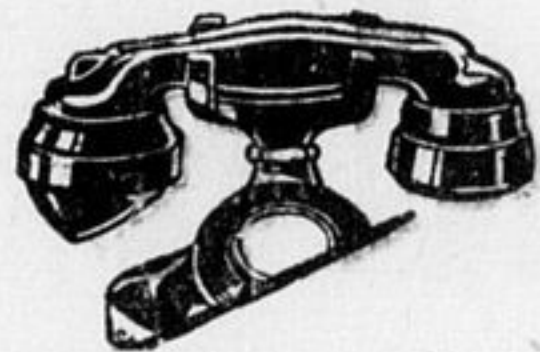




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A Merry Christmas
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Christmas Carols Have Interesting Histories and Origins

(By Sir Dan Godfrey)
Some people are ashamed to go carol singing at Christmas time. They have no need to be, for carols have been written and sung by some of the most famous poets in history, and there are romantic tales behind many of them. I know there are also people—some of them quite religious, too—who are heartily sick of the melodies of Christmas carols and who, when they hear a group of people singing "Good King Wenceslas" or "Christians Awake" outside the front door, simply exclaim "Oh, good gracious! Those hackneyed tunes again! I wish they would get some new tunes for Christmas!"

But believe me, we have no need of new tunes for Christmas, for the romance behind some of our carols should keep them fresh in our memories.

Could you imagine any more rousing tune, or jollier words than those of the carol, "Christmas Awake! Salute the Happy Morn, Whereon the Saviour of Mankind Was Born!"

It is the sort of song which nobody need be ashamed to sing, no matter to what branch of Christianity they belong. And yet... I wonder if you know how this typically Christmas carol came to be written?

"Christmas Day for Dolly"

A certain John Byron, who died at Manchester in 1763, made quite a name for himself with his humorous poetry. He was a Kelsal boy—born in Kelsal just at the end of the seventeenth century, and he had a streak of natural humour and optimism in his veins.

Unfortunately he never managed to make much of a living out of his poetry but he was greatly appreciated by all his friends, and by none better than his own little daughter, Dorothy. On Christmas Eve, 1745, she begged her father to write her a beautiful song for Christmas time. She asked him to write it overnight and persuade Father Christmas to put it in her stocking with her Christmas morning presents.

Although most of Byron's poetry had been humorous, he had written a number of verses of extreme beauty, so he could not have found it very difficult on Christmas Eve to sit down and write the wonderful Christmas song which Dorothy found in her stocking in the morning. He called it "Christmas Day for Dolly," but when because of its strong Christian sentiments, it was adopted as a Christmas carol by the Church, the title was changed to "Christmas Awake!"

The Medieval Style

Some of our Christmas carols are old folk songs which have come to us through so many various sources that it is difficult to trace their history. Many of them are hundreds of years old. You can usually tell carols of this nature by the peculiar medieval style of their melody.

"God Rest You Merry Gentlemen," is one of the old folk songs. This carol has been sung in England for centuries and there are many different versions.

Perhaps the best known is that of which the first verse runs:

God rest you merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay
For Jesus Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we are gone astray.

Probably you didn't think of "Ring Out, Wild Bells" as a carol as it is frequently heard as sacred music at Christmas time.

It is part of Lord Tennyson's longest poem which is really a whole series of short poems in which over a number of years, Tennyson mourned for the loss of Arthur Hallam, who was a very dear personal friend. The long poem, of course, is called "In Memoriam." Each of the separate little poems describes the varying seasons of the year, and the one which we use so much at Christmas time starts off—

"Ring out wild bells to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light,
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out wild bells and let him die."

Tennyson describes a glorious vision of perfection, and it would be very wonderful for the world if this vision were to come true. But it is uncooling to have our minds filled with such thoughts as Tennyson finds in the ringing of the bells. The words are certainly very appropriate for a Christmas carol, but there is a romantic thought behind it all that "Ring Out Wild Bells" was written only because a very dear friend of Tennyson had passed away.

Sir Walter Scott's Carol

Do you know that carol which runs: "Heep on more wood—the wind is chill But let it whistle as it will We'll keep our Christmas merry still."

This is a carol in which the very spirit of the old-fashioned Christmas is reflected. It was written by Sir Walter Scott, and it is a very graphic description of a typical old British Christmas.

The words are really well worth learning. Sir Walter talks about "the fire with well dried logs supplied, went roaring up the chimney wide" and he refers to the "Wassail in good brown bowls" and the general atmosphere of Christmas cheer.

Then he says: "Then came the merry echoes in Of carols roared with blithesome din If unmelodious was the song, It was a hearty note and strong."

Ben Jonson's Hymn

Ben Jonson, who was one of the greatest of the Elizabethan poets and dramatists and was a friend of Shakespeare, wrote a carol which we know now as "A Hymn on the Nativity of My Saviour."

Jonson was a strong old English type of man and not at all the sort of person whom you would think would indulge in carol writing, but there is a fine sense of reverence and humility

in Ben Jonson's "Hymn," and I must give you the first verse of it to bring it to your mind, for you may hear it set to an attractive tune this Christmas. It runs:—

"I sing the birth: Was born to-night
The author both of life and light—
The angels so did sound it,
And like the ravished shepherds said
Who saw the light and were afraid,
Yet searched and true they found it."

This carol, is hundreds of years old, and it is very interesting to think that a friend of Shakespeare wrote it.

"Wenceslas" Only 80 Years Old
But in spite of all these old carols, I expect "Good King Wenceslas" will be the one which we shall hear most of this Christmas.

Everybody knows the quaint old mediaeval tune of this, but it is not generally known that the tune of "Good King Wenceslas" had been previously used for a Spring carol, and was not meant for Christmas at all.

I dare say you have noticed that it is a much more cheerful tune than most of those which are sung even at Christmas time, though Christmas should of course be a time for rejoicing.

Some people will tell you that "Good King Wenceslas" is one of our oldest carols, but they are wrong. The words of it were written just over 30 years ago by a well known English hymnologist, Rev. J. M. Neale. He wrote "Jerusalem the Golden," and so he was a very sympathetic sort of person to set words to such a beautiful tune as that of the Wenceslas carol, which does not lose any of its beauty by the fact that it is sung so often.

A Prince of Bohemia

People think that the "Wenceslas" carol is an old one because the legend of King Wenceslas goes back to early history. The Rev. Neale took one of the most romantic legends of Wenceslas and used it as the theme for his carol.

It may interest you to know that Wenceslas was born in 907, and was the grandson of the first Christian prince of Bohemia. He was also the son of the first Czech saint, and he was murdered by his own brother, who was anxious to wrest the throne from him.

Wenceslas to-day is a national hero of his people and there is a Wenceslas Memorial in the main square of Prague.

There are many other legends and carols about Wenceslas other than that which is sung so much in this country at Christmas time.

There is one which for five hundred years and been the Czech National Anthem.

During the war the Austrians would not allow the Czechs to sing it—so you see that carol singing has not always been a peaceful occupation!

XMAS MEMORIES

I am dreaming to-night in the fire-light's glow,
Of childhood days, long long ago,
For then as the Christmas time grew near,

Great plans were made for Yuletide cheer;
The big fruitcake and the doughnuts brown,
Plum pudding and pies; then the trip to town;

The presents hidden for days before,
Whispers and secrets and mysteries galore,
E'er the break of day on Christmas morn,

Hear the toot, toot, toot of a big tin horn;
Oh! I've got skates, and here's a sleigh
These dishes and doll must be for May;
Look, here's some bells for Dad's new cutter.

Guess this silver knife is for mother,
So the noisy, happy hours slip by,
Then at last we hear the welcome cry,
Dinner's ready! Come, we are late,
And Dad is waiting to pass your plate;
Then we gather round that festive board,

That fairly groans 'neath its heavy load;
The big brown turkey seems bursting with pride
(Perhaps it's the "dressing" heaped inside).

There are dates and nuts and oranges too,
And candy of every sort and hue,
But all too soon the day is done,
For night falls fast at the set of sun,
Then Mother called us around her chair,
And told of a Babe, most wondrous fair,

Who was born in a manger; and how a star
Did guide the shepherds from hills afar,
Till they came and knelt at those tiny feet.

With gifts and offerings of incense sweet;
And the angels in Heaven in chorus sang
Till the joyful notes o'er the whole world hang:

"Oh, troubled hearts, rest and be still,
O'er all the earth peace and goodwill,
For unto you is born a Son,
In the little town of Bethlehem."

Then she told how the Baby lived and grew
To be a Man, so noble and true;
And how at last His life He gave
The weak and sinful of earth to save.

And now to-night, after many years
Of joys and sorrows, and smiles and tears,
A star gleams bright in the eastern sky,
Like a beacon to guide to that Home on High,
Where at last when the journey of life is o'er,
We many dwell in peace forever more.

—O. W. W.

THE SEASON'S GREETINGS



May we at this Yuletide season express our sincere appreciation of the support and co-operation shown us in the past year expressing also best wishes to all for a

MERRY CHRISTMAS and a HAPPY NEW YEAR



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At this time we would thank the public for co-operation and goodwill throughout the year, and for the patience and kindness shown under the war conditions, also wishing one and all

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