

Traditional drama in the island of Newfoundland: Text, context and performance.

In 1967 Christopher Cawte, Alex Helm and Norman Peacock's volume, *English Ritual Drama: A Geographical Index*, appeared.¹ Influenced by previous scholarship in the field,² the reader was presented with a bibliographical guide to mumming play locations and texts, but with little discussion as to the physical, social, and economic contexts of these traditions.

In contrast, in 1969 Herbert Halpert and George Story's *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History* was published.³ Influenced by the then emerging "text versus context debate" amongst folklorists and others,⁴ this volume presented considerable detail regarding the contexts of the various mumming traditions in the province, but primarily focused on what they considered the dominant tradition to be: the Christmas informal house-visit by disguised mummings.⁵

Building on these two prior seminal works, and in an attempt to provide a more balanced view of the mumming play tradition in Newfoundland, this current study fuses together these two approaches. Accordingly, while identifying and examining the texts, it also presents details of the multi-dimensional contexts in which these plays were performed.

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador embraces both the island of Newfoundland and mainland Labrador. It became the tenth province of Canada on 31 March 1949, but it was not until 6 December 2001 that the official name of the province was changed to Newfoundland and Labrador. Positioned in the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the island of Newfoundland is the most easterly point in North America, and was claimed as England's first overseas colony in 1583. It was subsequently populated by a mixture of English and Irish settlers, with smaller populations of Scots and French. Today it is predominantly English speaking. In 1961, shortly before the time that the earliest recordings in this study were made, the population of the province was 457,853, with 51% living in a few urban areas, the remainder dispersed in small rural settlements.

The study of mummering traditions in Newfoundland began in the 1960s. Its aim was to explore and document these traditions while they were still within living memory. Among them was the long-established custom of visiting houses in disguise during the Christmas season, a practice which Newfoundlanders refer to as "mummering", or more recently as "janneying".⁶ Reports soon emerged of another Christmas house-visiting custom: the

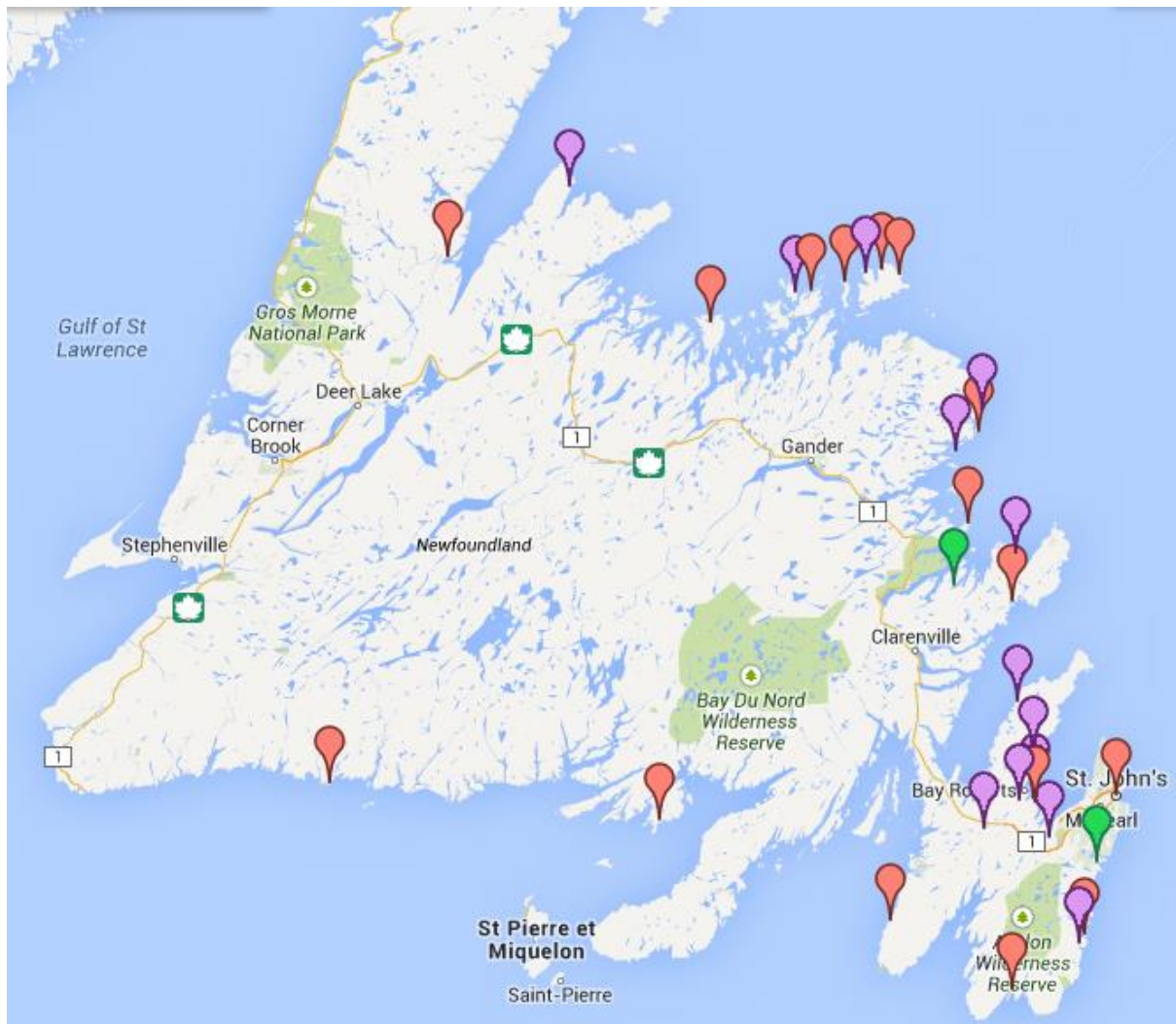
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performance of mummings' plays in various parts of the province. These reports, deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, prompted fieldwork which focused on the recording of the texts of the plays from the living oral tradition, together with information on their context and performance.

The archive reports revealed that all but one of the plays were from communities on the east coast of the island (See Maps 1 to 3 following). Roughly half of these localities are previously of English settlement and half of Irish. Whereas much of the material previously available on traditional drama in Britain and Ireland focuses on texts and secondary reports of performance, the field recordings are mostly first hand eyewitness accounts of the whole event, as recalled in the local vernacular by speakers who remember actual performances. The detailed oral testimony in these recordings is therefore not only of great significance to the traditional heritage of Newfoundland, but also to international scholarship which focuses largely on the history, provenance, transmission, and distribution of the plays.⁷ This material adds substantially to existing knowledge of these hitherto largely un-researched examples of traditional drama, and sheds light on their origin, dissemination, and distribution. It also contributes to the ongoing debate on the relative importance of printed versus oral transmission of texts, and the process of variation in text and performance over time and space. With one exception, the plays are all of the "hero-combat" type well known in Britain and Ireland.

In Newfoundland the performers were regarded with respect, and were welcomed by their hosts, in marked contrast to the regular house-visiting mummings, whose boisterous behaviour was not always appreciated. In some cases the performers marched in procession from house to house, led by a flag-bearer. Sometimes the leader of the group would ask permission for the play to be acted. In other places, a group of "fools" would ensure that a space was cleared for the performers, and/or the first speaker would request "room" for the play to take place in the house. After the performance the actors would be rewarded with food and drink, often ending up with a "time" (party) at the last house visited. Typical features such as these are illustrated throughout the contextual material, indicating recurrent features and patterns of performance and behaviour in all the communities concerned.

The material in the Archive collection ranges from brief reports to substantial accounts which incorporate printed and/or manuscript versions of plays and their performance and context, together with transcriptions of tape recordings, and other material. It significantly extends the



Map 1: GENERAL DISTRIBUTION OF MUMMING PLAYS IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Red – Full, Substantial, or Fragment of Text Identified.
Purple – Play Has Been Reported.
Green – No Play Reported. However Tentative Evidence That a Play or Similar Traditional Activity Might Have Existed.

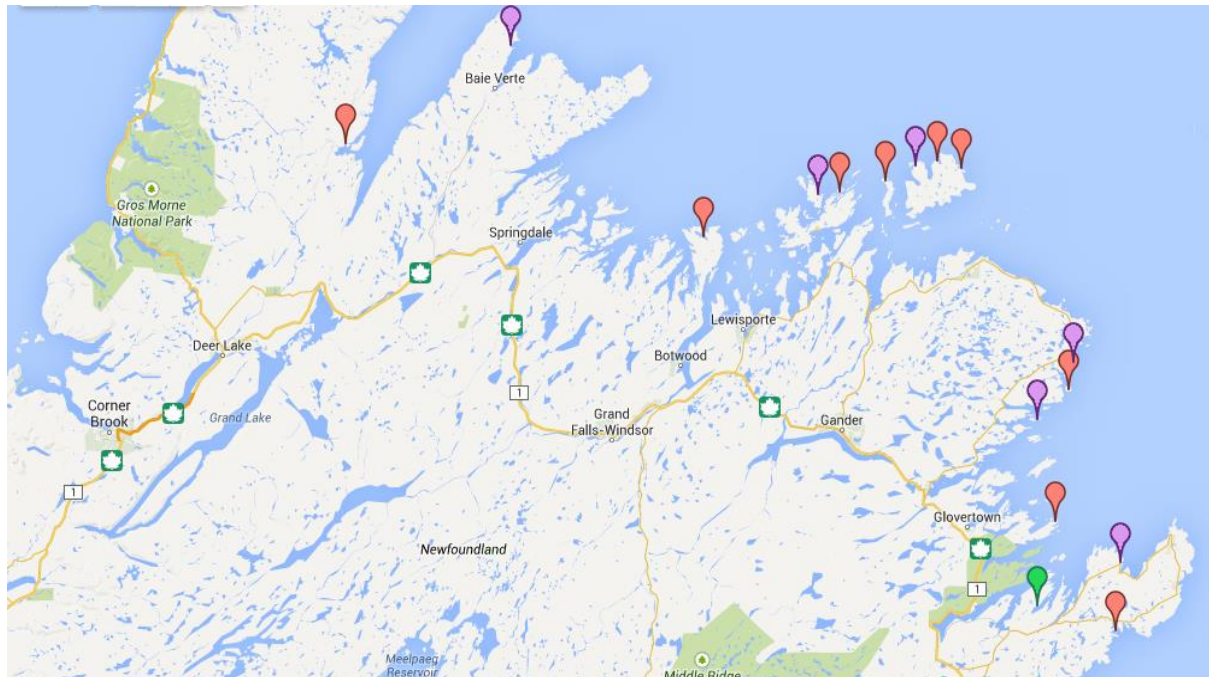
available information on traditional drama not only in the province but also in the English-speaking world. The data relating to thirty three communities falls into four groups:

1. Seven communities where a full or substantial text has been identified: Change Islands, Herring Neck, Patrick's Cove, St. John's, Salvage, Tilting, Trepassey.
2. Nine communities where a fragment of text has been identified: Boxey (Vocksinge), Brigus, Burgeo, Fortune Harbour, Greenspond, Joe Batt's Arm, Port Kirwan, Sop's Arm, Trinity.

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3. Fifteen communities where a play has been reported: Carbonear, Coachman’s Cove, Cupids, Fair Island, Fermeuse, Fogo, Holyrood, King’s Cove, Little Harbour, North River (Conception Bay), Port de Grave, Renewes, Scilly Cove (Winterton), Wesleyville, Whitbourne.

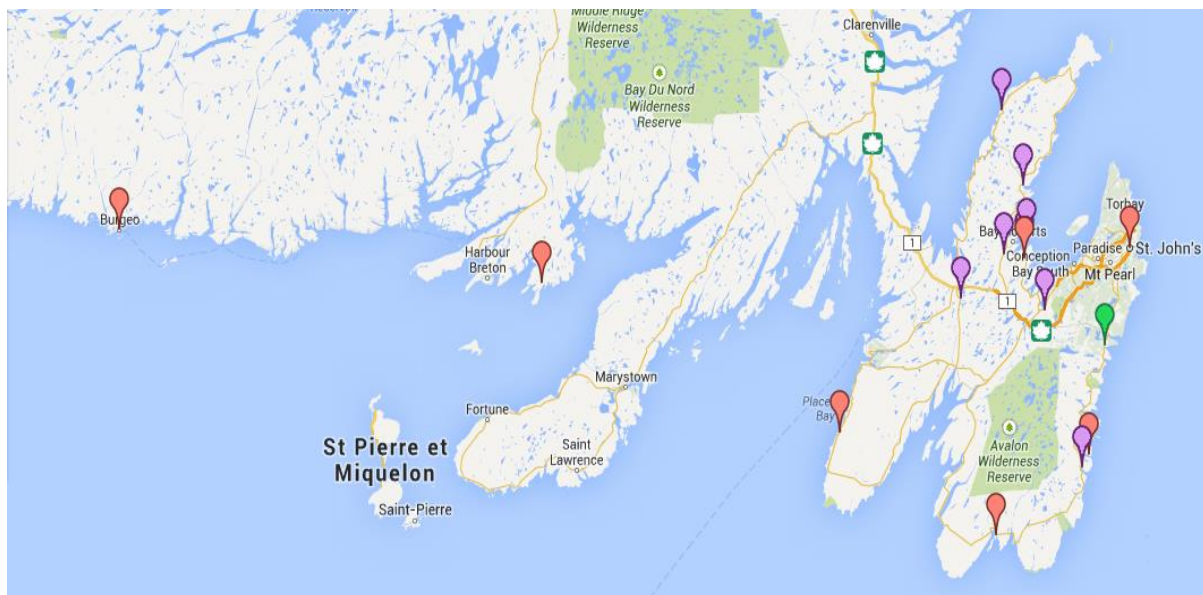
4. Two communities where no play has been reported, but where there is tentative evidence that a play or similar traditional activity might have existed: Quinton’s Cove, Witless Bay.



Map 2: DISTRIBUTION OF MUMMING PLAYS IN NEWFOUNDLAND (NORTHERN SHORE):

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 – Sop’s Arm | 5 – Herring Neck | 9 – Tilting | 13 – Salvage |
| 2 – Coachman’s Cove | 6 – Change Islands | 10 – Wesleyville | 14 – King’s Cove |
| 3 – Fortune Harbour
Cove | 7 – Fogo | 11 – Greenspond | 15 – Quintons
Cove |
| <u>4 – Little Harbour</u> | <u>8 – Joe Batt’s Arm</u> | <u>12 – Fair Island</u> | <u>16 – Trinity</u> |

In Group 1, the material from Change Islands, Salvage, and St. John’s is by far the most extensive. In Change Islands this is due not only to the existence of manuscript and printed versions but also to several tape recordings of the plays.



Map 3: DISTRIBUTION OF MUMMING PLAYS IN NEWFOUNDLAND (AVALON PENINSULA AND SOUTHERN SHORE):

1 – Burgeo	7 – North River	13 – St. John’s
2 – Boxey	8 – Port de Grave	14 – Witless Bay
3 – Patrick’s Cove	9 – Cupids	15 – Port Kirwan
4 – Winterton	10 – Brigus	16 – Fermeuse
5 – Carbonear	11 – Holyrood	17 – Renew’s
6 – Whitbourne	12 – Trepassy	

The St. John’s text has been reported quite extensively in print, but no version was tape recorded in the city. The material in Group 2 ranges from one or two lines of a speech from the play, through a single verse, to several verses with additional contextual information. Group 3 comprises one or more brief reports about the existence of a play, usually with further commentary. The information from the two communities in Group 4 extends the core data to take account of traditions reminiscent of certain features of traditional drama in the province which hint at the possible existence of a play in these localities.

The material is now being prepared for publication, the data being presented alphabetically by community. Each entry begins with an introductory overview, normally followed by the

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fullest available text(s) of a play, whether in manuscript, printed, or tape recorded form. The various recensions of the text are then set out, beginning with the most extensive and/or significant. Shorter texts, fragments, and contextual details are generally presented in descending order of completeness. Where a number of recensions are listed, these are compared in some detail, with the aim of establishing the similarities and differences between them, and indicating where relationships and recurrent elements might be identified. The comparisons reveal a range of differences between the various versions of a specific text as it is replicated in manuscript, printed, or tape recorded form. While many of these differences are minor, they illustrate the changes which take place in the transmission of the texts, whether orally or in written form. Versions of the texts are numbered sequentially within each community listing, together with identification of the source. A substantial amount of contextual information either features within the texts themselves, or is presented after the relevant text as part of the analytical commentary on transcription, language, costume and accoutrements, performance, performers, contextual features, and the social significance of the play in the seasonal celebrations in the community.

The commentaries quote extensively from the wealth of primary source oral testimony. The tape recordings of the texts and the eyewitness accounts of performance, expressed with all the vigour and immediacy of living vernacular speech, add a significant dimension to the material as a whole, investing it with the first hand experiences, knowledge, and reminiscences of those who actually witnessed or even participated in performances of the plays. Such insights are conspicuously lacking in many previous studies of traditional drama in Britain and Ireland, which concentrate primarily on the texts. The transcription of the texts and ancillary information is verbatim, in order to preserve the essential colour, rhetoric, and expressiveness of the oral tradition, and to illustrate some of the features of the actual spoken performance of the plays. The transcriptions aim to make the recorded speech as intelligible and accessible as possible. The system indicates salient elements of oral communication such as pausing, hesitation, emphasis, and the general flow of speech. An obvious problem for the transcriber is how to present the usually rhymed texts of the tape recorded versions. In general, the recorded texts in the collection are presented in rhyming couplets in relatively short lines of uneven length. This mode of presentation reflects that of the available printed texts of the Newfoundland plays. However, the line length in some manuscript texts is inconsistent, rhyming segments being run together more or less as if they were prose. Similar inconsistencies occur in the tape recorded texts, which include lines which rhyme internally,

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and also segments of prose, as well as numerous examples of disjointed verse, repetitions, and partial and/or unfinished speeches. To make the texts as accessible as possible, individual speeches and parts of speeches are presented much as they would be in the conventionally printed texts, insofar as pairs of lines, quatrains, other groups of rhymed lines, or single lines/parts of a line are concerned. This facilitates comparison between the texts within the collection and with available texts elsewhere.

The verse form typically features decasyllabic rhyming couplets, but this basic pattern is subject to considerable variation. Speakers often seem to be aware of the underlying structure and rhythm of individual lines and couplets, indicated by the almost formulaic utterance of certain lines in which the rhythmic pattern is strongly foregrounded. This may reflect the ways in which the specific lines of a speech are memorised and which act as triggers in recalling them within the sequence of lines in a given speech. In the tape recorded texts the variations in line length are such that a line may consist of as few as four syllables to as many as twenty two. There is also the further complication that some lines, both long and short, incorporate an internal rhyme. For the most part, the chosen mode of presentation fits quite well with the style of delivery, a style which suggests that the various mostly rhymed speeches seem to have been learned and/or remembered individually, relying heavily on the rhyme scheme to aid recall. The speakers usually deliver each line fluently, and seem much more concerned to recite individual speeches in full than to maintain a logical or consistent sequence of these within the overall plot of the play. The speakers are comparatively unconcerned about precisely where a given character fits into the action. Characters move freely from one part of the action to another, and their speeches are often conflated, or spoken in whole or in part by another character altogether.

The tape recordings have been transcribed in detail, and include accounts of costumes, accoutrements of the performers, the performances, and many other contextual aspects of the plays, and on their role in the community. The costumes, makeshift though they usually were, aimed to distinguish the individual characters in the play. A variety of quasi-military uniforms were typically used for the leading characters. Such attire is seen in the costumes of the Soldiers in the *Change Islands* play, who marched from house to house, dressed in white shirts over their everyday clothes, with a red stripe down their trousers. The various characters were also differentiated by wearing a coloured sash or some other appropriate means of identification. In *Trepassey* the actors' uniforms were decorated with ribbons and

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rosettes, and they wore masks. Masks are also reported from Fortune Harbour and Herring Neck, but in most other localities the actors were unmasked. However, the extraordinarily elaborate headgear worn by the performers in several communities often fitted down over the shoulders, thus obscuring the face, or were so large that the faces could not be easily seen beneath them. Some of the headgear resembled the tricorne hats of the Georgian period, or were fashioned from a base such as a flour barrel hoop, which gives an indication of their large size. These hats, sometimes surmounted by ribbons and feathers, are the most distinctive feature of the performers' dress. By contrast, the Doctor was usually dressed like a gentleman, and often carried a bag with him, along with his strangely named cures. Female characters, including Little Devil Doubt in one report, wore long old-fashioned women's dresses, with hair made of rope. Jack Tar typically wore a naval uniform and in one report the Captain of the play was dressed as a naval captain.

The actors involved in fighting in the play all carried swords. These were usually made of wood, and the points were sometimes dipped in red paint or ink to simulate blood. In one report the swords were said to be made of metal, and in another it is suggested that tarred paper was used. Father Christmas is usually dressed like the familiar traditional figure, and in some localities carries a stick. In some of the reports, he and a few other characters are presented as having a hump-back, or he carries a bag on his back. In one report from Change Islands, Father Christmas's outfit is extensively padded with cushions to make him look big and fat.

Many of the performers, and also the "fools" in Tilting, are named in the fieldwork accounts, tying individuals to their performances as specific characters. In some cases this extends to the idiosyncrasies and behavioural mannerisms of participants, preserved in the memories of eyewitnesses to the original event. Such insights allow us to eavesdrop on performances from more than half a century earlier, and to catch a glimpse of their impact on the audience. A century after most of these performances last took place, the reminiscences in the material open a window on those events which would otherwise have remained closed.

The recordings include a wealth of information on performance, ranging from accounts of when and how the players visited homes in the communities concerned, through descriptions of the performances as a whole, to the actions of individual characters. For example, the actor who initially presents the cast, whether this is the Captain, Father Christmas, or another character who calls for "Room", usually does so in a loud, commanding voice. In the first

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interview with ninety year old Barney Moss about the *Salvage* play, he made a sweeping circular gesture with his cane and said, “You wants the Mummings’ Lesson, boys? Clear the room!” before launching into the first speech, suggesting a possible way in which the presenter would ensure sufficient space and attention for the performance. The fights between the various “champions” are often described, including those in which the actors march to and fro across the room, reciting a line of their speech as they do so, and clashing their swords together as they pass. This stylised mode of performance is reminiscent of that at Tichborne, Hampshire – one of the rare early examples of the mummings’ play captured on film. It also mirrors the clashing of swords typical of sword dance traditions in England. The wounding or apparent death of one of the combatants is described in several of the tape recorded accounts. However, the most detailed descriptions of performance are reserved for the actions and antics of the Doctor in his efforts to revive the fallen champion. This usually involved much horseplay, not only in the treatment of the patient, but also in one account his attempting to test his cure on members of the audience. In two of the Change Islands versions he is aided and abetted by Father Christmas, who tries to blow life into every available orifice of the patient, to the obvious amusement of the audience. During the singing of the song at the end of the Change Islands play, Father Christmas is bending down, leaning on his stick, while the performers walk round him in a circle, resting or tapping the tips of their swords on his back. This is reminiscent of elements in the English sword dance tradition. In one Newfoundland account he raises his stick or sword while the actors circle around him, waving their swords.

Most of the Newfoundland plays end with a song and/or the playing of specific tunes. In the printed versions of the St. John’s text, it is clear that, unusually, a fiddler plays music before, rather than after, the final two speeches. This raises the question of whether these speeches are additions to the main text. The musician accompanying the performers in their parade at Tilting played “Napoleon’s March” on the accordion. At the dance after the performance the accordionist would play “The Green Fields of America”. Neither of these tunes seems to be particularly appropriate to the play, and none of those interviewed mentions the singing of a song at the end of the Tilting play itself. The song “The Bonnie Light Horseman”, which ends the *Salvage* play, has no obvious relevance to it. The song “Here come I Jack Tar”, which follows the play at Herring Neck, is perhaps the most appropriate, especially in the maritime environment of Newfoundland. Part of the song is also found in the speech of Jack Tar, the

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final character in the *Change Islands* play. The performance of this latter play ends with a version of “One more river to cross”. This song again has no direct relevance to the play.

Contextual information includes details of how, when, and where the plays were performed, as well as comments on attitudes to the plays, the actors, and the performances, and on the social function of the tradition. In those communities where the play was performed, it was central to the Christmas celebrations. It offered an unusual spectacle for the entertainment of young and old, and played an important part in bringing people together in a spirit of neighbourliness and conviviality. Its progression from house to house, sometimes including every home in the community, and often throughout the full twelve days of Christmas, was eagerly anticipated and its performance greatly appreciated. The celebrations reached their climax in the communal eating, drinking, and dancing after the final performance of the season in the last house visited. As in so many other traditions, the whole sequence of events, including learning the speeches, rehearsing the play, often in secret, the making of costumes and equipment, the performances themselves and their organisation, made considerable demands on all the participants. In turn, they were rewarded by the warm reception and hospitality of their hosts in the houses they visited – a reciprocal arrangement which made all the efforts worthwhile. The importance of the tradition to the community in those days is confirmed by its being still vividly remembered more than half a century later.

There is ample evidence that plays, “skits”, and recitals were commonly staged in St. John’s and in the outports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the period when most of the mummings’ plays were last performed. These covered a wide variety of subjects both serious and comic, so the mummings’ plays could be seen as part of a more extensive complex of dramatic performance. The regular mummings who visited houses in disguise sometimes dressed up as specific characters. Among the more popular of these disguises was to dress as a doctor, a naval officer, or Father Christmas, and in one case as a full wedding party, including bride, groom, best man, bridesmaids, and minister, the latter “chosen for his clarity of speaking – and perhaps his singing ability – and most certainly for his prim and proper look”. Wedding dresses were a popular form of disguise among the house-visiting mummings. While there are no reports of the traditional wooing play in Newfoundland, it is interesting to note that it was not unusual for mummings to impersonate characters typical of a wedding. Although figures such as a doctor, naval officer, or Father Christmas are comparatively easy stereotypes to impersonate, it is not impossible that some of the costumes

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may have been handed down over the years, and that the choice of such characters may reflect a vestigial memory of the earlier mummings' plays.

This extensive complex of traditional drama has survived on the island of Newfoundland for longer than in most other parts of the English-speaking world. As is also true of many other aspects of language and tradition, mummings' plays have been uniquely preserved in the province, only a few scattered examples of their transatlantic transference being known.⁸ Their survival is demonstrated not only in respect of the texts themselves, but also with regard to the wealth of available information on costume, context, performance, and social function, which invests them with particular significance in this field. Fortunately, their recording and documentation at the eleventh hour when they were about to disappear from living memory and the oral tradition, offers a major new resource for reference and further research.

Acknowledgements

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³ Herbert Halpert, and George M. Story, *Christmas Mummings in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969, 1990

⁴ Dan Ben-Amos, "Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context", *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), 3-15, and Yigal Zang, "The Text/Context Controversy: An Explanatory Perspective", *Western Folklore*, 41, 1 (1982), 1-27.

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⁷ For example, Reginald J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummings' Play*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923, rpt. Chicheley, Buckinghamshire, Paul P. B. Minet, 1972; Edmund K. Chambers, *The English Folk-Play*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933; Needham, 1936; Goldstein, Kenneth S., "The Induced Natural Context: An Ethnographic Folklore Field Technique", in June Helm, ed., *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, Seattle and London, American Ethnological Society, 1967, pp. 1-6; Alan Gailey, *Christmas Rhymers and Mummings in Ireland*, Ibstock, Leicestershire, Guizer Press, 1968; Cawte, Helm, and Peacock, 1969; Alan Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, Cork, The Mercier Press, 1969; Alan Brody, *The English Mummings and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970; Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mummings*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1975; Michael J. Preston, M. Georgina Smith, and Paul S. Smith, *Chapbooks and Traditional Drama, Part I: Alexander and the King of Egypt Chapbooks*, CECTAL Bibliographical and Special Series, No. 2, Sheffield, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1977; Cawte et al., 1980; Alex

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