FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Christmas: A Candid History
Bruce David Forbes
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The word *Christmas* conjures up all sorts of associations: the holiness of the birth of Jesus, the beauty of the lights and evergreen decorations, and the frantic shopping for last-minute presents, to name just a few. In his six-chapter overview, Bruce David Forbes touches on various aspects of the holiday's history, both secular and religious, resulting in an accessible and informative read.

Forbes is a professor of Religious Studies at Morningside College and the co-editor of *Religion and Popular Culture in America*.

In the book's opening chapters, he describes how mid-winter celebrations took place all over Europe long before the existence of Christianity; in fact, early Christians initially did not celebrate the birth of Jesus. The ancient Roman festival Saturnalia, for example, arose as an agricultural holiday, where work ceased, slaves and noble-born had temporary equality, greenery and candle decorations abounded, and people exchanged small trinkets. Similarly, in northern Europe, Vikings celebrated Jul after slaughtering cattle, with feasting and beer drinking, stories, and bonfires. Only due to the observance of Epiphany—how Jesus was shown to be the son of God—did western European Christians in the fourth century begin to celebrate Christ's birth. With Constantine's acceptance of Christianity, the recognition of Jesus' birth at Christmastime merged with the familiar winter celebrations as a way for the religion to spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Forbes uses the image of a growing snowball to illustrate how the Christmas holiday adopted components of European winter festivals while Christianity was expanding from the Mediterranean region into central and northern Europe. Many legends, for example, describe the origin of the Christmas tree. The Benedictine monk Boniface instructed Germans that the triangular shape of a fir tree represented the Trinity. Germans also traditionally constructed a *Lichstock*, a small wooden pyramid hung with figures and treats.

At least as many theories focus on how the legendary Turkish bishop Saint Nicholas evolved into the modern American gift-giving Santa Claus. In various tales Saint Nicholas gave

three bags of gold, raised three boys from the dead, and walked on water. So popular was Saint Nicholas that merchants from Bari, Italy stole his relics in order to attract religious pilgrims to their city; thus Saint Nicholas's reputation expanded into western Europe, especially into the Netherlands ("Sinter Klaas") and Germany. In the United States, the early Puritans discouraged rowdy Christmas celebrations, but in locations colonized originally by Dutch or Germans, such as New York, the character Saint Nicholas continued to develop. The famous 1823 poem "The Night Before Christmas" was crucial in introducing several new components: Saint Nicholas traveled in a sleigh which was pulled by reindeer, he visited on Christmas Eve, he wore no bishop's robe, and he was portrayed as an elf.

Various other contributions helped to establish Santa Claus as primarily a gift-giver, paralleling the United States' rise of modern consumerism. Until the nineteenth century, gifts were not emphasized in celebrating Christmas, but rather were associated with the nearby holidays of Saint Nicholas's Day and New Year's Day. Only with the industrialization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did merchants begin to view holidays as profit opportunities, since people started to purchase manufactured presents as opposed to hand-made ones. Commerce—not Christianity—made Christmas the central holiday in the present United States. Along with the proliferation of gifts, Christmas also has spawned entire businesses of cards, decorations, wrapping paper, music, and movies.

Concluding that while tension certainly exists between a religious and a cultural Christmas, Forbes maintains that a purely spiritual Christmas never did exist and that many people do thoroughly enjoy Christmas without its religious aspects. He offers some ideas for coping with the associated holiday stress or even ways for experiencing Christmas differently. One of his thoughts is to expand Christmas to the twelve days of Christmas for a more rested spiritual focus. Another proposal is to limit the dollar amount of Christmas presents.

Readers should not expect to become experts on the topic of Christmas when they finish this summary. Forbes rightfully acknowledges that the volume serves as "a brief, accessible overview," and it is not filled with novel historical theories or groundbreaking discoveries. For those who are inspired to learn more, the author includes a thorough bibliography with useful annotations. But for the many who do not wish for added stress during the holiday season, this book will provide readers with basic history in a highly manageable and enjoyable way.