

## **Mumming in New England**

### **Christmas in New England**

Many Americans believe that the English enjoy a better Christmas than we do. We imagine an English Yuletide rich with ancient custom, charming eccentricity and an unbroken connection to the mythic ancestors. You have the Druids. We have Bing Crosby. You have Avebury. We have Disneyland. You have Herne the Hunter. We have Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. You have Old Father Christmas, with a crown of holly round his head. We have the Coca Cola Santa.

New England in particular has a troubled history when it comes to Yuletide pleasures. For quite some time, it was banned outright. Christmas was a work day in Puritan Boston. The Reverend Cotton Mather warned that the ‘Burning Wrath of God’ would be visited on anybody who ‘made merry’ or even took the day off from work.<sup>1</sup> Heavy fines were meted out for the crime of making ‘mynce pye’. The colonial government deputized ‘pie sniffers’ who spent Christmas Day policing the streets for the telltale aroma of cinnamon and cloves.<sup>2</sup> When pie-eating slackers are fined five shillings a mummer might find himself clapped in the stocks or worse.

### **Mumming in the Colonies**

Although the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas in Massachusetts, English holiday customs, including mumming took root elsewhere in the colonies. We know this because we keep careful police records. John Smith of Philadelphia, for example, was arrested on 26 December 1702 for the crime of going from house to house, dressed in women’s clothing, masked and speaking gibberish.<sup>3</sup> The Philadelphia Mummers point to this, with pride, as the first recorded arrest of a mummer.

The earliest written record of English mummers in Philadelphia comes from a diary, written in December 1686 wherein the writer describes “a party of mummers alle decked out in a most fantastic manner.”<sup>4</sup> They performed a rhyming skit about Saint George and a Turkish Knight, going from door to door. This performance would have been frowned upon because one of the first ordinances in Philadelphia passed in 1682, prohibited “stage

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plays, masks and revels.”<sup>5</sup>

Even in Massachusetts laws against Christmas did not go unchallenged. By 1730 they had been struck down and “misrule” was restored in the colony. Samuel Breck, born in 1770, tells us of the “Anticks,” a group he describes as “a set of the lowest blackguards” that went about in disguise on Christmas performing a Saint George and the Dragon play. “The only way to get rid of them was to give them money, and listen patiently to a foolish dialogue between two or more of them.” He recorded some of the dialogue:

See, there he lies

But ere he dies

A doctor must be had...<sup>6</sup>

The English colonists still practiced guising for the purpose of getting away with something, but instead of blackening their faces and donning rag coats, Americans put on war paint and disguised themselves as Indians.

Washington Irving tells of mummers and sword dancers, decked out in bells and fox pelt, coming to the door of manor houses in New York State.<sup>7</sup> The scripts evolved to suit the new nation. Instead of Saint George you might see George Washington, the closest figure we have to a patron saint, engaged in combat. I saw the revival of an old Connecticut mummer’s play in which George Washington battled King George.

A hundred years ago, during the Great Folk Revival, collectors traveled to the isolated Appalachian Mountains where songs that had died out in Great Britain were still being sung and patterns of Elizabethan speech lived on in the local dialects. When Marie Campbell went collecting folk plays in the Kentucky Highlands in the 1920s she came upon fragments of a mummer’s play. A woman named Susan told Campbell that her grandfather had always recited the part of the Turkish Knight. The full play had not been acted out in her lifetime, but her grandfather still recited his speech as a yearly ritual. She had heard the Turkish Knight’s speech so many times she too could recite it by heart, but

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she didn't know any of the other parts because she'd never heard the rest of the play recited. In 1930 a group of older people in the community actually presented an old mummer's play for Campbell, which hadn't been acted out for many years. The presenter opened with this speech:<sup>8</sup>

We air now aiming to give a dumb show  
for to pleasure the Little Teacher  
for not going off to the level country  
to keep Christmas with her kin.  
Hit ain't noways perfect the way we act out this here dumb show,  
but hit ain't been acted out amongst our settlement  
for uppards of twenty or thirty year, maybe more.  
I reckon folks all knows hit air bad luck  
to talk with the dumb show folks or guess who they air.  
Now then we aim to start.

(He then walked out of the cabin and came back with a broom to clear the way, and spoke these words.)

Room, room, gallons of room.

(When enough of a space was cleared the play began)

In comes old Father Christmas,  
Welcome or not, welcome or not,  
I hope old Father Christmas  
Never is forgot, never is forgot...

The play is archived in the County Index of English Folk Play Scripts. It's worth a read, if only to see how "room, room, brave gallants all" gets turned in to "room, room, gallons of room."

### **The Philadelphia Mummers**

This New Year's Day Mummers Parade is probably as much a mystery to most Americans as it is to you. At first glance, the Philadelphia mummers seem to have very little to do with English mumming. A close friend grew up in Philly and attended the parade every year, so she was able to give me an insiders' view. The parade goes back to the colonial era when colonists celebrated Christmas in the streets, going from house to house and reciting a few remembered lines in exchange for food and drink. There may have been a play. There were certainly costumes and disguises. Again, we know this thanks to the arrest records.<sup>9</sup> In the 1800s, immigrants from Italy, Germany, Poland and Scandinavia got in on the fun in Philadelphia, with each group bringing its own twist to the celebration. The recitations got lost but the costumes and face paint remained and every year it got more elaborate. By the late 1800s Philadelphia storeowners actually started offering prizes for the best costumes.

The first organized parade took place in 1901 and groups of mummers competed for prizes. Just as towns and villages in the old country had a strong sense of community and belonging, so did the immigrant neighborhoods. To this day the mummer's clubs are linked to particular neighborhoods and many mummers take their father's place in the group as they come of age. The groups are 100% male. Their wives make the elaborate costumes, which are worked on for an entire year. The Italian groups, who have played a major part in the parade for many years, maintain that the mummers take their name from a Roman god, Momus and that the celebration can be traced to the winter feast of Saturnalia when misrule reigned and slaves were waited on and wore their master's clothing.

What I see in all of this is an American crazy quilt, patched together from European traditions, with a dollop of African thrown in. The fringed costumes suggesting rag coats or straw. The clubs are linked to a particular neighborhood, in the same way English mummers are associated with a particular village. This is more than most Americans know about the Philadelphia mummers, and far more than any Englishman needs to.

### **The Christmas Revels**

In the United States, you are far more likely to see mummers for the first time on the stage rather than the street. We have a national organization called “The Revels” which every year puts on an elaborate stage show in several cities. The original Revels production, in Cambridge Massachusetts, had a medieval English theme and included a mummer’s play, a sword dance, country dances, traditional carols, recitations and our own version of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. The theme of the Revels changes every year and from city to city. Each of the seven cities selects a different ethnicity to explore. Local Morris dancers, folk dancers, singers and musicians volunteer to perform side by side with a handful of paid professionals. It’s a great honour in the community to be asked to perform.

Even though the exploration of different music and dance traditions is exciting, the Revels are always built around a core of traditional English mumming and morris dances. The rest of the production is pieced together with music, dances and stories taken from the theme culture and there’s always a simple story line which holds it all together. This mingling of Yuletide lore and music from many countries built around an English core makes a great deal of sense in the United States because this is how our own culture grew. It’s no wonder that we would have had the impulse to create a ritual performance that mirrored the blending of cultures that we all grew up in.

### **John Langstaff**

John Langstaff was the founder of the Revels. He is probably the Father of American mumming. I met him at a Music Festival where he was speaking and told him about my own Mummers Team. When he learned that we still went from house to house and performed outdoors, his eyes lit up. He took my hand and said very earnestly “What you’re doing is very important....” It felt like a blessing. He too saw mumming as a way keeping a bit of the human spirit alive. The yearly repetition of the old familiar story rekindles our connection to a story the seasons tell of the mystery of death and rebirth.

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Langstaff said “There’s a need for art that connects us to each other. You go far enough back in any culture, and you find these rituals, these ways of bringing people together. I think that connectedness is so important to us. It always has been, you know — the rituals tell us this.”<sup>10</sup> This is what the Revels are all about.

Langstaff was born on Christmas Eve in to family of musicians. He told me that he grew up seeing mummer’s plays performed in the living room. His career was far too distinguished to cover in a few minutes, so suffice it to say he was a brilliant musician and a gentle man. I’ve never heard an unkind word said about him. In 1957 he produced “A Christmas Masque of Traditional Revels” in New York City. The television network NBC recruited Langstaff to create a similar program in 1966 for national broadcast. Dustin Hoffman, directed by Langstaff, played the dragon in the mummer’s play. In 1971 he produced the first Christmas Revel at the Sanders Theater in Cambridge. Originally known as The Christmas Revels, they evolved in to The Revels — A Celebration of the Winter Solstice.

Americans treasure the scraps of folklore and ritual that our grandparents brought to the new world. This is why the Revels are so popular. There is new material every year, but the core is repeated over and over again, the definition of ritual. The audience would be very unhappy if the Horn Dancers did not appear. They would miss jumping to their feet to join in a serpentine dance round the theatre when “Lord of the Dance” is played. They have been known to take matters in to their own hands if a key element of the ritual is eliminated. A director decided to drop The Sussex Mummers Carol from the performance one year. The audience sang it anyway — at every single performance.

### **Mumming On Stage**

The Mummer’s play and the Abbot’s Bromley horn dance are the heart of the production. Without a Mummer’s Play, it simply would not be a Revel. The Horn Dance and the Play are what we go to see. I’ve seen Arabic Revels, Balkan Revels, Irish Revels, Scottish Revels, Midsummer Revels, Winter Revels, Medieval Revels, Renaissance Revels,



**Bavarian Revels “The Uglies and the Beautifuls” © Roger Ide courtesy of Revels, Inc.<sup>11</sup>**

Bavarian Revels and several English Revels. In the staged revels Saint George almost always dies by the swords of the sword dance team:

*St. George shall come  
And die by swords which circle round his neck.  
As winter dies, so shall he die and rise again as spring.*

*(After Saint George is brought to life again he speaks these words:)*

*Good morning, gentlemen, a sleeping I have been.  
And I've had such a sleep as the like was never seen.  
But now I am awake, alive unto this day.  
The dancers shall have their dance and the doctor take his pay.*

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One of my favorite Revels had a Bavarian theme. In the mummer's play that year the Doctor travelled from Vienna and was named Dr. Freud. The play contained all of the traditional elements, with the twist of having a doctor of psychology who raised Saint George and analyzed the problem of death and resurrection at the same time. The Bavarian Revels also introduced us to the Perchten (the ch is pronounced as in Munich). These are the wild elemental mountain spirits. Like a mountain blizzard, or a field of alpine flowers, the Perchten are neither good nor bad. They are simply "ugly" or "beautiful". They are now part of our Midwinter Cultural Mix.

### **Growing Up Mummer**

Led by singer David Coffin, many of the children in the chorus were brought up contra dancing, folk singing and going to Morris Ales. For them Mumming and Morris are not revivals they are simply the culture and community they were brought up in. We didn't think about it when we brought our children mumming or Morris dancing that it would mean something different to them than it does to us. We adopted it. They grew up with it. Mumming and the Horn Dance are at the heart of my son's childhood Christmas memories, and those of my nieces too.

### **Who Is Saint George?**

In the mummer's play I saw in Massachusetts in 2011, the character of Saint George did not appear at all. He was replaced by a character named Solis, who clearly represented The Sun. I'm not at all sure that I approve and I certainly heard grumbling in the audience when we realized that there would be no Saint George. It's one thing to kill Saint George — we do it every year. It's quite another to kill him off entirely. I think I understand how we go there though. In the United States the battle between Saint George and the Turkish Knight has come to be seen as a struggle between darkness and light. Saint George is believed to be an incarnation of an earlier pagan character that represents the sun defeated by winter darkness. Our relationship to Saint George is very different than yours is in England. Even if you no longer believe in such things, he's still the patron saint of England. In America, we don't have a patron saint. We didn't grow up seeing the image of Saint George on our stained glass windows, or Green George peeking out at us from a

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cathedral corner. To us, he's just another hero, but one who provides an important link to our ancestors.

The history of England stretches back beyond the certainty of memory or the written word. The full story can only be accessed through the imagination, helped along by bits of forgotten lore disguised as folk characters. Our history as a nation dates to 1776, well within reach of written and printed records. Our founding father, and the nearest figure we have to a patron, was George Washington. We all know exactly what he looked like. No mystery there. We've even seen his wooden teeth. But as the children of immigrant families, we needed a connection to our ancestors. It appears that we have re-invented mumming to fill this need. It may have been a re-enactment originally, but it's become a living tradition. Saint George is currently seen as a symbol of the sun, but that could change too. This probably won't come as news to any of you, but I now realize that Saint George probably doesn't represent the sun at all. If anything he is the spirit of the vegetation, which dies off each year, and is reborn in Spring. Like Saint Martin, Sinter Klaas and all of the other characters who ride in with the winter storms, George rides a snow white horse.

Scholars can only date the mummer's plays, as we know them, back to the 18th Century. I respect this, but I believe that folk characters usually have more than one layer of meaning. Saint George has certainly been around longer than that. Like the sun, he rose up in the east. The name George comes from the Greek name Georgios, which is translated as farmer — but which literally means “worker of the earth”. The Greenman is often called Green George, suggesting a connection. I think we have gotten it all wrong here in America. George is not the sun. Unlike the sun, he dies every year. He is a reminder of Green George and the mystery of life and death in the agrarian year, which so many of us have become all too distanced from. In the end, he willingly surrenders to the sword. In misunderstanding Saint George, we may have misunderstood the season itself. The American Indians of the Southwest celebrate the Winter Solstice as a sacred season for coming in to balance. It's a time for letting go of anger, and resolving differences. They believe that in restoring harmony within themselves that balance is

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restored to the universe itself, so the rains will come in season and the crops will grow.  
Perhaps we will find a way to restore this in to our own rituals.

A new way to view the mummer's play might be to consider the battle as the struggle of night and day, not to defeat one another, but to come back in to balance. The two seasons— spring and fall — when day and night are balanced, are times of planting and harvest, productivity and plenty. They are good times. The darkness, in and of itself, is not a negative force. It leads us in to rest, restoration and dreaming. It's high time we got over casting 'night' as the bad guy.

### **Mummers Groups I Know Personally**



**The Paper Bag Mummers of Waltham, Massachusetts © Claudia Chapman**

The Paper Bag Mummers of Waltham, Massachusetts, have taken mummers plays off the stage and put them back in the street, where they belong. Under the able leadership of

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Lynn Noel, this is a remarkably creative group and an inspiration for us all. They create their costumes, sometimes on the spot as needed, from paper grocery bags, write new plays at the drop of a sword, and improvise constantly. Their motto is “We never rehearse, we only perform...”

Most Americans do not see their first mummer’s play on the street. They are far more likely to be introduced to mumming as part of a Christmas revel on stage. “Welcome Yule” is produced annually in Turner’s Falls, Massachusetts in a lovely old town theater. Every year the local Morris side, contra dancers, community chorus and musicians come together to create this event. The program always includes a mummer’s play, a Border Morris dance, The Abbot’s Bromley Horn Dance and a variety of songs, recitations and music. There is always a theme that unifies the songs and readings — a battle between the Holly King and The Oak King, for example. The mummer’s play is re-worked every year to incorporate some new lines and surprises, but the familiar characters appear and there is always a battle, a death, and a mysterious resurrection which the quack doctor takes credit for. The same actors often take the same part year after year, most notably the extremely tall, heroically proportioned gentleman who always plays the female lead.

Welcome Yule is ritual theater created by the local community. The players belong to the same Morris teams and contra dance together on Saturday night. Everybody knows one another and performs for the fun of it. The modest \$10 admission fee covers expenses and provides a budget for props and costumes.

There are many groups like this in New England. Community revels are usually staged in churches, or old town hall theaters. I usually know at least some of the players from folk music festivals, or Morris Ales and am greeted as a member of the community. Like The Revels, the heart and soul of these more homespun events is always the mummer’s play, coupled with the Horn Dance. It is theater, but it’s also ritual. Similar productions included “Sing Back The Sun” in Irvingtown, New York and “Take Joy” in Stratford Connecticut.

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For the first time in 2012 I attended the town-wide Sinterklaas festival in the Hudson River town of Rhinebeck, New York. Even Old New York was once New Amsterdam, so the Sinterklaas festival combines Dutch and English customs. You can order a beer at The Beekman Arms, a colonial era inn and tavern, while you watch Saint George battle the Dragon. In the evening, the mummers parade through the street as part of a spectacular community procession. Sinterklaas on his white horse leads the parade, accompanied by a small army of elemental wildmen in rag coats, many of them masked or with blackened faces called the Grumpuses. Pokingbrook Morris, a New York State team, performs the Abbot's Bromley Horn Dance at various locations in the street all day, and they march in the parade in the evening. The people of the town work for weeks in advance, creating giant illuminated puppets of stars, the sun, the moon and various mythical creatures and animals include hobbyhorses and a herd of mushroom-eating-shamanic-cows. An English mummer would feel right at home at any of these events.

### **Missing Pieces**

When I was growing up in New York City, the concept of an American 'melting pot' was very strong. There was an expectation that immigrants and their families would throw off the language and customs of the old country and take on a new, modern 'American' identity. Unfortunately this process left many people with a sense of 'something missing'.

I live in New England now, on land that was once English soil. Before the English claimed it, the Mohicans called it Quinnehtukqut, which means long tidal stream. It was Indian land. It seems only natural that the grandchildren of immigrants in search of a deeper ritual connection to the earth and the changing seasons might look to local American Indian traditions. But the spiritual leaders in these communities directed seekers of European ancestry to look towards their own history and traditions instead. It's all there, they explained. Everything you're looking for from us is right there in your own ancestral traditions.

The Indians of New Mexico celebrate their winter rituals in the same sacred mountains as their ancestors. Their link to these mountains goes back beyond recorded time. None of

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the tribe's origin stories or ancient history has been written down. I've been told that each clan is responsible for memorizing one piece of the story and one portion of the rituals. When the stories are recited, each clan is responsible for one part of the re-telling. As long as the tribe stays together, their story is preserved.

As I wrote about the people of the pueblos learning their part by hearing it spoken by an older member of the clan, I thought of the girl in Kentucky who recited the Turkish Knight's speech for Mary Campbell in 1920. She'd learned it from hearing her grandfather recite his own bit of the mummer's play year after year, long after the other mummers were gone and the rest of the play seemed to have been forgotten. I wonder what speech, long since forgotten, her grandfather based his own recitation on. The entire play must have been carried across the Atlantic in memory. Oral tradition is a powerful thing.

I sometimes look to other cultures to fill in the gaps when something seems to have gone missing in my own. A good example is the Horn Dance, which is linked with mumming in the United States. Many American Indians perform a ritual deer dance as well, especially in communities where people depend on game animals to feed their family. These deer dances are connected to the hunting season, and the sacred relationship between hunter and prey. It's a remarkable experience to see the antlered dancers emerge from an underground kiva on the appointed day as they have for hundreds of years. Everyone watches in silence because the dance is a prayer in motion.

When I saw the deer dance I made a connection to the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance. I understand that many English dancers are curious about the hushed reverence so many Americans feel for the horn dance, as it is performed over here. We wonder why you don't feel the same way we do, because it seems like such a link to the distant past. I look at mumming in the same way. It something that connects me to my ancestors and to the country that my grandparents loved so well but had to leave behind. The written records take us back a couple of hundred years, but not all the way to the beginning. The beginning is still a mystery. At the heart of all the fun and laughter of a mummer's plays,

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there still lies a mystery. Without this mystery, there would be no need for ritual. And without ritual the heart of our seasonal celebrations would be lost.

The way in which we celebrate the Yuletide season in New England has changed. Instead of striving for a melting pot where the old traditions fade away and are lost, over the last few decades a different vision has emerged. We've pieced together music, dance, stories and folk plays from the many cultures which are represented in the United States, and in the process, stumbled upon a way of celebrating the season which is uniquely our own. Mumming and the Horn Dance is very much a part of this. At first contemporary mumming in New England may have been a re-enactment, but it has become a part of our culture. We rarely mention anymore that it's an English tradition because now it is our own tradition as well. The children grew up with it. I expect that it will continue to evolve and change. I certainly hope so.

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<sup>1</sup> Anon, Christmas in Colonial and Early America, *World Book Encyclopedia*, World Book Inc, 1996. p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Stradley, History of mincemeat pie, *What's Cooking America?*, 2004  
<http://whatscookingamerica.net/History/PieHistory/MincemeatPie.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of disorder: Early blackface minstrels and their world*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Cockrell, D. 1997, p.44.

<sup>5</sup> Cockrell, D. 1997, p.44.

<sup>6</sup> H.E. Scudder (ed) *Recollections of Samuel Breck With Passages From His Notebooks (1771 - 1862)*, Philadelphia, 1877, cited in Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle For Christmas*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Washington Irving, *Old Christmas - From the Sketch Book of Washington Irving*, Macmillan, 5<sup>th</sup>. Edition, 1886, pp. 150-7; Illustrated by Randolph Caldecott.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/93--kycm.htm> . Also, Marie Campbell, Survivals of old Folk Drama in the Kentucky Mountains, *Journal of American Folklore*, Jan.-Mar.1938, Vol.51, No.199, pp.10-17.

<sup>9</sup> E.A. Kennedy III , *Life, Liberty and the Mummers*, Temple University Press, 2007, Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> John Alarick, Obituary for John Langstaff, *Boston Globe*, December 14, 2005. Republished by New York Revels at <http://www.nyrevels.org/Langstaff.html#1>

<sup>11</sup> See [www.revels.org](http://www.revels.org) for detail of an organisation with pivotal history in the theatrical production and realization of traditional material. Their website notes that: "In 1971, John Langstaff founded Revels, Inc., to link the music, dances, and seasonal rituals from an older world to a modern world that needs them."