



## Transcript of Nordic on Tap podcast: The Many Faces of the Tomte

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**Guest:** Dr. Lotta Gavel Adams, Emeritus professor, Scandinavian Studies, University of Washington

It's time for Nordic on Tap. Welcome to our podcast, featuring interviews, music, folktales and lots of hygge, all with a Nordic flavor. I'm your host, Eric Stavney.

Eric: Welcome to this December edition of Nordic on Tap. We'll have a look at Tomte, the artists who have illustrated these creatures and the origin of Nordic Santa Claus. The Tomte is an elf-like creature who traditionally took care of the farm and its animals, but otherwise it's invisible to humans. He and it's a he is equivalent to the Norwegian Nissen. I first learned about the Swedish tomte when my wife introduced me to Harold Wiberg's illustrations and three tomte books, which somehow I had amazingly never seen.

I'm quite familiar with the Norwegian nisse, but the tomte is very similar. I absolutely loved Wiberg's tomte in his books and also admired his lifelike depictions of the farm animals and the Fox in those stories. Now, when I think of a tomte, I see only Wiberg's illustrations in my head, but each illustrator before him moved the concept of the tomte in different directions, including, as you'll see, the development of the modern day Santa Claus. To try to tease out the cultural history of tomte illustration, I called up emeritus Professor Lotta Gavel Adams from the University of Washington Scandinavian Studies Department.

She's a cultural historian and a specialist in Nordic mythology, among other things. So to prepare you for this conversation, if you like, we're going to talk about several pictures, and I wanted to give you the opportunity to go look those up so you can see what we're talking about. We'll start with pictures drawn by Jenny Nyström, which is Jenny in the American pronunciation J-E-N-N-Y , Nyström N-Y-S-T-R-Ö, with the two dots over it, M ---and if you just Google her name, you'll see many postcards of the Victorian art with this little guy in it.

Second, we're going to talk about Beskow is spelled B-E-S-K-O-W...and especially you'll want to Google the scenes around the table in Petter P-E-T-T-E-R and Lotta's L-O-T-T-A-S Petter and Lotta's Christmas. This is a book that she illustrated, and you might also add to that Google request to look at the scenes with goat masks in them. We'll also talk about Haddon Sundblom H-A-D-D-O-N and Sundblom S-U-N-D-B-L-O-M and his pictures of Santa Claus with Coca Cola. We'll touch on Astrid Lindgren of Pippi Longstocking fame; Lindgren L-I-N-D-G-R-E-N who rewrote the tomte books from the poems that they were originally written in, and Harald Wiberg, W-I-B-E-R-G, the naturalist artist who illustrated them.

And I was talking about the Lindgren-Wiberg books are the Tomte T-O-M-T-E, The Tomte and the Fox, and Christmas at the Tomte's Farm. Those are all the English titles. I'll place pictures of these artists on the Nordic on Tap website at nordicontap.com when that gets up and running. So here's our conversation.

Eric:

....Where that might come from...I can imagine that isn't necessarily only Scandinavian.

Lotta:

No, it isn't. But it has a long, long tradition goes back to the Middle Ages that we have records of having a farm spirit that spirits. If somebody drowned in a lake or in a creek, then it was the water Sprite, some kind of supernatural being that dragged them down. If you walked in the forest and you got lost, then it was the huldre who kind of lured you off the beaten tracks. But each farm, actually, the word tempted comes from the word, which means a plot of land or a farmstead.

So he was originally the farm spirit, and he would take care of the farm and the people there. He wasn't very visible. He was out at night most of the time, and he was mostly very good. He didn't really care for children, but he was very good with animals. But you had to treat him well, too, because he had kind of a bit of a temper. There are many stories, stories in the old Nordic folktales about the farm spirit on Christmas Eve. He definitely wanted his porridge to put out in the stable, and he wanted sugar on or honey on it.

Otherwise it was bad business. There's one story about the farm wife put the honey on top of the porridge and it sank to the bottom. And so the Tom came out and said, wow, no honey. And he got so angry that he broke the legs of the cow and just in anger. And then he started eating the porridge and he realized the honey was at the bottom. So then he regretted what he had done and took the cone with the broken legs and carried it over to the neighbor's house and brought back the healthy cow again.

So you had to treat him well and it could be a little touchy if you didn't do that.

Eric:

Yeah. So that served the purpose of explaining the unexplainable why people have good luck or bad luck, maybe.

Lotta:

Yes. People like to have something to explain good luck and bad luck and also to behave in certain ways so that they do get better luck.

Eric:

Right. I like that. So was it (Viktor) Rydberg that sort of focused the home in wintertime because it's darker, right? Is he supposedly the first person who kind of focused it?

Lotta:

Then he is one of the first ones who wrote about the tomte. And he did it in a story, Adventures of Little Viggs at Christmas Eve, and particularly in a poem from 1881. And it has nothing of Christmas in it, nothing of Christmas. It's a cold midwinter night and the tomte is out there standing looking at the snow and wondering what's the meaning of all this? Where do we come from? Where are we going? And he asked this young painter illustrator Jenny Nyström to illustrate his poem. And she did.

And she has since been credited of creating the image of the Swedish Swedish because nobody know before read by what the Thumper looked like. It didn't look like. So she created a small little being so very small, tiny person dressed in Gray and with a Gray hat. It was an old man. Eventually he got a red cap. Jenny Nyström went to Paris and studied painting there. And then she discovered the postcard market and said, wow, why don't we have that in Sweden? And she went back and talked with a Bonnie Or publishing company.

They were not interested first. But eventually they discovered that the postcard market was great and that's when she started creating her tomtes. And in the beginning they were little old man.

These are kind of the things that you would put on the table at Christmas. And you can see this guy is. [We're looking at a Jenny Nyström postcard with the tomte]

Eric:

An old guy on white beard and red cap.

Lotta:

He has a green jacket.

Eric:

He has a green jacket and a red belt. Yes.

Lotta:

And you also have this complaint that he looked so ugly. So they wanted to make him a little jollier, a little nicer. So she did. And you see here with the Christmas goat. Yes. The Christmas goat.

In the original stories around Christmas. It wasn't the talk that brought the presents. It was the Christmas goat. And the man of the house would dress up in a goat mask on Christmas Eve and give the present. And that is illustrated in an Elsa Beskow early book. And he's one of them.

Eric:

Oh, look at that goat mask [we're looking at Petter and Lotta's Christmas book, with the table scene and two men with goat masks].

Lotta:

Yes. He was one of the most famous illustrators and book writers of the early turn of the last century. And it's interesting today. We say "jultomte" today. And Norwegian is "julnisse". But in Finnish it is "joulupukki". And that means julkuk. So they still call him Santa Claus. But that's the name...the Yule or Christmas goat is the one who brings the present in Finland today.

Eric: Interesting.

Lotta: Yeah. But anyway, it was Jenny Newstrom's original illustration. She has been credited by creating the image of the Swedish new tote, the Swedish.

Because before this Valley and in a symptom, nobody really know what it looked like. And then eventually her image spread so fast because it was postcards on cookie jars on everything. It appeared everywhere. So they became very popular.

Eric:

And then did they eventually start to look like in terms of colors and what was worn more like modern Santa Claus? I mean red with white, fur cuffs.

Lotta:

Also, even the old Father Christmas in the old story, in the old poem the Night Before Christmas. The illustrations from that poem, the contemporary illustration, is dressed in green, sometimes in red, but mostly in green, as you can see.

Well, this is, but it's interesting that the modern day Santa, the original Santas were very small. But the modern day Santa is actually a creation of the Swedish American illustrator Haddon Sundblom, who was asked by the Coca Cola Company to make an ad campaign in the 1930s because Coca Cola was then only drunk in the summer.

So the Coca Cola company wanted to create something to make it Coca Cola very convenient around Christmas time, too. So he created all these pictures that we today see everywhere. And that in the present day Santas that you find in the malls. And so are models of Haddon Sundblom. And he was born in the US, but his parents came from Öland in Sweden. And why all red? Well, CocaCola colors are red and white. We have some images of some red before, and sometimes when you say it was Coca Cola that made the Santa Claus red and said, no, that's not true.

We had some red ones before, but he was the one that created this big, jolly guy with big beard with happy face, red nose, kind red pants, red jacket, and the fur cuffs on his collar, white beard and a black belt. That was his creation. And for some reason he was a big Santa too. He was not small.

So he kind of became the image that we today see in the malls and whatever in contemporary, there are many that's the American version of something, right. But of course, there are many, many other hardly isn't an illustrator that hasn't tried their hand in some way at the interpretation I think you mentioned Harald (Wiberg).

Eric:  
He's my favorite.

Lotta: He's your favorite. He's kind of a latecomer, though he wasn't until the 1960s that he started to illustrate before that. He was illustrator and painter and sketcher and etching of animals. I remember the summer house where I spent the summer. It was a very nice one with the deer of the deer that my father got. He kind of priced it. So he did a lot of animals, lots of nature. And when you do nature, it's not very far to do to step into the when he got his breakthrough, it was with a version of a modern version adaptation of Rydberg's poem.

And it was adapted by Astrid Lindgren. And he was asked to illustrate the story, "The Tomte". And there's also one called "Tomte and the Fox" that you probably think his tomte is also small. Yes, it isn't the Coca Cola tomte. It's a small one of the farm spirit, and he's not bigger. He often portrayed with a cat or a Fox, and he is just as small as they are. But he has an enormous big head and enormous big beard, small body but a big hat and a big beard and a big head.

And he's also very close to the animals. The more famous illustrations are with the cat or the Fox, and he's kind of the same size of those.

Eric:  
So what is it that he speaks the language that only animals and children understand?

Lotta:  
Yeah. That's what they like to say.

Eric:  
So what happens to us when we grow up? We can't understand that language anymore.

Lotta:  
No, we lose the ability to play and we become too serious. We become too serious. We lose our imagination. We lose our ability to dream and imagine and go off into a Wonderland because then we enter adulthood and then we can't do it too bad.

Eric:

So it sounds like you're saying, and I make that connection, too, that Wiberg was so nature connected. And it's almost as you said, a small step to see the tomte as sort of part of that backdrop as nature spirit. Is that what you're saying? You think?

Lotta:

Yes, I'm saying. And all in Scandinavia, the tomtes in the Nordic countries, tomtes are fairly small. They have spirits for nisse, which is short for Nils, or St Nicklaus.

Eric: No kidding?

During the Olympic Games in Oslo, in Norway, they had the opening ceremony. They had little kisses, little spirits popping up from the ground. So they are small. And they are nature spirits that live in nature. And you better behave nice to nature. You better treat nature nicely. I think that's one of the basis, too, for sustainability and respect for nature. And nature loves in Sweden because it's alive.

It lives, something lives. Then you better take care of it. You can't kind of profit and exploit it however much you want.

Eric:

Yeah, that makes sense. Would you say that Astrid Lindgren took the narratives that she put in the book is fairly different from Rydberg's poem that she departed from? It was pretty close? I've heard different people address that question.

Lotta:

An artist, takes a text and adapts it. They make that change. And I was kind of looking for my copy of Lindgren and I couldn't find it!

Eric:

I know where mine is!

Lotta:

I thought I knew I've been living out on Vashon, which has been my summer home. But now I'm back in town again. Sure, I have it there. And I was looking. I was kind of rummaging through the bookshelf. I couldn't find it.

So at this point, I don't exactly know how she adapted it, but it was based on Rydberg. But Rydberg's poem. The Tomte is the classic Swedish Christmas poem, and it has nothing to do with gift giving or Christmas. Essentially, it's a dark, cold night. And one of the farm spirits is wondering, where do we go and where do we come from? And what is the meaning of it all? Very philosophical.

Eric:

Yes, indeed.

Lotta:

But still draw the deep. Nothing commercial or really Christmas light. But it still has become the classic Christmas poem. And particularly, I think most Swedish kids growing up in school know the first line,

"Midvinternattens k√ald √sr h√rd, stj√snorna gnistra och glimma" ["The cold of midwinter's night is harsh, the stars sparkle and twinkle"],

and the last line, "The snow is shining white on the roofs and everywhere", "endast tomten  $\sqrt{\S}$ r vaken"... "and only the tomte is awake".

Those are the lines, the rest you probably don't remember. But this poem was at least growing up in Sweden, as famous as it was the Night Before Christmas.

Eric:

I've always sometimes had the feeling that the tomte books, the Astrid Lindgrens and Gammeldagsjul [written by Harald Wiberg alone] as well....there's this edge about it. Is he lonely? Is he not lonely? He's just solitary?

Lotta:

He's solitary. I no, don't think he's lonely. He's just holiday. He likes to go around and ponder what nature. What the meaning of it is how you take care of nature. It was also a little grumpy. It was a little grumpy.

In the early folktales. You had to treat him well. Those are the stories about how one farm wife thought that he was looking so raggedy that she made him a nice new suit. And he was really offended. Really offended. So you had to be give him porridge Christmas and with honey and sugar on and keep him happy.

Keep nature happy. Do what's right with nature.

Eric:

Yeah. I've heard lots of really good. Like he got so grumpy. He tied the cow's tails together in the bar or mysteriously the gate got open and all the animals got out.

Lotta:

Exactly. He would do all kinds of things. All kinds of things.

Eric:

Valter Juva did the Finnish book of it? "Tonttu"?

Lotta:

Yeah. Tonttu. There's also Finnish name for it. But really what he's mostly known for is joulupukki, which is the julbuk if you look up. But Tonttu's also name that's more kind of a farm spirit. I'm not so familiar with this person you are talking about. I only know of Zacharias Topelius in the turn of the century (1900). The same at same time as Rydberg. And so on. He did some Christmas writings too. About the tonttu.

Eric:

We have a picture of John Bauer's joulupukki and a little guy on top.

Lotta:

Yes, that is lovely too. That is lovely.

When you go to Ikea. Now you can buy this Christmas coat and put the decorations. I have several years that my grandchildren enjoy and so on. They always have to put one by the Christmas tree. When you put the Christmas presents under, you have to put the new book next to it because he's the one that brings the presence.

Eric:

That's great. Yeah. We have one of the straw julebuk, the Norwegian version. Yeah.

Lotta:

There's one more recent illustrator, also called Sven Nordqvist. I don't know if you have heard, but he did the Mamma Moo stories. Very popular. He was actually an architect, but he really wanted to be an illustrator. Has written a series of books, and he has also done one called The Fox Hunt or The Fox Chase, where he also deals with and he has a cat. He deals with being kind to nature and taking care of nature and so on. He also has a tomato, but that's a mechanical tomte.

He's a tomte machine because he has his very favorite cat called "Findus" -- or I don't know what he's called -- "Pettson and Findus" in Swedish. He has sometimes another name in the English translations. I don't remember call it right now. But he's very concerned that his beloved cat will not have Santa [tomte] come for Christmas. So he decides to create one mechanically instead.

But that has not become very popular as widespread. Still, the most widespread are the Nyströmm ones, the Santa Claus ones that nobody really connects with.

Eric:

Coca Cola.

Lotta:

Yes.

Eric:

And I don't even connect that with tomte. I'm sorry. Santa Claus. Sure, he's over there. But the tomte is something else.

Lotta:

He's over here. Yeah. Exactly what we call the view.

When I grew up in Sweden, Santa Claus would come in person, lived in a house four story house with four, eight families or something. One medical doctor had his practice on the first floor, and he was always the one that was attuned. And so my mother would put the bag outside outdoor. And then we would all stand in the window and we would see him coming. And he looked raggedy clothes. He had a big beer and a big mask on his face.

And he would go and he would knock on the door. Come on, come on, come on. We knocked on the door and he said, Come on, come on, come on. And he would then start coming. And he would joke with us and ask the classic question since nursinga la born. Are there any good? Well, we have kids, kids? Yes. And then he would hand out the presents and he would get the glass of glug. Then he would go up the next floor and the next floor and he gets replaced.

So I understand we lived in the second floor. So we were fairly good. The people who lived on the fourth floor said when he came to the 8th apartment, he was pretty west. He couldn't speak very well. But in the early times, Christmas presents were not delivered through the chimney. He came in person and he knocked on the door and asked if you had been well behaved all year. And that is a continuation of the Christmas goat where you dressed up in where the man of the house dressed up in these goat masks and so on.

And then they were the ones who brought the presents. And then you would review who they were. But we of course, we could see the Santa. And we saw that it didn't look normal. He had this kind of face mask and so on. So we know it was the Daddy of the house would disappear before Christmas. And then suddenly the Santa Claus would appear. But here in the US now, with the

Santas coming, dropping through the chimney at night and delivering presents a lot. There have been a lot of discussions in psychological terms.

Also, is it good for children to believe in Santa? Should parents deceive them and tell them there is a Santa, or should they tell them that it's all fake? Will that destroy their imagination? And there's two sides to this. Some people say, no. Let them keep their joy in doing it. And others say, no, you can't deceive the children. When my daughter was small, I was at the school. You don't deceive your children. You speak honestly. I told them there isn't really a Santa, but this is what we say.

It's a game. We do. And so on. And she would hear that. They said yes. And then we still would go to the mall and she would climb up on the lap of Santa and says, okay, so when you come down to the chimney, walk down the hall and in the guest bedroom on the top shelf there in the presence, she would also say, at night before Christmas. Oh, look, there's somebody flying. That must be Santa. So I could tell her all I wanted. Santa is just an imaginary figure.

She still likes to kind of strike the sense that when it would come to the chimney exactly where the presents were so that he would know.

Eric:

Yeah. I remember the day when my daughter figured out that the nisse was me. We would make a tree together and set it out. And then in the middle of the night I would go and try to hoof down. As much of that. I got to talk about a stomachache, but it was always partly eaten the next day and somehow she worked it out. And that was a tough day.

That was a tough day.

Lotta: They have their own world and we may impose on it, but they mature as they mature. Yes.

Eric:

So kind of off to the side. Back to the goat. What's the relationship to sort of the evil side of Krampus?

Lotta:

I think there's two different submissions there. We don't really know where the Nordic julebuk comes from, and he's kind of typical for the Nordic countries. I think they think back. I read some historical version at one time, but when it goes back to the time in the Roman times, when they would deliver presents around New Year's Eve and then eventually during Christian times, you started delivering presents around Christmas Eve instead, and in some way that got translated to the book in Sweden. But the Krampus is quite a different thing.

He is the one that punishes the kids for having misbehaved. And I don't know if you've been to a town in Germany or in Austria, they are horrible, absolutely scary. Adults would get scared. But the streets are lined with kids with a parent and they are so excited. And the Krampus, the different monsters with horns will come and the kids with their whoops and so on. And the kids would just squeal with fear, squeal and be happy. That's a different tradition. It isn't really a connection.

I don't think there is a small connection. I don't think it has been really clear that between the goat and Father Christmas and then in connection also with St. Nicholas, I have an early illustration hearing.

Eric:

He's got a bush [wreath of ivy] in it on his head and he's riding a goat. [We're looking at a picture of Father Christmas on a goat]



Lotta:

He's riding a goat, but he's not in red, but he's bringing presents.

Eric:

That's great. Well, I'll let you go. Thanks so much. I appreciate it.

Lotta:

Okay.

Eric: Vi sees.

Lotta: Hej d√.

Eric:

You can hear, and in fact, see Dr. Gavel Adams read other stories, such as those of the famous Moomins and drawings of Tove Jansson at [nordicmuseum.org](http://nordicmuseum.org) or rather, just Google "Expert Chat with Lotta Gavel Adams" on YouTube. As I mentioned, Dr. Gavel Adams teaches at the University of Washington, where I earned my degree in Norwegian language and literature.

So now some music. Since we're talking about secular spirits like the tomte, let's move to the non-secular to the Scandinavian Christian tradition celebrating the legend of Santa Lucia.

This ceremony is usually held around December 13 in Norway, Sweden, Finland -- or the Swedish speaking part of Finland -- and Denmark, and by other Scandinavians around the globe. It's also, of course, celebrated in Italy, which is where the origin of the Santa Lucia Festival began. Santa Lucia was a fourth century martyr, a young woman who brought food to the Christians hiding in the Roman catacombs.

In the ceremony, a young woman playing Santa Lucia, St. Lucy, in a white robe walk slowly into the room or a Church with a wreath of lit candles in her hair, followed by other young women holding lit candles.

Sometimes young men in white are included, and they often are wearing a cone shaped hat with stars on it. So I'd like to play you a recording of the song De Lucia song. It comes from the Festival of St. Lucia, a video produced by Gustavus Adolphus College in Bemidjii, Minnesota, in 2020. The song is usually sung by Santa Lucia and young women, young men who are in the processional and go into the Church or into the room and up to the front.

The Lucia Singers are led by Dr. Elisabeth Cherland, and on the organ is Chad Winterfeld.

[The choir sings the Santa Lucia song, accompanied by the organ in the Christ Chapel of Gustavus Adolphus College].

Beautiful stuff. If you're a lover of Scandinavian music like I am and want to hear more of this kind of thing or folk or pop or jazz of a Scandinavian flavor. I encourage you to check out the Scandinavian Hour broadcast out of Seattle. It's at 6:00 and 09:00 a.m. Pacific on Saturdays and again at 6:00 am Pacific on Sundays. They broadcast on KKNW radio, but it's easiest to visit their website at [www.scandinavianhour.com](http://www.scandinavianhour.com), all one word, lowercase. And just click the "Listen Live" button.

So my friend Seth Tufteland is the main host. Doug Warne is still there in the background, and their friends serve up an hour of great tunes from the Nordic countries and the Nordics around the world.

To read up more on nisse, I recommend the articles in the Norwegian American news at [norwegianamerican.com](http://norwegianamerican.com); that's all one word. That's another place to learn about Nordic culture, especially the article by Henning Sehmsdorf on tomte.

Our introductory theme music is the New March, played by Alfred Morten Høyirup and Ruthie Dornfield at [mortonalfred.com](http://mortonalfred.com) and [ruthiedornfeld.com](http://ruthiedornfeld.com).

Our outgoing music is composed and performed by the Amazing One Man Band (see our podcast about him), Darryl Jackson at [darryljacksonmusic.com](http://darryljacksonmusic.com) D-A-R-R-Y-L-J-A-C-K-S-O-N [music.com](http://music.com).

And so "til neste gang", this is your host, Eric Stavney on Nordic on Tap. Vi sees.

[outgoing theme music plays]