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## The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift-Giving (American Social Experience Series)

*William B. Waits*

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**William B. Waits : The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift-Giving (American Social Experience Series)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift-Giving (American Social Experience Series):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The Sociology Behind Christmas By L. M Young This is a different sort of Christmas book for me, as it is a sociological textbook, albeit one that starts with an amusing piece by Corey Ford. Where most critics of the 20th and now 21st century Christmas blame its excesses on "commercialization," Mr Waits (and what an appropriate name for a man who is comparing the old Christmas with the new!) examines a different theory: that the change of the United States from a largely agrarian nation to an urban one brought about the change from the idea of home-crafted personal Christmas gifts as being appropriate to the purchase of manufactured goods (since the seasonal lull for farming families would not happen to those employed in an industrial society, and thus no time for making gifts). The main draw of this intriguing book is the reproduction of advertisements from the 1880s through the 1930s showing the change from the original manufactured gifts (notions or "gimcracks") to the simple elegant card to more expensive gifts, including those which years before would not have been considered gifts, like appliances, automobiles, and everyday clothing. There's also an examination of how advertisements made people

think certain gifts (and therefore themselves) as inadequate, and also how the face of the woman consumer changed across the decades from the Gibson girl to the fun-loving flapper to the elegant, detached matron of the 1930s, and how advertisements composed after the closing of the frontier emphasized manly gifts for boys as a way of strengthening their manhood without a need for them to experience the frontier for themselves. I quite enjoyed this...your mileage may vary!

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. **AN EXCELLENT BOOK FOR ANYONE WANTING TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CHRISTMAS** By Steven H Propp Although subtitled, "A Cultural History of Gift-Giving," this book by William Waits covers a broad spectrum of this history of the Christmas celebration in this country. "This book tells how the modern Christmas emerged by focusing on gift-giving." Abundant historical illustrations and pictures are included to amplify the story. Chapters include, "The Gifts Everyone Wanted: The Rise of Manufactured Gift Items," "The Feminization of Christmas: The Expanded Role of Women in the Celebration," "Something for the Kid: Gifts from Parents to Children," "The Rationalization of Charity: Gifts from the Prosperous to the Poor," "The Rationalization of Christmas Bonuses: Gifts from Employers to Employees," and "Riches and Uncertainty: Superabundance and Retailers' Anxieties Since 1940." There is also a very helpful Index. Waits states that "The custom of presenting handmade Christmas gifts began to change after 1880 because of rapid industrialization and the dramatic expansion of the country's transportation system." He later notes that "The Santa Claus of the first eighty years of the nineteenth century both rewarded and punished children," but more recently, Santa has become "more gentle and forbearing with children." Waits observes that Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" story "was the first major literary piece in several centuries to advocate Christmas charity and it caught the public fancy." Of course, "When it entered the welfare field during the Depression, the government used rational, bureaucratic forms to collect and dispense aid to the needy ... By the 1930s, personal individualized Christmas charity was rationalized almost out of existence." He concludes by noting that the "nostalgic" notion of a simple, rural Christmas in the "good old days" is correct "in many respects," but "is misleading in other significant regards." For example, "it never defines accurately when the nostalgic Christmas existed, and when it was transformed into the modern celebration"; "it obscures the diversity of the many aspects of the celebration"; "they overlook the enthusiasm with which Americans have embraced the modern form of celebration with its purchased manufactured gifts"; and "they got, by and large, the type of celebration they wanted. The modern Christmas was not forced on Americans against their will." This book is **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED** for anyone wanting to know more about Christmas and its modern celebration.

Christmas was a relatively modest occasion in the English-speaking world, celebrated by the exchange of modest handmade gifts, until the Victorians invested the holiday with immense significance as part of a larger effort to celebrate home, family and a mythic past of well-ordered communities. By the late 19th century, Christmas had become a major American festival. Today, it is a multi-billion dollar industry and easily the most important seasonal event of the year. In this survey of the modern American Christmas, William Waits shows how this holiday emerged, tracing its evolution from the days prior to 1880, when people presented one another with simple crafted presents, to the turn of the century, when industrialisation brought with it waves of inexpensive, tawdry gimcracks. In the early 20th century, reform-minded Americans reflecting on the new Christmas prompted a backlash against this cheapening of the Yule tradition, and the Christmas card was born. Henceforth, family members and close friends exchanged useful, costly items, while cards were sent to acquaintances and distant relatives. These reformers also persuaded retail stores to keep their regular hours of business during the holiday, rather than lengthening them, to give trade workers the opportunity to join in the celebration. They also rationalised the collection and distribution of holiday charity, resulting in the Christmas celebration we have today. Waits' book aims to illustrate the notion that "Christmas is uncontrollable" is simply untrue. "The Modern Christmas in America" also examines the differing traditions of giftgiving among friends, employees, the poor and entire communities.

"Amplly illustrated, this volume offers us a look at Christmas Past and a chance to understand why Christmas Present is the way it is." -Wilson Library Bulletin

About the Author William B. Waits brings an interdisciplinary perspective to the study of Christmas from his doctoral studies in American history at Rutgers University and his graduate anthropological training at Rutgers and Yale. Currently Attorney for the New Jersey Department of Banking, he celebrates Christmas with his family at his home in Lambertville, New Jersey.