

Our Changing Economy

Herein Nostalgia For Old Saturnalia

By Philip Stoddard Brown

"ONCE again Christmas is at our throats." There's the same old piling up of deadlines, the long shopping list, the crowded social calendar, the children home from school and the mounting deficit of sleep.

It's some consolation that for those who die at midnight on Christmas-Eve, the gates of Heaven stand wide open—according to an Irish folktale—so that the soul can pass straight through without having to expiate its sins in purgatory.

Not so comforting is the prospect of those who do survive and have to face Christmas bills in January, and income tax too. They live but to consolidate their debts and fight their way through to another Christmas. Survival, in the sense of solvency, comes only after death.



Brown

Where We Went Wrong

What we now call Christmas is a horrendous month-long razzle-dazzle sales promotion that exploits religion and folklore. Gifts are prior sales. Consequently, every conceivable appeal to charity, vanity and self-interest is used to expand the scope of gift-giving.

Peeling hymns alternate with pulpit-intoned readings of the Christ story and both blare forth equally loud in "Men's Wear" and "Hard Goods," in the "Beauty Salon" and crowded elevators. In specialty shops and five-and-dime stores, carol singing is punctuated by the ring of cash registers.

Religious symbols are used to create a glow of good will and will to give. Every purchase (and hence every sale) becomes a benefaction. Male shoppers pass many a creche on their way to buy lingerie and mink coats—no swaddling clothes for their babes—and women on their way to "Men's Toiletries" pass life-sized figures of bearded Magi bearing gifts of myrrh.

Folklore, too, is exploited to promote giving. Santa Claus, the kind, generous Patron Saint of children has been shamefully used. The illusive night rider in his reindeer-drawn sleigh has become ubiquitous. All the mystery and piquancy of this old, old venerable gray-bearded gentleman have been lost. He has become a drab, often tawdry, figure who no longer knows the secrets of children without being told.

Where we went wrong, I think, was in all this giving of gifts. It started by giving candy to children. Now children must give to adults. Since it's increasingly hard for them to find inexpensive gifts for all their uncles and aunts, grandparents and godparents—many of whom have everything five dollars can buy—mothers have to do the shopping and fathers, much of the financing.

When Saturn Ruled the World

Why not abolish all this gift-giving and sending of cards, and the massive retaliation it invites? Let it be decreed that nothing shall be given to an adult that can't be eaten or drunk . . . If we don't have to buy gifts for one another, we won't have to work as long to pay for them. Therefore, we can well afford a fortnight of idleness.

Let's restore Christianity by celebrating the winter solstice in pagan revelry, garnished with the impish gaiety of medieval times. Let's reinstitute the festival days of ancient times. Call them the Twelve Days between Christmas and Epiphany, since this is a Christian land, but the important thing is gaiety. We must not let commercialism, in the guise of charitable gift-giving, again take over.

In pagan times, the Saturnalia was celebrated by seven days of feasting and drinking, masquerades, games, dances and boisterous frolic of every kind. The utmost license of speech and action was permitted. All distinctions of rank were suspended and rules of conduct loosened—all in memory of the golden age of liberty that existed long ago when Saturn ruled. Masters and servants changed places; slaves wore their owners' clothes and were waited upon by their masters.

A mock king was chosen and as long as his reign lasted his word was law. He could deride authority, play practical jokes on solid citizens (those that send thousands of expensive outsize Christmas cards with their names imprinted) and ridicule eager and serious parents (those that send out long mimeographed Christmas letters telling in laborious detail about all the family's fun-loving togetherness during the past year).

In medieval times, Lords of Misrule were appointed to direct festivities in the great houses and colleges and they had unlimited power.

Would that I were such a Lord. I'd start off with a wing-ding of a party for all my readers, my forbearing editors and other overworked fun-loving friends. None but diplomats in full regalia of medals and sashes would serve drink and food. In the kitchen, I'd have admirals' wives to prepare the food; an elite staff of dishwashers, all leaders of White Citizens' Councils—no integration here. For hat-check girls, Gwen and Perle.

For wash room attendants, I'd select those gay-loving fellows who gave their friends last Christmas diapers emblazoned with "Harvard." I'd insist, of course, that they wear "this conversation-type gift." For outside attendants, I'd choose other gag-loving men and spray them with "Spring in Paris," a perfumed manure for house plants, that they thought so hilarious last year.

For entertainment, I'd have an all-League-of-Women-Voters chorus, with costumes borrowed from the Latin Quarter. For solo parts, I'm not saying which of Washington's dowagers I would choose . . . Mr. Summerfield would be my choice for a public reading of Lady Chatterly's Lover.

But alas, I sense that the time for revolt is not yet. I cannot be Lord of Misrule by self-appointment. So I must go forth Monday and enslave myself to the Lord of Pay-Later.