

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

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### **PLAYFORD IN AMERICA – 3<sup>RD</sup> FIGURE**

Gene Murrow

Board of Directors, *Country Dance and Song Society*

While thinking about the relationship between Playford's work and American culture over the last 350 years, I found it useful to distinguish three historical periods. Of course, many first edition Playford dances have three figures, thus the conceit of the title of this paper, which will focus on the third "figure," the role of Playford's work in America today. First, a quick "walk-through" of the first two...

#### **FIRST FIGURE – "KEEPING UP" IN COLONIAL AMERICA**

Wealthy and socially ambitious residents of the American colonies, whether visiting from abroad or settling permanently in the New World, actively maintained or developed their dancing skills as an emblem of their status. In this, as in nearly all matters of fashion, they followed the lead of British and European cultivated society.

The dance most frequently mentioned in contemporary 18<sup>th</sup>-Century American sources (letters, diaries, journals, memoirs) is the longways English country dance, the cultivated urban dance published by Playford and his followers, and in booklets in America. These publications, whose significance for the transformation of culture is detailed in J.H. Plumb's 1973 study, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century-England*<sup>1</sup>, made it possible for dancing masters and motivated individuals to keep up with dance fashion, despite their distance from England and their separation from the Royal court and society. Interested readers should obtain Kitty Keller's *If the Company Can Do It!*<sup>2</sup> for a detailed description of cultured dance in Colonial America and a thorough bibliography.

Simultaneously, the cultivated dance that was the 18<sup>th</sup>-century-English longways was adopted and transformed into "contra dancing" in rural New England, a form that remains vital to this day, while in the ballrooms of society, the country dance was eclipsed by the cotillions, quadrilles, and couple dances (including the waltz) popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

#### **SECOND FIGURE – "SIDING WITH HISTORY" IN THE REVIVAL**

Cecil Sharp, the leader of the folk revival in England, visited New York City in 1915 to consult with Granville Barker on a production of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. On that visit, according to his diary entries, he taught some Playford dances, including *Hey Boys* and *Newcastle*. He visited three more times between 1916 and 1918. Prior to his first visit, Mary Neal had taught the Morris to over 400 New Yorkers, according to an article in the *New York Times*.<sup>3</sup> The article noted that her agenda was to introduce "innocent pleasures" as an alternative to "the other kind."

These visits established the English folk revival in America. The American branch of the English Folk Dance Society was founded in 1915 following a meeting between Sharp and Boston philanthropist Mrs. Helen Storrow. Centers with regular schedules of dancing were founded in Boston, New York, and Pittsburgh. Summer training programs were held in Maine and Amherst, Massachusetts, with Mr. Sharp and his associates. Two members of his demonstration team, May Gadd and Lily Roberts, immigrated to America to lead the re-

vival, and in 1935 annual national summer training programs began at Pinewoods Camp, Mrs. Storrow's summer home (originally called "Pinetree"). Sharp's travels in Appalachia to collect songs and the "running set" dance eventually led to the establishment in 1939 of the annual Christmas Country Dance school at Berea College in Kentucky.

Americans danced the Sharp/EFDSS repertoire of English country dances as the English revivalists did, using a fast, light, and vigorous style and running step for most of the historical dances, with the rant, double step, step-hop, and polka for the traditional dances. At that time, and through the 1960's, when I began my involvement, Sharp's prevailing view of the revival – restoring the "gay simplicity" of pure English culture as our Anglo-American heritage, with its connection to "merrie olde England" – was attractive to many Americans. Revival English country dancing flourished.

### **THIRD FIGURE – "EMBRACING" PLAYFORD FOR OURSELVES**

In 1974, Pat Shaw was invited to teach at Pinewoods Camp. Though part of the EFDSS establishment, he promulgated "another look" at Playford and wrote many new dances and tunes. The effect of his prodigious talent, strong presence, and point of view was, in effect, to give us all permission to make this material our own. English country dancing is now a central activity in the lives of thousands of Americans.

#### **Scope of Activity**

The Country Dance and Song Society ("CDSS") has 240 group affiliates devoted to American and English dance located across the country, of which fifty-four (or just less than 25%) offer regular English dancing. Readers are encouraged to visit the CDSS web site at: [www.cdss.org](http://www.cdss.org). Each issue of the *Newsletter*, published six times per year, includes newly composed or reconstructed dances, of which about one-third to one-half currently are English. Of the sales stock maintained by the CDSS, 40% is English dance material.

Many group affiliates offer full-day and residential weekend workshops; the largest ones attract a regional and national crowd. About eighteen Playford Balls are held annually, sponsored by various affiliates. These feature a pre-announced program of dances usually held from 8:00 to midnight. Often there are weekly preparatory sessions and a run-through on the afternoon of the dance. Dress is "formal" or "period" and highly accomplished bands provide the music.

Many large folk festivals now include English dance, including the long-running NEFFA (New England Folk Festival Association), Philadelphia, and Falcon Ridge (New York) Folk Festivals, and more recent events such as NOMAD (Northeast Music and Dance) and the "Dance Flurry" in New York State.

The CDSS program at Pinewoods Camp has grown from two "dance weeks" to six weeks that include English dancing, plus two weeks held at other camp facilities at Buffalo Gap, and Ogontz. The Bay Area Country Dance Society in California sponsors two weeks in Mendocino. The Berea Christmas School continues as it has since 1939.

A number of special events feature English country dance. The *Amherst Assembly* was a week-long workshop on the origins and evolution of the country dance, held in 1996 in conjunction with the international Amherst Early Music Festival at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Publicity surrounding the recent Jane Austen novel dramatizations has inspired similar workshops at various universities and other sites around the country. Enthusi-

ast and travel wizard Ken McFarland organizes annual trips to England specifically for English dancers. George Marshall's celebrated contradance week in the Caribbean has been expanded to a second week exclusively for English dancers.

The CDSS Board has committed to increasing the number of training workshops available to emerging leaders of English dance. These include week-long programs by Bruce Hamilton in calling skills and by Jacqueline Schwab in playing for English dancing, as well as my own course in musical literacy for callers, held regularly in conjunction with other Pinewoods Camp programs.

The embracing of the Playford tradition by Americans has created entirely new roles for the "Playford" dance: as a language for expressing American creativity and as a basis for building community. New styles of music, new tunes, and new dances are emerging regularly, while our dance communities are strengthened and invigorated by the creative process.

### **Characteristics of the Music**

Whenever possible, American groups devoted to English dance use live music. The most popular instruments are piano, violin, viola, flute, clarinet, oboe, recorders, cello or gamba, and harp. We rarely use accordion, relying instead on pianos provided by church halls and other dance spaces, or on electronic keyboards. Nearly all musicians are "classically" trained, with good technique and sight-reading skills. The emphasis is on improvisation and variety, influenced more by chamber music than by the strong folk tradition as exists in England. Among the bands devoted to English Playford-style repertoire are Boston's *Bare Necessities*, Princeton/Philadelphia's *Hold the Mustard*, New York/Connecticut/Vermont's *MGM*, and Seattle's *Tricky Brits*.

Among the most accomplished and celebrated American composers of Playford-style dance music is Jonathan Jensen, a bassist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and talented piano, recorder, mandolin, and ocarina(!) player. When asked what inspired him to embrace the Playford tradition, he wrote<sup>4</sup>:

"Whenever I become immersed in a particular kind of music, as a listener or performer, I soon find myself composing bits and pieces of music in that style. So it was with English country dance ("ECD") tunes, which I began playing regularly at dances in early 1984. I soon internalized certain basic stylistic traits of these tunes and found it rewarding and challenging to create melodies that were recognizably ECD in style, while exhibiting something of my own musical personality. When I began submitting tunes to local dance leaders to be choreographed, I found it even more rewarding to be part of a larger creative process, and to watch the fruits of our collaboration unfold on the dance floor.

I am happiest with those tunes of mine that I feel capture the spirit of traditional ECD music while introducing subtle non-traditional twists. One of my favorites is *Twenty Something*, which I think could have been written 250 years ago – except that the phrases have ten measures each, rather than the usual eight or twelve

The final work succeeds or fails on the dance floor as a marriage of music and movement."

### **Characteristics of the Dance**

The inherent appeal of the Playford-style dance derives from the intellectual challenge of the patterns, the quality of movement as reconstructed by Sharp, the beautiful music, and the historical connections. But we Americans have invested it with additional characteristics that reflect our culture (or what we'd like it to be)!

Generally speaking, Americans are more socially informal than the English. Upon first meeting, an American is more likely to use your first name, look you in the eye, or discuss personal matters. We value dance forms that maximize social interaction, and this has several consequences in the areas of programming and etiquette as well as choreography. At an English dance party, we prefer a preponderance of longways dances during which one can pay attention to the variety in the music and the interaction with others in the set, rather than focusing attention on the complexities of pattern characteristic of most set dances. As these events are an opportunity for socializing while dancing, we change partners after every dance. Indeed, in many American groups it is deemed inconsiderate to dance with the same partner more than once, even if it's your spouse! Furthermore, we are very flexible when seeking partners: not only may men ask women to dance, but women may ask men, women may ask other women, and men may ask other men. Some groups sponsor "gender neutral" dance classes and parties. Typically, one simply joins a circle of people as an individual, which then "flattens" to a longways. The person standing opposite you is your partner, regardless of gender or the side of the dance!

As for choreography, most Americans prefer "flowing" dances with figures that follow smoothly from one to the other and offer sufficient interaction with one's partner and others in the set. There is a decreasing willingness (unfortunately, in my personal view) to do rants, slipping circles, and "traditional" dances. Partly this has to do with the aging of our core of English dance enthusiasts, but it also reflects an aesthetic judgment. Some of the modern set dances with challenging patterns that are popular in England are also not usually well received in America, except perhaps in narrowly defined workshop sessions.

This focus on the social and aesthetic aspects of the English dance creates an attendant emphasis on community. The English country dance group, for many, has replaced the traditional communities of extended family, workplace, or congregation, and is the setting for celebrations of birthdays, marriages, anniversaries, and even memorial services. The recent sudden death of Mary Kay Friday, a much-loved dancer, organizer and member of the CDSS Board, was marked by a memorial service attended by 400 dancers, overwhelming family members. Other recent, large commemorative events within English dance groups celebrated the sixtieth wedding anniversary of Ed and Christine Helwig (reconstructor of a volume of Bray's dances and a volume of dances to Purcell's music), the earned doctorate of choreographer Orly Krasner, and the years of service of New York organizer Sharon Green.

Often, new dances are commissioned for such occasions. The result is an opportunity and demand for American creations. Over the last twenty-five years a number of very talented and prolific choreographers have embraced the Playford tradition to create new volumes of country dances, in the English tradition but with American sensibilities.

### **Some American Choreographers**

Friede Metz Herman is our most prolific choreographer, with seven published books and an eighth on the way. Originally from the Netherlands, she lived in Pat Shaw's house in

England, danced with the Whirligigs, then immigrated to America. She is the author of many favorites in England and America, including *The First Lady*, *Peace Be With You*, and *The Archbishop*.

Her description of the creative process is classic:

“I do not think I write a dance—there is a curious feeling that it gets written for me, or that it exists somewhere and I find it.”

The American community influence led to her creation of “dance patterns,” specifically for teaching:

“I find a simple but pleasing melody, sit down at my desk, and write a dance—actually a dance pattern—to highlight a particular movement. One might call me at such times a ‘skilled artisan.’ There’s no artistry needed. There’s nothing new in this dance—no moment of surprise.”

Fried is the creator of several new figures, including “Astoria siding,” the “Choice Morsels hey,” and the “chevron.” Readers are referred to her privately published collection “Ease and Elegance”<sup>5</sup> for a long and informative essay on teaching and writing dances.

Gary Roodman is another prolific American choreographer known on both sides of the Atlantic. He is a just-retired professor of management at a large New York State university, with five books of dances already published. He has also just started writing and publishing dance tunes as well. He is known for his judicious choice of historical tunes and flowing dances, including *The New Beginning*, *Handel With Care*, and *Wibsey Roundabout*. When asked how he got started and how he proceeds, he wrote:

“I remember hearing a tune, *Le Basque*, on a James Galway recording that got me up and dancing, even though I did not have particular figures to do. I also remember noticing that the B part was twelve bars and wondering what figures might fit it. For me, it was a bit like solving a mathematical puzzle.

...almost always the music comes first. I usually begin by simply dancing around the room to a tune to see what it tells me. Out of this, a few kernels for a dance will sometimes emerge. ...when something satisfactory emerges, I dance it with my local people, maybe revise it again, and then send you a copy. I try never to work to a deadline, so that I will have as much time as I want.”

Victor Skowronski is an engineer living in Boston who wrote *O, Susato*, *Albany Assembly*, and *Rafe’s Waltz*, dances now becoming known in the U.K.

“Why did I start writing English country dances?... I remember deciding that this would be something that I would do for me. There were other tasks in the community that I was doing that were for others. I almost always start with a tune. I hear or feel something in the tune that makes me want to write a dance to it. *O, Susato* was inspired by hearing it on the Canadian Brass recording *Renaissance Men*. There was something about the contrasting textures of the three sections that made it a challenge to come up with dance figures that could reflect the changing nature of the music.

More generally, I approach writing a dance as if it were a puzzle or a problem... I am definitely obsessed with getting things to flow properly. Even in other contexts, I seem to have a talent for constructing smooth motion between tasks.

The tune for *Albany Assembly*, *La Morisque*, is the quintessential Renaissance dance tune. Writing a dance for it was like filling in a gap in the repertoire... *Rose Without a Thorn* is another dance that fills a gap in the repertoire. In this case, the tune is by King Henry VIII and it seemed strange that so English a composer did not have an English country dance to his music. “

Scott Higgs is a computer consultant in the Philadelphia area, a very popular dance caller, and author of *Early One Morning* and *Wooing Mairi*.

“I started composing dances to address the organizers’ request for “fresh, unfamiliar material” at a dance series in the early 1980s... It is not easy for me to find tunes that have the perfect balance of lyricism and “danciness.” When I succeed in finding such a tune, it runs through my head for days, weeks, or months — and patterns and figures flow with it as I experiment and seek the perfect match. Generally, after matching some figures, finding smooth transitions is the next step, and making sure that the dance has a story line that makes sense. At other times, I begin with a nifty figure and/or transition (often an adaptation of something in an existing dance) that deserves a perfect setting.

The dances of which I am most proud are the ones that dancers have found most rewarding. After all, the dance doesn’t mean much on paper: dancer enjoyment is the only reason for composing. *Wooing Mairi* was devised in close collaboration with the music’s composer. His observations about building and releasing tension and energy are closely reflected in the choreography. *Early One Morning* is a simple assembly of fluid, lively movements. The B music has always “spoken” to me as a perfect match for the *Hole in the Wall* progression.”

Orly Krasner is a professor of music in New York City and author of *Evergreen* and *When Laura Smiles*. She often writes both music and dance.

“When people ask me [why I started], I tell them that I had gotten tired of doing dances written for people I knew... I figured it was going to be a long time before I rated highly enough to warrant anyone doing that sort of thing for me (either as direct inspiration or as the recipient of a commission), so I figured I’d better start writing my own! And I suppose there was also some sense of curiosity akin to the desire to do crossword puzzles that propelled me into this.

And sometimes it’s an occasion that drives a dance... I wrote “Evergreen” as a birthday present for Charles Bolton, who had been guiding me through the choreography process for about a year at that point, answering many plaintive late-night e-mails born out of utter frustration and ignorance. Of more recent vintage, there’s *When Laura Smiles*. A member of our dance community asked me if I would write a dance in honor of his fiancée, Laura. The tune seemed a logical choice, but when I realized that it had a thirteen-bar B, the fun really began. The end result fit the bill: the dance matched the tune and it was appropriate to the dancers for whom it was written.”

Robin Hayden is a poet, musician, membership secretary of CDSS, and one of the most beautiful dancers in the States. The importance of the music and her local dance community is evident in her statement:

“The impetus to compose *In the Bleak Midwinter* was simple: I wanted to dance to that [Gustav Holst] tune. But once I started working on the choreography I had other considerations in mind. I needed a dance that would create the “AHA!” moment for the perpetual beginners at my weekly dance — one that was simple enough for them to execute but in which the phrasing was too compelling for them not to GET IT.”

In the Pacific Northwest (Portland, Oregon), Chris Sackett and his wife, Brooke Friendly, composed the distinctive dances *Impropriety* and *Puck’s Deceit*. They wrote:

“We’ve written both English and Scottish dances both together and individually. We each think our best dances have been composed collaboratively as a duo... part of what is important to us in teaching, dancing and creating dances is the idea of dance facilitating close social communities.

[We especially like] *Impropriety* because it is an original concept... The concept of switching sides of the dance each time through was what drove this dance. *Puck’s Deceit*... we have always loved the tune Kettle Drum from the first edition. We were putting together a class that focused on heys for four and didn’t find anything in English duple minor format, so we put together something to that tune. The dance then went through several iterations until we felt it worked well as a dance. People say it dances well. It was published in the CDSS newsletter... and was used on a ball program in the mid-west because of that.”

## CONCLUSION

In 1997, when asked to provide a theme for a workshop I was invited to teach at one of our weeklong dance camps, I reflected on the fact that one of my favorite dances, *Mr. Isaac’s Maggot*, was at least 300 years old. That caused me to wonder what dances might be around 300 years in the future, and so I titled my workshop “Chestnuts of 2297.”

Among the dances I chose were works by all of the American choreographers quoted above. The vitality of their ideas as expressed in their dances, the robustness and inclusiveness of the English dance communities that sponsor such workshops, and the health and activity of our CDSS national organization indicate that the “Playford tradition” is alive and well in America and that it will remain so for the foreseeable future.

## REFERENCES

1. Plumb, J.H. *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England*. Reading: University of Reading, 1973.
2. Keller, Kate Van Winkle. *If the Company can do it! Technique in Eighteenth-century American Social Dance*. Sandy Hook: The Hendrickson Group, 1991.
3. “English Experts Here to Teach the Famous Morris Dance,” *New York Times*, Jan. 22, 1911, pt. 5: 11.
4. This quotation and all subsequent quotations from American choreographers and composers were drawn from interviews conducted via email during February, 2001.
5. Herman, Fried de Metz. *Ease and Elegance*. Privately published. Available from the author at 66 Chestnut Avenue, Larchmont, New York, USA 10538-3535.

