

Mistletoe played role in ancient Druid rites

By M. McIntyre Hood
LONDON — Digging into the night of the year, the English way of observing Christmas provides some interesting material of ancient origin. Browsing through the edition of the Sunday Times dated Dec. 22, 1963, I found an unusual feature in which details of some of these customs were given, along with a large cartoon illustrating all of them in a winter's night setting. From this, some extracts are worth giving, as adding to the wealth of lore surrounding the Christmas season.

In medieval England, it appears, it was customary to ring a peal of bells at midnight on Christmas Eve. This custom still survives in many parts of the world.

Mistletoe, in pagan days, was a sacred plant to the ancient Druids. It was never allowed to be used in decorating Christian churches, except at York, where, in the middle ages, mistletoe was brought into the minister and laid on the altar to be blessed.

The pulling of crackers at Christmas is said to be the modern counter-part of ancient fire-games which were played at Christmas.

CHRISTMAS CRIB

In the 12th century, St. Francis of Assisi gave the poor people of Greccio a Christmas crib. Today, many churches have a nativity scene, and the custom of setting up a crib is the central feature of Christmas.

During the middle ages, nativity plays formed a prominent part of pageants performed in the open air by members of guilds. In recent years, there has been a revival of such plays in schools, churches and halls.

A legend tells how St. Nicholas, one of his many names, dropped a purse of money down a chimney.

Are kids starting to doubt Santa?

By M. McIntyre Hood
LONDON — Is Santa Claus slowly but surely being debunked, and will have to look to his laurels? Is Christmas tree now taking his place, and doing away with the old legend that Santa comes down the chimney on Christmas Eve to put presents in the hanging stockings of the children?

There is good reason to believe that this is the case, and much of it is blamed on the fact that in practically all of the department stores, Santa Claus makes his appearance much too early. In many cases he appears in October, and at least early in November. And he appears in so many places that it is a time that children are beginning to associate Santa Claus not so much with Christmas as with the coming of winter.

Another reason is that children tend to see Santa Claus at a department store as often

Various ideas given on origin of Boxing Day

By M. McIntyre Hood
LONDON — At the Christmas season, in England, and particularly on the day after Christmas, known as Boxing Day, one becomes accustomed to the visits of various people, such as milk delivery men, newspaper delivery boys, postmen, garbage collectors, and others, seeking their traditional "Christmas Box."

There has been considerable research into the origin of Boxing Day, and antiquarians are not at all unanimous as to how it, and the custom of giving Christmas boxes, came into being.

One suggestion, made by a Bishop Hooper in 1867, but which is not given much credence today, is that the term Christmas Box was derived from the Oriental term "Baksheesh."

There is more inclination to associate it with the church alms-boxes, which were once opened on the day after Christmas for the benefit of the poor of the parish.

17TH CENTURY IDEA

Research into this question has been going on a long time. In 17th century notes by John Aubrey, a Wiltshire antiquary, describes a custom of Roman coins, the color of a crucible and the shape of the 'prentice's Christmas Box' in a silt in U.S.

In the same decade, Randle Cotgrave's French-English dictionary offers a French equivalent for "Christmas Box, a box having a clasp in the lid on the side for money to enter it."

Juveniles, however, non-delinquent, would appreciate the fact that such receptacles would give their contents only when smashed.

AN ISSUES VIEW

An article published in Chambers' "Book of Days" in 1888 indicates that the quality of seasonable goodwill was sometimes strained by the Christmas Box custom. It said:

"Journeymen and apprentices were wont to levy regular contributions from their masters' customers, who in addition were tempted to augmented charges to recompense the tradespeople for gratuities expected by servants."

Further back in 1837, the Foreign Office frowned upon the expectancy of Christmas boxes by its staffs. It sent out a circular to all its embassies "re-bidding Christmas boxes to messengers, domestic servants of Viscount Palmerston, foreign

First Christmas card was issued in 1846

By M. McIntyre Hood
LONDON — Many unusual facts and stories have been recorded surrounding the observance of Christmas.

When W.E. Dobson, R.A., designed a special Christmas greeting in the form of a painting on a card, for distribution to close friends, he started something which has grown to tremendous proportions. That was in the year 1846 and is believed to have been the origin of Christmas cards. After that, cards were printed in outline and colored by hand. Some of them were outstanding as works of art. A few years ago, a specimen of one of these early Christmas cards was sold in London for \$150. And it is on record that Alfred, Lord Tennyson, refused a fee of \$3,000 for composing verses to appear on Christmas cards.

What is regarded as possibly the most expensive Christmas gift in the world, worth \$20,000, the famous "Bambino," which is to be seen in the Church of Ara Coeli, in Rome. Made from the wood of an olive tree growing on the Mount of Olives, it is swathed in gold, silver and tissue, and studded with jewels. It is symbolic of the Christ-child.

From the other side of the Atlantic, however, comes the story of what was probably the most costly Christmas tree. It graced the apartments of James Clemens, one of the pioneers of the

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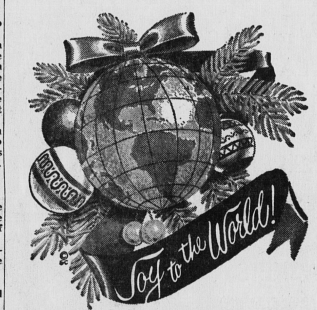
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