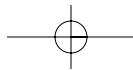
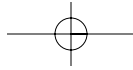
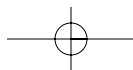


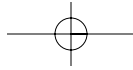
# CHRISTMAS PAST





*Map of Christmas Land  
Vintage postcard  
ca. 1920*





# CHRISTMAS PAST

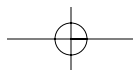
By Barbara Hallman Kissinger

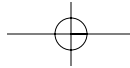


*Vintage postcard  
Printed in Germany  
ca. 1912*



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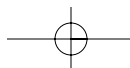
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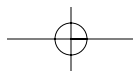
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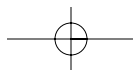


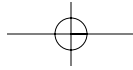
To my grandchildren and great grandchildren: Troy, Sunshine, Jessica, Ben,  
Kyle, Ariel, Wesley, Nathan, Kyree, Kelli, Jackson, Koen, and Gracie

Many thanks to LaVon Worley and his class at SCC

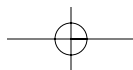


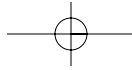
*Vintage postcard marked PFB  
Printed in Germany, postally used 1909*





German Christmas  
season figures  
Vintage postcard  
Postally used 1920



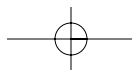


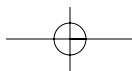
## CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Heralding Angels	15
Messengers from Heaven	16
The Christmas Crib	18
The Christmas Star	21
St. Lucia's Day	24
The Christmas Candle	25
Christmas Bells A-Ringing	27
Bringing in the Yule Log	30
The Gathering of the Greens	35
O' Tannenbaum	40
Wassailing	45
Caroling, Caroling, Caroling	47
Vessels of the Gift Giver's Gifts	51
Pretty Parcels of Surprise	57
Christmas Trade Cards	63
Christmas Greetings	67
The Gift Givers of Europe	71
Santa in America	101
Resources and Further Reading Guide	126

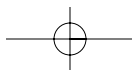


*Vintage postcard  
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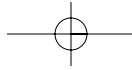




*The Norseman's Christmas from The Pictorial World,  
December 25, 1875*







## INTRODUCTION

Christmas, the most celebrated holiday in the Christian world, is steeped in customs, traditions, and symbols. You might wonder where the world's Christmas customs originated. Many of the traditions that are such a treasured part of this season are rooted in pagan celebrations. In the first centuries, the Christian church, in order to find acceptance by the general population, adopted some of these ancient customs so that the beliefs and practices of Christianity would be more acceptable to the followers of the old religions.

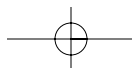
Of the many pagan customs that eventually became the foundation of the Christmas season, many were adapted by the Christians from Norse mythology. The celebration of the Yule month, or Thor's month, began on the longest night of the year, referred to by the name of Mother Night. (Some historians think that Mother Christmas, the female counterpart of Father Christmas, descended from the name of this night.) The festival was called Yule, meaning wheel, because the sun was supposed to resemble a wheel rapidly revolving across the sky. The month of Yule was a time of feasting and rejoicing, according to the book *Myths of Northern Lands*, for it heralded the return of the sun. When Christians began to convert the northern peoples of Europe, missionaries, perceiving the extreme popularity of this time of feasting and celebration, thought it best to encourage the feast, but they claimed the drinking as a celebration to the health of the Lord and his twelve apostles. A celebration similar to Thor's feast has continued throughout the centuries.

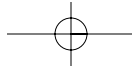
Aspects of this Norse festival became so integrated with the Christian celebration that today,

the word Yule is equated with the Christmas season. The Norse god Thor and his father Odin, or



Bringing in the Boar's Head  
from *The Illustrated London News*,  
December 23, 1871





## 10 CHRISTMAS PAST



*The Gathering of the Mistletoe from The Illustrated London News, July 13, 1895*

Woden (his Anglo-Saxon name), who were celebrated during this month, are the source of many Christmas traditions. Christmas revelers in medieval England, following a tradition rooted in the celebration of Thor's feast at Yule time, brought boar's heads to large Christmas feasts in the castles. In other parts of Europe, Christmas lore arose around personal characteristics of the Norse gods. Thor was known to travel through the skies in a cart or wagon pulled by two goats, and the European gift givers had been known, in centuries past, to sometimes travel on or with a goat, a custom probably originating with Thor. Odin traveled on his eight-legged horse Sleipner through the skies of the pagan world. This Norse influence can be seen in the Netherlands, where St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, traveled on a white horse, delivering gifts to good children on the eve of his feast day, December 6.

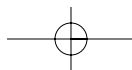
Norse custom also provided the origins of decorating with evergreens, a symbol of eternal life. This practice was common among other cultures as well. The Druids, Celtic priests, also used evergreens, ivy, and mistletoe in their winter solstice

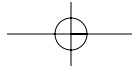
celebrations during the month we call December. The Druids harvested mistletoe by cutting it down with a golden sickle in a grand ceremony.

Another culture that contributed to the modern celebration of Christmas was that of the Romans. Saturnalia, the most celebrated festival of the Roman Empire, began December 17 and lasted for a week. Not only did celebrants use greenery in the festival's decoration, but at this time of year they participated in some of the earliest gift giving in history.

Gift giving also occurred in other areas of the continent. Women of Norse and Germanic mythology were gift givers in some legends of Europe. Prechta, a legendary gift giver in the areas around Germany, was even known to accompany the Christ child on Christmas Eve to help deliver presents. However, this aspect of her legend did not develop until after the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

With the birth of Christ and the development of the Christian religion, the dominance of the old religions began to wane. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a Christmas celebration





was held as early as 336 A.D. in the Eastern Roman Empire.

After the decline of the popularity of Roman and Greek gods, St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, was adopted during the fourth century by the Roman Catholics. He replaced Neptune and Poseidon as an angel of the sea. Nicholas rose to sainthood by performing at least twenty-one miracles of the sea and mankind. Stories of St. Nicholas's miracles were spread by the sailors of the Mediterranean as they worked on boats that traveled the rivers of Europe.

In past centuries St. Nicholas was the third most revered Christian figure after Jesus and the Virgin Mary. St. Nicholas was even named the patron

saint of Russia. He was the patron saint of many groups, including sailors, pawnbrokers, bakers, merchants, and children. Throughout the centuries, St. Nicholas also became the original Santa Claus to children of Europe. Children across Europe put their shoes out for St. Nicholas to fill with goodies of fruit, nuts, and sweets on the eve of his feast day.

It was Christianity that brought most of the gift givers to Europe. Some say the first Englishman who converted to Christianity was King Bran, around 60 A.D. King Bran brought his beliefs back to England after being taken hostage by the Romans, who then sent him to Rome where he learned of the new religion. But Christianity didn't really spread throughout England until the sixth century, with the help of the king of Kent. St. Patrick brought the religion to Ireland in the fifth century.

France also embraced Christianity in the fifth century, during the reign of Clovis, the King of the Franks. St. Boniface brought it to Germany in the eighth century. The peoples of what are now Bulgaria, the former Czechoslovakia, and the former Yugoslavia were converted to Christianity by two brothers, Cyril and Methodius of Greece. Vladimir I of Russia brought Christianity and the legend of St. Nicholas to his country in the latter part of the tenth century.

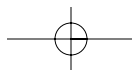
During the early Middle Ages, Epiphany (January 6), or Twelfth Night, as it was known in some places in Europe, was more celebrated than Christmas itself. Great feasts were held with wild celebrations. Gifts were given as the three Magi did when they found the baby Jesus.

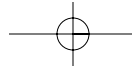
Martin Luther, during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, broke away from Catholic dogma and established the Protestant side of the Christian religion. The Christ child became the gift giver in many Protestant parts of Europe; however, he was sometimes accompanied by traditional regional helpers.

You will learn more about the European gift givers later in this book. This book also has a section on the rise of Santa Claus in America and includes



*Prechta, or Holda, and the Christ child  
Vintage postcard, signed "Mailick"  
Printed in Germany, postally used 1900*

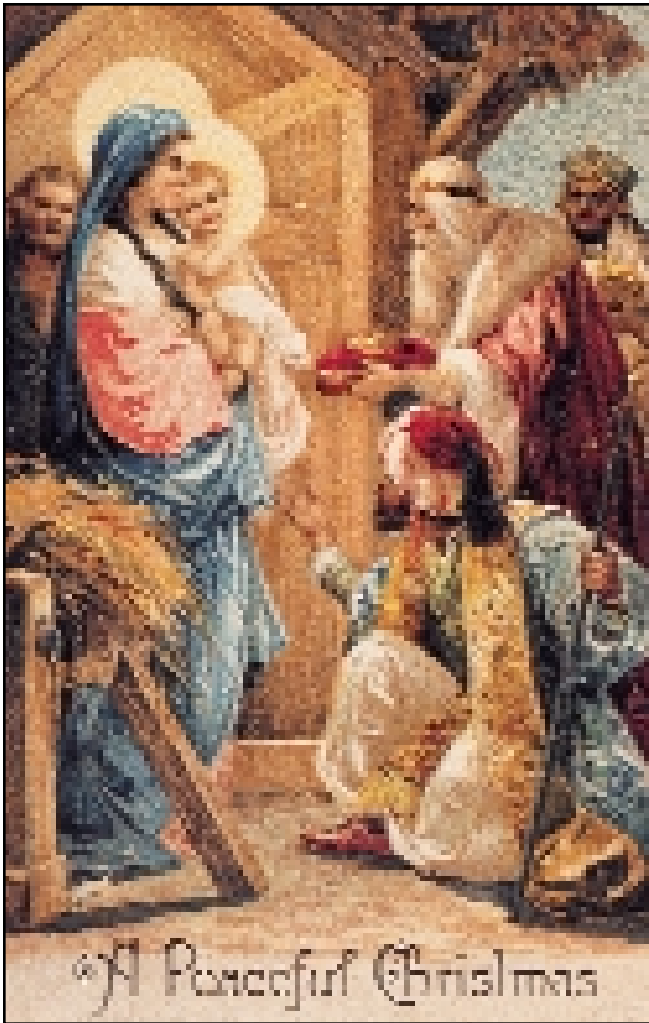




## 12 CHRISTMAS PAST

some history of the symbols of Christmas. For further reading on the historical development of Christmas and its traditions, refer to the Further Reading Guide at the end of this book.

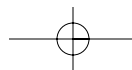
This preamble hopes to lead you into discovering the history as well as the beautiful and historical images throughout *Christmas Past*. The imagery is from the author's collection of "Golden Age" (1898-1918) Christmas postcards and old Christmas cards, trade cards, and book and newspaper illustrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

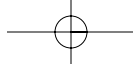


Vintage postcard marked PFB Serie 11060  
Printed in Germany, postally used 1910



St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, 1660 Engraving  
Original painting by Veronese





# CHRISTMAS PAST

