



# May McD's Christmas Page



## The Genesis of Christmas

IT is always an interesting task to trace back a stream to its sources. Not casually or arbitrarily was the feast of the nativity fixed in midwinter. Almost all the heathen nations regarded the winter solstice as the most important point in the year, as the beginning of the renewed life and activity of the powers of nature, and of the gods, who were originally, perhaps, only the symbolic personifications of these. In the northern countries this fact must have made itself peculiarly palpable—hence the Celts and Germans from the earliest times celebrated the season with the greatest festivities.

### Traditions Derived from Ancient Customs

Ages and ages ago, perhaps a hundred centuries or more, when human beings began to record the facts of the physical world, they noted that there was a definite season at which the short days of winter began to lengthen, and the long, grim nights to grow more brief. This was at the time of the winter solstice, in December, when the sun turns in its apparent course among the stars, and seems slowly to return, with its radiant light and vivifying heat. Men knew that the power of stern winter had been broken, and that soon would come the springtime, thrilling the earth with new life, causing the seed to swell and the buds to burst, and suffusing all created things with the fresh joy of vigorous youth. All the world over this moment of transition was watched for eagerly; and when it came it was welcomed with merry-making and with a sort of symbolism which belonged to the nature worship of the primitive peoples—east, west, north and south alike.

### Yuletide Among the Druids

In the remote north, where winter is stern and unrelenting for many months of the year, the first token of its decline was hailed with great joy. In the black Scandinavian forests great fires were kindled, fed with mighty trunks of pine and spruce, until the flames shot far up into the heavens, defying the frost king and hailing his approaching downfall. Around these roaring seas of billowy flame gathered the savage, bearded northmen, basking in the ruddy warmth, calling with hoarse voices upon their barbaric gods, and clashing their rude weapons; for the time was coming when the ice in the fjords would melt, when the serpent-shaped boats would again be launched, and when the vikings would glide out to slay the monsters of the sea, or to fight and plunder and ravage the abodes of other men.

But on the night that was longest, just before the great flaming wheel of the sun turned backward once again, and when the yule logs were made ready

to flare out, a terror, strange and sinister, took possession of the timid. Men and women and children whispered to one another that on this night there were many who suddenly put off their human forms and were changed into werewolves, fierce, ravening, and thirsting for blood; and that these dreadful creatures roamed in the forest glades until the rising of the sun of the new year. In this belief is seen again the symbol of the transformation of the season.

### Mysterious Ceremonies of Celts and Gauls

Strange, weird and awe-inspiring was the December ceremonial among the Celtic peoples of Western Europe, and most of all in the rites of the Britons, who observed this period of their winter solstice in their great roofless gardens and temples. In them torches blazed at night, and mysterious ceremonies accompanied the cutting of the sacred mistletoe, which symbolized the

personal movements and interferences on earth of their great deities, Odin, Bercht and others. Many of the beliefs and usages of the Germans passed over from heathenism to christianity and have partly survived to this day.

The yule festival like the Saturnalia of the Druids, was the greatest feast of the ancient Germans. It was dedicated to Odin, or Wodan, the greatest god of the heathen. He was the old Germans "god of heaven" who blessed the fields and gave victory; who was worshipped as the giver of good things.

In Jewish homes the Nanukah, the great Festival of Lights, spreads the glow of the transition period into the hearts of Jewish children, almost at the same hour when Christmas sheds its light and sets ablaze the tree under the neighbor's roof. This is to welcome the renewal of light and heat from the returning sun, and the custom goes back farther than recorded history.

The Egyptians celebrate the

The pagan festivals, it has transpired, were called "unconscious prophecies" of the law and divine promise. The Church sought to combat and banish the deep rooted heathen feeling by adding, for the purification of the heathen feasts and customs which she retained, her grandly devised liturgy, besides dramatic representations of the birth of Christ and the first events of His life.

So it was that manger-songs arose, and a multitude of Christmas carols, as well as dramas, which sometimes degenerated into farces or fools' feasts. And so arose also the Christ-trees, or Christmas trees, present giving, and Christmas dishes. Thus Christmas became a universal social festival for young and old, high and low, as no other Christian festival could have become.

### Why We Celebrate December 25

Nobody knows whether December 25th is the exact date on which Christ was born, or what people first celebrated that date. It may have been in April, or in October, but unlikely in December, judging by some of the attendant circumstances.

But if heathenism was to be understood and conquered, some of its established institutional and festive ways must be adopted and reformed, and filled with a new meaning in accord with the new thought and hope then beginning strangely to move the hearts of men. And this was the very thing that happened. After the triumph of Christianity, the prejudice of the early Christians against the celebration of birthdays as heathenish died out.

Some time between 337 and 352 Pope Julius directed Saint Cyril to ascertain the correct date of the Nativity. He reported that the Western churches observed it on December 25, although other churches kept the day in January, April, May, March, and September. Pope Julius was so satisfied with Saint Cyril's report that he set December 25 as Christmas Day, and our observance of that date has come down to us from that decision.

The observance of the festival of the Nativity was from the beginning called Christmas or Christ Mass, because a special mass was celebrated on that day. The pure glow of the spiritual festival dissipated the dark clouds of licentious and wicked ceremonies that marked the notorious Roman Saturnalia; but the Christian observance, while exterminating the evils of the heathen festival which it displaced, permitted many of the pleasing and innocent features to remain. Among these are customs which survive at the present day—the decorating with evergreens, holly and laurel; the burning of the yule log and singing of Christmas carols, which are the evolution of the ancient hymns of praise to Saturn and Bacchus and other heathen gods.

## A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year

continuance of life and of the means of life throughout the winter.

But more wonderful still was the scene among the Gauls on the coast of Brittany. Human eyes have never gazed upon a stranger sight than these marvellous sanctuaries, with their thousands of huge white columns, uncovered and not enclosed by walls, rearing their forest of stone up to the frosty heavens. Amid all this maze of mystic pillars, the flames of countless fires glared at night, as the natives, crowned with chaplets of green, moved in their imposing procession. At a distance the uninitiated gazed with awe upon the spectacle, perceiving on the cliffs the frantic figures of the women, their hair streaming in a sort of fiery mist, as they waved their torches wildly and shrieked out cabalistic words and litanies, while the myriad pillars echoed to the fearful chanting of the men.

### Germans, Jews and Egyptians had Winter Festivals

At the winter solstice the Germans held their great yule-feast in commemoration of the return of the fiery sun-wheel; and believed that, during the twelve nights from December 25 to January 6, they could trace the

same season, and it is a curious and interesting fact that they chose for its symbol a new-born child, since at that time another year was born. It was also the period when nature began to give birth to new plants and grains.

### Sanctification of Heathen Festivities

These were, indeed, an awful precursor of the Christmas that we know—a heathen Christmas, kept by tall, skin-clad savages, on whose volcanic passions a check was placed only by the reputed magic powers of their mysterious priests. The Saturnalia, the Juvenalia, and the Brumalia of Italy were transmuted into and sanctified by the establishment of the Christian cycle of Christmas observance. The superstition of the Egyptians, the savagery of the northern people, and the frantic and bloody practices of the Druids, have all been purified and touched with grace and beauty; so that there remains a festival of harmless mirth, of light and color, of song and melody, of good-will and peace, and through it all the happy innocence of children's laughter.

The Church must be credited with the effort so to use the pagan customs which she felt constrained to adopt as to make them profitable to the souls of the people.

