

# Just a card (but what a card) at Christmas

How we enjoy the Christmas cards that tumble through the mail slot this time of year! They don't shed like the tree, they don't make you fat like shortbread or impaired like eggnog. They just sit there, brightening the place up and reminding us of how lucky we are to have good friends.

Christmas cards became part of the Yule festivities at about the same time as Victoria's Prince Albert, Dicken's Christmas Carol and Germany's Christmas tree. In the mid-1800's talented Victorians drew and painted seasonal cards for their special friends. By the 1870 commercially printed cards were common and the annual race to get them in the mail early was on.

When Canadians began printing their own Christmas cards around 1870, they turned their backs on the British ones which really were little more than valentines replete with violets, chubby moony-eyed infants and paper lace borders. Just as the Canadian psyche is firmly stamped with the pawprint of winter, so Canadian Christmas cards reflected a lot of ice and snow, skates and toboggans and romantic rural settings depicting jolly settlers cavorting in front of their snow-covered log cabins. When you think of all the moose, icicles and snow-covered countryside that were mailed across the pond each year on Canadian Christmas cards, it's a wonder anybody ever emigrated to this chilly Dominion.

## Shirley Whittington



The etiquette of Christmas cards was neatly explained in a Halifax Herald of 1882: "Among people whose acquaintance is too formal to admit of the exchange of presents, and who yet desire to remember one another at the holiday season, the beautiful Christmas cards serve an excellent purpose. Everyone may receive a Christmas card as freely as a Valentine. Exquisite ones may be had at very low prices, while others may be found in the ascending scale to \$10. A handsome card is in much better taste than a cheap-looking 'boughten' present."

The propaganda caught on. By the turn of the century Toronto letter carriers were staggering under forty pounds of mail at one time, and extra men had to be hired to cope with it. In fact the custom of working at the post office over Christmas was a fairly universal one amongst impecunious students until recently.

Around here, we get Christmas cards all

year long because we collect the old-fashioned ones. Our earliest is a sugary little number that dates from 1882 and features a bland boy bearing mistletoe, and a verse which begins: "Begirt with flowers be life's fair hours."

By 1911, it was okay to be risqué on a Christmas card. One of our favourites shows a donkey's head encircled with holly and mistletoe. The message reads, "Don't make an ass of yourself this Christmas."

It was also okay to be mercenary in those early days. One of our most charming cards bears this very direct sentiment: "I wish you a very merry Christmas and I hope you will get lots of nice things."

Oddly enough there are few mangers or madonnas in the early cards though angels are a dime a dozen. One of our more remarkable acquisitions features a suffering head of Christ crowned with thorns and surrounded by bright holly wreath. Others

are decorated with the swastika, which was a good luck symbol for centuries before it became a military one.

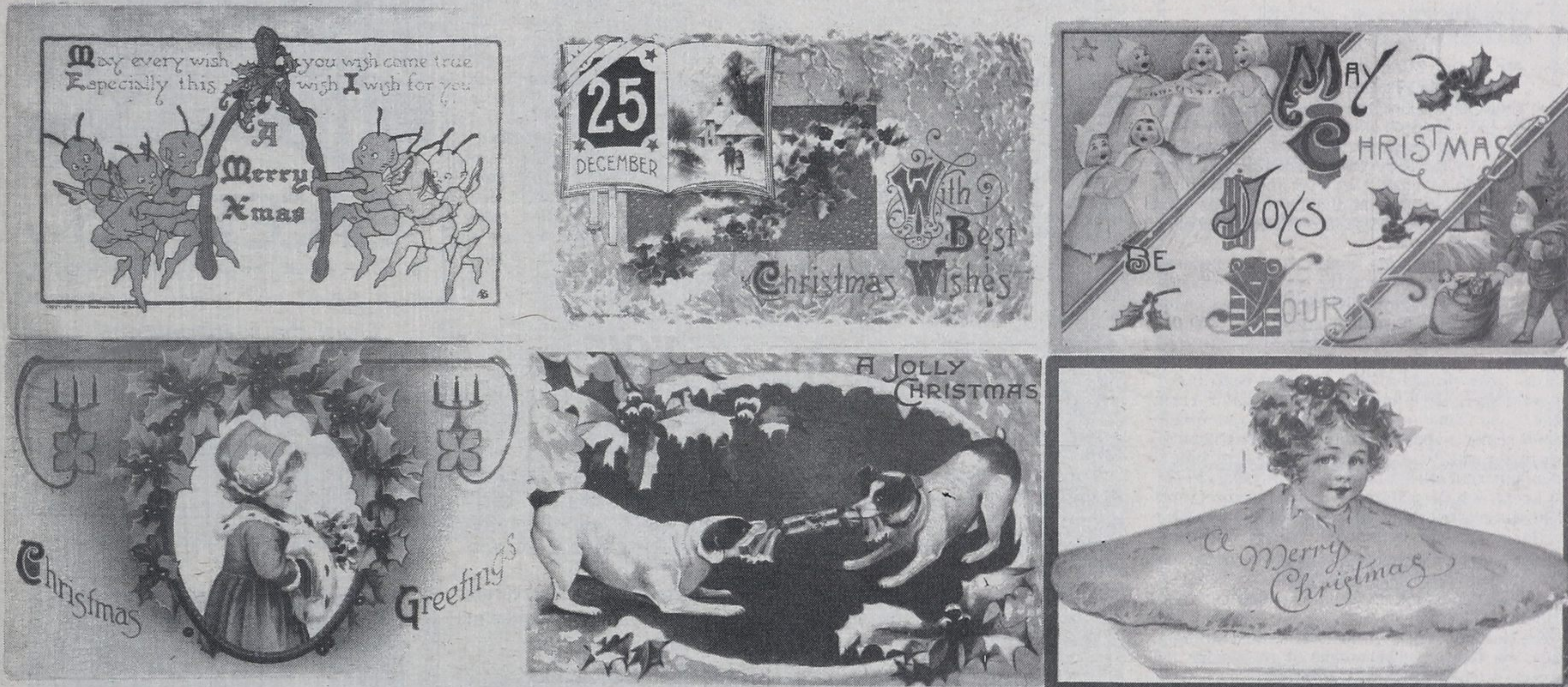
Then, as now, Santa Claus was featured on many cards, but he Santas of the early 1900's were thinner and lacked today's flushed cardiac look. In the early part of the century S.C. was a rather elegant old gent who wore a long red hooded coat with enormous pockets stuffed with toys. Several decades of Christmas Eve snacks have transformed him into today's overweight hedonist.

Though the cards may change, the sentiments don't. Neither do the signatures. Almost all our oldies bear spidery variations on "Love to Edith and Eddie and children from Charlie, Alice and girls."

Will Christmas cards go out of fashion entirely? People were pondering that question back in 1883 when the following appeared in the Halifax Herald: "Christmas cards are always said to be going out of fashion next year but as a matter of fact have no more idea of going than Sir John A. MacDonald or courting...or the Irish question or roast beef."

Now here's an antique but seasonal greeting for you from a 1907 Canadian Christmas card: "each leaf of holly bears the wish that Christmas may bring you good cheer and every little berry red is a prayer for your happy new year."

I couldn't have said it better myself.



Here are some more vintage Christmas cards from a wonderful collection owned by Midland freelance writer Shirley Whittington. We hope you enjoy these gems.

# Christmas past and looks to Christmas present

LIKE practically everything else in the frantic 20th century, Christmas is vastly overdone. A day that was, for our ancestors, a simple observance of the birth of Christ combined with a family get-together of reasonable jollity, has grown to the proportions of a nightmare in which shopping for gifts, exchange of cards, Christmas entertainments, high-powered advertising and a steady and relentless stream of so-called "Christmas" music make up the accumulation of horrors.

In the good old days, the family rose early, and went to church, where the parson gave them a two-hour appetizer. They went home eating in the kitchen, preparing the vast dinner to come, they took a bite of lunch. Then the ladies set off to distribute food parcels to the poor, while the men put their tails to the fire and went after that chill again.

That's your ancestors I'm talking about. Mine were among the people the ladies were taking the food to. I can still see them kicking the pigs under the bed when her ladyship came in, tugging their forelocks, scraping their feet, and saying "f'ank yer, milady, f'ank yer, mum" as she pulled one of the geese that had died of disease, and one of last year's bottles of blackberry brandy, which had turned vinegary, out of her basket.

Today, of course, my ancestors' descen-

## Bill Smiley



dants will eat turkey on Christmas Day until they bear a resemblance to purple pigs, while the descendants of milady, who have managed to hang on to the old home only by taking tourists through at a shilling a shot, will be dining meagrely, in the only room of the big house they can afford to heat, on a nice bit of brisket and some burssells sprouts. And serves them right.

However, that's not what I strated out to say, but I can't remember what it was, anyway. Oh, yes, about the old days and today. Well, despite all the wailing and throwing of hands in the air at the paganism and commercialism surrounding our Christmas today, I wouldn't trade it for the old-fashioned one of a hundred years ago.

And don't forget, I said "surrounding" our Christmas. Sure our kids believe in Santa Claus. Sure our pre-Christmas preparations are getting more and more hectic and more

and more subject to commercialism. But our kids grow out of Santa Claus, without any dire effects. And we get over the pre-Christmas panic and celebrate the day with just as much reverence and just as much family fun as ever our ancestors did.

I'll warrant our youngsters know just as much, and maybe more, about the story of Christmas, and the coming of the Christ child, as their counter-parts of a hundred years ago knew. Mine do, anyway, thanks to their Sunday School teachers.

And I'll bet we're not half as smug and selfish, despite our much-touted materialism, as our Victorian great-grandfathers were, sitting on their fat rumps by the fire on Christmas day, and letting the poor worry about themselves. On this coming Christmas Day, in our own little town, the Band will be out in the cold, playing for the old people and shut-ins. Groups of ladies and men from a

dozen different organizations will be scurrying about with vast baskets of food and treats for the needy.

And the needy are pretty few and far between these days, simply because we have a whole lot more social conscience than our ancestors had. Outside that warm, cosy, jolly Pickwickian Christmas of a hundred years ago lay a world of cold and hunger and degradation. We wouldn't let it exist today.

So don't let the worry-warts spoil your Christmas, with their perpetual complaining that Christmas is being paganized. Nothing can sully Christmas, because Christmas is in your heart, in the simple story on that day, in the shining eyes of a child, in the liveliness of the carols.

Yes, and it is in the Christmas tree, and the gay windows, and the colored lights against the snow and the perspiring Santa Claus at the Christmas concert, and the card from a friend you haven't seen in years.

Just gird up your loins, plunge into your shopping, enjoy the giving of gifts, run yourself away into debt, be happy in the family reunion, go to church on Christmas Day, stay away from the hard stuff, and don't be a pig with the turkey, and you won't go far wrong.