

THE VICTORIANS AT CHRISTMAS

The Transformation of Tradition

David Parker

In the twenty-first century images of a middle class Victorian Christmas remain immensely popular – families enjoying a lavish turkey dinner, travelling on a stage-coach through the snow, walking to a candle-lit church, and watching home entertainments such as a puppet or lantern show. They seem indicative of a more stable, confident and less demanding and confusing age, but of course this is deceptive. This book and its 150 period illustrations takes readers back to a host of Christmases in the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) to highlight their diverse effects on the rich, the middle classes and the poor whether living in industrial towns or rural villages.

The book follows the transformation of the bucolic mid-winter revel of the early Victorians days into the massive commercially-oriented festival embracing lavish meals with delicacies drawn from across the world, a host of novel presents, decorations and games, and spectacular pantomimes centred on the often violent supernatural tales loved by contemporary audiences. It finds Christmas was a complex festival with its fundamental religious and humanitarian threads promoting Christian values and social harmony running alongside an obvious joy in closing doors on the outside world and indulging in as splendid a family gathering as its money could buy.

The transformation and dichotomy did not go unnoticed at the time – far from it. Some of the featured illustrations here are dramatic in their impact, some are full of wry and unexpected humour, and others are nuanced though-provoking conversation pieces, and together they reveal a society full of conflicting ambitions and emotions as Great Britain transformed itself into a major industrial society with robust trading links across the world, a growing Empire, and an expanding, wealthy and confident middle class. And herein lay the dilemma, as many others found the grimy industrial towns and the wretched lives of the workers utterly depressing. As part of the reaction, an idealised vision of Medieval feudal society grew in popularity in Art, Literature and Architecture eulogising a society where all sections of society acknowledged their dependency on each other in a tight knit community and came together for a bumper mid-winter celebration. Many illustrators promoted this illusory past, while criticising what was seen as the greed-ridden and segregated society – and Christmases – of the day. Social harmony in a largely industrial society fractured by rigid hierarchies, extremes of wealth, and social tension remained a Victorian ideal much sought after, but in practice falling far short of realisation, and perhaps this very failure gave Christmas its poignancy and attraction – which this book reveals so clearly.

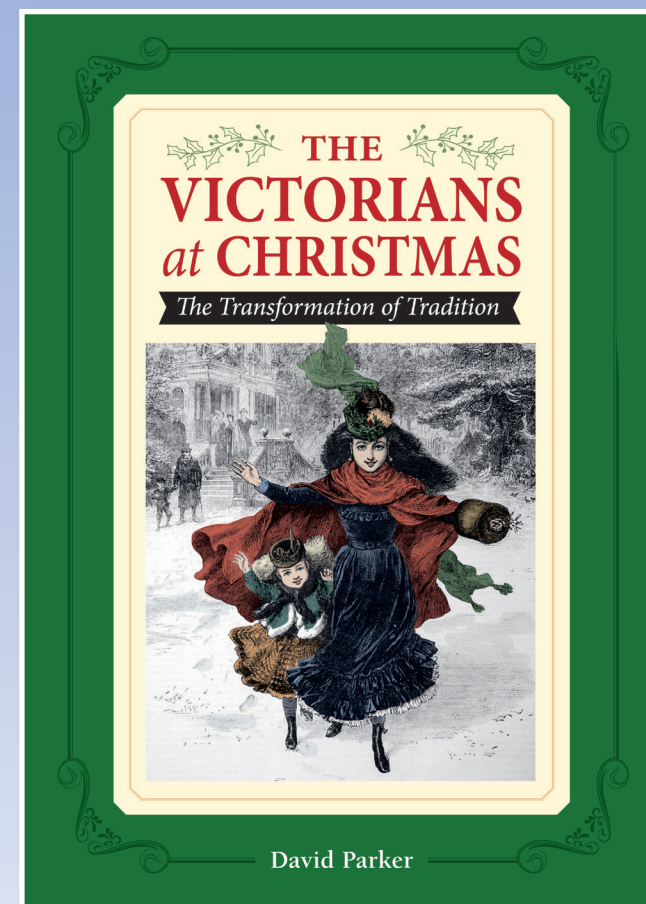
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Parker was a headteacher in Hertfordshire and then successively a History lecturer and the UK and European Masters Programme Director in the University of Plymouth's Faculty of Arts & Education. During this latter period he was engaged in three three-year European Union projects on educational leadership and research, and in the UK's headteacher training programme (NPQH). This is his twelfth book on educational and historical themes, and he has written many articles for scholarly and other journals. He contributed to a dozen TV and radio programmes linked to the centenary of the First World War and its aftermath, and has given many talks to historical societies in the South West. Dr Parker and his wife live in Exeter and have two grown-up children.

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