Huron Carol

Jean de Brébeuf, A jesuit Missionary - 1642

TablEdited by Burt I Kahn

The "Huron Carol" (or "Twas in the Moon of Wintertime") is a Canadian Christmas hymn (Canada's oldest Christmas song), written probably in 1642 by Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit missionary at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons in Canada.[1] Brébeuf wrote the lyrics in the native language of the Huron/Wendat people; the song's original Huron title is "Jesous Ahatonhia" ("Jesus, he is born"). The song's melody is based on a traditional French folk song, "Une Jeune Pucelle" ("A Young Maid"). The well-known English lyrics were written in 1926 by Jesse Edgar Middleton and the copyright to these lyrics was held by The Frederick Harris Music Co., Limited, but entered the public domain in 2011.

The English version of the hymn uses imagery familiar in the early 20th century, in place of the traditional Nativity story. This version is derived from Brébeuf's original song and Huron religious concepts. In the English version, Jesus is born in a "lodge of broken bark" and wrapped in a "robe of rabbit skin". He is surrounded by hunters instead of shepherds, and the Magi are portrayed as "chiefs from afar" who bring him "fox and beaver pelts" instead of the more familiar gold, frankincense and myrrh. The English translation uses a traditional Algonquian name, Gitchi Manitou, for God, which is not in the original Wyandot version. The original lyrics are now sometimes modified to use imagery accessible to Christians who are not familiar with the cultures of Canada's First Peoples.

The song remains a common Christmas hymn in Canadian churches of many Christian denominations. It is also found in several American hymnals, including The Hymnal 1982 of the Episcopal Church (United States) (No. 114), The United Methodist Hymnal (No. 244) and Evangelical Lutheran Worship (No. 284).