

**THE GALA DAY BREAKFAST: *COMMUNITAS* AND CIVIC PRIDE IN A SMALL SCOTTISH TOWN.**

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*Figure 1: The Breakfast in full swing.*

## Introduction

**G**alashiels, known locally as 'Gala', is a small town in the Scottish Borders, about 33 miles South-East of Edinburgh. With a population of 15,000, the town is situated in a rural area but maintains itself as the commercial centre of the region.

In this ethnography I will explore the public event of the Gala Day Breakfast: a communal, all-male breakfast held annually in the town hall on the morning of the civic celebration of Gala Day. Having grown up in the town of Galashiels, I have experienced the civic celebrations and have attended the Breakfast on a number of occasions. I will use my past experiences of the event to inform parts of the ethnography but, I must make clear from the start, this ethnography is not about my experiences of the Breakfast but rather the experiences of participants who have attended the event since its incarnation who will reflect on their attendance of the event. To maintain the integrity of this emic perspective I have endeavoured to mute my authorial voice as much as possible.

Beginning with a discussion of the socio-historical context of the event and its positioning within the larger event of Gala Day, the ethnography will move towards a description of the ritualistic aspects of the Breakfast encompassing the dress code, the stories, the songs, the food, and other features of the formal structure of the event. The final part of the ethnography will focus on the mixed opinions of the Breakfast held by local people: from the pessimistic standpoint of the event as a mere 'piss-up' to promulgations of the event as a representation of 'true civic pride'.

Being more than a mere description of events the ethnography will be informed by the theoretical approaches of Victor Turner and his ideas on liminality and *communitas*; Dona Handelman and her focus on the 'logics of organization, of design, through which public events are put together' (Handelman 1998:xi); and Bruce Kapferer's movement '... beyond conventional perspectives of the event as representational (...) of society and, instead, as a moment (...) of immanence and the affirmation and realization of potential' (Kapferer 2015:2). Through the application of these theories to the Breakfast I hope to promulgate a theorisation of public events as autonomous phenomena in their own right and to move away from the common anthropological model of public events as merely representational

of social-order. Above all, the ethnography is an informed exploration of the gap between rhetoric and reality.

### **Methodology**

The fieldwork was carried out in April, 2016 through interviews which were recorded on a microphone then transcribed. My informants were all natives of Galashiels, the majority of whom had attended the Breakfast on multiple occasions. They varied in age, the youngest being 22 years-old and the oldest 64 years-old, and despite the Breakfast being all-male I also interviewed a number of women from the town in order to collate a wider perspective of the event. The ethnography also employs photography as an illustrative tool to convey certain aspects of the Breakfast in a visual sense.



*Figure 2: The first ever Gala Day celebration in the 1930.*

### **Socio-Historical Perspectives: Setting the Scene of the Breakfast**

I feel it is necessary to begin the discussion with a schematic outline of the historical and social contexts that played a formative role in the creation of the Gala Day, and

subsequently the Breakfast, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the investment of local people in the event. To begin to un-pack this incredibly complex 'happening' I will use the account of one of my informants, Bill, a neighbour of mine who has lived in the town his entire life and possesses an incredible knowledge of the town's history.

The following is a summary of an interview I had with Bill, he tells me "The first ever Gala Day was celebrated on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1930,

There were many reasons for the creation of a civic celebration in the town. Firstly, Gala suffered heavy losses during the First World War. Of the pre-war population of 14,000, 635 men failed to return home. Coupled with this the Tweed Trade, textile factories on the banks of the River Tweed, which had thrived in the region for decades began to decline, there was high unemployment and the town found itself in a rut. There was economic and social depression in the town and it was from this that the Gala Day celebration was thought-up to bring some pride back into the lives of the 'Galaleans.'

### **The Breakfast: Humble Origins.**

The Gala Day celebration itself has been running for over 85 years; conversely, the Breakfast is a relatively new event. To explore the link between the wider celebrations of Gala Day and the creation of the Breakfast the following part of the ethnography focusses on extracts from interviews conducted with informants who were present at the first Breakfasts.

One of my informants, Keith, spoke of the first ever Breakfast:

'The first breakfast was held in 1997 at the Abbotsford hotel. Richie<sup>1</sup>, his brother Kenny and a couple of his pals decided it would be a good idea as it would get as many people as possible supporting the Braw Lad and Lass right from the start and make a great day last even longer. Over the years however, it's actually made it a shorter day for some... The first four were in The Abb (Abbotsford Hotel) then in 2001, it was held in the Volunteer Hall (Town Hall) where it's been ever since.'

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<sup>1</sup> Richie Gray. Richie is the leader of proceedings at the Breakfast and one of the original organisers. I contacted Richie while researching this ethnography but owing to his current position as a coach in the Scottish rugby team he was unavailable to interview; at the time Scotland were playing in the 6 Nations rugby tournament.

Thus, the organisational structure of the Breakfast was inspired heavily by the same communal spirit that informed the creation of the Gala Day itself. With local men hoping to extend the festivities of the day and encourage a coming-together, as another informant, Jamie, explained:

‘The idea was to get the various communities in Gala together, early, and to spread the Gala Day atmosphere quicker - in hope of creating a longer buzz around the whole week. Each year the Breakfast has been either full, or close to capacity, so it is easy to see that the idea has been a success.’

From these accounts it is clear that on a thematic level the formation of the Breakfast relates directly to the larger celebration of Gala Day and maintains many of the principles that informed the creation of a civic celebration in the town. However, an important facet of this discussion is the status of the Breakfast as an ‘unofficial’ event. The Breakfast has never been endorsed officially by the Braw Lads Executive and despite its obvious popularity the event remains completely autonomous from wider proceedings. Thus, far from reflecting social order within local society the Breakfast may be viewed as reactionary to the structured civic celebrations of Gala Day. As Handelman explains: ‘If in the horizons of their practice – of their coming-into-being and their existing – rituals are understood primarily as representational, then these rites are tied down, utterly in thrall to the social and cultural orders that they are said to express’ (Handelman 1998:xiv). Therefore, in applying Handelman’s ideas, I believe it is important that the Breakfast be defined on its own terms and not simply as representational of the wider celebrations of Gala Day.



*Figure 3: The Volunteer Hall - current setting for The Breakfast.*

### **The Breakfast: Order of Proceedings.**

Since its inception 19 years ago the order of proceedings at the Breakfast have changed very little and follow an extremely ritualistic formality from the moment the attendees enter the hall. As one of my main informants Jamie told me:

‘The Breakfast itself follows a similar pattern every year - you go in, sit down at a table with a group of friends, family, or strangers, and socialise over a bacon roll, pie, tea/coffee or beer, if one is so inclined.

At a set time, the main proceedings occur, speakers of fame from the Borders community come to speak, to recite tales of Breakfasts beforehand, as well as sharing humorous anecdotes and tales with the rest of the hall, from atop the stage.’

The speakers at the Breakfast come from the community in Galashiels; are individuals of acclaim from neighbouring towns such as Hawick, Selkirk and Peebles; Ex-Braw Lads who talk about their memories of Gala Days gone-by; or are guests of honour from other countries. One year I attended there was a young man from France who spoke about his hometown and a similar celebration they host there.

Humour plays a hugely important role in the Breakfast speeches. Speakers often humour known individuals in the town or more commonly other Border towns with whom Galashiels hold historic rivalries. More often than not these 'toasts' concern the town of Hawick, the second-largest town in the region, which lies 18 miles south of Galashiels and to this day maintains a historic rivalry which is most explicitly viewed on rugby and football pitches throughout the season.

One informant, Keith, expanded on the contents of the Breakfast speeches: 'The entertainment is all about the gathering and other Border festivals with songs and banter from ex-Braw Lads and guests from other towns.'

After starting at around 4 o'clock in the morning the Breakfast ends at around 8 o'clock providing an electric start to the day for all the attendees, as Jamie explains: 'By the end of the Breakfast most of the attendees are usually merry - from the singing, the atmosphere and/or the alcohol.'



Figure 4: A Breakfast attendee with Shepherds Tie and Braw Lads Rosette.

### **Liminality and Communitas in the Breakfast.**

There are obvious comparisons to be drawn between the Breakfast and common anthropological definitions of ritual; Kapferer suggests ritual is “...a series of culturally recognised and specified events, the order of which is known in advance of their practice, and which are marked off spatially and temporally from the routine of everyday life.” (Kapferer 1984:194). This part of the ethnography will discuss the ritual aspects of the Breakfast, through this discussion I argue the significance of these activities in reflecting Turner’s notions of liminality and *communitas*.

#### **1) Uniform of Attendees**

One of the most explicit liminal aspects of the event is the shared uniform of the attendees (see *Figure 4*). The black trousers, white shirts, Gala rosettes and Shepherds ties render the attendees equal in appearance and thus in hierarchy. All status is left at the door, these are men who in their daily lives all hold differing occupations, social status, political orientation,

and economic class. Turner defines this position ‘...as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system – in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands.’ (Turner 1969:95).

The significance of the shared uniform is understood by the attendees in a distinctive manner as Jamie elucidated:

‘The fact that every Breakfast attendee dons the same attire of white shirt, black and white chequered tie and a rosette creates a uniformity, and identity, for the attendees. The rest of the town tend to get up around 8ish to start the day, in plain clothes, whilst the attendees have been up since 4, dressed the same, in fine mood and ready to carry on as they were...

It is easy to distinct who has been to the Breakfast, and who hasn't.’

This distinction between the attendees of the Breakfast and the other members of the community who come out to celebrate Gala Day creates an intense collectivity among the attendees: as liminal individuals in this position ‘... tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism’ (Turner 1969:95).

The development from liminal beings into a concrete community of shared solidarity is manifest throughout the Breakfast in the shared uniform, the enjoyment of songs written about the town, and the sharing of food and drink.

## **2) Food and Drink**

From my informant Jamie’s account, the food and drink available at the Breakfast are overwhelmingly normal – ‘bacon rolls, steak pies, beer, and tea or coffee’ - and may be viewed in complete contradiction to Freud’s theory of the ‘sacred meal’ (Freud 1938:54) and to Durkheim’s theory of totemic animals (Durkheim 1976:127). For the attendees of the Breakfast, the foodstuff available are common place and eaten in their daily lives; they constitute neither ‘taboo’ nor ‘totems representing ancestors’.

My interpretation of the significance of the food eaten at the Breakfast relates back to the humour that is at the heart of the event as a whole. It is almost satirical for the attendees to hold this significant event yet serve up the most normative foodstuffs possible, food that

the attendees would have eaten in their homes on that morning anyway. The most basic, and most likely, understanding of the significance of the food eaten at the Breakfast is simply related to the communal quality of the Breakfast, as Fox explains:

‘Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers’ (Fox 2002:1).

By applying this understanding to the consumption of food, I argue that through the shared experience of eating and drinking, the attendees constitute a shared “body” and this, in turn, enhances their sense of community.

### **3) The Songs**

The Breakfast is steeped in oral tradition: storytelling, songs and music play an important role in the event. The types of songs that are sung are related to local history and celebration of the town. As a boy growing up in the town these were songs that we sang in primary school around the end of term when the Braw Lad and Lass made their annual visit. No one truly sat down and learned them, it was the repetition of hearing the songs and then performing them that got them into your head. These songs are an illustration of the power of the oral tradition and shows that this type of musical education is still alive and well in Scotland today.

*Braw Braw Lads* is a song I wish to highlight and is the most common of all the songs sang throughout the celebration week. As Bill explained: ‘The original can be traced back to a 1773 poem by Robert Burns entitled *Braw Lads O’ Galla Water*...this song is sang at the end of proceedings just as the Braw Lad and Lass leave to start their day.’ (See appendix for lyrics).

This discussion on the songs is very brief but it endeavours to illustrate the significance of the oral tradition within the Breakfast event. One of my informants, Keith, commented:

‘The music at the Breakfast is what really gets everyone going, by this time everyone’s had a drink or too and the spirits are high ... the icing on the cake being the visit of the Principles and singing the Braw Lad and Lasses songs giving them a great start to their memorable day.’

Thus, the communal attributes of food and song, and the shared uniform of attendees builds an extreme feeling of camaraderie among the participants and gives them a brief sense of 'a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties' (Turner 1963:96).

### **Perceptions of the Breakfast in the Wider Community.**

The Breakfast has always been a point of contention in the local community with a noticeable dichotomy of opinion relating to the civic integrity of the event. For some it is viewed as an archaic event that exacerbates the heavy drinking culture present on Gala Day. Many of my informants shared this opinion, including Moira: 'Don't get me wrong. I love the Braw Lads Gathering. However, a lot of the guys are completely gished. They carry on regardless and it's a great day.' And Malky: 'Any cereals/fry ups, toast etc. are solely for the purpose of absorption.'

For others it is a testament to the town and represents true civic pride - if you attend the Breakfast you are a true 'Galalean' as Kenny explained:

'For me the more I went the beer was secondary and the real meaning of the Braw Lads gathering came through. Songs are sung, the history is rekindled and a chance for people who have left the town to return and be proud where they come from and see faces from the past. I'll be back one day for my 5 AM bottle of Bud and a bacon buttie. Braw braw lads.'

During my research I also interviewed informants who had never attended the Breakfast and this brought up a more balanced opinion of the event as one of my informants Stevie explained:

'It's all a bit guid auld Gala for me. Seems good if you are into guid auld... Some folk have more civic pride than others. I would say more generally about Gala that the demographics have changed enormously since I was your age. A lot more incomers now and as kids leave the area it dilutes the civic pride numbers if that makes sense. It's for diehards and bevviers and that's all right!'

### **Conclusion**

I have sought to explore the public event of the Gala Day Breakfast through descriptions rooted in an emic perspective. The ethnography began with an illustration of the significance of the Breakfast in the wider civic celebrations of the Gala Day through a description of the celebration's socio-historical context and the significance of this from a local perspective. The subsequent section explored the beginnings of the Breakfast and through the application of the theories of Handelman and Kapferer promulgated an Anthropology of public events that views the event as autonomous and self-contained - not a mere representation of wider social order. The main body of the ethnography moved towards a description of the ritualistic aspects of the Breakfast informed by the theoretical understandings of Victor Turner. Here I argued that through the shared uniform of the attendees, the communal consumption of food and the oral tradition of song the participants of the Breakfast foster a deep sense of solidarity which creates a generalised social bond that is felt by all individuals present. This *communitas* is a key concept in the ethnography overall and one that encompasses all aspects of the event. The final part of the ethnography highlighted contrasting perceptions held by locals concerning the Breakfast: the dichotomy of opinion present in my research indicated the Breakfast either as a "piss-up" that exacerbated the drinking culture present in the celebrations or as a representation of "true civic pride" with attendees encompassing the position of a true 'Galalean'. Above all the ethnography aimed to explore the significance of the Breakfast to the attendees within the paradigm of the civic celebration of Gala Day. Owing to the extreme complexities of this celebration further research would look at the other ceremonies present on Gala Day and to what extent these further reflect the themes of solidarity and civic pride illustrated in the Breakfast. In a wider anthropological context this ethnography highlights the importance of viewing public events as autonomous entities and to move away from the common, and reductive, use of public events within anthropology as simple illustrative representations of society.

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*Figure 2: The first ever Gala Day in 1930. (Sourced from the Bygone Galashiels Community Page)*

*Figure 3: The Volunteer Hall - current setting for The Breakfast.*

*Figure 4: A Breakfast attendee with Shepherds Tie and Braw Lads Rosette.*

## Appendix:

### Braw Braw Lads

Braw, braw lads on Yarrow-braes,  
They rove amang the blooming heather;  
But Yarrow braes, nor Ettrick shaws  
Can match the lads o' Galla Water.

But there is ane, a secret ane,  
Aboon them a' I loe him better;  
And I'll be his, and he'll be mine,  
The bonie lad o' Galla Water.

Altho' his daddie was nae laird,  
And tho' I hae nae meikle tocher,  
Yet rich in kindest, truest love,  
We'll tent our flocks by Galla Water.

It ne'er was wealth, it ne'er was wealth,  
That coft contentment, peace, or pleasure;  
The bands and bliss o' mutual love,  
O that's the chiefest world's treasure.