Feathers and festivity

How did the turkey end up on our tables or a partridge in a pear tree? Birds play an interesting part in our festive traditions

WRITTEN BY CARLA PASSINO

Isabella Beeton had no doubt. In her 1861 *Book of Household Management*, she noted that 'a Christmas dinner, with the middle classes of this empire, would scarcely be a Christmas dinner without its turkey'. Since then, however, birds have come to dominate more than just the festive table; from carols to cards, many have become veritable icons of the Christmas season.

ROBIN

With its seasonally appropriate breast, the robin is steeped in Christian folklore. Some stories link the bird's red colouring to the blood of Jesus: as the robin tried to pick off the crown of thorns, a drop fell and stained its breast. Others say that the robin fanned the flames to keep baby Jesus warm and in so doing it scorched its breast. Either way, "The robin is the ultimate Christmas bird," according to natural historian Stephen Moss, the author of *The Twelve Birds of Christmas* and *The Robin: A Biography*.

The real origin of the bird's connection with the holiday season is likely to be far more prosaic: it turns up at a time when not much else does. "The fact that midwinter is so dead in other forms of animal life [means that] the ones that are around develop their own folklore, their own specialness," believes Mark Connelly, professor of Modern British History at the University of Kent and the author of *Christmas: A History*.

It helps that the robin tends to capture people's imagination. According to Moss: "It is a ground-feeding bird and, in the old days, when it used to snow at Christmas, it was starving. So it would arrive on your doorstep, fluffing out its feathers – of course, it was doing that because it needed to get warm – and it would be very tame because it needed food. Everything the robin did was for its own benefit, but we saw it as this cute creature doing things for us."

The bird's association with Christmas was enshrined in the late 19th century, thanks to the inspired idea of a Victorian card designer. Early postmen wore red uniforms and were often referred to as 'robins', says Moss. Eventually, "someone put a robin on a Christmas card, sometimes dressed in a postman's uniform, or even carrying the letter in its beak – and that became the link".

Archibald Thorburn's *Partridge and a bullfinch in the snow* – could the famous 'pear tree' actually be the French '*perdrix*' (pronounced 'pair-dree')?

At the time, adds Connelly, Britain was embracing commercial colour printing, so "things like a robin started to proliferate because they looked so good". Considering that competing designs for early Christmas cards included frogs, beetles and even a mouse riding a lobster, it's easy to see why the robin won hands down.

TURKEY

Unlike the robin, the turkey is rather lacking in the looks department – but the changing fortunes of international trade put it on Christmas plates from Britain to Australia. The bird, which first arrived from North America in the 16th century, had long made an appearance on festive tables. Already in 1573, Thomas Tusser's *Christmas Husbandly Fare* spoke of:

Beef, mutton, and pork, shred pies of the best,
Pig, veal, goose, and capon, and turkey well drest,
Cheese, apples, and nuts, jolly Carols to hear,
As then in the country, is counted good cheer.

Historically, it was often baked in a pastry 'coffin'. In 1747, Hannah Glasse included in her *Art of Cookery* a recipe for Yorkshire Christmas-Pye, a gargantuan dish in which a pigeon, a partridge, a fowl, a goose and a turkey are boned, seasoned with spices and wrapped into a 'good standing crust... so as it will look like a whole turkey'.

However, it was only in the late 19th century that the turkey really took over. Notes Connelly, "it's all to do with global technological and economic developments. By then, you had the opening up of the great wheat prairies of North America," with copious amounts also produced in Argentina and Australia. Because the British could count on the world's largest merchant navy to transport the wheat, it became much cheaper to feed birds at home. But grain-fed turkeys bulk up far more quickly than geese, according to Connelly. "So, thanks to changes in grain prices, the turkey began to eclipse the goose because you could feed more people with it. You got more bang for your bucks."

Recipes multiplied and by 1861, Mrs Beeton not only suggested stuffing the Christmas roast with a forcemeat made of ham (or lean bacon), suet, lemon, herbs, spices, breadcrumbs and eggs, but also recommended several inventive ways, from croquettes to hash and fricassee, to make the most of leftovers. But it's her reference to turkey as the staple of the 'middle-class' Christmas lunch that's →

particularly telling. Parts of the upper class, says Connelly, had become "rather snobbish about the turkey; they felt that it was for those who did have to watch their pennies". Ultimately, however, the sheer number of turkeys smothering the country overcame their resistance. "A sense of economic patriotism kicked in: if the local farmer is producing turkey and the local butchers are dressing it for Christmas, you end up falling in line with that."

GOOSE

Charles Dickens etched the Christmas goose indelibly in our collective imagination: 'And now, two smaller Cratchits, boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming that outside the baker's they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own; and basking in luxurious thoughts of sage and onion, these young Cratchits danced about the table... "Hurrah! There's such a goose, Martha!"'

Like the Cratchits in *A Christmas Carol*, much of Britain had cherished the bird's 'tenderness and flavour' for centuries, although goose never monopolised the festive table. "In the 18th century, when the modern Christmas began to develop, for a lot of people beef would have been a Christmas Day meal," explains Connelly. However, goose – rigorously stuffed with sage and onion and often roasted by bakers, because many British families didn't have ovens big enough to cook it – would have been a very special Christmas treat, "largely because of the sense of indulgence about it". It certainly was so for the Cratchits who, notes Connelly, "despite being top end of the working class or very low middle class, had obviously saved up for their goose on Christmas Day". Albeit now dwarfed by the ubiquitous turkey, the tradition of the festive goose still resists – the British Poultry Council reports that about 250,000 are eaten every Christmas.

PARTRIDGE

Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with *The Twelve Days of Christmas* must at some point have wondered what on earth a partridge was doing in a pear tree. So it's a shock to discover that there may not have been a pear tree in the first place. Instead, Moss believes the song's first verse originally mentioned 'a partridge and a perdrix', the former referring to the English partridge and the latter to the red-legged, or French one. After all, *perdrix* is French for partridge and pronounced 'pair-dree', it sounds suspiciously like 'pear tree'. "It's like a little joke," says Moss.

This is a view he shares with Oxford music lecturer Andrew Gant, author of *Christmas Carols: from Village Green to Church Choir*. However, Gant also puts forward an alternative, rather shocking, explanation: that originally, there might not have been any partridge at all. Instead, the verse could refer to 'a part of the juniper tree', which appears in one of the song's many versions and is consistent with the evergreen's prominent role in seasonal decorations. At some point, the line could have been sung incorrectly, making the infinitely more entertaining partridge in a pear tree a Christmas symbol.

Top: the 'five gold rings' could allude to the yellowhammer (foreground). *Above:* the robin's red breast has been linked to the blood of Christ. *Right, top:* the turkey has been a festive staple since the 16th century

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SWAN

Before it went 'a-swimming' in *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, the swan graced affluent dining tables on feast days, including Christmas. "It was a status symbol," says Moss. The king had to grant a special permission for aristocrats and the gentry to keep the bird in swanneries, so it was invariably associated with what Moss calls conspicuous consumption. "You had to be very rich to serve it."

Although the swan wasn't just the preserve of the Christmas celebrations, the upper echelons of medieval society often ate it during the festive season, usually accompanied by equally expensive birds such as peacocks. Henry III, in particular, seemed to have a taste for swans. According to NF Ticehurst's *Early History of the Mute Swan*, the king kept ordering officials across the country to bring large numbers of birds to his court, making it clear that they'd better deliver or else. In 1247, the poor Sheriff of Hampshire was told that he had to turn up at the castle in Winchester on the Monday before Christmas with six swans "as he valued his body". But that was a trifle compared to 1251, when Henry demanded that the sheriffs of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Cumberland and Lancashire provide an extraordinary 125 swans for his Christmas festivities.

Perhaps surprisingly to modern eyes, historically the bird's place has been a lot more secure in the festive kitchen than it has in culture, despite *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Among the many versions of the song, there's one that dispenses with swans altogether, having instead squabs a-swimming in the seventh verse – and probably drowning very swiftly, considering their limited ability in water.

FIVE GOLD RINGS

What do rings have to do with festive birds? A lot, according to Stephen Moss. In his view, every verse of *The Twelve Days of Christmas* could refer to an avian species.

"We know that seven of 12 are obviously birds, so I started thinking: could the others also be birds? Why would they suddenly switch?"

He believes the 'ladies dancing' are cranes and the 'lords a-leaping' are black grouse. The five gold rings are harder to interpret, but he thinks he has the answer: yellowhammers, from 'yoldring', an old folk name for them.

TURTLE DOVE

Few birds have a firmer place in Christian iconography than the dove, which has been a symbol of the Holy Spirit ever since the newly baptised Jesus 'saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him' (Matthew 3:16). Although that particular bird was most likely a rock pigeon, turtle doves recur in the Bible, often as a sacrifice, and have long had a place in folklore as a symbol of loyalty and love (not least in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, which includes a 'wedded turtel with hir herte trewe' [her heart true]).

Their evolution into a Christmas icon, however, is much less clear, especially considering that they are migratory birds that leave the UK by September and don't return until April. It might simply derive from the popularity of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*: turtle doves make an appearance in the second verse to represent love, then, through the song, they become a symbol of Christmas in themselves. But their absence might have contributed to making British hearts grow fonder. This is certainly true for Moss, albeit not for turtle doves: "At Christmas, I think of swallows because they are not here: it's three months into when they've gone and three months till they'll come back."

PHEASANT, WOODCOCK AND OTHER GAMEBIRDS

Historically, says Connelly, "gamebirds tended to be the preserve of a rural aristocratic class or the beaters who helped them, because most were not good value for a middle- or lower-class family. They didn't give you enough meat – and that was not going to be good on Christmas Day".

On country estates, however, plenty of birds would have been shot and hung not only in the run-up to Christmas but also on Boxing Day, so, says Connelly, they often featured on the festive table later in the holiday season, towards the New Year and even Epiphany. Rather than replacing beef, they were served alongside it. Roasted or in pies – Queen Victoria's chef, Charles Elmé Francatelli, made a celebrated Christmas pie with pheasant, woodcock, wild duck and fowl – they were part of a lavish, multi-course menu that could also include fish, turkey and, in Queen Victoria's case, a wild boar's head. ■