



The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving (The American Social Experience)

William Waits

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In days of old, Christmas was defined by the custom of exchanging simple handmade gifts. Today, it has become a multi-billion industry, synonymous with commercialism and consumption. How did this transformation occur?

In this incisive and engaging examination of how Christmas has evolved since 1880, Waits chronicles the history of the holiday, from its origin to its current form. The book is illustrated with dozens of historical photographs and will be of interest to cultural and social historians alike.

Christmas was a relatively modest occasion in the English-speaking world, celebrated by the exchange of modest handmade gifts, until the Victorians invested the holiday with immense significance as part of a larger effort to celebrate home, family, and a mythic past of well-ordered communities. By the late 19th century, Christmas had become a major American festival. Today, it is a multi-billion dollar industry and easily the most important seasonal event of the year.

In this survey of the modern American Christmas, William Waits shows us how this holiday emerged, tracing its evolution from the days prior to 1880 when people presented one another with simple crafted presents to the turn of the century when industrialization brought with it waves of inexpensive, tawdry gimcracks. In the early twentieth century, reform-minded Americans reflecting on the new Christmas prompted a backlash against this cheapening of the Yule tradition, and the Christmas card was born. Henceforth, family members and close friends exchanged useful, costly items, while cards were sent to acquaintances and distant relatives. These reformers also persuaded retail stores to keep their regular hours of business during the holiday, rather than lengthening them, to give trade workers the opportunity to join in the celebration. They also rationalized the collection and distribution of holiday charity, resulting in the Christmas celebration we have today. Waits's book clearly illustrates that the notion that Christmas is uncontrollable is simply untrue.

An incisive and engaging history of giftgiving, *The Modern Christmas in America* also examines the differing traditions of giftgiving to friends, employees, the poor, and among entire communities. Handsomely illustrated with dozens of historical photographs, this book is not only the perfect holiday gift but will also be of interest to any student of American history and culture.

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