

## OPINION

# Commercialising Christmas: What's the problem?

By Susan Ryder



I love Christmas. I love everything about it, from shopping to decorating to singing carols. It's my favourite time of the year, as it is for millions around the world.

There's something about putting your tree up. I put mine up earlier than anybody I know, with the exception of my sister who occasionally pips me to the post. I usually aim for the last Sunday in November, complete with my favourite festive music. My youngest sister, a mother of three, somewhat violently swears the two of us to secrecy, lest my nephews and niece pester her to get their tree up ridiculously early, too.

The music is important, because it simply wouldn't be Christmas for us without it. The first is from Bing Crosby & the Andrews Sisters, originally recorded in the 1940s. My late grandfather was a huge Crosby fan and he and Nana had the record. We played it every Christmas until it quite literally warped – and even then we still played it. Several years ago we discovered it on CD, thereby preserving the tradition for the next generation, who I'm delighted to report know all the words of *Mele Kalikimaka*.

The second is a relative newcomer, "Aaron Neville's Soulful Christmas", introduced by one of my brothers-in-law, a musician. Aaron might look like a criminal – and he does – but he has the voice of an angel. I defy the hardest heart to not be moved by his rendition of "O Holy Night" in particular. Occasionally we will permit an interloper on Christmas Day itself, but generally it's just Aaron and Bing. Perfect.

Anyway, back to the tree where my decorations are like old friends who visit once a year. Some were picked up in my travels in the days when the offerings in New Zealand were severely limited, but now, thanks to globalisation, we are spoiled for choice. No matter the size of the tree, though, or the quality and quantity of the decorations, they come alive with Christmas lights. The lights provide the magic.

Retailers love the Christmas season and for good reason. For many, it's the busiest time of the year with December sales representing a healthy portion of their turnover. The big annual spend-up on Christmas gifts is an example of the market at work. Stores are stocked to the brim with goods to sell, employing thousands of staff in the process. Students are gainfully employed as much-needed additional staff to help offset the costs of their next educational year, or to just get through the summer. Manufacturers work hard to complete orders on time and freight companies are flat out with seasonal deliveries. The livelihoods of many depend upon the Christmas season, and yet every year we hear the same cries that Christmas has become commercialised, as if it is a bad thing. But why is that so?

To answer that question, it is worthwhile to explore its origins. Here's a quick look. Christmas is a Christian holiday and like other Christian holidays, it has its origin in paganism.

Saturnalia was a Roman festival in honour of Saturn, the god of agriculture. It began on 15 December and lasted for seven days of feasting and revelry, just prior to the winter solstice that fell around 25 December on the Julian calendar. The solstice included glorification of Mithra, the god of light who several centuries later became known as the god of the sun. The Roman Catholic Church had the habit of absorbing pagan traditions into Christendom, converting the holiday commemorating the birth of the sun god into "Christ Mass", a ceremony honouring the birth of the Son of God.

However, Christmas-time celebrations prior to the 1800s still featured much pagan revelry among the British commoners, at times little more than wild carousals. It is believed that this drunken revelry had much to do with Oliver Cromwell – never much of a partygoer – going so far as to outlaw Christmas in the 17th century, forcing it underground for a time. This ban was extended to many of the early North American colonies where "violators" were fined five shillings. After its reinstatement, Christmas still bore much of its earlier debauchery, but some of our current traditions started to appear. For example, caroling began with groups of individuals visiting houses in the community singing songs in exchange for eggnog. Gift-giving, however, was still extremely limited, and virtually unknown within families.

The traditions of several countries are involved. The Yule log came from Scandinavian mythology, "Yule" being the Anglo-Saxon term for the months of December and January. After most Scandinavians had converted to Christianity, "Yule" became synonymous with Christmas. By the 17th century, the Germans had converted the Christmas tree, originally a sign of fertility, into a Christian symbol of rebirth.

The Dutch called Saint Nicholas, an altruistic bishop from the 4th century, 'Sinterklaas', who was to become 'Santa Claus' in the USA. In 1823 the American professor Clement Clarke Moore wrote the delightful poem entitled *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*, better known as 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.

But perhaps the greatest change occurred after the publication in 1843 of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, providing lessons on charity and the importance of caring for family and friends. As a result, Christmas became a joyful, domestic holiday focusing on children in particular. It was an illustrator with "Harper's" magazine, who first depicted Santa's Workshop at the North Pole in the latter half of the 19th century, while Coca-Cola ran commercials in 1931 showing Santa as the children's gift-giver, as we know him today. Rudolf, the much-loved ninth reindeer appeared in 1939 via an advertising agent on behalf of his retailing client, all of which paved the way for the commercialism seen annually for decades.

The festive colour and sparkle brightened the dark days of the long northern winters, with the seasonal sales providing welcome