Chapter 5

The Expansion of Christmas Consumerism: Gifts and Commodities

It did not take many years after the resurgence of a standardized Christmas before colorful booksellers’ windows became an expected part of the Victorian experience. Articles recording the Christmas marketplace touch upon the evergreen stalls, the food stalls, the toy shops, and the rainbow of volumes:

Not a tradesman but lays a trap for us, as if the public were sparrows in the frost. We might go through the whole category of tradescraft, from the butcher, with his prize oxen from the Cattle Show, to the booksellers and stationers, alive with coloured plates, Christmas numbers, and Christmas cards of every shape, size, variety, and price. How we must pity the large hearts with small means, suffering the allurements of the tempting windows.1

As the Christmas reading audience became adept at the cultural performance of Christmas, the print matter served up for holiday consumerism transformed to meet new needs. In the decades after the 1840s, much of the population willingly adopted the rituals associated with the cultural Christmas. As a result, the bulk of December texts became far less invested in Christmas ritual and sentimental instruction; nonetheless, December book sales continued to climb. As critics did not tire of mentioning, the Christmas book label had broadened to embrace a wider flood of volumes put forth for the holiday season. The new designation explains the divorcing of Christmas narratives...
from Christmas print expectations, and it also represents the decisive
move to a child-focused, gift-centered market.

During the 1840s, the amount of Christmas material and festive
scenery in the Christmas books varied widely, but by the end of the
decade, the term “Christmas book” became a marketing slogan rather
than an indication of holiday content. Reviews still recommended
collections of Christmas carols and the *Punch* Almanacks, but the *Times*
reviewer of “Decorated Christmas-Books for 1848” seems to
have been confused by the onslaught of ornamental books that “have
nothing in common, save the time of their publication. . . . they look
as if they stoutly defied being coaxed under one heading.”2 Another
reviewer calls them “original works of solid literary merit . . . well
adapted for illustration,” noting also that they take part in a carnival
of commerce requiring “festive costume”—cover design and color.3

Stories translated from the German, often reminiscent of the Grimm
brothers’ work, were also a popular category of Christmas books,
which is probably why Eleanor Hervey wrote one set in Germany (*The
Pathway of the Fawn*, 1852), and why John Ruskin’s father and pub-
lisher decided to print Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River, a Tale of
Stiria* (1851) as a Christmas book. In Ruskin’s case the German set-
ting, fairytale narrative, and short, illustrated format gained his novel
access to the holiday market. The publishing phenomenon opened
the market to a wide range of Christmas books, as one 1850 review
attests: “It may be a fairy story; it may be a story of real life; it may be
a piece of broad humour; it may be a social satire.”4

Nonfiction dominated the Christmas catalogues. By the 1860s, titles
listed as “Christmas Books” were often ornately illustrated table-books
such as *Examples of Chinese Ornament* (1867), a work with little text
but over a hundred plates of Chinese designs procured from objects in
English museums. *Japanese Fragments* (1866), a text that satisfied the
reviewer that Japan boasted of comic illustrators on par with Richard
Doyle, also featured in the lists. Collections of English literature,
nonfiction histories of various cultures, travelogues, and biographies
appeared under the category of “Christmas Book.” While they had
nothing else in common, *Russo-Turkish War* (1880) by Edmund Ollier,
*An Unsentimental Journey through Cornwall* (1884), and *The History
of Lace* (1864) all shared the distinction of being Christmas books.
Volumes eventually shrank from their ornamental, 1860s extremes.
The larger table books went out of style in the 1870s because “drawing-
rooms ceased to contain tables capable of holding such tomes, and, as
a result, there was no place for them.”5 As they were weeded out of the
drawing room, so too were they weeded out of the book catalogues.