A typical Edwardian Christmas

By Professor Mark Connelly, Friday 30 November 2012

For 100 years Universal has been making films including the most iconic Christmas film of all time – It’s A Wonderful Life. To launch a celebratory Christmas collection of DVDs it has commissioned Christmas historian Mark Connelly – Professor of Modern British History at the University of Kent and author of Christmas: A Social History - to look back at the decades of Christmas and show how front room entertainment evolved from a gathering round the wireless to catching up with a new blockbusting film on high definition DVD.

For the average, British middle class family in 1912, Christmas Day would have started with a church attendance. The tree would have been brought into the house the night before and decorated – none of this shove it up as soon as the last firework bangs on November 5 in those days. Decorations were largely of paper and glass, and there was often a patriotic theme as well as a religious one – so it was not uncommon for Union, Dominion and imperial flags to be used. Fire risks were huge as candles were still hung on trees.

Family entertainment was still centred upon the piano, and the day would have reflected the reverence for Christmas carols that had evolved in the Victorian period. Particular favourites were ‘Good King Wenceslas’, ‘It Came Upon the Midnight Clear’, ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen’, and ‘Once in Royal David’s City’. This last card had that great Victorian moral to the young: ‘Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as He’.

However, for the more flush families, by Christmas 1912 there was the chance to splash out on a good gramophone. The Times carried an HMV advert on December 19, 1912, showing its full range of gramophones under the heading ‘Christmas Gift Problem Solved!’ at prices ranging from £4, for a basic version, to £50 for a walnut-cased pedestal set, which was well beyond many purses.

Other favourite gifts for adults were pens and stationery sets, manicure/grooming kits and, for those at the forefront of leisure fashions, with the funds to match, driving clothing such as waterproofs and caps, with Burberry being the market-leader.

For boys, toy soldiers were very popular, and for girls, dolls and tea sets. For younger children, wooden animals were often recommended and wooden alphabet/number blocks revealing the culture carried on from the nineteenth century (and still present to this day) that children could learn while playing. Lots of these items would have been bought in department stores, which had emerged in the late 1860s, and were a mainstay of Christmas shopping rituals by the time of the Edwardian/Georgian period.

For Christmas dinner there was a range of options: turkey was available, but was by no means dominant and it still competed with goose and beef. The opening up of the British Empire and the world’s trade routes through steam-shipping meant that exotic wonders that pandered to the famed British sweet tooth could also be indulged – dates, figs, chocolates and sweets, fortified wines and sticky cakes. Crackers would have been pulled and paper hats worn.

For those wishing to go out, Boxing Day was traditionally a day of sports and outdoor entertainments, but the new entertainment industry of cinema was also just beginning to make its presence felt. And, already, there were signs of specially-made Christmas movies, with early adaptations of Dickens’ Christmas Carol proving popular.

*Universal Blu-Ray and DVDs – including Christmas favourites like It’s A Wonderful Life, the new high definition version of ET the Extra – Terrestrial Anniversary Edition, Downton Abbey Series Three and Michael McIntyre: Showtime! - can be found at www.amazon.co.uk.

Christmas - A History by Professor Mark Connelly

Professor Connelly’s book explores the various themes that contribute to modern Christmas: its Anglo-German origins and the idea of the bourgeois Christmas expressing family virtues; the need for a touchstone with the past in an age of rapid expansion and thus the myth of Merrie England; and the revival of English music: in short, all the elements making up the modern Christmas. Normally priced £12.99, you can buy this book at a discount (http://www.sagabookshop.co.uk/BookItem.aspx?Item=9781787630133) from Saga Bookshop.