

Reading Log #7

The two articles in discussion this week focus on the charivari tradition in early Canada. This practice is no longer seen today in the public eye and over the years has changed meaning in its practices. The majority of charivari in Canada took place in the nineteenth century, and had different views before and after the Lower Canadian Rebellion of 1837¹. From examining the articles by Allan Greer and Susanna Moodie, readers can grasp a general understanding of what the charivari was and what it meant before and after 1837.

The charivari custom originated from the French and was widely used in Lower Canada throughout the nineteenth century². The charivari was “[o]riginally an aggressive ritual directed against marital deviants” but later became a more political movement³. The charivari ritual generally consisted of members wearing masks and costumes, and loudly protesting (often threatening) outside the targeted person’s doorstep at night⁴. This was a practice that dated all the way back to the Middle Ages of the French⁵. The description of this event may sound similar to that of an angry mob, however charivaris “were fairly organized demonstrations, carefully prepared in advance”⁶. The earlier charivaris in Canada didn’t stop until a determined sum of money was paid whereas the later charivaris typically requested the resignation of the individual⁷. Depending on the willingness to comply of the targeted individual(s), the charivari could last many weeks or even a month⁸. It is also important to note that participants ranged from any age

¹ Allan Greer, “From Folklore to Revolution: Charivaris and the Lower Canadian Rebellion of 1837”, *Social History* 15, no. 1 (1990), 25-26.

² Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush, or, Life in Canada* (Montreal: Dawson, 1871), 248.

³ Allan Greer, “From Folklore to Revolution”, 25.

⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid*, 33.

⁷ *Ibid*, 30, 35.

⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

to any gender, though the men “appropriated the starring roles”⁹. Now let’s take a closer look at charivaris pre-1837, and later post-1837.

Before the rebellion of 1837, “the French of Canada always directed charivaris at newly married couples only”¹⁰. In all cases of charivaris following a wedding, it was always due to a “mismatch” of the couple, meaning there could be a “steep age difference” between the pair, large wealth difference, or perhaps one or both of the partners have been previously married¹¹. These disparities within a couple were not “objectionable in themselves, but they did alert vigilant clergymen to the possibility of sinful motives” such as a monetary gain or sexual intentions¹². Originally the charivari in Renaissance France was important to “regulate the local supply of brides”¹³, whereas charivaris in Canada that focused on marriages were based on “the purity of their intentions”¹⁴. The loud and obnoxious demonstrations harrassed the couple until they paid the charivari, and the couple was “punished through both humiliation and monetary extraction”¹⁵. This was known as the “charvari fine”¹⁶ and the “proceeds of a charivari were normally divided fifty-fifty”¹⁷. Half of the money would go to “an organized charity or distributed directly to the local poor”, and the other half was given to the participants of the charivari and paid for their drinks at the tavern¹⁸. Another important concept of the charivari pre-1837 is that the demonstrations were not violent and that “[r]eal violence occurred only when the crowd came under actual attack”¹⁹. However, this changes over time with the introduction of the political charivaris, after the rebellion of 1837.

⁹ Allan Greer, “From Folklore to Revolution”, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 27.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

The charivari demonstrations after 1837 were primarily “used to destroy elements of the existing state structure and even to prefigure a new regime”²⁰. Unlike the marital charivaris, the political charivaris consisted of two phases²¹. The first phase (August to mid-October 1837) “seems to have been rather more spontaneous and popular in origin” and the second phase (late October to early November 1837) the “charivaris were used for more clearly strategic purposes”²². The political charivaris originated from the want of “colonial autonomy” from many of the “middle-class radicals of the ‘Patriot party’”²³. At this time in Montreal, a charivari was the favoured way to force resignation of office-holders and “[a]nyone who continued to hold office was subject to attack”²⁴. The word attack does work for this kind of demonstration, as the political charivaris were more violent than the previous marital charivaris. For example, “[b]arns were burned, and men were stripped, beaten and thrown in the river”, and it didn’t take long for a seemingly “normal” charivari to turn violent²⁵. Charivaris also took special liking to the action of cutting down maypoles that stood in the yards of captains, and this held a very symbolic meaning to the collapsing of the captain’s power²⁶. Charivaris at this time held great power when it came to making changes in the political structure of the colony. This had a great significance in the beginning of the creation of an autonomous country years down the road.

Since the charivari was a tradition at the time with the French of Canada, there was little to no action depicted in the articles that was taken against them, allowing the marital and political charivaris to continue for some time. This makes me wonder what other impacts the charivari could have made if they directed their demonstrations at other concerns. The charivaris held great power due to their threatening nature, especially the later political

²⁰ Allan Greer, “From Folklore to Revolution”, 26.

²¹ *Ibid*, 35.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 37.

charivaris. I also find it interesting that this was allowed for as long as it was, considering in some cases depicted, the violence of either the charivari or the targets ended in death. Over the course of its term, the charivari customs changed according to what was happening in the country and were specific to how many of the residents were feeling. It's interesting to see that the earlier demonstrations were able to maintain order (in most cases), regardless of how many demonstrators there were. As I have never even heard the word charivari before these articles, this helps to show that there were many different aspects of Canadian life that led to the shaping of the country today, and many people may not even know about a majority of them.