Now Dasher! Now Dancer! Fettle up; it’s nearly time for St Nicholas to go visiting on!

Ho, Mr Classicist

You’ve set yourself a problem this time. What are you going to do about this one?

You are right, Gentle Reader,

for what we have here is undeniably a classic: a rum-ti-tum set of verses, 56 lines in all, that have been on the go for 180 years and are more widely known now than ever before. But in Britain anyway they have had a lopsided history and have achieved no definitive status. Neil Philip for instance does not include the poem in his Oxford Book of Children’s Verse (1996) although his predecessors, the Opies, had done so in their edition of 1973.

Undeniably of cultural moment too.

These verses are the first classic contribution by the United States to the canon of children’s literature in English, and they stand behind the christening of St Nicholas magazine, the greatest of all such productions for children. They are also the probable source of the aerial Christmas reindeer and their sleigh (and hence of such abominations as ?Jingle Bells? and the hateful Rudolph). Further, they contain the first description of that figure ?dressed all in fur? who has come to preside over bran-tubs in a million stores ? faithfully represented as to looks, if not temperament, in Raymond Briggs’s latterday classic: ?He had a broad face and a little round belly / That shook when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly ...?

Despite all that, he had unpretentious beginnings.

His verses were composed by Clement Clarke Moore, a professor at the General Theological Seminary in lower Manhattan, and he is said to have written them on Christmas Eve in 1822 as a surprise for his family. A friend though, visiting from upstate Troy, copied them into her album and a year later caused them to be published in the Troy Sentinel newspaper under the title ?Account of a Visit from St Nicholas?. From that obscure start they made their way through various almanacs and magazines, sometimes with ?Santa Claus? incorporated in the title and occasionally with one or two rough and ready line drawings.

It took a quarter of a century

for American publishers to realize some potential here (merchandizing possibilities and character-exploitation not then being a sine qua non for acceptable children’s books). By 1847 ? thanks largely to London influences ? there was a healthy trade in picture books and in that year Henry M Onderdonk of New York published the first independently-
conceived edition of the poem (dated 1848), illustrated by a local wood engraver, T C Boyd.

With only 56 lines and a theme of seasonal appeal

you'd think that picture-book makers would see the poem as ideal copy. But successors were slow to follow and only after the famous edition of 1869, illustrated by Thomas Nast, did Commerce really get going and ?The Night Before Christmas?, as it came to be called, was all set to take on the character of an American folk-ballad.

Not so in Britain however.

It is one of the mysteries of publishing that, despite the festive reputation of the Victorian Christmas and despite the zest for picture books shown by Victorian and Edwardian publishers, no significant edition of The Night Before Christmas appeared in Britain until Harrap published the one illustrated by Arthur Rackham in 1931. Even that seems to have been a bit of a fluke and it's only in the last 30 years or so that the poem has come out with any frequency, and then often in internationally syndicated editions.

So what to recommend?

? a question barely answerable since everything goes out of print so quickly. (What happened to Michael Foreman?'s jolly rebus pop-up of 1988? Why do Oxford not keep Tomi de Paola?'s version regularly in print?) Any judgement on what is most fitting depends on whether you like your Father Christmas to be an artistic creation or a participant in the customary seasonal vulgarities. There?'s a lot to be said for the latter and its historic range can be glimpsed in a Chronicle Books edition (1) which illustrates the verses with illustrations drawn from over a dozen past publications. Santas jolly, and a few Santas sinister, abound, and if you feel that such figures conform to a natural, rather than a synthetic, excitement that children have for Christmas then you could also try the Award Edition, illustrated by Lesley Smith (2), the pages begirt with busy pictures involving many frolicking elves. Among more self-conscious interpretations you might do well to disregard that of William Wegman (3) who peoples his version (reindeer included) with a bunch of photogenic Weimaraners. Much more acceptable are, first, Christian Birmingham?'s cosy ?in period? rendering which alternates soft-focus colour plates with monochrome spot-drawings (4), and, second, a wondrous folio album illustrated by Matt Tavares with quasi stipple-engravings manièr de Chris van Allsburg (5). Every square millimetre is subject to the canons of elegant design ? a Christmas Eve for the connoisseur classes.

Bibliographical Notes:

The numbered books above are all entitled The Night Before Christmas with the author given as Clement Clarke Moore, except for (5) which reads ?Twas the Night Before Christmas by ?Anon?. Mr Tavares harbours doubts about Moore?'s authorship.

(1) Chronicle Books (San Francisco, 1997), 0 8118 1712 1, £10.99, available from Ragged Bears
(2) Award Publications Ltd (London, 2001), 1 84135 011 7, £2.99
(3) Hyperion (NY, 2000), 0 7868 0608 7, £11.99, available from Turnaround
(4) Collins (London, 2000), 0 00 713398 7, £4.99
(5) Candlewick/Walker Books (Cambridge MA/London, 2002), 0 7636 1585 4, £10.99

Some information on editions and dating comes from Nancy H Marshall?'s Descriptive Bibliography of the poem published in the USA by Oak Knoll Press, Delaware in 2002 (1 5845 6071 1).

The illustrations are taken from the Chronicle Books edition, see (1) above. Top left is by Elizabeth McKinstry from 1928, top right by Joseph Cummings Chase from 1899 and the main illustration by A.E.K. from 1918. The cover artist is unknown, the picture being taken from a postcard circa 1908.