hall finally managed to preach Christmas sermons to their congregations—by taking advantage of the calendar in those years when December 25 happened to fall on a Sunday. Still, both men apparently feared the accompanying prospects of holiday misrule: Parkman by noting the danger of the 'excesses of this Day' and Hall by worrying that the occasion might not be celebrated 'in a suitable manner.'¹¹⁵

115. *The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman 1703-1782: First Part, 1719-1755*, ed. Francis G. Walett (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1974), 160 (1747), 195 (1755); manuscript diary of David Hall, in 'Pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts Diaries,' Massachusetts Historical Society: Microfilm 5:1. See also, for example, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. F. B. Dexter, 3 vols. (New York, 1901), II: 103 and 315.

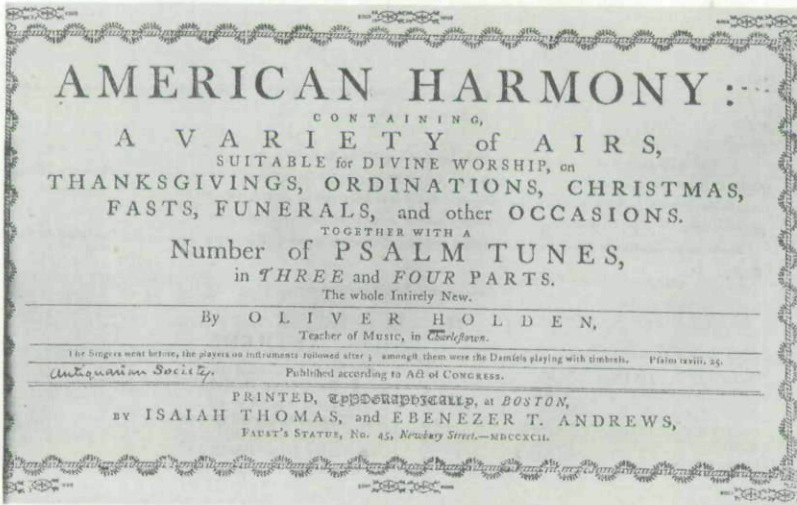


Fig. 10. Christmas music for divine worship. As the title page indicates, this collection of choral church music, printed in 1792 by Isaiah Thomas, consisted of pieces 'suitable for divine worship' on various occasions. All but one of these occasions were conventional enough for orthodox New Englanders—"Thanksgivings, Ordinations, . . . Fasts, [and] Funerals." But Christmas was slipped casually into this otherwise familiar list: it too was now an event that required 'divine worship.' (The composer of *American Harmony*, Oliver Holden, taught music in Charlestown, Massachusetts, the same community for which William Billings had written his first Christmas piece two decades earlier.) Oliver Holden, *American Harmony Containing a Variety of Airs Suitable for Divine Worship . . . Together with a Number of Psalm Tunes* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, [1792]). American Antiquarian Society.

Neither Ebenezer Parkman nor David Hall (and these two clergymen were by no means unique in their longing to observe Christmas) publicly advocated the formal celebration of the holiday. Not until the end of the century would any Congregational minister dare to do such a thing. The first to issue a public call for the celebration of Christmas by the churches of New England was Thomas Thacher of Dedham, Massachusetts, a minister with proto-Unitarian sympathies. In 1797 Thacher preached a Christmas-day sermon in Dedham's Episcopal church (his own Congregational church was of course closed on that day). Just as impor-

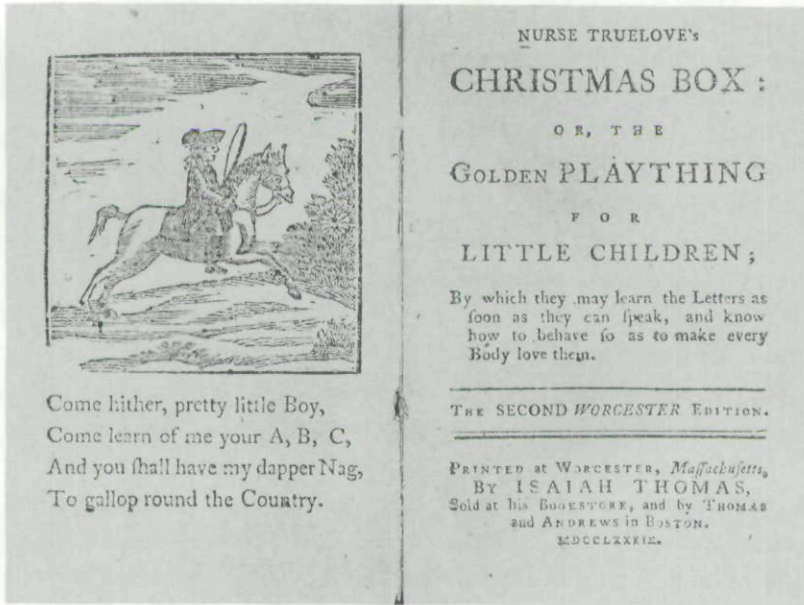
tant, Thacher chose to have the sermon printed. Thacher asked for the 'patience' of his Episcopalian audience (and by implication of his Congregational readers) as he undertook to explain why those he called 'our ancestors of the New-England states, who founded our churches, refused it [Christmas] that honour and notice paid by all other Christians.' And he proceeded with a summary of what he termed (using the third person) '*their* objections.' The date of the nativity was unlikely to have been in December, since (for example) shepherds were *feeding their flocks by night*. ('Though Palestine be in a climate much warmer than our own, yet such employment was improbable at that late season of the year.') Thacher also reminded his audience that his Puritan ancestors 'might dislike the manner in which it [Christmas] was observed by the ignorant and unthinking part of the community, and might therefore view it as productive of dissipation and indecent mirth.'¹¹⁶

But all those objections were 'of very little consequence' in the modern era, Thacher assured his Episcopalian listeners (and admonished his Congregationalist readers). Times had changed, and there was more tolerance now than formerly—on both sides of the debate. Thacher assured his listening audience that the more 'moderate' representatives of the Congregationalist church had come to recognize 'that some day should be set aside for this purpose.' Thacher admitted that he himself was drawn to the kind of religious rituals that 'admit of some entertainment to the senses'—at any rate (and here came the by-now standard caveat), when such rituals were 'restrained by decorum from sensual excess' and were rendered 'perfectly innocent.'¹¹⁷

Thacher added a final argument, and a new one. In the pluralistic republic that the United States had now become, not bound together by a single established church, it would prove socially constructive if the competing religious sects could share such common occasions as Christmas. And in New England itself, the

116. Thomas Thacher, 'Sermon, preached in the Episcopal Church in Dedham, December 25, 1797; being the Festival of Christmas' (Dedham, 1798), 20–22.

117. *Ibid.*, 22, 23, 26.



Come hither, pretty little Boy,
Come learn of me your A, B, C,
And you shall have my dapper Nag,
To gallop round the Country.

NURSE TRUELOVE'S
CHRISTMAS BOX :
OR, THE
GOLDEN PLAYTHING
FOR
LITTLE CHILDREN ;

By which they may learn the Letters as
soon as they can speak, and know
how to behave so as to make every
Body love them.

THE SECOND WORCESTER EDITION.

PRINTED at WORCESTER, Massachusetts,
BY ISAIAH THOMAS,
Sold at his BOOKSTORE, and by THOMAS
and ANDREWS in BOSTON.
MDCCLXXXIX.

Fig. 11. A Christmas present for children in early New England. This little book received its first American printing in 1786 by Isaiah Thomas, although the edition from which the frontispiece and title page are pictured here dates from 1789. The term 'Christmas Box,' that had originally referred to a kind of piggy bank kept by artisans' apprentices (see fig. 4), was now being used to indicate any kind of Christmas present. Isaiah Thomas gave the book its title simply because he published and advertised it on December 25. *Nurse Truelove's Christmas Box: or, The Golden Plaything for Little Children* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1789). American Antiquarian Society.

decorous celebration of this holiday would constitute an effective challenge to the bigoted remnant of the region's old Calvinists.¹¹⁸

For such a sermon as this to have been delivered in New England suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century a new universe of discourse had opened up. This new language made it possible to dismiss the old theological objection to Christmas—the

118. *Ibid.*, 25–27. For Thacher's career, see Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. VIII (Unitarian), 140–2; also Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 245, 255, 285.

uncertainty over the date of Christ's nativity. On the other hand, the old social objection remained salient—the rude fashion in which many people continued to celebrate the holiday. But now it seemed possible that the devotional observance of Christmas day could actually serve as a way of neutralizing revelry, by giving people something better to do that day.

From that point on, momentum began to build. The pressure to hold Christmas-day services was centered in Boston, led on the one hand by the liberal wing of the Congregationalist clergy—those ministers whose sympathies lay, as Thomas Thacher's did, with the emerging Unitarian movement—and on the other hand led by an evangelical sect, the Universalists, who began to hold Christmas services as early as 1789. In 1817 Boston's Unitarian clergy, together with some of their more influential congregants, organized a systematic public effort to close the town's businesses and open its churches on December 25. The movement lasted three years. For a week before Christmas Boston's newspapers were filled with letters and editorials calling for the general observance of the day and announcing the prospects for business closings and open churches. Three of Boston's Congregational churches held services on December 25, 1818 (it fell on Friday), and these were joined by the town's two Universalist churches and one Methodist church. (A service was also held in Worcester, Massachusetts, under the aegis of the Reverend Aaron Bancroft.) Enough businesses were closed in Boston that one visiting merchant was unable to sell the wares he had brought to town. Even the staunchly Trinitarian journal the *Boston Recorder* (organ of the Park Street Church—'Brimstone Corner') was 'happy to learn that it is the intention of many persons to observe Christmas day . . . in a more solemn manner than they ever yet have done'—the caveat was revealing—and expressed the 'hope' that 'divine service will be performed [on Christmas] in all our churches.'¹¹⁹

119. The movement can be traced in *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 24, 1817; *Independent Chronicle*, Dec. 24, 1817; *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 25 and 29, 1817; *Boston Intelligencer*, Dec. 12, 19, and 26, 1818; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 20 and 22, 1818; *The Idiot*, Dec. 24, 1818;

The movement ran out of steam just a year later. (As it turned out, the period 1817–19 was to represent a historical highwater mark in the religious celebration of Christmas in Boston. To this day the Congregationalist, Unitarian, Baptist, and Methodist churches of New England do not ordinarily hold services on December 25.) A number of Boston business establishments did continue to remain closed on December 25, although in 1823 one newspaper reported with amusement that several of these only *appeared* to be closed—their window shutters were fastened shut, but ‘their doors kindly opened to all who would take the trouble to lift the latch.’ The proprietors of these businesses had declined to sacrifice ‘the profits of [doing] ordinary business’ simply on account of public pressure. By the late 1820s the movement to close the shops and open the churches was dead. In 1828 the *Boston Statesman* noted with regret that ‘few places of business were closed yesterday, and none but the churches of the Episcopal order, we believe, were opened.’¹²⁰

But by that time Boston shopkeepers, like those in the rest of the United States, were beginning to do a brisk trade in Christmas presents. By 1828, in fact, Boston’s shopkeepers had been using the local press for twenty years to advertise the availability of Christmas gifts. The first notice for ‘Christmas and New-Year’s Gifts’ had appeared in a Boston newspaper as early as 1808—virtually as early as such advertisements were printed anywhere in the United States. By 1823 commercial Christmas presents had become sufficiently ubiquitous in Boston that a local paper was able to make a joke about them. In an editorial headed ‘Christmas and New Year’s Presents,’ the *New-England Galaxy* noted that King Solomon himself had said “‘There is a time to give’”; and

New England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine, Dec. 18, 24, and 25, 1818 (letter to editor); *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 21 and 24, 1818 (churches holding services on Dec. 25); *Massachusetts Spy* [Worcester], Dec. 22, 1818 (Worcester service); *Boston Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1818. The 1818 experience of the visiting merchant is recorded in Caroline Sloat, “Before There Was Christmas,” *Old Sturbridge Visitor*, 24 (1984): 10. In 1817 a collection of Christmas hymns was printed in Boston, probably as part of the same movement: G. Carseer, *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Saviour* (Boston, 1817).

120. ‘On Public Festivals,’ *Missionary Herald at Home and Abroad* [*The Panoplist and Missionary Herald*] (Boston), vol. 16 (Feb. 1820), 57–59; *Boston Statesman*, Dec. 27, 1828.

the paper went on to make the punning observation that had old Solomon 'lived in these days, he would have acknowledged, that there was no time like the *present*, and never a better assortment of *gifts*.'¹²¹

In New England, as elsewhere, the next incarnation of Christmas was taking shape. That incarnation engaged powerful new forces that were coming to dominate much of American society in the years after 1820—a heady brew that mixed a rapidly commercializing economy with a culture of domesticity centered on the well-being of children. Both elements were present in a new Christmas poem that soon came to define the rituals of the season in middle-class households throughout the United States. This new poem, written in 1822, began to receive wide distribution in the newspaper press (including that of New England) five years later. The poem was written by the son of an Episcopal bishop—and ignored religion altogether. Although it was set on the night before Christmas, its subject was not the nativity but 'A Visit from St. Nicholas.' So it would be Santa Claus, not Jesus of Nazareth, whose influence finally succeeded in transforming Christmas from a season of misrule into a day of quieter family pleasures.

121. *New-England Galaxy*, Dec. 26, 1823.

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