

Washington Irving on the Problem with Christmas

There are generally two main complaints I hear every time Christmas rolls around. The first is that Christmas has become hectic and exhausting. The second is that it has been stripped of all that is meaningful and neutralized so as not to give offense.

I thought of these two complaints when I came upon a [Christmas essay](#) published in 1820 by famed American author Washington Irving.

Although Irving speaks fondly of the Christmas celebration, he admits that there are several trends in the celebration which he finds worrisome:

*“One of the least pleasing effects of modern refinement is the havoc it has made among the hearty old holiday customs. It has completely taken off the sharp touchings and spirited reliefs of these embellishments of life, and has worn down society into a more smooth and polished, but certainly a less characteristic, surface. **Many of the games and ceremonials of Christmas have entirely disappeared, and, like the sherris sack of old Falstaff, are become matters of speculation and dispute among commentators.** They flourished in times full of spirit and lustihood, when men enjoyed life roughly, but heartily and vigorously—times wild and picturesque, which have furnished poetry with its richest materials and the drama with its most attractive variety of characters and manners. The world has become more worldly. **There is more of dissipation, and less of enjoyment. Pleasure has expanded into a broader, but a shallower stream, and has forsaken many of those deep and quiet channels where it flowed sweetly through the calm bosom of domestic life. Society has acquired a more enlightened and elegant tone, but it has lost many of***

its strong local peculiarities, its homebred feelings, its honest fireside delights."

If such was the case in Irving's day, it is certainly twenty times more so today. We pride ourselves on being "the most educated" generation of Americans, enlightened by the knowledge technology brings and the increased productivity it supplies. Yet in spite of this "enlightened" state, we all sense that something is sadly lacking in our Christmas celebrations and even in our daily lives.

Reading between the lines, Irving seems to be suggesting that we would find more fulfillment in our Christmas celebrations if we stepped back and returned to the simpler traditions which were once the norm.

Do you think he's right? Would we regain lost joy in the holidays if we set out to celebrate Christmas in this way?

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