The Most Famous Dissident you didn’t even know was involved in dissent.

Alex Lyons

Liz Phillips: Our next presentation is a talk by Alex Lyons, who's a student at Birkbeck. Now, Alex's dissenting in different ways in terms of her presentation because she's also dissenting against the calendar. So, Alex.

Alex Lyons: Hello. Can you all hear me if I don't use the microphone? Brilliant. It puts me off. So I am going to be speaking about someone who, I think you will be very surprised to hear that they were involved in dissent. So I'm going to tell you about someone who was originally a dissident and an enemy of a repressive regime. So think, festive. Would anyone like to have a guess at who I'll be talking about today?

And I'm thinking you will have heard of them. They are the possibly the most famous person who's ever -- no, that's a bit much. They're a very, very famous historical figure. Any guesses? Think Christmas. Not. It's not Jesus. No. It is actually. Father Christmas. And we're not talking about Santa Claus. We're talking about Father Christmas. It's really important from the outset that we know these are different dudes, different people. Uh, yes. We're not talking about Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus or Pere Noel or Santa Claus or Weihnachtsmann or Kris Kringle. We are talking about Father Christmas, who is English in his origins. You may be surprised to hear that I've been allowed to talk about Father Christmas today; The man who famously sells Coca Cola.

But he hasn't always been a capitalist. He was once a dissident on the run from the law and banished from England for his political subversiveness. Now, I walked in today, and I saw just through there a picture of Oliver Cromwell, and I hadn't made the connection. We're in the sort of Mildmay area just up the road is Fleetwood House, and so I feel like I'm in the wrong place. But we are going to be talking about the puritan ban on Christmas, and I'm afraid that those guys will be the baddies in this story today. So I'll try and be respectful and bear in mind where I am.*

So you've probably heard of the ban or the puritan ban of Christmas before. It started from the beginning of the War of the Three Kingdoms or the English Civil War in the 1640s. So way, way back. Henry the Eighth had broken with Rome about 100 years previously, and people were still getting to grips with what it meant to be an English Protestant. And I should say that the puritans weren't an organised political or religious group. They were individuals who read the Bible and wanted to follow it really hard, but they did tend to be wealthy. So there were many of them in Parliament. And their arguments against Christmas were twofold. Firstly, that it encouraged lots of partying and immoral behaviour. Because the 17th century Christmas involved drinking, dancing, acting in plays, carol singing and contributing to the birth-rate in August.

[Thank you. I'm glad that got a laugh.]

It's important to mention that many of the puritans were very often of the prosperous kind, and they were the ones who paid the poor rates. So if a lot of illegitimate children were born, or poor people increased the size of their family beyond their means, it was the

merchants and the gentry who were asked to contribute. So there is a degree to which personal financial interest played a part. But there's also the total lack of prescription for the celebration of Christmas in the Bible and puritans, like I said, they really wanted to follow the Bible to the word. No date is given for the Nativity. Jesus didn't say to celebrate his birth. So for the puritans, Christmas seemed overly Catholic or even pagan, which is why parliamentary forces, when parliamentary forces had taken control of the country, they banned Christmas first in 1644, and then soon after they did it sort of permanently. This caused huge uprisings initially, actually. The people of Kent, there was something called the Plum Pudding Riots, and it actually turned into an outright rebellion in 1647 and contributed to what's called the Second Civil War.

So it was a really big trigger issue at the time. But after that, people sort of settled in a little bit more and just kind of got used to it. There weren't any more open rebellions anymore. But from that moment, royalist authors started to use the resentment around the ban on Christmas to their benefit, drawing on Father Christmas to represent the plight of Christmas. So there have been plenty of writing discussing the biblical implications of Christmas, but these could all be quite stuffy, and this was a subject that really affected the people. So they needed a format which would be popular with the people. In 1631, a poet called John Taylor had written a humorous pamphlet in The voice of Old Christmas, decrying the decline of Christmas in London. In 1635 we have a Christmas carol called *Christmas' Lamentation for the Loss of His Acquaintance*, in which he (Old Christmas) speaks of his sadness that people are turning their backs on him. And then after the ban, we suddenly get a lot more of these pamphlets involving the Old Christmas character. I won't go into them, but John Taylor wrote another one which was very similar to the first, but it has this sort of new, explicitly political salience.

We're not talking about Father Christmas. Sorry. We're not talking about Santa Claus, but the character we are talking about, this Father Christmas is much more like the ghost of Christmas Present in The Muppets Christmas in the Christmas Carol, I like that one the better. So try and imagine him. And that's the character we'll be talking about.

So then we get this anonymously written pro Christmas ban. And it has a very catchy title of *The Arraignment, Conviction and Imprisonment of Christmas on Saint Thomas Day Last*, *and how he broke out of prison in the holidays and got away, only left his hoary head and gray beard sticking between two iron bars of a window with a hue, and cry about Christmas after Christmas. And a letter from Mr. Woodcock, a fellow in Oxford, to a malignant lady in London, and diverse passages between the lady and the crier about old Christmas, and what shift he was fain to make, to save his life, and great stir to fetch him back again with diverse other witty passages.* Now I have read this pamphlet, and take it from me. There are no other diverse, witty passages in it. That is it. and this seems like a terrible attempt at satire until you notice a couple of things about it.

It references an old, old, very old man and also old Christmas flying over the Thames, and a gentleman from Oxford who I originally assumed referred to the King, who, once he realised London was too dangerous for him, packed up and went off to Oxford. But professor Mark Stoyle has pointed out that the Royalist poet John Taylor had also gone to Oxford after he was very publicly tried for sedition in London, and Taylor had also published an obituary

called *An Old, Old, Very Old Man*. And John Taylor had started his career as a waterman, someone who rowed people across the river. So when the author writes “bid him come by night over the Thames” I first thought this was Father Christmas flying himself, but actually it probably is talking about rowing… like a waterman would.

So with this alternative reading, the title itself looks like it's mocking the very format of humorous satirical pamphlets. And in this pamphlet, Old Christmas is called Father Christmas, actually for the first time in this period. And so it really feels like it's actually mocking the age of the figure, and it's mocking Father Christmas. It's saying he is old and he's out of touch. So when we call him Father Christmas today, we're actually making fun of him, or it's a legacy of making fun of him.

This is John Taylor here, here is the man himself. In 1652, he wrote a couple more publications including Father Christmas. These were in the form of travel writing, which he was famous for writing himself. In the *Vindication of Christmas*, which beautifully is illustrated for us. Old Christmas wanders the country looking for someone to spend Christmas with, and he's turned away by the puritans in London, whose worship of money caused them to hate Christmas and decline hospitality, which is a big no-no in the 17th century. But luckily, later in the day he finds some farmers in Devon who are celebrating, and this echoes rumours of the time that the West Country would largely ignore the Christmas ban. They were lawless down there and they were also wedded to their old ways! Taylor doesn't make a feature of this miraculous travel. I don't know, we can now get from London to Devon quite comfortably in a few hours, but back then they definitely couldn't. So he just kind of glosses over that because this is a time of witch burnings and the suspicion of the magic of the Catholic mass. But it's an interesting, thing that has sort of held in there. It's interesting now to look at.

So in Devon, the people were poor, but in the story, they gave the hospitality they could afford because they know that in a northern European country, as we know, a mid-winter festival is important. It's important to quality of life. And it was probably not the best idea to cancel that. You know, people didn't enjoy it, as I've already said.
So all over the country, people were ignoring those laws because of what Christmas represented to them. And I argue that Father Christmas became a mascot of that. So who was he?

Aha! There's some other images of him here. He is depicted, as you can see, as being old and bearded like today. He wears long robes appropriate for the winter weather, but also out of fashion to signify his age. Possibly he is reminding people of the bishops who had been removed from the church quite unpopularly before. And you'll see, in this one, the artist has put him in the hat of the working man to associate him with the sort of decent, honest working people. He's a celebrator of Christmas. He doesn't bring gifts, he inspires generosity in others, but he doesn't actually hand out presents. So he's loved by manufacturers and shopkeepers and wives, but not by the husbands who have to buy the presents.

When travelling, the mode of transport is not explicitly mentioned, and there are certainly no reindeer. He joins the party. He shares food and plays cards. He enjoys dancing and the wild games of the young, but is himself rather reserved. He doesn't join in and this reflects

the anxieties of the character (I mean the festival) having Catholic roots, or inspiring immorality. The writers still trod carefully while they were writing.

Like today he is peripheral to the religious aspect of the festival, but he is always at pains to talk about how he is a good Protestant. Probably the largest difference was that children aren't mentioned in these pamphlets. Christmas isn't really a festival for children in the 17th century. Sadly, John Taylor died in 1653 before Christmas was restored, but Father Christmas did not die with him. He is mentioned quite a few more times for the rest of the decade. And in 1660, the final Republican government collapsed and Charles the second was invited back. Father Christmas was commemorated in that period and because in the 18 years of parliamentary Republican rule Father Christmas had gone from an allegory, a representation of Christmas to a fleshed-out character with a purpose and a role. He survived all attacks on him, even in one anti-Christmas pamphlet, the author conceded that Father Christmas had escaped from prison in time for Christmas, so by the 1750s he is a sort of stock character in these folk plays called the Mummers plays. And in his opening line he says, “In comes I, Father Christmas be I welcome or be I not, I hope Christmas shall never be forgot.” And that demonstrates that this anxiety around the Christmas ban was a key part of his identity, long after the political threat had disappeared

So the historian Caroline Boswell has written a lot about various themes in royalist propaganda during the period that they used nostalgia and they drew on traditionalism, traditionalism, oh my gosh, traditionalism. And they fetishized features of rural life, such as the drinking of ale to identify ale with decent people. Taylor did all of that. He pointed out the high rate of tax after the war, the quartering of soldiers in people's homes. But it wasn't just about the war. Taylor understood better than many royalists that the ban on Christmas and summer festivals and Easter and Morris dancing and maypole dancing and all of these things that the poor liked to do, were specifically targeted at the poor. if Christmas is illegal and you have the means to invite all of your friends and a band of musicians and chefs and cooks and throw a massive party in your own home, there's not really anything that the authorities can do to that. So just like today, the poor who are much more reliant on public spaces are much more policed than the rich would be.

So while the parliamentary and republican governments accomplished incredible things, I have to admit in this space, they were elitist and they really didn't have any respect for the poor at all. And Charles the Second was no better in that respect. He didn't either, but he did at least let the poor enjoy their lives. And in that sense he was a lesser tyrant. I feel like this isn't the space to say something like that.

So I know that to a Festival of Dissent, a brilliant day today in the Unitarian Chapel in Newington Green. Newington Green, one of the most famously dissenting parts of London, and also the week after the coronation of another Charles; for me to come here and hold up a Royalist figure and call it dissent, it seems quite perverse. Particularly one who would go on to sell more stuff than anyone else ever has. Here is the range of things he has sold; This is printer ink, ridiculous. But I would strongly, strongly argue that he was a figure of dissent, a figurehead of popular culture, and a really, really powerful one against a regime which we would definitely consider today to have been repressive. Thank you. Merry Christmas.

Liz Phillips Thank you. Alex. So I bet you didn't know that, right? Thank you very much.

Authors note: Mildmay is named after Henry Mildmay and Fleetwood House was named for Charles Fleetwood who together with their colleague, Oliver Cromwell were all Parliamentarian (anti-Christmas) Heroes of the Civil War.