

The history of a Christmas festival dates back over 4000 years. Ancient Midwinter festivities celebrated the return of the Sun from cold and darkness. Midwinter was a turning point between the Old Year and the New Year. Fire was a symbol of hope and boughs of greenery symbolized the eternal cycle of creation.

Celebration

I think back to Change Islands in the twenties. Christmas didn't start then, as it does now, back in November. In October, we had to get ready for Bonfire Night in early November and rest awhile; then came Advent, a solemn season when we were supposed to get ready in mind and spirit for the coming of the Savior, and hold ourselves back if tempted to anticipate too excessively what lay ahead. Just a few days before Christmas Day, toys would be on display in the shops and a few decorations here and there. The Christmas tree had not yet become popular and in our case was only seen in the Church and perhaps the Lodge if there was going to be a children's party.

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Behind us children lay the school concert and Christmas exams; behind adults lay the squarin' up, trips up the bay for wood, the stowing away of fishing gear, the hauling up of boats and the killing of the pig and saltwater birds. Adults intended to celebrate Christmas with the minimum of work and maximum of fun and, in their way, enjoy it as much as children did. We became almost obsessed with the prospect of mummering at night, and sliding during the day and visiting homes for syrup or peppermint with cake and cheese.

And so Christmas Day came and the community met in Church either at midnight or Christmas morning and celebrated as one big family an event of long ago involving



Christmas means "Christ's Mass" and is the celebration of Jesus Christ's birth and baptism. Although December 25th is generally accepted as being the time when the Christ Child was born, the exact date has never been chronicled with any degree of accuracy.

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one small family. And we thought about it for the rest of the day as we ate and played and visited grandparents and aunts and uncles and a few special friends.

Then came St. Stephen's Day - Boxing Day now - and for twelve days and nights there was celebration, not necessarily to do with the Christ child but with many a child of nature of pre- or non-Christian society. There's nothing especially Christian or un-Christian about feasting, mummering, or enjoying a drop of stuff for a season. It's just a natural thing to do if you can find the right occasion, and most of us are pleased that the Church in her wisdom retained many of the customs of the pagan

world for our enjoyment. The main thing was, and still is, to keep the balance right, to keep Christ in Christmas as well as a few other nice things and try to get rid of some of the ridiculous excesses of today in costly presents and terribly expensive habits. There must surely be a return to simplicity and controlled celebration and spending.

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I mentioned that I am thinking mainly of the twenties. I used to quiz my father about his day and the goings-on then. He was born in 1886 and was therefore fourteen at the turn of the century. He lived till 1979, in his ninety-third year. When he was a boy they used to do the Mummers' Play. It was brought to Change Islands by Justinian Dowell who came there as teacher in the 1870s and remained till his death early in this century. The play belongs to the hero-combat form, and could well have been forgotten but for Joe Peckford, a Change Islander living in Gander Bay, who remembered it word for word pretty well. He and my father were good friends and I often heard the latter recite large sections. It's worth reading; see the section "Newfoundland Mummers' Plays: Three Printed Texts" in Halpert and Story's Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland. By my time, a generation later, it had vanished. We simply went mummering, with the emphasis on concealing our identity in voice and attire and visiting all the homes we could manage on any given night and having all the fun we could make.

But, apart from this, other things went on among adults. The people were not heavy drinkers and went most of the year without liquor; but they liked a drop of stuff for times of celebration. At the turn of the century rum was cheap and very strong, so strong that when taken on an empty stomach it was referred to as 'a punch in the gut'. It really was like being hit; it cut its way down. And the old-timers brought over from their home countries a word for a drink or a swallow, namely a horn (which was pronounced 'ham' down home). You could hear an old-timer shouting to some buddy on a cold, frosty morning "Come in for a ham O' rum." Exactly how much a horn was I don't know, but it came up to a certain point on a glass and most people knew how

much a tippie should be. It was certainly very strong but no one would dream of spoiling it with water. No wonder a Change Islander said about ten years ago when we were down there, " 'Tis not rum at all now, too wake" (weak) and with a disgusted grin told of a St. John's fellow "down here the other day who wanted water in hees".

At times of celebration there was a drop around, and some made it if they couldn't buy it. Imagine all through the Christmas season groups of men going from house to house and settling in one house for a feed and a game of Auction 45s. An old man described it to me most dramatically and I could well imagine the empty feeling when Christmas was over. The hard thing was trying to get back to work, especially if you knew that somebody had a drop left.