

The way we were at Christmas

- [Gillian Bouras](#) 08 December 2020

Christmas is coming. The goose is getting fat. Please to put a penny in the old man's hat. If you haven't got a penny, then a ha'penny will do. And if you haven't got a ha'penny, then God bless you!

I remember a great many Christmas seasons. I also remember pennies and ha'pennies, but wonder how many people can. And does anybody remember that particular rhyme, one from a simpler time?

When I was small we spent Christmas camping by a river in NE Victoria. The festivities began on Christmas Eve, when campers and residents of the township of Bright gathered for carols by candlelight. During the singing of my favourite 'Good King Wenceslas,' I never wondered about the absence of snow 'deep and crisp and even.' I don't imagine anyone else did, either. At that point I had only a vague idea of what snow was: I had certainly never seen it.

Christmas Day always began early for my sister and me, with the liquid notes of magpies in the trees along the river, and grey light visible through the tent flap. Stubble pricked our bare toes as we reached for the bulging pillowslips that were at the foot of our camp stretchers. We blew our cardboard trumpets with the shredded red and yellow paper spilling out the ends, cracked our teeth on minute rainbow-coloured balls of lollies, pranced along the river bank with excitement, and generally drove our parents and our grandparents mad.

The ceremony of the tree began with the exchanging of modest presents such as home-embroidered handkerchiefs, and culinary preparations followed. At one o'clock sharp we started on the traditional dinner of roast poultry and boiled pudding, sweltering the while behind swathes of cheesecloth and butter muslin, the grown-ups' weapon against the invading armies of flies. We probably drank lemon cordial, a glass of which Father Christmas had already drunk in the middle of the night. It is all quite vague now, and was very much taken for granted then.

Decades later, I occasionally wonder how Granny produced this dinner: clearly the pudding in its rag and enriched with the mandatory threepenny and sixpenny bits, all silver-minted then, was brought from home, but the chicken? Things change: we left the river, and the new decimal coinage meant we could no longer boil coins in the puddings. Much later, my sister and I both married Europeans, who were naturally bemused by our hot Christmas dinners, nearly always eaten in soaring temperatures at home, and certainly not at the beach, a myth we liked to think perpetuated by envious Brits.

Things changed again, quite radically, when I migrated to Greece, and found myself anticipating my first northern Christmas. It seemed all wrong: the cold, the short dark days, snow-capped mountains, bright orange groves, and the sound of turkeys gobbling their way to fatness and to an inexorable fate. But then there was no commercial bunfight, and my mother-in-law's forty days of strict abstinence from meat, eggs and dairy products took me back to my youth, when Christmas was still very much a religious occasion, even in secular Australia.

On Christmas morning in Greece, the liturgy starts at 5 o'clock. By six village churches are packed with the faithful, their breaths visible in white puffs as they light candles and kiss icons. A mist of incense envelops the congregation, and the priests and cantors intone the Christmas story. This is the usual procedure, but it remains to be seen what happens this year, as churches are currently closed because of COVID-19.

Of course Greece has changed, too, so that many children now receive their presents on Christmas Day rather than on St Basil's Day, January the 1st, which is the traditional day for presents. And commercial sprees are, alas, becoming common, with American-accented carols blasting their way along city streets, although children still go from house to house early on Christmas Eve, singing a traditional song:

Good morning, landlords, I have come to herald Christ's arrival in your household.

During my first winter here, I was struck by memories of the warmth and light of an Antipodean Christmas, but now I think every southerner should experience the starkness of a northern one, with the Birth being the one ray of light and hope, so much needed this year, penetrating the gloom.