

Literary Sleuth Casts Doubt on the Authorship of an Iconic Christmas Poem

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Every Christmas for more than 150 years, children have hung their stockings by the chimney with care and learned to thank Clement Clarke Moore for the tradition.

Moore, a wealthy Manhattan biblical scholar, went down in history as the man who in 1823 created the American image of Santa Claus as author of the "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas." Better known as "The Night Before Christmas," it became one of the most widely read poems in the world.

But did Moore really write it? In a new study of the poem's early history, Don Foster, an English professor at Vassar College and a scholar of authorial attribution, accuses Moore of committing literary fraud. He marshals a battery of circumstantial evidence to conclude that the poem's spirit and style are starkly at odds with the body of Moore's other writings.

In a new book, "Author Unknown," (Henry Holt & Company) Mr. Foster argues that "A Visit From St. Nicholas," first published anonymously in a Troy, N.Y., newspaper in 1823, closely matches the views and verse of Henry Livingston Jr., a gentleman-poet of Dutch descent.

Livingston, who lived in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., died before Moore was ever named as the poem's author.

Livingston's family first noticed the poem's growing popularity two decades later and has insisted ever since that Livingston wrote it. But without physical evidence these claims came to naught. Last year Mary Van Deusen, Livingston's seventh-generation descendant and an amateur genealogist, sought Mr. Foster's help.

"The real issue was always, would a man of God, a bible professor, tell a lie?" Mr. Foster said in an interview. "No one was willing to say, yeah, he would. But he did."

Mr. Foster, a well-known literary gumshoe, pioneered the technique of studying the details of a text's wording and syntax to establish authorship, using computerized archives to look for telltale influences. He is best known for identifying Shakespeare as the author of the anonymous poem "Funeral Elegy" and the journalist Joe Klein as author of the novel "Primary Colors." Mr. Foster has become the Livingston camp's ardent partisan, frequently comparing Mr. Moore in the book to Dr. Seuss's Grinch.

His case is still untested by other scholars, but it promises to create a lively debate about a poem that has become an American icon. Whoever wrote it played a formative role in shaping the modern American Christmas, said Stephen Nissenbaum, author of the history "The Battle for Christmas" (Knopf, 1996). Before 1820 Americans typically pictured St. Nicholas, also known as Santa Claus, as a skinny, stern bishop visiting children to dispense discipline as often as gifts, and not necessarily on Christmas Eve. The poem helped recast St. Nicholas as a jovial elf and turn Christmas into a time for giving gifts to children.

It first appeared at a time when genteel men of letters often published anonymously because newspapers were considered beneath them. Not until about 20 years later, after the poem's popularity had spread through reprinting around the country, did Moore step forward as its author. He later explained that his long silence stemmed from embarrassment over what he called his trifle. No original manuscript has ever surfaced, and no one has ever convincingly challenged his role.

But in Mr. Foster's account, Moore, owner of an estate covering what is now Chelsea, was too much of a grouch to write such a playful poem. He took a stern approach to being a parent, and his poems and writings often focused on the annoying noise of "clamorish girls" and "boisterous boys." In other Christmas poems he admonished his own children to be humble, mindful of their mortality and aloof from transient pleasures. He condemned "immodest verse" with "no other recommendations than the glow of its expressions and the tinkling of its syllables, or the wanton allurements of the ideas that it conveys."

The poem's St. Nicholas enjoys a pipe, but Mr. Moore railed against tobacco as "opium's treacherous aid." Mr. Foster has also caught Moore in a reindeer mix-up. Writing out the poem by hand later in life, he misstated the original names of Santa's last two reindeer. He followed a printer's error that made them "Donder and Blitzen" instead of the Dutch-American words "Dunder" and "Blixem," meaning thunder and lightning. Moore spoke German, but not Dutch.

"People called the first version a misprint, but to a Dutchman like Livingston it was exactly right," Mr. Foster said.

He has also unearthed an apparent precedent for plagiarism. Donating a sheep-farming manual to a library, Moore wrote inside the cover that he had translated it from French. But a small copyright note printed on the last page credits someone else as sole translator.

"Clement Clarke Moore was no George Washington," Mr. Foster said.

Historians say the idea of Moore's authorship first surfaced in 1837, when his friend Charles Fenno Hoffman floated the notion. But Mr. Foster argues that Hoffman had the wrong poem in mind. The other poem, "Old Santaclaus," appeared anonymously in a pamphlet published in 1821.

Foster says that poem shares several of the hallmarks of Moore's writing, including frequent use of "dread," reliance on the adjective "various" and an unusual use of the passive form "seen." "Old Santaclaus" devoted four stanzas to castigating naughty children.

Moore kept mum for another 14 years, and his friend Hoffman had a nervous breakdown before anyone thought to ask him how he reached his conclusion.

Finally, at his family's behest, in 1844 Moore took credit for the famous poem, including it without fanfare in a collection of his more solemn verses. But not before he checked that "the coast was clear," Mr. Foster said.

Shortly before stepping forward, Moore wrote to the owner of The Troy Sentinel, the newspaper that first published "A Visit," to ask if anyone knew where it came from. Everyone who knew had died within a few years of its appearance.

The crux of Mr. Foster's case is in the literary roots of "A Visit." Whoever wrote it, Mr. Foster says, followed closely in the tradition of the 18th-century poets William King and Christopher Anstey. Both wrote popular, bawdy poems in an anapestic meter, with the accent on every third syllable. One of King's poems, for example, described a hung-over Apollo struggling to pilot his chariot across the sky. Among other details, Apollo's "coursers" "prance" like Santa's reindeer.

"A Visit" borrows its meter, style, images and vocabulary from both poets and a few others in the same vein, Mr. Foster writes. But Moore wrote only one undisputed anapestic poem, "The Pig and the Rooster," moralizing about laziness and arrogance.

It borrows almost nothing from the poems that influenced the author of "A Visit." Moore generally mimicked pious poets, Mr. Foster said.

Henry Livingston, however, lifted frequently from such bawdy anapests, by Mr. Foster's analysis. Livingston wrote anapestic verses to his family every Christmas. Many of them borrow language and form from King and Anstey, and so resemble "A Visit."

To make his case Mr. Foster has compiled a litany of stylistic quirks common to Livingston's known works, the texts that influenced them and "A Visit." For example, Livingston's writing is

peppered with the unusual use of "all" as an adverb, and so is "An Account of a Visit From St. Nicholas," in phrases like "all through the house," "all snug in their beds" and "dressed all in fur."

The first known uses of "all snug" are in the ribald anapests that influenced Livingston's other poems. Another example: the benediction "Happy Christmas." Almost everyone else said "Merry Christmas," but Mr. Livingston consistently used "happy."

"A Visit" is a hodgepodge of Livingston's favorite images, Mr. Foster writes. Livingston's light poems are crowded with flying children, animals, fairies, boats and other vehicles, like Santa's flying sleigh and reindeer. Livingston also fancied himself an expert on the Arctic and wrote elsewhere of Lapland's reindeer. He also wrote of the Norse god Thor, whose chariot was pulled by flying goats. Livingston would have been familiar with the Dutch legend of annual visits from St. Nicholas.

The original author of the poem also sprinkled extraneous exclamation points through Santa's reindeer roll call, another Livingston habit. "It is vintage Livingston," Mr. Foster said.

Ms. Van Deusen, who enlisted Mr. Foster's help, said that some of Mr. Livingston's other descendants retained letters and manuscripts that could potentially gain some value if he was established as the author of the famous verse. But she said she was motivated only by family pride, with no financial stake in the question.

Clement Clarke Moore II, a descendant of the famous poet, said he was not concerned about the challenge. "It is the poem itself that is important, not the authorship," he said.

Mr. Foster faces an uphill battle in convincing historians and antiquarians that Moore did not compose the famous poem, at least until other scholars test his assessment. Some experts cite the evidence that Moore wrote out four copies of the poem by hand late in his life. They have become among the most valuable documents in American history. Seth Kaller, a New York antiquarian dealer, bought the fourth in 1997 for \$211,000 in an auction at Christie's.

"It is like someone coming forward and saying that he wrote 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' not Francis Scott Key," Mr. Kaller said, "or that he wrote the Gettysburg Address, not Lincoln."