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Penne L. Restad. *Christmas in America: A History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. x + 219 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509300-1.

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Christmas in America: Origins and Evolution of Santa

An ambitious and eclectic history of America's most important holiday, *Christmas in America* not only traces the origins of American Christmas practices, but explores the nineteenth-century "invention" of the modern holiday. Using an impressive array of diary and journal entries, newspaper accounts, and promotional literature, Penne Restad outlines the changing meaning of Christmas in American culture. While skillfully navigating the current of scholarship connecting the meaning of Christmas to the rise of a consumer society, Restad argues instead that the widespread adoption of certain Christmas practices and beliefs represented the efforts of a new, urban middle class to forge a national identity in the face of increasing cultural pluralism. In the nineteenth century, Christmas became a "fluid mix of sacred, secular, and profane" (p. 172) promoting middle-class Protestant notions of "appropriate familial and public life" (p. 33) while at the same time creating "new ways and manners to help knit society into modern fabric" (p. 34).

Restad works more in the realm of cultural analysis than history, and her excellent understanding of cultural theory interlaces the prose. For example, she uses current ethnographic studies of the meaning of gift-giving in different cultures to illustrate the complicated web of social meanings behind this American Christmas ritual. According to Restad, the ritual of gift-giving in American culture not only reinforced social hierarchy but also provided public representation of an individual's character, suggesting certain personal qualities "that held no monetary value in the world of commerce" (p. 69). In addition, gift-giving fitted well into the growing importance of home in antebellum America. In this context, "Giving joined two potent elements of the domestic ideal, those of family and religion" (p. 69). Indeed this concept of a "Protestant home religion" (p. 69) was central to the nineteenth-century reconstruction of Christmas.

In addition to the rituals of the holiday, Restad examines the development of Christmas icons, particularly Santa Claus. Tracing the foreign origins of the American Santa Claus, the author creates a profile of the jolly elf that is religious and secular, "combining the characteristics of God, Jesus, and human parents into a presence embodying love, generosity, good humor and transcendence" (p. 51). According to Restad, the American Santa Claus was born in New York City, a product of city booster "efforts to promote the rising commercial and political importance of their city" (p. 46). The Dutch St. Nicholas acted as the early model for the stories of Washington Irving and John Pintard, and this idea of Santa Claus was recreated and embellished in popular children's books across the country.

By examining popular literature and personal journals, Restad concludes that Santa Claus was adopted and then transformed by the urban middle class both to teach their children about "the possibility of the miraculous" (p. 52) and to provide an excuse for the increasing importance of consumption. The availability and popularity of magazines and newspapers made the creation of Santa Claus possible, and his widespread acceptance inevitable. At the same time, the popular image of Santa and his workshop full of industrious elves conjured notions of the ideal, efficient factory environment and presented a "highly romantic vision of American capitalism" (p. 149). Restad cleverly uses this complicated, almost paradoxical, image of Santa to introduce her closing chapter on the current debate over the secular and material aspects of Christmas.

While *Christmas in America* traces the development of a modern Christmas, the author clearly is not interested in the typical historical questions or approaches. Throughout the book the reader is left with little sense of cause or effect. Restad argues that "The consolidation and nationalization of Christmas emerged from the more general trends and events of the period" (p. 91), yet the process she assumes is never really clear. Whether the development of the marketplace was more important

in defining these cultural meanings than the cataclysm of the Civil War, for example, does not seem to make any difference to Restad's analysis. In addition, the ubiquity of the middle class in Restad's account makes the term suspect. While it seems obvious that middle-class Americans played an important role in defining Christmas, Restad's use of the label seems to transcend time leaving little understanding of how the profile of the middle class changed from the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War.

Overall the book is an important contribution to the history of American holidays. Restad's cultural approach to history is appealing and her decoding of the icons and rituals of Christmas is completely convincing. Her work faces some of the difficulties common in writing cultural history, yet promises to provide a richer understanding of the shape and construction of American middle-class identity.

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