

Christmas Cards: A New Christmas tradition

George Matheson discovers a wealth of memories and even a few genealogical clues in old Christmas cards found in the attic



Christmas cards as ornaments can be a fond reminder of Christmases past.

Those from the 1950s reminded me of how my parents would string cards across windows and doorways. Occasionally, I paused as one of these cards revived a memory of someone long forgotten, a glimpse of a Christmas morning, or a feeling of what the season was like when I was young. But it was the much older cards, the ones from way before my time, that most intrigued me. Some were delicate and intricate, many very beautiful, most signed but some not, many relaying familiar greetings, a few with special messages. I began to wonder which ones had been kept because of their artwork, how many had been sent by beloved family and friends, and what the exchange of Christmas cards had meant to previous generations.

In my grandparent's time sending a card was an essential, almost sacred, part of the Christmas season. *The History of the Christmas Card* (George Buday, Rockcliff Publ., London, 1954) written almost sixty years ago, describes it as "a pleasant tradition, now growing old, and which is essentially of affection and good will towards all." It

In bundles tied with string, lost in piles of old letters, left lying on the bottom of dresser drawers, stuffed into vintage candy boxes. This was how I came upon them – hundreds of Christmas cards scattered amidst the accumulated treasure and junk

in the attic. Some older, but most dating from 1912, the year my grandparents married, to 2006, the year my elderly mother celebrated her last Christmas in the house, they surfaced to become, for me, a source of nostalgia and curiosity.

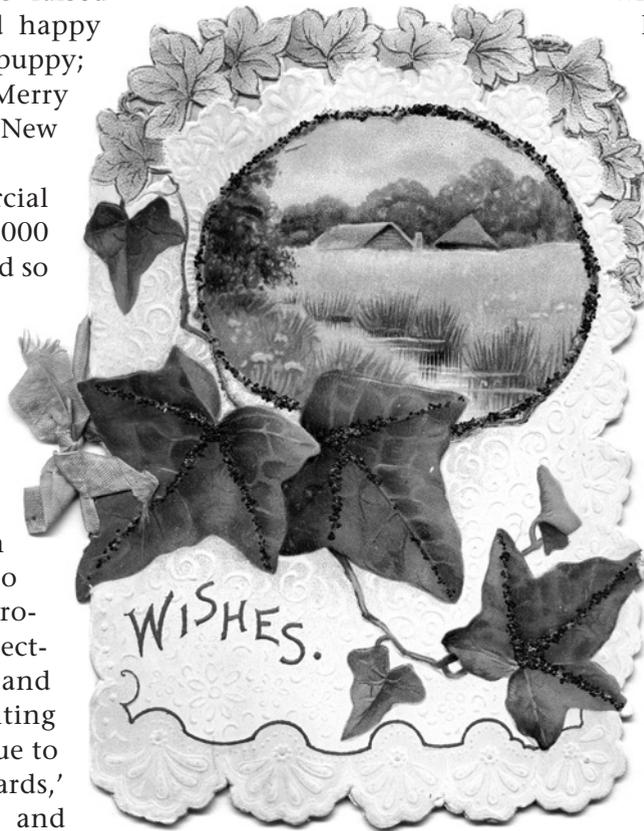
started in 1843 London when Sir Henry Cole, keen to take advantage of the new Penny Post system which he had played a key role in establishing, hired a well-known artist, John Calcott Horsley, to design a holiday card that he could mail to his friends and acquaintances. Lithographed and hand-painted by a professional 'colourer', it depicted a festive scene in which adults raised their wine glasses and happy children played with a puppy; the message read: "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you."

As the first commercial card, it sold about 1,000 copies. Cole's idea spread so quickly that by the 1880s it was the fashionable thing to do and the manufacture of Christmas cards had become a thriving business.

Throughout the 20th century, it remained so with the design and production of the cards reflecting changing tastes and evolving mass printing techniques. But now, due to rising postage costs, 'ecards,' environmental issues, and modern trends, this ritual of mailing Christmas cards is in decline. Every Christmas now I am heard to comment on the dwindling number of cards we receive and on how short our Christmas card list is becoming. Disappearing, perhaps even in my lifetime, is a rich vein for family genealogical study spanning the era from 1843 to whatever that date may be when the last Christmas cards are mailed. These ominous thoughts about the imminent demise of the tradition served to

increase my already deepened fascination with my collection of old Christmas cards.

So, perhaps, you can imagine my excitement as I spread them out across the dining room table and began to see how they chronicled not only family history but also cultural shifts, and even historical events such as the Great War and World War II. Back before boxed cards, when



Die-cut, hand-decorated card.

production methods were less uniform, each card was like a unique gift – sometimes expensive and usually carefully chosen. As Buday wonders: "how could they fail to tell us many interesting things of their time and people – if only we try to understand their language?" (p.3)

As I looked at the cards, I was struck by how few resembled the prototypic contemporary

Christmas card. In contrast to the familiar wintery scenes, religious images, candy canes and all that red and green, the earlier cards were light and airy, with spring flowers, winged fairies, chirping birds, and fanciful drawings. The messages were of friendship and hope for the future.

I reached first for the oldest one. Die-cut, hand-decorated with glitter, featuring a naturalistic, pastoral picture encircled by brown ivy, it had been sent in 1901 to my grandfather by his father, with wishes for a "right happy New Year." I had never met him but I had seen enough pictures that I could easily imagine my great grandfather, a recent immigrant from Guernsey who aspired to wealth and social respect, with fountain pen in hand and top hat nearby, extending his formal 'best wishes' to his eldest son. An expensively made card such as the one he had chosen was, at that time, something of a status symbol.

The dozens of elegant but diminutive cards (about the size of modern business cards) that next caught my attention proved to be an illustration of this. They would have served as a seasonal alternative to the conventional, engraved calling cards of the early 1900s; ones that would be delivered or left after "tea." By their elegant simplicity, they conveyed the assumption of a higher status shared by sender and recipient.

In the early 1900s, Christmas postcards became a popular economic alternative with postage costing half of comparable cards. Many of the ones I came

across were not addressed; likely they had been sent in unsealed envelopes which allowed them the same lower postage.

One that caught my attention was sent by a relative in England to my grandparents. Dated 1912 (the year of the Titanic disaster), it featured a globe and depicted an across-the-sea handshake above a ship tossed by waves with the joyful message:

*"In loving greeting take
This kindly wish from me
For old acquaintance sake
A hand across the Sea."*

Just a few years later many of these Christmas postcards carried not only such good wishes from one person to another but also reminders of events casting a wide shadow over the world. One of these, hand-embroidered on delicate fabric, was sent in 1916 to my grandparents from somewhere on the Western Front in France. As I discovered, postcards like this one were handmade by French and Belgian women working out of their homes or in refugee camps during WWI and sold to soldiers as they passed by on the road. The one I have was signed by Pte. Cyril Grega of the 44th Canadian Forces. Curious to know his fate, I searched Archives Canada and found that in 1918, he was awarded the Cross of the Order of St. George 4th Class for 'distinction in combat' on the Eastern Front and later he emigrated to the USA. He had survived.

For the most part, the cards from the war years remained festive and hopeful though I did come across a few that demonstrated a sobering expression of Christmas cheer. One of these from 1941, was mailed by a friend to my grandfather with



A hand-embroidered card on delicate fabric.

the message: "Wishes for the New Year" (note the lack of 'happy'.) On the inside, instead of the usual uplifting words, was this foreboding quote from Winston Churchill: "We all have a chance to play our part and do our duty in some great design the end of which no mortal can foresee."

After WWII a new and now iconic character – a kind, jolly man in a red suit, the Coca-Cola version of Santa Claus (c. 1931) took centre stage on Christmas cards. He's still around and so too are many of the other images familiar to my generation.

***But, as I lamented earlier,
this whole Christmas card
tradition, so nostalgic for
those of us who grew up with
it, may soon be a thing
of the past.***

My old cards are up in the attic again but, each Christmas-time, I carry them all back down

for, as Kenneth Ames writes: "Christmas cards of the past...are worth a second look." (*American Christmas Cards – 1900-1960*. Yale University Press, 2011. p. 243). Always there's one card that catches my attention. And a scanned copy, along with a message about the history of that card and what makes it special, becomes the card we mail out to those on our Christmas list. Then it becomes an ornament on our tree, taking a prominent place among the many cards that, along with crystals from an antique chandelier, fragile glass balls and tinsel (all found in the attic), create a Christmas tree that spans generations of happy memories and warm feelings.

For our family, this ritual has become something of a new Christmas tradition – one that, perhaps, will keep alive the memory of an old Christmas tradition. ☒

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