

## Any Mummers Allowed In? Reflections on Newfoundland Mumming

### THE MUMMERS' SONG ([SIMANI](#))

*"It don't seem like Christmas if the mummers are not here,"  
Granny would say as she'd knit in her chair.  
"Things have gone modern, and I suppose that's the cause  
Christmas is not like it was."*

*(knock knock knock) (breathy, squeaky voice) "Any mummers 'lowed in?"  
"Hark what's the noise out by the porch door?  
Granny, 'tis mummers, there's twenty or more."  
Her old weathered face brightens up with a grin  
"Any mummers, nice mummers 'lowed in?"*

*"Come in, lovely mummers, don't bother the snow  
We can wipe up the water, sure after you go  
Sit if you can, or on some mummer's knee  
Let's see if we knows who you be."*

*There's big ones and small ones and tall ones and thin  
Boys dressed as women and girls dressed as men  
Humps on their backs and mitts on their feet  
My bliss, and we'll die with the heat.*

*There's only one there that I think that I know  
That tall feller standing o'er 'longside the stove  
He's shaking his fist for to make me not tell  
Must be Willy from out on the hill.*

*Now that one's a stranger if there ever was one  
With his underwear stuffed and his trapdoor undone  
Is he wearing his mother's big forty-two bra?  
I knows, but I'm not going to tell.*

*Don't s'pose you fine mummers would turn down a drop?  
No home brew or alkies, whatever you got.  
Not the one with his rubber boots on the wrong feet  
He's enough for to do un all week.*

*"Spose you can dance?" Yes, they all nod their heads  
They've been tapping their feet ever since they came in.  
Now that the drinks have been all passed around  
The mummers are planking her down.*

*Be careful the lamp and hold onto the stove  
Don't swing Granny hard, 'cause you know that she's old  
No need for to care how you buckles the floor  
'Cause mummers have danced here before.*

*"My God, how hot is it, we'd better go  
I allow we'll all get the Devil's own cold."  
Good night and good Christmas, mummers me dears  
Please God we will see you next year. 1*

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### CHRISTMAS MUMMING IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Christmas mumming in Newfoundland is the topic of a hit country song; a house-visiting custom as familiar to Newfoundlanders as caroling to most North Americans; a moribund relic of a colonial past; the springboard for a nationalist theater revival movement; and a source of community bonding and regional identity. As American mummers, we may be interested in Newfoundland mumming as the oldest extant North American mumming tradition. However, a more intriguing viewpoint, and one with implications for North American revivalists, is that of a crystal of customs that both define and create community, continually creating new meanings as they are illuminated by changing cultural context.

Why is there mumming in Newfoundland, and what is it? Newfoundland was the first British colony in North America, and even after Confederation with Canada in 1949 retained strong cultural ties with Britain. 89% of the immigrants to the colony were from England, and 64% of these from the two counties of Devon and Dorset. The second largest group of immigrants came from the southeast coast of Ireland. Thus, Newfoundlanders originally came from areas where folk plays were widely practiced<sup>3</sup>. (Incidentally, this argument is also useful for partially explaining the absence of morris dance in Newfoundland: there was no significant emigration from the Cotswold or Border areas). This highly localized migration meant that kinship patterns were preserved in the new society. Men migrated seasonally in family groups to fish the rich waters of the Grand Banks and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, bringing over wives and children to settle permanently in small, isolated coastal communities. These outports remain the dominant settlement pattern in Newfoundland today.

Life in the outports was harsh, and Christmas was a time of great celebration. The only major holiday in the calendar, Christmas meant a full twelve days of freedom from rough physical labor for men and women alike. House parties or “times,” church suppers, dances, and house-visits reaffirmed community bonds of kinship and neighborliness, and celebrated the community’s survival through yet

Another cycle of seasons. Mumming, mummering, or “janneying” as it is sometimes known<sup>4</sup>, was an important part of these festivities, and revolved around two elements: the masked house-visit and the folk play.

### TYOLOGY OF MUMMING

Folklorist Herbert Halpert gives “A Typology of Mumming” in his definitive study of Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland. Halpert points out that “masking, with its frequently attended costuming, is a worldwide phenomenon, connected with religion, ritual, and drama.”<sup>5</sup>

“...the full range of mumming activities in the English-speaking tradition ... is very much wider (than the Newfoundland customs). It includes such contemporary phenomena as the Philadelphia Mummers’ Parade, the New Orleans Mardi Gras, the North of England Sword Dance, the St. Stephen’s Day wren boys, the Shetland

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“skaklers,” the “belsnicklers” from German tradition in Nova Scotia, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, medieval and renaissance pageants, the court masque of England, the pachtenlauf of Austria, and the folk plays of Thrace. Clearly we have here an enormous body of customs.”<sup>6</sup>

Halpert groups mumming activities into two parallel pairs, as follows.

### . Indoor Activities

#### 1. The Informal Visit

- a) the informal visit (Newfoundland janneys)
- b) the visitation by inquisitors (Eskimo “nayuluks,” St. Nicholas and Black Peter)

#### 2. The Visit With Formal Performance

- a) renaissance dumb-show, masque
- b) the dance (Sword dance, Morris dance)
- c) the folk play (Hero-Combat, Plough, Wooing, or Sword Dance play)

### . Outdoor Activities

#### 1. The Informal Outdoor Behaviour

- a) undirected wandering (general carnival behaviour)
- b) going from point to point (see A1 above)

#### . The Formal Outdoor Movement

- a) groups moving to give performances at fixed points (dancers, players, etc.)
- b) dance procession or “running” (Helston Furry Dance)
- c) the formal procession (parades, pageants)<sup>7</sup>

## NEWFOUNDLAND MUMMING

The salient features of Newfoundland mumming are:

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- 1) the house-visit by an informal group;
- 2) the attempt at complete disguise involving
  - a) disguise of face, hands, and body, frequently with sex reversal (man/woman)
  - b) disguise of gestures and body movement (such as dance steps)
  - c) disguise of voice, especially through breathy, squeaky, “ingressive” speech (produce by breathing in while speaking);
- 3) uninhibited, reverse-of-normal behaviour by the visitors, who may sing, dance, or play instruments when asked;
- 4) the attempt by the hosts to guess the identity of the visitors, who usually unmask when identified;
- 5) the return to normal social roles when unmasked; visitors are offered and usually accept, food and drink. Unlike their English begging counterparts, no part of this offering is taken away, nor is money exchanged.<sup>8</sup>

Guising, then, is the most characteristic aspect of Newfoundland mumming. The two most popular costumes are “the fisherman,” done with oversized rubber boots or mismatched shoes, oilskins or outdoor gear, and heavy gloves; and “the woman,” involving a tight dress, overstuffed bra, women’s accessories and heavy makeup. Long underwear worn outside the clothing, or quilts wrapped shapelessly around the body, provide warmth for traveling as well as amusing disguise. Flour sacks were once the most popular head covering, but now are often replaced with nylon stockings or plastic Hallowe’en-style masks (the latter especially popular with young children). Gestures are disguised and imitated, and mummers will note a person’s characteristic mannerisms during the year for later caricature. Especially distinctive are dance steps: Newfoundland step-dancing is similar to Appalachian clogging<sup>9</sup>, and during the visit one mummer may dance another’s characteristic “step” to fool the household.

There are few references to the actual performance of the folk play in Newfoundland, and scholars believe it was already moribund by the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> By 1966, Halpert and his colleagues had collected 317 reports of Christmas house-visits, but only 14 reports of plays or fragments.<sup>11</sup> The three published playtexts<sup>12</sup> are all of the Hero-Combat variety, and all feature Saint or King George. In Halpert and Story’s analysis, “they are consistent with similar orally transmitted plays from the British and Irish traditions,”<sup>13</sup> and would ring familiar to any American mummer I have met. Further identification of a regional flavor or character to the plays must wait upon more playtexts. In my own visits to Newfoundland<sup>14</sup>, I found that almost everyone I spoke to was familiar with the house-visit, but only one woman, a

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librarian at Grenfell College, remembered hearing her uncle speak of performing a play during the visit.

### MUMMING AND NEWFOUNDLAND SOCIETY

Halpert and his colleagues offer some interesting insights into the function of mumming in Newfoundland society. In close-knit communities where no one locks a door, the knock of the mummers marks them as strangers “who have no place in local society,”<sup>15</sup> as do their ingressive speech and masked faces. Thus estranged, mummers can act out behaviour inadmissible at other times of year: rowdiness, personal remarks, or overt sexual behaviour. While most of the mumming described in Halpert’s work is peaceful, some outdoor behaviour is violent or frightening. Mumming was banned in the capital city of St. John’s in 1861 because of the rowdy and dangerous behaviour of the disguised bands, some of whom carried large sticks or broken bottles. Mummers are used as bogeyman archetypes to frighten children, and in one recent short story, the “mysterious mummer” who rescues a small boy from a snowbank without leaving footprints is identified as the Devil.<sup>16</sup>

The strangeness of the mummers allows role-reversal, empowering rural people to take on the roles of local merchants, tax collectors, law officers, and other important people in the community. It also provides a framework for “controlled flexibility in the ties that bind people together as kin, clan, neighbors, and co-workers.”<sup>17</sup>

One recent Marxist analysis links the decline of outport mumming to the decline of the inshore fishery. Gerald Sider argues that outport mumming was a “reproduction of the relations of production,” mirroring and amplifying community relationships in the inshore family fishery.

“Mumming was not so much a Christmas festival as a New Year’s festival, providing a framework for the reorganization of social relationships for the coming year. Now that a new era has come to Newfoundland, the era of wage-labour, the new year no longer has the same significance. Mumming declined when its socially reproductive functions were transferred outside the community.”<sup>18</sup>

The dying out of mumming, then, is symptomatic of Newfoundland communities’ response to radical social change.

Newfoundland’s history is one of communities firmly bonded to place, but more importantly one of a geometrically accelerating explosion of place perception. For three hundred years, Newfoundlanders’ community was bounded by the isolated, kin-bonded outport, and seasonal customs like mumming reinforced the sense of community. A stranger was anyone from outside the outport, and national identity came only after a century of nationhood. When Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the island had been independent from Britain for less than a hundred years, and Confederation after thirty years has only begun to create a community of Canadians. In the 1970s, the seal hunt thrust Newfoundlanders into global society while they were still struggling to accept themselves in their Canadian context.

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### MUMMING AS NATIONALISM

In 1978, a theater collective called the Mummers' Troupe toured Canadian cities with "They Club Seals, Don't They?," a political satire on the Greenpeace anti-sealing protest<sup>20</sup>. Organized by Newfoundlander Chris Brookes of the CBC and his fellow St. John's residents, the Mummers' Troupe deliberately drew on the existence of mumming and folk drama in Newfoundland to create a sense of nationalistic pride in dramatic expression. However, their process in no way resembled that of the traditional customs described by Halpert above, and their product owed far more to 1970s mainland social protest rhetoric and cultural nationalism than to folklore. Their plays were collectively scripted and theatrically produced, "containing elements of slapstick comedy, puppetry, dance, rock music and satire."<sup>21</sup> Their stated purpose was the promotion of Newfoundland cultural heritage through "useful theater,"<sup>22</sup> their goal "creating indigenous theater material in a way that speaks to people,"<sup>23</sup> and their ideal one of empowerment through collective action. In 1973, the Mummers' Troupe organized a protest of what some West Coast residents saw as forced resettlement for the then-proposed Gros Morne National Park. Their play "Gros Mourn" was written on the spot after interviews with locals, and presented in fishing communities as a consciousness-raising tool to catalyze organized protest of the Park<sup>24</sup>.

Janet Drodge examines the Mummers Troupe and their spin-offs the Rising Tide and Codco Theaters

*"within the wider cultural renaissance commencing in the 1960s, which resulted in a renewal of emphasis on indigenous and traditional forms of cultural expression such as music, crafts, and literature," and concludes that "nationalist theater evolved in response and in reaction to the perceived loss of cultural pride and identity, and the erosion of traditional values and forms following Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949."*<sup>25</sup>

Nationalist theater groups deliberately and consciously promoted local tradition as representative of a Newfoundland "national" lifestyle, and as such, ironically, must be termed "revivalists" by strict definition.

All three groups, and the kindred folksong revival groups Figgy Duff, the Wonderful Grand Band, and Jim Payne & Kelly Russell, express a powerful theme of the 1970s: the loss of Newfoundland community identity. The provincial government in the 1950s had compounded Confederation with a resettlement program that moved thousands of outport families into "designated growth centres" around the island to create jobs and provide improved education, health, and social services. In many instances, it replaced a close-knit community of self-employed families and neighbors with a welfare state of tract houses whose inhabitants were strangers to each other.

Ironically, mummers as strangers depend for their welcome on a community in which they are well-known. "To mum well is to conceal and then reveal."<sup>26</sup> Central to the fun of guessing and guising is the sure knowledge that the mask, once

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“thrown up,” will reveal a familiar face. The loss of this certainty symbolizes a much deeper loss of community, on a much larger scale.

### COMMUNITY FROM STRANGERS: THE FOLK REVIVAL

It is no coincidence that the folk revival of the 1970s began in the cities. Creating community among unrelated strangers was paramount: “in the folk movement, the sense of family is the amazing thing.”<sup>27</sup> Folk revivalists sought “a return to the kind of ideal folk life that is not available any more in America.”<sup>28</sup> One of the fascinating dimensions of the Newfoundland folk revival is that it is happening while that way of life is still available.

Or is it? “For reasons other than the obvious chronological ones, it is getting harder and harder to see the pre-confederation outpost for what it really was.”<sup>29</sup> Written histories are inescapably revisionist, and oral ones even more so; self-proclaimed preservationists double the risks of sentimentalism and bias in their efforts to “tell the real story.” Drodge outlines the basic paradox of nationalist movements thus:

A certain degree of vagueness or ambiguity is inherent in both economic and cultural nationalism. Both entail mixed feelings and often quite contradictory attitudes toward Newfoundland culture and the identity associated with it.... there are themes of independence, self-sufficiency and cultural “purity” coinciding with messages of exploitation, dependence, and demoralization, yet both interpretations are perceived as representing the pre-Confederation reality. (Critical reactions of praise for authenticity and of censure for stereotyping) typify the ambiguity with which all peoples alternately perceive themselves and their cultures, both in ideological and expressive terms.”<sup>30</sup>

This ambiguity can lead to frustration for those whose intentions are quite earnest. A Newfoundland folklorist-cum-folksinger once denounced a folk club audience for inattention to a traditional song, shouting over the crowd: “Shut up! Can’t you see? We’re preservin’ your f—king culture!” <sup>31</sup>

A generation of folklorists and revival performers have, then: a) earnestly and painstakingly recorded and thus preserved a rapidly vanishing body of traditional customs; b) recreated a romanticized, mythic Arcadian past from their own ritual-starved imaginations. Take your pick.

What seems clear is that we cannot deal with mumming without dealing with community relationships. A custom is inseparable from the cultural context that created it. What does this mean for us as urban mummers in 1980s North America?

### THE RURAL/URBAN FLIP/FLOP

Let us assume that mumming, in complex and multilayered ways, both creates and reinforces community. It works through the physical path of the mummers from house to house; the recognition (and misrecognition) of community members; the cathartic self-expression and group dynamics of the play, the singing, the dancing;

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the sharing of food and drink. How is this process different in the city and in the country?

At the risk of oversimplifying, I will take the morris team as an example of an urban community, and the outport as a rural one. Rural communities are tied by kinship, both blood and marriage, and by physical proximity. They are multigenerational, in contrast to friendship-bonded urban communities of similar age and interests (morris dancing). Even in urban communities with a wide age spread, it is the exception rather than the rule to find two related generations on the same team. House-visits, especially on foot, are difficult in the spatially diffuse environment of a large city (or even in rural areas where team members drive up to two hours to practice).

Rural communities are bonded by propinquity as well: "everybody knows your business" (and you) in a small town or an outport. In the city, a real fear of real strangers will prevent mummers from acting too strange, for fear we should be feared rather than enjoyed. Guising is an impractical way of interacting with the larger and more dilute community; hence the emphasis, in public performances, on the dramatics of the play.

Community values of sharing, trust, honesty, and continuity are much more consciously articulated and sought after in urban communities than in their rural counterparts. The spirit of revival is one of "creating tradition" in a rootless environment, the antithesis of the small-town resident's need for escape from stultifying habit. A common cry of the morris dancer reflects this: "It's traditional! We did it last year!" Or, as we say around Madison, "Twice, it's a tradition. Three times, it's a ritual."

Often, "creating tradition" means resuscitating "fakelore" from books, scripting plays from whole cloth like the Mummers' Troupe, or compiling from several sources. These old ways we revere for their sense of communal closeness may have very different connotations for an outporter to whom they "smell of poverty" and a narrow way of life. As one Newfoundland historian has pointed out, "the question of whether or not a country has a culture is a question for those with a full belly. It is unlikely to occur to the hungry."<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to justify rural values economically, especially for a "have-not" province" in a "have" society. The same scholar has responded to the nationalist nostalgia of the Newfoundland cultural renaissance thus.

*"The unforgettable fact of life in the pre-1949 outport was its burdensomeness, ... the need ...for mindless, repetitive labour combined with thrift. ... The decision of the Newfoundland people to join Canada in 1949 expressed their desire for a secure, decent way of life. Only sentimentalists will argue that they made a wrong move."<sup>33</sup>*

It is easy to sentimentalize from a warm city office, and just as easy to romanticize the city from a fishing boat. Both are essentially outsider's views, prizing the community on the other side of the fence. Drodge's ambiguity is rearing its head again, and dragging with it the hoary old question of "who are the folk anyway?"

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Rural and urban mummers are folk who share a sense of the power of drama as collective action to create community. Whether through the informal, unselfconscious antics of the janneys' house-visit or the deliberate and conscious pageantry of the Midwest Sword and Mumming Ale, community is manifest in the mummers' merry celebration.

In Newfoundland, mummering is a touchstone for community on a "national" scale, and one that is reached for ever more consciously as a talisman of cultural uniqueness. When the country duo SimanI recorded the Mummers' Song with which we began this essay, it became an island hit and sparked a revival of mummering. So do traditional customs survive, revive, and feed upon themselves.

American mummers may not find that sense of regional or national identity in mummering. (It is present in Hallowe'en guising, though!) Continuity and repetition are important on a smaller scale, and we create our own meanings for the plays we perform. They are somehow both survivals and revivals. American mummers' plays are a "real folk custom," and American mummers "real folk," because they are rooted in our own community, which in some mysterious way creates its own reality.

Outport mummers might not identify with our self-conscious fascination with the theatricals of the play, nor recognize some of the costumes at the Midwest Sword and Mumming Ale. These are loving re-creations of historic "traditional" English rag costumes or caricatures of Victorian quack doctors, medieval ladies fair and dragons straight from Arthur Rackham. We'd look mighty strange on an outport path, while their squeaky voices, threatening rowdiness, topsy-turvy social antics, oilskins and rubber boots might turn heads in a library or a shopping mall.

But underneath, perhaps, we're analogues. Strangers to each other, we might recognize the community bonds within each group. This is the familiar face we find when we throw up the mummer's mask: the bonds of community that create permanence, never mind how, in a changing world through dynamic repetition. "Please God we will see you next year!"