

ing out the history, although it would have been nice to know, for example, why nineteenth-century Americans stuck with "primitive" waste disposal even after the British developed rather different alternatives. It's harder to understand why he left out plumbing, which is neither listed in the index nor mentioned in the book. It's as if it doesn't exist in the city in Melosi's mind, and yet plumbing is as much a part of urban infrastructure as streets and sewer pipes, privately installed, but regulated down to the last washer and gasket by an almost annoying array of municipal ordinances.

But perhaps that's quibbling. *The Sanitary City* is an impressive achievement: a massive compendium packed with facts, figures, and a stunning array of illustrations: tables and graphs, period photographs, plans of specific city sewage systems, and so forth. If it's a bit short on history—well, there's plenty here for the historian who wants to tackle the big task of explaining why our cities look and function as they do.

Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday, by Karal Ann Marling. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. xii, 442 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.00 cloth.

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Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday is a treatise on certain customs associated with the American Christmas celebration, primarily since the mid-nineteenth century, focusing chiefly on their commercial aspects. Magazine advertisements and illustrations are the most common sources of data, along with some textual analysis of Christmas songs and films. Although much of the discussion is interesting, there is little that is actually new; the author mines familiar veins, such as the history of the Santa Claus figure, the Christmas tree, and the contributions of Charles Dickens and Washington Irving to Christmas observations. Throughout, the author assumes that readers celebrate Christmas, and celebrate it more or less as she does. Not until chapter 7, "Somebody Else's Christmas," does she discuss Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, and then only briefly.

In the preface, author Karal Ann Marling states, "This is another one for the moms!" (xi). In fact, it is not clear who the book is written for. Written by an art historian and published by Harvard University Press, it contains the footnotes and citations we expect in a scholarly book, and the text sometimes employs scholarly language and con-

cepts, as in the following discussion of gift wrapping: "The conventional explanation of wrappings as an act of decontamination is loosely based on the conclusions of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who saw paper and bows as a means of overlaying a commodity with sentiment and the identity of the giver. But this reasoning assumes a conflict between home and the expanded nineteenth-century marketplace which may not have existed as a functional reality in the minds of Christmas shoppers and givers" (20). This style is frequently interrupted, however, by a more journalistic style, as in this plea to a syndicated columnist who advises total honesty regarding Santa Claus: "Shame on you, Dear Abby! May you find nothing but a lump of coal in your Christmas stocking next year!" (42). Such occasional attempts at popularization are not well integrated into the book. Furthermore, at times Marling simplifies to the point of error: Santa is not sometimes "known" as Befana (277); they are two distinct gift bringers.

The book shares another problem with many recent publications that attribute the evolution of the American Santa Claus figure to Washington Irving and Clement Moore: it gives too much credit to literary works. Marling does not consider the possibility that these writers and others might just as possibly have been reflecting popular culture or folk tradition as they were inventing it. This idea may not have occurred to her as an art historian. As a folklorist, however, I believe that Irving may have popularized, and possibly embellished, local traditions. It is difficult to believe that he or Moore or Thomas Nast or Haddon Sundblom invented Santa Claus traditions whole cloth or they would not have been accepted so readily and so fully. This privileging of the literary and artistic over popular and folk traditions is a methodological flaw.

My primary difficulty with the book, though, is its reliance on received truths. It contains no original research other than the author's readings of illustrations and advertisements, and that type of interpretation is not always persuasive. She accepts without challenge standard interpretations of Christmas traditions. To be fair, I should mention that my own work, *New Old Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*, is cited once, although not in the discussion of popular song, film, and television, where it would have been most appropriate.

The book is not without merit. Overall it is interesting and engaging. It is best when it reflects the author's interests, as in the discussions of the history of holly boxes and gift wrap, department store promotions and window displays, and toy villages. Although it offers no new theoretical insights, it will hold readers' attention and perhaps stir some pleasant memories.

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