

THE BURRY MAN FESTIVAL, SOUTH QUEENSFERRY: WARDING OFF EVIL SPIRITS, CONNECTING WITH NATURE, AND CELEBRATING LOCAL IDENTITY

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Introduction

Each year on the second Friday in August the streets of South Queensferry, a village on the Firth of Forth, play host to a mysterious figure, the Burry Man (sometimes given as 'Burryman' or 'Burry-man'), as he wanders in silence from approximately 9 AM to 6 PM, collecting money and nips of whisky from the townsfolk. On the next day the town celebrates the annual Ferry Fair. The origins of the tradition are obscure, as is its meaning. Only a man born in South Queensferry may perform the role of the Burry Man, variously characterised as a village guardian warding off evil spirits and other enemies, a nature spirit akin to the Green Man and guaranteeing prosperity to the burgh, a source of luck for fishermen, and a scapegoat purging evil from the community. Being the Burry Man is a demanding commitment, with the weight and discomfort of the heavy costume of burrs (which requires two assistants to help carry it) intensified by Lothian's variable summer weather (if the day is warm it becomes unpleasantly hot, and if rainy it becomes unpleasantly heavy). Yet on 13 August 2010, John Nicol served his twelfth year as the Burry Man, and his predecessor the late Alan Reid was the Burry Man for twenty-five years. Nicol has publicly mused on the significance of his role, concluding that 'The fact that the reason behind it is a mystery is a reason for me to do it'.¹ This article explores the historical evidence for the Burry Man Festival and antiquarians' accounts and explanations of it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then its continued popularity and local relevance are located in anthropological and sociological studies of a trend, observed since the 1970s, toward revitalized local festivals and ritual celebrations as markers of identity for communities (in-group motivations) and as attractions for an increasingly important tourism industry (out-group motivations).²

The Burry Man Festival: History and Legend

Like many folk celebrations in the British Isles, the historical origin of the Burry Man Festival is disputed. Brief newspaper stories and news websites

¹ Anon, 'Visitors Come for the Burry Man' *BBC News Channel*, Friday August 11 (2006) at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4784271.stm>.

² Jeremy Boissevain, 'Introduction: Revitalizing European Rituals' in Jeremy Boissevain (ed.), *Revitalizing European Rituals* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 13-14.

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often cite the statistic that the festival has an unbroken nine hundred year history, which would require it to be documented since the early twelfth century. This legendary origin associates the festival with Margaret (later Saint Margaret of Scotland), the Anglo-Saxon princess who became the second wife of Malcolm III of Scotland (nicknamed Canmore, 'big head') in 1070 AD, and who is credited with establishing the ferry service between North and South Queensferry.³ Her son, King David (c. 1085-1153) is said to have awarded the ferry rights to Dunfermline Abbey. Another, variant, tradition associates the Burry Man's ritual walk with King Charles I's (1600-1649) granting of a 'free fair' to the burgh of Queensferry, which is first noted in the 'Proclamation of the Annual Fair' of 1687.⁴ This aetiological tale explains 'burry' as meaning 'of the burgh,' and the burrs that cover the Burry Man become a later misunderstanding of the original meaning. In fact, the earliest 'reliable' attempt to date the festival is that of the Scottish antiquarian and folklorist William Wallace Fyfe, who claimed in 1851 that an oral tradition among elderly residents in South Queensferry attested that the observation of the tradition was unchanged from the date of the battle of Falkirk in 1746, a little more than a century earlier. Yet even this must be received with caution as it could be a case of folk-memory falsely linking a significant event for the local community to a datable significant event for the nation, in this case the failure of the Jacobite Rebellion of Bonnie Prince Charlie. It is, of course, possible (and perhaps likely) that the custom antedates this event, but solid evidence is lacking.

Fyfe's description of the Burry Man is regarded as authoritative and is reproduced in almost all folklorists' accounts of the festival. He says the 'singular perambulations' of the Burry Man, who is costumed in burrs from the thistle *Arcturus Bardana* (the burdock), take place the day before the local Ferry Fair, and that:

the Burry-man [who requires to be either a stout man or robust lad, as weakly persons, like the man in complete steel who annually sacrifices his life to the Lord Mayor's Show in London, have been known to faint under the heat and fatigue of dressing], is indeed in his flannels. Face arms and legs all being covered so as nearly to resemble a man in chain armour from the close adhesion of the burrs: and the head as well as the

³ Ralph Richardson, 'Scottish Place-Names and Scottish Saints' *Scottish Geographical Journal*, Vol. 21, Issue 7 (July 1905), pp. 352-360.

⁴ 'Proclamation of the Annual Fair, 1687' in Susan Halcro (compiler), *Ferry Fair Festival 2010* (Edinburgh: Allander Print Ltd, 2010), p. 13.

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tops of two staves grasped with extended arms, being beautifully decked with flowers: while the victim thus accompanied is led from door to door by two attendants, who likewise assist in upholding his arms by grasping the staves. At every door in succession, a shout is raised, and the inhabitants, severally coming forth, bestow their kindly greetings and donations of money on the Burry-man who in this way collects, we believe, considerable sums to be eventually divided and spent at the fair by the youths associated in the exploit. Sometimes there are two persons thus decorated and led in procession from door to door, the one being styled the King, the other the Queen, in allusion to the passage of the royal party through the town.⁵

The presence of the Burry Man's female companion, the Queen (possibly referencing Queen Margaret), is not corroborated after the 1850s. In the twenty-first century the Burry Man is a unique phenomenon, but earlier commentators have noted that other communities had similar figures and rituals.

For example, it was recorded in 1885 that the fishermen of the Moray coastal village of Buckie (the football team of which bears the name 'Buckie Thistle,' testifying to the plentiful supply of local burrs), when seeking to improve a poor herring harvest, 'dressed a cooper in a flannel shirt, with burs stuck all over it, and ... he was carried in procession through the town in a hand-barrow'.⁶ The Aberdeenshire village of Fraserburgh maintained a similar custom into the 1930s, with a 'burryman' being adorned when bad weather prevented the fishing boats from venturing out. Slight variations are observed in both cases; the Buckie burryman is wheeled in a barrow, while the Fraserburgh burryman is carried on the shoulders of a fellow-fisherman. In both cases, the ritual is intended to facilitate plentiful catches of fish, and despite his consumption of considerable amounts of strong drink during the day, the Fraserburgh burryman's head is adorned with a proverb indicating a possible role as a guardian of morality and virtue in the community:

⁵ William Wallace Fyfe, *Summer Life on Land and Water* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, Ackermann & Co., 1851), pp. 50-51.

⁶ Ellen E. Guthrie, 'Superstitions of the Scottish Fishermen' *The Folk-Lore Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1889), pp. 46-47.

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Plenty o' herring an' nae dogs,
Honest men an' nae rogues.⁷

The Burry Man of South Queensferry, however, lacks an overt connection to fishing, though one folklorist, R. C. McLagan, suggested it was part of his heritage; he is also the only one of the Scots 'burrymen' to survive in the twenty-first century.

Before considering the function of the contemporary Burry Man Festival in South Queensferry, it is important to survey the interpretations of the phenomenon that were suggested by nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators. These can be divided roughly into positive and negative. The positive interpretation chiefly views the Burry Man as a benevolent nature spirit, in the vein of the Green Man, the image of a foliate head found in many medieval churches. The Green Man is an interesting figure of comparison, as he is a somewhat mysterious personification of wild nature, whose image was widely distributed throughout Britain and parts of Europe. Despite arguments to the effect that he was a pagan deity, variously the Greek Pan or the Celtic horned god Cernunnos, it is indisputable that he is most commonly found in Christian contexts.⁸ Further, Brandon Centerwall argues that he was a key 'character' in early modern English pageants; the first textual reference to the Green Man is in George Whetstone's play, *The Second Parte of the Famous Historie of Promos and Cassandra* (1578). Thirty years later, in a pageant staged by Robert Amerie, the former Sheriff of Chester, in honour of Prince Henry in 1610, there was mention of:

ii men in greene leaves set with work upon their other
habet with black heare & black beards very owgly to
behold, and garlands upon their heads with great
clubs in their hands with fireworks to scatter abroad to
maintaine way for the rest of the show.⁹

This practice of clearing the way is called 'whiffling' and is a feature of many folk rituals (for example, the suit of seven dances performed in the

⁷ M. Macleod Banks, 'Folklore of the Net, Fishing-Line, Baiting and the Boat on the North-East Coast of Scotland' *Folklore*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Dec., 1939), p. 347.

⁸ Lady J. Raglan, 'The "Green Man" in Church Architecture' *Folklore*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March, 1939), pp. 45-57.

⁹ Brandon S. Centerwall, 'The Name of the Green Man' *Folklore*, Vol. 108 (1997), p. 27.

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small Pennine town of Bacup on Easter Saturday, which has elements of the medieval custom of ‘beating the bounds’). However, no festival or performance involving a Green Man has survived to the present day.

The Queensferry Burry Man Festival resembles the collection of customs and imagery surrounding the Green Man as described above in a number of ways. Where the Green Man is covered with leaves and foliage the Burry Man is covered with burrs, but the effect is much the same. What observers see is a lumbering human-shaped creature that appears to be a plant or a walking tree. The Burry Man’s visual effect is acknowledged to be uncanny.¹⁰ Further, the two staves he clutches resemble the clubs of the whiffling Green Men in the Chester pageant, and his wanderings in the small town of South Queensferry were likened to ‘beating the bounds’ by the distinguished Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang, who connected this to the etymology that derived ‘burry’ from ‘burgh’.¹¹ According to that interpretation, the Burry Man protected the territory of South Queensferry, in addition to bringing fertility and prosperity to the town. Isabel Dickson, a contemporary of Lang writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, associated the flowers that decorated the Burry Man and his staves with the harvest, and while maintaining a pagan origin for the ritual drew attention to its closeness in date to the Christian ecclesiastical season of Lammas or ‘loaf mass,’ the harvest festival.¹² Thus, the possible ‘pagan’ quality of the Burry Man was, like that of the Green Man, ameliorated by Christian connotations, which included the feast of Lammas and the spurious genealogy linking the festival to Saint Margaret of Scotland.

Yet not all nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators agreed that the Burry Man was a positive figure. Another popular explanation was that he was a type of the scapegoat, who served to take on the ill-fortune of the town, in the process absolving the residents. Scapegoating is a perennial human activity that is often associated with both religion and identity. Rene Girard suggested that this practice flourished in three sets of circumstances; when an external crisis occurred (such as a famine), when an internal crisis was experienced (such as a murder), and

¹⁰ Benedict le Vay describes the appearance of the Burry Man as follows: ‘[a]n alien stalks round the town – or is it a terrifying Thing from the Swamp? It cannot be human, this puffy figure walking strangely and covered in rough brown-green fur’ in Benedict le Vay, *Eccentric Edinburgh* (Chalfont St Peters: Bradt Travel Guides, 2004), p. 13.

¹¹ Andrew Lang, ‘The Burry-Man’ *Folklore*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar. 30, 1909), p. 90.

¹² Isabel A. Dickson, ‘The Burry-man’ *Folklore*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Dec. 30, 1908), pp. 383-384.

when certain persons have ‘differences’ that cause disquiet in the community (including physical deformities and other characteristics indicative of social marginality).¹³ All three of these sets of circumstances have some relevance to the Queensferry Burry Man. Andrew Lang, after offering a positive interpretation of the Burry Man, raised the question of whether he might be equally well explained by negative means. Citing another nineteenth century authority, John Jamieson (1759-1838), whose *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1808) gives the possible derivation of “burry” as *bourreau*, executioner, Lang remarked that ‘[i]f so, the nameless Burry-man was once the hangman of Queensferry!’¹⁴ Although this etymology is speculative it is worth noting that a properly constituted burgh required an executioner to carry out the king’s justice, and that hangmen are socially marginal yet necessary to the wellbeing of the community (for example, in the punishment of murderers). With regard to the first set of circumstances, the ‘external threat’, the ‘scapegoat’ trope might be construed as the inversion of the ‘fertility’ interpretation. The scapegoat, though perceived as negative, through taking away the ills of the community leaves it in a more positive condition; he (it is generally a ‘he’) suffers and endures in order to purify the body politic (however defined) and to position it to flourish in the future. McLagan, mentioned briefly above, argued that in 1897 the Queensferry Burry Man still retained a connection with fishing, because an ‘enquiry for transport by a stranger might be answered by an independent seafarer or by the burgh (ferry)man.’¹⁵ The long-held connotation of ferrymen with death (which probably derives from the real risk that journeys across water may result in drowning) is an additional (small) piece of evidence for a negative reading of the Burry Man ritual. Evidence of his ability to frighten abounds; one journalist recently stated that ‘[a]lthough considered a foolish holiday by some, others can be genuinely frightened by this tradition. The Burry Man strikes fear in the hearts ... as the burr covered monster who slowly and silently wanders the streets of their fair city’.¹⁶

The Burry Man Festival in the Twenty-First Century

On Friday 13 August 2010 the Burry Man Festival took place in South

¹³ Richard Stivers, ‘The Festival in Light of the Theory of Three Milieus: A Critique of Girard’s Theory of Ritual Scapegoating’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. LXI, No. 3 (1993), p. 507.

¹⁴ Andrew Lang, ‘The Burry-Man’ p. 90.

¹⁵ R. C. McLagan, ‘The Burry-Man’ *Folklore*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar. 30, 1909), p. 91.

¹⁶ Afton Bangay, ‘The Burry Man is Coming’ *Associated Content*, at www.associatedcontent.com/article/914677/the_burry_man_is_coming.html?cat=74.

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Queensferry.¹⁷ The day began as usual with the robing of the Burry Man at the Stag's Head at 7 AM. The burrs have been collected from local sites; when joined they cling together like velcro. Doc Rowe, a local folklorist, has been involved in the dressing of the Burry Man since 1969, and has the right to apply the first piece of burr-fabric.¹⁸ All in all it is estimated that eleven thousand burrs are needed to clothe the six-foot-two Nicol. Des Hannigan describes the dressing process as follows: the Burry Man's 'head is protected by a knitted Balaclava helmet with holes for eyes, nose and mouth and the adhesive burrs are then carefully stuck to every part of his costume. A flag is wrapped around his waist and a bowler hat, covered with burrs and decorated with flowers, is placed on his head'.¹⁹ Yet in 2010 there were some changes to this traditional procedure. John Nicol, a 36-year-old graphic designer with Hibernian football club, accompanied by his close friends George Topping and Steve Cannon, began his twelfth year as Burry Man by entering the streets at 8.45 in anticipation of his first whisky at the Provost's House at 9 AM. Nicol, steeped in the tradition and responsibility of serving as Burry Man, had proposed changes to the costuming as a result of receiving photographs of the ritual in 1908 (the same photographs, incidentally, that were published with Isabel Dickson's article in *Folklore* that year). Nicol mused that this:

Burryman is 'engulfed in flowers' – blooms circle his ankles, waist, and chest, and adorn his head ... Observing a tradition with no clear guidelines has meant that at points since then, the Burryman has sported a Union Jack and a Lion Rampant ... the Union Jack was added in 1935 as a 'Jubilee touch'. The Lion Rampant has appeared within the last 30 years ... I have spent the last twelve years of my life intertwined with the Burryman and it feels like the right time to introduce this change ... In conclusion, I believe that there is no need for the Burryman to be aligned with anything outside Queensferry's boundary other than the plants and flowers that so uniquely

¹⁷ I attended the Festival with Don Barrett. Our personal observations are incorporated into the account that follows. Don Barrett took the photographs that illustrate this article.

¹⁸ Peter Ross, 'After twenty drams, our seedy hero is cut from his burry prison' *Scotland on Sunday* (16 August 2009), at <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/sos-news-columnists/Peter-Ross-at-large-After.5558247.jp>.

¹⁹ Des Hannigan, *Eccentric Britain* (London, Cape Town, Sydney, Auckland: New Holland Publishers, 2006), p. 144.

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define him ...²⁰

The strong identification of the Burry Man with South Queensferry, and the deep commitment required of those performing the role are immediately apparent in these musings. John Nicol's twelve years is eclipsed by the twenty-five years served by his predecessor Alan Reid, Burry Man from 1973 to 1998, and the Queensferry Museum's Burry Man display features photographs of Alexander 'Tutti Frutti' Sinclair who was Burry Man from 1947 (when the Festival began afresh after being suspended due to World War II, the last Festival having been held in 1939) until at least 1968.²¹ John Nicol's desire to employ a more traditional presentation of the Burry Man is contrasted with the museum display, which serves the important function of making the Burry Man Festival available to all those who visit South Queensferry on the three hundred and sixty four days of the year that are not the 'Burry Man's Day'. The costumed figure of the Burry Man in the museum has the Lion Rampant flag around his waist, and this image was reinforced in 2010 by the window display in the Physiotherapy and Sports Injury Clinic at 27 High Street. This cheerful and positive image of the Burry Man, made by children at the local primary school, also featured the Lion Rampant flag that John Nicol had deemed inauthentic on historical grounds.

The schedule for Nicol's progress through the town was printed in the Ferry Fair programme, enabling both townsfolk and tourists to view him at key points during the day. Traditionally, all pubs in the town must be visited, but other stops of personal significance, including Nicol's parents' house in Sommerville Gardens, were also marked. We came face to face with the Burry Man shortly after midday as he made his second appearance on Rosebery Avenue, to the south of the town near the high school and the Queensferry Leisure Centre. In addition to his two attendants (who are costumed formally in black suit jacket, white shirt, tie and Black Watch tartan trews) the Burry Man was accompanied by two boys and a girl, who chanted 'Hip hip hooray, it's the Burry Man's day!' and distributed burrs to people who put coins into the charity buckets they carried. The Burry Man's silent progress was quite slow and laboured, although more than half the day's distance was still to be covered. The uncanniness of the sight was emphasised to us by two separate women, who were both on the streets with

²⁰ John Nicol, 'Friday 13th August 2010 The Burry Man: 2010 Marks John Nicol's 12th Year as Queensferry's Burry Man' in Halcro (compiler), *Ferry Fair Festival 2010* pp. 26-27.

²¹ Queensferry Museum at <http://www.gnws.co.uk/edinburgh/queensferry.htm>.

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their children. The first had already sighted the Burry Man and was on her way home. She advised us where to find him and cautioned, ‘When you see him, you know ... it’s really strange’. On Rosebery Avenue the second woman, who was clearly acquainted with John Nicol, fixed her gaze on him and exclaimed ‘You freak me out! Not you personally, you mind. But you freak me out ... It’s your eyes!’ This comment was probably in reference to the local tradition, that while it is good luck to encounter the Burry Man during his perambulations, it is bad luck to look him in the eye. The head of the Burry Man is quite possibly the strangest aspect, as the burr-covered balaclava leaves his eyes, mouth and nostrils barely detectable.



This caused a certain amount of amused speculation among the children present. We overheard one small girl ask her father, ‘How does he pee?’ John Nicol has been frank about the physical discomfort of

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performing the Burry Man. The Burry Man never eats during the day, as excretion is not possible. Consuming whisky results in the need to urinate, which is similarly not possible Nicol has stated that:

he had to prepare mentally and physically for the nine-hour task. 'It is agony to wear the suit as it is as uncomfortable as it looks,' he said. 'Wearing a suit covered in ... burrs, which slash your skin while walking all day unable to sit down, is very hard. I am unable to go to the toilet and am obliged to drink a whisky in every pub I visit through a straw. I also have to keep my arms raised otherwise they will stick to my sides and the burrs are covered in insects. The pain is there for a reason though, which makes me worthy of being the Burry Man, it is agony but worth it in every way. The relief when it is over after six o'clock is amazing and gives me quite a buzz for a few weeks afterwards.'²²

The majority of the crowd were local residents, with a small number of tourists swelling the ranks, and many walked with the Burry Man for part of the way.²³ We were informed that his entry onto the High Street around 4.20 PM and the final stage of the walk was the high point of the day for spectators. This final stage involves visits to four inns (the Hawes Inn, the Two Bridges, the Anchor, and the Ferry Tap) and two restaurants, before concluding at the Stag's Head, the starting-point of the Burry Man's journey many hours before. After his ordeal, the Burry Man sponsors the Fancy Dress Parade at 6.30 PM. The Boundary Race, the Wheelbarrow Race and the Bellstane Walk, events that preface the Ferry Fair on the Saturday, follow.

The Ferry Fair is in sharp contrast to the masculine orientation of the Burry Man Festival, in that women and young girls play a dominant part. The culmination of the Ferry Fair is the coronation of the Queen-Elect,

²² Martin Frost, 'Visitors Come For the Burry Man' *Frost's Scottish Anatomy* at

<http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/scotnews/edinlth/burryman.html>.

²³ In the Queensferry Museum at around 11 AM a visitor from Edinburgh told us he came most years, and had in 2010 witnessed the emergence from the Stag's Head of the Burry Man at 8.45 AM for the first time. Usually he came later and concentrated on the final stages of the Burry Man's perambulations.

usually a pre-teen or teenage girl. Flanked by ladies in waiting and posy girls, halberdiers, heralds and a male crown-bearer, she processes through the town, and is crowned by the Gracious Lady, a senior woman in the community. Accompanying her in procession are squads from various locals bodies, such as the Tae Kwon Do Club and the Criterion Jazz Band. The crowned Fair Queen then performs a number of symbolic actions, including laying a wreath at the War Memorial. She serves as Queen for the next year. Strong community loyalty and continuity is exhibited in the institution of the Fair Queen, similar to that found among the Burry Men and their escorts and dressers. In 2010, Lyla Martin, the Gracious Lady who crowned Queen-Elect Holly Fair Queen, had herself been a lady-in-waiting to Lena Berry, the Fair Queen crowned in 1947. Further, the printed programme for the Ferry Fair contained a list of the Fair Queens and the Gracious Ladies who crowned them from 1930 to the present.²⁴ This emphasis on local tradition is exemplified throughout the Ferry Fair programme, in which local dignitaries including the Lord Provost, and the outgoing Fair Queen Evie, have printed messages. The role of children in the ritual includes the Fair Queen and her attendants, the child collectors accompanying the Burry Man, and the 'Wee Burry Man' (a children's role, which was possibly first held by Judith McPhillips in 1948).²⁵ Village groups including the Dalmeny Art Group, various Christian churches, the Bowling Club, and the Masonic Lodge Saint Margaret advertise in the programme, and recently deceased worthies (including Colin Reid, the brother and dresser of the late Burry Man Alan Reid) receive tributes. Other significant events of the year, including Christmas celebrations in South Queensferry, are also advertised. It will be argued in the next section that loyalty and local tradition are the twin pillars that prevent contemporary Scottish folk festivals, including the Burry Man and Up Helly Aa in the Shetland Islands, from becoming spectacles purely for tourists.

Atavistic Festivals, Modernity and Community Identity

The contemporary West is a society in which institutional religion is in decline and respect for history and tradition is often asserted to be similarly on the wane. The historical processes of secularisation, 'industrialization, rationalization of production, mobility, mass media, [and] alternative sources of amusement ... [took] their toll of public rituals'²⁶ and at the start

²⁴ Anon, 'The Gracious Lady' in Halcro (compiler), *Ferry Fair Festival 2010* p. 49; 'Ferry Fair Queens & Gracious Ladies Roll of Honour from 1930' in Halcro (compiler), *Ferry Fair Festival 2010* pp. 60-61.

²⁵ Anon, 'The Burry Man' *The Burry Man Writers Center*, at <http://www.burryman.com/>.

²⁶ Jeremy Boissevain, 'Introduction: Revitalizing European Rituals' p. 1.

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of the twenty-first century the survival of a ritual such as the Burry Man Festival raises questions about the place of history and folklore in the creation of local identity. Folklorists and ritual specialists have noted that local festivals in Europe have been revived since the 1970s. Jeremy Boissevain argues that:

[t]he revival of public celebrations also marks a renegotiation of identity and a related realignment of boundaries. By eating, dancing, singing, clowning, and drinking together, a 'we' group defines itself vis-à-vis a 'they' group. Cohen has suggested that symbolic action in the form of ritual takes place to strengthen social identity and group solidarity when community boundaries and identities are blurred or undermined.²⁷

It is reasonable to argue that local identities have been profoundly challenged by the increased mobility of late capitalist society. For example, there is the travel industry, in which cultural experiences and geographical locations are sampled by consumer-tourists, commuting for employment weakens local ties, and international relocation for work, political asylum, religious freedom, or personal relationships is similarly disruptive of community and identity. The net results of these social trends include diminished participation in voluntary associations, decreased church attendance, disaffected youth, and increased family breakdown.²⁸ One response to this crisis in community is for the increasingly prominent Western individual to participate in 'invented' communities that are based on elective affinity rather than blood kinship or institutional membership.²⁹

Historians have noted that invented traditions antedate the twentieth century and frequently acquire traction when they offer a Romantic interpretation that effectively counters the Enlightenment tendency to quantification and rationalisation. In religion this has resulted in the revival of pre-Christian Paganisms (Greek, Roman, Celtic, Germanic and Slavonic,

²⁷ Jeremy Boissevain, 'Introduction: Revitalizing European Rituals' p. 11.

²⁸ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

²⁹ 'Elective affinity' is an English translation of the title of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's third novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften* (1809), sometimes translated as 'kindred by choice.' The term was later popularized by sociologist Max Weber. See Richard Herbert Howe, 'Max Weber's Elective Affinities: Sociology Within the Bounds of Pure Reason' *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (September, 1978), pp. 366-385.

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among others). For local communities in countries under pressure from more populous, more politically powerful neighbours, such as Wales, Cornwall and Scotland, the pressure to invent traditions and to cling to markers of difference is particularly strong.³⁰ In compendia of folk traditions of the British Isles the Celtic regions are poorly represented. However, Scotland's premier folk ritual and festival (for both tourists and locals), Up-Helly-Aa, which is celebrated annually in late January in Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Islands, is one of the most spectacular of all. Elaborately costumed squads of men follow the ritual leader, the Guizer Jarl (who takes on the persona of a medieval Norse chieftain, for example Hakon Hakonson or Thorfin Karlsefni) and his Jarl's Squad (costumed as Vikings), singing songs and performing ritual actions that culminate in the burning of a Viking longship.³¹ After this dramatic climax the night is passed in performances and dances called the 'halls'. That this is a modern, invented tradition is not in doubt; Callum Brown has meticulously documented the gestation of the festival from 1873 to 1906, and has convincingly argued that it was the result of an increasingly powerful Evangelical Christian culture developing in Lerwick, and economic and social changes that profoundly affected the small Shetland community.³²

The importance of Up-Helly-Aa as a comparative for the Burry Man is multi-faceted: Up-Helly-Aa is a masculine festival, in which women play significant but supporting roles; it is a centralised festival but there are ten smaller local festivals (Bressay, Brae, Mossbank, Scalloway, Northmavine, Hillswick, Ollaberry, Cullivoe, Uyeasound and Nesting) with the same characteristics (like the Fraserburgh and Buckie Burry Men); it has a children's festival led by the Junior Jarl which inculcates love of the tradition in the younger members of the community; and it demands personal commitment and loyalty from the men who participate, particularly the Guizer Jarl. The festival is organised by the Up-Helly-Aa Committee, which meets in the upstairs room of the Up-Helly-Aa Museum in Lerwick (which functions like the Queensferry Museum's Burry Man display, in that there is a replica galley on display and visitors throughout the year can

³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), contains essays by Hugh Trevor-Roper on Scotland ('The Invention of tradition: The Highlands of Scotland') and Prys Morgan ('From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period').

³¹ James W. Levine, *Up-Helly-Aa: A Century of Festival* (Lerwick: Shetland Publishing Co Ltd, 1982).

³² Callum G. Brown, *Up-Helly-Aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* (Manchester: Mandolin, 1998), pp. 126-154.

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watch a film of the Up-Helly-Aa ceremonies). The committee numbers seventeen; fifteen members who are elected at a rate of one per year, the current Guizer Jarl, and the previous year's Guizer Jarl who serves as the current Master of Ceremonies (and retires when this duty is discharged, creating a vacancy). Thus, a man commits to fifteen years on the Committee and participation in activities such as longship building every year, as well as long-term financial planning, as the Guizer Jarl and his squad fund the festival in the year of his elevation. Most importantly, both Up-Helly-Aa and the Burry Man Festival attract tourists (and thus enhance both the economic condition and cultural reputation of the community) but remain primarily local events. The Shetlands have a population of a little over twenty-two thousand, but Lennart Fjell noted that in 2006 the Shetland Tourist Office confirmed that the number of non-Shetlanders attending the festival in which an estimated ten thousand gather in Lerwick (despite the cold and inhospitable northern winter) was between six and nine hundred.³³

Scholars who have studied the revival of ritual since the 1970s generally identify a number of factors that have fuelled the revitalization of local festivals. Prominent among these is the desire of a community to retain a distinctive identity in the face of an increasingly homogenised world. Starbucks, McDonald's and other global chains, skyscrapers, international airports and sporting venues, create a *utopia* (no place) by erasing difference and rendering cities around the world dully interchangeable. When Callum Brown first attended Up-Helly-Aa in 1993 he was struck by the way that the festival 'symbolically constructed the islands as a separate nation, distinct from both Scotland and Britain',³⁴ by an exclusive emphasis on the Shetlands' geographical proximity to and shared history with Scandinavia. This is an example of in-group motivation, where the purpose is to maintain identity and resist the encroachment of globalization, and it has the positive side-effect of creating a close-knit and socially flourishing community that can better resist the seductions of the wider world.³⁵ The Ferry Fair programme promotes an 'olde worlde' image

³³ Lennart Fjell, 'Contemporary Festival: Polyphony of Voices and Some New Agents,' *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, Vol. 19 (2007), p. 139.

³⁴ Euan Hague, 'The Emigrant Experience: The Scottish Diaspora' *Scottish Affairs*, No. 31 (Spring, 2000), at www.scottishaffairs.org/backiss/pdfs/sa31/sa31_Hague.pdf.

³⁵ This is reinforced by the publication each year of both an A5-sized Up-Helly-Aa programme and a lavishly illustrated A4 magazine. Jose Gonzalez (designer), *Up-Helly-Aa 2010 Annual* (Lerwick: Ocean Kinetics, 2010) contains photographs of each squad, all the Committee members, the Guizer Jarl Rae Simpson, the Junior Jarl Sam Maver and many other notable members of the Lerwick community. Liam Summers,

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of South Queensferry as a Royal Burgh with a Town Crier, a Queen and her Court attendants, and a replica of Queen Margaret's ferry; all drawn from a medieval past which also includes the town's guardian spirit, the Burry Man.

Yet out-group motivations also affect the small communities that typically cling to the performance of folk rituals and customs. Where in the past South Queensferry was a thriving fishing and agricultural village, modern residents are likely to commute to nearby Edinburgh for work, and the local economy is increasingly dependent on tourism. South Queensferry's attractiveness to tourists is considerable: the Hawes Inn, one of the Burry Man's whisky stops, is featured in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic adventure novel *Kidnapped* (1886); the twin modern engineering masterpieces of the Forth Road Bridge and the Forth Rail Bridge span the Firth of Forth on either side of the village; the island of Inchcolm with its plethora of birdlife and picturesque ruined monastery is a short boat journey away; and the three local stately homes, Dalmeny House, Hopetoun House and Dundas Castle are open to the public in the summer months. In the Shetlands the Tourist Office reaches out both to tourists proper and to Shetlanders throughout the world. Callum Brown noted that emigration from the Shetlands between 1870 and 1930 created a sizeable diaspora. Its strong ties with home are evidenced by the fact that:

[i]n May 1928, the Shetland Society of New Zealand held one of the first overseas Up-Helly-Aa festivals in Wellington, with a galley, a Jarl and his squad and most of the trappings of the original. Further Up-Helly-Aa festivals followed ... and the images, songs and ritual of the Lerwick original became an international symbol for the 'roots' of exiles.³⁶

This diaspora community gave rise to another Shetland festival, the 'hamefarin' (or homecoming), in which Shetlanders from around the world return for a visit (at the time Brown wrote hamefarins had occurred in 1960,

a member of the Up-Helly-Aa Committee who will be Guizer Jarl in 2020, told me that future Jarls pick their squads (which can number up to forty) up to ten years in advance and all men involved pay into an investment account in order to be able to afford the expense of the festival when their time comes.

³⁶ Brown, *Up-Helly-Aa*, p. 179.

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1962, 1969, and 1985).³⁷ On occasion the group has been as large as five hundred, representing significant tourist revenue. In 1987 a reverse hamefarin, with a party of Shetlanders visiting New Zealand, occurred. Brown noted that ‘the Lerwick Guizer Jarl and his squad has developed into a vital element in the hamefarin whether at home or abroad, and they now travel to form the focus of the event’.³⁸

Conclusion

The Burry Man Festival, whatever its origins and meaning, is now a vital part of South Queensferry’s identity, both in terms of how residents see themselves and how they present the village and community to outsiders. Festivals that serve this purpose often elide problematic historical details and present an image of ‘permanence, endurance and continuity’ of the community and its traditions.³⁹ In the case of both the Burry Man and Up-Helly-Aa, the participants in the festivals make a significant commitment to the community, often a matter of decades, and that commitment is valued as a sign of the importance of the ritual and the necessity of its continuation. While academic attempts to ascribe meaning to these rituals may result in interesting interpretations, the indeterminate meaning of the Burry Man is, for John Nicol at least, an important factor. He has stated that:

[n]obody knows precisely what the function or origin of the Burryman is and I think that’s its modern day unique selling point. As we move into the future, we all have the option to dispose with tradition. I am proud that my hometown of Queensferry has the foresight to see the value and importance of preserving this one. Everyone I see through my tiny eyeholes on the day gives me the energy to continue. Confused toddlers, smiling grandmothers, my family and friends and the memory of those no longer with us all make my efforts an absolute honour to carry out.⁴⁰

The Burry Man and Ferry Fair and Up-Helly-Aa are interesting

³⁷ Robey Callahan, ‘Ethnic Politics and Tourism: A British Case Study’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1998), p. 822.

³⁸ Brown, *Up-Helly-Aa*, p. 179.

³⁹ Susan Wright, ‘“Heritage” and critical history in the reinvention of mining festivals in North-East England,’ in Boissevain (ed.) *Revitalizing European Rituals*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Anon, ‘Queensferry’s Burry Man’ *Ferry Fair Festival*, at http://www.ferryfair.co.uk/the_burry_man.htm.

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examples of atavistic festivals, in that while they appeal to tourists and boost the economy of the local community, they are principally oriented towards the residents of South Queensferry and the Shetlands, respectively. These rituals serve as markers of difference in a homogenized world, as traditions that belong explicitly to locals. The significant effort required of members of the community to make the event happen each year functions as social cement, and the promise of further participation acts as a spur for further commitment. Yet the 'out group' motivation of appealing to tourists is not neglected; each community has a permanent museum display which exhibits its once a year, unique festival to all those who are not able to visit on that precise day. John Nicol's meditations on performing the role of the Burry Man, referred to throughout this article, clearly indicate that for him, and presumably for his dedicated predecessors, being the Burry Man is a vocation. To abandon that vocation would be to imperil South Queensferry. In that sense, it is accurate to say that the Burry Man is variously guardian spirit and scapegoat, protector and suffering victim, of the community. Its wellbeing depends on him, not in any metaphysical sense, but in the sense that the Burry Man and South Queensferry are mutually constitutive of each other's identities.⁴¹

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