

## Introduction

St. Nicholas Press is pleased to release this nearly 190-year overdue milestone in American Literature. For the first time since December 23, 1823, when the *Troy Sentinel* published what has since become perhaps the most-beloved children's poem in the Western world, we are printing this classic work in the name of its likely author, Henry Livingston, Jr.

Since "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" made its anonymous appearance, the poem has been published in over 1,000 editions, and in dozens of languages. But in a real sense, this is a "first edition" of the fabled work because no previous title page has ever credited Henry as the author. In giving this Poughkeepsie, NY., farmer, poet, and judge his due, we are hoping to establish a venerable tradition that will eventually overturn one of the longest-standing uncritical biases in American publishing.

This letterpress edition includes several other firsts as well. An historian of St. Nicholas would notice them, but others many not. Our illustrator, Indigo Moorehead, drew inspiration from the first illustrations of "SANTECLAUS" found in an American book (1821). The title page border is patterned after the first time (ca 1830) the poem was printed with illustrations. This may also be the first time the dancing and prancing poem has been printed with line breaks that cut the original tetrametrical anapests into halves. Lastly, our own Nicholas is based on what is believed to be the first drawing (1810) of St. Nicholas ever commissioned in North America.

We have chosen December 6<sup>th</sup> to release the book for two reasons. First, because it is the Feast Day of the ancient namesake of our Press, St. Nicholas of Myra in Lycia, the Wonderworker. Secondly, this was the date in 1809 upon which Washington Irving published his famous satire on New York history, a book that began the bowdlerization, and eventual bastardization, of the Dutch Sinterklaas. Nicholas' cultural conversion from revered Saint to King Santa, son of Mammon, which began in the Reformation, received a jolt that day. Henry, perhaps fortunately, never lived to see how in fact his own creation played such a pivotal role in the development of the modern Santa Cult, with its own strange mixtures of mythic wonders and vulgar absurdities.

Because Henry Livingston died in 1828, nearly 20 years before the Rev. Clement Clarke Moore publicly claimed authorship of the poem, he could not defend his honor. In truth, there is not now and probably never will be any documentary evidence to definitively prove who the author was. The copies of the poem in Moore's hand, fabricated decades after 1823, are bogus as evidence. The handwritten copy of the poem claimed to have once belonged to the Livingston family apparently went up in flames in a Wisconsin farmhouse fire.

Having said that, however, we heartily agree with those scholars, folklorists, and poets who see in "Account..." the hand and heart of the very Dutch Henry Livingston. Despite good arguments on either side, he clearly has the better claim to authorship, so we are pleased to be the first publishers to honor him in this way, even if it is 188 years late.

Wishing you all a Merry Feast of St. Nicholas,

Michael B. Billmeyer  
St. Nicholas Press