

CORNISH MUMMING: INTRODUCTION

At one time the tradition of mumming in Cornwall appears to have been well established, as these fragments, some of which are printed for the first time, clearly show. However, it was a tradition which fell into disuse some time in the early 20th Century, only to be partially revived in the recent appearance of guisers as part of the Penzance Montol celebrations.

Both mumming and guising first entered the vocabulary of folklore scholars at the start of the 19th Century in the works of people like John Brand. They were seen as a means by which working men could earn extra cash for their Christmas celebrations.

Over much of the West Country, including Cornwall, Father Christmas made the introduction to the Mummer's play, while in all cases St George was the champion, fighting a Saracen or Turkish knight often termed Slasher. The other, lesser characters were the fool, a man with a club or frying pan (sometimes called Beelzebub). The tone of these entertainments was comic and loosely improvised around a basic script with no clear historical setting. The actors, always men, were variously termed Guisers, Guizards, or Mummies. By 1900, however, they were fast disappearing from our Cornish villages.

In 1890 Sir James Frazer published *The Golden Bough*, a theory of anthropology in which he maintained that ancient pagan religion could be reconstructed by examining modern survivals of folklore. His theory dominated the work of folklorists right through until the 1970's. Several scholars then interpreted the mumming and guising traditions as evidence of pagan ritual, a trend which has only been challenged in recent years.

As early as 1903 the scholar E.K. Chambers could show evidence of nearly thirty mummers' plays and by 1933 he had over a hundred to draw upon. By the late 60's as many as 156 complete texts had been collected.

The earliest known text was found in a chapbook published between 1746 and 1749, but the actual origins of the play itself remain a mystery. In 1990 Gareth Morgan suggested the plays might have a Greek origin having been brought to Britain by way of the Crusaders via Flanders. He based the idea chiefly on the Greek word *momoeri*, which is close to our word *mummer*. However, it should be noted that the Greek word does not appear until the 2th Century and may have been adopted from the English or French word. It does seem likely that the plays originated in the late 18th Century and reached a peak of popularity in the early 19th Century in Britain.

In Cornwall itself one of the oldest documented examples comes from Stithians at the time of the first war. In this mummer's play the main characters are Jack, the Doctor, Lord Nelson and Jacky Sweep. It appears that in Cornwall at least, Jack is a much older figure than St George or the Turkish

Knight. He is the personification of summer and is linked to Robin Goodfellow and the Green Man. In the Cornish Miracle Bewnans Meryasek, the doctor, a burlesque character, is accompanied by 'bachelor Jenkyn,' who appears in some of the Cornish plays as 'Little Man Jack'. In Meryasek, the doctor's fee is ten pounds – similar to the versions which figure St George. The Dragon, hobby horse and Beelzebub are also common to both versions. In the Cornish drama, the battle between the Duke of Cornwall and Teudar is very similar to the scrap between St George and the Turkish Knight.

An interesting insight into the Cornish mumming tradition was given by Tom Miners many years ago, who was handed a version of the mummer's play performed in 1887 at the Helford Passage and Mawnan Smith. This was termed the 'Christmas Goose Dance,' but according to Mr Miners, an old inhabitant of Manaccan, Aunt Mary Tonking, told him that in her girlhood the Guise Dance and the play were entirely separate entities. In the guise dance the girls were dressed as boys and vice versa.

Some of the Cornish mumming plays incorporate wassailing songs and speeches of Father Xmas were also turned into wassail songs. In some of the Cornish versions of the mummer's plays, like those at Ruan Minor, little man Jack is the son of Father Xmas and he carries a club which he uses against the Turkish Knight. In all the Cornish versions women are rare, although there is an account of Old Mother Nipper Nopper in the Cadgwith play.

The mumming play still survives in the Helston Hal An Tow ritual. Enacted early morning on May 8th (the feast of St Michael), this version features St George, a dragon and several other mumming characters. The most recent enactment I witnessed (2000), featured a number of Green men and women, and I was privileged to be among their company.

The fragments herein represented are but the tip of the iceberg but they give the reader a flavour of what was once a widespread folklore custom in Cornwall.

My thanks are due to the late Tom Miners, a contributor to the *Cornish Antiquary*, who first drew my attention to the Cornish mumming tradition.