

On Common Ground 3: John Playford and the English Dancing Master, 1651

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INTRODUCTION

For those who do not know me let me start by introducing myself and outlining what I do here at the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS). I manage a Dance in Education project that is in its fifth year. My official title is Teacher Training Manager and that is my prime purpose in life, to train teachers, and student teachers, to provide traditional dance classes to their charges. And to do this, in as creative and enjoyable way as possible, so that no one is 'put off for life' as some pupils undoubtedly are. I organise workshops around the country and so that those attending workshops have supporting documentation I publish dance manuals and recorded music, with part funding from Sport England, so that teachers are able to be independent. I also get involved with projects organised by Sport England and the Central Council of Physical Recreation and see my role as an information provider for those folk animateurs and leaders who work independently many of them working on behalf of the Society. I have this faith that the traditional material we are dealing with is so robust that given even half a chance it will prove an invaluable educational aid even if it is handled shall we say with less respect than it deserves.

My subject is traditional dance, as you would expect at such a conference, more specifically the historical development of traditional dance through the twentieth century and purely in an English educational setting. I am indebted to Derek Schofield for providing in his paper much background knowledge of the EFDSS so I hope to be able to take some short cuts because of his work.

Why the title? The first part of the title refers to an unflattering and unwanted image inherited from the early twentieth century, of women dance teachers wearing gym clothes and plimsolls. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century this old memory haunts our consciousness and keeps traditional dance unnecessarily linked with physical education lessons. If we are to successfully pass on traditional dance, to a new generation, and encourage young leaders then somehow in the parlance of this century we have to imbue it with some 'street cred', hence the title. However,

- because we need music to dance, sometimes my discussion revolves around music
- because as a society we are a multicultural nation, I also need to draw on educational practices that struggled with this idea of multiculturalism
- because so much of the educational story is indelibly stained with the sweat of PE teaching, I can only look at the structures, language usage and outcomes of Educational Acts and particularly the PE Curriculum
- but, the subject is always the dance
- and traditional dance in English primary schools is alive and well in all its varied forms.

MAYPOLE DANCING AND RUSKIN

Alongside the educational development of morris dance and country dance is a form of traditional dance that would appear to owe very little, until recently, to the work of Cecil Sharp and the English Folk Dance and Song Society. It has developed in parallel to, and alongside, the forms of traditional dance encouraged by the Society but both forms of dance have benefited from their parallel development.

The spread of Maypole Dancing in British schools (and possibly to other parts of the world) could be said to stem from an influential man's abhorrence of examinations. John Ruskin wrote;

'healthy working will depend on the total exclusion of all competition in any form or disguiseit is effort that deserves praise..... By competition he may paralyse or prevent his faculties.' Works, XXIX, 496 *Fors Claviger, Letter 95.*¹ (Personally I am suspicious of a nation that has taken this creed to heart and produces characters like Eddie the Eagle who enters international skiing championships, consistently falls off his skis, comes consistently close to last, yet is feted and lauded in the media as a trier! While real achievement sometimes seems to create a sense of embarrassment and unhealthy envy. But this is my personal prejudice.) It needs to be said that neither of the two important characters at the hub of this story subscribed to the Victorian idea that if you crammed female brains with too much information they would burst; it being believed at this period in time that females had smaller brains than men of course!

Whitelands College was established in 1841, by the Church of England, with the avowed aim of producing *'a superior type of parochial schoolmistress'*². Add to this mixing bowl the very forward thinking principal, the Rev. John Faunthorpe MA FRGS, who treated his female students as if they were male (by teaching them the same subjects as men) and actually set about 'training' teachers and changing attitudes which was almost revolutionary, then mix in a visionary with a mission, like John Ruskin, and you have a powerful recipe, which changed the lives of the students and gave a very special ethos to this still flourishing college.

The friendship between Ruskin and Faunthorpe resulted in a shower of gifts from Ruskin, for the use of students, of rare and beautiful books for the library, a first edition of Dr Johnson's great dictionary for the junior common room, (to help spelling studies and an understanding of the meaning and history behind vocabulary and language), copies of sixty works of art by the likes of Richter, Durer and Turner being displayed in special frames. And later Ruskin was responsible for William Morris and Edward Bourne-Jones contributing to the interior decoration and stained glass windows in the newly built chapel. Faunthorpe raised academic standards to the extent that Whitelands' students outdid all other teachers in exam results and this, together with Ruskin's support, gave the newly qualified teachers confidence in their being a special generation. If the college historian is to be believed most of those who qualified were immediately appointed to headships where it is assumed they had the power to import new forms of education.

In all, the students were given a practical demonstration of how the idea of beauty and pleasure from beauty can improve a life, bring one closer to God and a spiritual understanding of our world. From frequent sermons and genuine encouragement Whitelands' students understood they were to develop their own nobility, apply themselves to education and share what they learnt with others. Ruskin also believed that no amount of cramming could create a truly noble character and to be great you had to be self-motivated and learn because you enjoyed learning. Ruskin was an idealist with Christian beliefs mixed with Greek philosophy and used myths as 'coat hangers' to put across his views. At Whitelands the myths were concerned with St Ursula who was practical and championed female education and Persephone who personified Spring and the celebration of new growth.

The physical expression of all this theory was the college's May Queen Festival fostered by Ruskin. A Spring festival that involved much pageantry, beautiful hand crafted gowns³, an unselfish and community minded student being chosen as Queen, given very public praise for such qualities and material gifts of gold jewellery and books being handed out. All the principal had asked for was a prize for the best student who came top in botany in the three-hour exams held on Saturday mornings. He actually got a lot more than he bargained for. The Maypole dancing began sometime in the 1890s but like others before me I have been unable to find in the archives the exact date it began. However, from the photographs stored at Whitelands there is much

evidence to show that throughout the early twentieth century girls at the college were also taught, sword and morris dance as well as Maypole.

Although no statistical data is available it is obvious to me in my position, as Teacher Training Manager here at EFDSS, that the students at Whitelands took their myth of Spring and ideas of the importance of beauty, entwined with Ruskin's philosophical teachings to places firstly across England and later further afield to Scotland, Ireland and Wales and eventually the Commonwealth countries from which later students came. It is ironic that Maypole dancing with ribbons, as developed at the end of the Victorian period is now seen as so quintessentially English when actually it is an imported tradition from the continent and quite unlike the indigenous tradition. Old English Maypoles were often well over a hundred feet tall, did not have ribbons and although records exist of morris dancers dancing at the foot of maypoles we have no knowledge of exactly what was danced or how it was danced.

As an historian I guessed correctly that in a millennium year there would be increased interest in Maypole dancing, and with help from another practicing teacher, I wrote a training resource book and had an appropriate CD recorded. To date we have sold over 600 sets of these books and music resources, in under two years. Maypole dancing is alive and well in many schools but particularly in church schools because they value the social and team skills that are absorbed through the activity of dancing round a maypole. Such an activity is primarily for performance; it is not competitive. It is used to show off students' skills to their families thus increasing their self-confidence and possibly their status. It increases social cohesion and is an excuse for having fun as a community. It has survived because in a school community it has a real function.

The major point for the Society is that until this Dance in Education project was begun there was an unspoken prejudice that Maypole dancing with ribbons was not traditionally English and therefore was not something the Society should be involved in or encourage. This was a short sighted cultural prejudice because more often than not schools and communities that interest themselves in maypole dance traditions almost always, in my experience, do other forms of dance such as morris or molly or social dancing as well as maypole. Skills learnt in one form of dance are fully transferable and the social, physical, and emotional benefits gained from each dance form is the same. My response to detractors is that if something has been thriving for over a century and provides the same benefits to a community as a traditional form of activity are we not entitled, after such a long time, to call it traditional? I suspect again that detractors who castigate Sharp for high jacking older traditions will now resent my 'interference' in this sphere and criticism will justly say that the economic motive was a strong influence. In my defence I would just like to point out that, with the help of the resources we produced, hundreds of teachers and thousands of children have had a great deal of fun learning necessary skills as functioning human beings and many a partisan audience has watched with bated breath as a beloved offspring has plaited their ribbons to the traditional music they might never otherwise have heard.

INHERITANCE – EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

This part of my discussion is primarily about Music, in the second half of the twentieth century, specifically as an aide to achieving multiculturalism, and its ramifications for my work. Although the focus of the paper is on dance, because the 'dance sits on the music' I think this is a relevant digression when discussing dance in education.

In the first half of the twentieth century successive governments had agendas other than multiculturalism. After both world wars traditional dance was encouraged in schools as part of Physical Education and there was government support on each occasion for Sharp and EFDSS staff. During the First World War like many others Sharp lost friends who had supported him in

his early work and this possibly affected the overall progress and development of the movement. However, from 1919 to 1924 both Sharp and Helen Kennedy were appointed occasional inspectors in training colleges and schools.⁴ After the Second World War financial help was forthcoming from what later became the Arts Council and Sharp's successor, Douglas Kennedy, was allowed to try out new methods of teaching in Emergency Training Colleges. Direct Government support was important in the after war years even helping with the refurbishment of Cecil Sharp House after bomb damage. With the influx of workers to England, from the Commonwealth, and refugees from oppressive regimes the government began to look at new ways of developing multicultural educational. At the same time the Society was expanding its repertoire to include American square dance and because of this was attracting many new members.

As the second half of the twentieth century rolled on successive governments needed different educational ploys. In 1966 Roy Jenkins, then Home Secretary, introduced the notion of 'Cultural Pluralism' 'cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.⁵ This took a long time to develop. Some teachers labelled this the '3S' version of education i.e. Saris, Samosas and Steel Bands and probably the major criticism of this was that it encouraged tokenism. By the early 1970s the idea of 'Cultural Deprivation'⁶ coloured educational thinking. This was characterised by the notion that a child was disadvantaged if not able to speak Standard English and this spilled over or transferred to the art, music and dance of other cultures. Western high art forms were seen as the pinnacle of achievement, like Standard English, and traditional art forms, like dialects, were perceived as being of less value therefore causing deprivation, if that was all you had experienced.

By the late 1970s the Department for Education and Science acknowledged 'Multiculturalism' and that the curriculum should reflect this new awareness. The government also acknowledged the under achievement of ethnic minority pupils and the Rampton Committee was formed. Also, by the late 1970s and early '80s racism was acknowledged in our society. Local Education Authorities asked schools to actively declare policy statements that reflected this awareness and to publicly state how the school was going to tackle racism. This was called anti racism.

In the Early 1980s there were four major reports concerning racial issues and there were disturbances in areas with large ethnic minorities. Following this it was suggested that 'pluralism becomes acceptable'⁷ and that education has a vital role in helping to combat racism. In practice the use of multicultural materials were probably restricted to multiethnic schools and certain subjects like music, and probably the best outcome was that in this area white pupils attitudes to other cultures was changed for the good. But, there were real gains for music teachers, who acquired extra resources and as a result all pupils experience of music was enhanced. From my own personal experience working here at the Society, there have been interesting outcomes to anti racism policies. I have received a number of telephone calls from school teachers who say their schools have had experience of Chinese, Japanese, Bangladeshi, and a other cultures music and dance but they have now started to wonder if we have any English cultural traditions of our own and how can they access them. If I were a pessimist I might be disheartened at this lack of knowledge but if I were an optimist, as I am, I would say at least the experience of the past is prompting the teachers to ask this important question!

By 1993 the Runnymede Trust was producing writings on good educational examples of how to combat racism. The advice was that this must be achieved in a whole school framework. The conclusion seems to be that music and dance can aid intercultural awareness. Specific examples from other countries trying out policies to deliberately integrate traditional music into the school curriculum indicated that pupils must not only be passive listeners and watchers but, must be practically involved in their music and dance traditions to gain maximum benefit. Most im-

portantly integration of traditional art forms into a curriculum can be seen to aid the practical integration of diverse cultural groups.⁸

With all this educational history it was therefore important that any dance products, produced for sale by the English Folk Dance and Song Society, at the end of the twentieth century, should reflect the multicultural nation we have become. And this is what I did with the first resource that was published for the Dance in Education project. Although all the dance items in this resource have been absorbed into the English repertoire during the twentieth century they originated from such diverse places as Scotland, South Africa, America, France and Ireland and are useful both as an introduction to English traditional dance styles but also for teachers in a multicultural setting.

INHERITANCE – THE PEOPLE

Now I want to come back to the Society and look at what I inherited when I began this job. The two practitioners who dominated the first half of the twentieth century were undoubtedly Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal. Even years after their deaths energetic disciples continued their influence. There are even echoes today in the distinct ideas about how to teach and what to teach when considering traditional dance. The subject of their much publicised disagreement was specifically about the Morris but there were underlying factors about politics, class and gender that have echoed down the century and may still be reverberating in the traditional dance world.

Sharp was a pragmatic man. He realised that if he was to proselytise and spread the word he needed more teachers but political and class issues were evident in his final choices. In 1907 he was happy working with Mary Neal and in the first edition of ‘The Morris Book’⁹ he gave credit to Neal and her Esperance Club seamstresses, especially the help they gave him in working out the notation of the morris. However, all reference to her and the Esperance girls was omitted from the second edition in 1912.¹⁰

It is interesting to note here that Sharp was unhappy with the Suffragette Movement. Rev. Charles Marson noted that Sharp ‘abhors Girton and Newnham’ (i.e. the women’s colleges at Cambridge, his old alma mater) and the ‘mental loudness of girls’.¹¹ Now, Mary Neal sympathised with the suffrage movement. Her teaching of the working class girls who initially helped Sharp was indicative of her attitudes in helping to educate working class women. Her teachers were drawn from these working class girls. Although Mary herself was not overtly militant her co founder of the Esperance Club was most intimately involved with the Pankhursts, and Esperance girls gave dance displays at suffragette events. Even Sharp’s sister Evelyn Sharp was a militant. She was sentenced to a short stay in Holloway prison for breaking a window at the War Office. She actually came out of prison a few days before Sharp founded the English Folk Dance and Society so the breach between Neal and Sharp would have been fuelled, by their being in opposite camps politically.

Even when the board of Education recognised the importance of the morris dance and Sharp was asked to teach the students at Chelsea Physical Training College it was again women he had to rely on to become his main teachers. But these women were middle class and behaved accordingly. They were not working class seamstresses. It is perhaps interesting to note here that Sharp was actually appointed by Vaughan Williams’ brother in law who was in an important government position. Although Sharp professed to have socialist tendencies, in practice he behaved in a more conservative way and, consistent with the period, he behaved in a most patriarchal fashion.

Another aspect of the breach with Mary Neal revolved about whether or not she was teaching ‘pure’ tradition. It would seem that Sharp had made an earlier mistake about a ‘fake’ tradition, which had been created by a Victorian entrepreneur called D’Arcy Ferris (Ferris used three different spellings of his last name during his lifetime – each one intended to impress more than

the last). This mistake was to colour Sharp's perceptions and make him perhaps defensive as to how one should transmit traditions. Roy Judge considers this one mistake in judgement turned Sharp into a 'purist'. Sharp thought Neal was not purist enough, although they had both learnt first hand from the old tradition bearers like William Kimber. The difference seems to have been that Mary allowed the folk process to adapt and change the traditions as was needed by the dancers she worked with. Scholars today would I think approve of Mary, as it is acknowledged that, to survive, all cultural traditions must be relevant to a contemporary community. It was also the difference between emphasising the fun to attract disciples and then teaching them style and technique which was Neal's way as opposed to going for the style and technique right from the beginning and hoping that the fun would grow as knowledge was gained, Sharp's way! Experiencing traditional dance teaching methods at this end of the century and very much from a personal point of view I find that when encouraging children Neal's way is far more successful.

It's sobering to notice, in the written accounts, that the press inflamed the well-publicised breach between them (does nothing ever change?) and that although they disagreed on policy they still met on committees and behaved in a civilised manner when face-to-face. I was most surprised to discover while I saw myself as following in Sharp's footsteps that while reading for this presentation that probably what I advocate today is closer to Mary Neal's ideals than it is to Sharp's. I wonder if my working class background and being a woman has anything to do with that? Or perhaps it is just the changing times. When I was a child we were expected to concentrate for longer periods of time and not to complain about hard work. My pragmatism, unlike Sharp's suggests that when dealing with modern children, who live in a fast food / instant and throw-away culture I want to hook their interest first before I start looking at dance technique. Like Mary I am using dance as an educational resource to enhance the life of an individual in a school community. I am trying to create interest in cultural traditions not teach cultural traditions for their own sake. However, before I am castigated by anyone – I am very clear about being as accurate as possible and rarely, if ever, do I deliberately change traditions. It is more about making judicious choices about what to teach while at the same time stretching the dancers.

The point is that Sharp's ideas on purity were seen as accuracy by friends and called pedantry by enemies. These two opposing strategies at this time in history are still both well entrenched in the membership of the Society and the styles of teaching. Kennedy's appointment as Sharp's successor also illustrates much about attitudes to women and gender issues. Remember what Victorians thought about women's mental capacities. Today I would like to think that it is much more likely that Kennedy's sister in law Maud Karpeles would have been appointed and not Kennedy. She worked much more closely with Sharp as one of his original teachers from Chelsea College. She travelled with him and was also an occasional inspector in training colleges, which Kennedy was not. As Georgina Boyes, in her acerbic style, points out his 'involvement had been limited to 'weekend' dance.¹² He was by all accounts a brilliant teacher, but he was also responsible for driving women away from the Society in droves, when he dictated only mixed couples could dance together but that's another story.

It is rather a shame that for a large part of the Society's history, particularly in the field of teaching and education, it is women who have sustained the effort and enhanced the work of the Society, as well as supported their male colleagues, yet in terms of history and recognition they have largely been ignored and treated in rather patriarchal ways. It is only now that the balance is perhaps being somewhat redressed with women collectors at last being given the recognition they deserve. I do so hope that National Councils in the future will be more inclusive in their attitudes towards the many women who continue to work for the Society with very little recognition. Patriarchal patterns of behaviour in a Society dealing with traditions still die hard.

CONCLUSIONS

I try at all times to remember that we are dealing with a living tradition, that change occurs naturally and can be for good or bad. Whatever the academics think, if a dancing community decides to opt for a style or a version that we don't like that is their choice. I agree whole heartedly with Sharp when he said, 'It is ... of paramount importance that the dances should be translated into the schools as accurately as possible in their native and traditional forms'¹³. But whether he actually did this is another matter. Kennedy does say that Sharp 'modified and adapted his material for use in primary schools thereby reducing its value to grown-ups.'¹⁴ My own experience would suggest that much has to be modified for the young such as triple minors being changed into three couple set dances but as long as the archives are there it is up to the individual skill of the teacher to present material suitable for the practitioners, whatever their age or physical ability.

Since working here as the Teacher Training Manager I have developed an absolute belief that traditional dances, the music and songs have an inherent flexibility that cannot be damaged even if mishandled. The material itself will survive because whatever you do with it there will be a level of joy, pleasure and enhancement in some way for the participants. I am also acutely aware, as Douglas Kennedy pointed out, that 'the text book usurped, almost immediately, authority over local traditional practice'¹⁵. I go to great pains to tell anyone attending courses, or using the books I write, that it is important for them to remember that the printed word is frozen in time and that things change over time – no one way is the right way. There are collected versions and living versions subject to change and without prior notice. This is why I am so very glad we have the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, an important archive, to refer to when we perhaps get confused about origins and development.

Since preparing this paper I have become even more acutely aware of continuity. I think that what I do incorporates a greater awareness and sensitivity towards both the material and the tradition bearers than in previous years but only history will tell. I have tried to formulate a more multicultural response, drawing parallels with traditions from the English speaking world, and particularly using material that is common to other parts of the British Isles, America and Europe. I see my role as providing Curriculum Support for beleaguered teachers, initially as a response to the National Curriculum but going beyond that in disseminating information to anyone who requires it. It is clear to me that the most important input to any folk activity is usually from charismatic enthusiasts who are excellent role models for young people. The immediate example that comes to mind is Liza Austin-Strange who leads the all dancing and playing of Fosbrooks from Manchester and who was justifiably awarded an MBE earlier this year for her services to traditional music. It is also important to work with other agencies like Folk South West and Folkworks, which is why the Folk Arts Network should be encouraged, especially as a national pressure group.

Traditional dance, at the beginning of yet another century, in all its varied forms is alive and well in English primary schools. Some of it specifically fostered by the EFDSS and some of it existing purely because it is such good educational material. 'Street Cred' is no problem up to the age of about ten years, depending on the town or rural status of the school. What is a worry is the problem of sustaining the traditional arts into secondary education but current plans at EFDSS, primarily to do with music, might be a way to encourage more teachers to use traditional music in schools. Meanwhile the current social, moral, spiritual and cultural curriculum in England suggests that all children at primary level should have the opportunity to perform traditional dance as this helps them to understand their cultural identity, so it is up to us to help teachers do just that.

NOTES

1. Cole, M. *Be Like Daisies, John Ruskin and the Cultivation of Beauty at Whitelands College*. The Ruskin Lecture 1992. Published for The Guild of St George by Bentham Press, p 20
2. *Ibid.* p 3
3. The very first gown, created by Kate Greenaway, together with most of the costumes worn by successive Queens, and now Kings, are kept in the college archives.
4. Kennedy, D. *English Folk Dancing Today and Yesterday*. London: G Bell and Sons Ltd, 1964, p 20
5. Floyd, M. (editor) *World Musics in Education*. Scholar Press, 1996, p 10
6. *Ibid* p 10
7. *Ibid* p 12. From Lynch. J. *Multicultural Education – Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986
8. Promoting Traditional Music: The Kenyan Decision. In: *World Musics in Education*, pp186–205
9. Sharp, C.J.; Macilwaine, H.C. *The Morris Book*. London: Novello and Company Ltd., 1907
10. *Ibid.* but 1912 edition.
11. Fox Strangways, A.H. (in collaboration with Karpeles, M.) *Cecil Sharp*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933. p 12
12. Boyes, G. *The Imagined Village. Culture, ideology and the English Folk Revival*. Manchester University Press, 1993. p 177
13. Sharp, C.J. *The Country Dance Book Part I*. London: Novello and Company Ltd, p 14
14. Kennedy, D. *English Folk Dancing Today and Yesterday*. London: G Bell and Sons Ltd, 1964, p 24
15. *Ibid.* p 108

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