

Mumming

By Kristin Harris Walsh

A sharp rap is heard at the door. Outside, in the crisp winter air, a slightly unkempt and rowdy crowd, shuffle to keep warm and jostle to get a better position in front of the door. They are garbed in all manner of dress: baggy clothes stuffed like scarecrows; underwear worn over coveralls; heads and faces covered with everything from kerchiefs to pillowcases to Halloween masks. One of them shouts, voice disguised, the familiar refrain, "Any mummers 'llowed in?" Finally, the host opens the door, that role suddenly thrust upon them by the unexpected visitors. They barge in, seemingly unaware of appropriate behaviour for guests. They leave their snowy boots on, demand a drink and some food. One mummer whips out an accordion and plays some tunes. The visitors dance, and pull up members of the host family to join them. The host tries to guess who the mystery visitors are, and they take off their masks as their true identities are revealed. After a while, the visitors depart, on to the next house, then the next. The familiar is made unfamiliar; the usual, unusual; the common, uncommon.

This scenario describes what most Newfoundlanders and Labradorians would identify as the tradition of mumming. The house visit during the twelve days of Christmas is indeed, traditionally, the most common and well-known form of mumming, also known as mumming or janneying, in the province. It is a cherished tradition, embedded in the memories of older generations of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, the subject of academic and journalistic writing, the focus of a documentary, and even immortalized in song. However, it is part of a larger

tradition with other variants both in Newfoundland and Labrador and in other cultures as well. Moreover, although the manifest function of mummering may be celebratory, it often served latent functions as well, particularly those involving tensions within a community related to class and interpersonal relationships.

Mummering is linked to other forms of masking and Christmas traditions, and is practiced in various forms in Newfoundland's antecedent cultures, such as Ireland and Great Britain, as well as in other diasporic cultures, such as the northeastern USA. As illustrated in the documentary *Mummers and Masks*, mummering has been linked to Roman Saturnalia customs, disguising practices in Ulster, wren traditions in Ireland (which Dennis Flynn has also identified as a continuing tradition in Conception Bay) and hobby horse customs in England. Moreover, Herbert Halpert draws parallels between mummering and the Naluyuk tradition in Labrador (Ben-Dor in Halpert and Story), Mardi Gras in New Orleans, belsnickles in Nova Scotia German tradition, and others in one of his contributions to the seminal collection, *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Halpert and Story 35). On their Mummers' Festival website, the Intangible Cultural Heritage office of Newfoundland and Labrador identifies links between Newfoundland mummering and similar Christmas customs in the province, including Nalujuit, wren, ribbon fools and hobby horses.

In this anthology, Herbert and J. M. Story collected what is arguably the foundational scholarship on mummering practices in Newfoundland and Labrador. Their collection, which includes essays by noted folklorists, anthropologists and other social scientists working in the area of Newfoundland culture in the 1960s and

1970s (such as John Szwed, James Faris and John Widdowson, among others including Halpert and Story themselves), provided the basis for later scholarship and public sector development of mummering research and practices by more contemporary scholars and folklorists, such as Gerald Pocius, Paul Smith, Martin Lovelace, Joy Fraser, Dale Jarvis and Ryan Davis, for example. *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* paved the way for renewed, critical thinking about the roles and functions that mummering has played over the years in the province, as well as some of its antecedent links to other cultures.

Halpert's typology of mummering outlines the various forms that mummering takes (in Halpert and Story 36): the informal visit (house-visit, visitation by inquisitors, collectors' performance); the visit with formal performance (Renaissance dumb-show, masque, the dance, the folk play); the informal outdoor behaviour (undirected wandering, going from point to point in house visiting); and the formal outdoor movement (groups moving to perform at fixed points, dance procession, formal procession or parade). Halpert notes that Newfoundland traditions focus around the informal house visit, which usually includes specific commonalities: visitors are an informal group, they attempt complete disguise, there is role reversal of various kinds, the hosts' attempts to guess the identities of the visitors, and the unmasked guests socialize with the host (in Halpert and Story 37-8). These elements of Newfoundland mummering, identified by Story, illustrate the concept of what Barbara Babcock identifies as "symbolic inversion," which she describes as, "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values

and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political” (14). Reversal is critical to this tradition, as it is with many other forms of festival and carnivalesque events (see Bahktin). During these times of reversal, social norms are suspended. During the mummering season, that reversal can be seen with disguising the voice through ingressive speech, breathing inwards while speaking; disguising appearance through age and gender reversal (males dressing as females and vice versa, young dressing as old and vice versa); wearing underwear on the outside of outer clothes; and disguising normative behaviour by knocking on the door of the house of friends and family (where Newfoundland convention dictates coming into a house without knocking during normative times) and acting aggressively towards hosts, something which would not be acceptable during regular social occasions.

It is this last feature of mummering that has attracted the attention of scholars, who have delved more deeply into the functions of this tradition. While the outward or manifest functions of mummering would be socialization, fun, and injecting variety into the perhaps endless visitation associated with the Christmas season, the custom may arguably serve other purposes. Szwed, Faris and Chiaramonte, all in the Halpert and Story anthology illustrate how mummering might have been used as a tool to deal with social issues: class differences between merchants and fishermen (mummering would be the only opportunity to get in the house of the merchant, a way to exert a modicum of power over the hegemonic forces that governed the Newfoundland credit system); balancing out reciprocal obligations from the year through unwritten rules of hosting and visiting; and mummering aggression as a way of settling scores of deviant or otherwise

unacceptable behaviour that occurred at other, non-carnavalesque times. Although many proponents of mummering wish to keep the elements of tradition and enjoyment at the forefront of the discussion, it is important to note the possible underlying ways that mummering may have been used, from time to time, to restore the balance to social inequities in small communities.

The links between mummering and aggression culminate in an event that occurred on December 28, 1860, in Bay Roberts. There, hoodlums disguised as mummers beat Isaac Mercer to death with a hobby horse. His two brothers-in-law were badly beaten. This event was the last straw in a list of crimes committed by those in disguise, and led to the 1861 Act Outlawing Mummering, which stipulated: “Any Person who shall be found ... without a written Licence from a Magistrate, dressed as a Mummer, masked, or otherwise disguised, shall be deemed guilty of a Public Nuisance.” The punishment was “a Fine not exceeding Twenty Shillings” or a maximum seven days’ imprisonment (Consolidated Acts of Newfoundland, 1861: 10). However, despite this law, mummering, particularly in the form of the house visit, continued to thrive well into the late twentieth century.

Some might argue that mummering no longer occurs in Newfoundland and Labrador, that with modernization – paved roads, electricity, television, internet, and other contemporary distractions – mummering was no longer needed as a way to socialize. Indeed, it would not be surprising to attribute the decline of mummering to some of these factors, also linked to the change in many other aspects of Newfoundland traditional culture. However, as Sheldon Posen describes in his article on folk music, perhaps the tradition has been recontextualized, rather

than in decline. Yes, the house visit may not be the most prevalent form of Christmas revelry. Although anecdotally, some house visitation mummering may still occur and even thrive over the twelve days of Christmas; many folks in rural communities lament its loss, and some younger people don't know much about the tradition at all. However, mummering has been recontextualized, particularly in St. John's, through a number of initiatives. In 1972, Chris Brookes and Lynn Lunde founded The Mummers Troupe, which, over its ten-year period of existence, revitalized mummering through their *Christmas Mummers Play*, founded the RCA theatre company, and bought and renovated the LSPU Hall. More recently, another variant of mummering tradition has come to the forefront of Newfoundland consciousness through the efforts of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) office, led by folklorist Dale Jarvis in partnership with Memorial University's Department of Folklore. They identified mummering as a tradition at risk and, in 2009 instituted the mummers parade, which occurs annually in mid-December in downtown St. John's. Each year, participants can join in such pre-parade events as hobby horse workshops, concerts and public lectures in order to better understand the tradition and to carry it forward, albeit in a different format than was typically practiced in outport Newfoundland. This event is becoming more and more popular each year in St. John's, and may become the future face of mummering in the province.

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