

Editorial

This issue of the *Bulletin* is about rituals, old and new. How old the old are is a matter of some controversy. Of course, space may be a more useful dimension than time to help us to understand ritual, though the claim for antiquity may be used to help create that space. Thus Michael Tacon roots his understanding of the value of ritual drumming in a variety of religious *traditions*, but he *defines that value* as being the creation of a safe space for affective sharing. Still, ritual can function without the sanction of the past. When adults would scold me during my childhood, I frequently wrote the defiant words I could not speak on the roof of my mouth with my tongue. On a more serious level, Elly Danica (*Don't: A Woman's Word*. Charlottetown: gynergy, 1988) writes of the abused child creating a space in her mind where the abuser cannot enter. We seem to inhabit a dangerous world, and ritual—be it a bonfire at the winter solstice, an incantation ("Sticks and stones..." or "Bless us, O Lord, for these thy gifts..."), the imaging of a locked door by a victim of rape, or regular habits of cleanliness, which many of us (this writer included) carry to the level of neurosis—seems to help to feel and maybe be safer.

Which suggests that ritual matters. When Pauline Greenhill read "On the Whiteness of Morris" at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada conference this summer, one response suggested that Morris revival clubs were just hobbyist groups and ought not to be taken too seriously or be read too closely. So this is also controversial. The essays gathered here are not entirely comfortable together, though they generally support the contention that ritual has important effects, in the bonding of family, of gender groups, of humans to the natural world. We believe that these controversies produce a creative tension, and we hope that readers will find these different experiences and perceptions useful in their own ritual building—and in questioning.



When I sent out the call for articles for this issue, a former director queried, in an aside, "What's the Canadian dimension here?" Indeed, at one point, I asked myself that very question. If it seems a snarky one—and I'm throwing that adjective onto *my* asking of it, not his—well, perhaps there's some justification in that. One too-common response to Coca-colonization has sometimes a simplistic identification with the British aspect of the Canadian heritage. Of course, for those who emigrated here from Britain, a fondness for things of home is understandable and echoes the nostalgia and self-definition of all who've left their native lands. I know what that's like. Britain does provide an ancestral *and* ongoing source for our culture. But so do France *and* the Native Nations *and* Ukraine.

China, the Netherlands, and the nations of Africa. At its worst, the privileging of the British heritage amounts to patronized toadying, which is no more dignified when it's pointed back east than southward. I remember gritting my teeth when someone in mentioned in the *Bulletin* some years back that he was in the habit of asking British performers who visited Calgary folk clubs how they rated Canadian performers. Pauline Greenhill points out in her essay in these pages that this nostalgic reinvention of tradition may have other dangerous implications.

Which is not to say that I do not participate in this nostalgia or that Greenhill would forbid it.* There is a strain of the classicist in most folk music aficionados, and it's not something to be ashamed of, though we should attempt to understand both our own motivations and the implications of what we are about.



My own interest in retread British ceremonials actually predates much of my active interest in music, folk or otherwise. The first principal at Sutton Elementary School in Houston, Texas, during my time there must have fallen under the long distance spell of Cecil Sharp, since for roughly the first three of those six years, we celebrated May Day. Not, of course, the workers' holiday, but what schools all around the English-speaking world had been doing for half a century: so-called folk dances of the world, dished up for the parents, with a Maypole Dance at the event's core.

Our Maypole was the school's flagpole, and my memories of braiding it have in them the sort of childhood delight that presumably grows beyond the wonder of the day itself. I can still close my eyes and be amid the lovely colored ribbons, slowly creating the tall braided rod in the middle of the schoolyard. Texas flagpoles are *tall*, you know, and a Maypole made from one is impressive.

My memories of the dances themselves are spottier and include more frustration than of delight. My class did *El Jarabe*, the Mexican hat dance, one year, the only one I remember for sure. I wasn't thrilled; I might have been, had I understood that a *charro* is a Mexican cowboy, but, then, probably the Cisco Kid wasn't on the tube yet. I have a fuzziest memory of a waltz or a grand march or something of the kind for which one of the teachers sang "In The Good Old Summertime," and I suspect I cared for that even less.

What I was waiting for was Grade Six, when the boys did—I didn't have a name for it at the time, but I'm sure it was—a *Morris Dance*! Not just any morris dance, mind you, most of them wouldn't have impressed me any more than *El Jarabe* or the Gay Nineties parade. No, the Grade Sixers did a *Robin Hood* dance, with Lincoln green outfits and *real bows*! No arrows, true, but the swellest little bows you ever saw. I can still see them doing a righthand star,

*The current casting of feminist and leftist thinkers and activists as bluestocking naysayers is a fairly calculated move on the part of a currently ascendant right wing. That some of us may poof up clouds of puritanical political correctness from time to time should not be allowed to define this movement, any more than the popular portrait of temperance workers should lead us to forget that alcohol was a serious problem—some would say *is* one—and that the efforts of these workers, including the spells of prohibition in Canada and the USA, may have helped to solve it! As a number of writers have pointed out, these spoilsports were also often progressives and feminists.

touching bowtips instead of grasping each others' wrists.

You've probably guessed by now that I never got to do this dance. Our neat old, fat, probably Catholic, principal left, and we got a ... younger?—not to my eyes then!—but probably young enough *not* to have been turned on by that earlier folk revival when she was at teachers' college ... skinny, undoubtedly Protestant (Baptist for sure, and probably a Republican!), woman who turned off May Day her first year in charge, and instituted instead a *Sports Day!* Anyone who knows me doesn't need to be told that I probably tried to avoid that!

I always nursed a grudge about missing the Robin Hood dance, but I was always grateful for the memory of the Maypole. Many years and a couple of marriages later, I had a pile of children and friends, and I decided to try to have my own Maypole. May 1st in Calgary is pretty dicey; weather was always a threat, but never prevented me from having a Maypole *on May*

Day. I'd have cancelled rather than to run it on another day! Several years, like the very first one, it rained in the morning but cleared up in time, so the grass wasn't even excessively wet. Now, I do remember one year when most of the party was held inside, and we went charging out when the rain slowed down to a drizzle and braided the pole, then went back in where it was warm. The barbecue took a *long* time that year! But I never did have to cancel.

That first celebration was pretty *ad hoc*: the Maypole was a carpet tube stuck on a 2x4 hammered into the ground. We danced to canned music, as I recall. I'm not sure "dance" is necessarily the operative word, though with practice we were able to get the thing braided. It started out pretty clumsily, but one of our resident geniuses, Rose Scollard (who's since begun to make a fine name for herself as a writer), slowed us down and had us all go over or under at the same time at her call until we got it down; then we could return to the music.

I've long been a Fellini fan, especially of his reminiscence of the annual cycle of life in a small Italian town, *Amarcord*. If you've seen it, you'll remember that it



begins with the arrival of Spring and the ceremonial burning of Winter. Most years we had some such piece of foolishness. Not, of course, the massive bonfire of the movie, but I would occasionally carve some sort of figure to serve the purpose, and maybe mount it in the barbecue pit. Once or twice I made some fairly impressive little carvings—at least once someone said it was too nice to burn—but somehow the effort I'd put into it made the burning of it all the more satisfactory. I can understand potlatch a little better now.

I usually got the kids involved in other ways, too. They were all stagestruck, and I asked them to make up skits on the subject of the exit of Winter, arrival of Spring. Occasionally they outdid themselves. The youngest, Carolyn, usually portrayed Spring, often as an airhead. (I seem to remember that her older sister Johanne took the role the first year in a more pouty mood, which suited the hormone-defined personality of her teendom.)

One year, when we only had three around, Stephen was Winter, a stern-minded Commissar, Carolyn offered a bubbly, not-too-bright Spring, and Mark played the Reporter on the Election, who served as vote counter. After listening to Winter's stern, practical admonitions, and Spring's cheap promises, we all voted to have Spring arrive, at which Winter broke down in tears and began to beg. No go!

I usually included a reading of Allen Ginsberg's "Kral Majales," a poem written when he'd been chosen the King of May by students in Prague, but was thrown out of Czechoslovakia when the cops found his private journals and learned that he did in fact behave in a manner appropriate to the season. The poem points out that neither the capitalists nor the communists understand the spirit of May; it's a favorite of mine, and I once read it at a more formally leftist May Day, but I don't think they appreciated it.

It seems to me that we used the carpet tube for maybe two years. At the end of the second year, a friend said we could go up to her acreage and cut a poplar tree. That was a

delight. By the way, if you've ever wondered how much water there is in a tree, cut one and bust your back putting it on the car with the help of a strong teenager, then let it dry in the yard for a year, then plant it all by yourself. Interesting.

I always left the ribbons on the Maypole through the year—it was a pretty thing to look out and see in the middle of winter. (One of my cats appreciated it, too—when it was too miserable even for her to want to go out adventuring, she'd yowl at the door until we opened it, then race out to the pole, shinny up and down, and come back in. Not happy, but willing to be satisfied.) I'd kept part of the carpet tube to crown the pole with; it was just the right size for a bottle of Hungarian wine, which I put up for one of the teenybops to bring down.

The tube and ribbons had about a decade lifespan, which proved to be just right. The tenth was the last of my May Days, at least of that round. It wasn't so easy to keep many of the kids around any more, and a lot of friends had moved to the suburbs or Kamloops, and I tried a new batch—of *colleagues*, for God's sake! from a local college—but it just didn't click. We even had Michael Pollock over that year, to call some contras between the Maypole and the barbecue. When we had to twist English-teacher arms to get them to respond to his call, "Take couples for a longway set," I knew that an era had ended.

I left the pole up, until my divorce. Even then, it was one of the last things I took down, and one of the saddest. That was probably two or three years after the last dance, and at the time I thought, Never again ... probably never. But Lois and I will be looking for a new house before too long, and I have a feeling I'll be looking at the size and layout of the backyard.

The kids and I also did a Mummer's Play from time to time, at Christmas, not May Day. I think it started when we wanted to participate in a Christmas concert at an alternative school they attended. I'd picked up a book of some sort of Black Country lore on a trip to London a while back, and I was able to modify it to suit our numbers. At first it was a pretty straight recreationist entertainment. As the

On or near July 1 we always had a local picnic. Every one was there for a noon meal, then sports for the young people, and dancing started when it was too dark to do more. We always liked to dress up in the best we had for these occasions and put on a little rouge and lipstick. Once my Dad threatened to make me stay out in the wagon until going home time if I didn't wash it off. Lillian Kirkness and the Bjur girls liked to do the latest dances they learned in the city. Daddy didn't approve. He always said we should dance only with our feet and be able to keep a book balanced on our head. We always liked to learn the latest songs and be called "flappers."

Virginia McKay Chamber, *Packhorse to Pavement* (Buck Lake, Alberta)

Grouard was also the base for the Royal North West Mounted Police, then the law for the territory. Corporal Cochran, officer in charge of the R.N.W.M.P. post, had a young bride who, like me, was a newcomer from the outside. I was invited to be their houseguest, and while I was there, I attended some of the post dances. At one dance there was an Indian ceremonial tea dance where both Indians and whites joined hands and danced in a circle doing a kind of one-two shuffle to the beat of Tom-Toms.

Della Brown Dixon, *Pioneers Who Blazed the Trail* (High Prairie, Alberta)

neoconservative years droned on, however, the death and resurrection of King George seemed to have allegorical value. Someone gave one of the kids a paper half-mask that was clearly recognizably Reagan; that was the start. Later, as part of a reading/concert I gave, entitled *Some Angry Words For Christmas*, I rewrote the text a bit, and gave the Turkish knight a mushroom (cloud) with which to attempt to perform his nefarious chore. We'd always used the couplet

Poke the fire and make a light

For in this room there'll be a fight!

as a refrain to our skit. We did so again, but following the resurrection of King George, the group faced the audience with a group speech that ended,

Poke the fire and make a light

For in this room at least, there'll be no more fights!

I suppose some would have found it a bit heavyhanded, but, then they probably wouldn't see the twinkle in the eyes of those feminists who like to speak of "herstory," either.

From our continuing (alas!) Oops Department: the photo essay of last year's Winnipeg Folk Festival was the work of Rodger Leeder (not Roger), with the help (we learned after we'd gone to print) of his sister Carla, both of whom are clearly the offspring of one of us, the D in Rodger's name being inherited from family custom. It's not the only typo in that issue, but it's the silliest. [It's a wise father that knows his own child! —JL]

I first saw Rika Ruebsaat's "Underneath the Cow" in a recent issue of *The Three Quarter Times*, the Newsletter of the Vancouver Folk Song Society. As it was printed there, the penultimate line of the last verse went, "But when I'm singing *at* the folk"; we offer here the revised version Rika sent when I requested the song for this issue, where it seems to me to fit well. I don't know whether the first version was a typo or the revised version represents further thinking, but it seems to me that what I first saw has merit. You decide; folk process and all that stuff....

-GWL