Notes and Comments

'Bunning': A Contemporary Office Custom

The city of Edinburgh has enjoyed a long association with financial enterprises of one kind or another. Of particular significance is the insurance and life assurance industry, which today employs a substantial proportion of the city's workforce. The success of the industry is apparent to any Edinburgh resident, who will most likely be familiar with at least some of the insurance and life assurance head offices located either in St Andrew Square and its environs, or in newer buildings in less central areas. It seems that earlier generations of Edinburgh people would also have been aware of various forms of insurance operating within the city. In the medieval burgh, for example, burial guilds and mutual insurance societies seem to have played an important role within the merchant and artisan clases, and we know that by the eighteenth century commercial companies were to be found specialising in fire insurance.[1] It was not, however, until the second half of the nineteenth century that commercial life assurance, which now dominates the insurance scene and contributes so much to the city's economy, came to prominence with the dropping of premium costs to within the reach of the ordinary citizen. By the twentieth century insurance had become something that directly touched most people's lives.

Clearly then, Edinburgh's insurance and life assurance offices are of great potential interest to the economic historian. But their significance does not end there, as such offices also provide fine hunting grounds for the ethnologist. Even a preliminary investigation of these workplaces, such as the author conducted in four companies, reveals a wealth of vital, contemporary folklore, the exact nature of which varies from office to office and indeed varies from division to division within one office. Most head offices contain a large and generally young workforce, with roughly equal numbers of men and women (at the non-managerial level at least) who are usually highly educated and fairly frequently understimulated by their work. In such conditions it is only natural that a large corpus of folklore should come into existence and be maintained.

It is amongst one's peers in the employment hierarchy that most transmission of folklore seems to occur in these offices. Senior management tend to keep themselves apart from the rest of the workforce, especially in social and informal terms and indeed could be said to form their own occupational community. The same applies to groups of workers such as catering and messenger staff. The clerical workers and their immediate supervisors, who comprise the majority of the

workforce and who are the focus of this brief study, interact continuously with each other, both at the formal and informal level. Because some offices have over three thousand employees, two-thirds of whom fit into the clerical or supervisory category, one tends to find that it is a smaller group than the body of clerical workers as a whole which is of more significance for the individual in terms of social interaction and the transmission of folklore. This group can be defined as one's immediate colleagues (usually between five and ten individuals), those one trained with (who may not be in the same part of the office as oneself), and those one knows from sports and other social events. Rarely does this group exceed thirty members in total.

The significance of such a group can be easily seen by looking at the example of one frequently found office custom. A whole range of customs is of course to be found in insurance and life assurance offices, including customs associated with the decoration of workspace, with recreation, with dress, calendar customs and customs associated with the individual's rites of passage, but it is the custom of giving gifts to colleagues to mark rites of passage in one's own life which we will look at here. Usually those involved in this custom do not refer to it by any special title, but some informants from Scottish Widows Fund and Life Assurance Society, Dalkeith Road, have named it 'bunning'. As the Widows' title indicates, it is often the case that those celebrating a birthday, or the announcement of an engagement or wedding, or celebrating the birth of a child, have to buy cakes or 'buns' for their colleagues to eat at work, usually their immediate co-workers and sometimes other members of the group at a local pub either after work or at lunchtime. In this case the individual who is celebrating will put out a message via computer mail inviting colleagues to come to a certain pub at a certain time. For birthdays the invitation is generally given only to group members, but for weddings and engagements the invitation is wider, often being addressed to all those working in the same department as the individual, or even the whole office. However, it is usually just the members of the group who turn up, which is frequently a matter of considerable relief to the person paying for the drinks.

One does of course receive as well as give at rites of passage. The computer is again used, this time by a close friend of the individual, to distribute a message to all or part of the office asking for contributions to a collection, out of which may be bought a card or present or both (presents are always given on eighteenth and twenty-first birthdays, and also at the announcement of weddings). Another friend will be responsible for collecting the money, and a third will choose and buy the gift. Usually it is only members of the group who will respond to such a message, but it is considered impolite not to ask others.

Here then we have an example of modern insurance and life assurance office custom. The author would be interested to know if equivalents of 'bunning' are, or were, to be found in other types of office, or indeed in other types of workplace. If

you have any information on this topic please write to Susan Storrier, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 27 George Square, Edinburgh.

NOTES

1 See G. Clayton, *British Insurance*, London, 1971.

SUSAN STORRIER

Brose an Bannock Day

The following information was recorded by Margaret Bennett on 5 May 1985 at Ardvaser, Skye (School of Scottish Studies Archive, SA 1985/41), from Gladys and Charles Simpson, Keith, Banffshire. It was transcribed by the late Bill Salton.

G.S.: I had never even heard of Shrove Tuesday when I was a child, it was just always Brose and Bannock Day we called it. But my mother called it Fastern E'en, I think. We had brose made with what I thought was the water the turnips had been boiled in. But I think there may also have been beef boiled in it, you know, too, because I have a further recollection of the grown-ups having beef with their potato and turnip later, whereas we had the brose and then turnip and potato and then the bannocks. But I have that recollection that the grown-ups might have had beef with the potato and turnip.

M.B.: Now, at what time of the day would you have the brose?

G.S.: The middle of the day . . . Dinner-time was the middle of the day. Sometimes we had the bannocks at dinner-time and sometimes the bannocks at tea-time. But the bannocks would be special bannocks. You know, not like the usual pancakes. They would have spices in them and be big. The whole size of the girdle. And we would get them on a plate with syrup.

M.B.: Was it a batter rather than a dough?

G.S.: Oh yes! A batter like a pancake batter, but I suppose very similar to a pancake batter but with spices mixed in.

M.B.: Did she put eggs in it?

G.S.: Oh yes! Yes! Flour, eggs, sugar. Well, I would say if she had about half a pound of flour she would have two eggs maybe. And milk, you know. We just put the whole thing on a plate. We got one each.