

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

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**‘LITTLE BALLETS’: PLAYFORD, SHARP AND DOUGLAS KENNEDY
IN THE 20TH CENTURY FOLK DANCE REVIVAL**

Derek Schofield

In July 1931 the English Folk Dance Society was invited to perform at the Ninth Annual Gathering of Northern Folk Dancers in Copenhagen, alongside the Scandinavian countries, Estonia, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Three descriptions of this festival from participants are relevant to this paper, and highlight features of the folk dance revival. Molly Kirwan and Joan Sharp wrote first-hand accounts at the time, whilst Douglas and Helen Kennedy wrote about the festival in 1961.

The crucial comment, from which the title of this paper is drawn, comes from Douglas and Helen Kennedy, and had a lasting effect on the folk dance revival. To quote the Kennedys, “It was at this Northern Festival that the English team was asked whether England had any *social folk dances*. When we pointed to the Playford Country Dances which figured largely in our programme, to our astonishment these were dismissed by the Northerners as ‘Ah, these are only *beautiful little ballets*’. It was then that we realised how far we had *strayed from tradition* both as to the *form of dance* and *style of performance*. We had in fact created a way of dancing pleasurable enough but *sophisticated rather than “folk”*. ... After that experience we were always careful to ensure that our traditional country dances, *at that time few in number*, were invariably presented when performing overseas.”¹ [Italics above and below are my emphasis].

Molly Kirwan wrote about a folk dance party at the festival, “The dances were mostly forms of the *waltz and polka*, very vigorous and exciting, and danced with unrestrained abandon by all and sundry, including ourselves, who after a turn or two decided that this *infectious enjoyment* almost concealed a skill and lovely precision of movement sadly *lacking in our own efforts*.”²

Joan Sharp’s comments were that, “The English dancers were not expert at the polka, and felt very deeply their lack of education... English folk dancers ... are too independent, or too spread out... or not passionate enough... Or it may be ... that it is the beautiful, long-flowing phrases (so peculiarly English) of the Playford dances to which the English owe their impassive and independent carriage, which is, after all, so characteristically insular. Whatever may be the real reason, and the discussion still continues within the circle of the EFDS, the English guests have returned to their own country filled with a *natural and becoming admiration* of these northern dancers, and a desire to *emulate the gaiety and excellence* of their dancing.”³

Cecil Sharp was a musician and music-teacher. On Boxing Day 1899, he had a chance meeting with the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers and notated their tunes. In 1905, he recommended the dances to Mary Neal for use with the Esperance Girls’ Club in London, and this showed the potential of the Morris dances in a new performance context. Partly as a result of the controversy surrounding Sharp and Neal’s later disagreements, Sharp was very careful to note the dances exactly as described by the traditional dancers. The dances had to come from authentic sources: “the folk”.⁴

In the meantime, Sharp was searching for the ingredients for a distinctively English music. He found them in folksong, the first example of which he heard, as sung by a member of the rural working class, in August 1903. Key themes of his collecting were to note the tune and words exactly as sung by the singer, to reject any modern-sounding songs and to collect from members of the rural working class: “the folk”.

Through 1904 and 1905, Sharp embarked upon a campaign to persuade the Board of Education to include folksong in the school music curriculum. Performances of Morris dances by the Esperance Club in 1906 led to the publication of *The Morris Book*, but by the end of 1907 a rift had developed between Sharp and Neal. Sharp disliked the Merrie England image that Neal was promoting and there was conflict over leadership of the revival. Sharp had to exert his authority, which he did through a concern for accuracy, through graceful dancing and widening his collecting of dances.

1909 was the key year during which Sharp was able to establish a separate identity from that of Neal and the Esperance dancers, with programmes of Morris dances, folksongs and singing games by his supporters. It is unclear exactly when country dances were added to the repertoire of Sharp's lecture-demonstrations, but in August 1909, the Board of Education published its new Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools, which included the teaching of Morris dances and country dances.⁵ In October 1909 the HMI (His Majesty's [Schools] Inspector) for Sussex wrote to Sharp "We shall want teachers of Morris and Country Dances *at once*."⁶ This suggests that country dances were already 'on the agenda' and in December 1909, country dances were included in one of Sharp's programmes. By the end of the year, the first part of *The Country Dance Book* had been published, containing traditional social folk dances.⁷

The book contained 18 traditional dances, collected in Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Devon, Somerset and Surrey, although the book does not indicate which dances came from which counties, or who the specific sources were. This is in contrast to Sharp's procedure with the Morris dances and folksongs. Sharp's manuscripts reveal specific sources, however, and several of the dances came from Armscote in Warwickshire and were collected on September 16 1909, in other words, only weeks before they were then published.⁸ Amongst the reasons for Sharp's speed must be his concern to establish superiority over Mary Neal, and to provide educational materials. What is clear, however, is that Sharp foresaw future issues of *The Country Dance Book* – the book is labelled 'Part 1' and he indicates, in the introduction, the content for part 2: "older dances...deciphered from the old dancing books" of Playford.⁹

Sharp was not, of course, the first person to bring the dances in the Playford books to modern audiences. Nellie Chaplin had staged some of the dances in 1906, from interpretations by Miss Cowper Cole, and published them in 1910.¹⁰ Sharp's Morris dancers performed at one of Chaplin's concerts on June 22 1909,¹¹ although correspondence suggests that Sharp had not seen Chaplin's dancers perform before 1910 if at all.¹² Having experienced partnership with Mary Neal, it seems that Sharp had no desire to repeat the experience: he wanted to be his own master.

The dances from Playford's books were first performed in public by Sharp's dancers on or before January 24 1911,¹³ and part two of *The Country Dance Book* was published in the same year. Further parts containing Playford dances were published in 1912, 1916 and 1922. (Part 5, containing American Running Set, was published in 1918).¹⁴ In other words, no further traditional social folk dances from England were published by Sharp. This is in marked contrast to his work in folksong and the Morris and sword dances, where he rejected material that was from historical sources.

What are the reasons for rejecting the collection of traditional dances in favour of interpreting the Playford dances?

Firstly, in his folksong collecting, Sharp was clear about the distinction between the older 'traditional' songs – genuine folksongs according to his definitions – and the more recent songs of music hall and other origin. He recognised that singers might include both types of songs in their

repertoire, but he was only interested in one style. This was a stylistic distinction – musically and lyrically – as well as an aesthetic judgement. When he came to the social dances, he maintained a similar distinction. During the 19th century various dances came to England, firstly from Europe, then from the USA. They were danced by fashionable society and many of them gravitated down the social scale to the middle and working classes. These dances included the waltz, the quadrille, the lancers, the Caledonians, the Galop, the polka, the schottische and the mazurka, and from the USA the Boston and the Military Schottische (usually known as the Barn Dance).¹⁵ Sharp’s attitude to these dances can be seen from his Introduction to *The Country Dance Book Part 1*: “In the village to-day the polka, waltz, and quadrille are steadily displacing the old-time country dances and jigs, just as the tawdry ballads and strident street-songs of the towns are no less surely exterminating the folk-songs.”¹⁶ This was a good reason for Sharp to collect the “old-time country dances and jigs” in the same way that he had collected the folksongs, but (apart from the dances in part one of *The Country Dance Book*) he did not pursue such collecting. Perhaps he did not come across many examples, perhaps he didn’t look. Perhaps the dances he did come across included polka or waltz steps, or were danced to tunes in these rhythms. Sharp wrote of the steps used by the dancers in the villages in the early twentieth century such as the polka, galop, and waltz steps – “like the figures with which they are nearly always associated, they are obviously of more modern derivation.”¹⁷

Secondly, all the traditional dances Sharp collected were of the same style – “longways for as many as will” as Sharp reminded his readers. Of course Sharp found this form in the Playford books, although he believed that the other forms in the 1651 edition were “the older forms of the dance” – rounds, squares and longways for specific numbers.¹⁸ This is not the occasion for a study of the origin of Playford’s dances and tunes. Suffice to say that Sharp believed that Playford’s Country Dances came from the village green, that they were taken up by the upper classes, that the newer longways dances ousted the older rounds and squares and that the decline of the country dance was hastened by the professional dancing master.¹⁹

Having collected a few traditional dances, Sharp saw sufficient parallels in Playford’s collections to conclude confidently, “For those interested in the revival of folk-dancing, it [Playford] is the only book in which the English Country Dance, in its earliest, purest, and most characteristic forms, is described.”²⁰ Sharp’s last words on the subject were, “if progress is to be made, this [publication of the earliest editions of Playford], the moment when the dance was at the apex of its development, must necessarily be the point of departure [for the revival].”²¹

These statements are loaded with value judgements, but they indicate a clear reason why Sharp should concentrate on the Playford dances.

Having decided to popularise the Playford dances, Sharp had to justify their inclusion. Unlike the Morris dances and folksongs, they had been danced by the upper and middle classes, and they were from historical sources. The justification was to claim that the dances are classless, “the dance [in Playford] had never been the exclusive possession of any one class.”²²

Thirdly, for Sharp, an important purpose of dance recovery was as an inspiration for an English ballet form. He was a stern critic of the ballet (“artificial – inexpressive and decadent”), especially the Russian ballet that appeared in London in the early twentieth century,²³ and recommended that England should “start afresh and endeavour to create a ballet founded upon one or other of our national folk-dance techniques.”²⁴ In this respect, Sharp was providing an English dance renaissance to place alongside the musical renaissance.²⁵ And as with the music renaissance, the inspiration for dance came from the folk repertoire, and from the era when England was a land *with*

music – Purcell, Tallis, madrigals, Tudor England – from Elizabeth I to the Restoration, Playford came from just the right era.

Sharp's criticism of the state of dance in the early 20th century was not confined to the ballet – he also criticised the “inelegant, restless and often unpleasant movements which pass for dancing in our ball-rooms”, stage clog-dancing and the “begowned aesthetic dancer”.²⁶ In other words, Sharp's intention was not simply to rescue the ballet, but all dancing, including the social dancing of the middle classes, and to improve the dances of the working classes – all through the use of folk dance.

Fourthly, for Sharp, folk dance was an art. For the supporters of Mary Neal, Sharp's emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic aspects of folk dance, was a point for criticism. Neal herself wrote of a performance by Sharp's dancers in December 1911, “the dancing itself was beautiful, graceful and charming, so much so that I do not feel able to criticise it, for it falls into the category of the art and not the folk dance.”²⁷ Sharp was still at pains to distance himself from Neal – he described the dancing of Neal's Esperance Club as “a romp” and emphasised, perhaps over-emphasised, the gracefulness of his own interpretations. The Playford dances lent themselves to this interpretation.

Fifthly, English social dancing took a new turn in the twentieth century. The Boston and the Barn Dance had come from America, but now came the cake-walk, the tango from Argentine, the fox-trot, turkey-trot and bunny hug. The Hammersmith *Palais de Danse* opened in 1919 and in 1920 the Original Dixieland Jazz Band first appeared in England (although it was, of course, an all-white band).²⁸ Sharp tended to use a catch-all term for these dances – ‘jazz’. He had first come across ‘jazz’ when he was in the USA during the First World War, and described it as “uncouth and in many ways so objectionable that I hesitate to describe it in plain language. Of natural grace, dignity, rhythm, beauty of any kind, I could see in it no trace whatsoever. . . . It had become heavily loaded with native African characteristics which however harmless or even admirable in the recreative gambollings of the American negro are scarcely desirable qualities in a white man's dance.”²⁹ This may seem now like the statements of a racist, but it was a more widely held view at the time. Many of the newspaper accounts of the activities of the EFDS in the early 1920s contain Sharp's views on jazz, and how English country dance would be a much better alternative. Folk dancing was to be a tool of social regeneration.³⁰ One must admire Sharp's crusading spirit, yet wonder about his lack of realism!

Sharp died in 1924 and in 1925 Douglas Kennedy was appointed Director of the EFDS. Within a few years of Sharp's death, an English ballet was created, although not on the lines he had suggested. Its national inspiration was drawn from British literature, music and painting, rather than folk dance, although its founder, Ninette de Valois, later introduced folk dance to the Royal Ballet School.³¹ Alongside these developments, the EFDS continued Sharp's intention of developing ballets using folk dance, and ballets devised by Amy Stoddart, Joan Sharp and Douglas Kennedy himself were performed through the 1920s and into the 1930s.

So, what was the state of the folk movement at the time of Sharp's death? Folksongs were sung in a classical style by singers such as Clive Carey, with piano accompaniment. Choral singing from the books was included in EFDS vacation schools, often with Ralph Vaughan Williams. Morris and sword dances were still confined to the classroom, danced by men and women and subject to examination. The Travelling Morrice from Cambridge organised the first ‘Morris tour’ in 1924 – dancing outdoors, in village streets. Now so familiar, then it was unique. Social folk dances were almost exclusively the Playford country dances which were also subject to examination, sometimes danced in ‘folk dance parties’ but more often in the classroom, and, like the Morris

dances, were danced ‘seriously’ and ‘artistically’. The enthusiasts, especially the leaders of the movement, were drawn mainly from the upper middle, and middle classes – professionals, educated, public school and Oxbridge, with a smattering of the titled. There was a large proportion of teachers, and the majority was women.

So how did the folk dance movement change during the twenty-year period from the death of Sharp to the end of the Second World War in 1945?

One aspect needs to be explained before continuing. Even though the subject matter of the folk movement – the Morris and sword dances, the folksongs and the traditional social folk dances – were drawn from the rural working class, there was the view that the revival movement was creating a new artistic movement, not a copy of the tradition. Indeed, very few people had heard a traditional singer, or seen traditional Morris and sword dancers, or heard a traditional musician. But during this twenty-year period, the traditional Morris and sword teams were increasingly invited to appear at the EFDS winter festivals in London and also at Vacation Schools. Traditional musicians William Kimber and George Tremain were invited to Vacation Schools so that their styles of playing were heard. Recordings of traditional singers were released.

This increasing contact with ‘the tradition’ had several effects. One of these was a discovery that ‘the tradition’ did things differently, and that ‘the revival’ way of doing things was not necessarily better. This was shown at Bampton, where the traditional Morris dances were being done differently from the Sharp notations. At Headington Quarry, William Kimber’s way of playing was different to the notations of the tunes made by Sharp. His playing gave the tunes more lift than the revival musicians, and it was realised that the playing of the latter accounted for the lifeless dancing style of the revivalists.³² The Morris dance revival changed to reflect the tradition. This experience led to a greater awareness of the tradition in all its forms, including social dance.

Contact with the folk dance of European countries gave the English movement, and Douglas Kennedy in particular, further experience of traditional practice, or of alternative revival practice. The Basque dancers and the Calusari from Romania who appeared at the 1935 International Folk Dance Festival in London had a profound effect on Douglas Kennedy’s thinking, especially with regard to the ritual significance of the dances and the importance of tradition. The experience in Copenhagen is also relevant.

The immediate aftermath of Sharp’s death was characterised by ‘business as usual’ and Sharp’s programme was largely unaltered – a fairly obvious tactic given that some people doubted that the movement would continue without Sharp to lead it. The campaign to raise funds for the Sharp memorial took much of Douglas Kennedy’s energies through the 1920s and Cecil Sharp House opened in 1930.³³

At the start of the new decade, Kennedy voiced his concern about ‘dance quality’ in the EFDSS magazine. In January 1931, he commented on the lack of dance vitality at the annual London festival,³⁴ and then contributed a series of articles, ‘The Basis of Folk Dancing’ in 1932, in which he stressed that dancing should be with the whole body not just the legs and described vertical rhythm and natural arm movements.³⁵ Violet Alford passed on comments from folk dancers in other European countries, such as “Do you never dance for fun?” and quoted their descriptions such as grim, earnest, solemn, boring and the uniform style.³⁶ These views were repeated by Prunella Stack, “Please smile *often* instead of occasionally!”³⁷ In 1937 Kennedy was stressing the need for “unselfconscious and carefree dancing” before describing his ‘Dance Quality – A New Definition’. The five headings of his definition included ‘Freedom of the Whole Body’, ‘A Live and Buoyant Carriage’, ‘Poise and Balance’ and ‘Lilt’, and here for the first time he described the term

‘anacrusis’.³⁸ There was to be a new emphasis on rhythm, in order “to produce a new race of folk dancers”.³⁹

Kennedy was looking to a more natural movement of the body in folk dancing. He attacked the “machine age disease” which led to the country dances being studied and stylised whereby they “lost their kick” and appeared uniform.⁴⁰ He blamed the examination system for this uniformity.

Kennedy was also concerned about quality linked to the dance repertoire in order to attract more dancers, especially more men. The pages of the magazine reveal the increasing inclusion of newly-discovered traditional social dances in the repertoire, and some of these dances were published separately. The dances mentioned in Thomas Hardy’s novels, dances from the Yorkshire Dales, Maud Karpeles’s collection *Twelve Traditional Country Dances* which included Morpeth Rant, the Norfolk Long Dance, reels from the Lake District and so on.⁴¹ It was not just the dances themselves. There were also reports of these dances still being performed as a part of rural village life, for example in Cambo in Northumberland.⁴² There was a desire to inject more enjoyment into the folk dance revival. The Coronation of 1937 was marked by the publication of a book of traditional dances and there were free folk dance parties at Cecil Sharp House each evening of coronation week, with an emphasis on social dancing for this festive occasion.⁴³ Jack Putterill wrote, “The Folk Dance does not become alive until it is the expression of corporate joy and the holiday spirit,” whilst Kenneth Loveless wrote, “our movement, if it is really to succeed, must leave the classroom and become a spontaneous act in the towns and villages of our country.”⁴⁴ Putterill commented on the Lambeth Walk, an urban folk dance parody introduced in the London musical *Me and My Girl*, and which then became a novelty dance craze throughout Britain.⁴⁵ He wrote that it had in its performance “ease and abandon, and the people lose themselves in it”. There was support for the concept of the Lambeth Walk and also the Palais Glide in folk dance circles – Kennedy wrote of “the universal desire for community expression”⁴⁶ in the Lambeth Walk – and the comments were in marked contrast to Sharp’s views on popular dance forms.

‘Popularisation’ was a key word just before the war. How to bring new people into the movement, especially young people, without putting them through classes and examinations. How to make the dancing experience enjoyable. How to make it easy for people to walk in off the streets and join in straight away. Douglas Kennedy found the answers in the USA, where he came across the Square Dance and, more importantly, the dance band and dance caller. By the time war broke out, he had already published a book of Square Dances, and experimented with a dance caller.⁴⁷ The war re-emphasised the need to have a social dance that was easy to learn and join in with, and in his 1944 ‘manifesto’ for a new EFDSS, Kennedy wrote:

“But it is over the Country Dance that we shall have to watch our step in this second revival. In the first revival we ran into trouble over pattern-making, which is the common malady among country dancers. The conditions required for a satisfactory initiation are those provided by any good country dance party. The best method is the traditional one of watching and joining in.

“In our second revival much more care must be taken over the Playford dances, a large number of which are quite unsuited to the rough and tumble of the Country Dance Party. Those I have in mind require team practice before the members of the team can even begin to dance. Otherwise they become mere patterns and turn the dancers into pattern-makers. Such Playford dances are not folk dances in the sense that the traditional dances and Square dances are folk dances, and they should be preserved for conditions under which they can be studied and produced properly.”⁴⁸

Kennedy called the Playford dances the ‘classics’, which require mental effort, physical memory and blindfold confidence as a result of practice and repetition.⁴⁹ Encouraged by the term Community Singing, and the government’s initiative to establish Community Centres, Kennedy published the traditional dances in a series of Community Dance Manuals.⁵⁰ It was the basis for his ‘folk dance for all’ policy, for the festival in Stratford, for his new programme at Cecil Sharp House after the war, with music from the Square Dance Band – and it annoyed many of the established folk dance members of the EFDSS.

The respected folk dancer and musician, William Ganiford, writing from the armed forces, wondered if the new dancers were going to be left dancing Cumberland Square Eight and Nottingham Swing, “Or are we going to show them that these are but stepping-stones to the higher forms of our art? ... But I think it would be criminal to relegate our esteemed Dancing Master to the status of a museum piece, only to be studied by experts in secluded corners.”⁵¹

Helen Kennedy had anticipated the concern of the established Playford supporters in a 1942 article.⁵² She described the dances as being of “great beauty”, but admitted that whilst the Society had brought them to a large number of English people, “the dances were never enjoyed by the masses”. She referred to inferior demonstrations of the dances and “over-serious and academic teaching presentation.” Helen Kennedy also pointed out that the traditional dances were more likely to attract men – this was a big issue within the female-dominated EFDSS, leading to Douglas’s policy of “mixed couples only” at post-war dances, which aroused more controversy than the switch away from the Playford dances. For Helen Kennedy, a predominantly traditional dance programme with an effective dance caller and “good stirring music” could accommodate Playford dances such as Hunsdon House or Oranges and Lemons. She felt that there was no need for the “great wealth of Playford Dances to be shelved. As an increasing public becomes accustomed to the simpler form of set dance, a proportion will become ripe for the wealth of beautiful and intricate Playford dances requiring a more polished and expert skill of movement” before concluding, “Both types of dances have their place in the aims and objects of the EFDS [*sic* EFDSS].”

In spite of these reassurances, there was suspicion that Douglas wanted to relegate the Playford dances. Inevitably, some of the pre-war Playford dancers fell out with Douglas, but generally not with the EFDSS.

With hindsight, two developments had not been anticipated. Firstly, there was an assumption that people who became folk dance enthusiasts would want to ‘graduate’ from the ‘easier’ traditional dances to the more intricate Playford dances. That was not the experience with the 1950s enthusiasts, and even less so with the English ceilidh-goers from the 1960s to the present day. Enjoyment has come from the social context of the event, the excitement of the music, the traditional dances themselves and the invention of new dances in traditional format. That is not to deny that some enthusiasts did want to graduate, whilst others wanted to enjoy a mixture of styles. And over the years, the Playford dances came back into the EFDSS dance clubs.

Secondly, there was an assumption that the style and context of the Playford dances in the 1920s and 1930s would continue exactly into the 1940s and 1950s. That might not have happened, even without Douglas Kennedy policies. Douglas Kennedy attempted to build a “firewall” – a break in the link between pre-war and post-war Playford interpretation, in order to eliminate the poor dance quality. New people came in to research, teach and interpret the Playford dances – from Margaret Dean-Smith and E.J. Nicol to Tom Cook and Pat Shaw, through to Colin Hume and Andrew Shaw.

In conclusion, several observations can be made:

- Sharp's lack of traditional dance collecting potentially missed a body of repertoire, and there were fewer dances to collect in the 1930s and onwards. This led to more dances being invented in 'traditional' style.
- The inclusion of the Playford dances legitimised the folk dance revival as an art form and gave it historical significance.
- Douglas Kennedy had the strength of character to change the style and repertoire of the dance revival in the face of strong opposition. The upheavals of the Second World War helped enormously.
- The revival of traditional dances influenced the Playford scene by "making it folky", introducing the dance caller and changing the style of performance of the music.
- The Playford dances influenced the traditional dance revival by placing emphasis on the longways, circle and square dances rather than on the couple dances and step dancing found in working class rural areas. It also emphasised the walking step, rather than the stepping which was promoted later by the Reading Traditional and Step Dance Group and others.
- The continuation of Playford in the repertoire of the EFDSS dance clubs determined, and determines, the image of the EFDSS.
- Douglas Kennedy retired in 1961, and the traditional dance-based ceilidh movement from the 70s happened largely outside the EFDSS, which was reluctant to accommodate the new interpretations, the stepping and English traditional music.
- Finally, the Playford dances continue to give pleasure and enjoyment in a variety of interpretations, and as a part – but just a small part – of the wider folk dance scene.

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EFDSS English Folk Dance and Song Society.

VWML Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the EFDSS.

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