

Chasing Shadows: Retrieving the Text and Context of the Change Islands, Newfoundland, Mummers' Play

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The tradition of mumming (or mummering, as it is known there) has survived in Newfoundland into the twenty first century - considerably longer than in most parts of the English-speaking world. For the most part, the tradition manifests itself in house-visiting by members of the community dressed in unusual costumes and participating in the game of guessing identities. In a few places in the province, however, traditional mummers' plays also persisted, though these were no longer actively performed by the time my own fieldwork in the province began in the early 1960s. Indeed, it had been thought that information about these plays was no longer in living memory, until systematic enquiries about language and folklore in Newfoundland and Labrador, initiated by the Department of English at Memorial University, began to reveal a wealth of data which led to further investigation. At first, only a few tantalising reports were received about the possible existence of such plays. These came in responses to questionnaires about local language and folklore completed by several hundred students from across the province. When fieldwork began as part of the emerging folklore programme established by Herbert Halpert at the university it was relatively easy to collect information on most aspects of mummering, but with the notable exception of the plays, which proved to be very elusive. Sometimes the students and other fieldworkers were lucky enough to come across individuals who remembered that such plays had been performed, but only a few of these recalled them in any detail. Field trips were then planned to the various parts of the province where evidence of plays had been reported, with the aim of tracking down anyone who still remembered them. In due course information on the plays was recorded in several communities along the east coast, notably in Notre Dame Bay and Bonavista Bay. At the Traditional Drama conference here in Sheffield in 1979 I reported on one of these plays as recalled by Ned Foley who was then living in Norris Arm, Notre Dame Bay. This was a fairly extensive account with a substantial text of the play.

Some years earlier, however, I came across traces of a play which used to be performed in the small community of Change Islands, also situated in Notre Dame Bay. Confirmation of its continued existence in oral tradition came first during an interview in 1964 with a retired fisherman, Edmund (Ned) Hynes, who still lived on Change Islands for part of the year. He remembered the names of three of the performers, and just a fragment of the text:

“Stewart G. an' Jimmy B. and Alf W., a crowd of 'em - that's ol' Alf now - an' oh yes, I can remember (them) ... when they used to dress up an' go around, come in houses, an' ...

'Here comes I the Turkish Knight,
Came from Turkish land to fight.

I'll fight King George with courage bold,
If his blood is hot, I'll make un cold.'

An' what was the last one? Can't remember.

['?Step in] somebody else
An' boldly take thy stand'

- something like that.”

Although I interviewed other people on Change Islands during that visit, none of them recalled the play, and it seemed as if this small fragment might be the only remaining evidence that it was still remembered. It so happened that my fellow fieldworker, Fred Earle, the Memorial University Extension Services Representative for the east coast of the island, shared the interviewing of Ned Hynes. Fred was born and raised on Change Islands, and the fragmentary information gleaned from the interview reminded him that he had heard his father, Fred Earle senior, then aged 78 and living on neighbouring Fogo Island, talk about the play in the past and had even quoted a few lines from the text. We realised that Fred senior might well be our only hope of retrieving any further information from the oral tradition. Our interview with him, though brief, was indeed memorable. Remarkably lively and animated for a man of his age, he regaled us with humorous stories about people on Change Islands in the past, told several traditional toasts, and sang a couple of songs. The majority of the interview, however, focused on what he could remember of the play.

From the outset it is clear that he is unsure of the order in which the characters present themselves, and that he can recall only a few verses of the play. Even so, from what he remembers it is possible to begin to piece together the overall structure, and to reconstruct essential details of costume, performance, and context. As was the case elsewhere in the province, the play took place at Christmas time. The performers, who were known locally both as “the soldiers” and “the mummers” went from house to house over three or four days of the Christmas season, preceded by a man carrying a flag, though Fred Earle did not tell us which flag it was. According to him, however, it was customary for local men to try to take the flag away. The soldiers/mummers would then chase them and, if caught, the person who took away the flag would be “sold” for the price of a drink, usually a drink of rum for the soldiers - he had to pay for it. As they went from house to house the soldiers would be given drinks - “a drop o' rum when they could get it, or syrup.” By the evening some of them would be getting “a bit merry”, and they would end up in someone's house for “a bit of a feed”.

At the beginning of the interview, Fred Earle first lists the names of the characters. He remembers a total of eleven: Roomer, Old Father Christmas, King George, the Turkish Knight, the King of Egypt, the Valiant Soldier, Picketywick, Bold Hercules, Jack Tar, the Doctor, and Beelzebub. While this is a substantial list comparable with the fuller accounts of the play elsewhere in Newfoundland, Fred's information on costume, performance, and text is much more sketchy. Nevertheless, some of the details he recalls are highly significant. In terms of costume, for example, we learn that the soldiers - presumably the majority of the performers - wore a uniform: “some kind of special jacket” or shirt made of “some kind of light ... material”. They carried wooden swords, similar to those used in the play performed at Tilting on nearby Fogo Island, and wore big high hats made out of cardboard, perhaps fifteen or sixteen inches high, diamond-shaped, with notched sections, and trimmed with tinsel and paper “and whatever they could get”. The costumes of three characters are described in more detail. Jack Tar “was dressed like an ordinary sailor ... probably in a Royal Navy Reserve suit”.

The Doctor “was dressed up as a ... gentleman”. He wore a long coat, and three bottles hung down at his side. Fred did not think that he carried a bag. Old Father Christmas was “dressed up” with a “false face (mask) on. And he used to have a great big hump on his back ... like a pillow ... strapped around his waist” and “he had a big stick too”. We can also presume from the text of the play that Beelzebub carried a club and a pan of some kind.

As regards performance, which took place in “the house”, i.e. the kitchen of the houses visited, the characters introduce each other serially, as usual. Of particular significance, however, is the description of their actions: “... they'd walk back and forth the house, see, and they had these swords ... When they was ... passin' one another, they'd strike the swords together, see. Yes. You'd strike yours, I'd strike mine, like that, see. They'd strike the swords [as] they walk back an' forth the house”. Many years ago I had been puzzled by the behaviour of mummers performing a play at Titchborne, Hampshire, which Paul Smith showed me on a copy of an old cine film. This depicted the performers crossing and recrossing a small outdoor area in front of a white sight screen on a cricket ground. Obviously, the characters would be more clearly visible against this white background, but there was no doubt that they were reciting their lines while passing each other in this restricted space. One might perhaps have assumed from this that they were performing in this rather strange way to enable the cameraman to record the scene more easily. The evidence from the interview with Fred Earle, however, shows that not only was this a traditional mode of performance, but also that it had been transferred to at least this part of North America.

Another very interesting aspect of the Change Islands performance is the behaviour of Old Father Christmas. Firstly, he takes over much of the part usually acted by the Doctor, by capering and jumping about and indulging in slapstick attempts to revive the Turkish Knight. He pokes his stick in turn alongside the Turkish Knight's nose, mouth, and finally arse, and tries to blow breath into him, to bring him round. When he fails, he calls for the Doctor. Secondly, and of much more significance in terms of the ongoing debate about the relationship between mummers' plays, morris dancing, and sword dancing. Old Father Christmas literally plays a central role in the singing of the song at the end of the performance. As Fred Earle remembers it, he would lean on his stick - presumably crouching down quite low - and the other characters formed a circle around him. As they sang the song they patted their swords on his back.

The character of Picketywick also deserves comment. His performance is recalled with great amusement because his lines are punctuated by a kind of stuttering laugh. It is unclear whether this is part of the characterisation or whether the particular individual speaking the lines used this for comic effect. In the recording, the stuttering laughter is interspersed between the lines of the speech, and uttered in a stylised way as a repeated “keck keck keck keck”.

Fred recalls that either King George or the Valiant Soldier fights with the Turkish Knight, who is apparently killed but is revived by the Doctor. He remembers the names of some of the participants: Henry John G. always played the Doctor, and Jim C. was nearly always Father Christmas, “ 'Cause he ... he had no education, he couldn't learn anything, but he was a great Father Christmas ...” The performance ended with the group in a circle around Father Christmas, singing the song “There's one more river to cross” - an interesting and distinctively North American choice, contrasting markedly with the old traditional songs which concluded the play in other parts of the island.

It is not easy to reconstruct the text of the play from the disjointed recollections recorded on this occasion. However, Fred knows that Roomer “was the first when they come in”, and that he is followed by Father Christmas:

“Room, room, gallant room,
Room required here tonight,
For some of my bold champions
Are coming forth to fight.

Old act, new act,
An act you never seen before,
For I'm the very champion
That brought old Father Christmas to your door.
And if you don't believe these words I say,
Step in. Father Christmas, and boldly clear your way.

Father Christmas, he come in then. Yes.

Here comes I, Father Christmas,
Welcome or welcome not.
Christmas comes but once a year
And I hope you'll never be forgot.”

These last two lines may be somewhat garbled, but clearly parallel the usual lines spoken by this character in other versions of the play.

The remaining characters' verses remembered are in random order: first Beelzebub, then Picketywick, followed by two lines of the Turkish Knight's speech, a fragment from an unattributed character, and finally Father Christmas's speech calling on the Doctor, together with some hints about the Doctor's speech:

“Here comes I, Beelzebub,
Under one arm, carries me club,
In me hand, carries me pan,
Thinks meself the jolly old man.”

“Here comes I, little Picketywick
Keck, keck, keck, keck.
Put me hand in me pocket,
Keck, keck, keck, keck.
And pay what I thinks fit.
Keck, keck, keck, keck.
Ladies and gentlemen, sit at your ease
Keck, keck, keck, keck.
Put your hand in your pocket,
And pay what you please
Keck, keck, keck, keck.
An' if you don't believe these words I say
Step in - the next character - and boldly clear your way.”

“Here comes I, the Turkish Knight,
Come from the Turkish land to fight ...”

“He took the rainbow from the sky,
An' splice both ends together ...”

“Doctor, doctor, come with speed,
And help me in my time of need.
My time of need I... now deplore,
I was never in such need before.”

While the information on characters, costume, performance, text, and context confirmed the continued existence of the Change Islands play in living memory in the 1960s, the evidence is patchy and inconclusive. This initial brief foray into the field was also hampered by the primitive recording equipment and by my own ignorance of the play which inhibited the interviewing process. It is difficult now to realise that at the time the only recording machine available was hand-cranked, recorded at 7.5 rpm from right to left, and had no playback facility. Coupled with the very large chrome microphone on a heavy steel stand, this hardly made for the kind of easy informal interaction we enjoy with unobtrusive modern equipment. The necessity of conserving battery and tape meant that the interviewers' questions and comments were often not recorded, which causes additional problems in transcribing the material. On returning from this early field trip it was a relief to find that the machine had actually recorded the interview, but disappointing to think that this rather fragmentary evidence might be the sole retrievable information from the oral tradition. Even so, it had been possible to establish that the actors were known as the soldiers, they went from house to house, led by a man with a flag, over several days of the Christmas season; they were given food and drink; they acted the play, which had a cast of at least eleven characters, some of whose costumes and performances were described, along with samples of their speeches. The trip had whetted my appetite to make a return visit on the offchance of discovering further information which might fill the gaps in this incomplete account.

The tentative plans for a return visit received a major boost with the purchase by the Department of English of a state of the art, fully portable Uher tape recorder - an unbelievable luxury in comparison with the equipment used in 1964. What was more, Fred Earle junior recorded on tape an interview with his father in January 1965, and again asked him about the soldiers. His father confirmed that he had never taken part in the play himself, but had seen it performed when he was a boy aged about ten. This would date the play to around 1896. He added that it was said that a Mr. Dowell brought the play to Change Islands, probably from England, confirming the printed record. Fred Earle senior again recalled that the soldiers were “rigged out nice” and wore “hats made out of cardboard, and all trimmed up”. He repeats Beelzebub's speech, making clear this time that Jimmer, the man who plays the part, stammers between the lines and speaks them in a jerky manner. Fred also repeated Picketywick's speech, this time without the repeated “keck, keck, keck” and in a slightly different form:

“Here comes I, little Picketywick,
Put your hand in your pocket
And pay what you think fit.
Ladies and gentlemen
Sit down at your ease,
Put your hand in your pocket
And pay what you please.”

This only complicates the issue of whether the repeated “Keck, keck, keck” in his 1964 version a few months earlier is actually part of the speech, or perhaps a humorous addition. However, the interview added at least a few more details to the slowly emerging picture.

In August 1965 Fred Earle junior and I paid a second visit to Change Islands in the hope of collecting further information. We first interviewed Frank Hynes, the younger brother of Ned whom we recorded the previous summer. He remembered that the mummers who acted the play were indeed called “soldiers”, and that they would go around, day and night, for perhaps a week, and “they used to have a little rhyme to say”. He thought that one of the characters was called King William, remembered the line “Here comes I, little Picketywick” and, after prompting, agreed that there was a character called Beelzebub. His memories of the costumes were more informative:

“they ... make a special suit, you know, with ribbons, strips on their pants. And of course Old Father Christmas, he was involved with it, see. Yeah. Of course, he'd be the real Santa Claus, with his big rope whisker, you know ... had a bag, yes, Santa Claus did, yes.”

He added that it was understood that the soldiers would be entertained by the man of the house when they visited and that he remembered the visits being after dinner rather than in the mornings when people would normally be working. They did not wear masks “though you'd have a job p'raps to recognise 'em, you know, 'cause ... owin' to their rig ... they'd each have a different uniform; if one was a king, he'd look like a king ... he had more ornaments and sashes on, an' one thing and 'tother.” Frank also remembered that Fred Earle senior's brother Will had been involved in the early performances, adding weight to Fred's hint in the 1964 recording that Will - Billy, as he called him - might perhaps remember something about the play.

We then called again on Frank's brother, Ned, though we were not expecting him to add much to what he had told us the previous summer. To our surprise he revealed several more useful details. He recalled two groups of performers from his boyhood, “about fifty three or fifty four year ago” (i.e. around 1912/1913). The first of these chronologically included Billy Earle and Bobby W. as performers. The second group included George Peckford, Jimmy B., Jack C., and perhaps Alf W., all of whom were now dead. He estimated that the second group performed the play approximately eight or ten years after the first group. The “soldiers' rig” they wore would be as authentic as they could make it, and “the whole crowd” - he believes there were twelve of them - would walk around the community. He remembered the King of Egypt, King George, and Picketywick and, after prompting, the Doctor. The soldiers had wooden swords, and when one character is saying his piece the next one is outside. The speaker, for example, will say:

“Come in. King George
And boldly clear the way.”

King George would then “step in. And when they was passin' one another, they strike their swords, you see: ... 'Here comes I, King George ...”

The wooden swords had a handle — a crosspiece “to keep your hand from slippin' down, on the sword. Oh, the sword was made perfect. And lots of 'em, you know ... had 'em ... dipped in red ink ... for five or six inches ... you see - make out... that blood was on 'em, see.”

This part of the interview ends with the comment that if anyone on Change Islands can still remember the play it is Will Earle, who is renowned for his remarkable memory.

Spurred on by the recommendations of Fred Earle senior, and Frank and Ned Hynes, we arranged to interview William C. Earle, then aged 73. Fortunately, he certainly lived

up to his reputation. As a member of the earliest group of performers still remembered, he had first-hand knowledge of the play and its performance, and was able to provide quite detailed information. As often happens in recalling material from many years ago, however. Will's memories of the event differ in some respects from those of his older brother, Fred. This may be due in part to their remembering different performances, one as performer, the other as spectator, quite apart from the inevitable fallibility of human memory in attempting to recall details of what happened more than half a century ago. Armed with the new tape recorder and a range of specific questions based on the partial information from the previous interviews, I was much better equipped to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the interview.

Will recalls that the dramatic performance was called "the soldiers' play for Christmas". He confirms his brother Fred's list of eleven characters: Roomer, King George, King of Egypt, Valiant Soldier, Turkish Knight, Doctor, Picketywick, Beelzebub, Bold Hercules, and Jack Tar. All the performers were male: Will himself played the Valiant Soldier in the older of the two groups still remembered. Other performers in that group were Walter G. (King George), Arth H. (Father Christmas), Dicky E., Walt O. (Doctor), Bobby W. (Picketywick), Jimmer P. (Beelzebub), and Walt C., the first three of whom were still alive in 1965, though no longer living in the area. The later group, "the younger crowd", included Joe C., and their last performance was in 1913. Beginning on St. Stephen's Day (December 26th): "... we'd be at it that evening, we'd start after dinner. We'd be at it that evening, then till about eleven or half past eleven in the night. And then the next day we'd start again, till we'd go to all the houses on this side ... three days an' nights." The soldiers marched in single file from house to house, led by a man carrying a flag (the red ensign) and accompanied by a man with an accordion. The flag was planted outside each house they visited. Although boys followed them everywhere, trying to watch the play from outside, they peeped through the windows but were not allowed in. However, contrary to his brother Fred's recollection. Will emphatically denies that anyone ever took away their flag. The soldiers asked for admission at each house: "Will you let the soldiers in?"

The soldiers wore white shirts and "a big hat like the soldiers wear ... very high an' all trimmed up with ... coloured tissue ... red, green, white ... and then a red sash on ... across the shoulder ... over the white shirt, and red ribbon down your pants." The pants would be "dark ... blue serge or something like that, an' the red would be on each side of the pants, sewed on." Most of the characters were dressed in this way, and carried wooden swords, including Roomer, the Turkish Knight, Picketywick and Bold Hercules. Beelzebub was dressed similarly, but carried a club and a pan. The swords were three feet long and painted red, but Will recalls that they had a handle into which the soldiers could put their fingers - contrasting with his brother Fred's memory of them having a cross-shaped handle. The two kings were dressed in a similar way to the other soldiers, "... but they ... were dressed up, rigged up like kings". Will seems rather too eager to respond affirmatively to my questions about whether they wore crowns or cloaks, so one might interpret this simply as confirmation that their hats and costumes were probably a little more elaborate and distinctive than those of the soldiers. The performers made their own hats "out o' cardboard, cardboard box. And we'd have 'em out in front and out behind, and then have it all trimmed over the sides with this tissue paper ... a big peak and a big thing at the back, and had it all done up ... 'twas all different colours ... paper cut up in little bits ... put on the sides and all that, see.

Will remembers his own costume as the Valiant Soldier, and also hints at tricks played on the mummers by people in the houses they visited: "I had a belt on, an' ... a

pistol on me side, tied on the belt. An' we went in one house, an' when I got out me pistol was gone, an' I had to go back. An' the feller that took it from me, he cut it off. I said, 'You got my pistol now.' He said, 'No, I haven't.' I said, 'Yes, you have'. An' he handed [it] out to me, an' I got outside the door, an' I tied me pistol on again.." After questioning from his nephew, young Fred Earle, Will agrees that the hat he wore was wide, nearly two feet long, though not very high, trimmed with red at the front and back, and "cut in behind". He adds that Walt G., who was "the main John" in the group, knew what the soldiers had worn previously, and showed the group how to make the hats and costumes. Will kept his hat for many years: "Boy, I wish I had mine. I used to give it to the mummers ... an' they used to have it an' put it on [when they] dressed up, see, [at] Christmas. And ... after so many years, you know, it got wrecked up, an' the last fellow had it beat it up or lost it or something ... I used to loan it out. They used to come after it for when they'd dress up, mummering, and they'd want this hat that I had for when I was a soldier. An' I give it to 'em, an' then three or four years they brought it back, you know, and on the last of it, I lost it; they broke it up."

As for the characters not dressed as soldiers or kings, Father Christmas has a hump on his back and his face is hidden by his beard. Will at first says he has a sword, but later agrees that in fact he carries a stick. He is "rigged up like ... Santa Claus". The Doctor wears a clawed-hammer coat and a hard hat. He carries a bag and a cane. Jack Tar is "dressed as a sailor, like the Navy fellows have in the Navy: blue, he was all blue. He had a sailor's cap on, had it on the side of his head."

Will remembers quite a few details about performance. The play would be acted in the kitchen of the houses visited: "'twas a big crowd for to go into a kitchen, they were small kitchens, see. Big crowd goin' in, a little kitchen like that. And they'd walk in and act their part, an' then step out in the porch somewhere, see." He confirms his brother's description of the clashing of swords as the speeches are recited: "... they'd go up and down the house ... with this sword, strike then- swords an' go back an' forth an' he'd say his part ..." When the Turkish Knight is killed. Father Christmas starts poking him with his stick, then tries to blow life into him by putting the stick into the Turkish Knight's mouth and finally into his backside. Will remembers that the Doctor makes a raspberry sound as he blows one end of the stick in his vain efforts to revive the dead man; "... he'd blow, an' blow, an' blow, see, an' he would have the people in the house roarin' in laughter". He then calls in the Doctor, who by contrast does not indulge in such traditional horseplay, but is played "straight": "... he stooped down on the floor, you know, an' rubbed his forehead, an' rubbed the side of his head, an' this medicine he had, you know, all this funny names. An' then after a while he took him by the hand an' told him to rise up." So in this performance not only does Father Christmas apparently subsume the character known as Johnny Jack in some British versions (Halpert and Story, 189), he also appropriates much of the slapstick normally reserved for the Doctor. After the Doctor revives him, "... up gets the Turkish Knight ... all alive, and then he commences [fighting] with his sword again. At the end of the play the actors surround Father Christmas as they sing "One more river to cross", and as they do so they strike Father Christmas's stick (Will at first calls it his sword, but later corrects himself). This account differs in some details from that of Will's brother, Fred, who said that the actors patted their swords on Father Christmas's back. Will reckoned that the performance would take three quarters of an hour, and after it was over "they thank those people in the house for bein' so generous, givin' 'em whatever they give 'em", and "if they let us have a dance, we'd have a dance", accompanied by the accordion player. "... we'd only have a step [dance] ... what we call 'ram dance'. Get out, four or five of us, you know, in

the middle of the house, an' dance, an' then swing an' have a few minutes at it, an' then we'd go on, 'cause we were goin' from house to house all over the island on this side - we didn't go on the other side - ... every house." He adds: "We were big fellers, thought we were!" and recalls how the performance was enjoyed both by the spectators and the actors themselves, revealing what a happy community event it was: "We went down to Mr. Roberts', I know, old man Roberts, Jack Roberts' father. Well, didn't he laugh! See, we had him laughin' to beat the band. ... Oh, 'twas great fun!"

Turning now to the text, Will's memory of it was triggered mainly by his efforts to recall the characters and the order in which they appeared. While his recollections are somewhat haphazard and by no means complete, they at least allow the retrieval of more of the text than from any other known recording from the oral tradition. It is therefore possible to present the following reconstruction, using the Peckford text in Halpert and Story as a guide.

Roomer:

Room, room, gallant room, room required here tonight
For some of my bold soldiers are comin' forth to fight;
Old act, new act, act you've often seen before,
For I'm the very champion that brought old Father Christmas to your
door.
If you don't believe those words I say
Step in, old Father Christmas, and boldly clear the way.

Father Christmas:

Here comes I, old Father Christmas, welcome or welcome not,
I hope that old Father Christmas'll never be forgot;
Me wife's so big and me family's so small,
One crumb of bread will feed them all.
If you don't believe those words I say,
Step in. King George, and boldly clear the way.

King George:

Here comes I, King George, from old England did I spring,
Some of my victorious works I'm just going to begin.
Old act, new act, an act you've often seen before,
For I'm the very champion that brought the Turkish Knight to your door.
If you don't believe those words I say,
Come in, Turkish Knight, and boldly clear the way.

Turkish Knight:

... from the Turkish land to fight;

Valiant Soldier:

Here comes I, Valiant Soldier, Slasher is my name,
Sword and pistol by my side, I'm sure to win the game ...

? Father Christmas:

Is there a doctor to be found
To heal my son of his deadly wound?

Doctor:

Yes, there is a doctor to be found
To heal your son of his deadly wounds
... hinktom, spinktom ...

Picketywick:

Here comes I, little Picketywick ...

Beelzebub:

Here comes I, Beelzebub,
Under me hand I carries me club,
In me hand carries me pan,
Thinks meselfajolly old man.

Jack Tar:

... take the rainbow from the sky an' splice both ends together ...

Song:

There's one more river to cross,
An' that's the river of Jordan,
There's one more river,
An' one more river to cross.

The fragmentary nature of this reconstruction reflects the fading memory of a moribund tradition, but nevertheless corroborates the relevant sections of the Peckford text. There is confusion after the first two speeches: the King of Egypt is absent and King George calls in the Turkish Knight with a form of words repeated from part of Roomer's speech. Although he actually played the part of the Valiant Soldier, Will remembers only the first two lines of his speech, and the order of speeches in this section of the text is somewhat confused. The lengthy dialogue in the Peckford text between King George, the Valiant Soldier and the Turkish Knight is lost, as is much of the repartee between Father Christmas and the Doctor. Picketywick's and Bold Hercules's speeches are missing, and we have only a fragment from what Will thinks is Jack Tar's speech but is actually part of Bold Hercules's speech. Incidentally, Jack Tar is the subject of the song which ends the play at Herring Neck, Notre Dame Bay, and the first two lines of his speech in the Peckford text are very similar to the opening lines of the song. Neither Will nor his brother Fred include the macaronic line "The pig and the bug and the bumble-bee" in the version of the song "One more river to cross" which ends the play in the Peckford text, and the references to "bug" and "bumble-bee", according to the Preston *Concordance*, are unique to the Change Islands text.

What, then, can we make of these shadowy fragments from the oral tradition? Clearly, they confirm the cast list but corroborate only a proportion of the published text, but this at least suggests that the Peckford version is reasonably authentic, despite any reservation about some of the published speeches seeming somewhat arch and contrived. The Peckford text also raises questions about the origin of the text, given the fact that a considerable proportion of it is unique, as far as evidence from the Preston *Concordance* attests. What the field interviews do give us, however, is a significant amount of quite detailed information on costume, performance, context, and the role of the play within the community - details which would otherwise have been lost for ever. Together with the published versions of the play they give considerable substance to the

emerging picture of the event as a whole. Is this a unique play with a unique combination of familiar characters to which some hitherto unrecorded characters and speeches have been added? Are there texts identified since the Preston *Concordance* was compiled which might offer clues as to its origin and transference to the New World? These and many other tantalising questions remain unanswered, but as I resume work on transcribing other plays from the oral tradition recorded in Newfoundland in the second half of the twentieth century, I hope to unearth further information which may shed light on the tradition in the province as a whole. In other words, I shall continue to chase the shadows in the hope of giving them at least a little more substance.

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