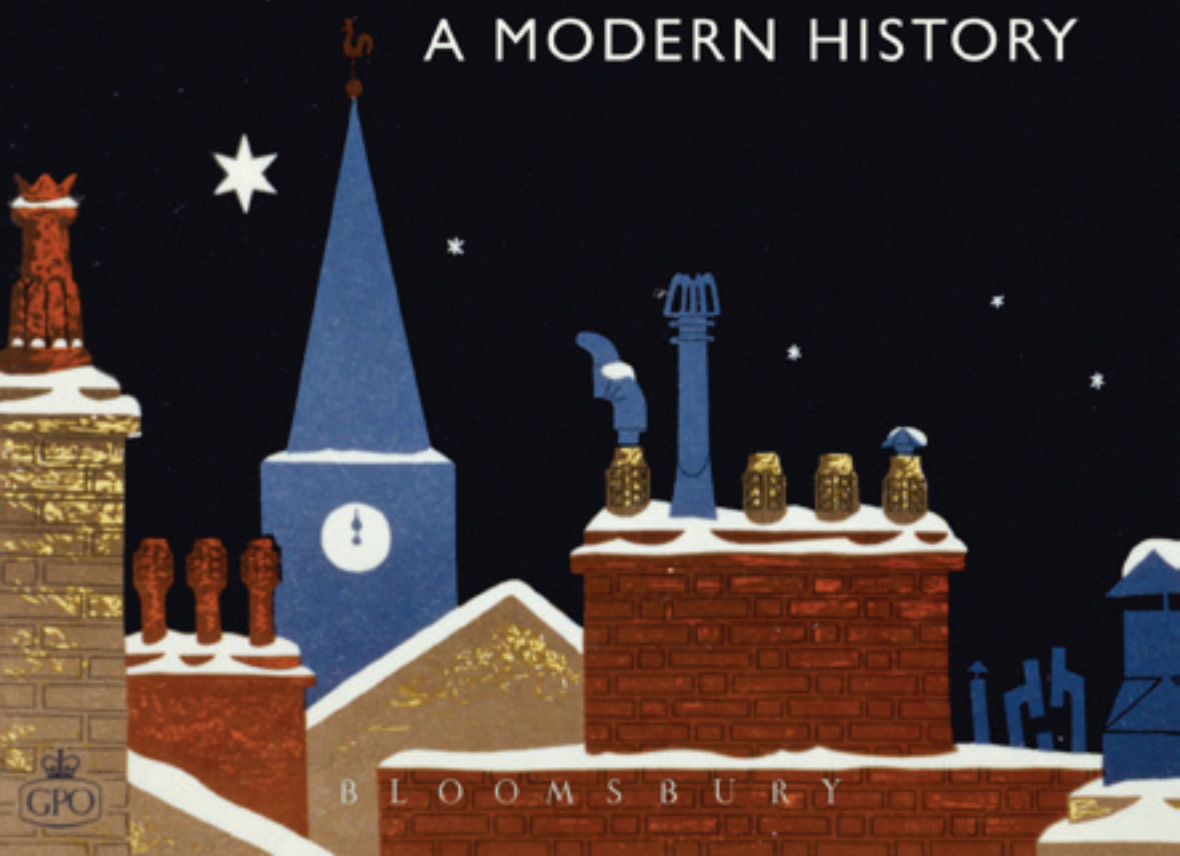


MARTIN JOHNES

CHRISTMAS AND THE BRITISH

A MODERN HISTORY



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Christmas and the British

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A Modern History

MARTIN JOHNES

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One just knew that it was the nicest day of the year. Turkey and plum pudding in the middle of the day. Lounging over the fire in the afternoon, with books and nuts and piles of goodies. In the evening, games round the fire and a cold supper with everyone washing up afterwards, so that the maids had a clear kitchen when they came in.

Woman's Own, 19 December 1936

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I tried to write some of the book while listening to festive songs. This research technique proved to be more irritating than enlightening, but I feel I owe Tracey Thorn's *Tinsel and Lights* some thanks for proving there is such a thing as a pleasant Christmas album.

My family have inevitably shaped my personal experience of Christmas and in recent years put up with my ponderings on customs. My parents ensured I did not grow up with bad memories of the festival (or much else). The Moyes clan showed me how other families do Christmas. My daughters, Bethan and Anwen, wandered the streets with me counting how many houses had decorations up, shared lots of Christmas movies, tolerated some of them being in black and white, and were important in reminding me of how exciting the festival can be. Heather Moyes was important in far too many ways to list.

This book was born, discussed and thought about on trains between Cardiff and Swansea. Richard Fry, Chris Millington, Andrew Neate, Sarah Rodgers and Steve Smith all allowed Christmas to infest their daily commute without complaining or taking the mickey too much. I can only apologize to them that there is not more about *Die Hard* in the book.

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INTRODUCTION

As darkness fell along the Western Front on Christmas Eve 1914, the atmosphere of war slowly faded. It began with soldiers ignoring signs of movement from the enemy trenches. Some Germans hoisted Christmas trees onto their parapets. Both sides listened to the other sing carols and then shouted greetings and suggestions of a ceasefire for the following day. In the morning, tentatively at first but growing in confidence and in number, some soldiers left their trenches and ventured into 'no man's land'. There they met the enemy, swapped cigarettes, food and drink and wished each other a merry Christmas. One Birmingham soldier wrote home: 'if you could only have seen this mob, you would have thought you were dreaming ... it is an experience never to be forgotten.'¹

The truce did not happen everywhere. In places it was simply an opportunity to bury the dead. Some soldiers took advantage of it to note the condition of the enemy's defences and others opened fire when they saw men leave the opposing trenches. The military authorities on both sides were not happy. But it was a remarkable occasion all the same. Indeed, the Christmas truce of 1914 has become one of the most powerful symbols of humanity amid the horrors of war. Yet what tends to get overlooked is how it had taken the festival of Christmas to bring out the front-line soldier's desire for a respite from fighting. As one soldier in the Queen's Westminsters put it, the events were 'a tribute to the spirit of Christmas'.²

The importance of Christmas in British culture was evident in the fact that Douglas Haig had already ordered that there were to be no reliefs carried out and that troops should be given 'as easy a time as possible'.³ Back home, what had become established as the rituals of Christmas were being kept up. Pantomimes and charitable dinners and distributions to the poor, sick and elderly all took place. In Dundee, the local newspaper even thought that more effort than normal was going into giving children treats, perhaps, it speculated, because it was no longer permissible to show goodwill to all men. New recruits were told they would not have to report until after the holiday and were even given some advance pay to enjoy themselves first. Father Christmas could be found in department stores, and all manner of goods were being advertised as presents. War toys were popular gifts; appeals were made for troops to be remembered in Christmas prayers and for donations of mufflers, mittens, socks and shirts to be sent as presents to those in the forces.⁴ There were other signs of the shadow of war. There was turkey and beef on sale for Christmas dinner, but prices were up.

Oranges, holly and mistletoe were all scarcer than normal. In Manchester, the Post Office estimated that it dealt with a third fewer Christmas cards than normal. In Burnley, a mill manager tried to stop the Christmas Eve tradition of stopping work for a while for 'a little jollification'. The result was that one of his workers punched him.⁵

Other officials also thought it wrong to celebrate at a time of war. Territorial soldiers complained that they were not getting Christmas leave and some local authorities turned down the many requests for extensions to licensing hours on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day. However, closer to popular opinion was the writer in *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* who maintained that the festival must be celebrated 'for the sake of the children if for no other reason'. Christmas, he argued, is for the 'Kiddies', and 'the dreadful shadow of war should not put a blot upon their beloved, happy Yuletide'. But he also saw something in it for the adults: 'we should be able to appreciate the charming flavour of the time-honoured Christmas legends and put a bit of it into our all too matter-of-fact and all too sternly real modern life.'⁶

Ultimately, Christmas carried on at both the front and at home because of the depth of its social and cultural functions. These extended far beyond a day to simply enjoy oneself in the depths of winter. It was a festival that celebrated the bedrocks of Victorian and Edwardian respectable society: religion, commerce and domesticity. Shopkeepers were often seen as the primary promoters of Christmas, but first and foremost, it was a religious celebration, not just of Christ but also of the values of charity and goodwill that were supposed to be integral to Christianity. One form that goodwill took was present-giving, and this freed the frenzy of Christmas shopping from the guilt or vulgarity that was associated with high levels of consumption and spending. The festival also brought families together and encouraged charity, soothing the consciences of those who shut their children away in nurseries and at boarding schools and who lived with plenty when there was poverty and misery all around them. Furthermore, Christmas celebrated tradition and the idea of a simple 'Merrie England' in a world of change and complexity.⁷ One historian has argued that this helped make Christmas a symbol and expression of Englishness itself.⁸ The idea of the Victorian and Edwardian Christmas as a national symbol is, however, undermined by the fact that material deprivations prevented many working-class families from enjoying the kind of festival that the middle classes knew. While the middle classes ate, drank and were merry, most workers were limited to a few simple presents for the children and a modest celebratory meal. A few could not celebrate at all. Christmas was thus as much an illustrator of social divides as something that crossed them.⁹ Nor was the Victorian and Edwardian Christmas free from conflict and doubt. The middle classes worried about gluttony, drunkenness, begging and a lack of propriety and Christian feeling. Commercialization too was a matter of some concern, even though that was what had created much of Christmas culture in the first place.

But these concerns were clearly outweighed by the social good that was seen in Christmas. Middle-class charity meant those in institutions such as hospitals and workhouses had a pleasurable day too. Indeed, they probably enjoyed a more luxurious Christmas than the better off members of their class. Moreover, a Christmas of excess was something to aspire to for the workers, which meant Christmas was only ever going to get bigger. The general rising living standards of the interwar period and early post-war decades saw the working class embrace Christmas and its rituals, using them to brighten their lives and show off both their taste and affluence. In the process, they made the festival a more far-reaching part of national culture than it had been before the Great War. The hundred years that followed 1914 thus saw Christmas evolve, but there were also remarkable degrees of continuity. This was because Christmas was both a product of its time and an escape from it. The festival was changed by growing affluence, shifting family structures, greater expectations of happiness and material comfort, technological developments, a decline in religious belief and the fading of Scottish exceptionalism. It became a battleground for concerns over religious observance, holiday entitlements, social obligations, public behaviour and the influence of royalty and media. Thus, as one writer noted in 1931: 'the change in the celebration of Christmas is a measure of the change in the social life of England.'¹⁰ But at its heart remained the same trinity of shopping, family and goodwill that had appealed so much to the Victorians. So, too, did the Victorian rituals of present-giving, dinner, trees, cards and Santa Claus and the fact that the majority of people appreciated the companionship and simple joys experienced on the day itself.

Understanding all history is about understanding continuity and change but this is especially true of Christmas because it was an event that encouraged reflection on the past. This did not just happen at a collective level but also at an individual level. To think about how Christmas had or had not changed was, for most people, to reminisce, to think about their own childhood and to contemplate the march of time since. People often did not have much choice in this: Christmas was inescapable. Grumpy old men, those alone, those of different religions and creeds all had Christmas thrown at them on the streets, on television, at work or school. It may only come once a year but it comes every year. It is an inescapable and permanent feature of Western culture. And this is not likely to ever change. Despite the cynicism and the nostalgia it could induce, Christmas was, above all, a happy time and for that reason it was, and continues to be, an integral feature of British culture.

Christmas's ubiquity has perhaps blinded us to the roles it plays both in our individual lives and in wider society. So, too, does its 'naffness'. Christmas is full of the kitsch, throwaway and the sentimental and such characteristics dominate many of the sources available to the historian of the festival. In 1978, the historian J. A. R. Pimlott claimed there was an 'aesthetic poverty' to the modern English Christmas. He argued there 'has probably been more bad writing, and particularly bad verse, about Christmas than about any

other subject, and the relatively good has been painfully derivative'.¹¹ This was not entirely fair and perhaps owed something to Pimlott's generation not always seeing cinema and television as part of intellectual culture. Christmas has provided the setting for some classic films and programmes, but whatever the artistic quality of depictions of Christmas, they all tell us something about the 25th of December. Moreover, depictions of Christmas on screen and in the 'bad' writing of genres such as romantic fiction are more than just sources to tap into the practices of the past. They helped influence and shape that past too, creating a framework against which people judged their own celebrations. The Christmases of popular culture not only encouraged people to behave in certain ways but also allowed them to feel superior and sneer at the poor taste of others. Yet knowing what people thought of what they watched, read and received is very difficult and the historian of Christmas is faced with a situation where the volume of sources is overwhelming but their completeness is limited.

Nonetheless, through diaries, newspapers, social surveys, television, films, novels, advertising and a wealth of ephemera, the historian can begin to understand something of how people celebrated and thought about Christmas, from their philosophical and political musings to what they ate and did. These details matter. As Abrams and Brown argue: 'in the smallest aspect of daily life, in the smallest ritual or rite, is to be found an imprint of the whole of culture.' Moreover, they point out that 'Lives are shaped in the main by everyday practices rather than exceptional events'.¹² Christmas is both an everyday practice, in the sense that it happens every year, and an exceptional event, in that it involves behaviour very different to the rest of the year. Christmas says something about British culture, about how people live out and think about their lives, about their values, habits and tastes. But its details, its rituals and its rhetoric also all helped shape Britain and the British at both individual and collective levels.

This, then, is not a book about where Christmas practices and traditions came from, but about how these practices and traditions were lived out, adapted and thought about over the course of the century that followed the start of the Great War. It is about the social, cultural and economic functions of Christmas. It is about the ordinary and extraordinary things people did and continue to do on the 25th of December. It is about how Christmas is part of the fabric of society, and the complex web of beliefs, values and activities that unites people and turns them from individuals into a community. It is thus as much a book about Britain, its values, hopes and fears, its structures and its shape, as it is a book about the most unusual day of the year.

In 1957 C. S. Lewis wrote that there were three Christmases: the religious festival, a merry holiday and a 'commercial racket'.¹³ Actually there were many more and this book looks at the different forms of the festival. It is organized around six themes that helped define twentieth-century Britain: consumerism, family, tradition and ritual, religion, local and national communities and government. Class and gender were also central currents within

British society and they too feature within the book, but cutting across all the chapters.

The first chapter examines the commercial and consumer Christmas. It explores the festival's economic role and the experience and nuances of Christmas shopping, focusing on what people bought as presents and why. The chapter argues that despite the complaints that Christmas was overly commercialized, gift-giving was actually something that brought great pleasure and reaffirmed social bonds. The chapter also investigates how the working class increasingly shared in the commercial Christmas, arguing that this was a time of year when the masses could signal their inclusion in a consumer society but when the poorest in society could feel most excluded.

The second chapter argues that the festival helped cement and celebrate the central place of family in British society. It looks at the different meanings of Christmas for men, women, children and the collective family unit. It shows how the festival could be a source of both considerable pride and stress for women, that men varied very significantly in their reactions to the festival and how the festival represented the increasing child-centred nature of society. However, while Christmas reinforced the family's place at the centre of society, it could also increase the isolation of the elderly and those alone.

The third chapter looks at the rituals that defined the festival, analysing the function and form of decorations, cards, Santa Claus and the Christmas dinner. It not only demonstrates the reverence for traditions that so often existed, but also shows that these traditions were malleable and subject to renegotiation and reinterpretation, something which was central to why Christmas was so ubiquitous.

The fourth chapter takes the spirit of Christmas as its theme, exploring the roles of religion, charity and individual and collective reflection as defining features of the festival. For poor and rich alike, Christmas was a contrast to the real world and everyday life and that lay at the heart of its spirit and the charity and happiness it could induce. Yet others took the festival as a sign of the times, and it also became a hook on which complaints about the nature of society were hung. One such common complaint was the secularization of society and Christmas itself; however, the chapter argues that the festival was actually central to upholding Christianity, particularly the values of Christianity, within Britain.

The fifth chapter looks at Christmas as communal culture, examining the shared aspects of the festival that became part of national and regional cultures. These varied from local customs, public decorations and carol singing that brought together and helped define local communities, to songs and films that nearly everyone knew and television programmes that were watched simultaneously in millions of different homes. Immigration did present new challenges to national unity, but as regional differences in the celebration of Christmas faded, most notably in Scotland, Christmas became, the chapter argues, a stronger part of the fabric of British culture, a shared story that helped unite people of different backgrounds.

The final chapter looks at government and other official interactions with the festival. These too were varied and ranged from regulation of rationing, holidays and public services to generosity towards those guilty of crimes. The chapter demonstrates how many wider public ideological battles were played out in microcosm through Christmas, but that ultimately the state's role in the most important day of the year tended to be reactive and self-serving.

With Christmas taking different forms and interacting with different trends, it is unsurprising that it generated different responses. As Pimlott points out, 'Devotion to the Holy Child may be juxtaposed with schoolboy greed and adult abandon, love of tradition and a strong sense of family with dislike of the Christmas chores and an aversion from particular customs.'¹⁴ This was true of the nineteenth century too and Armstrong has argued that as 'an imagined ideal' in that century, 'Christmas attained the power to stimulate and intensify a range of emotions, including familial love, benevolence and anticipation, but also loneliness and disappointment.'¹⁵ While that is true, we should be wary of exaggerating Christmas. Life for most people is not a matter of extremes. It is not about great happiness or sadness but more mundane feelings. The pleasures of life for most are simple – a drink or two, a good film or television programme, a conversation, a cuddle or a nice cup of tea. Christmas fits into that pattern. Some, especially children, derived huge pleasure from it. For those alone it was often a moment of despondency, but for many more it was a small moment of happiness shared with others, something generally nice, albeit accompanied by a number of irritations. It was not perfect, but nor was it usually tragic. It was part of the rituals of existence that made life not only tolerable but also enjoyable.

Thus, ultimately, the history of Christmas is a redemptive one. In a century beset by war and inequalities, there was still a basic decency in British society. Although few people, except in war, made significant sacrifices for strangers, Christmas showed that most people were committed to others and generally happy in themselves. If there is a big idea to this book, it is that Christmas, just as Dickens had tried to convince people, is a good thing. It may not be fashionable for historians to pass moral judgements on their subjects of study, but that does not mean it should not be done. In a century in which so many people felt so much was going wrong, Christmas was a force for the positive. It was a break from work for most. Its economic significance was huge. It could unite local communities and even the nation through shared traditions and a way of life. It also brought families together (and sometimes reminded them why they lived apart for the rest of the year). It put a smile on people's faces, especially children's. Of course, not everyone liked it. It made some angry or exasperated or sad. As Terry ranted in a 1974 episode of *The Likely Lads*: 'It's all got out of hand these days. It's just one big racket. ... People over eat, over spend and over sentimentalize.' But more in tune with public opinion was the reply of his friend Bob: 'I know, I know, I know and I love every minute of it.'¹⁶

CHAPTER ONE

The consumer Christmas

In 1931, the *Daily Worker* contrasted the lavish Christmas displays in West End department stores with the ‘tawdry’ cotton wool, paper festoons and tinsel in East End shop windows. Inside they were selling scrawny turkeys, Christmas packages that consisted of tea, sugar and a tin of milk, and pre-packed stockings containing vile sweets, paper toys and wooden whistles. The newspaper argued that capitalism was keeping Christmas gifts from children.¹ Both before and after the Second World War, Britain was a deeply unequal society but, unlike the *Daily Worker*, most people did not want to bring capitalism down, but simply share in its spoils. They wanted to consume and at Christmas the vast majority of people did.

The practice of buying and giving Christmas presents was well established by the Great War, at least among the middle classes. The late Victorian period had seen the emergence of a distinctive shopping culture based around the six weeks before Christmas. Its extension to the working class may have been limited, but among the middle classes Christmas gifts had become so established that even the Great War did not stop it. Of course, not everyone approved. Even in the Victorian era, there were those who saw the busy shops and extravagant displays as a sign that a religious festival was being tarnished by commercialism.² Such voices of disapproval grew in number and volume over the course of the twentieth century, as the festival grew more commercial and consumerism itself became more embedded in society. Whatever some critics thought, the cause of this was not the advertising of aggressive retailers. They were responding to demand rather than creating it. As society became more affluent, more and more people wanted to share in the festive indulgences that the Victorian middle class created. After 1914, all classes did some Christmas shopping, even if their budgets could not stretch beyond the cheap goods found in bazaars, backstreet shops and Woolworth’s. Shopping became as integral to the festival as religion and one historian has called it the ‘most visible and significant part of the English

Christmas'.³ Indeed, so engrained was the culture of buying presents many people felt unable not to take part for fear of being seen as ungenerous. This does not change the fact that most people's Christmas spending was rooted in a generosity and a commitment to friends and family. The festival was thus not a monstrosity of commercialism but rather a sign of a deeper goodwill in society. Moreover, while Christmas may have been an extreme example of how integral consumerism was in British society, it was also a symbol of the pleasures and benefits consumerism could bring. People enjoyed spending. They enjoyed what they spent money on. However much the consumer society might be looked down upon, it helped bring a little colour and comfort to people's lives and this was never more true than at Christmas.

Going to the shops

By 1914, shopping itself had become a leisure pursuit for middle-class women, and a trip to the shops before Christmas was also never just about buying things: it was an experience in itself. The crowds, the elaborate shop displays and the public decorations were all spectacles to gaze at and enjoy. Influenced by trends in America, British department stores placed significant emphasis on making their interiors and window displays lavish. In larger stores, in the run-ups to interwar Christmases, this meant electric lights, and brightly coloured assemblages of moving mechanical toys and unusual gifts, arranged into seasonal scenes resembling theatrical sets. Smaller shops too tried to replicate this approach, although with their holly, cotton-wool snow and more commonplace toys, the result was far less spectacular. Spectacular, though, was what the larger stores offered. A visit to Santa was already well established in department stores by the Great War and in 1921 Whiteley's in London even had children climb aboard a submarine to visit him in Toyland. In the 1930s, Bentall's of Kingston had an in-store Christmas circus with elephants and a lion.⁴ In the larger shopping districts, the cumulative effect of decorated shops was genuinely engaging. In 1933, a female correspondent in the *Daily Mail* wrote with delight: 'The shop windows are ablaze with tiny coloured lights; merchandise which would make our ancestors' eyes pop out of their heads is strewn in gorgeous profusion before us; jostling, chattering, laughing crowds, plentifully sprinkled with children, throng the pavements before the windows.'⁵ Poet Vernon Scannell remembered of shopping in Aylesbury in 1932: 'The smell of excitement and extravagance was in the air.'⁶

The media was important in supporting and promoting such images and Christmas shopping in general. Children pressing their faces against department store windows to gaze at toy displays was a reoccurring image in interwar December newsreels. In the early 1920s, the *Evening News* even ran a competition for novel shop window displays. Local newspapers



PLATE 1 *Santa and his elf at the 'Land of Good Luck', Selfridges, London, 29 November 1928. Harold Clements/Getty.*

frequently ran features on the latest Christmas items in stores, providing readers with gift ideas and companies with free advertising. These were probably also intended to cement good relations with the shops, whose advertisements were an important source of revenue for the newspapers throughout the year. Advertisements enhanced the idea that shops were at the heart of Christmas and that a visit to them was more than a trip to buy things. A 1928 advertisement for Whiteley's claimed that 'we have a complete understanding and inside knowledge of the true meaning of Christmas, and we achieve this delightful atmosphere throughout the Store not only by beautiful decorations and merchandise, but by entering wholeheartedly into the true spirit of Christmas.'⁷

The spectacles were not limited to large towns and cities, although the scale and lavishness of Christmas shopping in small towns could not compete. In small country towns the Christmas market drew people from the surrounding villages and offered opportunities for men and women to socialize and drink, as well as shop. In 1938, the *Daily Mail* rather patronizingly remarked: 'Anyone travelling through rural England at this time may see in the small towns more than a little of the traditional spirit of Christmas among a people who are content with simple things and prize good will above all.'⁸ But, as shopping trips to large towns became more common with rising living standards, and images of the more luxurious store displays

appeared on the cinema screen, it was becoming difficult for the smaller shops and towns to impress. Indeed, the cinema itself was broadening horizons and imaginations. A 1920 story about a fancy goods shopkeeper bemoaned that children were no longer impressed with his Father Christmas display and even criticized the free entertainments, modern toys and 'real live Santa Clauses' of the big stores. The story concluded: 'Nowadays it seemed that children were less simple-minded.'⁹

The writer of this story was coming from and speaking to a middle-class audience. Interwar working-class children probably did not have the luxury of being so critical. Although shops were often unofficially demarcated by class, shopping districts were not and they included a variety of establishments serving different clientele. This meant that before the Second World War, the working class certainly witnessed the Christmas spectacles aimed at those with deeper pockets than themselves. Mass Observation, for example, noted groups of 'urchins' in a Bolton Woolworth's, looking at festive displays with no hope of getting anything.¹⁰ It would be easy to interpret this as the inequalities of society being rubbed in the faces of the poor. We should not, however, assume that Christmas displays evoked envy. In the 1930s, a survey of York found that the working class enjoyed browsing in large stores without having to buy anything.¹¹ People were remarkably accepting of their situation in life and it was hardly just at Christmas that the inequalities



PLATE 2 *Toy shop window display, c. 1939. Daily Herald Archive/SSPL/Getty.*

of society were evident. Shortages and poor-quality clothing, housing and food were all regular reminders of how harsh it was to be poor. Perhaps the lavish Christmas shops were even a small distraction, affording a few moments of joy, even if the festivity could not be fully shared. Moreover, in the 1920s, some children discovered that if they visited toy shops in the run-up to Christmas and looked longingly enough at something, a well-off lady might actually buy it for them.¹²

Working-class adults enjoyed Christmas shopping too. Between the wars, most women did do at least a little festive shopping. Entries to a Mass Observation writing competition about Christmas shopping in Bolton noted the beauty of displays, the enjoyment to be derived from seeing so many happy faces among shoppers and shop assistants, and the whole act of choosing gifts and thinking about the delight the presents would give to the recipients. It was a chance to forget daily cares and one woman described Christmas shopping as a 'land of make believe'.¹³ Yet entries also noted that the most enjoyable thing was having money to spend, something that was simply not a norm for the working classes. Shoppers thus enjoyed the freedom that savings gave them. They were able to browse and buy things normally out of their range. But limited budgets meant that not much of that shopping took place at department stores.¹⁴ Instead, women shopped with the ingenuity that the working class relied on to turn life into something more than simply survival. Thus, for those who could not afford toy stores, hoops could be bought from blacksmiths and dolls' houses from carpenters.¹⁵ The working classes scoured street markets, bazaars, Woolworth's and hawkers who laid out their novelties and cheap toys on pavements. A Woolworth's employee in Bolton told Mass Observation in 1938: 'People will buy any bloody thing put in front of them at this time of year.' In the three weeks before Christmas, his store's turnover and staff trebled. After toys, decorations and cards, its bestselling line was artificial flowers.¹⁶ Such 'fancy goods' may have been easy to sneer at, but they were fancy for those without much and they gave a bit of colour to hard lives.

By the Second World War, the Christmas season was so well established that festive displays at department stores continued to be set up in November. But all wartime shops found sourcing goods difficult and in 1941 Christmas shopping was described as a 'strange ordeal'. The crowds were still there, although less numerous, but the counters were very austere, with limited choices. Metal toys were very scarce, wooden ones were common but expensive, many dolls were now in uniform and military toys had replaced racing cars. Yet there was still a determination to ensure children got presents and a reluctant willingness to pay inflated prices for the displayed items.¹⁷ Nonetheless, giving second-hand toys became more common and there were official campaigns to salvage and restore old toys. The hike in prices did become a source of anger and in 1942 the government regulated the cost of toys to ensure Christmas prices were the same as in September.¹⁸ Shortages and accompanying frustrations continued into the austerity of the late 1940s.

In 1946, *The Listener* argued that, compared with before the war, Christmas preparations now involved 'far greater' effort for 'reward infinitely less'. A 1947 writer noted the expense or unavailability of presents was causing 'tens of thousands of people' to wear 'themselves out thinking of presents they can't afford, to give to people they don't really want to give anything to'.¹⁹ But people still took so much effort because even an austerity Christmas was a contrast to the greyness that then pervaded so much of everyday life.

In the early 1950s, the shops returned to their old brightness and variety. Indeed, Christmas became a marker, not just of the return of affluence but also of post-war economic progress and of the wider modernization of society. In the mid-1950s, some people were drawing contrasts between the array of toys on sale and the sweets, nuts and oranges that they had been so delighted to receive as children. It was not just the goods that marked a return to prosperity but the packaging too. By 1954, for example, crystalized fruit was available in wooden boxes, wicker baskets, brightly coloured pottery and plastic containers.²⁰ The development of cheap plastics in the 1950s not only improved food packaging, but also the toys, kitchen ware and decorations that were bought at Christmas. Electricity was another technological development whose impact on Christmas shopping gathered pace in the 1950s. In a 1961 novel about a small country town, an electricity showroom had a display of life-size wax figures sitting down to Christmas dinner, and hair dryers, torches, bed warmers and toasters labelled as 'Acceptable Xmas Gifts'.²¹

In a world where the prime minister could claim without ridicule that most people had 'never had it so good', such showrooms were as much aimed at the masses as the middle classes. The pleasures of Christmas shopping were democratized as affluence became more widespread. The working classes not only had more choice in what they could afford to buy but also in where they shopped. Major shopping centres grew more accessible as travel became more affordable; some small towns and villages even began organizing Christmas shopping coach trips. This was a chance for housewives to escape their own patch and head to the bigger shops of 'town'. Such was the sense of occasion that people dressed up for it.²² London, in particular, drew people from all over the country. This had been true before the war, but then it was limited to the moneyed class 'up from the country'. Affluence changed that. In 1961, ITV found people shopping in London from as far as Dundee, Scarborough and Grimsby. They said they were drawn not only by the decorations, but also, more importantly, by the wide variety of items on offer. Some made a trip of it and stayed over.²³

The allure of traditional shop displays thus continued well into the post-war years. However, the opulence they suggested and the wonder of their moving displays both lost power as the toys children actually owned became more sophisticated and as television raised the stakes on what looked wondrous.²⁴ The displays never disappeared but by the 1970s they were no longer spectacles of their own. By then, the spectacle had shifted to the

electrical lights that adorned streets and public places rather than individual shops. In 1934 the local authority in Edinburgh decided to light the city's castle over Christmas and New Year after a trial the year before had helped bring in visitors.²⁵ External displays of electric Christmas lighting were also seen on interwar department stores, but it was in the 1950s that they became serious attractions across the country. The capital led the way here after the *Daily Telegraph* complained in 1954 that London looked 'drab'. This led Regent Street to begin an annual display of lights that quickly grew so elaborate that it caused traffic congestion, as people slowed down to look at it. London was not alone and the switching on of Hastings' Christmas lights in 1954, for example, was accompanied by Santa Claus driving through the streets, newsreel cameras and cheering crowds.²⁶ Usually paid for by shops and local authorities, such displays required cooperation between rivals, which was sometimes easier said than done. Oxford Street had followed Regent Street's lead in 1959, but cost meant it forewent the displays from 1967 to 1978.²⁷ The growth of competition from out of town retail parks in the last quarter of the century forced greater cooperation in the Christmas efforts of the traditional retail centres. Indeed, the importance of street lighting displays grew to the extent that costs were generally taken over by local authorities, although that did not stop shops from extending the provision at their own expense. By 2011, Manchester City Council was spending £336,700 on Christmas lighting.²⁸

Lighting displays were important because they gave late twentieth-century Christmas shopping a sense of occasion that differentiated it from the



PLATE 3 *Christmas lights, Oxford Street, London, 1960. Fox Photos/Getty.*

wider shopping experience that had become so embedded in everyday life. Major shopping expeditions now took place all-year round and the experience of shopping itself changed as stores and local authorities placed a new emphasis on making it a pleasurable pastime. The growth of pedestrianized streets in the 1980s had given shoppers a safe distance from the noise and fumes of cars. Department stores had grown plusher and nearly every high-street outlet shifted to being a store where one could browse rather than depend on shop assistants. Moreover, the growth of chain stores imposed something of a uniformity on shopping across the UK. High streets still had their own character and the diversity of shops and quality of parking facilities often varied significantly, but inside the shops there was little to distinguish London from Loughborough. Christmas lighting was thus part of conscious attempts to imbue town centres with a sense of identity. This also extended to trying to create an imagined historic atmosphere through street markets, complete with stalls selling mistletoe, roasted chestnuts and other traditional foods. Whereas once it was modernity that gave Christmas shopping a sense of wonder, now it was tradition.

This imperative to enhance festive shopping trips gathered pace at the end of the 1990s as the internet emerged as a new threat to the retail hegemony that town and city centres had once enjoyed. By 1999 market research suggested that 3.6 million people were buying presents online in what was described as the UK's first cyber Christmas.²⁹ By December 2013 almost a fifth of all non-food purchases that month were made online.³⁰ Convenience and price were key to the growth but, for those on low incomes, online shopping was also attractive because it limited spending to what was needed and avoided additional expenses associated with a visit to a shopping centre, such as a cup of coffee.³¹ But despite the growing volume of online Christmas shopping, neither the impact of nor the innovation in what was happening should be exaggerated. In some ways the internet was simply a development of mail order, something touted as a way of avoiding the Christmas crowds since at least the 1960s.³² Moreover, the vast majority of Christmas shopping was still done in person. This was partly because people enjoyed the browsing and whole experience of visiting shopping centres. Research in America suggested that at Christmas people considered more possibilities, visited more shops and spent more time than when making normal purchases.³³ But the enduring appeal of Christmas trips to the shops also owed much to online shopping not actually always being as convenient as it first seemed. It created new headaches and anxieties – about delivery times, the need to be at home to receive large parcels, and even the fallout from being caught shopping online during work hours.³⁴

The biggest change in post-war Christmas shopping took place not in present-buying but in grocery-shopping. Before the early 1950s, food shops were little changed from Victorian times, with most selling goods in whatever quantity customers wanted. Despite this personal service, food shopping was actually a precarious business. The difficulties of storing

perishables at home meant people left festive food shopping until late and in 1934 the Early Closing Association argued that the bulk of festive trade was actually done two or three days before the festival.³⁵ With restrictions on opening hours generally lifted in the week before Christmas, some small shops even stayed open until 11.00 pm on Christmas Eve.³⁶ Although the 1950 Shops Act allowed retailers to deliver goods on a Sunday if Christmas was on a Monday, that falling of dates could create storage problems for customers unable to afford deliveries. They faced not being able to shop for food for three days. Meat prices could also change from day to day, depending on supply level and how fast stock sold. With butchers having limited facilities to cold-store meat, waiting until just before Christmas Day could either deliver a bargain or sometimes nothing at all. In 1956, there was no reportedly no turkeys left anywhere in Swansea on 23 December.³⁷ The growth of refrigerators and freezers in the 1950s, both in shops and at home, helped solve some of these issues. By 1969, 60 per cent of households



PLATE 4 *Turkeys, chickens and ducks on sale at Caledonian market, London, 17 December 1926. Kirby/Getty.*

had a fridge and this helped move households away from daily to weekly shopping. The range of produce on sale diversified too. 'We can give you beautiful green-tipped spears of Evesham Asparagus at Christmas, and they are as fresh as the morning they were cut' promised one 1937 advert.³⁸ But it was not until the 1970s that many people were able to take advantage of such possibilities. In 1973, just 9 per cent of homes had a deep freezer but five years later the figure had risen to 40 per cent.³⁹

Even before most households started buying frozen foods, the supermarket had already revolutionized Christmas shopping. In 1957, there were only a little more than eighty supermarkets in Britain, but they offered people convenience and choice under one roof and took away the need to traipse up and down the high street. Their growth came in the 1960s, boosted by the development of own brands and the end of retail price maintenance on branded goods (where producers could dictate how much their products sold for), which enabled the supermarkets to undercut traditional shops. By 1970, there were 3,500 supermarkets, although they still only accounted for a quarter of grocery business.⁴⁰ Their advance however was unstoppable, especially as they branched out in the 1990s from groceries to almost every conceivable item a household might buy. Supermarkets also led a return to longer opening hours. Their December trials of 24-hour shopping in the mid-1990s were very successful and led supermarkets to normalize these opening hours throughout the year and to some toyshops following suit in the Christmas run-up.⁴¹ The Christmas shop epitomized why supermarkets were so popular. A family could buy a large quantity of competitively priced food, presents and sundries in a single place that was easy to drive to, easy to park at, easy to get around and offered loyalty rewards for your custom.

Where and how people shopped may have changed, but there was far more continuity in who was doing it. Although men did take part, females continued to dominate shopping. This was true of both the middle and working classes, of the department store and the provincial and backstreet stores, and of Christmas shopping and other times of the year. In December 1926, one paper called the shopping area between Marble Arch and Oxford Street 'Ladies' Mile' and estimated there were 100 or more women to every man in the dense crowd.⁴² This domination meant shopping was a sphere where women enjoyed some status even before their social and political emancipation became more complete. Department store shopping, in particular, gave women not just something that was fun to do but also choice and the power to consume.⁴³ Male storeowners had little option but to meet their demands if they wanted to be profitable. Yet, as the research of Hosgood has argued, in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, shopping had also left women vulnerable to accusations that they were overly concerned with trivial and petty vanities and this undermined its liberating effect. Christmas, however, was a time when they could reclaim shopping as a legitimate activity because it was being done for others and not themselves. Moreover, its necessity and their knowledge of it gave them some authority over their husbands,

while its difficulties furthered the idea that women were enduring something for others rather than indulging themselves. Nonetheless, any power that women did gain was limited and temporary. In the Edwardian period, the excesses in behaviour and spending at the January sales soon brought back the image of the irrational female shopper.⁴⁴ Indeed, even at Christmas time it might not have completely disappeared. Some men were rather superior about their ability to shop quickly, while women were 'attacking every counter, buying heedlessly and frantically things they didn't in the least want', as one man put it in 1932.⁴⁵

However limited and temporary it was, there is no reason not to think the empowerment Christmas shopping could bring was not also true of later periods. Victorian jokes about men having to pay for and then carry their wives' gifts carried on into the interwar period and beyond. In 1919, the *Daily Mirror*, pondering which sex was the fragile one, thought men lacked the patience and even the endurance needed for Christmas shopping.⁴⁶ Even at the end of the twentieth century, there was little doubt in most families about who was in charge of and doing most of the festive shopping. A 2007 survey suggested that women bought on average presents for 14.7 people, while men bought for 10.7; women spent £738 and men £588.⁴⁷ Three years earlier, another survey had suggested that 40 per cent of women spent twenty hours on Christmas shopping. In response to such levels of female activity, an Essex retail centre set up a crèche for men where they could play snooker, drink and watch football while their partners Christmas shopped. This female domination was partly because women gave more gifts, but also because they remained more motivated by domestic concerns than men.⁴⁸ That concern gave them control over many household issues but, like housework and childcare, Christmas shopping was not always an easy or pleasant responsibility. In families with low incomes, control over the household budget was a source of stress not power. It put women under pressure, making them worry and fret about making ends meet.⁴⁹ But what women's influence over family budgets and shopping does do is undermine any idea that society was a simple patriarchy.

Christmas was the one time when men could not escape shopping altogether, even before the Second World War. In the Edwardian and Victorian periods, Christmas shopping was often seen as emasculating and degrading for men, but it was also sometimes unavoidable.⁵⁰ The obligation upon males to buy some presents was not particularly popular, partly because of their general unfamiliarity with the whole experience of shopping. But a growing public pressure on them to get involved was undoubtedly there, at least among the middle class. In 1919 *The Times* claimed that 'A man worthy of his salt fares forth upon his adventure alone and unassisted'. It also noted though that most men enjoyed a trip to the toyshop and being taken back to their own childhoods. They thus happily spoil their own children and realized from their shopping experiences that their wives had much to endure because this was 'her normal day'. By 1922, the same paper was

noting the number of fathers in family shopping parties: 'He seems to recognize his Christmas duty better than he used to, perhaps from a noble change of spirit, perhaps under the modern wife's impressive compulsion.' This was not universal however and a 1935 *Times* editorial felt it had to urge men to do their duty and get involved.⁵¹ Duty was a key word here and the involvement of men owed much to the growing mid-century expectation, in middle-class circles at least, that husbands and fathers could not simply abdicate all domestic responsibilities. That was clear in their growing involvement in shopping all-year round. Research in the late 1960s suggested that 35 per cent of husbands were regularly helping with the shopping.⁵² Men may have been shopping more, but it nonetheless remained a predominantly female activity. Although men had a significant input in decisions over major purchases such as televisions, research in the early 1980s found that women were making or influencing over 80 per cent of all domestic purchases.⁵³ Christmas was no different.

Men's reluctance to Christmas shop was a source of recurring humour, but this also meant that if it was an activity that empowered women it was a power that many men were willing to concede. As one column in the *Spectator* joked at the end of the 1950s, to raise the question of present-buying two weeks before Christmas was 'at least thirteen days too soon for most men, who generally wake up to the problem some time around the afternoon of Christmas Eve'.⁵⁴ There seemed to be clear evidence to substantiate this. A 1973 survey found that by 20 December, only 52 per cent of men as against 85 per cent of women had bought presents. In 1970, a store assistant told *The Times* that on Christmas Eve her shop was full of men who had left their shopping until the last minute and were desperate for advice.⁵⁵ The difference in Christmas shopping habits extended beyond timing. At the end of the century, research found that whereas women started earlier, bought more presents and spent more time on the activity, men put in less effort, being more willing to seek advice from a salesperson or be guided by the implications and connotations of a particular brand or price.⁵⁶ By the twenty-first century, grumpy old men were even talking about how they had given up trying to find presents their wives liked and had resorted to letting them not just choose the present but buy it too.⁵⁷ This was at least an improvement on what happened in some families before the war. A 1937 response to Mass Observation recorded that the wife always gave a gift to her husband, but did not receive one in return. The logic was that it all came out of the same money and that she found amusement in choosing, whereas he found it hard work. The arrangement was his suggestion.⁵⁸

Even for women, for all the spectacle and glamour of the shops, Christmas shopping presented a number of challenges. In a 2004 survey, 49 per cent said Christmas shopping was stressful, 6 percentage points higher than the proportion of respondents who said the same about going to the dentist.⁵⁹ A central cause of stress was the crowds, or what *The Times* in 1923 called 'the Black hole terrors of the real Christmas scramble'. In 1926, the *Daily Mail*

said of London's Oxford Street: 'Such a dense crowd of shoppers thronged the pavements that many people found it difficult not to be pushed off the kerb, while at times shoppers could scarcely make any headway through the masses of people.'⁶⁰ Those who had to cope with this with excited children faced an even more challenging task; newspapers offered various pieces of advice such as wearing sensible shoes and not shopping for too many items at once. Some stores tried to help out and in 1964 Woolworth's in Dudley even opened for three hours after closing time to allow pensioners to do their Christmas shopping in peace and quiet. Shopping early in December or in the morning were two ways of avoiding the crowds, and shops were keen to encourage this, even sometimes suggesting that three times as much could be bought in one morning than in three crowded afternoons.⁶¹ Before the Second World War, 'shop early' became something of a mantra that was exhorted on behalf of both shop workers and customers. In 1923 the *Daily Mirror* was calling early Christmas shopping a duty, like going to the dentist regularly and paying income tax.⁶² Yet the mantra only existed because people did not follow it. In 1938 a sweetshop in Bolton noted that its working-class clientele liked to shop at the last minute; so it stayed open till 11.00 pm or midnight on Christmas Eve.⁶³ The problem did fade somewhat as opening hours extended, central shopping districts grew bigger and out of town retail parks drew away some of the crowds. But the congestion never went away, especially in the last day or two before Christmas and it was compounded by the fact that not all shoppers knew what to buy. In 1980 one commentator said, 'Christmas shopping combines the hopelessness of not being able to find anything with the terror of being swept away by the Gadarene stampede of those who enjoy shopping and know what they want.'⁶⁴ The size of these crowds was clear in Manchester where 1.168 million people visited the central shopping area in the week before Christmas 2011.⁶⁵

After the war, such crowds generated significant congestion problems. By the late 1950s traffic was becoming a serious problem in Britain's towns and cities, and temporary car parks and extensions of parking restrictions had to be introduced to cope with the Christmas shoppers.⁶⁶ Cars did at least alleviate the problem of how to carry the purchases. In the 1920s car parking attendants were reporting that people might return to their cars twice to deposit parcels before heading back out to shop some more.⁶⁷ For those without cars there was little choice but to struggle with armfuls of parcels on public transport or to make several shopping trips. In response to this problem, the Central London Railway had introduced Christmas season tickets in 1912 to allow women unlimited travel after 10.00 am. The Great War led to a decline in shops offering staff who would carry parcels for people, and in 1918 *The Times* ran an article on 'The problem of the parcel', which argued that Christmas shopping required skills of 'elbowing, pushing, dominating, judging, and finally carrying ... Brown paper has subjugated us all.'⁶⁸ This was perhaps most acute for those on middle incomes, able