

Where does Christmas come from?

by Allyn Cadogan

I'm one of those nuts who likes to know why we do things the way we do, and Bill Meilen's forum last week got me thinking about Christmas.

According to Meilen, when the Romans came to Britain, they brought to the religion they found there their sun god Mithris. The Romans celebrated Mithris' birthday on December 25. It was believed by Mithric followers that the sun god had had a miraculous conception, birth and death. And that he was resurrected on the third day after his death.

I found this all very fascinating and decided to read further on the subject. Unfortunately, I couldn't find anything in the library--undoubtedly I looked neither long nor hard enough.

The three books listed in the card catalogue, dealing with my topic, were not to be found on the shelves so, in desperation, I resorted to a survey of what the various (shudder) encyclopedias had to say about Christmas.

The word Christmas comes from the Old English *Christes maesses* (Christ's mass), and was first used in the eleventh century.

Interestingly enough, during the first three centuries of the Christian era, the Church opposed the celebration of birthdays which, it felt, reeked of paganism. However, Saturnalia, the winter solstice, which coincided with the celebration of the feast of Mithris, was popular throughout the Christian world.

Sometime between 320 and 353 the Church assigned the date of December 25 as the date for the celebration of Christ's birth. By the end of the fourth century this date was used by the entire Christian world with the exception of the Eastern churches who retained January 6 for the celebration of the Nativity.

Apparently the Church, who had some excellent propagandists on its side in the early days, saw this as a way of turning the day away from a purely pagan festival to one of adoration of Christ.

The Teutonic tribes of northern Europe celebrated the winter solstice and developed many customs and traditions that became part of the Christmas festival.

For instance, in northern Europe, the evergreen was symbolic of eternal life, and eventually became almost an object of worship. During the Roman Saturnalis, laurel and other greens and flowers were used to decorate homes. Combine the two customs and you eventually get a Christmas tree. Early trees were decorated with cookies and fruit, and later, candles.

The custom of decorated Christmas trees spread from Germany throughout Europe. The tradition was brought to England in 1841 by Prince Albert of Saxony, Queen Victoria's consort.



The Druids felt that mistletoe was sacred, holding many miraculous powers. The ancient Romans regarded it as a symbol of peace. Legend has it that when enemies met under a sprig of mistletoe, they laid down their arms and declared a truce. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe has its roots in this legend.

And according to another legend, Christ's crown of thorns was really made from holly which is why we make holly wreaths today.

Our use of Christmas candles probably derives from the Jewish Chanukkah. In the middle ages it was the custom to set a candle in the middle of a laurel wreath and keep it burning all of Christmas eve and for the rest of the season.

In Ireland, especially during periods of religious persecution, candles were placed in windows of homes on Christmas eve to serve as a guide to any priests passing through the neighborhood. The priests knew they could find safe refuge in these homes and they might possibly celebrate a mass.

From this custom of candles through the Christmas season comes our modern habit of decorating houses and trees and just about everything else with lights of all kinds.

The ancient Romans gave "good luck" gifts, called *strenae*, of fruits, pastry or gold to friends on New Year's Day during the winter solstice.

The gift-giving custom remains today although the methods vary from land to land.

In England the feast of St. Stephen, Boxing Day, was held on December 26. During the middle ages, on this day priests opened the alms boxes and distributed the contents to the poor of the parish. Later it became customary to distribute "boxes" to servants and public workers on this day.

In most European countries, children believe the Christ child brings their gifts. In others, the children believe St. Nicholas brings presents on the eve of his feast day, December 6.

In Slavic countries children sometimes sleep on beds of straw to share in Christ's humble birth.

On St. Nicholas eve, Dutch children fill their wooden shoes with hay for Santa Claus' white horse, hoping he will eat the hay and leave the shoes filled with candy and toys.

Italian children set out their shoes for *La Befana*, a female Santa, to fill with gifts.

In Czechoslovakia, it is customary to put a cherry branch in water at the beginning of Advent. If the branch

blossoms at Christmas, this is a sign of good luck.

Last year, I asked a Jewish girlfriend of mine if it would be all right if I gave her little boy a Christmas present. She laughed and said, "I'll tell you a secret--I really like Christmas. Of course, I don't celebrate the birth of Christ, but I like the happy vibrations I get from everyone else at this time of year. I think we're even going to have a Christmas tree this year." I gave her son the Christmas present.

Christmas, seeped in ancient tradition, the celebration of the life of a Christian god, who adopted a pagan's birthday, something for everyone, Christian or not.



Letter!

I find the action of the University administration in having the cars parked in front of St. Joe's and all along that street ticketed to be a shoddy trick. It was only last week that it was announced that parking restrictions would be lifted during the bus strike. Now, it seems, the administration thinks it can make some quick and easy revenue by going back on its word. I will grant that these cars are parked in the bus stop zones and that the Edmonton Police have said that this is still illegal. If this is so, they, rather than the campus police should be giving out the tickets. Which brings us back to the first conclusion, the desire for some extra revenue. (In this case, it would appear they wish to beat the city out of it.)

Whatever the explanation is, it does not appear to reflect creditably on the U of A administration.

R.W. Gillespie
Commerce 3

The Gateway requires a

News Editor

commencing

Jan. 1st, 1974

Details and applications available at the Gateway office
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BAC bldg.

The proposed Arts Court site for the Business Administration and Commerce Building, planned for the near future, should be re-examined a brief by GSA urges.

In view of the revised long range population prediction being reduced from 30,000 to 20,000, it is even "unlikely that several buildings proposed in the long range plan will ever be built."

The Board of Governors have planned to construct the BAC building south of the Tory Building on the Arts Court in the north-east sector of the campus.

The brief presents five reasons given by the Campus Development Committee, the long range planners and the long range landscape planners justifying the construction in the Arts Court. These are: 1. BAC would make the Arts Court a "better defined" and a "more manageable" open space; 2. the building contributes to the principle of consolidation of the campus core; 3. the faculty of Business and Commerce would be close to the social sciences located in Tory and the proposed computing centre; 4. the BAC building would provide needed entrance and foyer space for the Tory Building; and 5. BAC would contribute to an east-west pedestrian walkway.

The arguments presented by GSA for each of the five points against the proposed building site are: 1. a natural area of relief from man-made forms, the court would lose the esthetic

and recreational value it has at present; 2. the addition of a large number of people and another building in a congested area would be detrimental to the learning and living environment; 3. space will be available soon in the Campus Towers and the General Services Building which could house the facilities proposed by BAC; 4. the west side of Tory and the south entrance can be renovated to accommodate the flow of traffic using these entrances at present; and 5. a pedestrian walkway constructed at ground level would be of more use than an elevated walkway leading to the second floor, as the main traffic in Tory is destined for the main and lower floors.

A petition signed by more than 140 faculty members from the departments of Economic, History, Geography and Sociology was signed in November, 1972, opposing the Arts Court site for the construction of BAC.

The brief calls the planners' reasons for the construction of BAC, or any other building in the Arts Court as not being well thought out, full of "vague, rhetorical rationalizations and based on possible peripheral benefits, which are far outweighed by the costs." The brief has been submitted to all members of the Campus Development Committee; the chairmen of departments housed in Tory and Arts buildings; the Senate Task Force on Physical Planning; and the Building Board Committee.

FORUM FIVE

