

by Susan Hegedus

Dreaming of a White Christmas

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Inhaling the scent of fresh pine needles while curled up on the sofa to watch classic old movies, read much-loved novels, or listen to music is a cherished Christmas activity. The trappings of the winter season and the spirit of Christmas enchant us in our own living rooms as we snuggle closer to the fire to warm ourselves against the harsh ele-

ments outside. But while we might hide from the cold temperatures, the key ingredient of many an idyllic Christmas scene—snow—is never far from our thoughts. White Christmases and the magic that accompanies them are the stuff of films, songs, and books that fire up our imaginations and help form our idea of the perfect holiday season.

In the film *Holiday Inn* (1942) a roaring fire and a shimmering Christmas tree provide a homey background for the action. It was in this movie that Bing Crosby crooned the unforgettable song “White Christmas.” The song begins: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.” This hit single has sold more than 50 mil-

lion copies, thereby cementing its place in popular culture. Though its fame was sealed by the movie, the song "White Christmas" was first performed in 1941, only 18 days after the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbor. American Forces Radio made it a favorite with U.S. troops, giving a voice to their feelings of homesickness.

In the remake of *Holiday Inn*, which was retitled *White Christmas* for the 1954 version, the titular song accompanies a winter fantasy that often does not match up to reality; in the last few moments of the film the snow begins to fall, turning a Vermont landscape into a perfect Christmas wonderland that signals the film's stars to perform the song "White Christmas" with gusto.

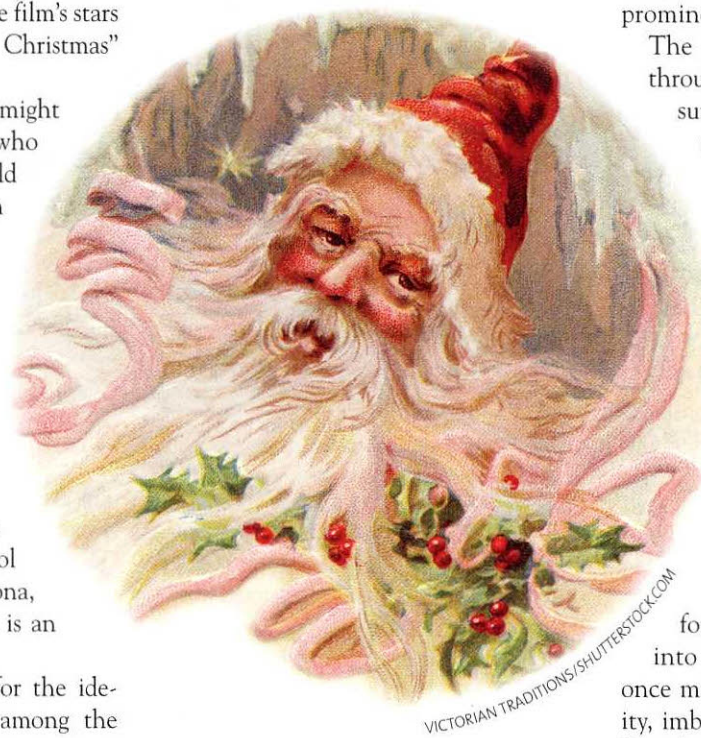
The song's focus on snow might seem overstated to people who live in warmer parts of the world where it rarely, if ever, snows on Christmas day. This is borne out by an original verse from "White Christmas" that was ultimately omitted from the popularized version: "The sun is shining, the grass is green, the orange and palm trees sway, there's never been such a day." It is said that composer Irving Berlin wrote this song while lounging by a pool in the bright sunshine of Arizona, where Christmastime snowfall is an infrequent visitor.

The song's deep nostalgia for the idealized snowy Christmas was among the first Christmas films and songs meant to capture the public heart. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" was written for the film *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1946) and was sung by Judy Garland to soothe her younger sister in the movie; the comforting scene is filled with typical Christmas images, including a perfect family feast and a fairy-tale snowy backdrop.

A number of other snow-themed songs popularized during the twentieth century have become associated with Christmas, even though they never refer to the holiday. The jingle "Let It Snow" (written in 1945 and performed the following year)

is one of the most popular holiday songs of all time, but its lyrics never mention Christmas. The popular Christmas short film *The Snowman* (1982) is a 26-minute wordless animation piece about a little boy who builds a snowman that comes to life. They clasp hands and fly to the North Pole, twirling over the Moon and sea. "Walking in the Air" is the song that accompanies their journey but not once does it mention the word "Christmas."

Long before Hollywood did its part to popularize the concept of the white



Christmas, Victorian writer Charles Dickens brought the simple joys of a snowy holiday to the masses through his stories. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which was published in December 1843, was an immediate hit with audiences who camped in the street to hear public readings. In the story, Dickens describes an idealized Christmas scene: "[P]eople made a rough, but brisk and not unpleasant kind of music, in scraping the snow from the pavement...whence it was mad delight to the boys to see it come pumping down

into the road below and splitting into artificial little snow-storms."

Dickens had personal experience with bitter European winters; he lived through the tail end of the Little Ice Age, which swept across northern Europe in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The unusual weather patterns that comprised the Little Ice Age meant that 6 out of Dickens' first 9 Christmases were white; Dickens experienced only 3 more white Christmases after that, and since 1900 London has had only 4 white Christmases. With such powerful childhood memories, it is no wonder that snow features so prominently in *A Christmas Carol*.

The author Jane Austen also lived through the Little Ice Age, and, not surprisingly, included snowy holidays in her writings; in *Emma*, the title character has to contend with heavily falling snow when she travels to visit friends on Christmas Eve.

Half a century later, Louisa May Alcott described a heartwarming scene near Christmastime in the opening chapter of her beloved novel *Little Women*: "...the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within."

Snow has the ability to transform the most ordinary of scenes into something magical. What was once mundane takes on a fairy-tale quality, imbued with purity and peacefulness. But above all it has the ability to fire up the imagination and keep us yearning for the white Christmases of yesteryear that many of us have never experienced. Images of sleigh rides, falling snow, and laughing children that are immortalized in movies, songs, and books continue to make us hope for the perfect Christmas. Perhaps this year the planets will align, the clouds will gather, and the weather will cooperate with our fantasies, granting us all a white Christmas. **W**

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