

On the Twelfth Day of Christmas ...

On the twelfth day of Christmas,
my true love sent to me
Twelve drummers drumming,
Eleven pipers piping,
Ten lords a-leaping,
Nine ladies dancing,
Eight maids a-milking,
Seven swans a-swimming,
Six geese a-laying,
Five golden rings,
Four calling birds,
Three French hens,
Two turtle doves,
And a partridge in a pear tree!
And a partridge in a pear tree. - Bing Crosby

Next time you're having about the origins of 'Boxing Day' (boxing of presents? or decorations? or just punching each other after all that Christmas-time family tension?), do spare a thought for the loved one of the famous Christmas carol. Because come Boxing Day (which is the carol's 'first day of Christmas'), this person's troubles are just beginning.

Inspired by the Sydney Sunday Telegraph's kind gift of a CD that included Bing Crosby's version of the carol, I came to some realisations that I needed to share.

I had always thought that the carol simply described a new gift-package being given each day, with a list of all the previous days' gifts recalled each day. So on Day One a partridge, Day Two the turtle doves, and so on. Even if that were the case, the carol might better be called *Ode to Conspicuous Consumption*. But listening to Bing's silky tones, I realised with horror that on a plain reading of the carol, the true love is clearly *resending* all the previous days' gifts, with the addition of *one extra* package each day. That much is clear from a simple grammatical analysis of the commas and the repetitious 'and' (in bold):

On the first day of Christmas,
my true love sent to me
A partridge in a pear tree.

On the second day of Christmas,
my true love sent to me
Two turtle doves,
And a partridge in a pear tree.

On the third day of Christmas,
my true love sent to me
Three French hens,
Two turtle doves,
And a partridge in a pear tree.

... and so on. By January 5, the end of the Twelve Days, the loved one will own twelve partridges (or, if Bing's repetition of the final line of the carol is to be accepted at face-value, thirteen). Clearly then, when the rest of us have long finished boxing gifts or bashing relatives, this person is in deep, well, animal manure. By early January, he or she will own:

12 (or 13) partridges
22 turtle doves
30 French hens
36 calling birds
42 laying geese

42 swimming swans
hundreds of cattle (see below)

Of course dozens of people have arrived too:

12 drummers
22 lords
30 pipers
36 ladies
40 milking maids

Only one set of gifts, it seems, has come from what we would recognise as a conventional trip to the mall:

40 gold rings

The totals are daunting:

Jewellery: 40 pieces
Personnel: 140 (22 male, 76 female, 42 unspecified gender)
Various poultry: 184 birds

Of course we know that cattle are involved by use of the present-tense, 'milking'. The lover could simply have sent 'milkmaids'; but since they are in the act of milking when received, many cattle are clearly present as well. A light day's milking probably involves, conservatively, 10 head of cattle per milkmaid; a heavy day's milking, say, 50 each. In order to keep all forty milkmaids occupied, we should infer a herd of at least four hundred, up to perhaps five times more. So we can add to our totals:

Dairy cattle: 400-2,000

At least a herd of cattle can be stored outdoors, but the problem of feeding and accommodating 140 people, whether as employees, indentured servants, or slaves, are quite insurmountable (although to be fair, if the loved one lives in Australia, recent changes to industrial relations laws will make it easier). The highly excitable lords and the ladies will probably need to be segregated; and as anyone who has worked with drummers and pipers knows, conflict between them will be inevitable, and probably irreconcilable. I'm not sure if the maids would resent their milking or consider it a calling, but either way it will be difficult, what with all the drumming, piping, dancing and leaping unnerving the cattle. It does all depend on the size of the property I suppose. I do hope it is not all happening in a home unit.

Happily, all these concerns lead me to suspect that the personnel are being contracted on a daily or short-term basis. The poultry, though, are an entirely different matter. I don't imagine the vendors would ever take these bird back. Birds are just sold outright, and the true love has not perhaps heeded the RSPCA's call to be careful of pet purchases at Christmas. Unless the loved one can put some of the aristocrats, musicians and bovine lactation technicians to work cleaning the aviaries (not to mention the cattle pens), then I predict come February that several exotic bird species will appear alongside all the usual poor-sad-dog-needs-a-home ads.

Assuming too that each goose lays an egg a day, and that the loved one keeps the geese throughout January, then by February 1 he or she will have 1,218 goose eggs to dispose of. Not only so: although I am no expert on cow-output, I'm guessing that 3,500-17,000 litres of milk will need on-selling, which in turn will require a serious outlay for refrigerated tankage. Remember too that twelve (or thirteen) pear trees are involved, although I'm not sure when they fruit. I can't even begin to imagine what is involved in keeping all the swans swimming. I suspect the rings will be hocked first, to pay for upkeep. Almost certainly the true love will be foremost among those who feel suicidal about credit card debt come March.

At first glance, then, the whole thing is a salutary lesson on the hidden dangers of our Christmas gift-giving. Like the true love, we mean so well by it. Actually, legend has it that these items

symbolise various Christians truths (one God, two Testaments, three Virtues ... see below). Sadly, the true love could have achieved all this and more simply by giving a Bible. As things stand, the giving and receiving of presents too often leads us to want to tear down our old barn – oops, I meant house – to build a bigger one, to store all our stuff in. (Cf Luke 12:16-23.)

But on the other hand, the song is also a celebration of God's outrageous abundance. We live in a world with milk and eggs, with music and dancing, with birdsong and ... well, more birdsong (I wonder if the true love has become a bit fixated on the poultry theme? There are other great gifts ideas out there.) So why shouldn't Christmas be a time when we feast, and give, and remember that in God's good world, scarcity is never really the problem? Christmas says: God is so abundant, *He even gives his Son* to all who call upon his name. How much more, then, may we be certain that Sydney's beaches have room enough for everyone.

Have a great Christmas, thank God for his abundance, and try not to become so fixated on stuff that it weighs you down. This might be a good verse for the twelve days of Christmas and beyond:

Whatever you do in word or deed, do Christmas in the name of the Lord
Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

[Col. 3:17, flagrantly altered!]

- Andrew Cameron
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Internet scuttlebutt about the carol:

<http://www.cvc.org/christmas/12days.htm>

(with a musical rendition in a pleasing variety of styles, including country & western)

<http://www.abcog.org/12days.htm>

http://www.carols.org.uk/the_twelve_days_of_christmas.htm

... and according to this site, The Twelve Days of Christmas is a collection of medieval Catholic symbolism:

- 1 True Love refers to God
- 2 Turtle Doves refers to the Old and New Testaments
- 3 French Hens refers to Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues
- 4 Calling Birds refers to the Four Gospels and/or the Four Evangelists
- 5 Golden Rings refers to the first Five Books of the Old Testament, the "Pentateuch", which gives the history of man's fall from grace.
- 6 Geese A-laying refers to the six days of creation
- 7 Swans A-swimming refers to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit *or* the seven sacraments
- 8 Maids A-milking refers to the eight beatitudes
- 9 Ladies Dancing refers to the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit
- 10 Lords A-leaping refers to the ten commandments
- 11 Pipers Piping refers to the eleven faithful apostles
- 12 Drummers Drumming refers to the twelve points of doctrine in the Apostle's Creed

... although some think this schema is a complete urban myth!

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