

Special News Feature

Who really wrote 'The Night Before Christmas'

By Frederick M. Winship

NEW YORK, Dec. 5(UPI) -- Isn't it about time we recognize Henry Livingston, not Clement Clarke Moore, as the writer of "The Night Before Christmas" now that indisputable evidence has been offered as to authorship of America's most popular holiday poem?

First published anonymously two days before Christmas 1823 in the pages of the Troy (N.Y.) Sentinel, the poem whose original title was "A Visit from St. Nicholas" was not claimed by Moore, a distinguished professor at General Theological Seminary in New York City, until 21 years later after he had inquired of the newspaper who had submitted the poem and was told that all involved were dead.

It was then, in 1844, that Moore -- describing the poem as "a poor trifle" -- published it in a volume of his own collected poems. Before he died in 1863, he gave a number of manuscript copies of the poem to friends on request, three of which survive. One of them sold for \$225,000 at auction in 1995.

Moore's claim to authorship did not go down well with Livingston's children who wrote accounts of having heard the poem from their father's lips at breakfast on Christmas 1808, 15 years before it was published in the Troy Sentinel.

Livingston, a Dutchess County, N. Y., surveyor, mapmaker, and amateur journalist and poet, died in 1828 without making any claim of authorship to the poem that started with the famous line, "'Twas the night before Christmas ..." and established such conventions as St. Nicholas as a jolly elf, the stockings hung on a chimney used for his entrance and exit, and a sleigh drawn by eight tiny flying reindeer.

It was not until 1999 that Livingston's descendants applied to Professor Donald Foster of Vassar College, famed as a literary detective for finding the authors of unattributed texts, for help in establishing their ancestor as author of "The Night Before Christmas."

Foster had made headlines identifying a lost poem of Shakespeare's and unmasking Newsweek magazine's Joe Klein as the author of the best-seller, "Primary Colors." But his biggest coup was aiding the FBI in identifying Ted Kaczynski as author of the "manifesto" sent anonymously to The New York Times and therefore as the Unabomber.

Foster gives space in the last chapter of his book, "Author Unknown," a recent publication of Henry Holt & Company, to the Moore-Livingston controversy in which he has come down on the side of Livingston, known to his contemporaries as "Jolly Harry" and as a versifier in anapestic meter. This is the two short and one long syllable meter in which "The Night Before Christmas" is composed.

Moore, wealthy son of an early president of Columbia University and a specialist in the Hebrew language and Greek and Oriental literature, was known as a dour character who rarely smiled and a strict father who frowned on home frivolities. Although he did write verse, he used anapestic meter only once in a moralistic fable that Foster says was clearly based on an early Livingston poem.

Livingston, a major in the Revolutionary War, was a member of an extended Hudson River land-owning family that spawned many prominent Americans.

They included Founding Father Robert R. Livingston, who swore George Washington in as first U.S. president, Declaration of Independence signer Philip Livingston, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brockholst Livingston, and New Jersey's first governor, William Livingston. Latter day twigs on the family tree were Margaret (Mrs. William B.) Astor, a 19th century New York social queen and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

The Livingstons, though English, were tied to the Dutch patroon system and thoroughly versed in Dutch traditions and merry holiday observances. The Moore family lived by English custom only, according to Foster, and considered Christmas as a day for worship and repentance. Henry Livingston knew Dutch, Moore did not and it is unlikely that he would have named two of St. Nick's reindeer Dunder and Blixem, Dutch for "thunder" and "lightning."

Other clues to Livingston's authorship of the poem: Moore detested tobacco while Livingston wrote of it approvingly and was more likely to have put a pipe in St. Nick's mouth; Livingston often used the words "Happy Christmas" in his writings, but Moore never did, and the poem has St. Nick shouting "Happy Christmas to all."

Just as telling, Foster claims, are Livingston's custom of using the word "all" as an adverb as in "all through the house," repeated four times in the poem, a usage not found in Moore's literary output, and the poem and Livingston's writings are littered with exclamation points, rarely used by Moore.

Was Moore the Grinch who stole the authorship of the most famous of all Christmas ditties? Indubitably. So let's start giving credit where credit is due -- to "Jolly Harry" Livingston.

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