

The Commercialization of the Holiday Season in Quebec, 1885-1915

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Hooray for Santa Claus!

By

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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

This book was first published in French by Les Éditions du Boréal (Montreal, Canada) in 2006. No change was made to the original edition. Although the study of popular culture is a growing field in Quebec, very few scholars—if any—have focused their attention in the last 15 years on the fascinating “invention” of a consumerist Christmas in this part of the world at the turn of the twentieth century.

Readers unfamiliar with Canadian history should note that French-speaking Canadians living in Quebec were referred to as French Canadians up until 1960, after which they adopted the term Québécois. It is also important to remember that a century ago, practically all French Canadians were Roman Catholic. As the journalist and senator Thomas Chapais once declared: “A non-Catholic French Canadian is an anomaly. A French Canadian who is no longer Catholic after having been baptized is a monstrosity.” Religious observance reached near unanimity in rural and urban milieus.

One can already anticipate that the commercialization of Christmas at the end of the nineteenth century was not to be without profound consequences for such a society.

CHRISTMAS! YOU'RE NO LONGER THE HOLIDAY OF OLD

*Hourra pour Santa Claus! [Hooray for
Santa Claus!]*

Ad for the Compagnie Paquet, which
claimed to be the “store where everything
exudes Christmas.”¹

The commercial Christmas that has come to form part of our North American culture is generally assumed to be a recent creation. Many Québécois, nostalgic for the old days when scarcely an orange or two was exchanged, can today be heard bemoaning the loss of the traditions and ancient customs that marked their childhood Christmases. Rumour has it that this holiday is not what it used to be. The mad scramble for gifts in overcrowded but anonymous shopping malls, the distortion of religious rites, the growing individualism of modern life—these have all contributed, it seems, to turning this once-joyous collective celebration into a fair divested of its authentic spirit. Merchants, advertisers, producers and consumers alike are accused of having betrayed the sentiments that animated these family reunions some fifty or hundred years ago. Though Santa Claus is no longer burned in effigy on the steps of the cathedral by parishioners and priests invoking his role in the paganization of religious rites,² each new year brings its somewhat less dramatic share of denunciations, criticisms and regrets.

These grievances are not new, to say the least. They date to the mid-nineteenth century, when the upheavals of industrialization began to take their toll on many age-old Québécois traditions. Conservatives lamented the disappearance of customs that gave meaning to community life in cities and towns.

Christmas! ... But it is no longer the universal feast
That our child's heart regrets and recalls not least.
It is no longer this special day so desired by all,
Where none would have missed its pious call.
Why are these ancient customs no more?

The graceful hymns, the evenings of lore,
 The legends our forebears loved to recite,
 To family encircling the vast firelight
 Where the log crackles amid devotees? ...
 This blessed night has no poetry . . .
 All the past is fading . . . Even in villages,
 Little remains of these precious usages. . .
 Christmas! You're no longer the holiday of old.³

This blessed night has no poetry. These verses of 1843, taken from Bishop Ignace Bourget's *Mélanges religieux*, evoke a common theme of modern progress, that of society's impending descent into decadence. If the world is changing, it must be changing for the worse, say conservative thinkers for whom the golden age always takes place in a recent but immemorial past. Already, during this period, and despite the pomp that had come to surround the celebration of Christmas, French Canadians were beginning to miss the solemnity of former times, when the songs of the angels themselves seemed to accompany the parish church bells ringing in the distance.⁴ The sentiment of nostalgia that would soon become an essential component of the winter season spirit, began to permeate critics' and commentators' discourse.

There was nonetheless a certain truth in the concerns expressed by the editors of *Mélanges religieux*. Christmas was being gradually transformed by French Canadians' new living conditions. The holiday, which had been subject to different influences in Catholic history, began to adopt the new forms imposed on it by the capitalist society that was then redefining the nation's economic, social and cultural landscape. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as young people began to balk at the dreary prospect of observing a holiday deprived of its bygone splendor, some journalists felt the need to affirm the beauty and grandeur of Christmas. Their efforts to breathe new poetic life into the holiday and remind French Canadians of the joy it would bring are good indications of how the meaning of Christmas, without being lost, had changed under the influence of forces that were not primarily religious.

This book focuses on the commercialization of the holiday season in French-language Quebec (and primarily, given the subject, Montreal) during a pivotal transition period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The broader history of the commercialization of French-Canadian culture has been recounted by several authors. Their works have shed light on the slow and irreversible adaptation of traditional values and customs to the realities of an industrial and consumer society.⁵ Our interest here is not to revisit this interpretation, which would be difficult in general to disagree

with, but rather to emphasize how the religious culture itself was retranslated in the second half of the nineteenth century into the language of the new society.⁶ The process of dechristianization that accompanied the rise of the State and industrialization of the economy both weakened and paradoxically reinforced certain elements of religious popular culture.⁷ The example of the December holidays is particularly evocative in this respect. On the one hand, it allows us to observe how consumer society appropriated the rites surrounding the celebration of the Nativity and the New Year, and, on the other, it reveals how the tradition⁸ itself was reinvented according to a logic and intention that were no longer the exclusive domain of the Roman Catholic Church. Also, to assert, as has sometimes been done, that the Christmas of yore was gradually hijacked by a system that was foreign to it would be reductive. The example is more telling of the traditionalization (that is to say, the traditionalist remaking and not the traditional reproduction⁹) of a religious holiday through both capitalist and Catholic means.¹⁰ Herein lies the interest of the present volume. Rather than examining winter rites and practices in New France, or changes made to the liturgical calendar within the Catholic Church (in the form of new rituals or increased devotion), this study attempts, in a much more concentrated way, to better understand the social construction of an original holiday-season culture. It is commercial Christmas, and commercial Christmas alone that concerns us here.

The period that we have decided to cover (1885-1915) corresponds to an era of prosperity and enthusiasm for Quebec's merchants. It was with them in mind that Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier proclaimed the twentieth century to be the century of Canada. The country underwent a phase of intense expansion that was at once geographic (with the founding of the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905), demographic (with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of European immigrants) and economic (with the development of international commerce and the rise of industrialization). The business community was aware of this and did not hesitate to make their optimism known. The production value of the manufacturing sector in Montreal rose from 71 million in 1900 to 166 million ten years later. Industrial production in Greater Montreal accounted for approximately 17 per cent of Canada's overall production. Quebec's metropolis continued to be the country's financial centre, controlling 44 per cent of banks' assets. Closer to our subject of study, the retail sector employed 32,000 in 1911, including employees working in transport.¹¹ This was truly *la belle époque*, the expression used to designate the period from 1896-1914, when life appeared to many to be rapidly improving. Of course, all was not perfect in the best of worlds: the extreme prosperity of a handful

of millionaires should not obscure the poverty of the vast majority. Nonetheless, in spite of difficulties and economic setbacks, French Canadians genuinely benefited from an overall increase in collective wealth during this time.

This economic development clearly also had an impact on cultural practices in Quebec. The increased standard of living and integration into industrial society profoundly changed popular values and rites in Montreal and elsewhere in the province. "Forms of culture and entertainment evolved in a radical way in the West and in Montreal between 1880 and 1920. . . . Capital was not only invested in work; it also organized and shaped "non-work," entertainment, leisure."¹² As Christmas approached, store windows were a sure sign of this new opulence. "There is no question now that we are in an era of abundance at the sight of such luxury in store windows. Toys and New Year's gifts, the stores are full of them; the serious merchandise is pushed to the side to make room for them."¹³ Increased buying power enabled French Canadians to participate in the consumer society that was beginning to take root in the province and that flourished in particular—we will attempt to understand why—during the holiday season.

We have drawn most of our examples and citations from mainstream newspapers, a decision that can be easily justified given that, besides having a wider circulation (135,000 per day for *La Presse* in 1914, 45,000 for *La Patrie*) and more diversified advertising, these were the first publications to open their pages to the new interpretation of the Nativity.¹⁴ George Bernard Shaw was half-correct when he wrote in 1897: "Christmas is forced on a reluctant and disgusted nation by the shopkeepers and the press."¹⁵ No, the majority of English or Canadians did not regard the holiday with coldness and disgust, but merchants and the press were indeed its most active proponents. Moreover, it would be accurate to say that mainstream newspapers, including *La Presse*, contributed "to shaping Montreal's distinct francophone urban culture by integrating French-Canadian traditions and American models."¹⁶ The world of daily newspapers comprises rich material for anyone seeking to understand the changes that transformed French-Canadian life at the turn of the twentieth century. Along with various illustrated brochures and leaflets, the vast majority of which are unfortunately lost to us today, commercial advertising in Quebec represents an abundant source of representations and discourses. Merchants, taking on the role of model citizens, sometimes made use of editorial language in their ads to address their potential customers. They were selling attitudes, values and beliefs as much as they were selling material products, much like today, with the difference that their approach was perhaps less restrained and subtle. They were not afraid to openly educate and discipline the readers of

the *Soleil* (a liberal paper), *La Presse* (a neutral paper, with populist and workerist accents), or the *Journal* (the organ of the Conservative Party). Not only did they advertise their products (“Is it worth advertising products that can sell themselves? Yes! A thousand times yes!”¹⁷), but they also used the occasion to defend values that reflected a certain worldview. So, for example, a New Year’s Day wish could become an occasion to remind readers of the importance of savings while also extolling the virtues of the product they were looking to promote. An ad for the Stamp and International Commerce Company offered the following advice: “Here are a few resolutions to make and most importantly to keep: Instead of asking for credit in 1905, only pay cash for your purchases. . . . By not buying on credit, you will not be helping merchants benefit from the bad debts they create by selling on credit.”¹⁸

Advertising was even more effective during the holiday season when the weather was cold, the sidewalks were snowed in, the stores were crowded, and the list of presents was long. Ads helped customers, especially women, to whom the task of shopping usually fell, better prepare for their day of shopping by reading the morning paper. Advertisers therefore had a vested interest in lauding the charms of their showrooms and the sumptuousness of their displays. The image they adhered to was, by necessity, an image of Christmas. It is this *mise en scène*—which should not be confused with reality—that we would like to explore in this book. The daily press gave shape to some of the themes and symbols of a new bourgeois social class, one that brought with it a culture and values to be upheld as ideals. Indeed, the December holidays constituted for this class a privileged vehicle of its worldview. Commentators of the period rightly observed that it was the merchants “who made most use of the legend of Santa Claus, I should say, rather, contributed more to maintaining and popularizing it with their newspaper ads and window displays.”¹⁹ The holiday season was not conceivable without this buzz of activity created by the owners of “department stores” in the province, as was the case everywhere else in North America. The history of the commercialization of Christmas is inextricably linked to the development of commerce in large cities.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, small establishments grew into large, multistory buildings with diversified inventories of merchandise. A product of the industrial revolution, urban growth, and accelerated transport, these department stores first conquered the streets of Paris, London and New York before setting up shop in Montreal. “A number of small boutiques or novelty shops already selling fabrics, ribbons, silks or other articles of haberdashery, soon gave way [beginning in the 1870s],

sometimes at an astonishing rate, to veritable department stores.”²⁰ From 1885 to 1915, the urban landscape was transformed. St. Catherine Street, for example, lost its residential vocation to become a buzzing commercial artery.²¹ The merchant emerged as a new social actor, proud of his accomplishments and possessed of moral character. “We have conquered new laurels and believe to have earned them.”²² Aligning themselves with modern progress, the countless Montreal owners and managers described by Fernande Roy²³ would boast of serving the true interests of the population better than anyone else. New companies included John Murphy and Co. (1867), located on the corner of St. Catherine and Metcalfe; Scroggie’s (1883), on the corner of St. Catherine and University; Hamilton’s (founding date unknown), holding pride of place on St. Catherine Street between Drummond and De la Montagne; Carsley’s (1880), located at Notre-Dame and St. Jacques, which become in 1909 A. E. Rea & Co., then in 1911 Goodwin’s Montreal Ltd; the store Au Bon Marché, situated on 567 St. Catherine; Dupuis Frères (1868), the big east-end “department store” situated at the corner of St. André and St. Catherine; and, last but not least, the Zéphirin Paquet Company (1850), installed on St. Joseph Street in Quebec City. All of these establishments quickly became indispensable references in the lives of Quebec’s and Montreal’s residents.²⁴ People knew them as well as, if not even better than, their local Catholic churches. Their merchandise was the subject of endless discussions, and their sales drew bigger crowds than religious pilgrimages.

Analysis of the commercial cultural life of this period is nowhere to be found in Micheline Cambron’s edited volume *La vie culturelle à Montréal vers 1900*.²⁵ The book adopts a position that privileges high culture, or a humanist, literary or musical culture, to the detriment of more popular forms of cultural expression. Department stores, however, were already very important sites of social inscription for the majority of the population, far more so than museums, concerts or literary circles.²⁶ Re-examining the history of these spaces of socialization that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the development of industrial capitalism, is thus essential to understanding the changes that profoundly affected Québécois society.²⁷ The “department store culture” that took hold in the United States and England in the 1870s did not spare Quebec.²⁸ To understand the rapid rise of shopping during the holiday season is, at the same time, to study the customs and habits of the heart that animated and inspired people’s thoughts and actions at the turn of the century.

Consider, for example, Zéphirin Paquet’s store. In 1905, after three expansions, it decided to redo its entire two-hundred-foot-long façade. Its twelve storefront windows offered passers-by an unprecedented view of its

rich collection of products. This “genuine showroom exclusively devoted to exhibiting the merchandise, which passers-by can comfortably admire through the width of a window pane,” was created by professional window dressers. One window in particular, thirty-five feet deep and two stories high, attracted the attention of onlookers who, taking in the splendour of the displays, could not resist the desire to buy. “Come on, said a woman yesterday to her friend, it’s irresistible!”²⁹ To make Paquet’s décor resemble the department stores of the big American cities, in December, “as is customary over the holidays,” the first three windows were decorated with toys, a “traditional Christmas tree,” and the typical settler’s “log house.” Inside the store, multicoloured banners imported from Germany were hung from the ceiling. “Delicately woven and arranged, interspersed with graceful peacock’s heads, as well as balloons and Chinese lanterns,” they added a fabulous festive air to every floor.³⁰ If, as the ad claims, “a modern city isn’t complete if it doesn’t have next to its churches, grand hotels and theatres, at least one of these gigantic commercial bazars that sell just about everything,”³¹ then Quebec, thanks to Paquet’s company and a few other boutiques of the St. Roch business district, was a modern city. “From De la Courronne Street to Du Pont Street,” wrote Abbot Louis Beudet in 1890, “St. Joseph Street has become renowned in recent years for its stores and window displays. All of the modern improvements seen in the major shops of New York and Chicago have been integrated here: electric lighting, elevators, hot water or steam heating, tailored clothing in the latest fashions for *Madame* and *Monsieur*, scores of salesclerks eager to serve shoppers—we’ve got it all.”³² Modern, too, was Montreal, and had been for at least twenty years in the case of Dupuis Frères, among others. The latter could boast in 1882 of hiring 125 employees, including 50 salesclerks, and having an annual turnover in excess of three-quarters of a million dollars.³³ This store was the first, on east St. Catherine Street, to install elevators and electric lighting and to construct large display windows to exhibit its merchandise.

It should be noted from the outset that four of the seven stores mentioned above were managed by English Canadians, which is not surprising given the relative inferiority in which French Canadians had long been held in this domain. English owners were nonetheless looking to attract a francophone clientele. In Montreal, “fellow French-Canadian citizens” were invited to make their purchases in the west end of town. “A warm welcome awaits our French-Canadian customers.”³⁴ Classified ads for jobs in English stores mentioned an interest for bilingual saleswomen. In seeking to better understand the commercialization of the holidays in francophone Quebec, it might seem curious to have included among our sources the ads

of Carsley's or Goodwin's, which were almost always literally translated (or at least half translated) from English and published in their original version the same week in *The Montreal Star*. It is worth asking if these can be considered good indicators of changes affecting francophone popular culture or whether they simply represent, in the end, poorly assimilated exportations destined to forever remain foreign to the world of French Canadians. The truth surely lies somewhere in between. Without a doubt, the ads of merchants from west-end Montreal offer telling signs of the gradual commercialization of Québécois Christmas, especially given that francophone merchants responded, in turn, by publishing their ads in *The Montreal Star* or *The Gazette*. However, since these signs are often clearer in English merchants' ads than in those of their east-end counterparts, we must be extra cautious to not take these representations—diffused by business owners living in Westmount or Toronto—for reality.³⁵

The English and American influence is already discernable in the vocabulary of newspaper ads (words like “bargains” or “white sales” appear without translation in French newspapers), the names of firms (Brown, John Murphy), the images of Christmas (whose captions do not always seem to merit translation), holiday designations (Happy New Year, pronounced *la pinouillère* in Québécois French, Merry Christmas) and the December rites (Christmas stockings, Santa Claus). According to Germain Chiasson, born in 1876 in Saint-Joseph-du-Moine on Cape Breton Island, “the French exchanged gifts on New Year's Day but not on Christmas. There was no talk of Santa Claus among the French. We learned this from the English.”³⁶ It is evident, in hearing such testimonies, that the traditionalist form of Christmas that French Canada inherited was largely developed in the United States and England. Indeed, in Quebec, English newspapers were the first to propagate the image of a “consumerist” Christmas (in the sociological sense of the term), by promoting the sale of luxury goods and depicting the holidays as the perfect counterpart to consumer society, that is to say, as leisure time privileging the expression of individuality in all its warmth and generosity while also succumbing to the commercial craze. Subscribing to these Victorian-era rituals soon after they had become fashionable again in England and the United States,³⁷ English Canadians also began considering December 25 a day that, encompassing the emerging family ethos, went far beyond the enjoyment of candies, pastries, cakes and other sweets. Though not yet as popular as it would later become (there is only one mention of Christmas in Montreal's *The Gazette* between 1785 and 1840), the holiday was already described in a December 1846 issue of the *Novascotian* as a season of “festivity and thankfulness in every civilized country, a time for gratitude to Almighty God, a time for the meeting of family and friends, a

time for 'gifts and greets,' and last (but not least), a time for good food."³⁸ One has only to consult, for example, the *Canadian Illustrated News*, itself heavily influenced by American magazines,³⁹ to see the precedent set by English culture in this domain.⁴⁰ Starting in the 1870s, the pages of *The Evening Star* (rebaptized *The Montreal Daily Star* in 1881) were filled with ads selling "toys, sleighs, fancy goods, etc., suitable gifts for Christmas and New Year's presents at the very lowest cash prices."⁴¹ By 1880, Santa Claus, presents, the Christmas tree, and Christmas cards had become part of December's natural decor.

For French Canadians, the idea of offering "fancy goods" was certainly not an American or British invention, but the way it was recycled in the culture of consumer society for the most part was. We must emphasize, however, that the precedence of English Christmas was very relative, given that the new American Christmas spirit was translated into the Montreal context almost simultaneously, usually within the space of a few years. The Québécois metropolis can be regarded, in this sense, as providing as valuable a window onto the dynamics of popular culture at the end of the nineteenth century as any large American city.⁴²

The construction of Christmas was aided by the publication of serialized English tales, starting with those of Charles Dickens. However, it should be noted that British-American culture was also following Parisian trends at the time. In touting the qualities of a product, merchants in Toronto or New York did not hesitate to promote it as a French import. This can be illustrated anecdotally by recalling that the most expensive holiday plum pudding was not imported from England (35 cents) or the United States (40 cents) but from France (50 cents).⁴³ In attempting to imitate the English, French Canadians thus often found themselves borrowing from the French. Who visiting Paris did not rave about the department stores of the Champs-Élysées? "It's the reserve of Saint Nicholas; there's everything to have babies laughing and clapping the world over."⁴⁴ When not penned by local authors, the overwhelming majority of articles in French newspapers were reproduced from French periodicals.⁴⁵ Republished writings by Parisian authors included articles on the etiquette, rites and rules to respect during the holiday season, such as C. L. de Roode's text, specially requested by *Le Soleil*, on Christmas usages and customs.⁴⁶ Another example can be found in the introduction to an article published in *L'Action sociale*, where a journalist writes: "We find in a Parisian paper, on the subject of shopping for the Holiday season, a series of observations addressed to the bourgeois women of France, but which would also find an appropriate application in Quebec, Montreal and every other city in Canada."⁴⁷ Paris, in this respect, had nothing to envy Chicago, Boston or New York (and, to a lesser extent,

London or Berlin, more rarely cited). Should we conclude from this that the influences were double, that Paris represented in Quebec's merchant discourse a beacon of culture as influential as that of the large American cities? The *Bonhomme Noël* (Old Man Christmas), the custom of placing shoes in front of the fireplace, lighting the yule log or sending New Year's cards—were these not all of French origin as well? The import of this question will be discussed in further detail later. Suffice it to say for now that the French fashion served, in some cases, to reinforce a cultural form that first originated in the United States.

It is in the hearths of commerce that the new Christmas spirit was gradually forged during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This spirit took shape on two great battlefronts through a series of confrontations that the present volume will attempt to elucidate. On the one hand, the Baby Jesus was gradually replaced by Santa Claus. On the other, as the century advanced, Christmas began to supplant the New Year in popular culture. In seeking to understand how the feast of the Nativity became the quintessential consumer event of contemporary society, we have to examine how it managed to relegate New Year's Day to a secondary role in French-Canadian culture. These two battles, as we will see in the third chapter, triggered a strong reaction in religious and nationalist circles. In the name of religion and the homeland, conservatives attempted to reverse the growing tendency to situate the winter season within the sphere of industrial society.

In certain respects, this work could be criticized for being too brief. An important number of elements have been left out, starting with the religious or simply folkloric rites of the holiday season. But our purpose lies elsewhere. We have set out to present an overview of a civilizational shift that swept Quebec over a short period of time, rather than provide a detailed historical analysis of the multiple facets of the Christmas holiday. Our study is entirely oriented toward an analysis of consumer society, and the rest (which is considerable, we would be the first to admit, starting with the liturgy) has been left for future research.

We could also be reproached for concentrating on storekeepers and on Montreal merchants in particular. On the one hand, due to its budding commerce and the ever-growing activity of its population, the Quebec metropolis was the first theatre of the commercialization of the holiday season in the province. No other city could rival the buying power of its residents or the development of its retail business. On the other hand, we know the commercialization of Christmas partly benefited the Catholic Church. In Canada, Christmas became increasingly important in the cycle of seasons in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, the *Mélanges religieux*

hardly mentions it. Then the “*Quinzaine*,” or fortnight, as the period from December 25 to January 6 was commonly called, began to occupy a more important place in the popular and official culture. As elsewhere in the West,⁴⁸ starting in 1840, these developments followed the trend toward warmer, more collective forms of piety (blessings, processions, devotions to the saints, and so on). While ultramontanist privileged a stricter supervision of the faithful by tightening the reins of clerical control, the Ligorists, in turn, emphasized a more emotional, intimate relationship with the Divine.⁴⁹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, religious interests thus converged with those of an economic elite wanting to invest these festivities with a new symbolism and interpretation. Merchants were not the only actors affecting the evolution of these rites and customs, but, with a view to better understanding the processes involved in the commercialization of Christmas, we must admit that the role of religious elites was secondary, though not negligible, as we will attempt to outline in the pages that follow.

Finally, this book could be criticized for limiting analysis to the *belle époque* and not extending it to the Second World War, or even to today. It was very tempting to expand this study to paint the most complete historical picture possible. But the resulting pages and chapters would not have added anything essential to our understanding of the phenomenon at hand. In terms of strategies related to marketing, consumer goods, store displays, advertising, norms, and so on—everything was pretty much in place by 1915. The hundred or so years following the First World War have refined and, especially, democratized the bourgeois lifestyle by spreading it to the working classes, without significantly altering the symbolism and rites set in place during the first years of the century. Already, in 1900, commentators in Montreal’s newspapers were astonished at how the Christmas of their childhoods had changed beyond recognition over the previous decade. “The little ones’ eyes see so many beautiful things! These are the advances of centuries, and, at the risk of passing for a reactionary, I have only to shut my mouth. All the same, those times when, deep in the countryside, we cradled stone dolls with motherly affection, were very pleasant times... Remember?”⁵⁰ This question, posed a hundred years ago, is worth answering today. It is for the sake of remembering that this book was written. However, the memory of Christmas recounted here may not be the one we would expect to find in revisiting the history of pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec.

SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN

Gift-giving is most certainly a lovely custom! May grace never go out of style, even when our thoroughly rationalized world will have lost, along with its last "prejudices," the memory of any tradition.

—Foemina¹

Although Christmas evokes an ancient ritual that can be traced to the earliest time of Christianity,² signs of modern Christmas in the United States before the Civil War are few and far between. The growing popularity of children's gifts and lavish feasts is barely noted. It was really with the rise of industrial capitalism and advances in communication that factories and industrial manufacturing supplanted household production, and the American family became, by contrast, a sphere of affection, support and love. Other factors included, more specifically, the influence of German culture, which inspired the custom of decorating the Christmas tree, Dutch culture, which introduced the custom of Christmas stockings, British culture, which popularized the Christmas card, and, last but not least, the publication of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in the United States in 1843, which has sometimes been regarded as a pivotal moment. Nonetheless, Christmas (more so than New Year's Day, which remained popular among several American groups³), soon became an important date on the yearly calendar. Between 1845 and 1865, twenty-eight States voted to raise its status to a public holiday, and the federal government followed suit in 1865.⁴ Jock Elliott goes so far as to describe the birth of "modern American Christmas" as a veritable social "big-bang."⁵

The shift in focus from New Year's Day to Christmas festivities in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, was accompanied by the gradual replacement of Saint Nicholas or Kris Kringle by Santa Claus, as well as the abandoning of practical gifts, food and drink in favour of novelty and luxury items. In the "exhaustive" list compiled by poet and essayist Leigh Hunt in 1837, for example, one is hard-pressed to find among the sixty-one articles related to Christmas, any references to Christmas shopping, Santa Claus and his reindeer, toys, greeting cards or trees loaded with presents. The commercial transformation of the winter season, though already under way as of 1820 in the United States, did not really materialize

until the years between 1860 and 1880. In 1821, the character of Santa Claus (including the distribution of presents on Christmas Eve and a reindeer-driven sleigh) was fixed for the first time in a Christian poem called *The Children's Friend*. Two years later, abandoning religious symbols, Clement Moore's poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* (better known as *The Night before Christmas*) continued the transformation, portraying the figure as a big-bellied jovial fellow in his sixties, with full rosy cheeks and a long white beard, distributing presents and Christmas stockings. Though represented as elf-sized, a defect that would be later corrected, the figure's principal characteristics saw few changes from then on, even when Coca-Cola made use of the icon to promote its famous beverage. The publication of *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* announced, more clearly than ever, the emergence of a new symbolism in American culture. "More than any other text, it was Moore's poem that introduced the American reading public to the joys of a domestic Christmas."⁶

Nevertheless, despite these earlier examples and deep roots that can always be traced further back in time, most historians still agree that commercial Christmas was only really established on a large scale in the United States forty years later, in particular with the *Harper's Weekly* publication of cartoonist Thomas Nast's famous illustrations of Santa Claus in "Christmas Camp" in 1862 and "A Christmas Furlough" in 1863.⁷ Christmas ads, which were rare in Philadelphia's and New York's newspapers between 1820 and 1870, increased in number as of this date.⁸ "Between 1880 and 1920 . . . popular American magazines advertising in November and December began to encourage the purchase of manufactured gifts instead of home-made gifts."⁹ As it happens, the changes that affected American popular culture—which were immeasurably more economic than religious¹⁰—are similar to those that drew French-Canadian popular culture, at roughly the same pace, into the universe of consumer society.

In early nineteenth-century Quebec, the end of November marked the beginning of Advent, a period of anticipation and spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ. During these four weeks, known as "Little Lent," fasting, abstinence and penitence were recommended, though not obligatory and not equally observed by all French-Canadian families. Pleasures like dancing and desserts were likewise discouraged. The holiday season ended with the celebration of the baptism of Jesus on January 13, though several parishes kept their Nativity scenes up until February 2, which marked the presentation of Jesus at the temple and the purification of Mary.¹¹ Christmas was limited to the midnight mass and Christmas Eve. French Canadians did not exchange presents, nor did they decorate trees, send cards or eat turkey or plum pudding. Christmas was for them a solemn time for

reflection and prayer, but also for family dinners and festivities, which included celebrating the birth of Christ. "Christmas is one of the most gracious memories of our childhood," we read in 1850. "Who among us does not recall having been to see the Baby Jesus when he was little? Who among us does not recall the *midnight* mass?"¹² From this date on, however, according to several commentators of the period, the religious aspect of the celebration began to change. Some parish churches in Quebec and Montreal, for example, exhibited "a transparency representing the adoration of the shepherds, lit by two gas jets," silver candelabras, mirrors to reflect the altar candles, bouquets of artificial flowers, choirs accompanied by the music of a harmonium, as well as splendid Nativity scenes surrounded by trees and illuminated by numerous lanterns. The midnight mass was celebrated with increasing splendour. To the old hymns were added new arias inspired by the opera. By 1900, people began evoking the holiday with nostalgia, rekindling pious memories of a time when this celebration was shared by the whole village, for a winter's night, in the "little church illuminated by a thousand candles."

Christmas! The holiday of our childhood's fondest memories! How could the heart of anyone who reflects a moment not be filled with sweet emotions at the simplest evocation of those blessed days, when our child's soul tenderly received the great mystery of the birth of a Divine Child? Who does not recall the profound impressions of the first midnight masses they heard? How all of these displays of rarely seen splendours transported us into a state of ecstatic rapture, the joyous chimes of bells ringing in the night, the rumbling voice of the great organs, the touching and harmonious hymns, the illuminated sanctuaries, the clouds of fragrant incense, then, in a corner of the side chapel, the humble manger with its thatched roof where the Baby Jesus shivered in his cold crèche. Since then, our brows have been marked by a graver serenity. Our older sentiments have been blunted by life's disappointments, and yet, of all our youthful reminiscences, are there any that have remained more deep and enduring in our heart of hearts than this night-time celebration of sweet and mysterious charm?"¹³

There can be little doubt as to the majesty of the midnight mass in the minds of the young French Canadians, when we consider that it was the only mass celebrated in the dark of night amid flickering oil lamps, lanterns and candles, which gave a magical air to the old parish church. The long sleigh ride added to the dreamlike atmosphere for the young children bundled up in their wool blankets. Many French Canadians undoubtedly awaited Christmas with impatience, anticipating the family festivities after the mass (joined by a few neighbours), which began around two in the morning and included the first meal of the holidays, laughing and

storytelling, and indulging in *croquignoles* (beignets) sprinkled with white sugar, not to mention *tourtières* (meat pies) and the “famous” ragout.¹⁴

In the first half of the nineteenth century, New Year’s Day was also celebrated in relative simplicity.¹⁵ When the *guignolée* (from *Oh! gui! l’An né*, “Oh! Mistletoe! The Year is born”) was still practised, the village youth went “door-to-door in the evening,” “begging alms of provisions for the poor and singing songs,”¹⁶ which sometimes broke out into joyous charivaris. In the morning, the children kneeled to receive the paternal blessing. Then came the distribution of presents left by the Baby Jesus at the foot of the bed of children who had been good. Later, it was off to a special mass, followed by the traditional *fricot* (stew), cakes, and *croquignoles* or donuts, a feast to which more than thirty guests were often invited. While women were busy cooking, men took the opportunity to pay social calls, drink a toast to the New Year, and wish each other a “good” and “happy” New Year (“*je vous la souhaite bonne et heureuse*”).¹⁷

The lead-up to celebrations animated the household over several weeks in advance, even though the preparation of the dishes only began a few days before December 25. Children rehearsed Christmas hymns. The mother sewed the clothes that would be worn to church and prepared the traditional dishes (cretons, *tourtières*, sugar pies, beignets, and so on). The father sometimes killed a pig, chicken or sheep, which his wife and sisters would then use to make sausages, ham and meatloaf. It was also his job to prepare the barley or spruce beer for the holidays.¹⁸ Note that all of this activity remained confined to the domestic sphere. Not only was Christmas limited to the circle of family and friends, and not only was consumer society barely present in comparison to what it would later become, but Christmas was not yet clearly demarcated from other events on the Canadian Catholic calendar. It only began to receive significant attention in French-Canadian newspapers over the course of the 1850s. Before this date, references to Christmas were rare, if not exceptional. Over the next thirty years, this celebration saw an extraordinary rise in popularity, which the holiday season benefited from. But Christmas faced two tasks before establishing itself as the celebration we know today. On the one hand, it had to come to terms with the bourgeois world of commerce¹⁹ that had rapidly developed over the course of the nineteenth century, and, on the other, it had to distinguish itself as the great French-Canadian holiday. It is this double evolution that we will attempt to outline in this chapter.

Christmas and New Year's Day

Christmas was to become the great French-Canadian holiday. In the nineteenth century—and well into the twentieth century for a large part of the population —, New Year's Day was the natural celebration of French-speaking Canadians, the real main event of the winter season, even if it was still very simple and fragile. In his journal, for example, Lionel Groulx makes no mention of the Nativity and only speaks of the New Year to complain about short vacations, since the educational institution that he was resident of refused to let students leave to join their families for more than a few days.²⁰ This sums up a college student's view of these celebrations.

It took some time for Christmas to gain precedence over New Year's Day in French-Canadian culture. Gifts exchanged on January 1 were generally more important and more carefully chosen than those for December 25, as witnessed by the suggestions made in newspapers in the 1860s for customers to place their orders early, especially approaching New Year's Day. It was more common to celebrate "Christmas day in English families and New Year's Day in French-Canadian families"²¹—French Canadians being more likely in Montreal, for example, to take time off work on January 1. "Christmas is surely one of the most important holidays of the year, when our fellow English citizens exchange their wishes and gifts. But is NEW YEAR'S DAY not the holiday par excellence of French Canadians? The holiday where grown-ups exchange hearty handshakes while wishing each other health, happiness and success, and where our dear little ones hang their stockings, anticipating the morning's presents?"²² Like many American establishments before them, Montreal businesses adopted a sort of compromise in response to this duality, by suggesting that Bonhomme Noël made two rounds to the city's homes, first visiting the English Canadians (who for the most part lived westward of St. Lawrence Blvd, called the "Main") and a second time their French compatriots (who for the most part lived eastward of St. Lawrence Blvd). "I've been very busy since I arrived," declared a fictive Père Noël. "Fortunately, half of my work is done, having visited the whole west end of the city, from St. Lawrence Street to the borders of Westmount. I'm reserving next week for my dear little *Canadiens*, who, I hope, will be pleased with me on New Year's Day morning."²³

Nevertheless, the late nineteenth century saw a shift from New Year's Day to Christmas, a phenomenon made visible by the mass-circulation press—though it is difficult to precisely date when Christmas became, as it is today, the centre of the winter season. It could no longer be said that French Canadians were content with the midnight mass, the adoration of the

crèche, and the family dinner, while their English compatriots made Christmas into a day for distributing gifts, exchanging cards and decorating trees.²⁴ From 1860 to 1915, the number of ads for Christmas gifts tended to surpass those promoting New Year's Day presents.²⁵ But, complicating the chronology, the two celebrations coexisted for a long time, with the "anglophone" Christmas simply being added to the "francophone" New Year's Day. Rather than sacrificing one holiday to the other, French Canadians preferred to wholeheartedly celebrate both, and, adding to the confusion, they did so by mixing the two holidays' respective rites and symbols. Even more than in the rest of North America, where Christmas and the New Year formed a more-or-less inseparable whole called the holiday season (captured in the expression "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year"), the *Quinzaine* continued to be celebrated in the province, giving rise to a certain syncretism.

There is only the Province de Quebec where the two great races' rubbing shoulders has, so to speak, perfected the social forms and legitimate pleasures of life. Besides the Christmas Eve feast, that is steadfastly observed until morning, France does not give Christmas the importance of New Year's Day. In England, the opposite is true, to the point that the gifts offered on January 1, an ordinary business day, remain quite simply misunderstood. . . . French Canadians have done well to adopt the two holidays in all their splendour. It would be very difficult to say whether Christmas is not more anticipated by families with as much impatience as New Year's Day, and whether the same exuberance of deep joy does not manifest itself on both of these days of absolutely different origins."²⁶

Christmas and New Year's Day seem to have constituted a structural whole, one reflecting the inverse image of the other: children/adults, close family/extended family, religious/profane,²⁷ rigorism/exuberance (e.g. sobriety/drunkenness), interior/exterior, and so on.²⁸ "Christmas is the most important day of the Christian year; New Year's Day is the most important day of the social year. The one entirely devoted to God; the other, for the most part, to fellow men."²⁹ Due to this structural opposition that paradoxically united them, French-Canadian Catholics resisted—a little longer than elsewhere in North America—the eventual waning of New Year's Day in favour of December 25, thereafter associated with the one activity that crystalized, in a consumer society, social relations, drives and desires—the purchasing of gifts. G. A. Lamontagne declared in 1899, that "gift-giving on New Year's Days, this is still the custom"—a "still" that indeed betrays, starting from this date, a gradual shift that would prove to be irreversible.³⁰ It was "still," however, less and less the custom, even though the full and complete transition would not be a *fait accompli* until

the decades following the Second World War.³¹

The demotion of New Year's Day can be understood historically by considering several interrelated factors. First, merchants wanted to reduce a vacation period that was in their eyes too long and detrimental to business. The succession of holidays in the year caused concern with respect to the progress of commerce and national prosperity. In the Catholic liturgy, the Christmas period lasted two months, starting with the first Sunday of Advent and ending with the feast of the presentation of Jesus to the temple. Reorganizing the work calendar became one of the shopkeepers' goals (with the participation of the clergy in an effort to rationalize the sacred), and they achieved this in part by tackling the cycle and length of holidays. In Canada, the number of mandatory holidays decreased from 40 at the end of the seventeenth century to 9 at the end of the nineteenth.³² "Modern times are a time of "progress" through the increase in work time. It is not acceptable that a quarter of the year (40 days off and 52 Sundays) has become unproductive. In 1900, 85 per cent of days will be available for work."³³ Rather than celebrating a host of religious events, believers could celebrate a small number that, in concentrating the spiritual and ritual mission of the whole year, would become all the more important. Second, the New Year was associated with vulgar images of drinking, charivari, debauchery and carnivalesque festivities. The immorality and unruliness that reigned during the first days of the year scandalized and alarmed the conservative Catholics as much as it did the liberals, both groups being united in their desire to discipline French Canadians by teaching them the virtues of thrift, punctuality, industry and sobriety. By comparison, December 25 seemed like a period of reflection and piety. Third, the nineteenth century, which already placed importance on the family and children, found a natural ally in Christmas. The Nativity was connected to the idea of family happiness, already present in the image of the Holy Family.³⁴ "It seems that Christmas has something more than all the others [Catholic holidays]," we read in 1851, "its midnight mass and songs are marked by a tenderness that cannot be found elsewhere. Easter and the Corpus Christi are great and majestic mysteries; Christmas is the mystery of faith and of warm and tender emotions, par excellence. On the one hand, we have a God resurrected in all his power, on the other, a frail child in all his meekness."³⁵ By the middle of the century, the relation between Christmas and childhood was already well established, and it gradually developed with greater intensity as religious ritual gave way to the family ritual and domestic bliss that marked the triumph of "intimacy" associated with the Victorian ethic of privacy.³⁶

With respect to New Year's Day presents, we can conclude that these also had a lower market value compared to Christmas gifts, and this was

due to four principal reasons.³⁷ In the first place, whether owing to tradition or habit, the range of gifts offered on New Year's Day seems to have been more limited to boxes of chocolates and bouquets of flowers than was the case on December 25. Second, New Year's Day's symbolism was associated above all with relatives and not with childhood: presents offered to friends and relatives had to be reciprocated, whereas those offered to children did not. In the latter case, the gift could thus be more unreserved and unconditional, without regard for the rules of decorum that normalized social relations between adults, particularly, restrictions related to gender. Finally, and this is undoubtedly key, the commercial Christmas promoted in the rest of North America exercised an enormous and constant pressure on French-Canadian popular culture. It was, in a sense, a losing battle. The temptation to imitate (albeit with adaptations) the British-American model was too strong. The holiday season soon became the busiest time of year for stores in the province, and francophone shopkeepers were not going to insist on conserving New Year's Day in its traditional form if it meant sacrificing sales.

The transfer of festivities from one day to the other, from January 1 to December 25, modified not only the calendar, far from it. The capitalist translation of the popular traditions surrounding the Nativity was not to be confined to a simple juxtaposition. On the contrary, this new mixture profoundly affected the meaning and influence of Christmas. "The selling of American holidays represented far more than the simple extension of age-old fairs and markets, the predictable outgrowth of venerable folkways of peddlers and chapmen. In many ways, the modern entrepreneurial embrace of holidays was discontinuous with what had gone before, and this was not just a matter of degree or magnitude."³⁸ If, as we have stressed above, Victorian-era industrial capitalism initially waged a war against the supposed surfeit of holidays, it also gladly accepted them as soon as they were seen as an occasion to make a profit. The renewed popularity of Christmas, starting in the 1850s, but especially as of 1885, stemmed from this desire on the part of merchants to amplify the festive celebrations. Some astute observers of the period railed against those who opposed holidays on the pretext that they interrupted business and negatively impacted sales, arguing they did not understand that, reduced in number, holidays constituted a golden opportunity to encourage spending. Capitalism thus sought to make the December celebrations an integral part of its values and calendar.