

The Braw Lads' Gathering:

Civic Pride, Historicity, and Bounding Community in the Scottish Borders

Dylan Howel

Introduction

The vast rurality of the Scottish Borders is shaped by an expansive topography of rolling hills, dense forests, and vein-like tributaries. Ancient towns permeate this landscape, each exhibiting a unique civic identity, linked by an extensive and conflicted history that is manifest in the framework of annual 'Common Riding' celebrations held over sequential weekends in each town during the summer months. Conceived in 1930, amid growing economic and social depression in the town, the Braw Lads' Gathering in Galashiels is one such celebration. This study aims to elucidate the civic solidarity the festival fosters for local people, while discussing the ways in which this communal cohesion has been created and maintained through time. The research is historically and ethnographically informed and situates the two as mutually significant.



Figure 1: Act of Homage at first Gala Day, 1930

Each scene within the Gathering contains a plethora of complex and diverse forms. Given this fact, the central ethnographic body of the research foregrounds four key ritual practices and ceremonial rites conducted in the town during the Gathering. These, I believe, are indicative of the central themes communicated by informants during fieldwork and provide a lens through which a more holistic exploration of the celebration is made possible. The temporal alignment of past (Figure 1) and present (Figure 2), and the ways in which *historicity* is manifest within the celebration, is one focal point of the study. The extent to which local people interpret the past as a confirmation of their ‘Galalean’ identity in the present is a key question I posit. The suspension of norms experienced by participants on ‘Gala Day’ is my second focal point. This *liminal* status will be discussed in conjunction with the selection process of symbolic figureheads who exist as living embodiments of the community during the celebration. Finally, the ‘bounding’ of community within a spatial geography represents a further analytical paradigm. The delineation of Galashiels against the ‘outside’ world, and the extent to which this fosters a civic solidarity for participants, will also be explored. Each ritual is introduced with an ethnographic vignette copied from my field notebook as a means of drawing the reader into the ethnographic scene, while preserving a *naturalist* approach to fieldwork.



Figure 2: The Act of Homage 2017.

To the author's knowledge, the study at hand represents the first anthropological study of the Gathering in Galashiels, and as such, orientates itself as an elucidator of events, reflecting the forms of a classical ethnographic monograph. However, being more than a mere descriptor, the investigation will be informed by a diverse range of academic theory in a bid to decipher the complexities of the communal celebration. My own identity within the field as a 'native' researcher became a central facet within fieldwork and this is reflected within the final written piece. The self-reflexive starting point should be viewed as an integral part of the study and not merely as a symbolic claim to authenticate the work. Furthermore, any motivations for conducting the research stem from my prolonged experience of the Gathering growing up in Galashiels and the knowledge that there has been no substantial academic study of these events to date. In holistic terms, the paper aims to investigate the ways in which residents of Galashiels identify the Braw Lads' Gathering as method of (re)constructing and (re)affirming civic identity.