Who is Father Christmas? An historical investigation of Santa Claus

His first incarnation was as Nicholas, born in AD 270, who became Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (today part of Turkey). Imprisoned by the pagan Roman emperor Diocletian, he was freed by Constantine the Great and continued his saintly work. He died in AD 343, on 6 December – now St Nicholas's bones were stolen from Myra by Italian merchants and moved to Bari in 1087, and his reputation soon spread throughout Europe. The story of St Nicholas's miracles and his generosity to children spread throughout medieval Europe, and in the Netherlands he became known as Sinterklaas. The Dutch believed that, like the Norse Odin, he travelled by flying horse, but also that his assistants helped him choose the good children who deserved to be rewarded with pressies on the evening before 6 December, his holy feast day. However, in the early 16th century, Martin Luther – the German founder of Protestantism – considered Sinterklaas too similar to pagan Odin. Instead he decreed that it was the Christkind (an angelic Christ child) who brought gifts – though he visited on 25 December, not the 6th. (Adapted from https://www.history-how-old-reindeer-coca-cola-sinterklaas-krisk-linglet)

Examine the pictures and text below and match the historical images to the written descriptions:

7. Christmas is cancelled

This illustration depicts the attempt to ban Christmas under the mid-17th century Commonwealth, which held that there was no Biblical mention of the date of Christ's birth and that the festival gave rise to feasting, drinking and bawdy behaviour. "Old Christmas" is told to keep out by a Cromwellian soldier. The personification of Christmas was known as Old, Sir or Captain Christmas.



1. In need of a good meal This French Père Noël on a 1920s postcard wears a long habit and a hood but is a more ascetic and saintly figure, far from the corpulent

& ruddy-cheeked English or

US version.

5. Wheezy bringer of gifts

If Clement Moore described Santa Claus in words, it was his fellow American, the illustrator Thomas Nast, who fixed the appearance of this spirit of Christmas until well into the 20th century. His drawings for Harper's Weekly which he began in 1863, show Santa as much like Moore's "jolly old elf" though in his later work he settled on a portrayal closer to that which has now become traditional: a large jovial white-bearded figure, dressed in a red suit & matching cap.



GSir, Ibring



These early Victorian images are taken from the same magazine, Illustrated London News, in 1847 and 1848. Both depict Old Christmas, the pre-modern spirit of Christmas. One is a jovial, almost Dionysian, figure, a Lord of Misrule dispensing alcoholic good cheer. The other is lean and gaunt and rather akin to Old Father Time though he, nevertheless, brings warmth and refreshment.



By the 19th century, Father Christmas, as he was called in the UK, had become a central figure in Christmas festivities, even depicted delivering presents to British troops serving in Afghanistan. This illustration of a rather war-like Christmas spirit is taken from the Graphic (27 Dec 1869) and is part of an illustration of the way that British troops – sent, not for the first or last time, to a rather inhospitable Afghanistan – celebrated Christmas.



2. Did Coca-Cola make Santa red?

The definitive image of Santa Claus was created from the 1930s to the 1960s by Haddon H Sundblom in his many adverts for Coca Cola. He exudes warmth and kindliness, has a luxuriant white beard and wears a long red jacket trimmed with white fur and fastened with an enormous belt and long leather boots. He is secular and somewhat sanitised like the modern Christmas itself; there's still an echo of the Lord of Misrule in his "Ho ho ho" but the pipe has gone and instead of holding a flowing bowl he drinks Coca Cola.



6. US Santas not welcome

D

The Anglo-American Santa is not always welcomed in European countries by those who cherish their own customs and versions of seasonal visitors. The Dutch Saint Nicholas is not popular with traditionalists in the Netherlands. The municipal authorities of Assen were not tolerant of one Santa who went there in 1994. As reported in the Sunday Times on 4 December, the police ran him out of town.



4. These boots are killing me

Although the modern Christmas is an Anglo-American creation, the British Father Christmas dresses differently to the American Santa. He wears a long red habit trimmed with white fur and a hood rather than the red suit and cap favoured in America. Increasingly the British Father Christmas was replaced by the American Santa Claus. In this illustration of a Second World War Father Christmas he also carries a tin hat (Picture Post 23 December 1939). Increasingly the British Father Christmas seems to be being replaced by the American Santa Claus.

Image	Α	В	С	D	E	F	G	Н
Source Text								
Place the sources in	Oldest:							Most Recent:
chronological order								

"YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS"

Eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York's *Sun*, and the quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial Sept. 21, 1897. The work of veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages in books, movies, and other editorials, and on posters and stamps.

DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.

Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.

Papa says, 'If you see it in THE <u>SUN</u> it's so.' Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?

VIRGINIA O'HANLON. 115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET.

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood

Section A Question:

How does Francis Church 'debunk' the scepticism of the modern world?

Section B Question:

Imagine you have been asked to write a response to Virginia's question. How would you do that in a way that is relevant to a child of the 21st Century, rather than a child of the 19th Century?

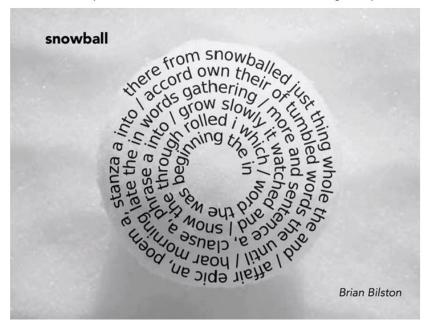
Needles - By Brian Bilston

I
wrote
a poem
in the shape
of a Christmas
tree but then forgot
to water it and only a few
days
later
there
words
were

all

over

Concrete poetry. Verse that emphasizes non-linguistic elements in its meaning, such as a typeface that creates a visual image of the topic, or one in which the combination of the written word and the precise layout of those words complement each other and where both add to the meaning of the poem.



The year Christmas was banned in Ireland and Britain



Source: RTÉ Brainstorm. https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1118/1178881-christmas-banned-cancelled-ireland-britain-1647/8 Published: 8th Dec 2022. By Martyn Bennett - Professor of Early Modern History Nottingham Trent University

"Fighting against the prohibition of Christmas was a political act". Image: David Teniers II's Twelfth-night (The King Drinks)

Analysis: Christmas was cancelled in 1647, but people fed up with restrictions and financial difficulties ignored the rules.

Back in 1647, Christmas was banned in the kingdoms of England (which at the time included Wales), Scotland and Ireland and it didn't work out very well. Following a total ban on everything festive, from decorations to gatherings, rebellions broke out across the country. While some activity took the form of hanging holly in defiance, other action was far more radical and went on to have historical consequences.

In 1647, parliament had won the civil war in England, Scotland and Ireland and King Charles was held in captivity at Hampton Court. The Church of England had been abolished and replaced by a Presbyterian system.

The Protestant Reformation had restructured churches across these islands, and holy days, Christmas included, were abolished. The usual festivities during the 12 days of Christmas (December 25 to January 5) were deemed unacceptable. Shops had to stay open throughout Christmastide, including Christmas Day. Displays of Christmas decorations – holly, ivy and other evergreens – were banned. Other traditions, such as feasting and the celebratory consumption of alcohol, consumed in large quantities then as now, were likewise restricted.

Christmas Day, however, didn't pass quietly. People across England, Scotland and Ireland flouted the rules. In Norwich, the mayor had already been presented with a petition calling for a celebration of a traditional Christmas. He could not allow this publicly, but ignored illegal celebrations across the city.

In Canterbury, the usual Christmas football game was played and festive holly bushes were stood outside house doors. Over the 12 days of Christmas, the partying spread across all of Kent and armed force had to be used to break up the fun.

Christmas Day was celebrated in the very heart of Westminster and the churchwardens of St Margaret's church (which is part of Westminster Abbey) were arrested for failing to stop the party. The London streets were decked with holly and ivy and the shops were closed. The mayor of London was verbally assaulted as he tried to rip down the Christmas decorations with the help of the city's own battle-hardened veteran regiments.

Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk also celebrated Christmas rowdily. Young men armed with spiked clubs patrolled the streets persuading the shopkeepers to stay shut.

Taking up arms and breaking the rules weren't just about experiencing the fun of the season. Fighting against the prohibition of Christmas was a political act. Things had changed and the Christmas rebellion was as much a protest against the "new normal" as it was against the banning of fun. People were fed up with a range of restrictions and financial difficulties that came with the Presbyterian system and the fallout of the civil war.

The worst Christmas hangover

The aftermath of the Norwich Christmas riots was the most dramatic. The mayor was summoned to

London in April 1648 to explain his failure to prohibit the Christmas parties, but a crowd closed the city gates to prevent him from being taken away. Armed forces were again deployed, and in the ensuing riots, the city ammunition magazine exploded, killing at least 40 people.

Norwich was not alone. In Kent, the grand jury decided that the Christmas party-going rioters had no choice but to answer to the law and the county went into exuberant rebellion against parliament. Royalists capitalised on the popular discontent and began organising the rioters.

Successively in 1647 and 1648, parties led to riots, these riots led to rebellions, which, in turn, caused the Second Civil War that summer. King Charles was put on trial after his defeat in the war and was executed. This resulted in a revolution and Britain and Ireland became a republic – all because of Christmas.



Questions:

- What specific steps does the author note to highlight how the observation of Christmas as a holiday was implemented? Refer to 3 specific ideas from the early half of the text.
- 2. What was the response of the 'ordinary people to the banning of Christmas? Refer to 3 specific actions (excluding what happened in Norwich) that people took to defy to banning
- 3. Is the author correct to argue that the Norwich Christmas riots were "the most dramatic" aftermath of the banning?
- **4.** How well do you think that David Teniers II's painting (top left) reflects the spirit of defiance outlined in the article as a whole?
- 5. What critique might you make of the closing line of this article, "-all because of Christmas"? Is this a valid conclusion to draw? Why/Why not?