

The Year They Cancelled Christmas

by Susan Rodd

The town criers passed through the streets ringing their bells and shouting, "No Christmas! No Christmas!"

RESOLVED BY PARLIAMENT

THAT NO OBSERVATION SHALL BE HAD OF THE FIVE AND TWENTIETH DAY OF DECEMBER COMMONLY CALLED CHRISTMAS-DAY; NOR ANY SOLEMNITY USED OR EXERCISED IN CHURCHES UPON THE DAY IN RESPECT THEREOF.

As we busily shop on streets lined with gay wreaths and twinkling lights, it is difficult to imagine a world in which Marley and the three ghosts simply allow old Scrooge to sleep peacefully through the night, awakening to just another morning of money-counting, as Frosty melts and the Grinch gleefully rubs his bony fingers in triumph. As our trees sparkle with cherished ornaments and spicy cookies bake in our ovens, it is difficult to imagine a world with no Christmas at all.

But it happened. On June 3, 1647, British parliament established punishments for anyone caught observing Christmas. The offender then was none other than the culprit that was later to grow in the hearts of Scrooge and the Grinch: commercialism.

Although the first record of a complaint against commercialism goes all the way back to 245 A.D. when the Church Father Origen proclaimed it heathenish to celebrate Christ's birthday as if He were merely a temporal ruler when His spiritual nature should be the main concern, commercialism didn't really get into full swing until it reached the courts of medieval England. In jolly olde England, the twelve days of Christmas had become the time for all good nobles and merchants to show their loyalty to the king by offering him

splendid gifts; cash was considered an appropriate present. In the mid-thirteenth century, when the merchant class was backward about doing its share, Henry III closed the shops for two weeks until the merchants agreed to come up with the stipulated two thousand pounds.

Gambling was very popular at Christmas. It is said that Queen Elizabeth I's nobles gave her loaded dice with which to play so that she would always win.

Kings and bishops vied to outdo each other in the splendor of their attire and the bounty of their banquets. For one Christmas feast, Henry II had 600 oxen slaughtered. A course of another banquet consisted of a Christmas pie which was 9 feet in diameter, weighed 165 pounds and contained 2 bushels of flour, 20 pounds of butter, 4 geese, 2 rabbits, 4 wild ducks, 2 woodcocks, 6 snipes, 4 partridges, 2 neat's tongues, 2 curlews, 6 pigeons and 7 blackbirds.

Outside the castle walls, balladiers could be heard hawking their carols at a penny a copy, and commoners lined up at the bookseller shops to buy their copies of carol broadsides. Carol broadsides were single sheets of paper of various sizes and shapes which were generally illustrated with woodcuts suggested by the Christmas story. In a sense, they have survived; today our Christmas cards are imprinted with similar scenes and often contain a quotation or verse from a familiar carol.

In sixteenth and seventeenth century England, these broadsides became very popular. The shops that sold them were so numerous that in some instances they created something of a problem; many a churchyard was cluttered with the small stalls that carried broadsides as a specialty. But that wasn't the only problem . . .

As the lives of the common people began to reflect the excesses of the court, Christmas on the streets was getting out of hand. In the sixteenth century, Philip Stubbs described it this way:

Thus things sette in order, they have their hobbie-horses, dragons, and other antiques, together with their baudie pipers, and thundering drummers, to strike up the Devils dance withall, then marche these heathen companie towards the church and churchyarde, their pipers piping, drummers thundering, their stumppes dauncing, their bells jinglyng, their handkercheefes swaying about their heades like madmen, their hobbie-horses, and other monsters skymishyng amongst the throng, and in this sort they goe to the church (though the minister bee at prayer or preaching) dauncing and swinging their handkercheefes over their heades in the church, like devilles incarnate, with such a confused noise, that no man can hear his owne voice.

Clearly, things had gotten out of hand. Inevitably, there were reactions against what Christmas had become, and, when the Puritans came to power, beheading King Charles I and establishing Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector of the country, the edict banning Christmas was made manifest.

The town criers passed through the streets ringing their bells and shouting, "No Christmas! No Christmas!". For those who celebrated Christmas quietly in their churches, this caused a good deal of soul



An early carol broadside



"Christmas Gambols"

searching and some martyrlike acts of courage. For the common people, however, it provided a new form of Christmas entertainment: the riot.

(from a contemporary account)

Upon Wednesday, Decem. 22, the Cryer of Canterbury by the appointment of Master Major [Mayor] openly proclaimed that Christmas day, and all other Superstitious Festivals should be put downe, and that a Market should be kept upon Christmas day. Which not being observed (but very ill taken by the country) the lawne was thereby unreserved with provision, and trading very much hindered, which occasioned great discontent among the people, causing them to rise in a rebellious way.

The Major and his assistants used their best endeavours to qualify this tumult, but the fire being once kindled, was not easily quenched. The Sheriffe laying hold of a fellow, was stoutly resisted, which the Major perceiving, took a Cudgell and strook the man, who, being no pury, pulled up his courage, and knocked down the Major, whereby his Cloak was much torne and dirty, beside the hurt he received. The Major thereupon made strict Proclamatum for keeping the Peace and that every man depart to his own house. The multitude hallowing thereat, in disorderly manner, the Aldermen and Constables caught two or three of the riot, and sent them to Jayle, but they soon broke loose, and jeered Master Alderman.

Nevertheless, the law was the law, and, in time, it had dire effects. Carol singing and broadsides disappeared from public life, and their preservation became an "underground" move-

ment that was fostered surreptitiously by the country folk.

The suppression was not limited to England. The Puritans who settled New England refused to celebrate Christmas on the grounds that no day was more important than the Sabbath. Often, new settlers had to be forced to work on Christmas Day.

In England, the people soon found the years without Christmas to be intolerable. In 1647, ten thousand men from Canterbury (always a spunky town) passed their own resolution that "if they could not have their Christmas Day, they would have the King back on his throne again." The monarchy was restored in 1660 and, with its return Christmas regained official acceptance once more. As the middle class rose, Christmas became more a celebration of the people and less an excuse for royal display.

The first state to declare Christmas a legal holiday was Alabama in 1836.

America took longer to recover from the Puritan influence. In 1856 Christmas Day was still an ordinary workday in Boston and failure to report to a job was grounds for dismissal. Classes were held in Boston public schools on Christmas Day as late as 1870. It was probably the influence of immigrants from Germany and Ireland that finally convinced the Yankees that Christmas could be a harmless, pleasant, and even religious festivity. The first state to

declare Christmas a legal holiday was Alabama in 1836. The last was Oklahoma in 1890.

In its years of absence, many of the fine old Christmas traditions were almost forgotten, and some were in danger of disappearing altogether. The Industrial Revolution further hastened what looked like the imminent death of the old-style Christmas of plum puddings, caroling and mistletoe. "Work!" was the motto of the day. The poor were too oppressed to celebrate, and those who were well off didn't want to waste the time. Christmas became a workday.

One writer believed that Christmas could still be alive and well, and he set out, almost single-handedly, to make it so. *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens remains to this day,



Charles Dickens

next to the Nativity itself, the best known and best loved Christmas story of all. *A Christmas Carol* is the ultimate embodiment of what Dickens called "the Carol philosophy" that Christmas is "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."

Dickens' effort succeeded, and Christmas blooms again. As we kiss beneath the mistletoe and sing, once again, the beloved carols that were nearly lost to us forever, let us strive to deserve the ultimate compliment that is paid to the reformed Scrooge: "... and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of all of us, and all of us!"

A very Merry Christmas to all of you, from all of us here at SHEET MUSIC! ☺