The Toronto folk club, Fiddler's Green, has held a special
Christmas celebration since 1975. Over the years the evening
has come to be more and more of a community attraction,
including many folk faces not often seen in the same place at
the same time.

We still call it the "Annual Christmas Show" and it does
include a number of the lesser-known Christian carols (such as
the "Sussex Carol") and folk carols such as "The Holly Bears
and Berry." However, the programme is neither strictly Brit-
ish (the American "Brightest and Best" is one of our favourites)
nor particularly Christian. Thanks to Grit Laskin's humour
and my own ecumenical bent, we always include material
related to Channukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, which is
also in December. And there is also a tremendous amount of
pagan Wassailing, mumming, dancing and wrenning in the
programme. Since all these ceremonial songs or activities can
loosely be said to have to do with the dying of the year at the
time of the shortest day and longest night, our show should
perhaps be more properly called "A Winter Solstice Special."

No matter the title, the evening is an immensely cheerful
one. The Wassail bowl flows. There are many contributions of
Christmas cake, "your moldy cheese" and homemade good-
dies which get gobbled. Candles add to the sparkle in everyone's
eyes. Marvelous singing is shared by a friendly crowd, possibly
one-third of whom are performers at some point in the
evening. It is a wonderful, joyous, funny and inspiring commu-
nity gathering, which many people tell us has come to be the
high point of their December celebrations.

Michael Cooney has told us about similiar celebrations held
in Massachusetts. John Langstaff has long been "king" of a
massive community concert in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge,
called "The Christmas Revels." Two years ago we were given
his recording by the same name (available from Revels, Inc.,
Box 502, Cambridge, Mass. 02139) for the first time, and not
long ago obtained his second record, "Wassail, Wassail!", cut
in 1982, using completely North American material (it includes
some Inuit poetry and our own Canadian song, "The Huron
Carol").

We have also learned about the "Pageant of Midwinter
Carols" called "Nowell Sing We Clear," performed and recorded
by John Roberts, Tony Barrand, Fred Breunig and Steve
Woodruff, from Marlboro, Vermont (Front Hall Records #013,
and Volume 2, FHR-026). This dynamic combination of folklore-
wise singers and musicians travels around New England every
December, sharing a programme similar to our Fiddler's Green
event.
What was (and is) exciting about discovering these concerts and records, and studying their contents was to see that people in many different places were coming up with similar formats at the same time. To me, this indicates some great cultural need to gather together and raise our voices (and glasses) against the increasing cold and darkness of winter, a need not fully satisfied by splendid performances of Handel's ""Messiah"" or church programmes of carols and readings. I go to these, too, but there are many people with no desire to participate in such a religious observance, yet who do deeply yearn to observe this anciently critical calendar time.

My experience as a performer with Mariposa In the Schools bears this out teachers and librarians are pleased to be able to present their students a taste of the whole spectrum of ceremonies and songs tied to the 21st of December without being exclusively Christian. It also provides an alternative commercial manifestations like ""Frosty the Snowman"" and ""Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town"". In this age, many of us think Clement C. Moore's poem, ""'Twas The Night Before Christmas,"" written in 1823, is one of the oldest traditional elements of the holiday, and we may well be unaware of the true age-source of our festivities: namely, the steadily lessening minutes of daylight which so strongly threatened our ancestors. In 1983, although we all may huddle around the TV more closely no one regularly goes to bed with the sun, or is confined to home and hearth by wind and snow when winter sets in, as were our forbears. For us, our convivial gatherings are full of fellowship and too much food and drink, whereas for much of humanity the feasting, firelighting and celebrating have been defiant acts in the face of impending darkness.

In fact, ritual sword dances and Mummers' plays include the "'death'" and revival of a central figure typifying the death and rebirth of the sun, and it was such strong magic at one time that an anonymous figure was actually sacrificed by the "tribal group," and replaced by a "new king," so that he could seem to be eternally youthful. For us, December means January sales and diets; to our ancestors, the magical Twelve Days of Christmas were a special chance for the community to eat well and fully before tightening their belts to get through the long, lean and lonely months until spring brought new sources of food once again. And the bonfires, yule logs and candles that were lit everywhere were a vital step to wake up the sun to "'show him how to do it.'"

Our annual programme begins with a re-enactment of the cycle of months from summer to winter solstice. Candles are snuffed out, one by one, as we sing verses of songs and recite folk rhymes and poetry, accentuating the inexorable decline of summer and ascendency of the cold and dark. Here are some samples of the sequences we have used.

June, too soon,
July, stand by;
August, it must,
September remember,
October, all over.

(weather rhyme about gales and hurricanes, in Touch blue, collected by Lillian Morrison)

We've plowed, we've sowed,
we've reaped, we've mowed,
We've got our harvest in...

(from Iona and Peter Opie, The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes)

(Sung)

With my fal lal, to be ral tal lal,
Whack for the di-rol day,
And what few nuts this poor girl had,
She threw them all away...

(chorus of The Nutting Girl)

Button to chin when October comes in,
Cast ne'er a clout til May goes out.

(folk rhyme)

(Sung)

The winter it is coming on,
dark, dirty, wet and cold
and to try your good nature,
This night we do make bold.
This night we do make bold,
With your apples and strong beer,
And we'll come no more a-acting,
Until another year.

(recessional song from Alderley Edge Souling Play)

(Sung)

But Martinmas is coming, lads,
What pleasures we shall see;
like caps before the wind, me lads,
We'll make our money flee;
And every lad shall have his lass,
And he’ll sit her on his knee.
Sing whoa, me lads, sing whoa!
Drive on, me lads, drive on!
Who wouldn’t be, for all the world,
a jolly waggoner?

(last verse and chorus of The Jolly Waggoner)

Cold December has set in,
Poor people’s backs are clothed very thin;
the trees are bare, the birds are mute:
a pint of good ale would very well suit!

(verse from an unknown Mummer’s play)

(Sung)

Snow, snow faster.
Ally, alabaster.
The old woman’s plucking her geese,
Selling the feathers a penny apiece.

(children’s snow chant in The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes; tune made up by CBP)

"But that was not the same snow," I say.
"Our snow was not only shaken from whitewash buckets
down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and
swam and drifted out of the hands and arms and bodies
of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely
white-ivied the walls and settled on the postman,
opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunderstorm of
white, torn Christmas cards."

(Dylan Thomas, A Child’s Christmas in Wales)

(Sung as round)

Christmas is coming,
The geese are getting fat.
Please to put a penny in the old man’s hat.
If you have no penny, a ha’penny will do;
If you have no ha’penny a farthing will do;
If you have no farthing, then God bless you!

(old English round)

The hallow days of yule are here,
The nights are long and dark;
A feeble sun scarce warms the sky,
And cold congeals the stoutest heart.
The hallow days of yule are come,
and now the Christmas folk bestir...

(from the text of The Christmas Folk by Natalia Belting)

(Sung)

Past three o’clock,
And a cold and frosty morning;
past three o’clock,
Good morrow my masters all.

Born is a baby,
gentle as maybe;
past three o’clock —
Good morrow my masters all.

(words by C. R. Woodward, slightly altered by DP, in the Cambridge Book of Carols.)

We realised, last year, that despite the non-Canadian origin of much of our material, we are evolving some genuine Toronto traditions. One of these new “traditions” centres on “The Boar’s Head Carol,” which was originally sung while parading in with a ceremonial papier mache pig’s head, complete with apple in its mouth. Two years ago some club regulars (Jamie Beaton and John Mayberry) thought of the obvious pun of “boar,” and after great mystery carried in a huge, platter. They lifted the lid and revealed carefully sculpted plasticine head of Tom Kearney, the co-founder of Fiddlers’ Green! For the second year of this newly evolved custom, Jamie and John got a tiny TV under that same large lid and played back a video of a talkative member of the local Morris Dance team, whom they had conned into telling the history of the group...Who knows what next year will bring?

Our programmes over the past seven years have always included a big opening and closing round of chorus or sing-along songs; a motley collection of comic songs — for example, Rick Avery and Judy Greenhill singing a Tom Lehrer parody of “O Christmas Tree” or John Kirkpatrick’s “Jogging Along Wi’ Me Reindeer;” and plenty of clowning around, not just with boar’s heads, but also with apple-shaped balloons tied to a branch for Wassailing and popped with a pin on the end of a wooden gun, or rubber chickens representing wrens, chopped to bits by competing wren boys. We sing old faithfults transformed, such as “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks” sung to the tune of “On Ilkeley Moor B’hat” or recite a Canadian version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” collected by Edith Fowke in Canadian Folklore; and we share unusual songs, such as “Green Growth the Holly” from the Oxford Book of Carols or the 16th century words of the “Storke Carol,” set to a Morris tune. There are Morris jigs or a sword dance play or a mummers’ play (perhaps the best remembered of these is when Jim Strickland, the other co-founder of Fiddlers’ Green, played the life-giving Dr. and entered through a trap door in the ceiling!). We have had storytellers, pretend sermon-givers, Renaissance musicians, hurdy-gurdy players, children giving shakey solos on the recorder and bashful singers tentatively leading folks who forgot the words again but it has all been good.

Our biggest problem is always having to cut something, so that the whole wonderful evening won’t get too too long — but there are always so many people who want to be included, each with much to contribute. If this is so in Toronto, it must be true wherever you are, as well! And so, to close, here’s a toast: More important even than the apple trees; may we raise our voices and glasses against all wintry blasts, and celebrate both the rebirth of the sun and our enduring human spirit, all across this land. Wassail, Be Whole!