



## Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England

Neil Armstrong

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Christmas was hardly an 'invented' tradition, emphasises Neil Armstrong, but it was, from the middle of that century, an 'expanded one', when commercialisation and consumerism added to (obliterated

some would say) earlier meanings of seasonal 'simple pleasures of warmth and good fellowship'. A time when the iconography of Santa Claus, the wide exchange of Christmas cards, decorating the home with a Christmas tree and focusing on the exchange of gifts, especially presents for children in stockings hung on bed posts or piled round the tree, became established and shaped our modern-day festivities.

Armstrong's is a fascinating excursion that throws up some aspects that it is easy to forget in a generalised blur of the typical Victorian (aka Dickensian) Christmas seen through modern eyes. The extension of Christmas rituals might mean a flinging open of the portals to tables groaning with Yuletide fare for the prosperous: for the workers it meant more labour and longer hours in shop, post office or railway station. Far from Christmas always being celebrated round the family hearth, Christmas by the seaside, or in a smart London hotel, or even 'Xmas in the High Alps', or in Bethlehem thanks to Thomas Cook and Sons, was becoming increasingly popular (among the well off) as the 19th century turned into the 20th. This was partly, as the *Lady's Pictorial* argued, because 'vast numbers of people live in flats, where it is impossible to entertain save on a very limited scale [and] domestic service has ceased to be what it was.' But also perhaps because nobody 'had the time nor the inclination in such thoroughly cheerful surroundings to feel disagreeable or rake up family squabbles.' A lesson maybe for our century when Christmas now extends for a midwinter week or more of celebration – and consumption?

JULIET GARDINER



A poster celebrating Christmas by Louis Rhead (1857-1926), New York, c. 1895.

pages for it, but Robinson finally hits the nail on the head: 'There is ... no point in looking for a single personality in an exceptionally creative individual, because it does not exist. To be exceptionally creative means to have a chameleon personality. Exceptionally creative individuals modify their personalities to suit their context.'

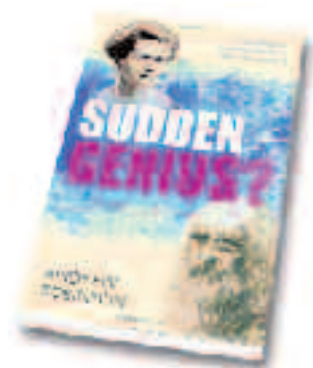
This is as much as to say that genius cannot be planned for, or learned, or emulated; but that it may and should be celebrated. The potted biographies which form the centrepiece of Robinson's work reveal the context in which 10 extraordinary discoveries and works were made, from *The Marriage of Figaro* to the discovery of radium; from St Paul's Cathedral to *Pather Panchali*.

Of course, stories themselves are selective. They work by leaving things out. We are told that Charles Darwin's anxiety about the reception of his theory of evolution through natural selection was 'a neurosis that apparently brought on his own desperate and untreatable illness'. The more believable explanation for the late publication of the *Origin of Species* – that Darwin had 10 other books on the go at once and anyway preferred looking at barnacles – is bathetic and unfashionable; Robinson omits it.

A more serious problem shows up in the summary third part of the book. A life story couched in terms of cause and effect needs a certain space to operate. Condensed, it becomes risible. 'Einstein's lack of intimacy with his parents,' we are told, 'and his rebellion against their choice of school and their conventional social values, helped prepare the ground for his revolutionary transformation of physics.' This is very weak.

Such glitches are few. In view of the ephemeral (not to say elusive) nature of his subject, Robinson's calm and authority are exemplary. *Sudden Genius* finds little to say about the experience of genius; in its own terms, then, it may be a failure. As a book about our ideas of genius, though, it's valuable: a corrective to today's Gradgrinds of higher education: who would, in Professor Eysenck's phrase, hedge the free play of intellect round with 'rules, regulations and envious mediocrity'.

SIMON INGS



## Sudden Genius?

The Gradual Path to Creative Breakthroughs: Creativity Explored Through Ten Extraordinary Lives

Andrew Robinson

Oxford University Press 352pp  
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Where do acts of genius spring from? What inspires a mural like Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, a theory as iconoclastic as Einstein's theory of special relativity, a novel as exceptionally true to experience as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*? Hang on: Virginia Woolf? One of

the great charms of Andrew Robinson's search for the well-springs of genius, is his unforced willingness to mix the iconoclastic with the iconic. The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and the filmmaker Satyajit Ray join Woolf in Robinson's list of geniuses for whom – as he delicately puts it – 'there is still some establishing to do'.

If genius could be fostered, all us pushy mums and dads would be fostering it in our children. As it is, we try anyway and make mild fools of ourselves in the process. Reading *Sudden Genius* I was suddenly reminded of Nigel Dennis's 1955 novel *Cards of Identity*: 'My parents never thought much of me; I was a diffused child. One day, they saw me floating matchboxes in a puddle. "Oh!" said my father, "so it's water he likes, is it?" I didn't like to say it was matchboxes. Next week, they bought me a sailor-suit and told all the neighbours.'

An early sense of vocation, Robinson tells us, is essential to excellence. He cites a study by the music psychologist Gary

McPherson, showing that those who express the most commitment when they start learning a new instrument do better in the long run than their more modest peers, even when those also-rans practise for longer.

This, and Robinson's other findings from the vexed world of giftedness research, has left me feeling conflicted: on the one hand I'm convinced I missed genius by a whisker: that, as Eric Morecambe put it in that André Previn sketch: 'I'm playing all the right notes – but not necessarily in the right order.' At the same time I'm no longer inclined to take genius very seriously. Talent, yes. Industry, definitely (Thomas Edison lodged an average of one patent every two weeks of his adult life; JS Bach composed 20 pages of finished music a day – 'sufficient to keep a copyist occupied for a lifetime of standard working hours in writing out the parts by hand'). But genius? It can look suspiciously like nothing else than hard work soured in buckets of dumb luck.

We have to wait nearly 300