ONSTAGE NOW

THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS

DICKENS’S EFFECT ON THE HOLIDAY SEASON

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Charles Dickens has been called “the man who invented Christmas,” and while that’s an exaggeration, it’s only a slight one. He didn’t invent the modern holiday by himself, but for many people, his vision of Christmas is Christmas.

Imagine a Christmas without carols or cards. No festive dinner or presents under the tree on Christmas morning. No tree. This was Christmas in most places before *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843.

By the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas had fallen into a bad way. In Elizabethan days, Christmas was a raucous affair, reminiscent of the pagan winter solstice rituals from which it emerged. When the dour Puritans seized power in 1642, they attacked Christmas as a pagan assault on Christ. They banned it and also outlawed another roguish activity, the theater, tearing down most of the existing playhouses. Christmas and the theater disappeared in England, and neither returned until the Stuart kings restored them in 1660.

Christmas was grim in England’s cities during the 1800s. Factories were open on December 25, and there was no day off for employees like Martha Cratchit. Still, while Christmas wasn’t much celebrated in large cities, some old customs were observed in rural villages, with games, carols, and dances. Garlands of evergreens and sprigs of mistletoe were hung in manor houses, and the gentry retained the tradition of opening their homes to their less well-off neighbors and distributing food and drink to the poor. As a child, Dickens heard of these customs from his father, whose parents were servants at a country estate in northwest England.

Back in America in 1820, Washington Irving—one of Dickens’s favorite authors—published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman*, a collection of tales and essays. In addition to “Rip Van Winkle,” the book contained three chapters devoted to Christmas at a British country estate called Bracebridge Hall. The place was fictional, but the accounts of Christmas celebrations were based on what Irving had seen and heard during years in Europe—sumptuous dinners, a blazing yule log, dances, games, songs. Dickens, then, had several sources of inspiration for a Christmas that neither he nor thousands of others had ever really experienced. This kind of Christmas matched his own temperament and needs, which were forged in a childhood of want and uncertainty.

When Dickens was 12, his father was declared bankrupt. He and the entire family except for Charles were imprisoned for debt. The boy, alone in the world, was removed from school and put to work. It was the formative experience of his life. It’s not surprising, then, that in a series of pieces beginning in 1835 with an essay called “Christmas Festivities,” Dickens depicted a holiday centered on families, with children who were loved and surrounded by good cheer. While Dickens produced five short books and numerous articles on Christmas themes, *A Christmas Carol* has always been the most popular, and the most successful in setting out what he came to call his “Carol philosophy,” concerned with the welfare of all.

Dickens’s image of Christmas as a time prompting generosity struck a chord with his readers. English poet Thomas Hood wrote in his review of *A Christmas Carol*, “If Christmas with its ancient and hospitable customs, its social and charitable observances, were in danger of decay, this is the book that would give them a new lease.” It did.

By the end of 1844, at least 12 unauthorized theatrical adaptations had appeared in London. At the same time, other Christmas traditions emerged to help create Christmas as we know it. In 1822, New York writer Clement Clarke Moore wrote “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (aka “’Twas the Night before Christmas”), with its vision of Santa Claus delivering gifts via a reindeer-drawn sleigh. In 1841, Prince Albert, the German consort of Queen Victoria, brought a Christmas tree to Windsor Castle. A tradition from his homeland, it was decorated with glass ornaments, candles, fruit, and gingerbread. By the end of the decade, it had become ubiquitous.

It’s a sad irony that the profit-driven atmosphere of the early 19th century, which led Dickens to write *Carol*, has infected the holiday in our own time. Still, *Carol* is an antidote to what a contemporary critic referred to as “this money-seeking age and money-getting country.” Dickens’s vision of Christmas isn’t about money; it doesn’t divide rich from poor. It encompasses all, child and adult, the loved and the orphaned— summed up in a sentence that retains its revolutionary plea: “God bless us, every one!”