

/ TO / BOOK:

THEME: Christmas traditions

READING

GUIDED COMMENTARY

Ring out the Old Year

In the midst of this season between Christmas and Twelfth Day comes the ceremony of the New Year, and this is how it is observed:

On New Year's Eve, at about a quarter to twelve o'clock at night, the master of the house and all that are with him go about from room to room opening every door and window, however cold the weather be, for thus, they say, the old year and its burdens can go out and leave everything new for hope and for the youth of the coming time.

This also is a superstition, and of the best. Those who observe it trust that it is as old as Europe, and with roots stretching back into forgotten times.

While this is going on the bells in the church hard by are ringing out the old year, and when all the windows and doors have thus been opened and left wide, all those in the house go outside, listening for the cessation of the chimes, which comes just before the turn of the year. There is an odd silence for a few minutes, and watches are consulted to make certain of the time (for this house detests wireless and has not even a telephone), and the way they know the moment of midnight is by the boom of a gun, which is fired at a town far off, but can always be heard.

At that sound the bells of the church clash out suddenly in new chords, the master of the house goes back into it with a piece of stone or earth from outside, all doors are shut, and the household, all of them, rich and poor, drink a glass of wine together to salute the New Year.

Hilaire Belloc, "A Remaining Christmas"

- ▶ What seems to be the setting for this text?
- ▶ What is "the ceremony of the New Year" described in the second paragraph? Why does the author say it is "a superstition, and of the best"?
- ▶ How does the author in the last two paragraphs help us share the different emotions of the people in the text?
- ▶ Why do you think the people of this house – and of the surrounding village – continue to perform these ceremonies year after year?

POEM

Make It Snow, by George Withers

(Excerpts are suggested at the end of the Grammar Review page.)

SUGGESTED EXERCISES AND WEEK-AT-A-GLANCE

COMPOSITION TOPICS

The whole family turned out with sleds and hatchets and ropes to get a fine tree. They cut a lusty round one and helped drag it home to the house. It smelled cold and spicy and delicious as they carried it up the steps of the back porch to wait for the great day.

C. Meigs

Continue the story.

Sliding on the ice in winter was another joy. Not on the big slide, which was as smooth as glass and reached the whole length of the pond. That was for the strong, fighting spirits who could keep up the pace, and when tripped up themselves would be up in a moment and tripping up the tripper.

F. Thompson

What do you call winter enjoyment?

It is about five o'clock that the guests and the children come into the house, and at that hour in England, at that date, it has long been quite dark; so they come into a house all illuminated with the Christmas tree shining like a cluster of many stars seen through a glass.

H. Belloc

Let us share in your Christmas traditions.

GRAMMAR ASSIGNMENT

1. Analyze: *On New Years' Eve, at the stroke of midnight, a gun booms in a far-off town and then the bells of the church clash out suddenly in new chords.*
2. Parse: *midnight, booms* and *far-off*.
3. Give the principal parts of *strike, boom* and *clash*.
4. Rewrite this sentence using a synonym for *booms* and for *clash out*.

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY

DICTATIONS

Christmas at the Manor (To be divided into two or more dictations.)

On Christmas Eve a great quantity of holly and of laurel is brought in from the garden and from the farm (for this house has a farm of 100 acres attached to it and an oak wood of ten acres). This greenery is put up all over the house in every room just before it becomes dark on that day. Then there is brought into the hall a young pine tree, about twice the height of a man, to serve for a Christmas tree, and on this innumerable little candles are fixed, and presents for all the household and the guests and the children of the village.

It is about five o'clock that these last come into the house, and at that hour in England, at that date, it has long been quite dark; so they come into a house all illuminated with the Christmas tree shining like a cluster of many stars seen through a glass.

The first thing done after the entry of these people from the village and their children (the children are in number about fifty) is a common meal, where all eat and drink their fill. Then the children come in to the Christmas tree. They are each given a silver piece one by one, and one by one, their presents. After that they dance in the hall and sing songs, which have been handed down to them for I do not know how long. These songs are game-songs, and are sung to keep time with the various parts in each game, and the men and things and animals which you hear mentioned in these songs are all of that countryside. Indeed, the tradition of Christmas here is what it should be everywhere, knit into the very stuff of the place; so that I fancy the little children, when they think of Bethlehem, see it in their minds as though it were in the winter depth of England, which is as it should be.

These games and songs continue for as long as they will, and then they file out past the great fire in the hearth to a small piece adjoining where a crib has been set up with images of Our Lady and St. Joseph and the Holy Child, the Shepherds, and what I will call, by your leave, the Holy Animals. Here, again, tradition is so strong in this house that these figures were never new-bought, but are as old as the oldest of the children of the family, now with children of their own. On this account, the donkey has lost one of its plaster ears, and the old ox which used to be brown is now piebald, and of the shepherds, one actually has no head. But all that is lacking is imagined. There hangs from the roof of the crib over the Holy Child a tinsel star grown rather obscure after all these years, and much too large for the place. Before this crib the children sing their carols, and mixed with their voices is the voice of the miller (for this house has a great windmill attached to it). The miller is famous in these parts for his singing, having a very deep and loud voice which is his pride. When these carols are over, all disperse, except those who are living in the house, but the older ones are not allowed to go without more good drink for their viaticum, a sustenance for Christian men.

Then the people of the house, when they have dined, and their guests, with the priest who is to say Mass for them, sit up till near midnight. There is brought in a very large log of oak. This log of oak is the Christmas or Yule log and the rule is that it must be too heavy for one man to lift; so two men come, bringing it in from outside, the master of the house and his servant. They cast it down upon the fire in the great hearth of the dining room, and the superstition is that, if it burns all night and is found still smouldering in the morning, the home will be prosperous for the coming year.

With that they all go up to the chapel and there the three night Masses are said, one after the other, and those of the household take their Communion.

Next morning they sleep late, and the great Christmas dinner is at midday. It is a turkey; and plum pudding, with holly in it and everything conventional, and therefore satisfactory, is done. Crackers are pulled, the brandy is lit and poured over the pudding til the holly crackles in the flame, and the curtains are drawn a moment that the flames may be seen. This Christmas feast is so great that it may be said almost to fill the day.

Hilaire Belloc, *A Remaining Christmas*

GENERAL REVIEW

Review any parts of speech that have posed a difficulty for the children. Review all forms of sentences: simple, interrogative, compound, complex, with adjective and adverbial clauses. Select the sentences below which are best at the children's level.

On Christmas Eve, holly and laurel are brought from the garden and from the farm.

This greenery is placed throughout the house in every room before dark on that day.

A young pine tree, about twice the height of a man, is brought into the hall to be the Christmas tree.

Innumerable little candles are fixed on the tree, and presents for all the household and the guests and the children of the village are placed under it.

At five o'clock, after night has fallen, the guests come into the house, which is all illuminated with the Christmas tree shining like a cluster of many stars seen through a glass.

These songs are game-songs, and they are sung to keep time with the various parts in each game.

The men and things and animals which are mentioned in these songs are all of that countryside.

Indeed, the tradition of Christmas here is knit into the life of the village.

The little children, when they think of Bethlehem, imagine it in the winter depth of England.

The miller is famous in these parts for his singing, having a very deep and loud voice which is his pride.

A very large log of oak, called the Christmas or Yule log, is brought into the house.

The master of the house and his servant cast it down upon the fire in the great hearth of the dining room.

At the Christmas dinner, crackers are pulled, the brandy is lit and poured over the pudding til the holly crackles in the flame.

Make It Snow, by George Wither

*So now is come our joyful feast,
Let every man be jolly;
Each room with ivy leaves is dressed,
And every post with holly.
Though some churls at our mirth repine,
Round your foreheads garlands twine,
Drown sorrow in a cup of wine,
And let us all be merry.*

*Now all our neighbors' chimneys smoke,
And Christmas blocks are burning;
Their ovens they with baked meats choke,
And all their spits are turning.
Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if for cold it hap to die,
We'll bury it in a Christmas pie,
And evermore be merry.*