



## Classic in Short No. 102

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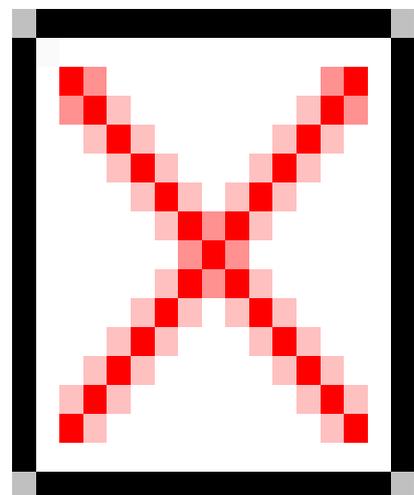
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The Night Before Christmas

A visit from Saint Nicholas in **The Night Before Christmas**



### In colonial times

and for some decades after the Revolution, American publishers had little in the way of original work to offer their juvenile customers. What books there were that supplied a measure of entertainment were plundered from British sources without so much as a by-your-leave, and when a classic tale did emerge ? **Rip van Winkle** no less ? it appeared in the pages of Mr Washington Irvine's adult satire **The Sketchbook of Mr Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.**

### A year or two after 'Rip' however

a genuine contender for local fame did come on the scene. Around Christmas-time in 1822 a notable scholar, Dr Clement Clarke Moore, was journeying back to his home (sleigh bells ringing?) in New York Town when he was visited by the Muse. Within an hour or two of his return he had penned a set of verses with the evocative opening line *'Twas the night before Christmas...* It was to be a festive gift for his nine or so children but would eventually be passed on to who knows how many million more.

### But it didn't happen that quickly.

The legend has it that a friend who was staying with the family took such delight in the children's recitation of the verses that she copied them down and took them back with her to her home-town of Troy in upstate New York. Thus it came about that on 23 December the following year they found their way into the local paper, the **Troy Sentinel**, under the title of **An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas**. It hardly caught on at the time though, turning up occasionally here and there as seasonal copy in various newspapers, almanacs, and anthologies, and only in 1848 ? twenty-six years

after its composition ? did it appear all by itself as a printed book 'with original cuts, designed and engraved by [Theodore] Boyd'.

### **Such a fragmentary and dispersed career,**

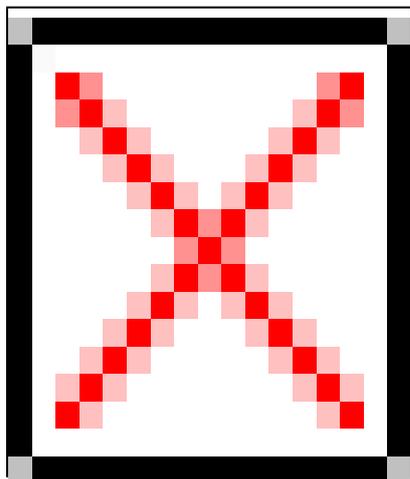
with no author being assigned to the text till 183, has been a gift to suspiciously-minded critics and academics, demanding more evidence for authorship than the hearsay of public acceptance. How do we know that this Moore chap was up to such frivolity? Indeed, in his rather funereal edition of the verses in 2002, that master of dense monochrome drawing, Matt Tavares, cites their author as Anonymous and writes a little preface to tell you why..

### **The years of plenty**

also took their time a-coming, with a turning point arriving perhaps in the 1860s with editions illustrated by such artists of consequence as F.O.C.Darley and Thomas Nast. About seventy would follow in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century and well over eight hundred in the twentieth. Perhaps unsurprisingly though, given the early neglect of that other hoe-down American classic, **The Wizard of Oz**, the British public were slow to warm to St Nicholas. His earliest visit to London seems to have been in an obscure magazine in 1851 (which may have prompted an entry in **Notes and Queries** in 1853) but the first picture books didn't arrive till the 1890s and then only by courtesy of such lithographic publishers as Hildesheimer and Ernest Nister who printed in Bavaria and had American contacts as well. Only half a dozen more appeared before 1945, three of them novelty-books, although another, illustrated by Arthur Rackham, is amongst the best in the field, while a rare Kynoch Press job with a single superb drawing by Philip Hagreen shows the quiet virtues of simplicity in a subject where razzmatazz is normally de rigueur.

### **Much of my information in all this**

comes from a gigantic bibliography published in 2002, which has caused me to wonder if any similar analysis exists devoted to what amounts to a mere 86 lines of jog-trot verse. Furthermore it raises the question not of whether the work was worth doing (its astonishment-quotient justifies that in itself) but of how many of the 1001 items described-- quite a few of them more or less duplicates ? have anything to say about their subject beyond the repetitious razzmatazz which ranges from the frightful to the boring. There is, after all, very little that one interpretive artist can add to the work of another among such tight specifics: people sleeping in a house...one of them woken up by the arrival of eight reindeer and a fat man...fat man comes down chimney... fills stockings and then departs (although how he gets back up the chimney is never revealed ? nor yet how the eight reindeer get, and stay, on the snowy roof ? nor yet what happens when he visits people who don't have Mansion House rooves). Each generation will of course produce versions that are governed by current illustrative fashions and technologies (see today's luxuriant visualizations by Angela Barrett and Roger Ingpen, but the impression gained from most of the examples in Professor Marshall's bibliography is that St Nicholas's gift to the American publishing industry has been the chance to profit from kitsch unlimited.



**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

**The Night Before Christmas** by Clement C. Moore, ill. Angela Barrett Orchard Books, 32pp, 978-1408318645, £6.99 pbk

**The Night Before Christmas** by Clement C. Moore, ill. Robert Ingpen, Palazzo, 48pp, 978-0956494290, £9.99 hbk

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