

Christmas and the Reformation Period

Remember, in England . . .



- Queen Elizabeth I's reestablishment of the Church of England (Protestant) did not go far enough for some protestants, including Puritans, who took the principle of *sola scriptura*¹ very seriously.
 - What implications could *sola scriptura* have for the Christmas season?



¹ By scripture alone.

- Many Puritans left England for North America, settling in the English colonies being established throughout Indigenous territory in what was being called *New England* (present-day Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont).



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- Following the English Civil War (1642–1651) the monarchy was abolished with the beheading of King Charles I. The republican Commonwealth of England (1649–1660) was established with Oliver Cromwell at its head.
 - Cromwell was a Calvinist (Puritan), an expression of Protestantism that held strictly to the belief of *sola scriptura* and a disciplined Christian life.
 - Cromwell's government was filled with similarly-minded Puritans.
 - The colonial settlements of New England were dominated by Puritans.

From Thomas King's *Truth About Stories*:

So the Puritans saw the world at war, a holy war, a war that was both philosophical and physical. Philosophically, God and the Devil were engaged in a spiritual battle for the souls of humans. Humans, in turn, fought a physical battle that pitted God's troops, in this case the Puritans, against the Devil's mercenaries. While they were in England, the Puritans had seen the manifestations of the Devil in the pomp of the Catholic church and in the impurity of the Anglican order. Transplanting themselves to America did not take them out of the battle. It simply pitted them against an old enemy in a new guise.

Land, on the other hand, was a godsend, satisfying two needs for the Puritans. First, it provided them the space in which to establish a community, something they had not had in land-poor England. Second, it provided settlers with enough room to isolate their community, so that the worldly influences that had plagued them in England could be walled out, and the forces of darkness and the wilderness could be kept at bay.

- Puritans had long targeted Christmas time as a festival that had little biblical justification and often included traditions that they saw as contrary to their idea of Christianity (**Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans still celebrated during the season**). Now that they had formed government, Puritans sought to influence what Christmas would look like going forward.
 - On December 19th, 1643, an ordinance was passed by Parliament during the Civil War encouraging subjects to treat the mid-winter period 'with the more solemn humiliation because it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers, who have turned this feast, pretending the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights'.²
 - Scottish Presbyterians (a Protestant denomination) had already outlawed Christmas in 1640. Christmas Day was not a holiday in Scotland until 1958.
 - Christmas, as well as Easter, services and celebrations (including at home) were formally banned by the English Parliament in 1647. Riots against the ban broke out in parts of England.

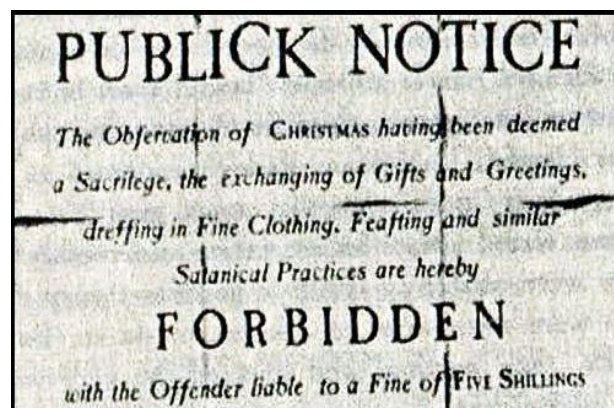
² Historic England. (n.d.). *Did Oliver Cromwell really ban Christmas?* Heritage Highlights. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/heritage-highlights/did-oliver-cromwell-really-ban-christmas/>

- Many people simply ignored the ban, including during the Commonwealth Period. It was very difficult to enforce such an unpopular ban (remember that there was no such thing as a modern police force, nor other enforcement mechanisms). Pamphlets were circulated by Royalists depicting Father Christmas (representing the festive season) linking his return to that of the King and Church of England.



Father Christmas depicted in *The Vindication of Christmas*, 1652

- In 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted a law called *Penalty for Keeping Christmas*. The notion was that such “festivals as were superstitiously kept in other countries” were a “great dishonor of God and offence of others.” Anyone found celebrating Christmas by failing to work, “feasting, or any other way... shall pay for every such offence five shillings.”³ It remained until 1681.



- With the restoration of the monarchy under King Charles II in 1660, Christmas was restored in England. However, not so in the Thirteen Colonies of North America where it was celebrated much more sporadically.

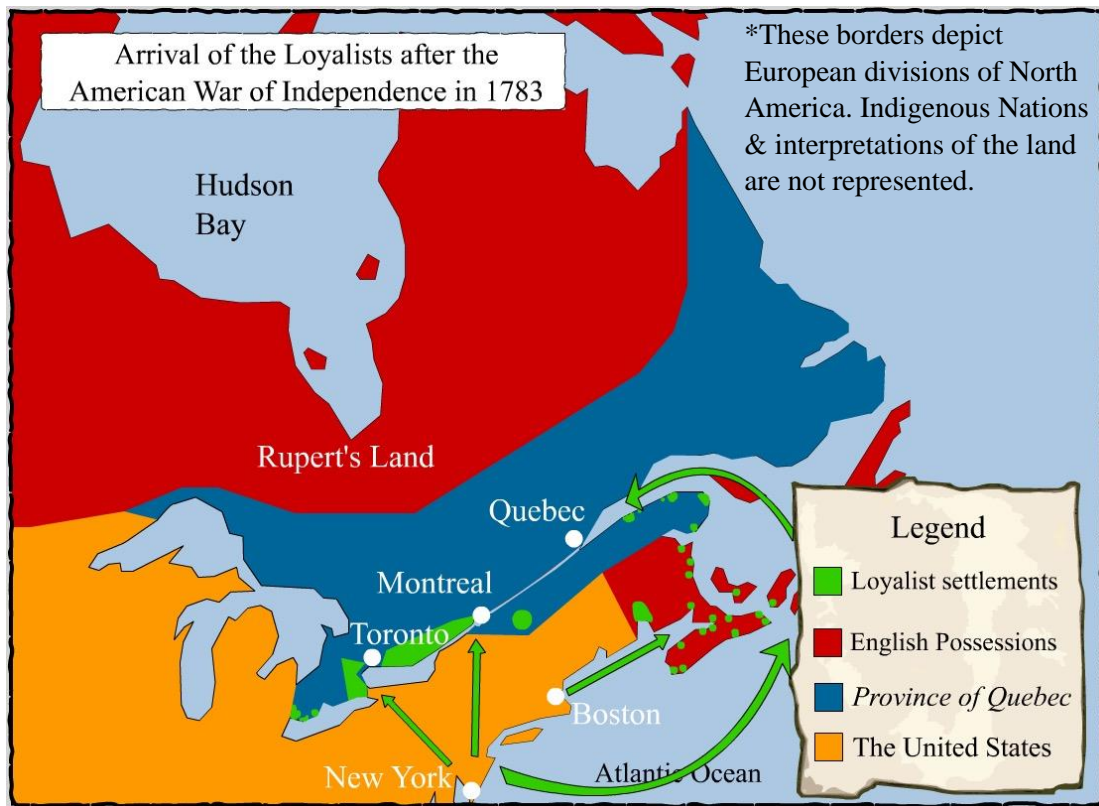
³ Hayden, M. (2014, December 16). Massachusetts law banning Christmas. Mass.gov. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.mass.gov/news/massachusetts-law-banning-christmas#:~:text=In%201659%2C%20the%20Massachusetts%20Bay,feasting%2C%20or%20any%20other%20way%E2%80%A6>

- Before 1776, Christmas was not widely celebrated in the United States. It did not become fashionable to celebrate Christmas in Boston until the mid-19th century.
- Christmas was not made a legal holiday in New England until 1856, with some schools still holding classes on December 25th until 1870.⁴
- Father Christmas is restored as the presiding spirit over the season. After a decline in the 18th century, the Victorian Age saw a renewed interest in Old/Father Christmas in England.



Old Christmas, 1836.

What does this all mean for English settler society in Canada?



⁴ Melina, R. (2010, December 14). The surprising truth: Christians once banned Christmas. LiveScience. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.livescience.com/32891-why-was-christmas-banned-in-america-.html>