

NEWFOUNDLAND CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

Worksheets for English 100 and 200 Students

Newfoundland is rich in tradition and customs, perhaps richer than any other part of English-speaking North America. These traditions and customs are something of which Newfoundlanders have a right to be proud: they should be valued. They are also of exceptional interest to scholars. Masking, for example, on certain occasions is as ancient as the rites from which classical Greek drama springs. The performance of a Christmas play is a very old English folk-custom which is described in Thomas Hardy's novel The Return of the Native (see especially chapters 4, 5 and 6). Members of the Department of English have been engaged in collecting information (both from students and through field-work) about these Newfoundland customs for some time and we already have an extensive collection from many parts of the Province. At the moment we are particularly interested in certain special Christmas customs and traditions. We are anxious to have as complete a collection as possible, and you are being asked to co-operate with us in gathering information.

Some of the richest material comes from very isolated outports; but we have found equally interesting material in such places as Corner Brook, Harbour Grace, Grand Bank, Bonavista, St. John's, Bishop's Falls, Springdale, and Port-aux-Basques. Wherever you are from, you are being asked by the English Department to contribute from your own knowledge, or that of your parents, relatives and neighbours, as much information as you can. (Older members of the community, in particular, are often good sources of information).

This is not a questionnaire to be answered briefly by yes, no, or single words. Wherever possible, information should be presented in whole sentences, paragraphs, or even full-length essays, giving as much detail and explanation as possible. Some of the questions will probably be on subjects and customs unfamiliar to you; but we ask you to make every effort to find someone from your community who is able to help. Please indicate whether information you give is from your own personal knowledge or from other people.

The Worksheets are to be handed in to your English Instructor at the beginning of the Second Term.

Course (e.g. English 100): ----- Instructor: -----

Student's Name: -----

Community or communities reported on: -----

PLEASE RETURN THESE WORKSHEETS WITH YOUR ANSWERS

(PTO)

1. Is there, or has there been, dressing up, disguising or masking at any time during Christmas in your community or any other communities you know about?
2. What were the dressed-up people called? (Some names that we have heard of are: fools, mummers, janneys, johnnys, darbies, maskers, guisers, white boys, soldiers, geezers.) If there is more than one name, which do the oldest people say they used? Approximately when did a newer term come into use?
3. On what day or days during the Christmas season did people dress up? Did they visit other houses? At what time of the day or night? How did they announce themselves? How large a group went visiting? How did they behave (a) outside the house, (b) inside? How did they ask admittance? Did they have any special way of talking? Did they dance, speak, sing? Were they rowdy? How were they received? Were they ever turned away? Why? What did they say when asking admission? What was the reply whether favourable or unfavourable?
4. We would like full details on the most common disguises, and on any that strike you as unusual, odd, interesting, comic or funny. Can you give details on the materials used for masks, body disguises, etc?
5. From some communities we have had reports of a play being put on by the disguised visitors. Was there any such play in or near your community? Can you give any details? For example, what was it called? What were the names of the characters? What was the play about? Did it have any fighting in it? Can you give any of the speeches? (Even fragments of dialogue and descriptions of parts of the action would be valuable to us). Was there a "Doctor" among the characters? Did he have any queer kind of cure? Was there a Turkish Knight? (Some of the characters who have appeared in different plays include Father Christmas, Roomer, the Devil, sometimes called Beelzebub or Little Divil Dowl, Oliver Cromwell, Nelson King George or Prince George, Patrick.) Did they take up a collection at the end? Did anyone do any sweeping with a broom before or after the performance? (See chapters 4, 5 and 6 of Hardy's Return of the Native for an English example of such a Christmas play.)
6. Was there any use made of animal disguises (for example, a bull, a ram, a horse.) If there was a horse figure, what was it called? Can you get a description? Is there one of them still around in your community? Photos would be most welcome, or drawings, or models.
7. Were any of the masked figures regarded as frightening? Were they used in any way by adults to scare children with? Were adults ever nervous about them? What other scary figures do you know about in your community?
8. Can you give any information about Hunting the Wren? When did it take place? Was there a procession? (please describe). Was any use made of disguise or costume? Was there a song? Can you give the words? Can you describe the Wren?
9. If you don't have information on any of the above customs, perhaps you would care to describe other Christmas customs and activities in your community. For example, parties, Christmas concerts (at school or elsewhere), present-giving, etc. Can you give an account of any differences between Christmas in the old days and Christmas today?

(PLEASE RETURN THESE WORKSHEETS WITH YOUR ANSWERS)