

Cressida Pryor, The Winchcombe Mummers journey to 2103, Mummers Unconvention, Gloucester, 2013.

The Winchcombe Mummers journey to 2013.

Eight years ago I found a little booklet with a weather beaten green cardboard cover in my grandparent's archive; they lived a few miles from Hitchin, in Hertfordshire. The booklet was published in 1904; written by a Mr W.B. Gerish in a folk lore series and was entitled 'the Mayer tradition in Hertfordshire'¹. My grandmother had been involved with setting up the first rural music school there and had an interest in folk arts so finding a booklet on this topic was not a surprise. In it are noted the words of the local Mayer's Song; the chorus relating to the dawn May Day calendar custom of putting may blossom in the door knockers of houses in Hitchin's main street:

“We've been rambling all this night
And almost all this day
And now we have returned again
With a big bunch of May, of May
And now we have returned again with a big bunch of May.”²

The verses were a thinly disguised reminder to put money in the pot and keep on the right side of the local clergy:

“Remember us poor Mayer's all
And thus we do begin
To lead our lives in righteousness
Or else we die in sin”³

The rest of the song's verses were similarly pious and I began to lose heart until I later read about the Hitchin custom of two characters being 'acted out' annually on May Day morning streets. Old Tom and Mad Moll; both were played by men, the former wielding a broom, the latter a ladle. Both had humps, sang and danced, wore old tattered clothes and seemed to have licence to cause havoc and mayhem, chasing and sweeping dust up into the faces of the onlookers if they felt the balance of merriment needed stoking up. Language was bawdy and drink flowed. Not a place for the faint hearted. The description immediately conjured up images that would not have looked out of place in a Breughel painting.

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My partner and I readily adopted the personas of these two larger than life characters and the following year Mad Moll and Old Tom strode, with energy and irreverent ease into a short ‘pub play’ about the Michaelmas Hiring Fairs at the end of September.

The descent into end of year mumming was the natural next step. Old Tom morphed into the striding proclaimer of the traditional Hero Combat play, Mad Moll became the every woman character introducing the whole event, the bridge between the audience and the players. I delved into various archives, mostly from Cecil Sharp House and chose characters and plot lines that I liked from the 1913-16 Ilmington Mummer’s Play, from the Kirk Hallam Christmas Guiser’s Play of 1907, and bits from the York Mummer’s Play. A blatant cherry picking of what I felt were the best lines of these plays. I avoided what I judged were overly lengthy verses that would lose the interest of modern audiences. The end result was a ‘mixum gatherum’ in the true Irish sense.

We also included the ‘tooth’ gambit; the extraction of said offending item requiring audience participation. Five main characters emerged: Mother Christmas as introducer and presiding deity to be treated with respect; Sir George or the King of France; the ‘Hero’ surviving despite challenges from; Slasher/ Hector, the ‘young pretender’; Doctor Giddy up Hearse, the highly effective quack and finally the Devil, Beelzebub, to scare the children.

The current Winchcombe Mummers Play grew when we moved to this Gloucestershire small town five years ago through absorbing the extant play as described by Eleanor Adlard in her 1892 book ‘Winchcombe Cavalcade’⁴. In this version Slasher was killed twice; an intriguing magical element that fitted well within the creative plagiarism from the other sources. The young pretender shows blind determinism through attacking the old king again despite previous mortal wounds; perhaps reflecting the history of this heroic little Cotswold town, surviving many scourges from town fire and financial ruin to civil war firing squads.

Professor Hutton in his book ‘the Stations of the Sun’ writes:

‘The ritual calendar, in an age in which most kinds of community have been atomised by central government and the mass media, is becoming a celebration of private relationships and the individual life cycle. Humanity has come to replace the natural world at the centre of the wheel of the year.’⁵

The Mummer play I hope can bridge the individual’s celebration and connection with the annual cycles and a wider communal response to these events. After the last performance of 2013 in a Winchcombe pub, the new ‘devil’ player asked me: “are we doing this for the

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audience or for ourselves?” My immediate reply was “Oh, for the audience”...but following due honest reflection on the journey the play has travelled, the fun we have rehearsing it and performing it I’d say we “do it for ourselves” too.

¹ Gerish, W.B. *The Mayer Tradition in Hertfordshire*, 1904.

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Adlard, Eleanor. *Winchcombe Cavalcade or Sidelights on Winchcombe History*, 1892. London: Ed. J. Burrow & Co. Ltd, 1939 with an introduction by H.J Massingham.

⁵ Hutton, R. *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, Oxford, 1996, conclusion, section VI.