



Funny how customs seamlessly mutate without our noticing

TRADITION: dict. def. 'custom or practice of long standing'. I've just opened the newspaper to a photograph of a whole terraced street in which every house is identically silhouetted in fairy lights. This is either a sign of neighbourly cohesion – or coercion. Suppose you were the only resident who refused to participate in the scheme? You'd have to flit. Outdoor decoration of house and garden is now 'the whole go' and people drive round town at night casting a critical eye over the standard of your display. Elegant restraint is out. More is more.

Can we agree that Christmas starts too early? Hallowe'en pumpkins are barely consigned to the bin before the first plastic Santa appears in store. London's Selfridges opens its Christmas shop on August 21. I know, because each year I buy a single ruinously expensive tree bauble there while on summer holiday.

There's nothing so wearying as long-term anticipation. It almost guarantees the event will be a flat-as-a-pancake disappointment. A tabloid newspaper reported last week that 'Devastated children have been left in tears after stores ran out of Advent calendars due to supply problems'. One mum reports, 'My two girls are really upset. It doesn't feel like Christmas without two Advent calendars in our kitchen'.

I mistakenly presumed there'd been a sudden outbreak of religiosity. Alas, Advent calendars no longer tell the Nativity story, but are full of Disney characters, superheroes and chocolate, or, for adults, wine, whisky, perfume or cheese, and the visit to see the Christmas crib has been replaced by a trip to Santa's grotto. What exactly does Christmas celebrate nowadays? The clue's in the first syllable, honoured

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more in the breach than the observance. Lord knows, I'm not exactly gospel greedy, but the secular 'X' of Xmas has usurped Christ – the 'X' standing for the x-orbitant amount of money spent that has turned the feast into a shallow, sentimental blingfest, heart-scald for the poverty-stricken, a god-sent guarantee of profit for business, but little trace left of Godliness.

That's it. Rant over. I don't want to be cast in the role of the Grinch Who Spoiled Christmas. Where was I? Ah yes – tradition. Let me indulge in a little "I mind the time-ery", when Christmas Eve saw our elderly tree brought down from the attic and its arthritic limbs extended to receive the antique spun-

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glass baubles, the ropes of hairy tinsel, the lethal fairy lights that needed replacing (but not this year) and the skely-eyed angel.

Next, assembly of the German crib, a stiff little wooden Nativity with handpainted figures and three small candles (purloined from the church) which made a whirling structure above them revolve – and frequently catch fire.

In the kitchen Auntie Mollie stood at the sink eviscerating the turkey, a Wills Woodbine in the corner of her mouth, from which the ash never fell. While my mother gingerly washed the wedding-present dinner service in preparation for its annual outing, I was tasked with folding the linen table napkins for the one day a year we used them and polishing the 'good set' of cutlery.

Then it was out in the unaccustomed dark to midnight Mass and a visit to the crib, where lay what's best described as a Germolene pink Baby Jesus. Family lore has it I, born when postwar rationing was still extant, exclaimed, 'Poor Baby Jesus. No clothes – and no coupons to buy clothes...'

Home for a big fry-up cooked by my mother, still wearing her hat and straight to bed, inhaling the shop smell of new pyjamas with the shop creases still in them and on the bedpost, a modest but hopeful stocking. Funny how customs seamlessly mutate without our noticing. When did watching the Christmas film become a post-dinner ritual? Back then it was *White Christmas* on a 14-inch screen with Rosemary Clooney and Bing Crosby in big flappy slacks (him, not her) and the adults semi-comatose with food and fatigue. Suddenly, it's Christmas chez Daughter Dear and *Love Actually* and her elbow in my ribs saying, 'Wake up Mumma!'

Where has the time gone?

ON THIS DAY

DECEMBER 8 1970

Discrimination in Dungannon

A DAMNING dossier of discrimination against Catholics by two County Tyrone councils has been prepared for submission to Stormont.

Compiled by Councillor Jack Hassard of South Tyrone Labour Party, it reveals in detail how a 48 per cent Unionist minority in the Dungannon Urban District Council area controls the local government body through gerrymandering and, as a result, can carry out an anti-Catholic policy in the provision of jobs and houses.

Mr Tom Gormley [Independent, Mid-Tyrone] said last night: 'Blatant discrimination of the worst type is being practised... The Government will have to take action to see that the Catholic population of these areas gets justice and the fair allocation of jobs and houses.'

Dungannon Urban District has a 52 per cent Catholic majority but through ward gerrymandering, there are 14 Unionist councillors and 7 Opposition members.

Councillor Hassard points out that in the urban area, not a single Catholic holds an administrative, clerical or technical position under the Council. Lord Cameron states in his Report (1969): 'I am satisfied that these Unionist-controlled councils used their power to make appointments in a way which benefits Protestants.'

Historic 'Society' Under Fire

DERRY Nationalist Party is to ask the Derry Development Commission for its support in an effort to wind up the Honourable the Irish Society – the London-based body which built the city's Walls and St Columb's Cathedral during the Plantation and re-named the city Londonderry.

In a letter sent to the General Manager of the Commission, Mr Gerald Bryan, yesterday, Mr Eddie McAteer, President of the Nationalist Party, asked a meeting, adding: 'As Derry people, we feel strongly that the assets and income of the Society must be repatriated for the benefit of the people from whom they have been wrung.'

'The Society was born of hatred of the native Catholic people and its still existing Charter is in deeply offensive terms. It will be a happy gesture to better days to wipe out that slur.'

The Society was the company set up in 1609 as 'The Society of the Governor and Assistants, London, of the New Plantation of Ulster within the Realm of Ireland.' James I ordered the London companies to undertake the plantation of the new county of Londonderry and the towns of Derry and Coleraine. The society stills owns property there.

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