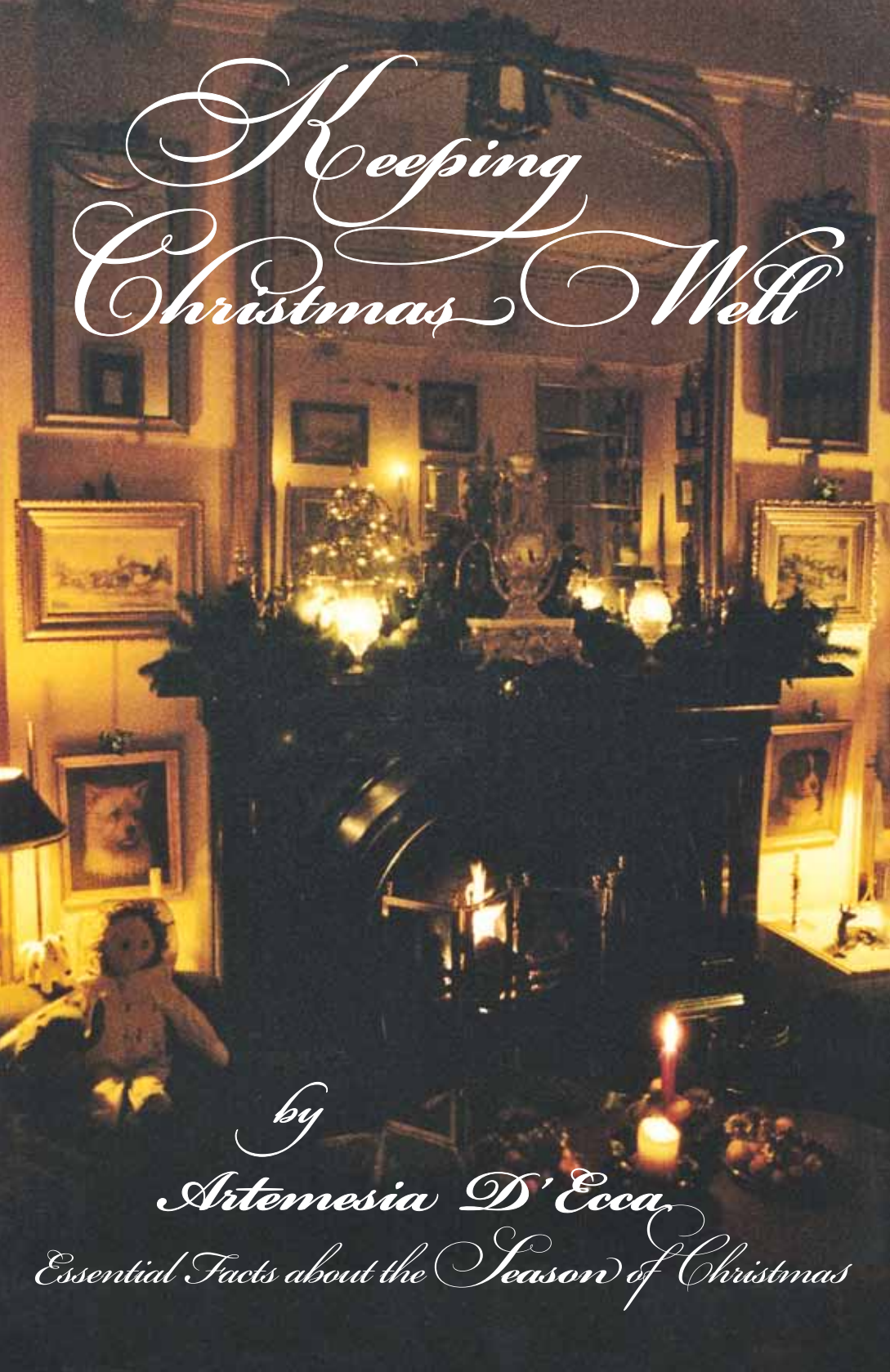


Keeping Christmas Well

by

Artemesia D'Ecca

Essential Facts about the Season of Christmas

Keeping Christmas Well

… Scrooge was better than his word … it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well … May that be truly said of us, and all of us!

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

1879,
A. HOWS

The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time. …

—Act 1 Scene 1 *Hamlet*,
Marcellus describes the Season of Christmas.

Keeping Christmas Well

—Until (at least) January 6th

by Artemesia D'Ecca

Essential Facts about the Season of Christmas

A Phaeton Guide

PHÆTON
PUBLISHING LTD.
Dublin

— Keeping Christmas Well —

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE U.K. & IRELAND 2011
PHAETON PUBLISHING LIMITED, DUBLIN

Copyright © Artemesia D'Ecca 2011
Artemesia D'Ecca has asserted her right
to be identified as the author of this work

Cover, jacket & design of book (& of eBook)
© O'Dwyer & Jones Design Partnership 2011

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by MPG Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn

ISBN: 978-1-908420-00-8 (HARDBACK)

British Library Cataloguing In Publication Data : A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

THE SAME BOOK CONTENT ALSO AVAILABLE IN
ISBN: 978-1-908420-02-2 (PDF EBOOK)
WITH ALL IMAGES OPTIMIZED FOR EREADERS
The PDF-format eBook and its images are designed specifically to suit current black+white (e-ink) e-readers–*Amazon Kindle* and *Sony Reader*, etc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, or copied in any form or by any means (electronic, digital, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published, and with a similar condition imposed on all subsequent purchasers.

WWW.PHAETON.IE

THE NATIVITY
(*BOOK OF HOURS*,
NORTHERN FRANCE,
15th CENTURY)

CONTENTS

PART I PAGE

SOME MAKERS & MILESTONES OF CHRISTMAS
—A PERSONAL SELECTION—

I. Charles Dickens & Washington Irving 2
II. Robert Seymour 9
III. Pagan Rome & its Empire 11
IV. Saint Nicholas 12
V. Saint Francis of Assisi 19
VI. Martin Luther 21
VII. Marchmount Nedham, England, 1600s 22
VIII. Edmund Andros, New England, 1600s 24
IX. Henry Livingston Jr. 25
& Clement C. Moore & Don Foster
X. *The Children's Friend*, 1821 31
XI. Prince Albert & Mr Mike Carr 33
XII. Thomas Nast 37
XIII. Ulysses S. Grant 39
XIV. Valentine Davies 39
XV. Col. Harry Shoup, USAF 39
XVI. The Year 1958 40
XVII. Unknown author of *Dán d'Oidhche Nodlag* 41

Continued

Contents

Part II

page

A Question-&-Answer Guide to the Season of Christmas

Chapter 1	The Merry Christmas —Where it Came From	43
Chapter 2	*Christmas Calendar:* The 40 Days of Christmas	60
Chapter 3	*Interlude:* The Tom & Jerry	74
Chapter 4	*Christmas Calendar:* The 12 Days of Christmas	78
Chapter 5	*Interlude:* Scrooge Movies	92
Chapter 6	*Christmas Calendar:* The 20 Days of Christmas	108
Chapter 7	*Interlude:* Christmas Movies	137
Chapter 8	The Vigils of Christmas	147
Chapter 9	The Banning of Christmas	157
Chapter 10	*Interlude:* More Christmas Movies	186
Chapter 11	The Resurgent Christmas of the English-speaking World	199
Chapter 12	The Street Carnival	216
Chapter 13	Other Days & Seasons	236
Chapter 14	*Afters:* Notes on 4 Christmas foods	247
	Christmas Cookies	256
	A Visit from St Nicholas, 1823	264
Sources		266

PART I

MAKERS & MILESTONES OF CHRISTMAS

Following is a short Honour Roll of People and Cultures that have shaped, defended, or enriched

Keeping Christmas Well

1. Charles Dickens (1812–1870) and **Washington Irving** (1783–1859) come first in this list because, without their combined efforts—in particular, the pioneering work of Irving—much of the world might be without a Christmas today.

CHARLES DICKENS IN 1842 (*PORTRAIT:* F. ALEXANDER)

Both men wrote in the first half of the 19th century, when English-speaking countries were turning their backs on Christmas. Many in England had stopped celebrating the holiday; many in the U.S. had *never* celebrated it; and powerful forces in both countries were determined that Christmas should remain an ordinary working day.

WASHINGTON IRVING *C.*1820

In England, the near-death of Christmas was remarkable, in view of the wild exuberance with which Christmas—'Old Christmas,' as it would later be called—traditionally had been celebrated there. Old Christmas (which retained its full vigour until the second half of the

(R. SEYMOUR, *THE BOOK OF CHRISTMAS*, 1836)

(*SAINT NICHOLAS MAGAZINE*, NEW YORK, 1910)

SANTA: "MY, BUT THIS BEATS A SLEIGH AND REINDEER!"

and a Later Saint–

v. Saint Francis of Assisi (*c.*1181–1226).

ST FRANCIS & WOLF (BOUMARD FILS, PARIS, *C.*1900)

To the early Church, Christmas was a time for addressing the serious business of man's redemption, not for celebrating. The faithful, however, had different ideas, and kept the holiday as if they were still pagans. The Church spent more than half a millennium condemning them for this. The much-loved and revolutionary Saint Francis, however, (at the start of the 13th century) took a more human view, focusing attention on the story of Bethlehem. Famously he re-created the Nativity scene with live animals. His influence gave legitimacy to the idea that Christmas should be a joyous celebration, centred on the birth of a baby.

< ST FRANCIS CREATES THE FIRST CRIB (IN 1223 AD, AT GRECCIO, ITALY), USING A LIVE OX AND ASS, (FRESCO BY GIOTTO DI BONDONE AT ASSISI BASILICA, *C.* 1300 AD)

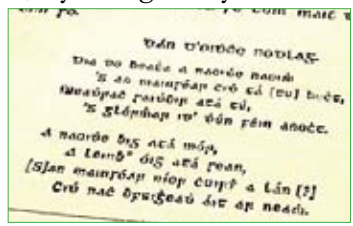
ABOVE: 'ST FRANCIS PREACHING TO THE BIRDS' (FRESCO BY GIOTTO DI BONDONE, ASSISI, *C.* 1300)

RIGHT: 'CHRISTMAS TREE FOR THE BIRDS (HUNG WITH CHAINS OF NUTS AND SUET FOR THE WILD BIRDS)' *I.L.N.*, 1922 >

< 'A STABLE AT CHRISTMASTIME' (E.N. DOWNARD, *I.L.N.*, 1874)

'STABLE IN BETHLEHEM' (L. RICHTER, 1803–1884, DRESDEN) >

XVII. THE UNKNOWN AUTHOR of a 17th century *Christmas Eve Hymn* from the west of Ireland (*Dán d'Oidhche Nodlag*) with English translation (a brilliant one) by Douglas Hyde.


Dán d'Oidhche Nodlag

For all those whose Christmas centres around the Nativity, the degree to which these lines from that hymn evoke a sense of the unfathomable is unsurpassed:

…Little babe who art so great,
Child so young who art so old,
In the manger small his room,
Whom not heaven itself could hold.
…Father—not more old than thou ?
Mother—younger can it be ?
Older, younger is the son,
Younger, older she than he.

MADONNA & BABY (MARIANNE PREINDELSBERGER STOKES, *c.* 1907)

1. You say that pagan Rome had a big influence on our Christmas customs, but in what way?

—Nearly all of our most appealing Christmas customs come from two great Roman festivals: the Saturnalia of 17th to 23rd December and the Kalends at the beginning of January.

'A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR' (K. MEADOWS, *CHRISTMAS POEMS & PICTURES*, 1864)

2. What do you mean?

—Well, have a look at the following set of 'rules.' Although they seem like rules for celebrating a particularly benevolent and generous Christmas, in fact they predated Christmas. They were conventions for celebrating the Saturnalia, set down (for fun) in the second century AD by Lucian, a Greek rhetorician.—

'BRINGING IN CHRISTMAS' (HARVEY, *CHRISTMAS POEMS & PICTURES*, 1864)

CHAPTER 2
The Traditional but Surprising Christmas Calendar:

The Forty Days of Christmas

1. Why do you say 'Christmas Calendar'? Is it different in some way from the regular calendar?

c. 1400 book of hours (nativity detail), *made for* johannete ravenelle of paris [*university of uppsala*]

—In fact, it is. The western Christmas calendar largely follows the liturgical calendar of the first millennium Christian Church. For a start, a 'day' can have a nonstandard meaning.

2. That sounds complicated.

—It's not really, but to understand why certain things are done on certain days (even to know why some people think the season of Christmas lasts for forty days) it is helpful to know something about the calendar of the early Christian church. It explains things.

3. Now that you mention it, my grandmother insists on leaving up her Christmas decorations until the night of February 1st, which she calls Candlemas Eve. She says the lights and greenery cheer up the month of January, and she quotes some poem that says it was traditional to leave

'candlemas day' (marianne stokes, 1901)

Books of Hours

Illustrations from Books of Hours appear throughout this book. For anyone who has not come across them before, Books of Hours are medieval devotional texts—very small, and often beautifully illuminated. They were much in demand in an age when prayer took up a large part of the day and night—not only for monks, but also for lay people, who wanted to pray to the monks' pattern.

NATIVITY PAGE, FLANDERS *C.* 1460

An 'Hour' refers to the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office, a fixed compendium of devotions/prayers (varying from day to day) to be performed at prescribed times of the natural day and night :
Vespers [before sunset]; **Compline** [before retiring];
Matins [during the night]; **Lauds** [sunrise];
Prime [first hour of the day]; **Terce** [third hour of the day];
Sext [sixth hour of the day (or, mid-day)];
None [ninth hour of the day (or mid-afternoon)].

For lay people, this was a lot of praying, but for monks, praying was (and maybe is) almost constant, and the battle against sleepiness was not one they always won. Hence the children's nursery song :

Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, dormez-vous ? Dormez-vous ?
Sonnez les Matines ! Sonnez les Matines ! … …'

ABOVE RIGHT & BOTTOM RIGHT: NATIVITY AND EPIPHANY IMAGES FROM A FLANDERS BOOK OF HOURS *C.*1460 *[GLASGOW UNIVERSITY]*

MIDDLE RIGHT > : NATIVITY FROM *THE 'DE GREY' HOURS* MADE IN FLANDERS *C.*1450 FOR THE ENGLISH MARKET (OF SARUM USE) *[NAT. LIB. WALES]*

BELOW LEFT: THE EARLIEST WESTERN NATIVITY IMAGE, *C.* 800 AD, IS IN THE ILLUMINATED GOSPELS TEXT *THE BOOK OF KELLS*, IRELAND

EPIPHANY (LUDWIG RICHTER, GERMANY, *C.* 1860)

BELOW: MADONNA AND CHILD (LUDWIG RICHTER, GERMANY, *C.* 1860)

15. Am I right in thinking that, at one time, the whole Twelve-Days Season had as much importance as December 25th has now, and was a really long public holiday?

—It seems the Twelve Days were about that important. Certainly the significance of the Season extended beyond the church and affected civil life and laws:

> In England, in the days of King Alfred, the Twelve Days finishing on January 6th were made Festivals. [—Bourne]
>
> Some writers are of the opinion that, but for Alfred's strict observance of the 'full twelve holy days' he would not have been defeated by the Danes in the year 878. [Dawson]

CHRISTMAS EVE TRUCE OF 1914 (*I.L.N.*, JAN. 1915)

16. That was unfortunate.

—King Alfred was not alone in losing a battle because he was a good Christmas-keeper. It seems that German devotion to Christmas may have helped Americans to win their War of Independence. The soldiers (on the British side) whom George Washington fought after he crossed the Delaware on Christmas night 1776 were from Hesse in Germany. It is said to have been an advantage to the Americans that the Hessian soldiers were preoccupied because of Christmas. A note warning that the Americans were approaching had been brought to their commander, Colonel Rahl, on Christmas Eve when he was having his dinner. He apparently ignored the note, was fatally wounded in the battle the next day, and the note was found in his pocket.

(U.S. NATL. ARCHIVES)

SURRENDER OF HESSIAN TROOPS TO GENL. GEORGE WASHINGTON, CHRISTMAS 1776 (1850 LITHOGRAPH)

CHRISTMAS 1914: 'BRITISH AND GERMAN SOLDIERS ARM-IN-ARM EXCHANGING FOOD & GIFTS' (A.C. MICHAEL, *I.L.N.*)

17. There's one thing bothering me about those 'Twelve' days…

—O.K. but first let me mention a final bit of history about them because it was a pretty development and showed how significant that 'Twelve-Days' Festal Tide was—how everyone took for granted that Christmas was to be celebrated as a season, rather than just as a single day:

> The laws of Ethelred II (991-1016) and of Edward the Confessor ordained it [the Festal

CHAPTER 5

—*Interlude*—

Scrooge Movies

Not everyone has read *A Christmas Carol* (a quick, fun read), but is there anyone who has not seen a filmed adaptation of it?

Scrooge Movies—Traditional

A Christmas Carol has been turned into more than a hundred films, either for the cinema or for television, and the story never loses its appeal.

The following are classic, traditional adaptations (those set in 19th century London, and with venerable actors playing Scrooge)—

Sol Eytinge, *A Christmas Carol*, Boston, 1869
(Eytinge images scanned by Philip V. Allingham, *see* '*Sources*')

CHAPTER 6
The Traditional but Surprising Christmas Calendar:

The Twenty Days of Christmas

1. I'm interested to hear what are the Twenty Days of Christmas, but do they really total 20 days? Or are they like the Twelve Days?

CHRISTMAS AT THE MASTHEAD (WM.SMALL *C.*1879)

—Well they do total 20 calendar days—from dusk on 24th December through the evening of the 13th of January.

2. January 13th ?? And that was really a recognized Christmas Season?

—Yes. Until around the start of the 19th century, everyone appeared to know about the Twenty Days of Christmas, if one can judge by the casual references to them in books and periodicals. In an article in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* of February 1784, for instance, a Mr Beckwith describes Christmas 'near Leedes in Yorkshire' when he was a boy and explains:

'CHRISTMAS IN YORKSHIRE' (DODGSON, *I.L.N.*, 1849)

'SONG OF THE THREE KINGS' (L.RICHTER, GERMANY, 1869)

16. O.K.

—As a popular holiday (i.e. as a day for celebrations and gifts) it is the most festive day of the Christmas season in much of the world. In Spain and Italy, for instance, it is the day when children are given presents. In Spain, the Three Kings, rather than Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas, are the gift-givers, while in Italy, a witch-like old woman, *La Befana* [from the word *epiphaineia* —Leigh Hunt, 1835], is the present-giver.

'*BEFANA IN CASA*' ITALY (B.PINELLI, 1800S) >

17. I know a lot of people in the US and in England who have never heard of the Epiphany.

—Yes, and that is very surprising.

its Eve used to be so popular, why are they not celebrated now in the U.S. and in England?

Keeping Christmas Well

—Powerful forces conspired against the poor old Twelfth Day. Ultimately, the Industrial Revolution and Capitalism killed it off, but the groundwork for its elimination in those countries had been laid earlier. In Ireland, by contrast, which remained an agricultural society until recently, the celebration of Epiphany (*'Little Christmas'*) prospered well into the twentieth century, certainly in rural Cork. The day was marked with a family party and an old-fashioned spread of cakes and desserts (very much in the style of those shown *right* >) on the night of January 6th.

DESSERT SPREAD (*MRS BEETON*, 1891 ED)

23. I thought it was called 'Women's Christmas' (*Nollaig na mBan*) in Ireland?

—That's another name for it. The theory is that women need do no work on that day (the next day—St Distaff's day—having marked their post-Christmas return to the traditional women's job of spinning). The observance of *Nollaig na mBan* has survived (in Cork, at least) and a tradition now is for groups of women to go to restaurants on that day—often booking every table.

'YOUNG HUSBAND FIRST MARKETING' (LILLY MARTIN SPENCER, 1880)

'STUDIO LUNCH' (H. S. MOBRAY, *C.*1880)

on the streets and in taverns. But there was also an interesting custom of calling to houses, performing minor plays, or at least acting the part of characters (whose disguises they were wearing) during the visit.

ST STEPHEN'S DAY MUMMERS ('WREN BOYS') CALLING TO A COUNTRY PUB IN IRELAND, *C.* 1950

15. Was that popular—I mean did people like it when a group in disguise came to their house?

—It depended on the house. The temperament of the householders as much as the behaviour of the mummers seemed to determine whether the visit would be an interesting social interchange or a worrying nuisance. There is a sweet description in a book on Philadelphia Mumming practices of how an 'old Quaker family'—not Christmas-keepers, and whose traditions would have been very far

'THE WREN BOYS' IN CORK CITY (ON ST STEPHEN'S DAY, 26th DECEMBER)

(*DRAWN:* D. MACLISE *C.* 1840, *ENGR:* LANDELLS, 1841)

'HUNTING THE WREN':

ONE OF THE MORE MYSTERIOUS CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS, 'HUNTING THE WREN' ON ST STEPHEN'S DAY, SURVIVED IN IRELAND (FROWNED ON BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH) TO THE 20th CENTURY *[PHOTOS ABOVE & FOLLOWING]*. ORIGINALLY, THE CUSTOM INVOLVED KILLING LIVE WRENS, AND 'WREN BOYS' (OFTEN IN COSTUMES MADE OF STRAW) WOULD BEAR THE TINY CORPSES—ATTACHED TO HOLLY BUSHES—FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE SEEKING MONEY 'TO BURY THE WREN.' IN MORE MODERN TIMES—ESPECIALLY SINCE THE REVIVAL OF THE CUSTOM IN CERTAIN AREAS IN THE LAST FEW DECADES (TO RAISE MONEY FOR CHARITY)—A FAKE WREN (OR NO WREN AT ALL) IS USED.

produced in Germany in 1851. Printed calendars (shortly to have little doors, varying in number from 19 to 32) appeared in the early 20th century, and finally (possibly in the 1950s) the wonderful calendars with chocolates behind the doors.

17. What exactly is an Advent wreath?

—Let me pass you over to Maria von Trapp. In the chapter 'An Austrian Christmas' from her autobiography, *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, published in 1949, she gives a fascinating, intimate account of a very thoroughly-kept Advent in pre-World-War-II Austria.

VON TRAPP FAMILY (1940S)

Then an aspirant nun (a candidate for the novitiate at the 8th century Benedictine Abbey of Nonnberg—'a place of unearthly beauty' as she put it) and deeply conscious of the religious significance of Advent, she describes her first Christmas in the von Trapp household, as a teacher to one of the children:

> 'Where do you usually put up the Advent wreath?' [she asks her pupil, also named Maria]
>
> 'Put up what?'
>
> I was aghast. 'Don't you have an Advent wreath every year?'
>
> 'No, never. What is it?'
>
> 'It is a large wreath made of fir greens, holding four candles, one for each of the four Sundays of Advent. People put it up in their living-rooms. It reminds

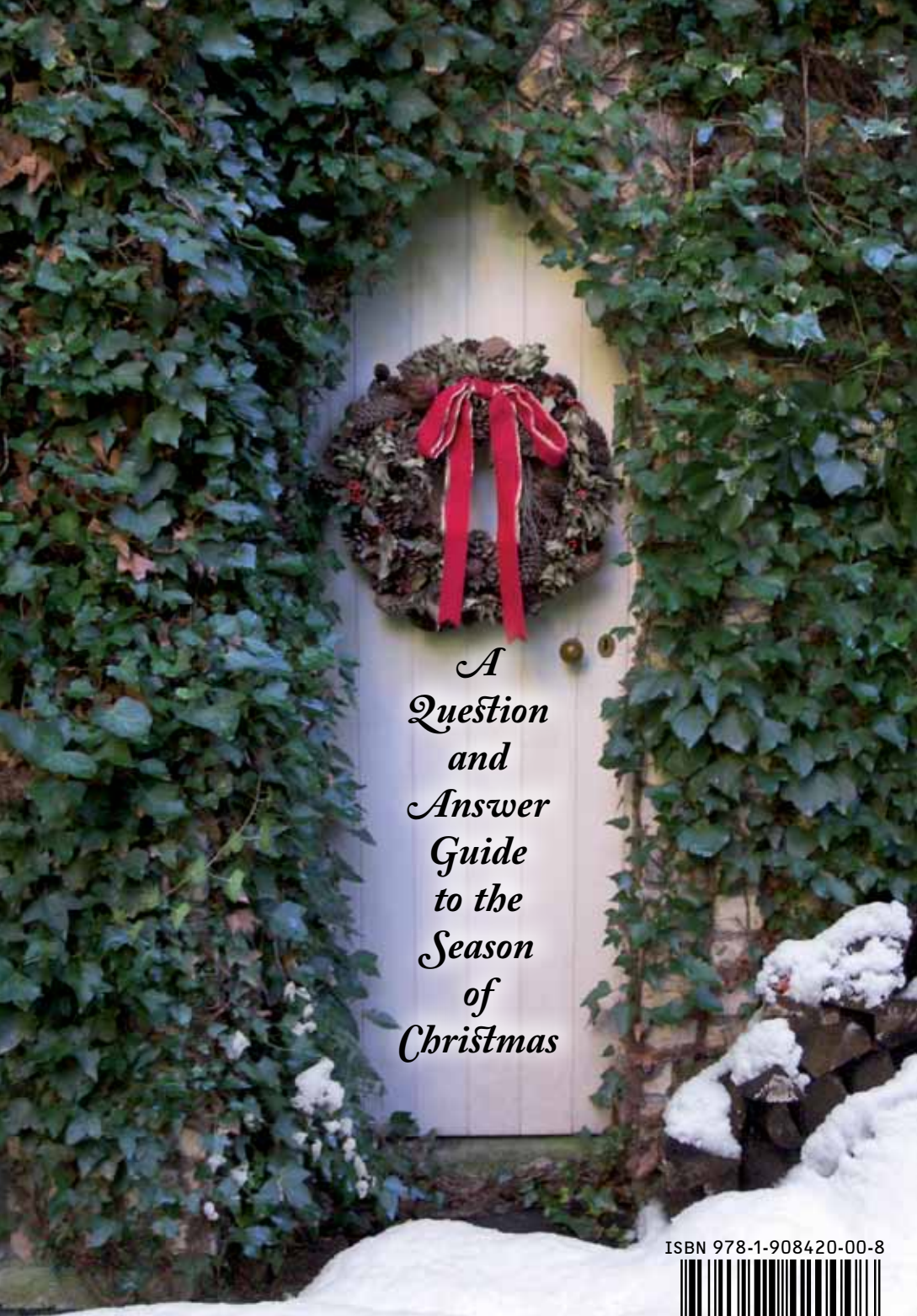
BENEDICTINE NUNS' CHOIR

PROCESSIONAL OF NONNBERG ABBEY SALZBURG, *C.* 1510

THE CHRIST-CHILD AND ANGELS BRING THE CHRISTMAS TREE AND CHILDREN'S PRESENTS (L. RICHTER, GERMANY, 1855)

The kind Saint Nicholas is followed, however,—
by the Krampus, an ugly, black little devil with a
long, red tongue, a pair of horns, and a long tail

VISIT OF NIKOLAUS & THE KRAMPUS (FZ. PAUMGARRTEN *C.* 1825, AUSTRIA)



ISBN 978-1-908420-00-8

PHÆTON PUBLISHING LTD. Dublin

Keeping Christmas Well Hardback £25.00
by Artemesia D'Ecca General Non-fiction

9 781908 420008