

***Christmas Rhymers and  
Mummers in Ireland***

***Alan Gailey***



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The introduction, the passages introducing each of the play texts, the notes on costume and disguise, on Leinster and Ulster mumming, and on the setting of the Irish folk plays, are by the editor.

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## Introduction

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Folk drama in Ireland has been a relatively unexplored topic until very recently. The sole attempt at an analysis of Irish folk drama, on the basis of existing material, was in 1946 in an article published by E.R.R. Green in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. An article in *Studia Hibernica* in 1966 showed that some of Green's conclusions were not valid, being based on too little material, but even since the latter article was written, much more material has come to light, much of it from a questionnaire enquiry made by post at the end of 1966 by the Ulster Folk Museum. There are now three complete sets of the material bearing on folk drama in Ireland, in the Ulster Folk Museum, in the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin, and in the Geographical Index of Traditional Ritual Customs, operated by E.C.Cawte, Alex Helm and Norman Peacock.

The extent of this Irish material is known only to a few people, although it is hoped that through publication over the ensuing years, it will become better known, the more so since it appears to confirm theories recently developed to explain the forms of folk drama found in Britain, and because there are many parallels with European folk dramas. There are now more than 75 play texts known from the provinces of Leinster and Ulster, while supporting information has been gathered from about 150 localities, mainly in Ulster and Leinster, but also from a restricted part of Connacht. The material includes not only the partial or complete

play texts, but much ancillary detail as well, dealing for example, with costume and methods of presentation. A relatively small number of the Irish plays has been published. E.K. Chambers knew of only four when he wrote *The English Folk Play* (Oxford, 1933), and a few exist in obscure local journals in Ireland. The two articles mentioned above made five others available, and it is hoped that publication over the next few years will make about eight others accessible to those interested in British and Irish folk drama. It is the function of this booklet to make five plays, that might otherwise remain unpublished, better known, and also to provide a little information on the methods of disguise and forms of costume used in Irish folk drama.

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## Disguise and Costume

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Most of the traditions of costume and disguise prevalent in Irish folk drama have their counterparts in Britain, but one feature, the use of straw on a fairly extensive scale, especially in west Ulster, appears to be unique. Examples of such straw costume are preserved in the Ulster Folk Museum and in the National Museum of Ireland, in Dublin.

The most recent tradition of costume may well be described as 'dressing in part', because the characters endeavour through their costume to make quite explicit the nature of the characters they portray. Thus Oliver Cromwell will have a cardboard false nose, the combatants are usually dressed in quasi-military uniform and St Patrick is normally dressed in green, often with the use of shamrock motifs on his clothing. Beelzebub's equipment matches his self-description in his lines, while the almost ubiquitous Devil Doubt is armed with a broom or brush. Such ideas are not always accompanied by disguise of the performers who represent the various characters, although in east county Antrim the use of blackening on faces is common, if not always

present. But the very idea of 'dressing in part' certainly was known in the early 19th century in south county Wexford, when Patrick Kennedy described it in his book on local life, *The Banks of the Boro* (London, 1867), wherein he also reproduced the earliest known Irish folk play text, ascribed to about 1818. 'Dressing in part' is the normal method of disguise or costume in much of modern Irish folk drama, and occurs everywhere, but is perhaps least obvious now in west Ulster and in county Wexford, but for different reasons in the two areas.

In county Wexford, in the Baronies of Forth and Bargy, mumming remains a popular custom, in part due to the influence of mumming competitions, organised both as events in their own right and as part of local musical and arts festivals. Hand in hand with the evolution of the play texts and the continued development of the association between the plays and the dance, costume has evolved in the direction of uniform and away from the concept of disguise. Modern Wexford mummers are typically dressed in long, dark-coloured trousers, light-coloured, or white shirts, peaked caps, sashes and rosettes, and the predominating colours in all the accessories are those in the flag of the Republic of Ireland, green and orange or gold. The drawing on the title page is based on a verbal description of a member of one of the recent south Wexford groups and is truly representative of the whole of this south-eastern Irish tradition.

Especially in Ulster, both east and west, older traditions tell of the use of paper or ribbon streamers attached either to normal, everyday clothing, or to long white shirts or similar garments specially reserved for mumming. Head-dress in this form of disguise was of a conical form more often than not, often made from paper, and bedecked with streamers in the same way as the clothing. Later traditions tell of these head-dresses taking the form of masks, some-

times worn over blackened faces, sometimes not; but it is known that the older way was for the conical head-dress to act also as a mask, rising from near shoulder level. Performers dressed very like this preserved relatively short plays in east county Derry until within the last two or three decades, and Fig. 1 is based on one of these groups. There is in these traditions of disguise a much greater emphasis of concealing the identity of the performers than is found amongst the groups who 'dress in part', and of course the uniformity that disguise similar to these east Derry examples imposes must assist in evoking a sense of ritual about the performances. When these traditions of disguise have broken down in recent times, it is noticeable that the head-dress has always been the last part of the costume or disguise to disappear. An example of this was provided recently by a group of mummers at Tromogagh, in the mountains of west county Fermanagh. Their head-dresses consisted simply of peaked caps with ribbons hanging down to conceal the faces. This comes from an area where conical head-gear, either of paper or straw, often bedecked with ribbons, was well-known.

A conical straw head dress or mask, such as that mentioned above, figures in Plate I, which comes from Belcoo, county Fermanagh. It is the same in all essentials as examples preserved in museums in Ireland, as already mentioned, and is similar also to masks used in other Irish folk customs, many of which display other similarities or connections with the folk plays. But in many cases such masks only form part of complete suits of straw, including leggings, skirts and coats or capes. Almost always in plays where he appears, Jack Straw includes straw in his costume, and in most west Ulster examples he is dressed in straw as described here. Also, in a limited number of cases, especially in west Tyrone and west Fermanagh, all the performers in the groups were dressed in this way. One Fermanagh tradition was that the



straw masks were put on a bonfire after the end of the mumming season, and new ones made each year, while in another case, the straw-clad performers adjusted straw head-gear in such a manner as to suggest that they were all of the same stature, thus heightening the sense of ritual which their disguise imparted to their performances.

It may, perhaps, be suggested that this extensive use of straw costume in Irish folk drama, which seems to find parallel only in the straw-clad guizards in Shetland, is only a relatively late rationalisation of an earlier use of greenery or vegetation of some kind, and if so, it would have its counterpart in the use of greenery in some English folk dramas in the disguise.

A comment may be added here on the presentation of folk plays in Ireland. Usually the plays were presented in the kitchens of homes in the countryside, or in the streets or in pubs and shops in the country towns. In all more recent examples the performers entered as they were called, at the appropriate points in the performances, and when each had finished speaking, if he was not required to do otherwise by the action of the plays, he stepped back into the background making way for his successor. However some older descriptions (and in the case of a notable revival in north county Antrim these are confirmed from as recently as 1965) make it clear that the performers entered as a group and formed up in a line or semi-circle, from which each stepped forward to declaim his lines, and, if necessary take part in the action, and to which each returned when he had finished. Almost without exception, the performers were men or youths, and it has only been as the tradition declined in recent times that younger boys, or even girls, became involved.

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## Leinster Mummers

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Mummers are still active in the Leinster counties of Wexford and Dublin. In the former county plays are lengthy and have been subjected to considerable interference. Some versions are still performed that retain the fundamental core of a conflict between two heroes, the death of one, followed by his revival which is worked by a doctor. Except for the doctor and the captain, all of the characters in these plays are historical figures, and from the internal evidence of the rhymes it seems likely that the plays originated in the first quarter of the 18th century. It is known that slightly earlier, plays that are similar to those current in Ulster were being performed in county Wexford, and one of these was revived in Enniscorthy more recently.

In county Wexford, however, the mumming tradition was taken over by nationalist sympathisers, probably early this century, and in the course of replacing historical characters like the Czar of Russia, Wellington, Napoleon and the Polish King by a succession of Irish national heroes and patriots, starting with St Columba and ending with John Kelly of Killane, the conflict, death and revival were lost. Nevertheless, the 'patriot' versions did serve a traditional purpose, because they have been instrumental in maintaining in county Wexford a connection between the folk play and male ceremonial dance. Indeed, the stick-dancing, akin to certain kinds of Cotswold morris dancing, is now regarded as the pride and joy of the Wexford mummers. This is the only part of Ireland where such a connection has been maintained.

The mumming tradition in north county Dublin is quite different. In form the plays are closer to those in Ulster and in many parts of England, and there is little sign of recent literary interference. However, it is fairly clear that the north Dublin plays represent a reworking of older material, and that extraneous material, both from the Irish custom of

wren-hunting on 26th December, and possibly also from the Derby Ram, were incorporated. The resultant plays are unique in the records of mumming in Britain and Ireland, and they include a number of traditional features, for example the fool, here given the name of Tom, who still is armed with a bladder and staff, the traditional equipment of his kind.

An interesting feature of the north Dublin plays is their use of long extemporised verses containing references to recent events in the neighbourhood. The existence of such verses has been known for a long time, but probably by virtue of their nature they have been recorded, so far as is known, on only one occasion, in 1965.

A north Dublin play has been selected to represent Leinster mumming, mainly because the Wexford plays are much too long to be included in a booklet of this size, and also because the nature of the Dublin plays is not so well known and none has ever been published. Mumming was also known in north Leinster, in mid-county Louth, where the plays had some characteristics in common with the county Dublin versions, and some that reappear in the plays of south county Armagh to the north. Two county Louth plays, from Dundalk and Castle Bellingham, were published in 1916 in *Folk-Lore*.

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## The Swords Mummers

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The following text is taken from a tape-recording made by Hugh Shields of Dundrum, Dublin, on 26th December, 1965 in the small town of Swords. The mummers gave their performance in a public house in the evening, but during the day they had given a number of performances elsewhere in the town. For reasons of length, the topical rhyme spoken by Tom Fool after the play was over has been omitted. It took the form of a calling-on song, and could more logically

have been included before the play as a means of introducing the characters. A number of ballads were included, both between the play and the topical rhyme and after the latter, and to accompany the singers, and also to provide instrumental solos, the performers had an accordion, a fiddle, a guitar and drums.

Tom Fool was dressed in a fur coat, the Wren wore head-gear consisting mainly of feathers, the Butcher wore a white coat and carried a butcher's knife and sharpening steel, and he had a bowler hat on his head. Tom Fool carried a box marked 'The Mummers' Jewels' into which contributions were put.

Because the play has been transcribed from a tape-recording made in a pub, a few very short pieces have had to be omitted, being too indistinct for full transcription.

\* \* \*

*Captain*

Come, room, room!  
Give me gallant boys room to rhyme,  
We'll show you our activity on a Christmas time.  
Activity in, activity out,  
The devil such activity ye never seen in any man's house.  
We are the mummers that walk the streets,  
We are the mummers that beat all we meet.  
..... beat four score,  
The devil such a beating as they never got before.  
And if you don't believe in all I say  
Here's Prince George.

*Prince George*

Here I come, Prince George.  
Out of England I have fled.  
I fed my horse on oats and hay,  
And afterwards he ran away.



Mummers' straw mask, with tail at back; made at Belcoo, county Fermanagh, in 1967

I fought in England, France and Spain,  
And now I'm here to fight again.  
Where's the man that dares me stand?

*Captain*

I'm the man that dares you stand!

*Prince George*

And who are you but a poor silly lad?

*Captain*

And who are you  
But an ignorant prince of British laws?  
I'll draw me bloody weapon for Irish laws!

*(Sword play, Prince George is struck, and falls full length.)*

*Captain*

Doctor! Doctor!

*Doctor*

I can cure the plague-o in and the plague-o out,  
The pipsy-popsy and the gout.

*(Doctor bends over the prostrate Prince, opens his bag and brandishes an empty stout bottle.)*

*Doctor*

I have a little bottle here in me waistcoat pocket.  
It's called hocus, pocus, medical pain,  
Have a sup, Prince George,  
And rise up and fight your battle again.

*(Doctor gives him a sup)*

*Prince George*

Thank you, thank you, doctor.

*(Prince George rises up.)*

*Doctor*

And if you don't believe in all I say  
Enter in here Joe Butcher.

*Joe Butcher*

Here I come, Joe the Butcher,  
With me knife and with me steel.  
I'd strip an old cow from the head to the heel,  
Strip her or slice her or do what I can,  
For a penny or tuppence to bury the wren.  
And if you don't believe in all I say,  
Enter in here Slick-Slack.

*Slick-Slack*

Here I come, Slick-Slack,  
With me wife and family on me back,  
Five fingers on a griddle,  
Five more on a fiddle.  
I'm the man that bate the devil.  
And if you don't believe in all I say,  
Enter in here the little Divil.

*Little Divil*

Here I come Little Divil,  
Little Divil in, little Divil out.  
..... the back of me mouth.  
Too much for one, too little for two,  
So what the hell am I to do?  
It's money I want, it's money I crave,  
If you don't give me money  
I'll send you all to your grave.  
And if you don't believe in all I say,  
Enter in the Wren.

*The Wren*

Here I come

The Wren, the Wren, the king of all birds.  
On St Stephen's Day I was caught in the furze.  
Although I am little, my family is great,  
Rise up landlady and give us a trate.  
Up with the kettle and down with the pan,  
Give a few pence to bury the Wren.  
Then I'll dip my wings in a barrel of beer,  
And I'll wish you all a happy New Year.  
And if you don't believe in all I say,  
Enter in Handy Andy.

*Handy Andy*

Here I come, Handy Andy.  
When I was young,  
I used to work for sugar and and candy.  
But now they're all giving me whiskey and brandy.  
And if you don't believe in all I have to say,  
Enter in here poor Tom the Fool.

*Tom Fool*

Here I come, poor Tom the Fool.  
Sure I brought along me super-market,  
Just grab a little basket, you all know the rules.  
I have some lovely Omo to wash your budgy down,  
..... Christmas crackers for to share.  
I even brought the blue rinse to dye the old mot's hair.  
Now here's me bladder and here's me staff,  
Throughout me life I've always loved  
To see the mummies happy  
And hear the chisellers laugh.  
And so, ladies and gentlemen sitting round the fire,  
Put your hands to your hearts and give Tom his desire.  
All silver and no brass,  
Bad coppers in me little box won't pass.  
So I hope you will good order keep,  
While each will do his part,



For our intent is merriment  
And pleasure to impart.  
And now good friends, fall into line  
As quickly as you may,  
This mummers' band, at my command,  
Will steal your heart's away.

(Song: 'I'm sitting tonight on the old rustic bridge'.)

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## Mummers and Christmas Rhymers in Ulster

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Mumming as a custom is more widespread in Ulster than in any other part of Ireland, and is equally well known in the east and the west of the province. Only in a fairly restricted part of mid-Ulster does the custom appear to have been absent. In spite of extensive enquiries of various kinds, including a questionnaire survey in 1966 by the Ulster Folk Museum, no information has been forthcoming on mumming in east and mid county Tyrone, west county Armagh and almost all of county Monaghan. It is generally agreed that the texts of mummers' plays known in the north of Ireland were brought into the country from England in the 17th century by settlers. But if this be true, it is difficult to understand why settlers from parts of England where folk drama was known, who were coming to the mid-Ulster areas mentioned, failed to bring the custom with them, in the same way that the custom was successfully transplanted to the other areas.

Another, possibly surprising aspect of mumming in Ulster, and also in Ireland generally, is that texts derived from English sources should have taken such a firm grip within Irish folk culture as recently as the 17th century. In this context it is interesting to note that the plays even spread from established strongholds of English or Scottish settlement into Irish-speaking areas, such as north county Donegal and south Armagh, and nevertheless were never translated into Irish, so far as is known. Some sort of connection has been recognised over the past couple of decades between the folk plays and the Wrenboy ceremonies. This problem received some attention in E.A. Armstrong's *The Folklore of Birds* (London, 1958), but as early as the 1920s John J. Marshall had noted in his *Popular Rhymes and Sayings of Ireland* (Dungannon, 1926,

1928, 2nd edn. 1931) that there was an identity of theme between the mummers' play and some wake games. Sufficient material has now been collected to show that the theme of the mummers' plays, death and revival, has been an integral part of a whole range of folk ceremonies in Ireland, attaching both to seasonal high-points and to critical junctures in the human life-cycle, and that this theme was almost certainly well-established in the country before the play texts were ever introduced. In these circumstances, and possibly at a time when the magico-religious relevance of the theme of death and revival had been almost forgotten, it is understandable how the play texts spread so easily in Ireland. And the reason why they spread must have been that they were seen to provide an explanation for the increasingly inexplicable theme of death and revival.

There is considerable local variety in the texts that have been collected in Ulster, and the characteristics of this variation are now so well known that an unprovenanced text can be fairly accurately located when its existence becomes known. However, in view of the large number of Scottish settlers in 17th century Ulster, it is surprising to find little or no unequivocal evidence for texts akin to the guizers' plays in Scotland. Almost all of the material in Ulster plays that can be recognised as of Scottish origin could have come from other genres of Scottish oral culture, for example from certain types of begging-rhyme.

Two main categories of texts exist. In the east of the province there are plays that seem to be younger than those in the west of Ulster, and, particularly in county Down, there has been some influence from the one known Irish printed version, *The New Christmas Rhyme Book*, printed in Belfast sometime about the middle of the 19th century. The chap-book appears to have stimulated the local tradition in two ways: in some cases it was undoubtedly used as a source, for example along the north county Down coastal strip, east of

Belfast; but in south-east county Antrim it acted as a spur to keeping a more complicated version alive than that printed in the chapbook.

In west Ulster, the plays are usually more complicated than in the east, they are longer, and they are undoubtedly older. Notable features are a close association with song and music, the common appearance of female characters, and of clowns and fools who sometimes, like the females, may have nothing to say, but who merely hover about uneasily on the margins of the performance. Also in west Ulster there is a very common use of straw costume and disguise, sometimes exemplified only in the character of Jack Straw, but in certain plays in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone, the entire group wore this straw covering. Robert Harbinson's autobiographical *Song of Erne* (London, 1960) provides a vivid account of straw-clad mummers. As in north county Dublin, so in west Ulster, and also in south county Armagh, there is evidence of a link of some kind between the mummers and the Wrenboys, some of the words used by the latter appearing in the plays, and also, in parts of mid county Cavan, Wrenboys sometimes used rhymes usually spoken by Beelzebub and Johnny Funny in the plays.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the Ulster plays all seem to derive ultimately from northern English origins, and the extent of local variation in the plays already mentioned is due more to development of the plays after they came to Ireland, than to variation in the original English source material. Consequently one finds St. Patrick, Oliver Cromwell, and Jack Straw taking prominence, the two former frequently displacing one or other of the 'normal' combatants, George, or the Turkish Champion, while two variants of Jack Straw are known, one almost everywhere in Ulster the other confined to a belt across the south of the province. The second Jack Straw variation is interesting, since it usually includes the line 'And I was reared in a barn of straw',

hinting, possibly, at an original straw effigy carried by the group of mummers, which was later rationalised into a character. One example of such an effigy, carried by guizers, has been recorded in Galloway, in south-west Scotland.



**Mummer from Knockloughrin  
east county Derry**  
Based on a description in Ulster Folk Museum Archives

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## Forkhill, South County Armagh Mummers' Play

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Like versions elsewhere in the same area, this play has features found both in west Ulster, in east Ulster, and also to the south in Leinster. But in addition some other south Armagh versions betray Scottish influence, reflecting secondary Scottish settlement in the 18th century, by way of the Ards peninsula in east county Down.

The attenuation of the combat and cure is fairly common in this part of Ulster, and Slasher's main speech contains words usually only present when St Patrick is involved. St George's speech after the cure is not a very common feature, and in this form is best known either in Leinster or in west Ulster, but it has attached to the end of the verse part of one of the begging-rhymes found almost everywhere, although usually only in the quiet. The third and fourth lines spoken by Johnny Funny come from the Wrenboys' verses, while Diddle-de-dout's comment about his protruding shirt-tail is found only in south Armagh and in county Louth to the south.

The play is preserved in the Norman Peacock Collection and comes from information received from Michael J. Smith in January 1957.

\* \* \*

### *Slasher*

Mummers, please, any room for mummers?  
Room, room, brave gallant boys,  
Give us room to rhyme, and we'll show you some activities coming on this Christmas time.  
If you don't believe or agree with what I say  
Enter in Prince George, and he'll clear the way.

*Prince George*

Here comes I, Prince George, from England I have sprung.  
I have ..... (*interrupted by Slasher*)

*Slasher*

Why, you're only a stable boy of mine.  
You fed your horse on oats and hay  
And after all he ran away.

*Prince George*

That's a lie, sir.

*Slasher*

Pull out your sword and pay, sir.

*Prince George*

Pull out your sword and try, sir.

*(Both draw swords, fence for a minute or two, and finally Prince George is run through by Slasher and falls to the floor. Slasher then bends over him, pumps his arms up and down, then raising his arms in an attitude of despair, asks:*

*Slasher*

Thirty shillings for a doctor. Is there a doctor to be found?

*Doctor*

Here come I, a doctor most pure and good.  
And with my strong medicine I will quench this man's blood.

*Slasher*

Doctor dear, do you think he will live?

*Doctor*

Yes, yes he'll live all right.

*Slasher*

Doctor, doctor, where do you carry your medicine?

*Doctor*

In the waist-band of my trousers.

*(Takes out satchel and holds bottles to Prince George's nose saying:)*

*Doctor*

Hokus-pokus, never complain.  
Rise up, dead man, and fight again.

*(Prince George rises, rubs his forehead, and looks round in a bewildered manner, exclaiming:)*

*Prince George*

Aloft, aloft, where have I been,  
Such awful wars as I have seen.  
I was bumed (*sic*), pumped, driven in disguise.  
Once I was dead, but now I'm alive.  
And God spare that Doctor who made me revive.  
Wishing you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,  
With your pockets full of money  
And your barrels full of beer.  
If you don't believe in all I say,  
Enter in Oliver Cromwell to clear the way.

*Oliver Cromwell*

Here come I, Oliver Cromwell, with my long copper  
nose,  
I have conquered many nations as you all suppose.  
I've made the English tremble and I've made the Spanish  
quake,  
Then I courted all the girls coming home from the wake.  
If I do not convince you, enter in Bighead and see what  
he can do.



*Bighead*

Here comes I that didn't come yet  
With my big head and little wit  
Though my head is big and my wit is small,  
I will do my best to please you all.  
But if you don't believe me enter Johnny Funny.

*Johnny Funny*

Here comes I Johnny Funny.  
I'm the man who collects the money.  
So up with the kettles and down with the can,  
Give us some money and we'll be gone.  
But first, let's have Beelzebub.

*Beelzebub*

Here comes I Beelzebub,  
Over my shoulder I carry a club,  
In my hand a frying pan,  
And I count myself a jolly old man.  
I will now call in Diddle-de-dout.

*Diddle-de-dout*

Here I come Diddle-de-dout,  
With the tail of me shirt hanging out.  
Money I want and money I crave,

*(He makes sweeping movements with a brush.)*

*Diddle-de-dout*

And if I don't get money, I'll sweep you all to the grave.

*(An accordion-player plays a dance tune to which the mummers dance or waltz. A song is sung and good wishes for the festive season expressed and an invitation to the dance extended to the members of the family. The dance is organised by the mummers and paid for from the proceeds of their collecting.)*

This version was played up to 1955 and possibly longer. The players had well-fitted masks, sometimes made of papier mache and painted in all kinds of wierd colours. Whiskers and beards of cotton wool and flax were attached, varying in pattern from Santa Claus to sheik or Red Indian types. The costumes were taken off after a performance at a house to prevent damage when moving to the next place, where they would be put on again for the next performance. Costume was as follows:

**Slasher** Usually the tallest member of the party. Wore a high fitting hat and carried a wooden sword on his belt.

**Prince George** Regal looking costume with wooden sword in belt.

**Doctor** Black costume and a small satchel in his belt. Black conical hat.

**Oliver Cromwell** Deep brown costume with a pot shaped hat like a crash helmet. Very florid mask with an exaggerated large nose.

**Johnny Funny** Multi-coloured costume. Carried a small box in his hand.

**Big Head** Small person with large stuffed hat to give an exaggerated large head.

**Diddle-de-Dout** Tight fitting costume with a piece of white shirt sticking out at the rear of his pants. Carried a broom or small sweeping brush.

**Beelzebub** Black costume with red splashes in places and a wicked looking mask with high pointed ears (home made). Black pointed beard. Carried a club and frying pan.

There were also an accordion player, a singer and a step dancer, but the last two, whilst an added attraction, were dispensed with if there were insufficient to fill the other parts. At the end of the play there was a four or eight hand reel and if any ladies were in the houses visited, they were brought into the dance as partners for the mummers. When the dance was over, a performer sang a comic song, in which everyone joined. After a donation had been given, Slasher invited any of the audience who wished, to attend the mummers' ball which was held after all the visits were over.

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## Christmas Rhymers, Ballycarry, county Antrim

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In most Irish folk plays the *quêteurs* all appear after the cure, but in a few examples, this play among them, they are distributed evenly over the presentation and *quête*. Here, Beelzebub and Cromwell both appear between the presentation proper and the entry of Prince George. This Ballycarry play is typical of a dozen or so, all recorded in a restricted part of south-east county Antrim where the custom remains active at the present day. One group, at Ballyboley, has been performing consistently over the past 27 years.

The plays in this area are based on a George *versus* Turkey Champion combat that almost certainly derived ultimately from Cheshire and south Lancashire. However, within Britain and Ireland the plays are unique, since they incorporate both Irish material, such as Cromwell, and Jack Straw (in this play amalgamated with Beelzebub), and also some Scottish material, best seen in Big Bellied Ned's and Devil Doit's rhymes. A further typical feature of these plays is the Turkey Champion's mother, known also in Cheshire; she must have come into being at some time as a rationalisation of the other more anonymous and mysterious female characters, found elsewhere, for example in west Ulster.

The play is preserved in Ulster Folk Museum archives in a communication from Mrs Lillian Sturdy, of Main Street, Ballycarry, who recorded the play from her husband, a native of the Ballycarry neighbourhood. Also in Ulster Folk Museum archives, in MS Notebook No 19 recorded by Ballycarry Women's Institute, there is the same version, except that it lacks the rhyme for Big Bellied Ned.

\* \* \*

*Room Room*

Room, room, brave gallant boys,  
Give us room to rhyme,  
We've come to show you fun  
Upon this Christmas time.  
Active young and active age,  
The like was never acted on the stage.  
If you don't believe what I say,  
Enter in Oliver Cromwell, he'll clear the way.

*Oliver Cromwell*

Here comes I, Oliver Cromwell  
As you may suppose,  
I've conquered many nations  
With my long copper nose,  
I've caused the earth to tremble,  
And my enemies to quake,  
And I massacred a gander  
On the night of Paddy's wake.  
If you don't believe what I say,  
Enter in Beelzebub, he'll clear the way.

*Beelzebub*

Here comes I, Beelzebub,  
Over my shoulder I carry my club.  
In my hand a drippin' pan,  
I think myself a better man  
Than Jack Straw  
Who shot a riddle through a rock,  
Through a reel,  
Through an ould spinnin' wheel,  
Through a bag o' pepper,  
Through a miller's lepper,  
Through a sheep-skin, banes an' all.  
If you don't believe what I say  
Enter in Prince George, he'll clear the way.

*Prince George*

Here comes I, Prince George.  
From England I have sprung.  
I've conquered many nations  
And caused the rest to run.  
Who is the man who'd dare me stand?

*Turkish Champion*

I am the man who'd dare you stand!

*Prince George*

Who are you but a poor, silly lad?

*Turkish Champion*

I am the Turkish Champion. From Turkey land I came  
To fight you, Prince George by name.

*Prince George*

I'll ram my dagger through your side  
And make your puddin's fly, sir.

*Turkish Champion*

I say, Prince George, you lie, sir.  
Pull out your sword and try, sir.

*(They fight. Turkish Champion is struck and falls.)*

*Mother*

Oh Geordie, oh Geordie, oh what have you done?  
You've killed and slain my only son,  
My only son, my only heir!  
To see him lying bleeding there.  
A doctor, a doctor, - £10 for a doctor!

*Doctor Brown*

Here comes I, wee Doctor Brown,  
The best wee doctor in the town.

*Mother*

What can you cure, Doctor?

*Doctor Brown*

I can cure the plague within, the plague without,

The palsy or the gout.

If there's nine divils in, I'll knock ten out.

Bring me an ould woman three score an' ten;

If she's bendy, I'll make her straight again.

*Mother*

What is your cure, Doctor?

*Doctor Brown*

My cure is hens pens, peasy weasy,

Midge's ribs an' bumbees bacon,

The sap o' the poker, the juice o' the tongs,

Three turkey eggs nine miles long.

Put that into a moose's blether,

Stir it up wi' a tam cat's feather.

Put three drops in Jock's left lug

An' he'll get up an' sing you a song.

*(Doctor administers the medicine. Turkish Champion rises.)*

*Turkish Champion*

Once I was dead but now I'm alive,

God bless the wee doctor who made me survive.

We'll all shake hands and fight no more

An' be as big brothers as we were before.

*Big Heid*

Here comes I who never came yit,

Big Heid an' Little Wit.

My heid is big an' my wit is small,

But I'll do my best to please you all.

If you don't believe what I say  
Enter in Big Bellied Ned, he'll clear the way.

*Big Bellied Ned*

Here comes I, Big Bellied Ned,  
If you don't give us money, give us plenty of bread.  
A half a loaf, a slice of cheese,  
A copper or two if you please.  
If you don't believe what I say  
Enter in Divil Doit, he'll clear the way.

*Divil Doit*

Here comes I, the Divil himself.  
If you don't give me money, I'll break all your delph.  
Money I want, an' money I crave,  
If you don't give me money  
I'll sweep you all to your grave.  
Rise up, ould wife, an' shake your feathers,  
An' give me none o' your imperent blethers.  
If you haven't a copper a ha'penny will do,  
If you haven't a ha'penny, God bless you,  
An' the ould man too.  
If you don't believe what I say,  
Enter in Johnny Funny, he'll clear the way.

*Johnny Funny*

Here comes I, wee Johnny Funny,  
I'm the man who lifts the money.  
All silver, no brass,  
Wrapped\* ha'pence won't pass.  
And as the end is drawing near.

*Omnes*

We wish you a Happy Christmas, and a Prosperous  
New Year.

\* Ulster Folk Museum MS Notebook 19 has *rapped* which is an 18th century word meaning *counterfeit*.

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## Spamount Mummers

### west county Tyrone

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Mumming has been an active tradition in west county Tyrone until recently, and occasionally there are revivals such as the play presented by the Melmount mummers in Strabane at Christmas 1966 when it was broadcast by Ulster Television, and the play below, which in 1965 was taught to a group of boys who performed it. The play text was contributed to the Ulster Folk Museum archives by Sgt. Cecil J. Reid, of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, who himself has acted in the mummers in various roles, but most often as Jack Straw.

The play was not always presented as in the text below. Sometimes the doctor was Doctor Brown, 'the best wee doctor in the town'. Although the personnel of the group included people of every religious persuasion, they were careful to present the play in different ways at different houses. For a Roman Catholic audience the characters were as listed below, but in Protestant homes King William was seen to overcome King James.

Typical features of west Ulster plays that are included here are Father Time's role as a presenter and his declared relationship to the slain combatant, Jack Straw's lines which incorporate a rhyming riddle (answer: a maggot or moth), and the appearance of the Clown. It will be noted that the last character has been provided with a variant of a well-known begging-rhyme to speak, but also there is the clear indication of the luck-bringing character of the custom. Prince Pat's lines are unusual, in that they contain an amalgamation of material from the rhymes usually spoken elsewhere by both the Turkey Champion and by George. Possibly more clearly than any other Irish version yet recorded,



this play indicates the apparent ease with which material from a number of different sources could be gathered together to form a quite unique play.

\* \* \*

*Father Time*

Here comes I old Father Time,  
With a Christmas Book and a Mummers' Rhyme.  
And if you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in Room Room, and he will clear the way.

*Room Room*

Room, Room, Gallant boys,  
Give me room to rhyme,  
I'll show you some activity  
Around the Christmas time.  
Active young and active age,  
The best you've ever seen acted on a stage.  
And if you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in Prince George, and he will soon clear the way.

*Prince George*

Here comes I Prince George  
From England I have sprung.  
I can tell youse lots of history  
About the days when I was young.  
I still say England's right and Ireland's wrong!  
Where's the man that dares before me stand?

*Prince Pat*

I'm the man that dares before you stand.

*Prince George*

Who are you?

*Prince Pat*

I am a Turkey Champion,

From Turkey land I came.  
I come tonight to fight you,  
And I mind Pat is my name.  
For seven long years you held me in a closed cage kept,  
Hidden by rock and stone.

*Prince George*

You're a liar, sir!  
For seven long years I fed your horse on oats and hay,  
When you hadn't the nails to scratch yourself.

*Prince Pat*

Take out your purse and pay me, sir.

*Prince George*

I'll take out my sword and slay you.

*(Sword fight. Prince Pat is struck and falls to the ground,  
wounded.)*

*Father Time*

George, oh George, what have you done?  
You went and killed my only son.

*Prince George*

He challenged me to fight him,  
That no one can deny.  
I'll cut him into quarters  
And let his body lie.

*Father Time*

Five pounds for a doctor who can cure.

*Doctor Black*

Here comes I, Doctor Black,  
The best wee doctor in the pack.  
I can cure . . . . .

*Father Time*

What can you cure?

*Doctor Black*

I can cure the plague within the plague,  
The polgy and the gout,  
If there's nine devils in,  
I can put ten out.

*Father Time*

What's your plaster, Doctor?

*Doctor Black*

Hens pens, turkey treacle,  
Midges' beef and bumbees' bacon,  
The sap of the sage,  
The wild goose egg,  
The brains of a beetle,  
The guts of a mouse,  
The paps of an old yellow woman  
That's never seen a fire;  
That's my desire.  
Slap that to his sole,  
As hot as he can thole,  
If he's a dead man in the morning,  
I will charge no fee.

*Doctor Black applies plaster, and says:*

*Doctor Black*

Dead man, rise, and fight again!

*Prince Pat*

Wonderful, wonderful, what have I seen?  
Eighteen devils knocked out of nineteen,  
Nineteen knocked into twenty-four.  
Prince George and Prince Pat will fight no more.

*Prince George and Prince Pat shake hands.*

*Prince Pat*

If you don't believe me, what I say,  
Enter in Jack Straw and he will clear the way.

*Jack Straw*

Here comes I Jack Straw, Striddle Straw,  
Such a man you never saw.  
Kissed the devil through a riddle,  
Through a rock,  
Through a reel,  
Through an old spinning wheel,  
Through a miller's hopper,  
Through a sheep's shank bone.  
Such a like was never known.  
If you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in Bel-z-bub and he will clear the way.

*Bel-z-bub*

Here comes I Bel-z-bub.  
Over my shoulder I carry a club,  
In my hand a frying pan,  
I think myself a funny wee man.  
Last night as I was frying a spit,  
I burned my fingers and I feel it yet.  
I burned my finger betwix' the thumb;  
I'll give its pain to any one.  
If you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in Big Head and he will clear the way.

*Big Head*

Here comes I, Big Head and Little Wit.  
Though my head's big, my body is small,  
I will do my best to please you all.  
If you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in Devil Doubt, and he will clear the way.

*Devil Doubt*

Here comes I wee Devil Doubt,  
The biggest wee devil that ever came out.  
Money I want and money I crave,  
If youse don't give me money,  
I'll sweep youse all to your grave.  
And if you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in John Funny and he will clear the way.

*John Funny*

Here comes I, John Funny,  
I'm the man that collects the money.  
All silver, no brass,  
Wooden half-pennies won't pass.  
If you don't believe in what I say,  
Enter in The Clown, and he will clear the way.

*The Clown*

Here comes I, The Clown.  
If youse want any change,  
I will change youse a pound.  
But we didn't come to your door,  
To beg or to borrow;  
We only came to your door,  
To drive away sorrow.  
God Bless the Master, the Mistress also,  
And all the wee children around the fire.  
Oh! With your barns full of oats,  
And your barrels full of beer,  
We wish youse all a Happy Christmas,  
And a Bright New Year.

## BALLYBOLEY CHRISTMAS RHYMERS



Room Room knocking at a farmhouse door



Doctor curing Turkey Champion  
From left: Turkey Champion, Doctor, Prince George,  
Turkey Champion's Mother

## North Fermanagh Mummers' Play

Plays in county Fermanagh feature female characters, perhaps more consistently than elsewhere in Ireland. Sometimes the female characters are identified and provided with words, as in south-west Fermanagh where they take over the words and functions of Johnny Funny, and are known either as Miss or Biddy Funny. But elsewhere, as in this play from the borderland between counties Fermanagh and Donegal, some miles west of the town of Pettigo, the female characters remain silent, and become only marginally involved in the action.

Tom Funny in this play has clearly been displaced from the *quête* to the presentation. Other features of note are the lines spoken by Jack Straw, which are really a sort of self-description; there is, however, the suggestion of an origin in straw effigies that might have been carried by the mummers. The Wren's lines are typical both of the Wrenboys' rhymes in this part of Ireland, and of the transference of these rhymes to the folk play. The ease with which The Wren was originally incorporated into the plays is fairly clear from the nature of the lines, which fit the context of the *quête*. The last feature to be noted is the part played by Cromwell, whose appearance as a combatant is relatively rare, being known only in a few plays in this borderland area between counties Donegal and Fermanagh, and again in a restricted part of north-east county Londonderry.

The play was recorded by Mr Paddy Tunny from his father and mother, of Garvary, Leggs P.O., Enniskillen, county Fermanagh, and is preserved in Ulster Folk Museum archives, together with the text of a song that was normally sung after the end of the play and before the Captain danced with the Lady.

*Captain Room*

Here comes I, Captain Room, give me room to rhyme,  
I'll show you some activity about the Christmas time.  
Christmas comes but once a year,  
And when it comes it brings good cheer.  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in Tom Funny and he'll clear the way.

*Tom Funny*

Here comes I, Tom Funny.  
I'm the man who carries the money.  
I have two leather pouches right down to my knees,  
Put your hand in your pocket and give what you please.  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in Beelzibub and he'll clear the way.

*Beelzibub*

Here comes I, Beelzibub.  
Over my shoulder I carry my club  
And in my hand a frying-pan.  
I think myself a jolly good man.  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in Oliver Cromwell and he'll clear the way.

*Oliver Cromwell*

Here comes I, Oliver Cromwell with my long copper nose.  
I have conquered many nations as you may suppose.  
I made the French for to tremble and the Spaniards for to  
quake,  
And I beat the jolly Dutchman and made his heart ache.  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in Prince George and he'll clear the way.

*Prince George*

Here comes I, Prince George, from England I have sprung  
I'm one of the noblest champions in all Christendom.



My head is made of metal and my body's made of steel,  
My knees are made of knucklebone; I command you to  
the field.

*Oliver Cromwell*

What are you, Prince George, but a poor servant boy,  
Who fed King James's horse on oats and hay  
For seven long years, and then ran away?  
I say, Prince George, you lie, sir!

*Cromwell draws his sword and runs Prince George through.*

*Oliver Cromwell*

I drive my sword right through your heart, and cause  
you for to die, sir!

*George falls to the floor mortally wounded.*

*Captain Room*

A doctor! a doctor! ten pounds for a doctor!

*Doctor Brown*

Here comes I Doctor Brown.  
The very best doctor in the town.

*Captain Room*

What can you cure, doctor?

*Doctor Brown*

I can cure the plague within, the plague without,  
The ague, the palsy, or the gout.  
The tunderinouns of a wee creepy stool,  
Or the brains of a smoothing-iron.

*Captain Room*

Can you cure this man, doctor?

*Doctor Brown*

I can.

I've a wee bottle in my inside outside trouser waistcoat  
pocket,  
Called hokeris pokeris, elegant pains.  
Get up dead man and fight again.

*(Doctor Brown administers the elixir to the dead Prince George,  
who then leaps to his feet.)*

*Captain Room*

Oh horrible! horrible! was the like ever seen?  
A man of seven senses driven into seventeen.  
By a buck, by a bear,  
By the devil's own ancestors, son and heir.  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in the Wren and he'll clear the way.

*The Wren*

Here comes I the Wren, the Wren, the king of all birds,  
At Christmastime I was found in the furze.  
Although I am small my family is great.  
Get up landlady and give your trate (*treat*)  
And if your trate is of the best,  
I hope your soul in Heaven will rest.  
But if your trate is very small,  
It won't agree with me at all.  
And if you don't believe these words I say  
Enter in Jack Straw and he will clear the way.

*Jack Straw*

Here comes I, Jack Straw.  
Such a man you never saw.  
My mother was straw and my father was straw  
And I had seven brothers and they were all straw;  
We were reared in a barn of straw..  
And why wouldn't I be straw?  
And if you don't believe these words I say,  
Enter in Wee Divil Doubt he'll clear the way.

### Divil Doubt

Here comes I, Wee Divil Doubt,  
If you don't give me money, I'll throw you all out.  
Money I want, money I crave,  
If I don't get money I'll sweep you all to the grave.  
Five shillings, no less,  
All copper, no brass.  
And I hope these words will come to pass,  
For it's all for the drink, boys, sing.

*(Each mummer carries a stout cudgel, and one of them has a length of heavier wood, that might be described as a log, which is placed in the centre of the floor, and while singing, the ring of mummers beat time on it with their cudgels.)*

### Omnnes (first sing)

We'll join our hands together and we'll never fight no  
more.  
We'll be as loyal comrades as we have been before.  
We'll bless the master of this house, aye, and the mist-  
ress too,  
And all the little babies who round the table grew.  
With your pockets full of money and your tables full of  
beer,  
We wish you a happy Christmas and a bright New Year.

*(All the mummers who can sing then join in second, progressive song. Then the fiddler strikes up a reel and the Captain dances with the Lady. This Lady has no rhyme, and is usually a man dressed up who is chosen for his ability to dance well. The dance is a two-hand reel. If the reception is good the mummers will sing another traditional song, and two others may dance.)*

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## The Belfast Chapbook Version

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Nicholson's *New Christmas Rhyme Book* has already been mentioned ( see pages 16 - 17 ) as helping to preserve the tradition in east Ulster, and because known copies of the chapbook are rare, it merits printing here. It is an unpretentious volume of sixteen pages 16 mo, with cheap woodcuts which serve to illustrate the action or dialogue on the pages. The woodcuts were obviously cut for the purpose; this is unlike the chapbooks of the north-west of England where any block available was used, irrespective of relevance. The use of the woodcuts proves that the chapbook had different editions, for although the same blocks are used throughout the various copies so far compared, some have border ornament while others do not.

Apart from the correction of typographical errors, the varying treatment of the woodcuts appears to be the only difference in the various editions, whose text is reproduced exactly below. There are no stage directions, nor any indication as to the character speaking, other, that is, than the opening line where identity is announced. It is not even clear which characters fought and which was killed; nevertheless, it is obviously a version taken direct from the local oral tradition. This makes it quite different from the chapbooks of England, where practised writers have clearly rewritten the texts to make them more attractive, and possibly coherent to a generation which had forgotten the tradition. The Belfast chapbook is contemporary with its English counterparts, being dated on typographical evidence to *circa* 1850, and it was still on sale in 1913.

\* \* \*

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## Christmas Rhymers

---

Room, room brave gallant boys, come give us room to rhyme, we are come to show our activity at the Christmas time.

Active young, and active age, the like was never acted on a stage; and if you don't believe what I say, enter in St. George, and clear the way

Here comes I, St. George, from England have I sprung, one of those noble deeds of valour to begin; seven long years in a close cave have I been kept, and out of that into a prison leapt; and out of that into a rock of stone, where I made many a sad and grievous moan. Many a giant did I subdue, I ran the fiery dragon through and through; I freed fair Sabra from the stake; what more could mortal man, then, undertake? I fought them all courageously, and still have gained the victory; and will always fight for liberty. Here I draw my bloody weapon - show me the man that dare me stand, I'll cut him down with my courageous hand.

I am the man that dare you challenge, whose courage is great, and with my sword I made dukes and earls to quake.

*George answers*

Who are you, but a poor silly lad, I am a Turkey Champion, from Turkey-land I came, to fight you, Great George by name. I'll cut you and slash you, and then send you to Turkey, to make Mince pies baked in an oven, and after I have done I'll fight ever a champion in Christendom.

A Doctor, a doctor, ten pounds for a doctor; is there never a doctor to be found can cure this man of his deep and mortal wound?

I am a doctor, pure and good, and with my sword I'll staunch his blood; if you have a mind this man's life to save, full fifty guineas I must have.

What can you cure doctor?

I can cure the plague within, the plague without, the palsy and the gout; moreover than that, if you bring me an old woman of three score and ten, and the knuckle bone of her toe be broken, I can fix it again. And if you don't believe what I say, enter in St. Patrick and clear the way.

Here comes I, St. Patrick, in shining armour bright, a famous champion and a worthy knight. What was St. George but St. Patrick's boy, who fed his horse on oats and hay, and afterwards he ran away.

I say by George you lie, sir, pull out your sword and try, sir; pull out your purse and pay, sir; I'll run my sword through your body and make you run away, sir; so enter in Oliver Cromwell, and clear the way.

Here comes I, Oliver Cromwell, as you may suppose. I conquered many nations with my copper nose. I made my foes for to tremble and my enemies for to quake; and beat my opposers till I made their hearts to ache; and if you don't believe what I say, enter in Beelzebub, and clear the way.

Here comes I, Beelzebub, and over my shoulder I carry my club, and in my hand a dripping pan, I think myself a jolly old man; and if you don't believe what I say, enter in Devil Doubt, and clear the way.

Here comes I, little Devil Doubt, if you don't give me money I'll sweep you all out; money I want, and money I crave, if you don't give me money I'll sweep you all to your grave.

Gentlemen and ladies, since our sport is ended, our box must now be recommended; our box would speak if it had a tongue, nine or ten shillings would do it no wrong. All silver and no brass.

*Song by them all*

Your cellar doors are locked,  
And we're all like to choke,  
And it's all for the drink  
That we sing, boys, sing.

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## The Setting of Irish Folk Plays

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The Irish folk plays are all Hero-Combat plays, one of the three main English types. Their local variety, exemplified in the six plays printed here, is matched by the variety in which the Hero-Combat plays exist in England, and while the Irish plays are quite different from anything yet discovered in England, they are just as clearly derived from English prototypes. Most seem to be based on northern English plays, as the appearance of Johnny Funny so often would hint, but Slick-Slack's burden of his wife and family upon his back, recalling Johnny Jack's similar statement in midland and southern England, might suggest an alternative source for the north Dublin plays.

As already hinted, there is plenty of evidence to show some sort of relationship with other Irish folk customs, especially with the Wrenboys. However, identities of theme and of incidental details in disguise or costume, and of motivation, point to connections at a fundamental level with a whole range of folk customs. Some of these, where there is the same theme of death and revival as in the Hero-Combat plays, were mimed performances, and they may be a clue to the nature of the original ritual from which the Hero-Combat plays, and ultimately also the main types of English folk drama, evolved a very long time ago. In particular may be mentioned some of the imitative wake games described in Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork, 1967). But above all else, the Irish mummers' plays are a fine index of the nature of the interaction between an implanted, mainly English folk culture, or at least between elements from such, and an indigenous tradition in Ireland, an interaction that was critical in the 17th and early 18th centuries, but one that has remained evident until today.





Price 4/- net

# Additional Notes

This booklet was originally published in 1968, as a consequence of the development of research since then, the author feels that he can no longer stand over a variety of statements made in this publication. You may care to note the following:

p.3 For a completed analysis of 99 Irish texts, all collected before c.2000, see *Irish Mummers' Play Texts: Their Content and Development – Part 1*, (Alan Gailey 2010) *Ulster Folklife Journal*, 2010, Vol.53, pp.1-56.

p. 4 37 of these 99 texts have been published, in many cases in obscure or local publications, many of them now out of print.

p. 5 The earliest known Irish folk. play text is, now, of course, the Belfast chapbook by Smyth and Lyons, 1803-10.

p.15 I now believe that the first texts introduced into Ireland came in probably in the second half of the 18th century. However, the 'Possibly surprising aspect of mumming in Ulster' remains a valid comment, even for the more recent dating.

p.16 The second and third sentences of the second para. need major revision, too extensive to set out here  
The New chapbook, of course, is no longer the only known printed version: see above.

p.19 Migrant agricultural labour from south Armagh to Britain must, now, be considered a more likely source of Scottish influence on the play texts there.

p.40 This entire page is in need of major revision: see: my own 'Chapbook Printings of Mummers' Plays in Ireland', *Ulster Folklife*, Vol. 51, (2005), pp. 34-53.

p.44 The final sentence would now, better, end after '.. such, and an indigenous tradition in Ireland.'