

The Christmas Encyclopedia

Second Edition

William D. Crump



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

Frontispiece: Engraving from the 1880s after a work by an artist identified as "Minthrop." From Charles Wesley, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* (New York: Dutton, 1889).

Illustration research and selection by Linda Campbell Franklin

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Crump, William D., 1949–
The Christmas encyclopedia / by William D. Crump.—2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7864-2293-9 (illustrated case binding : 50# alkaline paper) ∞

1. Christmas—Encyclopedias. I. Title.
GT4985.C74 2006
394.2663'03—dc22
2005025349

British Library cataloguing data are available

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Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com



A reindeer pulls a Laplander in his sleigh across the icy snow. From the Sunday School Visitor, 1897.

Finland

From the influences of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the conquest by Roman Catholic Sweden, Finland accepted Christianity over a period of years from 1050 to 1300. When the country broke from Rome in the sixteenth century, the Evangelical Lutheran Church replaced Catholicism and remained as the principal faith.

Joulua (Christmas) commences with the Advent season and citywide bazaars. Since the 1920s, most organizations, businesses, and families have organized social gatherings, called *pikkujoulu* ("Little Christmas"), as typical Christmas parties. Additional lights to combat the long periods of darkness fill the windows of shops and businesses, and decorations include Advent candles, Advent wreaths, Advent calendars, and winter greenery. It is also customary to erect a sheaf of grain on a pole outdoors for the birds ("Birds' Christmas Tree").

Since 1950, Finland has observed December 13 as St. Lucia's Day, a tradition acquired from Sweden in the 1920s and introduced by the Swedish-language newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* as well as the Finnish national health organization *Folkhalsan*. Although families select a Lucia among their own kindred, a national fund-raising competition selects one teenage girl annually as Finland's Lucia, who graces various functions, schools, and hospitals. Proceeds fund *Folkhalsan*.

Christmas trees are usually erected a few

days before Christmas Eve and decorated with candles, miniatures of the national flag, *himmeli* (straw mobiles) of various sizes and shapes, and paper and wood ornaments.

Christmas Eve officially commences with the "Peace of Christmas," a Scandinavian custom dating to medieval times. An annual ceremony dedicated to this custom is televised throughout Finland and Sweden at noon from Finland's former capital, Turku, which now refers to itself as Finland's "Christmas City." From the balcony of Brinkkala Mansion in the Old Great Square, a public official reads the text of a medieval document that orders all citizens to maintain peace during the Christmas season or suffer criminal penalties. Included in the telecast is a service from Turku Cathedral, in which bishops from the Lutheran, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Methodist faiths plead for world peace.

At sundown on Christmas Eve, families adorn the graves of their ancestors with lighted candles and wreaths and visit the sauna prior to the evening's festivities. Whereas manufactured gifts were popular in the early twentieth century, homemade gifts have once again become popular, as they were in the nineteenth century. Children personally receive gifts on Christmas Eve from *Joulupukki* (literally "Yule Buck," Father Christmas), who arrives in the form of a friend or relative dressed similarly to Santa Claus and who traditionally inquires, "Are there any good children here?" Children often dress as *Joulutonttuja* (elves or gnomes) in red suits and caps, while adults entertain the special visitor with carols. According to a tradition established by the Finnish Broadcasting Company in 1927, Father Christmas, who resembles the American Santa Claus with his reindeer and elves, resides with his wife, Mother Christmas, atop Mount Korvatunturi in the eastern region of Lapland belonging to Finland. Children address their Christmas letters to this location, where special postal workers answer each letter in the guise of Father Christmas.

The association of a goat figure with gift-bringer derives from pre-Christian Yule festivals, which paid homage to the gods. At the

winter solstice, it rode through the two billy goats and distributed gifts and chief of the eight-legged steed of slain heroes in goats portrayed entrances at Yule about, "died" among the Middle Ages into the devil in revels, and men masks frolicked the Church, which sixteenth century today, the gift Wainamoinen, v Ukko. The form in a red coat and tache, derives from mighty deeds and of anonymous, collectively comprising Finland. In that god.

The Christmas distribution of gift ham, herring, liver pâté mon, *joululeipä* (Christmas fruit cookies), *korva-glögg* (a warmed wine, sugar, raisin peeling, and almond dish served through a ridge with one receiving the all good luck in that there may be no singing of carols and walk around

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winter solstice, it was believed that Thor, as he rode through the skies in a chariot pulled by two billy goats named Gnasher and Cracker, distributed gifts to the Vikings while his father and chief of the gods, Odin, riding his white, eight-legged steed Sleipner, escorted the souls of slain heroes into Valhalla. Men costumed as goats portrayed this belief by making surprise entrances at Yule parties, and after dancing about, “died” and then returned to life. During the Middle Ages, the goat figure evolved into the devil in Scandinavian Christmas folk revels, and men costumed in goat skins and masks frolicked about, much to the dismay of the Church, which banned such behavior in the sixteenth century. In more remote regions today, the gift-bearer may be known as Wainamoinen, who arrives on his goat steed, Ukko. The former, depicted as an old man clad in a red coat and sporting a long, white mustache, derives from the principal worker of mighty deeds and hero of the *Kalevala*, a series of anonymous, centuries-old poems that collectively comprise the national epic poem of Finland. In that work, Ukko is the supreme god.

The Christmas Eve meal follows the distribution of gifts and often includes salmon, ham, herring, *lutefisk* (codfish), assorted casseroles, liver pâté, mixed fruit soup with cinnamon, *joululeipä* (Christmas bread), *joulutortut* (Christmas fruit pastry), *piparkakut* (ginger cookies), *korvapuustit* (cinnamon buns), and *glögg* (a warmed, spiced drink composed of red wine, sugar, raisins, cinnamon, cloves, orange peeling, and almonds). A traditional, holiday dish served throughout Scandinavia is rice porridge with one almond in the batch; the person receiving the almond in his serving will have good luck in the coming year. After dinner, there may be readings from the Bible or the singing of carols as family members join hands and walk around the Christmas tree.

Christmas Day is spent with family attending early morning church services and enjoying quiet devotion at home. St. Stephen’s Day or “Second Christmas Day” is also a holiday, while traditions of New Year’s Eve include fortune-telling games such as interpreting shadows cast from the shapes created after molten lead or tin is cooled in water. The

Christmas season ends on Epiphany, January 6.

“Merry Christmas” is *Hyvää Joulua*.
See also **Advent**; **Epiphany**; **Sweden**.

The Fir Tree

The only fairy tale by the celebrated Danish author Hans Christian Andersen with a Christmas setting. Clearly presenting a strong moral, the story features a young Fir Tree that cannot appreciate its youth or its lovely environment in the forest because it yearns to be taller, older, or somewhere else. When the Tree desires to be a ship’s mast, the Sunbeams caution it to rejoice in its youth. When the Sparrow brings news of gorgeous Christmas trees decorated in town, the Fir Tree impatiently wishes to be one. But the elements again caution the Tree to rejoice in the Air, the Wind, and its youth.

At last, the mature Tree is cut down, erected in a grand home, and trimmed exquisitely for Christmas Eve. Now, the Tree believes, it will live in splendor forever. But one of its burning candles scorches a branch, and then children plunder gifts from its branches, leaving its appearance disheveled.

Expecting to be redecorated the next day, the Tree instead is thrown into an isolated garret, where it remains alone for days. Inquisitive mice prompt the Tree to tell them its history, and in doing so, the Tree realizes too late that it really had a good life in the forest. Withered, yellow, and now considered ugly by the children, the Tree is soon burned for firewood.

It is uncertain whether Andersen deliberately incorporated a particular piece of European folklore about Christmas evergreens into the ending, but it is in keeping with the old superstition that, at holidays’ end, Christmas evergreens should be burned rather than thrown out. The story also implies that gifts were hung on the tree and not placed beneath, which further implies that the tree was set on a table (see **Christmas Tree**).

Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) wrote some 150 fairy tales. His life’s work as a writer of children’s fairy tales and stories commenced with a small volume, *Fairy Tales Told for Children* (1835). Although a number of his tales have winter settings, such as “The Snow