



George's Combat, 1745, Library of Congress, 2002699083

The English Diaspora Project

Christmas Newsletter, December 2011

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Welcome



Welcome to the English Diaspora Christmas Newsletter!

It has been an exciting few months since we officially commenced the 'Locating the Hidden Diaspora: The English in North America in Transatlantic Perspective, 1760-1950' project in September 2011.

In October we welcomed Paul Ward, Professor of History at the University of Huddersfield. Paul is an expert in national identities in the UK since the late nineteenth century. His research covers a variety of areas including the inter-relationships between identities of place and those of gender, ethnicity, class and politics. In particular, Paul is well known for his historical study of Britishness. Organised in conjunction with Northumbria's British and Irish Worlds Research Group, Paul gave a fascinating paper on 'Beefeaters and the British World since 1840'. Yeoman Warders (colloquially known as 'beefeaters') are a quintessential part of British history. Their distinctive Tudor costumes and their highly visible role at the historic Tower of London have made them iconic symbols of Britishness. In his paper Paul explored whether the befeater was a more enduring and imperial (and international) symbol of British identity than, say, John Bull. As more foreign tourists visited the Tower during the nineteenth century, the 'red and gilt' befeater was increasingly found in literature, music hall, opera and art. We are

pleased to say that Paul has come on board as part of the wider English Diaspora project team as Associate Researcher, joining Dr Sylvia Ellis (Northumbria) and Prof William Van Vugt (Calvin College).

Team members have been actively pursuing their different research themes. Don MacRaid and Tanja Buelmann have finished an article entitled 'Globalising St George: English Associations in the Anglo-World to the 1930s'. The article will be published in the *Journal of Global History* in early 2012, and traces the evolution of English associational culture in global context.

Don MacRaid, David Gleeson and Tanja Buelmann have also finished editing a collection of essays entitled *Locating the English Diaspora, 1500-2010*. With contributions from the UK, Europe North America and Australasia, the collection examines themes as wide-ranging as Yorkshire societies in New Zealand and St George's societies in Montreal, to Anglo-Saxonism in the Atlantic World and the English Diaspora of the sixteenth century. The book will be published by Liverpool University Press in the spring of 2012.

We hope you will enjoy reading our Christmas Newsletter and look forward to seeing you soon at one of our events, or meet you virtually on one of our different online platforms. Merry Christmas!

The English Diaspora Project Team

The English Christmas



By A.W. (Bill) Purdue

The modern English Christmas owes much to the repackaging of Christmas by the Victorians, who centred the festival on the family and on the indulgence of children, and, indeed, much of our idea of a 'traditional Christmas', with Christmas cards, a Father Christmas bringing presents to children, and, that importation from German traditions, the Christmas tree, date from the nineteenth century. It is to a family Christmas, the humble celebrations of the Cratchit family, that Scrooge, having been converted to benevolence, brings good cheer. But behind this home and family concept of Christmas lie older Christmases, which exert an enduring influence, for the English Christmas is multi-layered.

The medieval Christmas in England represented a synthesis between Christianity and pagan festivals, in which the birth of Christ mingled with residual pagan beliefs in the need to eat, drink and be merry at the darkest and most barren time of the year, with greenery brought indoors and great fires burning in the hope of fertility to come. This Christmas was a gregarious and largely adult affair, held amidst the laden tables of baronial halls, and was imbued with the concept of a time of license and the suspension of the normal rules of society, with the festivities being presided over, not by the usual figures of authority, but by boy-bishops, jesters and, what were known as 'Lords of Misrule', whose name epitomises the anarchic nature of the celebrations, while mummers waited at the gate. Some dignitaries of the Church accepted this Christmas as a necessary release of energy but others condemned its emphasis upon merriment as encouraging pagan and lustful appetites.

The puritans of the Commonwealth attempted to abolish Christmas on the grounds that there was no biblical evidence for the date of the birth of Christ and that the festivities encouraged immorality, but Christmas was popular and was re-established with the monarchy. The Christmas which survived is the one of which an idealised version continues to be printed on many Christmas cards: laden coaches, making their way down snow-covered lanes or stopping at inns with jovial landlords, on their way to rural manor houses, where paternal squires entertain friends and tenants to the twelve days of Christmas, while wives and daughters administer to the needs of the poor and sick. It was this 'Old Christmas', perhaps in its last years in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, that so attracted the American writer, Washington Irving, and is described so fondly in Charles Dickens' depiction of Christmas at Dingley Dell in *Pickwick Papers*. It is ironic, that, if today we feel nostalgia for the Christmas that the Victorians did so much to create, a major strand in the making of the Victorian Christmas was the nostalgia that Dickens and other nineteenth century writers felt for the previous English Christmas. The gap between older versions of a more gregarious and more adult-orientated Christmas and the

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more sentimental family Christmas with its emphasis upon home and children is bridged in Dickens's works, for, if the influential *A Christmas Carol* seems overall to contain a very different attitude to Christmas to that of *Pickwick Papers*, it retains a sorrow at the passing of the merrier Christmas past as portrayed by the description of 'Mr Fessiwig's Ball'.

The emergent Victorian Christmas was, no doubt, more suitable for an urban and commercial society and one which valued domesticity but the older spirits of Christmas kept peeping out with kisses under the mistletoe and the sauciness of pantomimes. Vestiges of the 'Lord of Misrule' and the 'world turned upside down', linger today in the office party and the custom of officers waiting on other ranks on Christmas Day. That central figure of the modern Christmas, Father Christmas, is an amalgam of many traditions and he owes much to the poem, *A Visit from St Nicholas*, by the American writer Clement Moore, but the merriment, jollity and good cheer of the plump, rubicund figure with his 'Ho, Ho, Ho!' point to older English Christmas spirits and to Lords of Misrule.



Christmas lights, the candles or electric lights upon trees, the carefully arranged illuminated decorations in high streets, and the more recent enthusiasm for houses to be lit up like ships awaiting review with flickering reindeer prancing upon their roofs, are reminders of the need of earlier generations of humanity in the dark winters of the North, but also in the Roman Empire where the worship of the sun-god, Mithras flourished, to hope for renewal and the return of the fertile sun. That this basic urge was enlisted for commercial purposes by the entrepreneurs of late-nineteenth century shop-keeping and the civic pride of towns, should not blind us to its ancestry amidst the Yule logs and tapers of medieval halls.

In an age of high emigration and of empire, Victorians were fascinated by the concept of Christmas in far way places and of Christmas gatherings in warmer climates and by thoughts of soldiers celebrating the festival amidst hardship and battle. That contradictory and complex institution, the English Christmas, has been exported to every part of the world where the English have settled.

A.W. (Bill) Purdue is a Visiting Professor in History at the Northumbria University and co-author with J.M. Golby of *The Making of the Modern Christmas*.



Research Areas

The overall aim of all project research strands is to challenge the existing historiography of English ethnicity in North America which explicitly dismisses it as weak and denies the relevance of 'diaspora'. Members' research areas are:

- **Don MacRaid** and **Tanja Bueltmann** are working on a history of English associationalism in North America, exploring the development, membership and activities of English ethnic clubs, including St George's societies and the Sons of England. The study will generate significant new knowledge of untapped records relating to the St George's and other societies established by the English in North America, as well as a vast quantity of newspaper reportage on their activities.
- **David Gleeson** is exploring the English Diaspora in North America to better understand concepts of American identity and nationality in the nineteenth-century, especially the interactions between British, US and Canadian political cultures in republican and imperial contexts.
- **Joe Hardwick** is investigating the overseas development of the Church of England and the contribution it made to the development of expatriate civil societies, interrogating the idea that the Church overseas was an 'English' institution.
- **James McConnel's** interest in the English Diaspora stems from his wider research project on the co-commemoration of 5 November in the nineteenth century Anglophone World. His main contribution to the project is research into 5 November in colonial and post-revolutionary America in comparison to commemoration in Canada.
- **Monika Smialkowska** is working on the reception of Shakespeare in America, for instance during the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary celebrations, assessing how Shakespeare was adopted for American audiences.
- **Dean Allen** is interested in the English Diaspora because of the profound influence the English have had on the introduction and development of sport and leisure throughout both the British Empire and the modern world.
- **Mike Sutton** is an active member of the Hexham Morris, thus pursuing his interest in English folk culture and music and supporting the project's community outreach activities.
- **Lesley Robinson** is working on English identity in the 'near Diaspora'.
- **Stephen Bowman** is investigating Anglo-Saxon rapprochement.

Contact Us



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There are a number of ways to get in touch with us:

- send an email to mail@englishdiaspora.co.uk
- use our website contact form: <http://www.englishdiaspora.co.uk/contact.html>

Contact individual team members directly:

Project Investigators

Prof Don MacRaid	don.macrauld@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr Tanja Buelmann	tanja.buelmann@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr David Gleeson	david.gleeson@englishdiaspora.co.uk

Project Researchers

Dr Joe Hardwick	joe.hardwick@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr James McConnel	james.mcconnel@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr Monika Smialkowska	monika.smialkowska@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr Mike Sutton	mike.sutton@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Dr Dean Allen	dean.allen@englishdiaspora.co.uk

PhD Students

Lesley Robinson	lesley.robinson@englishdiaspora.co.uk
Stephen Bowman	stephen.bowman@englishdiaspora.co.uk

Visit our website: <http://www.englishdiaspora.co.uk>

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