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England and German Christmas *Festlichkeit*, c.1800–1914

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural transfer of Christmas customs from Germany to England in the long nineteenth century, and contextualizes the

reception of new cultural practices by the English within the broader context of Anglo–German relations. Although the modern Christmas festival developed in parallel fashion in a number of countries, German customs, particularly the Christmas tree, played a significant role in the evolution of the festive season in England, and its configuration as a festival for children. The initial reception of Christmas tree rituals in England owed much to the activities of a small literary elite, who, particularly in literature for children, represented the Germans as an honest, simple and home-loving people, a theme which survived worsening Anglo–German relations in the late nineteenth century, and was a key narrative in the reporting of the famous Christmas truce during the First World War. It has also recently re-emerged in the popularity of German Christmas markets: they promote a vision of a timeless and authentic festival unspoiled by the taint of commercialism, which coexists alongside negative German stereotyping. The majority of nineteenth-century sources, however, failed to interrogate the German origins of the Christmas tree too closely, which encouraged the popular and enduring belief that Prince Albert introduced the Christmas tree to England. This reveals a strong tendency for imported customs to be naturalized and made palatable to the national story, and further complicates the process of trying to distinguish between cultural transfer and parallel developments.

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