

The birth of Santa

Some people question the very existence of Santa Claus. Quite frankly, this is foolish. Not only do we know he exists but we also know when he was born.

He was born in 1931 when a Swedish commercial artist and illustrator working for Coca Cola - Haddon Sundblom - painted his first jolly Santa. The image was to be used as part of an advertising campaign aimed to boost sales in the winter months when consumption of the famous fizzy drink was at its lowest.

At that time there was no firmly established image of Santa Claus. Some depicted him in furs, others in fairly normal contemporary clothes, while a popular poem of the nineteenth century described him as a little merry elf (a kind of magical dwarf) with twinkling eyes and clothes covered in ashes and soot.

To create an unambiguously positive image for the advertising campaign Sundblom came up with the tall, plump, bearded, elderly but sprightly Santa we know today. And to match the colours of the Coke label there was no question that he had to be dressed in red and white.

The names Santa Claus or Father Christmas also serve to distance the figure of the rotund man and his reindeer from his earlier identity: that of Saint Nicholas. Few British speakers hear any connection whatsoever between the name Santa Claus and that of Saint Nicholas, and yet these were once simply alternative names for the same historical figure.

The man who perhaps has the greatest claim to being the real Santa Claus was a fourth century bishop who lived in what is now Turkey. Originally, after becoming a saint, he had no particular connection with children or Christmas, rather he was seen as a protective figure for many groups including bakers, merchants and sailors. The connection with children derives from a story of him finding three murdered boys and raising them from the dead.

Some have argued that some north European groups - who were certainly not strict Christians - retold the story of Saint Nicholas in the Middle Ages and accorded him some of the attributes of older pagan figures. The habit of flying around the world may have been borrowed from the Norse god Woden (or Odin). In some parts of Northern Europe where Christianity had a very weak grip he was even depicted as a somewhat sinister figure with horns.

Any conscious connection with these pagan and Christian traditions was lost when the Saint became Santa and he started selling Coke. His image was taken up by many other businesses and that soon became virtually the sole representation of the spirit of Christmas. Dissociated from all its pagan and Christian references the image was as shallow and meaningless as the adverts it appeared in.

The history of Santa sums up perfectly the commercialisation of Christmas. That commercialisation is not just a matter of the obscene amount of shopping that goes on at this time of year. It is also the way in which commerce redefines the images of Christmas so that they fit in perfectly with some marketing strategy and then projects

them on huge billboards in bright technicolour all across the country so that pretty soon little is left of the older images and stories that were once a meaningful part of society's cultural heritage.

Santa the salesman

vocabulary revision

Match the key words with their definitions:

1. jolly	a. bubbles of carbon dioxide
2. boost	b. shine and flicker on and off like little lights
3. fizz	c. happy, merry
4. twinkle	d. with two possible interpretations
5. ash	e. increase
6. soot	f. black powder that collects in chimneys
7. ambiguous	g. grey remains of a fire
8. derive from	h. hold
9. attributes	i. come from
10. grip	j. disturbing, threatening
11. sinister	k. characteristics