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Making Christmas
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Chestnuts roasting on an open fire? Jack Frost nipping at your nose? Tiny tots with their eyes all aglow? A prize turkey as big as a small boy? What's your idea of the perfect Christmas?

Ten-to-one, it reflects this nostalgic vision -- Dickens' 19th century London by way of a Vermont Holiday Inn. Ah, the good old days! But, they weren't. Christmas just wasn't Christmas for Charles Dickens and his colleagues -- they had to invent it. When Thomas K. Hervey published his "Book of Christmas" in 1836, he bemoaned the decline of the holiday. He suggested that the Reformation had killed it, considering every day sacred and none special. And the various holidays that echoed ancient rural celebrations also had fallen into decline -- from St. Thomas' Day (Dec. 21) to St. Dystaff's Day (Jan. 7). What to do?

Together, through the "Book of Christmas" and "A Christmas Carol" (published in 1843), Hervey and Dickens melded folk practices and religious observances into the holiday that we now celebrate. The ritual of renewal through the exchange of evergreens had already been Christianized when it was aligned with the practice of almsgiving that marked St. Thomas' Day.

Now, Hervey suggested giving presents for their own sake -- particularly his "Book of Christmas," which in an illustration figured prominently in the middle of a stack of goods available for Christmas giving. And Dickens, with the Cratchits' famous turkey, united the practice of giving from rich to poor that marked St. Stephen's Day (Dec. 26; "Boxing Day" in Britain and Canada) with the exchange of New Year's gifts -- preferably gilt-edged editions of "A Christmas Carol" -- between equals.

So, does our Christmas really come down to a 19th-century exercise in boosting consumer culture? "A Christmas Carol" stresses not giving

to excess, but giving to each according to need and with a heart redeemed in a Christmas Yet-to-Come. When the uptight author Thomas Carlyle read Dickens' little tale, he rushed out, bought a turkey and invited all his friends to dinner.

We wish you, too, a Christmas where consumption is equally touched with joy.