

Edinburgh's Hogmanay in the Society of the Spectacle

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Abstract: This paper is based upon a continuous study of the cultural event entitled 'Edinburgh's Hogmanay' as it has operated since 1996 and, specifically, of the gated and televised late evening spectacle immediately leading up to the turn of each New Year held in and around Princes Street, Edinburgh's main street. The paper is based upon a series of interviews held with current and former members of the planning group for the event, an examination of media coverage between 1996 and 2003, the consideration of other documentary sources such as committee minutes and marketing literature and, finally, personal observations from attendance at the events themselves.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, festivity, authenticity, visitor experience, media coverage.

Background¹

The Scottish festival of 'Hogmanay' (31 December of any given year) is variously defined as "the last day of the year" or "New Year's Eve" and derives from the Gaelic 'oghe maidne' meaning 'New Morning' (www.dewarswow.com). No doubt, these descriptions accurately define the precise location in time of the festivity but it could be argued that they do little to present the cultural significance of Hogmanay in the construction of Scottish identity, the representation and transmission of 'scottishness' globally, the reproduction of cultural values taking place or the expectations and memories that the term evokes for those who count themselves among Scots. Although all cultures have mechanisms and means of recognising, recording and celebrating the transitions from one calendar year to the next, some aspects of the Scottish celebration of Hogmanay within the 'westernised' calendar appear to have resonated world-wide in the Twentieth Century. Particular elements of the Scottish experience of Hogmanay that have travelled well include: the tradition of travelling 'home' – within or back to Scotland – to participate in the celebration among friends and family; the importance of visiting family, friends and neighbours as a 'first foot' (the tradition of crossing the thresholds of others' homes for the first time early in the new calendar year – in practice, often the small hours of the morning of New Year's Day, 1 January – bearing symbolic gifts such as coal or shortbread, www.onlinedictionary.com); the corollary of warmly welcoming individuals (including strangers) into the home at this time; and, the cultural significance of alcohol (especially Scotch whisky in the 'orthodox' observation of the festivity) during and in all of these exchanges and transactions. Principal among the traditions of Hogmanay is the spirit and (sometimes) performance of 'Auld

Lang Syne', a song codified by the Scottish 'bard', Robert Burns (egalitarian ploughman poet and collector of traditional 'ballads' in the late Eighteenth Century). This song hectors its participants and audience alike with the exhortation that "auld acquaintance" should "be forgot, and never brought to mind" – put simply, that prior acts and deeds committed upon us should be forgiven, and that the metaphorical slate is wiped clean – a recurrent theme in the spirit of Hogmanay as 'renewal' and 'regeneration' of self and community.

Another recurring motif of Hogmanay is the negotiation and reconciliation of both private and public celebration within the envelope of the festivity itself. Private incarnations of Hogmanay are well recorded in the pages of Scottish popular culture icons such as the DC Thomson organisation's respectable urban working class family rooted in the 1930s, 'the Broons' (offered as a comic strip weekly in the Scotland's largest selling Sunday newspaper, *The Sunday Post*). The Broons are also available anthologised, usually published in time to reach the Christmas gift market. This version of the privatised Hogmanay typically involves the women of the Broon household furiously conducting family chores of cleaning and washing during the daylight hours of Hogmanay and, often, cooking delicacies for the impending arrival of (well-behaved) revellers at the midnight hour. The men are unlikely to be involved in such activity and are more likely to be represented as the well behaved visitors and beneficiaries of this symbolic cleansing and preparation of the 'feast'. First foots always arrive with what are purported to be the traditional and acceptable gift of a lump of coal and are greeted with a black bun – a rich fruit cake. Alcohol is seldom, if ever, on the agenda (mirroring the general conservatism of the editorial policies of the organisation) but it is common for a visitor to have brought some form of entertainment for the collective enjoyment of the household, e.g. a piano accordion. This romanticised portrayal of Scottish urban tenement life in which those living together within one block of flats or street (Glebe Street in this case) celebrate their collectivism and communitarian well-being in a situation where women are domestic workers, no-one is intoxicated and behaviour is self-regulated, ordered and respectable seems increasingly incredible in the face of actual lived experiences in working-class communities. Please see Figure I for an example from Glasgow's *'Evening Times'* of the image of first-footing in times past.

As far as public celebration is concerned, there is also a history of group participation at well-established gathering points which are usually



Figure I: *TIMESPAST* -
First-footing, Glasgow, 1954
(Source:
<http://www.eveningtimes.co.uk/lo/features/7010950.html>)

taken to be symbolic foci for their communities as well as vantage points for the collective consumption of the moment when a public time-piece announces (by bell or chime) the arrival of the new calendar year. Outside Scotland, Trafalgar Square in London and Times Square in New York are examples of such sites that have evolved a 'tradition' of people celebrating the occasion, together with varying results in terms of public safety and public order. Within Scotland, gathering places were usually in town or city centres, where crowding was possible (and easily policed, of course) due to the nature of the site and where the time could be (more or less) accurately and objectively counted and marked. In Edinburgh, the place taken by generations as this symbolic heart of the city was the Tron Kirk, a historically resonant Church of Scotland building midway between Edinburgh Castle and the Palace of Holyroodhouse in the (so-called) Royal Mile – all of which were the centre for tourism in Edinburgh throughout the mid to late Twentieth Century. These public gatherings have often been sites of anxiety for those concerned to regulate and monitor behaviour (e.g. the decision to 'discourage' any gatherings at Trafalgar Square after the 9/11 attacks upon the USA, ostensibly because of fears of terrorism). Some of the main concerns included: moral welfare in the face of the carnivalesque (e.g. 'over' indulgence in alcohol, drugs, sex and fighting in public); corporeal welfare at a time of year (in the United Kingdom) when night-time temperatures regularly fall below zero Celsius – this an even greater concern when taken alongside some of the moral concerns cited above; administrative risk aversion, particularly of liabilities for crushing and impact injuries or deaths in the climate of public policing post-Heysel and Hillsborough Stadium disasters; and, finally, the possibility of damage to public and private property as these other factors (and responses to them) interact to produce what could be interpreted as 'volatile' situations.

Public Safety, Public Order and 'Edinburgh's Hogmanay'

Close to the end of the Twentieth Century, the annual gatherings at the Tron Kirk in the City of Edinburgh had become fairly well-attended, especially by local young people, exhibiting most of the causes for concern among authorities with public responsibilities as cited above. The gatherings could not themselves be labelled as 'events' as they remained unorganised by any administrative authority, uncommunicated to any potential participants and largely contingent in their unfolding at the occasions themselves. Nevertheless attendances at the Tron Kirk rose steadily from an early 1950s low (in an era of austerity and rationing) and attendance policing policies became progressively more visible and officer numbers more numerous. It seems that Hogmanay at the Tron Kirk had become an 'unofficial' celebration by some citizens, demonstrating elements of what some historical commentators label as 'rough' behaviour when discussing popular recreations and pastimes of the Nineteenth Century (e.g. Malcolmson, 1982). Equally, policing in the face of the anxieties of city

government resulted in the inevitability of arrests and the recording of injuries and other casualties of the occasion via its ancillary elements. Perhaps the persistence of the occasion of Hogmanay for those who chose to celebrate out with their homes and their immediate communities is best illustrated by the growth of participant numbers (in police estimates) throughout the late Twentieth Century, despite only a sporadically functioning clock at the Kirk!

By the mid-1990s, it was beyond question that, in the United Kingdom at least, the local constabulary (Lothian and Borders Police) had considerable experience in the handling of large scale events, perhaps second only to the Metropolitan force in London. Mainly this arose because of the necessity of handling arrangements for the annual arrival of the Monarch (nominally on holiday) at the Palace of Holyroodhouse and of other activities associated with this visit. Various annual events connected to the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival Fringe also contributed to this experience base. However, the event which most respondents assert galvanised the impetus for change to the Hogmanay celebrations was the European Community Leaders' Summit held in Edinburgh in late 1992. This event had considerable impact upon Edinburgh for a range of reasons, some apparently contingent. Firstly, the experiences of the police force in responding to high-profile situations requiring sensitivity, security and (cheerful) public compliance grew considerably as a result. Secondly, tourist authorities and city government alike appear to have reflected upon Edinburgh's winter product and its aesthetic, economic and cultural aspects. Equally, these bodies began to consider trends in out-of-season visitation to cities and recognised that British cities were being overtaken by recently available mass market competitors such as Prague. That much of Edinburgh's emergent service economy, like the rest of Scotland, was effectively closed for business (hotel and guest house bedrooms, retail and café outlets) from late December to early January - a time commonly taken to be a traditional holiday for all in Scotland - was easily established. In the development of a range of related, local, small-scale festivities of an appropriate scope for winter and of 'recognisable tone' for European media consumption, it was also intended to assure the ownership of the Summit by the citizens of Edinburgh, ameliorate its inevitable disruption to their daily lives and give meaningful connection between Edinburgh and Europe. Within these initiatives lay an apparent realisation that, with a change in attitudes, practices and venues, a business opportunity for Edinburgh could emerge. Nearly all of the agencies involved in the evolution of the 'Edinburgh's Hogmanay'.

In research interviews, respondents make it clear that at the outset, the vision for a Hogmanay celebration on 31 December would be the culmination of almost a week of activities and visitor opportunity to participate and spend (all of which would be badged under the banner of 'Edinburgh's Hogmanay', thereby extending the economic impact to almost all of the post-Christmas to

Once inside the cordon (there are five entry points and seven exit points) participants have free access around the Princes Street and adjoining areas with a range of film and live events available. Principal among these events are: the 'World Stage', offering contemporary, live 'world music' acts; the 'Celtic Stage' presenting live acts of music and dance grounded in a Celtic tradition and the (chargeable) 'Concert in the Gardens' which has regularly featured both contemporary pop music and a revival of an act formerly famous. In 2002/3 this amounted to Mercury Music Prize winner Ms Dynamite and Culture Club respectively. The sounds of all of these events carry well across the city centre – beyond the confines of each outdoor venue. These events are accompanied by a fireworks display after the turn of the year – an element replicated (for 2002/3) across the seven hills upon which the city is built, thus effectively reaching any viewer anywhere in the city as far as its outermost suburbs.

Once the New Year has arrived, the managers of the event are keen to ensure that it winds down quickly and that the streets are cleared, so live acts cease soon after 00.30 and little or nothing (except public transport out of the city centre) is offered after 01.00.

Consuming Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party - Constructing Identity for the Occasion

On the streets themselves, the behaviour is usually described as 'revelry' in media coverage. This media coverage is a key to understanding some aspects of the success of the Street Party. From the mid 1970s, television coverage of the moments of one year becoming another in the Scottish 'tradition' was an increasingly thorny problem for Scotland's televised media organisations. Faced with viewers at home who were aware of what constitutes authenticity within the occasion, they struggled to offer programmes that reproduced its actuality or even its spirit. Programmes were pre-recorded in a 'White Heather Club' (a variety show providing sanitised elements of a ceilidh, a bothy evening and the Music Hall for the early television mass market of the 1960s) studio-type of format, some time in late November. These programmes showed rather sheepish and embarrassed studio 'guests' nursing a couple of small drinks at what was purporting to be a Hogmanay party while a few minor (usually, but not only, Scottish) celebrities went through the motions of performing some songs connected to the occasion and some professional dancers gave exhibitions of Scottish country dancing, with occasional opportunities for everyone to take to the dance floor for a sedate waltz accompanied by a small band live in the studio. Some of these broadcasts were shared with networks in England. Some companies experimented with actual live outside broadcasts on Hogmanay itself, but found that the cost of hiring staff and recognising that many customers chose to stay within the opportunities for things to become

'unplanned' where alcohol was involved were considerable and probable. Successful replication of the Hogmanay experience for Scottish and other audiences had been a difficult goal to achieve

Thus, the revelry on the streets that Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party offered was a welcome opportunity for the company that could secure access to coverage. Not only was there something 'real' and 'worth seeing' to cover using outside broadcast cameras, there was also an opportunity to syndicate pictures to a far wider audience, where a spectacular event was occurring and when news media were usually 'quiet' (thereby offsetting some of the costs of production). Programmes could be constructed for the home market around the event, based in venues close to the city centre and be able to use both anchor staff and live acts in these makeshift studios while also benefiting from coverage of the audience and acts on the streets themselves. Here was an opportunity to get coverage of the 'true' Hogmanay - authentic voices from the street, albeit monitored and sanitised - together with coverage that would keep viewers tuned-in, rather than have them reaching for alternatives (Wessblad, 2003). It offered a chance to 'be somewhere' where something was actually happening, rather than an artificially constructed set or false situation. Equally, it offered those with both a stake in Edinburgh's Hogmanay and in Edinburgh as a year-round venue to present the city in particular ways and to reach markets that would cost millions of pounds to penetrate in other ways (Green, 2002). Having a rather (perhaps unjustified) stuffy reputation as a destination for an older audience of cultural 'elitists', Edinburgh needed to demonstrate its cosmopolitan youthful credentials as a vibrant European capital that was spectacular to see and fun to be in. Media coverage of the Edinburgh Hogmanay event, culminating in the Street Party, could both deliver this message and reach these markets - whether live or in recorded format during early January (Evans, 2003). Thus, enabling media coverage of all types and from a wide range of local and international sources became a crucial part of the organisation of Edinburgh's Hogmanay. Often, media coverage is presented as necessary for securing local 'ownership' of spectacular events - and this was an important issue, given the level of tax-payer support - but this seems to have been secondary to a desire for developing public relations and marketing opportunities and for image and identity construction (de Bres and Davis, 1998).

As for the streets themselves, there is a relatively patient resignation to the security elements of entering the Street Party cordon. These include a checking of tickets, with few people presenting themselves ticketless and demanding entry. In practice, the culture of ticket acquisition or the expedient of getting inside the cordon prior to it being secured has become fairly well-established among the young locals. Visitors will tend to secure tickets via their accommodation or have heeded the warnings about the need to get into the

centre before 22.00. Most young visitors are carrying alcohol, many in glass containers which are not now permitted, and have this decanted into large trumpet-like plastic containers proved free by the sponsors of the event (Royal Bank of Scotland). Once inside the cordon, in theory, spectators may move around freely. In practice some areas, particularly junctions, become very crowded with people attempting to move in contradictory directions, thereby causing 'tailbacks' of pedestrian traffic in a number of directions. This restricts practical possibilities of movement, despite police attempts to secure channels in each direction. There is a general air of bonhomie, perhaps rather 'forced' in places, with three obvious segments to the spectators. Firstly, local youths, both male and female, who are taking advantage of a free (at point of use) popular culture event in their home city and who are often in large groups. They are often visibly intoxicated. Secondly, young people who have travelled for the occasion whether they are culturally Scottish or not (again both sexes, usually in smaller groups, sometimes staying in the city for one night only and with the desire to be 'part of' the event). Such young visitors, who are less likely to seem drunk, give a young, cosmopolitan 'aura' to the event. There seem to be many antipodeans, some from the USA and Canada and English-speakers from mainland Europe. Lastly, there are 'mature' visitors who have come 'for the experience' and may have stayed for more of the near week-long events. Usually in couples or with teenage family, these visitors are more likely to be staying in hotels or guest houses. These visitors are less likely to show signs of inebriation.

With all of the above visitors becoming part of the media spectacle, outdoor television coverage has tended to concentrate upon the high-profile acts performing (briefly) upon the stages and on demonstrating the international dimension to the festivity by interviewing visitors from outwith Scotland (Watson, 2003). It also seeks to ensure spectacular backdrops to any filming – hence the fireworks, the lit Edinburgh Castle and camera sweep of the 'pressure points' of crowded corners and near-stage fandom. All of this serves to deliver a media spectacle that provides an image of heritage (both built and cultural), youth, excitement, zeitgeist (in some of the acts chosen), of irony (in some of the acts chosen) and not taking itself too seriously, global accessibility as well as 'liberal' attitudes to 'high-spirits' on the streets – a tolerant, vibrant and expressive public culture (Green, 2002; Evans, 2003).

Regulating Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party – Sanitising Spectacle

Policing responsibility for the Street Party falls to the Lothian and Borders Constabulary. As previously mentioned, this force has considerable experience as a result of handling the visits of monarchs, handling foreign dignitaries and the opening of the Scottish Parliament in recent years. The force also manages

crowds at the annual fireworks event towards the end of the Edinburgh International Festival in the summer – in policing terms, an annual dress rehearsal for officers covering the Hogmanay event.

Policing such events is often taken to be a reconciliation of aspects of public order and public safety (Hughes, 1999). However, all of the officers interviewed in this research stressed the primacy of their public safety role. On the one hand, this is not surprising. By reputation, even if it is not admitted openly, the large crowd at the 1996/1997 event fuelled by the appearance of the band Ocean Colour Scene – relatively unknown when booked but having broken into the mainstream of popular culture at the time of the Street Party – caused considerable congestion (the term 'crushing' is never used except when objective measures of it can be provided) in the parts of Princes Street connected to Hanover Street. This gave serious cause for concern and led directly to the imposition of a ticketing and numerical control at future events. Taken together with the 'history' of injury when citizens gathered at the Tron Kirk, media speculation upon terrorist attacks aimed at the event (especially in 2002/3) and the potential impact upon those directly and indirectly affected by a hypothetical fatality, the focus upon safety is not surprising. Temperatures are usually below zero after dark at this time of year, the city centre environment is not designed for large crowds and everything from street furniture to fencing can become injurious in crowded circumstances. On the other hand, the necessity for public order is not incommensurate with public safety – clearly disorder has potential to lead to a compromise of safety (Ravenscroft and Matteucci, 2003). Moreover, it seems politically expedient, at the very least, to ensure that behaviour that would not be tolerated on a 'normal' Saturday evening, is handled consistently at this flagship event. Yet, arrests are few and can be counted on one hand.

A number of reasons can be proposed for the relatively low number of arrests. Firstly, any arrests will lead to officers having to relinquish street duties so that they can charge the alleged offenders. Clearly, a 'zero tolerance' approach could eliminate any visible police presence fairly quickly. Police refute any suggestion that they do not handle this occasion like any other, but some participants seem to be able to undertake some activities (e.g. cannabis smoking) that might not be tolerated at other times. Secondly, marksmen and women are used as 'spotters' on the roofs of buildings, ostensibly to warn the officer in charge of any crowd pressure points but they are also able to anticipate and indicate any difficult situations. More importantly, everyone interviewed asserted that the behaviour of those in the crowd was very different from that which could be expected on any similar occasion equally fuelled by cultural identity and alcohol (e.g. the aftermath of a football match between Edinburgh's rival teams, Heart of Midlothian and Hibernian) or almost any Saturday night. This was described by one respondent as a 'tartan army effect' – the said 'tartan

army' being the general term used to describe football supporters who travel to see the Scottish national team (as well as the specific – and some would say, gentrified – official travel club of the Scottish Football Association designed to enable supporters to follow the team to matches away from home). The tartan army has acquired a reputation that is distinctly ambassadorial – as well-behaved, law-abiding but always 'up for a good time' representatives of the Scottish nation, not only when dealing with supporters of other nations and when abroad, but also as hosts to others visiting Scotland – functioning almost as cultural *attachés*. Undoubtedly, there is a good deal of alcohol involved in the practices of the tartan army, but this does not seem to have become associated with negative behaviour, as it has done in other cultural contexts – e.g. what government refers to as 'binge-drinking' and associated behaviours. The hostility sometimes associated with confrontations between the supporters of some national teams does not seem to apply to the 'tartan army'.

This effect can be seen as a form of self-regulation. It is not to suggest that Scottish participants are somehow the same people as the tartan army, but that the technologies of the self involved in regulating behaviours are applying at the public celebration of Hogmanay in Edinburgh. Many of the local participants felt a need to explain that they had a responsibility to ensure that 'guests' enjoyed themselves – some obviously cherishing the possibility that such assistance could lead to a romantic encounter – and that they understood the significance of the occasion in Scotland. This self-regulation appears to function strongly at cultural occasions such as Edinburgh's Hogmanay, and is a key factor in securing 'acceptable' media coverage (Waterman, 1998). *Vox pop* coverage becomes possible and fairly reliable, lending an air of authenticity to the proceedings as a reporter interviews participants. Camera sweeps are unlikely to detect or select 'inappropriate' behaviour, leading to programmes that are fairly safe for family viewing while seeming to be 'of the street'. Equally, this form of social control contributes greatly to securing public order in the aggregate, even if there may be 'small' transgressions in the specifics of some situations (Ravenscroft and Matteucci, 2003). Where public order is subsumed within the envelope of public safety, self-regulation enables a 'hands-off' attitude to be adopted with confidence, while concerns about crushing or impact injuries (rather than, say, rioting) remain the priority of the authorities. Crucially, this event lasts for only some three hours – perhaps the key to maintaining order at the event. Those involved may be able to be contained within their personal and collective spirit of ambassadorial identities for that length of time, before returning to 'real' street behaviour in the less rarefied, less crowded, uncordoned world of the 'normal' city street.

Conclusions

Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party has transformed the celebration of the festivity in that city, from an element of 'rough' but naturalistic crowd behaviour

to a sanitised version of the event, planned, mediated and socially engineered to become a spectacle in which the spectators are also participants and, thus a key part of the event itself (Waterman, 1998). Like a televised football match played in an empty stadium, there is the effect of viewing an empty city as the bells ring and the fireworks ignite is not likely to garner many viewers. The sight of city streets filled with well-behaved revellers integrated across international divides and clearly enjoying a 'good-time' portrays the global city image that Edinburgh wishes to have. Not only is this the equivalent of countless marketing and public relations expenditure that would be politically difficult to sustain in the public sector but also it provides a site for hedonistic pleasure once a year for the citizens – and their compliance is vital to the continued success of the occasion. Moreover, the event confidently asserts Edinburgh as the home of the Hogmanay festival which is now global in its penetration and observance, and brands it alongside other global cities regularly featured on British television at this time – Sydney, Beijing, Moscow, Paris and New York. It appears to steal a march on London, still wrestling with forms of behaviour and policing that Edinburgh has left behind by adding the element of tourist visitation (whether apparent or real or both) to the social mix of the crowd and, thus, developed the expectations of diplomatic behaviour for both the cameras and for the guests. No longer is Hogmanay a local celebration encompassing forms of sexism, racism and 'rough' practices and pastimes. It has been sanitised and re-packaged for a new era where market expectations demand consumer friendliness, service sector economy values, 24/7 availability and smiling faces for transmission across the globe (Atkinson and Laurier, 1998).

The effect of this transition upon Edinburgh in particular, and Hogmanay in general, is for investigation elsewhere. It appears to democratise elements of the Hogmanay experience that were resolutely populist in their formation. However, it surely has a more hidden effect upon the homes of the citizens who have chosen not to come on to the streets for their celebrations (Hughes, 1999; Beckett, 2003).

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Edinburgh's Hogmanay in the Society of the Spectacle

Dr McPherson is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of Media, Culture and Leisure Management at Glasgow Caledonian University and her main research interests lie in the area of cultural policy. Her doctoral thesis utilised Steven Lukes' theories of power to examine the leadership and management of a local authority museum service. Other work has focused on leisure and health policy and she has also edited a book on leisure and social inclusion. She has published in the area of museum management and, most recently, has conducted research in the area of festivals and events as tools of public policy.

¹ Please see the URLs listed in the references to this paper for further background information on Hogmanay.