

CHRISTMAS I

For a journal even of our intergalactic circulation it is not altogether common to receive a letter from the next world, and so we give it pride of place instead of an Editorial.

Christmas Present

Purgatory
Advent Sunday

2003

Dear Sir,

My sentence being that until the woes for which I am deemed to bear some responsibility begin to be alleviated my own confinement in sulphurous and tormenting fires will continue, I beg leave to trespass on a little of your valuable cyberspace to give my true opinion of Christmas which, as it happens, has not changed since my sojourn in mortal flesh.

My responsibility comes from a most unscrupulous use made of my indisposition by a profiteering humbug now one of my companions in torment. Charles Dickens, unlike myself, never liked Christmas, but he had as good a business sense as I and fewer scruples about turning it to good account. The goods from my warehouse were all of sound English manufacture and sold at a reasonable price. When he came to write my story Mr Dickens was getting more than the penny a line he started with but was not above eking out the lines with padding and sentiments. Nor had he much regard for truth. One might nevertheless have hoped that the common humanity he made so much of would have prevented him from exploiting the evident temporary insanity of one old enough to be his father, and who, unlike his real father, would never have been committed to a debtor's prison.

Mr Dickens rightly depended on his readers' stupidity to make them miss the obvious symptoms of a minor seizure brought on by the shock of witnessing the behaviour of my half-demented nephew—for whose family I provided in my will in the event of his formal lunacy, which later occurred. The visions of Christmas past &c. that Dickens had the effrontery to report were of course the wanderings of a temporarily deranged mind. I ask you, Sir, would a man in his right mind suddenly spout such torrents of second-rate blank verse? In fact my illness turned out in the then state of the medical art to be so dangerous that within a few weeks of my having regained my normal mental composure it carried me off to this horrid place, before I had occasion to correct those facile outpourings from Grub Street.

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Mr Dickens was of course hostile to most of the religious manifestations of our time and, like his friend the lapsed Scotch puritan Mr Carlyle, had no time at all for the Oxford Movement. They have both of them learned that in several respects they were mistaken, for instance as to the existence of Purgatory, in which they had the Protestant foolhardiness not to believe. They now know better, by experience. One of Dickens's penances is to atone for his mortal over-indulgences by supping daily on gruel, in company with Hamlet's Father and myself. But Dickens did not belong to the more austere wing of Protestantism that saw Christmas as a Papish manifestation to be put down. He wanted—or said he did—the festivities and the charitable donations, and for their sake he made gestures of toleration towards the religious occasion of these goose-cookings. It is reported that in your strange universities persons of either sex receive stipends for the principal duty of supplying notes to the scribblings of poor Dickens, as if he were a Church Father, so I leave it to them, as a Christmas puzzle, to discover (one of the many facts about me which Dickens simply suppressed) in which of the City churches, in the vanguard of Ritualism, I was for some years the Vicar's Warden. In that office I joined with the young incumbent in making strenuous efforts to restore to the Church of England her rightful Catholic heritage. In point of fact the offence I gave to Dickens was, in the first instance, my presenting him with a copy of Tract Ninety, to which he had the impoliteness to refer as *hocus pocus*. I did not much care for the new robes and the incense, which seemed to me a minor matter and not worth the expense, but I held firmly to the seasons of the Christian year, including the Christmas season and the immediately preceding Advent. Mr Dickens, I believe, was unaware of any such season.

What I wanted then and now was the restoration of Christmas.

I am now nevertheless held responsible, because of the misrepresentations of the egregious Dickens, for what Christmas has become for you, that is to say, a serious affliction of the kind I believe you call *self-inflicted torment*; though the reader of even Dickens's most reckless and inaccurate report will see that Christmas already for my age had strong elements of the compulsory artificial jollity which always aroused my contempt and which seems to be all that you have retained of the festival. When Dickens reports the Christmas-day festivities at my nephew's house he tries to make them sound full of natural good cheer, but in fact has enough truthfulness to represent them as forced, to the degree of abnormality to which I have already alluded. My nephew spent much of the day "holding his sides, rolling his head, and twisting his face into the most extravagant contortions." His wife, as often happens, was sympathetically affected by this mania, and "laughed as heartily as he. And their assembled friends being not a bit behindhand, roared out lustily" (a line for which Dickens got more than a penny)

"Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Inane laughter can be a serious symptom, but it seems that nobody thought to call an apothecary or to check that there had been no escape of the newfangled gas from the dentist next door.

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The Christmas you keep in what is to me the next millennium is one of the features of your life on which I look with uncomprehending stupefaction. It is really, from the point of view of eternity, impossible to understand.

Your Christmas both proves and disproves the talk about the “multicultural society” which for the most part is equally incomprehensible. Special postage stamps are issued, special editions of the *TV Times* and *Radio Times*, the country shuts down for a week and the taverns make their money. Sixty per cent. of annual sales of what I would call general goods, and you consumer durables, I read in my favourite *Financial Times*, are concentrated on the eight weeks around Christmas. During the other forty-four weeks of the year therefore the shops are going on average at only about one-eighth of their Christmas pace, and I point out to you more complex economists the simple fact (I made my money by simple facts) that it would be more economical for them to open just for the Christmas season and to be shut the rest of the year. Your Christmas is for everybody including Muslims, Jews, secularists and even Christians, and is universally public, whatever you make of it in private.

It is even harder to grasp, but not mistakable, that your modern secular Christmas is certainly still religious. It is a debauch of obligation. You have a strong and universal feeling of *ought* in your ritual exchange of cards and presents. No stigma attaches for you to failure in Christian observance, but failure in the observance of this secular religion is reprobated. Failure to produce the requisite number of cards and presents results in the person concerned being branded with my name (that is, the reputation Dickens gave me as I was before my mental collapse). Would any family spend Christmas day itself in a round of eating and drinking too much and quarrelling if it were not taken to be what the late German called a categorical imperative? What other than religious obligation could account for the continuance of so dreary a set of customs? No formal creeds are used, but perhaps the deity sometimes called Santa and sometimes Father Christmas is a new avatar of Saturn, whose feast of the Saturnalia in that enlightened earlier imperial city of Rome much resembled your Christmas.

Christmas is not, of course, alone in having its secular shadow, though perhaps it is still the only festival where the shadow has come so close to replacing the substance. At Easter you have bunnies, and at Whitsuntide bonnets, but they are not as compulsory as Christmas cards. Yet even the more austere Christian seasons, I observe, have for you comparable secular shadows. You even have a secular Lent. People go on diets for Lent with no element of religious observance. The one to which I am constrained to draw your attention is Advent, also known as St Martin’s Lent.

Your secular Advent has Advent Calendars—I was shown one on sale in a Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge bookshop—on every day of which the child is to open a flap disclosing a sweet, thus standing self-denial on its head. The point is the anticipation of the secular Christmas Day, when there is a

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climactic picture of stocking-opening but no mention of the incarnation of Jesus. A few years ago there was a Barbie Advent Calendar. That season was the Advent of Barbie. (Barbie, I am told, is the valuable brand name of a teenage doll available in various states of dress and undress. My warehousing business, of course, only dealt in useful goods.) The Advent Calendars that offer a sweet a day are much on a par with something I am glad I have not yet seen, chocolate crosses on Good Friday.

At all events, Advent is for you increasingly submerged as “the Christmas season” extends forward, casting its baleful shadow ahead of it. At the beginning of October the Christmas crackers appear on the shelves of Tesco. At Wyevale, a garden-centre chain that has very little space for anything as useful as spades, Christmas started this year on Friday 10 October—well before, that is, even All Hallows Day—with “the launch of our biggest, best and most exciting Christmas display ever.” For £13.95 per person (enough for four days’ food on my budget) you were invited on that fast-day to have a three-course Christmas meal with *free fruit punch, mince pies and live Christmas entertainment*. This is not even humbug, because nothing even of vague goodwill is mentioned. It is all pure grisly spreading of the obligatory secular Christmas. I forbear to show you what the “entertainment” was like.

Advent begins the Christian year and, as you are still told by your contemporary churches, prepares us for the celebration of the Incarnation by a season of prayer and fasting. Fasting is of course age-old tradition, and not only medieval and not only confined to the three-quarters of the Christian total who are Roman or Eastern Orthodox. During our first Protestant age, even, fasting was enforced in English law. My friend Shakespeare tells me he was once fined for purchasing meat on a Friday. In Christian observance, Advent is to Christmas rather as Lent is to Easter.

I rarely hear from your religious leaders anything of the other and terrifying element that goes to the keeping of Advent: the looking forward to the Second Coming. English-speaking churches the world over start the Christian year with Charles Wesley’s great hymn, introduced into the Established Church since my day, “Lo he comes with clouds descending”, but no attention is paid to what it means, nor is there any enhanced attention to life as it is seen in the perspective of the Last Judgement, which could not but make you watch and pray. The Last Judgement is not a future event but the end of time, and unlike Christmas it needs no particular date of celebration, but Advent is the appropriate season for special emphasis. The other year I did receive a report of a well-meaning school chaplain’s mentioning the eschatological nature of Advent, but he missed the point by putting the Second Coming “even further in the future” than Christmas. One shall be taken and the other left, and ye know not the day nor the hour.

The two elements, expectation of the season of the Incarnation, and watching and praying because He comes like a thief in the night, are not easily held together. The Prayer Book still in use in many of your parishes is of course objectionably Protestant, but it is sound on

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the seasons, and I am not aware of any better way of holding together these two aspects than the daily use throughout Advent, as prescribed by that Book, of the collect for the First Sunday in Advent, which is, of course, the first collect in the book:

QQA Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. *Amen.*

TTIt is always difficult for Christians to keep the faith in any world, though yours has particular difficulties now that you have something called, if I have heard the strange phrase rightly, the Big Bang hypothesis, which is supposed to have explained the beginning and the end. (Down here it is held in much derision as we await the next scientific revolution.) How can you believe in the Son of Man coming with his angels if you think you know that the universe is due to go on expanding for a very long time? But the Last Judgement is not in time. Be not deceived, God is not mocked. You have to watch and pray. But it is harder to keep Advent when the world tells you that it is already Christmas.

Advent is in fact increasingly ignored by your Churches. Carol services are one of the two innovations since my mortal pilgrimage that seem to have been adopted by popular demand, the other being harvest festivals. Carol services are invariably held before Christmas, in Advent. No churches have them at their proper time, during the twelve days of Christmas. Schools, I am told, have to have their carol services before the end of term, which is usually well out of the octave of Christmas. So a cathedral normally issues a timetable called **Christmas Services and Events** which begins with an Advent Carol Service but does not mention Advent elsewhere at all and which ends on 28 December, the fourth day of Christmas. Carol services start on 3 December with "Schools Sign-along [*sic*] Carol Service" and include, all in Advent, as well as four school carol services, a Fire Brigade Carol Service (last year timed conveniently for a day when they planned to have struck work), a Countryside Alliance Carol Service and Carols for Shoppers. But even Christmas Eve, though some Christians make their Christmas communion on Christmas Eve, is still a fast day. In a fine mediæval poem the *editio princeps* of which, edited by Sir Frederick Madden, I borrowed from poor Marley, when Sir Gawain arrives on Christmas Eve at the northern castle of the Green Knight, they feed him (too sumptuously) only on fish, explaining that things will improve on the morrow.

As to the secular Christmas: the special lamps are lit by the undistinguished people you oddly call celebrities, before Advent; office parties set in during the first week of December or so. Even from the secular point of view you must surely find the spreading of

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the season what you call, I believe, “counter-productive” if the product is good cheer and jollity? Some hostelrys try to fill up the dismal slack days elsewhere in Winter with *simulated* Christmas: dinner, crackers, Christmas tree: though not, I suppose, Holy Communion. As if one or your Christmases in the year isn’t enough! or too much! And can they supply goodwill and merriment to order? When I was a boy (Mr Dickens glosses over the happy part of my childhood after I returned to a home where festivity had its due place in the Christmas season) I knew a family who never waited for Christmas day for their presents. This seemed odd to everybody, and we all thought it must make Christmas an anticlimax.

The beginnings of your forward-spreading secular Christmas are what aroused my anger. There was nothing unusual in my sending the Cratchit family a goose on Christmas Day. But I had to watch that my Clerk was not daily inebriated, giving the excuse of the season, on the days before Christmas. I was annoyed at any hint that Christmas started immediately after Michaelmas.

The other, older way round, with everything starting on Christmas Eve, carol-singing, bringing in the mistletoe and holly, putting up the decorations, decorating the tree, then Christmas Day as the *beginning*, is simply a better way to have a festive season.

The change came in that terrible twentieth century, and quite late in it, too. My nephew’s great-grandchildren were taken to the Pantomime, but never before Christmas, because there was no Pantomime till the Feast of Stephen, as the good Mason Neale calls it, the secular Boxing Day. The idea of Christmas parties of any sort before Christmas was as unheard of as Christmas communion before Christmas Day. Our superstition was that for every mince pie given by a different family in the Christmas season we were to have a happy month, but a mince pie eaten before Christmas brought bad luck. My companions in this grim but not unhopeful place, Thomas Hardy and Laurie Lee, both recorded truthfully carol-singing as the cheerful practice only of Christmas Eve. Where carol-singing survives in the twenty-first century it takes place more than a week before Christmas. Nearer the day people are too busy, we hear, preparing for the great secular event not by watching and praying but by cooking and putting up decorations. Christmas shopping did of course go on, in my time (though Dickens reports for once rightly that I did my own on Christmas day), parcel-making, card-sending; puddings were made beginning on Stir-up Sunday, the Sunday Next Before Advent, and in my own family when I was young a turkey was sent to us by a great aunt, by parcel post. But that could only have been just in time for Christmas because my family was not opulent enough to possess an ice-house.

Is there a worse day in your Kalendar than the day after Boxing Day, when even your indefinitely extended Christmas is over and there is nothing for you but to face the “winter but no Christmas” (as the new Christmas hymn puts it, but with application to the heathen nations) of your world? The Innocents’ Day, St John’s Day—these should be in the middle of the Christmas season, but how many of you have so much as heard of them? By the time of the concluding

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feast of the Epiphany, the showing forth of the Lord to the Gentiles, your shops have already completed their orders for the next secularity, the season of the Easter Bunny.

I behold you dwellers upon earth going off again, in the depressing month of November, into your present-mania, drink and ill-will, doing your duty to your peculiar economy by giving and receiving expensive presents that nobody wants. Once the connection with Christmas, with the mystery of the incarnation, is finally lost, the dreariness of the secular festive season will not be disguisable even from children. You seem to be near a borderline. I never had children myself and know little about them, but I am told that there is still something to wonder at in Christmas for some children who have no understanding of the Christian festival. The time must be at hand when even that goes and the children will be as glad as anyone when Christmas is over. How many adults actually enjoy your Christmas?

Pray forgive me for any share of responsibility for this truly horrid situation I may, thanks to the jester Dickens, be judged to bear. As for poor Dickens, his goose is well and truly cooked and, having done too much of it on earth, he is forbidden to communicate with mortals. The moral that he put in my mouth, "I will honour Christmas ... and try to keep it all the year" is now his punishment: to live in perpetual Christmas, except for his daily share of my gruel, with goose and plum pudding twice a day, until you restore Christmas to its proper celebration. As grace he is compelled to declaim some of his own lines of blank verse, including:

"Ha, ha!" laughed Scrooge's nephew. "Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh is now on the other side of the face.

I wish all your readers a truly miserable Christmas and a more hopeful New Year. And to all a good night.

I have, Sir, the honour to be,
your most ob^t serv^t
Ebenezer Scrooge

post scriptum I am confident that your readers will need no explanation of the significance of my baptismal name, which escaped Mr Dickens.