

THE CHRISTMAS ISLANDS DEFY YULE TRADITION

WITH THE SEASON fast approaching when countless columns in countless publications will be devoted to stories of the Nativity, Santa Claus, red-nosed reindeers, and Christmas customs and traditions, it seems only fitting that among all the reams of Christmas copy at least a few paragraphs should be devoted to the island that is the namesake of that popular holiday—namely, “Christmas Island.”

First of all, it is necessary that one rather confusing fact be cleared up right from the start. And that is, there is not “a Christmas Island”—there are two such islands. What's more, neither is located near the North Pole, as popular Christmas lore would favor placing them. On the contrary, one Christmas Island is located in the Pacific ocean south-southeast of Hawaii in a chain of islands called the Line Islands, and the other is found in the Indian Ocean just southwest of Java. (We'll call them “Pacific Christmas” and “Indian Christmas” to simplify identification.)

Now, when the word “Christmas” is mentioned, automatically a number of popular symbols flash to mind—churches, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, carols, shopping, etc. An appropriate thought, considering the islands' name, is how well do the Christmas islands live up to the concepts associated with their name?

NO SNOW, NO HOLLY . . .

Going down the list, the first to be crossed off is snow. The tropical locations of the islands take care of that score. “Indian Christmas” is completely covered by luxurious tropical vegetation, while on the other hand, “Pacific Christmas” is a low semi-barren, uninhabitable island famous for its beautiful colors—but without much in the way of fauna, and without soil that will grow fruits and vegetables usually found in the tropics.

Naturally, it follows that under such climatic conditions, Christmas trees as we know them are also definitely out. And those proverbial halls would have to go undecorated if they depended on the Christmas islands for their supply of holly and mistletoe.

Reindeer? There are none on the Christmas islands, of course. As a matter of fact, there are no animals whatever of comparable stature or size. “Pacific Christmas” is inhabited mostly by birds (and lots of them), turtles, land crabs, rats, and recently cats. The animal life on “Indian Christmas” is similar, mostly birds, rats, bats, and certain kinds of insects.

WHENCE THE NAME?

At this time a perfectly reasonable and legitimate question to ask is, “How ever did the islands become labeled with such a misnomer?” A little history supplies the answer.

EXHIBIT OF DARWINIANA IN SECOND MONTH



The special exhibit, “Darwin's Origin of Species,” opened last month to mark the centennial of the publication of the great naturalist's theories, will remain on view in Stanley Field Hall through December 31. There are six panels, each dealing with a phase of the Darwin story. Included are holograph letters written by Darwin, specimens he collected on the historic voyage of the *Beagle*, and a copy of the rare first edition of *Origin of Species*. In the photograph above, part of the exhibit is viewed by two high school girls—Karen Selchow, of Woodstock, Illinois, and Kathy Nelson of Chicago.

Let's go back to the year 1777. It is winter, and at a place called Valley Forge an army of American revolutionaries led by General George Washington is courageously holding its own against the elements in one of the fiercest winters the men had ever experienced—a winter later to be recorded in all U. S. history books. At the same time that struggle was going on at Valley Forge, on the other side of the earth another battle was being waged by a crew of able seamen led by a distinguished English navigator and explorer, Captain James Cook. But theirs was a struggle with the sea. Captain Cook was navigating the Pacific Ocean on a voyage that was destined also to get into history books.

On December 24, 1777, Captain Cook sighted land, a small island atoll in mid-Pacific. His ship was running low on food, so Captain Cook sent a party ashore to forage for additions to the ship's supplies. When the group returned the only thing they brought with them was a number of large turtles and the disheartening news that there was very little else besides turtles and birds to be found—and no fresh water. That evening when Captain Cook went to his journal he suddenly realized it was Christmas Eve. And that is how Christmas Island in the Pacific got its name.

As for “Indian Christmas,” we have to go back a little bit further in history for its christening. The year was 1643. A homeward bound merchant ship of the East India Company, commanded by Captain Williams Mynors, was passing through the Indian Ocean when it unexpectedly came upon an atoll not shown on its charts. The day was December 25, Christmas Day. And so, another island was named. It was not always called Christmas Island, however, for a number of years after Captain Mynors landed on the atoll, some other voyagers landed there and gave it the name “Moni.” On a few maps that name still appears, but Christmas Island is presently its official name.

BOTH ARE ATOLLS

It is a rather curious fact that the two islands, owned by the British, were discovered on the same day of the year, and consequently both named “Christmas Island,” for the pattern of the subsequent development of the two is strikingly similar. As already mentioned, both are atolls (“Pacific Christmas” with 222 square miles is the largest atoll in the world), and although one is covered with luxurious tropical vegetation and the other is barren in comparison, they have in common the fact that they lack any appreciable surface water. This factor discouraged human habitation on either for a number of years.

The first considerable settlement on the islands occurred around the end of the 19th century, prompted by the hope of economic exploitation. Both the atolls appeared to be rich in phosphates, “Indian Christmas” having a number of large limestone outcrops, and “Pacific Christmas” having deposits of guano. (These deposits consist of the accumulated excrement of birds, usually sea fowl, and occur in rainless areas along the ocean. Guano has commercial use as fertilizer.)

The first few attempts at profitable exploitation of the atolls were rather unsuccessful, and as a result the islands changed hands a number of times. In 1940, however, “Indian Christmas” exported 238,006 tons of phosphates under the management of the Christmas Island Phosphate Company. Production stopped for a period during World War II when the island was occupied by the Japanese. The productivity of “Pacific Christmas” has been less notable. Although it was leased in 1913 to the Central Pacific Coconut Plantations, Ltd., by the British government for a period of 87 years for the production of coconuts, oil, pearl shell, and guano, since 1930 it has been used mainly as a British air stopover.

These are the stories of the Christmas islands, rather insignificant in their impact on history and the world's economy, and equally insignificant in their effect on the Christmas season . . . sure is a shame they don't have any reindeer . . . or snow . . . or . . . Santa Claus!

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