

In the holiday season Nothing succeeds like excess

Every year it's the same. And every year you vow things will be different next year.

The lineups, the battles in the toy department, the endless parties, the weight gain, the looming credit card disasters...Is this really what Christmas is all about? Surely not!

Actually, it is.

At least that's what Nathalie Cooke says. Far from being a time of peace and calm, says the McGill University researcher, a proper Yuletide celebration almost requires excess as far as the holiday's secular side goes, anyway.

As a specialist in Canadian studies, and with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Cooke has been investigating the cultural aspects of Canadian "foodways" (the country's food habits and practices) for several years. And, she says, the traditional Christmas dinner, with the family dining table groaning under the weight of too much food, is right at the centre of the season's gluttonous heart.

At the core of the holiday is a paradox, she says. Christmas like other holidays celebrated around the same time such as Eid, Hannukah and Diwali falls near the midwinter solstice.

"But all of these holidays are festivals of light and plenty," she points out. "So what we're doing is creating an illusion of abundance in the middle of the darkest and leanest time of the year. The strings of lights, the flood of gifts, the cornucopia of food and drink, they're all



part and parcel of an illusion we create of light, wealth, leisure and comfort just when we need it most."

And while Cooke is more forgiving than most over Christmas excess, her studies also offer some consolation to those suffering festive overload.

Complaining about the season, she says, is almost as much a part of the tradition as celebrating it. As far back as 1853, pioneer Catharine Parr Traill wrote about her neighbours teasing her for the over-the-top customs she'd brought with her from Britain.

Her offense? Decorating her house with boughs of holly.

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—News Canada

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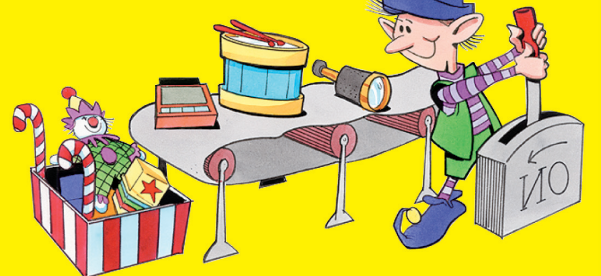


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