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### [Book about believing revives holiday mystery](#)

**With a new version of 'The Night Before Christmas,' a Maine publisher takes a side in the dispute over who wrote it.**

By [Bob Keyes](#) Staff Writer

FREEPORT — With its first book, the tiny St. Nicholas Press has stirred a centuries-old Christmas controversy.

This week, the Freeport-based publisher is issuing a limited-edition run of “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas.” The illustrated hardcover book features the poem known as “The Night Before Christmas.”

In and of itself, that’s not news. The poem, which is in the public domain, has been reprinted in book form hundreds of times since it first appeared anonymously in a New York newspaper in the early 1800s.

What makes the St. Nicholas Press book unique is the author. St. Nicholas credits Henry Livingston Jr. as the poem’s creator – not Clement Clarke Moore, who is widely assumed to have written it.

**“No one has ever published this book in Livingston’s name,”** said Michael Billmeyer of Freeport, the founder of St. Nicholas Press.

With this edition, Billmeyer champions the claim of Livingston’s descendants. They long have argued that Livingston wrote the poem, whose recitation has become a Christmas Eve tradition for many American families.

One of those descendants, Mary Van Deusen of Wrentham, Mass., wrote the introduction to Billmeyer’s new book.

“How appropriate that this wonderful edition of Henry Livingston’s famous Christmas poem should come to you just over 200 years from when Henry’s children remembered their father reciting it to them in the old family homestead in Poughkeepsie, New York, in about 1808,” she wrote. “The poem was first published in the Troy Sentinel in 1823, and that’s the version you’ll be reading here.”

The controversy is not new. Scholars and literary sleuths have debated the authorship for many years, and even those who feel strongly one way or another concede that the mystery will never be solved.

While Billmeyer believes Livingston wrote the poem, he admits that the mystery itself was part of his motive for making “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas” the inaugural title of his press.

“I love the whole controversy and the whole historical evidence chase,” he said.

He hopes the book will rekindle the debate and draw attention in literary circles.

**Certainly, the book itself might draw notice. It is a beautiful book, with a new set of illustrations by Indigo Moorehead, an artist from Massachusetts. Billmeyer had it printed in old-fashioned letterpress style by Ascensius Press, also is based in Freeport.**

**Billmeyer has printed only 250 copies of the book, making it a collector's edition. He has priced each copy at \$150, and expects to sell out quickly.**

Both principals in this story are long dead. Livingston was a Revolutionary War officer, a judge and a poet, among other things. Family lore says he read the poem aloud to his children in 1822, a year before it appeared in print. He died in 1828.

Moore was a professor and a poet, and began claiming authorship of the Christmas poem in 1844.

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## **LIVINGSTON VS. MOORE**

When “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas” (popularly known as “The Night Before Christmas”) first appeared in the Troy (N.Y.) Sentinel in 1823, the reindeer lines read:

“Now! Dasher, now! Dancer, now! Prancer, and Vixen,

"On! Comet, on! Cupid, on! Dunder and Blixem;”

When Moore published his version in 1844, he changed some reindeer names and punctuation. His lines read:

“Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen!

"On, Comet! On, Cupid! on, Dunder and Blitzen!”

## **WHERE TO BUY THE BOOK**

The St. Nicholas Press book “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas” is available locally at Longfellow Books in Portland and at Gulf of Maine Books in Brunswick, or online at

<http://www.saintnicholaspress.com/ordernik.html>