

## BOOK REVIEWS

All Silver and No Brass. An Irish Christmas Mumming. By Henry Glassie. Pp. xx + 192, bibliography, glossary, illustrations, index, photographs. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975. \$10.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Roger deV. Renwick

Glassie's book will not replace Halpert and Story's Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland as the best scholarly publication on British or British-derived mumming, but it is a well-wrought attempt to take a fresh look at this ancient dramatic form. He has chosen good data for his new perspective, for mumming was a traditional practice in Northern Ireland long after traditional adult teams had ceased their mid-winter rounds in England. To be sure, the activity he deals with was a revival (it had ceased for a time after the Troubles of 1916 and succeeding years), yet a more "natural," indigenous one than those which flourish from time to time in the mother country.

The place is the district of Ballymenone in County Fermanagh and the time evidently the World War II period and perhaps some time prior to that (Glassie is not always explicit in his dates). The mumming team was composed of a shifting number of local men, ranging anywhere from eight to twenty players. Information about the activity comes from interviews with long-time residents of the area who had been both audience to the mummings' house-to-house visits and performers. The play was the common hero-combat type, the major overt element distinguishing it from English and Lowland Scots forms being the inclusion of the characters St. Patrick and Oliver Cromwell. It was performed as usual in the mid-winter season.

In the first section of the book Glassie presents raw data--transcriptions of interviews with five people, three of whom had been performers. There are snippets of text here and there, with only one informant, Michael Boyle, able to offer anything approaching a "full" text. Most of the reminiscences are on the general ambience of the occasion. The second section, in five chapters, contains Glassie's analysis and interpretation. The first two of these chapters, "Survival" and "Geography," are the weakest. The purpose of "Survival" appears to be chiefly to introduce the general tenor of his perspective in later chapters and to briefly overview existing scholarship. Its dominant thesis is that the past, as it lives in present memory, is just as influential on action and idea as are immediately present stimuli. The "Geography" chapter has an even slimmer argument: that the Ballymenone mummings were aware that their play was part of a wider tradition manifested in other parts of Great Britain and shared similarities with other versions, yet it embodied enough differences to be distinctly their own. It thus "helped them locate themselves, eliminating anomie and giving precision to the idea of 'our district'" (p. 75).

It is in the third chapter of Section Two, "Performance," that Glassie truly comes into his own. Analyses of mumming activities seldom take microscopic looks at the flow of actual performance. Glassie counteracts this trend very

well by bringing to light the plasticity of the drama and showing how costumes, numbers of players, texts of the play, and other performance behaviors were manipulated according to audience, men available for the team, amount of money received, and so forth. He also widens the boundaries of the performance to include audience behaviors both during and after the mummies' visit, thus collapsing the separation between drama and audience response to reveal interesting structures of behavior that characterize the whole as a social event (see especially p. 93). This systemic perspective is an important lead-in to the later chapters.

A chapter on "Meaning" follows in which Glassie negotiates the interface between Frazerian diachronics and causal theory on one hand and structural-functional synchronics and reinforcement theory on the other. His own solution is one which merges the past and the present, the subconscious and the conscious, the ground of cosmology and the figure of mumming activities, by resorting to homologies and ethno-logical structures. He shows the fit between components of mumming behavior and components of the Irish historical and agricultural world view, positing semantic relationships between the two which are more metaphorical and informational than causal and energetic. His approach is much indebted to Lévi-Strauss and other anthropological structuralists and symbologists who often uncover semantic units of contrarities and their partial resolution by symbolic means.

The final chapter of Section Two, "Function," is brief and pointed: the goal of mumming was money, its purpose entertainment, its function to highlight the notion and practice of social integration, primarily through the complexities of transactive exchange. The final section is an "Envoi."

Glassie's book is an unusual one, especially so since it treats a subject which, even in very recent scholarship, has attracted primarily analyses that have a survivalist and ritualist bent. Its unusualness lies chiefly in the dialectical approach which seeks to synthesize a number of contrastive domains at several levels: organicism and mechanism, art and science, elite art and folk art, scholarly jargon and poetic writing style, subjectivity and objectivity, among others. Many of the attempted syntheses work quite well: for instance, one of the more charming and informative aspects of All Silver and No Brass to this reviewer is the interesting juxtapositions of and analogies between the Ballymenone peasant mumming and the idea of Irishness and the human condition in the works of Yeats, Joyce, and Samuel Beckett. This kind of integration is a recurring leitmotif throughout Section Two. Glassie also strives to participate imaginatively in the universe of what the community and its folklore could possibly contain for everyman. Indeed, the book is not only an often insightful and always sympathetic interpretation of Irish mumming, but also the affective account of a personal quest for understanding, the central actor in which is the fieldworker and author himself. (A not inappropriate alternative title for the book might be "Celticism and the Art of Scholarship Maintenance.")

There is a possibility that because of his adherence to the synthetic compass, he may be accused of slighting the analytic too much. While acknowledging his debt to contemporary structuralists, at times he himself does not cut deeply

enough along certain dimensions with the truly structural knife. What may be important elements of the mumming complex remain unexplained--for instance, why do historical characters like King George, Cromwell, and St. Patrick, who are known to have existed, cavort in a dramatic universe alongside such obviously fantastical figures like Miss Funny or Big Head and Little Wit? What is the significance of the differences as well as similarities between the speeches of the various dramatis personae from these different realities? Was there any significance in the everyday roles of the mummers (beyond their bachelor status) and their mid-winter activities? And I am uneasy that the interpretation of the meaning of mumming relies so much on the uniqueness of the Irish ecology and climate when similar dramas are still performed in culture areas with quite different environments (e.g., the Caribbean).

Ultimately, the chief flaw in this interesting book may be a rather simple one: Glassie does not have enough data for a full-length work of this scope. An investigation of mumming was not the main purpose of his field trip; the play had not been performed for some twenty-five years before the fieldwork was conducted; and only one informant could offer a text that approximated what was actually performed. It could be said that the author's approach was to make faithful texts a relative unessential, but this would be true only if he made one of the sub-themes of the book the major theme--how the memory of mumming is an active property in the older generations' contemporary mode de vie. But then it would not have been a book about mumming.

All Silver and No Brass can best be evaluated as a pioneer work in humanistic folkloristics. It is full of good feeling, has many insights into mumming as a social and performance phenomenon, is written in an engaging style, and has most attractive drawings by the author. It may err somewhat on the side of the essay sketch and at the expense of the scientific treatise, but this bias is not evident in Glassie's other recent work, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia, in conjunction with which All Silver and No Brass may most profitably be read.