

# **Morris Men: Dancing Englishness, c.1905-1951**

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Doctor of Philosophy

**Matthew Simons**

De Montfort University

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## **Abstract**

The morris dance revival of the early twentieth century was one manifestation of a nationwide resurgence of interest in English identity, predicated on an assumption that the truest essence of national culture resided in the vernacular traditions of rural society. Histories of the folk dance movement have often regarded the morris dance revival of the interwar period as one characterised by prevailing right-wing, conservative attitudes towards notions of class, gender, and nationalism. This thesis contests this view, arguing instead that the movement was motivated by various aesthetic and intellectual concerns, both conservative and progressive. Moreover, the nascent revival contained a diversity of political and artistic prejudices. Whilst appealing to the very same dances, presented in similar fashions, dancers projected onto their activity a multitude of ideological conceptions. This study is concerned with the ideas Englishness promulgated by a small group of morris men in the first half of the twentieth century. It is informed by extensive original primary source research, utilising archival materials largely unknown by scholars of the folk dance movement. Introducing the contested nature of authenticity in revival morris, through a reappraisal of the work of Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal, this thesis presents a series of intellectual biographies based on three protagonists of men's morris dancing in the interwar era. Pioneering agriculturalist Rolf Gardiner sought to subsume morris to the service of new communities, representing order and unity between people and their landscapes. Alec Hunter was an artist and designer who believed the dances represented the highest developed form of English social art, expressive of a native creativity. Joseph Needham was a biochemist turned historian, who conscripted morris as an agent in making plans for a Heaven on earth in a socialist mould. A final chapter addresses the condescension towards morris dancing, with reference to the caricature of the 'crank' as an obstinate enemy of progress, and their attitudes towards new commercial leisure practices. Allying ideas about dance and performance to those of national identity and culture, this study offers a new case study in the history of Englishness.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Plates</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>i</b>
Morris Dancing	5
Englishness	10
Methodology and Chapter Overviews	20
<b>Chapter One: Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp</b>	<b>29</b>
Sharp	32
Neal	37
Espérance	44
A Sweetened Life? Blanche Payling and Thaxted	52
Bodies	57
Spirits	66
Childhood	72
Conclusion	76
<b>Chapter Two: Rolf Gardiner</b>	<b>80</b>
Uprooted and Transplanted	84
Angry Young Man	92
Pilgrimage	97
Dancing Gods, Labouring Men	103
Patriot?	110
Rolfery	120
Conclusion	123

<b>Chapter Three: Alec Hunter</b>	<b>126</b>
New Jerusalems	132
Merry Meetings	145
Lads, Together	155
‘The Triumph’	161
Conclusion	171
<b>Chapter Four: Joseph Needham</b>	<b>173</b>
A Bridge	175
The Thaxted Tradition	183
Despised Knowledge	191
Ringstead	198
Conclusion: Dancing with Philosophical Freedom	205
<b>Chapter Five: Merrie England No More?</b>	<b>208</b>
Landscape	211
Society	219
Patriotism	229
Conclusion	234
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>245</b>

## **List of Plates**

- Fig. 1            ‘Merrie England Once More’ by Bernard Partridge (1907)
- Fig. 2            Untitled Mural, Market Cross, by Alec Hunter (c.1955)
- Fig. 3            ‘Briar Dance’, a textile design by Alec Hunter (1926)
- Fig. 4            Old and new Thaxted Morris costume (1955)



## Abbreviations

CMM	Cambridge Morris Men
CUL	Cambridge University Library
EFDS	English Folk Dance Society (1911-1932)
EFDSS	English Folk Dance and Song Society (1932-current)
ERO	Essex Record Office
NA	National Archives
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
StEWW	St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works
TM	Travelling Morrice
VWML	Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

# INTRODUCTION

Though numerous critical accounts of the English folk revival have been written, relatively few have focussed exclusively on the morris dance. A ubiquitous — though not consistently popular — national icon, morris dance in the twentieth century represented both a constituent problem in the riddle of Englishness and a clue to its solution. The performance of morris was both a maker and product of English national identity, a vector and conduit of meaning. In the 1950s, promoters of the dance said it possessed the ‘attractions of both art and sport’, combining an appreciation for English melodies with coordinated physical activity, practiced by groups of men in the open-air, enjoying ‘the freedom from sophistication,’ afterwards sharing in a ‘well earned pint.’<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly the basis for an enjoyable recreation, audiences were nevertheless expected not only to appreciate the physicality of the dance, but also wonder at its supposedly ancient provenance.<sup>2</sup> Dressed in white flannels, redolent of the Englishman at play, the dancers reminded their onlookers the basis for their display was far ‘older than cricket’.<sup>3</sup> It was implied that the significance of morris resided in a shared cultural memory, embodied in the dance and transmitted through its performance.<sup>4</sup> In the execution of their dance, the morris men believed they evoked a spirit of Englishness which in turn enchanted an otherwise disenchanted modernity. Moreover, their performance was not simply a cipher to an imagined past, but portrayed as a living embodiment of cultural inheritance, in which the nation was enacted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Morris Dancing through London: The Morris Ring Twenty-First Birthday Souvenir Programme, 8-10 July 1955’, Joseph Needham Papers A/845, Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL).

<sup>2</sup> Theresa J. Buckland, ‘Dance, History, and Ethnography: Frameworks, Sources, and Identities of Past and Present’, in Theresa J. Buckland, ed., *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Peck, *The Morris and Sword Dances of England* (Cambridge: The Morris Ring, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Theresa J. Buckland, ‘Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: the Politics of Embodiment’, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 33, (2003), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Robert Blackstone, ‘The Aural and Moral Idylls of “Englishness” and Folk Music’, *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 40, no. 4, (2017), p.570.

Born of a philanthropic impulse, the national revival of morris dancing commenced in 1905 as a movement disproportionately populated by women. Though a few historical references of women morris dancers do exist, for the majority of its documented history morris was the reserve of male performers, either as companies of professional entertainers or as bands of young men from the villages.<sup>6</sup> However, by 1923, the English Folk Dance Society — at that time the sole national organisation for the promotion of traditional English dance — had a membership of 666, of which five sixths were women.<sup>7</sup> Whilst losses incurred in the Great War contributed towards a widening disparity between the sexes represented amongst the membership of the EFDS, even in 1913 men were outnumbered at a rate of four to one.<sup>8</sup> In the 1920s, a number of male enthusiasts among the post-war generation sought to promote the peculiarly masculine attributes of the dance, in an attempt to inspire more men to take up the activity. This movement was manifest in an inter-connected network of men's morris clubs, established with the aim of fomenting a certain version of manliness in expression and sociability. Marshalled together, set apart from their female counterparts in semi-autonomous groups, the morris men posited a new mode of transmission to that hitherto known in the revival, based on informal public performances of dance. Juxtaposed against the everyday streetscapes of towns and villages, morris was presented as an enchanting agent of an imagined timelessness, a tonic for an increasingly disenchanted present. This thesis presents the first detailed history of the men's morris movement of the early twentieth century, narrated largely through three of its most prominent protagonists — namely, Rolf Gardiner, Alec Hunter, and Joseph Needham.

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<sup>6</sup> Compared with the volume of evidence for men's morris dancing from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Keith Chandler describes only a 'handful' of references to women dancers, though there were also exceptional incidences where women joined in with the men's sides. See Keith Chandler, *"Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles": The Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, 1660-1900* (London: Hisarlik, 1993), p. 4 and pp. 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher J. Bearman, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Rolf Gardiner and Mary Neal', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 4, no. 1, (2009), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

The revival of morris dancing in the early twentieth century was a foil to the perceived degenerative consequences of industrial capitalism, part and parcel of a nationwide search for ‘real’ England. Whilst the English looked to their institutions — namely, parliament and the elite seats of learning — these were largely taken for granted. They believed the official England was capable of looking after itself, and able to incorporate change whilst apparently staying the same.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it was to the rural countryside — perceived as a deep repository of folk knowledge largely untouched by modern industrialism — that the English turned in search of a genuine national culture.<sup>10</sup> Both institutional and rural types of Englishness sought evidences of survival, which defined their very essence. The folk revival of the early twentieth century was predicated on a belief that the morris dances represented an ‘authentic Other’ in contrast to the inauthentic, superficial modern.<sup>11</sup> Extracted from the last of the ‘folk’, and harnessed by the institutions of revival, the morris dance was presented as an intuitive expression of the national character, symbolic of English values and sensibilities. However, dancers failed to agree on whether this authenticity derived from unselfconscious expression, or constituted the most developed art of a pre-industrial rural working class. Whilst these differing emphases may appear slight, they nevertheless represented a fault-line in attitudes towards the performance of morris and the rationale for its revival. Like ‘authenticity’ and other such nebulous concepts, what it was to dance ‘naturally’ was a highly contested ideal, and presupposed the existence of certain criteria by which it was assessed and measured. We are advised to remember that truth is always a ‘social relation’, rather than a concrete reality.<sup>12</sup> Proponents of modern dancing and revival morris dancing each claimed to possess the true credentials to demonstrate the ‘naturalness’ of their respective forms. Indeed, the interpretation of dance as a

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<sup>9</sup> Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Theresa J. Buckland, ‘Th’Owd Pagan Dance’: Ritual, Enchantment, and an Enduring Intellectual Paradigm’, *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, vol. 11, no. 4 / vol. 12, no. 1, (2001/2002), p. 442-443.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (New York: Ithica, 1991), p. 232, cited in John Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer: the Consolidation of a ‘Folk-Song’ Construct in Edwardian England’, *Popular Music*, vol. 21, no. 1, (2002), p. 9.

vestige of religious ritual was not peculiar to morris or folk dances, but belonged to wider traditions of European thought which emerged in the wake of the enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

Folk revivalists of the early twentieth century sought a framework on which to build an Englishness governed by a wholeness and unity of purpose, a bulwark against individualism and scientific rationalism. They borrowed liberally from the writings of Blake, Cobbett, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, who venerated handicrafts and architecture, evocative of a pre-Reformation vernacular tradition, loosely termed 'medieval'. It was the longevity of these arts which was the chief criterion of their perceived quality.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the supposed ancient origins of the morris dance appealed to a movement predisposed towards the celebrations of 'survivals'. A palpable desire for promoting a national distinctiveness in dance was not peculiar to morris and its kindred folk types, but also infected modern ballroom forms too. For instance, discourse between professionals and the dancing public throughout the 1920s produced a modified Charleston, with the 'graceful elegance of the English style.'<sup>15</sup> However, unlike these modern social dances, morris was imbued with a ritual narrative, which served to both legitimise its revival and thereafter moderate its form.<sup>16</sup>

Deriving inspiration from a sometimes quixotic mixture of 'back-to-the-land' ideals and homosocial bonding, the protagonists of the men's morris revival were motivated by a desire to champion a style of dancing expressive of a certain sort of masculinity. Theirs was a jovial, ebullient manliness, a development on the often bellicose muscular Christianity of their fathers, which defined the

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<sup>13</sup> Buckland, "Th'Owd Pagan Dance", p. 415.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy H. Evans, 'Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism', *Western Folklore*, vol. 47, no. 4, (1988), pp. 245-247.

<sup>15</sup> Allison Abra, 'Dancing in the English Style: Professionalisation, Public Preference and the Evolution of Popular Dancing in Britain in the 1920s', in Brett Bebbler, ed., *Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 41-62.

<sup>16</sup> Bearman, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', pp. 24-25.

gentlemanly sporting culture of the preceding century.<sup>17</sup> This promotion of a masculine morris dance, performed out of doors by small groups of men allied to one another by association to a club, was not only an exercise in championing physical virility, but an attempt at an English re-enchantment. By shrouding the dances in the clothes of pre-Christian survival theories, they were offered up as performances of an enchanted present. Moreover, whilst popular discourse of the late nineteenth century generally regarded dancing of all sorts as a primarily female activity, the promotion of men's morris in the wake of a devastating war represented one attempt at fashioning new ways of performing masculinity, which was constitutive of the protagonists' Englishness.

### **Morris Dancing**

The enduring popular narrative celebrates a chance encounter of Cecil Sharp with the Headington Quarry Morris Dancers on Boxing Day 1899 as marking the beginning of the morris dance revival.<sup>18</sup> Though he was not actually the first person to instigate a revival of the dance, Sharp remains the most famous of the early protagonists. His success and notoriety lay in his ability and willingness to exploit an extensive network of personal contacts, as well as an enthusiasm for disseminating dance and music through publication, which made him a renowned populariser of morris dancing. However, his ideas about the dance's history and significance were not original, but derived largely from a synthesis of antiquarian, anthropological, and folkloric studies.<sup>19</sup> Historical scholarship of the last forty years, based on the compilation and scrutiny of all known references to 'morris', has attempted to purge the dance of all such mystical superstitions. The documented

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<sup>17</sup> Inextricably connected with the improved Victorian public schools, muscular Christianity emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a philosophy which combined athleticism and fitness with religious and corporal duty. The authors Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley are frequently cited as providing its literary basis. For an overview of the contributions of Hughes and Kingsley, as well as an account of their motivations, see Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: a Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 91-94.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Vic Gammon, 'Many Useful Lessons': Cecil Sharp, Education and the Folk Dance Revival, 1899-1924', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 5, no. 1, (2008), p. 78

<sup>19</sup> Roy Judge, 'Cecil Sharp and the Morris, 1906-1909', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, (2002), p. 197.

history begins in 1448, when the dance was a popular entertainment among the higher echelons of society, with the first reference to its Englishness in the Elizabethan period.<sup>20</sup> However, in spite of the apparent continuity in the name 'morris', the dance actually evolved significantly over time, following contemporary cultural fashions in relation to social mores.

With the notable exception of two studies of the geographical distribution of morris, which adhered to an evolutionary model, the dance did not receive substantial critical scrutiny from historians until the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Whilst Roy Dommett and Russell Wortley both made significant contributions towards the scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s, the most important work was carried out by a triumvirate of dancers based around Oxford, namely Keith Chandler, John Forrest, and Michael Heaney.<sup>22</sup> By their combined methodologies — those of the social historian, anthropologist, and librarian respectively — they produced a significant body of work which released morris from its suspended time warp, discrediting the 'fossilized ideas' invoked by earlier revivalists.<sup>23</sup> Gleaned from extensive searches of newspapers and local records, their studies sought to relocate incidences of morris dance to their respective social and cultural milieus, as popular customs. In 1991, Heaney and Forrest published the *Annals of Early Morris*, a chronological index of some 799 references to morris dance up to 1750.<sup>24</sup> This data provided the substantive basis for Forrest's authoritative work, *The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750*, published in 1999.<sup>25</sup> Here, the data was presented in seriation graphs,

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Heaney, 'The Earliest Reference to the Morris Dance?', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4, (2004), pp. 513-515; Michael Heaney, 'Kingston to Kenilworth: Early Plebeian Morris', *Folklore*, vol. 100, no. 1, (1989), p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Geographical Distribution of English Ceremonial Dance Traditions', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1936), pp. 1-45; E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm, R.J. Marriott, and Norman Peacock, 'A Geographical Index of the Ceremonial Dance in Great Britain', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, (1960), pp. 1-41.

<sup>22</sup> A selection of Roy Dommett's articles are available online at <http://www.opread.force9.co.uk/RoyDommett/>. For an example of Wortley's research, see Russell Wortley, 'The Cotswold Morris: Hey-Day, Decline and Revival', *Ethnic*, (1959).

<sup>23</sup> John Forrest, 'Here We Come A-Fossiling', *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, (1985), pp. 27-34.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Heaney and John Forrest, *Annals of Early Morris* (Sheffield: CECTAL, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing, 1458-1750* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1999).

designed to illustrate how the dance, and the dance event, changed over time, marked by its migration from royal courts to civic processions, later percolating from the urban streets to the rural communities.

In a summary article published in 1989, Heaney suggested the early Elizabethan years marked something of a zenith for morris, which precipitated a shift in the organisation of morris dancers, ‘from prerequisite official sanction to retrospective approval’, as teams acted on their own initiative to solicit patronage.<sup>26</sup> During this period, dancers became increasingly mobile, travelling widely to satisfy a growing demand for morris as an entertainment for the aristocracy. At this time, commentators also began describing the dance as ‘ancient’ and quintessentially English, representing ‘a new awareness of the significance and symbolism of the morris ... in part a result of the raising of the national political consciousness in the pendulum swings of Edward and Mary.’ As Heaney concludes, this new-found association of morris with the ideals of the Elizabethan Englishmen were soon to have grave consequences for the entertainment, with the rise of puritanical unrest.<sup>27</sup> Forrest agreed the late sixteenth century witnessed a drastic reversal of fortunes for the morris dance, culminating in its suppression by puritan agitators. By the early seventeenth century, morris was a focal point in the ideological struggles between Royalists and Puritans.<sup>28</sup> From this time forward, morris dance was inextricably linked with debates of what constituted the ideal national characteristics of the English.

Chandler’s *“Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles”* and its accompanying *Chronological Gazetteer*, both published in 1993, also approached morris as a ‘cultural phenomenon’, part of the ‘individual or communal human experience’, forged within a particular context.<sup>29</sup> Based on an analysis of the economics of labour,

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<sup>26</sup> Heaney, ‘Kingston to Kenilworth’, pp. 100–101.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> Forrest, *History of Morris Dancing*, pp. 186–214.

<sup>29</sup> Keith Chandler, *“Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles”: the Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, 1660–1900* (London: Hisarlik, 1993), pp. 1–3; Keith Chandler, *Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, 1660–1900: a Chronological Gazetteer* (London: Hisarlik, 1993).



contextualised by the onset of agricultural depression and industrial growth, he argued the continuation or otherwise of morris depended on the willingness and ability of people to dance, though the curtailment of Whitsun Ales throughout the nineteenth century also removed an important context for performance.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the long arc of history was not so much one of continuity, but ‘bursts of activity interspersed with dormant periods’.<sup>31</sup> An exodus from the countryside, combined with a series of moral panics over the perceived ribald and rowdy behaviour that accompanied morris, fomented its decline throughout the nineteenth century. After a peak in activities in the mid-century, by the 1880s ‘the public face of morris dance performance throughout the whole of the South Midland counties had all but disappeared’, maintained by only a very few localities dependent upon the enthusiasm of a small number of devotees.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the modern period, morris was often portrayed as a dance on the brink of extinction. As John Graham wrote in 1911, ‘the worth of morris dances was only appreciated fully when they were dying’.<sup>33</sup> However, the first scholars to examine morris in the nineteenth century were antiquarians, preoccupied with accounting for its origins rather than its historical development over time. They were not interested in the rural plebeian form still practiced across the counties of the south midlands, and so it was dismissed. In 1801, Joseph Strutt argued morris had evolved from ‘the Fool’s dance’ — a grotesque performance associated with midwinter dramatic plays — during the fourteenth century, and later introduced to England from Spain.<sup>34</sup> In this new form, it was ‘frequently joined to older pageants, and especially to those appropriated for the celebration of the May-games.’<sup>35</sup> Six years later, in 1807, another English antiquary, Francis Douce published *Illustrations of Shakespeare and of Ancient Manners*, which included ‘A Dissertation on the Ancient

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<sup>30</sup> Chandler, “*Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles*”, pp. 14-19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> John Graham, *Lancashire and Cheshire Morris Dances* (1911), cited in Russell Wortley, ‘Informal Talk on the Early Morris Revival’, *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 3, (1979), p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London: Methuen, 1903 [1801]), p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp. 183-184.

English Morris Dance'. In this essay, Douce emphasised the importance of pan-European fashions and the constant exchange of amusements between the courts of European aristocracy and royalty.<sup>36</sup> He argued the English morris was just a degenerate form of the 'real and uncorrupted Moorish dance' of Spain, introduced to England from 'our Gallic neighbours, or even from the Flemings'.<sup>37</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, morris dancing was appropriated as a symbol of a particular vision of Englishness, termed 'Merrie England', reproduced through literature, theatre, and pageants.<sup>38</sup> For this purpose, a mere allusion to the dance was sufficient — it often appeared more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Where performances of 'morris' did take place on stage, they were often little more than adumbrations, based on the few historical illustrations, and descriptions given by antiquarians, 'mummied in literary allusion'.<sup>39</sup> They bore virtually no resemblance to the form simultaneously disappearing from the villages. An exception to the prevailing trend for outright fabrication was pageant-master Ernest Richard D'Arcy Ferris, who from 1885 grafted visual representations of an idealised Elizabethan England onto a revival of a village morris side in Bidford-on-Avon, in Warwickshire.<sup>40</sup> The result was a repertoire of 'Shakespearean Morris Dances', performed as a touring venture in its own right, rather than a novel adjunct to Ferris' various pageants.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the 1890s, Oxford-based antiquary, Percy Manning, employed Thomas Carter, a local labourer and amateur archaeologist, in the collection of information on Oxfordshire folklore and customs, including

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Douce, *Illustrations of Shakespeare and of Ancient Manners* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839 [1807]), pp. 578-581.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 578-581.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Roy Judge, 'Merrie England and the Morris, 1881-1910', *Folklore*, vol. 104, (1993), pp. 124-143.

<sup>39</sup> Judge, 'Merrie England and the Morris'; E. Phillips Barker, 'Cecil James Sharp', *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 8, (1924), p. 205.

<sup>40</sup> Judge, 'Merrie England and the Morris', pp. 125-126.

<sup>41</sup> Roy Judge, 'D'Arcy Ferris and the Bidford Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 4, no. 5, (1984), p. 448; J. Philip Taylor, *Spotlight on Bidford-on-Avon's Morris Tradition* (Self-published, 2016), pp. 8-43.

morris dance.<sup>42</sup> Carter compiled intelligence on dances from some 15 different communities, including details of their costumes, office-holders, musical accompaniment, names of dancers, and the events attended.<sup>43</sup> However, only in one instance did he collect choreographic information on the dances, from one Joseph Goodlake of Stanton Harcourt.<sup>44</sup> Unlike those before and since, Manning and Ferris were more interested in the gathering of information rather than its analysis.<sup>45</sup> In 1899, Manning successfully resurrected an 'existing morris team which was on the brink of extinction' in Headington Quarry, near Oxford.<sup>46</sup> However, unlike the Bidford dancers under Ferris, Manning did not interfere with the teaching of the dance. Instead, instruction was given by two of the old dancers of the Quarry, who also trained a local fiddle-player in the tunes.<sup>47</sup> It was this side, with the addition of a new concertina player, William Kimber junior, that Sharp saw in December 1899.

## Englishness

Histories of Englishness first appeared in great numbers during the 1980s, when scholars began scrutinising English national identity as an idea and experience. Since then, studies have grown in their breadth and diversity, and now constitute a significant body of literature, with an historiographical discourse of its own. Most of these histories can be placed into either one of two categories. First, there are those that describe Englishness as an ideological product, an entity capable of manufacturing and reproducing a distinctive repertoire of ideas and symbols,

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<sup>42</sup> Percy Manning, 'Some Oxfordshire Seasonal Festivals: with Notes on Morris-Dancing in Oxfordshire', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 8, no. 4, (1897), pp. 307-324; Michael Heaney, ed., *Percy Manning: the Man who Collected Oxfordshire* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Heaney, 'Percy Manning, Thomas Carter and the Revival of Morris Dancing', in Heaney, *Percy Manning*, p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164-165.

<sup>45</sup> John Forrest, *Morris and Matachin: a Study in Comparative Choreography* (Sheffield: CECTAL, 1984), p. 5; Judge, 'Merrie England and the Morris', pp. 125-127.

<sup>46</sup> Heaney, 'Percy Manning, Thomas Carter', p. 158.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

originating in isolation from the workaday English.<sup>48</sup> The second group, far fewer in number, articulates Englishness in relation to the lived experience, as an identity which emerged from the consciousness of the English themselves.<sup>49</sup> Whilst the former emphasises the novelty of Englishness in modernity, imposed on the nation by the elite, the latter recognises it was there all along, reproduced in the day-to-day. However, the various essences of Englishness abundant in the interwar period were not manifestations of an English political nationalism — as understood in the context of nineteenth century European nation building — but a repertory of banal patriotisms, a multitude of ‘forgotten reminders’.<sup>50</sup> As summarised by Krishan Kumar, it is often inferred that England did ‘not know nationalism’: ‘*Other* nations have nationalism; the English, it has been conventional to say, have patriotism, royalism, jingoism, imperialism’.<sup>51</sup> Conversely, David Edgerton has recently argued that it was only in the context of a withdrawal from imperialism in the post-1945 epoch that Britain — as opposed to England — first became attached to notions of national identity, as opposed to the looser expressions listed above.<sup>52</sup>

So-called ‘moments of Englishness’ are conceived largely as products of cultural rather than political consciousness. Robert Colls and Robert Tombs have both argued convincingly that England and Englishness are not modern concepts, but long-standing identities born out of sovereign relationships between people bound by attachment to place. Whilst it may be clothed in ancient apparel, Englishness did not represent a single complete concept but a multiplicity of ongoing processes: national identities are by their quiddity contingent and

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<sup>48</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2009); Simon Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, second edition (London: Reaktion, 2016); Paul Ward, *Britishness Since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004); Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940-2000* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Kumar, *Making of English National Identity*, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: a Twentieth Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), pp. 25-29.

provisional, though not endlessly flexible.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, such identities are intellectual constructs as much as they are socio-political ones, insofar as they are produced from and sustained by a cooperative imagining of the community as a whole.<sup>54</sup> As Ernest Gellner argued, identities which fail to achieve mutual recognition by their constituents are doomed to disintegrate.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, these identities do not exist solely as concepts or ideas, but as experiences. Formed and sustained by processes both creative and circumscribed, Englishness was reproduced through a repertory of mythological narratives.

John Carey has demonstrated how modernist writers of the twentieth century treated the newly literate ‘masses’ with scorn, excluding them from their work by an insidious elitism, in which the ‘mass’ was ‘always wrong’.<sup>56</sup> Intellectuals perceived themselves as the ‘transmitters and guardians’ of ‘timeless values’, a venerable literary tradition above the ephemeral concerns of social economy.<sup>57</sup> Edgerton and Colls have also both demonstrated the pervasiveness of middle-class prejudices on national identity. Colls argued that whilst plebeian modes of Englishness remained open to broad swathes of influence — incorporating a wide variety of motifs and fashions, albeit unequally — ‘Middle-class Englishness took what was common but only if it was sensible.’<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Edgerton noted how an insidious social conservatism ensured that the dominant modes of national identity were emphatically middle-brow and middle-class.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Colls, ‘The Lion and the Eunuch: National Identity and the British Genius’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 4, (2011), pp. 575–576.

<sup>54</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 5–7.

<sup>55</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>58</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 310.

<sup>59</sup> David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 96.

In the history of Englishness, the term ‘invention’ is best understood as a proxy for the ‘complex and overlapping processes of invention, transformation and recovery’.<sup>60</sup> So-called ‘invented traditions’ were seldom ever entirely fabricated or genuinely ancient, but their authenticity depended on an agreeable evocation of a knowable past in contemporary society. As Colls argued in a 2011 essay, ‘[w]e need our myths. Nations could not exist without them.’<sup>61</sup> Myths, like stereotypes, are useful ways of communicating complex narratives about subjects which would otherwise be unintelligible to a mass audience. Like a tarnished mirror, the English expected their myths to reflect some semblance of themselves, a recognition which secured their longevity. Outright lies and falsifications would not do. These myths were not fakes, but highly specialised intellectual entities, peculiar to their context and circumstance.<sup>62</sup> They were prompts, which influenced understanding. In spite of the attempts of psychologists in the early twentieth century to eradicate them, it is evident that ‘life without myths is itself the stuff of myth.’<sup>63</sup>

Myths depended less upon facts than they did common understandings and assumptions. They died when they ceased to resemble truth. The entire basis of the folk revival depended on a common recognition that the songs and dances contained ‘sacred English truths,’ unavailable elsewhere, having emerged from the social interactions of dying communities.<sup>64</sup> Stephen Corrsin described the folk dance revival as a manifestation of a widespread tendency among intellectuals of the late Victorian era to devise a ‘new, secular mythology’. Its preoccupation with magic, stability, and national exceptionalism was in response to the decline of religion, and the acceleration of socio-economic change, contextualised by European competition over markets and territories.<sup>65</sup> As Frank Trentmann

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<sup>60</sup> Philip Dodd, ‘Englishness and the National Culture’, in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920*, second edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Colls, ‘Lion and the Eunuch’, p. 575.

<sup>62</sup> Buckland, “Th’Owd Pagan Dance”, pp. 433-434.

<sup>63</sup> John Gray, *The Silence of Animals: on Progress and Other Modern Myths* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 98.

<sup>64</sup> Blackstone, ‘Aural and Moral Idylls of “Englishness”’, p. 565.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Corrsin, ‘The Founding of English Ritual Dance Studies before the First World War: Human Sacrifice in India ... and in Oxfordshire?’, *Folklore*, vol. 115, no. 4, (2004), pp. 321-331.

observed, anti-modernism in the twentieth century was as much a product of modernity as it was a reaction *against* its principles.<sup>66</sup> Englishness and its myths are inseparable from one another as mutually reinforcing agents of identity-creation. Moreover, myths cannot simply be written off as fakes, but must be interpreted as cultural products, which assisted people in the articulation of their own identities, and framed meaning.

The English folk revival was one manifestation of an intellectual fashion, endemic throughout interwar Europe, especially among certain sections of the middle-class, for romanticised versions of national pasts. Revisionist historians, writing in the closing decades of the twentieth century, tended to discard such ideas as nostalgia and tradition as inherently conservative ones, reactionary concepts employed by governing elites in constructing a semblance of order and unity during times of social unrest. In the late 1980s, David Lowenthal described nostalgia as ‘a social pariah’, out of touch with a desire for all that was new and fresh.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, champions of revivals and preservation were perceived as constructing a ‘community sanctioned by the natural order,’ a deliberate and willing falsification of reality.<sup>68</sup> These so-called marxisant histories and theories were largely predicated on universal assumptions of the hegemonic functioning of a society, in which an implausibly omnipotent ruling class was conceptualised as the sole agent in determining intellectual discourse.<sup>69</sup> Following the criticisms of Dave Harker, folk revivalists were interpreted as ‘mediators’ at work in the ‘cultural expropriation’ of working-class practices, satisfied with the fulfilment of their own preconceptions, in-keeping with their exclusively bourgeois prejudices.<sup>70</sup> Harker argued that the

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Trentmann, ‘Civilisation and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 29, no. 4, (1994), pp. 583-585.

<sup>67</sup> David Lowenthal, ‘Nostalgia Tells it Like it Wasn’t’, in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, ‘The Dimensions of Nostalgia’, in Shaw and Chase, eds., *The Imagined Past*, pp. 1-17.

<sup>69</sup> Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 192.

<sup>70</sup> Dave Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British ‘Folksong’, 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985); Dave Harker, ‘May Cecil Sharp be Praised?’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, (1982), p. 49.

predominant fear among middle-class revivalists was the perceived extinction of ‘not only that idealized ‘golden age’ ... but their very own material security’.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, he claimed they were not chiefly interested in the inherent qualities of the songs and tunes, but only recognised them as ‘a commodity with a market-value — an ideological ‘instrument’ and cultural ‘raw material’” for the construction of a national culture.<sup>72</sup>

Harker’s scholarship focussed primarily on music and song, with only occasional references to dance. The imbalance was partly redressed by Georgina Boyes in her 1993 book, *The Imagined Village*.<sup>73</sup> Boyes derived much of her theorising from *The Invention of Tradition*, an edited volume of essays compiled by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.<sup>74</sup> Their definition of an ‘invented tradition’, which became the standard model for historians confronted with questions of identity. It incorporated ‘both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and datable period’.<sup>75</sup> The function of these inventions was the inculcation of ‘certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition’ — they were held to be unchanging, at once immediate yet distant.<sup>76</sup> Boyes applied this definition, apparently revealing an invention of the folk based on an imagined people, defined by their ‘otherness’ to modern, urban society. The folk were ‘separate, historical, non-literate and anonymous’.<sup>77</sup> Following Harker’s lead, Boyes argued the morris and country dance movement was another manifestation of a middle-class culture obsessed with the manufacture of Englishness, reifying the established socio-political hierarchy. According to this Gramscian analysis, morris was a product designed to embody a

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<sup>71</sup> Harker, *Fakesong*, p. 171.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>73</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, second edition (Leeds: No Masters, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>75</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *Invention of Tradition*, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 16-17.



hegemonic source of national culture. Responding to the socio-political milieu of Thatcherite neoliberalism, Boyes and Harker sought to demonstrate how a quaint, though nevertheless superficial, version of national heritage allowed the forces of exploitative capitalism to get in through the back door by superficially eschewing class difference.<sup>78</sup>

In their criticisms of the folk revival movement, Boyes and Harker emphasised an inevitably dichotomous relationship between subject and observer, of the ‘unconscious’, ‘irresponsible’ folk, and the ruthless, manipulative collector. Their intention was not the rescuing of ‘the folk’ from the enormous condescension of revivalism, but the discrediting of its avaricious middle-class interpreters, accused with commodification, expropriation, and deceit. However, inequalities between the observer and the observed were endemic to all forms of social investigation, not just the collection of folk dances and songs. As Mark Freeman identified, even in the most sympathetic of enquiries, ‘the labourer remained a subordinate partner’.<sup>79</sup> In their preoccupation with the impenetrable dissonance between collector and source, critics such as Boyes and Harker reinforced the barriers of class, leaving out working-class revivalists and middle-class ‘folk’. Moreover, though she emphasised the centrality of bourgeois sensitivities to the aesthetic development of revived dances, Boyes failed to deconstruct these sensitivities, presenting them as a singular, ready-made cache of behaviours.<sup>80</sup> This thesis offers an alternative perspective to those of the marxisant histories, in that it rejects the notions of cultural expropriation and contests the idea of a singular bourgeois collector type, arguing that the imagined Englishness of morris dancing appealed both to those of the political left as well as those of the right. Whilst the movement was largely run by middle-class dancers, they resembled not a single unified coterie but a varied group.

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<sup>78</sup> Harker, *Fakesong*, p. xi.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Freeman, ‘Folklore Collection and Social Investigation in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century England’, *Folklore*, vol. 116, no. 1, (2005), p. 62.

<sup>80</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 94-119.

Though the ideological processes behind the construction of ‘the folk’ have been revealed by a succession of scholars, it is insufficient to simply point out the novelty of their invention.<sup>81</sup> A spirited rebuttal of Harker and Boyes was offered by Christopher Bearman, who set out his stall in opposition against what he understood as ‘Marxist and left-wing commentary generally ... more concerned with ideas than substance’.<sup>82</sup> Bearman argued that though Sharp may have appeared patrician in his work, he was nevertheless ‘a man with a deep interest in people’, whose success depended not so much on coercion as friendship.<sup>83</sup> He also accused Boyes of selectively implying ‘guilt by association’ on the men’s morris movement by exaggerating the importance of Rolf Gardiner’s friendship with members of the Nazi Party to the founding principles of the Morris Ring.<sup>84</sup> Bearman’s scholarship was meticulous in its detail, based on extensive primary source research, but placed an emphasis on the celebration of Sharp’s work over a scrutiny of the movement more generally. Katie Palmer Heathman’s recent doctoral thesis was a welcome addition to the scholarship, which sustained concepts of both ideology and culture, arguing that the folk revival emerged from ‘progressive movements, aimed at improving both the lot of the working classes and English society as a whole.’<sup>85</sup> Of particular value is her argument that, contrary to the claims of Boyes and Harker, some devotees of the revival emphasised folk dance and song as class products over national ones.<sup>86</sup> Both Bearman and Palmer Heathman ably demonstrated that whilst the revival appealed to conservative motifs, the underlying motivations were frequently progressive and even revolutionary in nature.

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<sup>81</sup> Buckland, ‘Dance, History, and Ethnography’, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher J. Bearman, ‘The English Folk Music Movement, 1898-1914’, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Hull, (2001), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher J. Bearman, ‘Cecil Sharp and Photography’, in David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Proceedings of the English Folk Dance and Song Society Folk Song Conference 2013* (Loomis House, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Bearman, ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, pp. 17-29.

<sup>85</sup> Katie Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival: the Transformative Potential of English Folksong and Dance, 1890-1940’, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leicester, (2016), p. 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The subject of folk dancing as a leisure activity remains neglected by studies in social history. With its origins in the advent of ‘history from below’ in the 1960s, the historiography of leisure in modern Britain has been shaped by the assumption that activities voluntarily pursued in an individual’s ‘free’ time revealed a deeper insight into their ‘true’ nature.<sup>87</sup> Robert Snape made a small, though nevertheless important, contribution in an article which examined the ‘sub-cultural leisure practice’ of folk dancing in the early twentieth century.<sup>88</sup> He argued that participants were largely ambivalent towards the explicit notions of its Englishness, or rather they appreciated the moral tenets it represented in other ways. For instance, whilst the country dance involved a mixing of the sexes, the couple was subsumed within the whole, therefore maintaining a respectable distance. Classes and social events hosted by the EFDSS and its constituent branches appealed especially to women because they ‘offered a safe environment for socialisation with people of a similar standing whilst also offering a degree of independence in leisure’.<sup>89</sup> It was not only the dance but the venues which were considered ‘safe’: performed in church halls or school rooms, the dances were ‘devoid of sexual undertones’.<sup>90</sup> Whilst the wider motivations of the movement championed its inherently English virtues, the majority of dancers appreciated them for their personal values, so its representational potential was minimal. However, Snape failed to recognise that it was by these banal signifiers that ideals of Englishness were perpetuated.

Gender is a central theme to this study. The Great War was less a watershed than an interruption in norms of masculinity and its relationship to other identities of nationhood and class. As Joanna Bourke explained, though aggression and stoicism continued to stand as pillars of masculinity after the war, in the more

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<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey Hill, ‘What shall we do with them when they’re not working?’: Leisure and Historians in Britain’, in Brett Bebbier, ed., *Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 11–13.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Snape, ‘Continuity, Change and Performativity in Leisure: English Folk Dance and Modernity, 1900–1939’, *Leisure Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, (2009), pp. 297–311.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 305.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 304.

'familiar worlds' of peacetime, 'manly nurturing and emotiveness' continued.<sup>91</sup> By the outbreak of war, male bonding was already well-established in English society, promoted not only through the elite institutions but also through voluntary association and private clubs. Scouting in particular championed a 'Brotherliness'.<sup>92</sup> However, in spite of evident continuities in male kinships, Bourke demonstrated how the shared identity of maleness was severely disrupted by the war: 'situations where men kill men.'<sup>93</sup> This crisis, together with a perceived threat of feminism to men, were among a number of factors in the interwar years that coalesced to precipitate a desire to 'reassert manliness'.<sup>94</sup> Melanie Tebbutt recently demonstrated how 'boyishness' became a key motif in notions of ideal masculinities during the 1920s, demonstrating also a growing importance and visibility of generational identities, especially those of younger people.<sup>95</sup> A national preoccupation with physical culture also reinforced 'connections between fitness, manliness and national identity'.<sup>96</sup> Manliness was thus reconstructed and reproduced by physical training. Whilst Sharp's EFDS originated in a training college, the men's morris movement of the interwar period consciously moved away from these institutions of conspicuous making, in favour of a more instinctive method of training in national expression. Similarly, their version of masculinity subverted and translated earlier notions of muscular Christianity, replacing them with an ebullient manliness. It was a shift towards cultural introversion, based on a self-regarding Englishness.

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<sup>91</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pp. 152-153.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Melanie Tebbutt, *Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 46-49.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

## Methodology and Chapter Outlines

This is a study into a hitherto neglected aspect of modern English cultural history, narrated principally through the lives of three morris dancers who combined ideas about England and Englishness with performances of an imagined past. It does not profess to being a comprehensive account of the morris dance revival, but rather an intellectual history of some of its constituent themes, salient to ideas of national identity. Whilst morris was often presented as the epitome of English traditional dance, the values and motifs it projected were not necessarily congruent with those of a dominant middle-class, middle-brow Englishness. As an expression of an alternative kind of masculinity, morris dance in the interwar period drew from a mixture of prevailing norms and new modes of gendered kinship. Their fraternity was based on an mixture of medievalism and cultural primitivism, exercised through exclusively male bonding. The chronology of this study roughly corresponds with the period which Dave Harker deemed to represent a 'silence' in the folk movement.<sup>97</sup> Whilst most scholarship on the English folk music movement has focussed on the activities before 1914 and after 1951, this study is based chiefly on the events of the interwar years. Though this period appeared to be something of an interregnum for folk song, it was a profoundly important time for the morris dance, as its development spanned the first and second folk music revivals.<sup>98</sup> Incidentally, this work is also a contribution towards Harker's thirty-five year-old appeal, made in the concluding pages of *Fakesong*, that we 'need *critical* biographical studies' to better understand the motivations and actions of the protagonists at work in reviving English folk song and dance.<sup>99</sup>

Unlike previous research into the folk music revival, which scrutinised the content of songs, music, and dance, this study is not principally concerned with the textual source upon which the movement was predicated. Whilst it is possible to

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<sup>97</sup> Harker, *Fakesong*, p. xvii.

<sup>98</sup> It is generally accepted there were two distinctive folk revivals in England during the twentieth century. The first commenced in 1898 with the formation of the Folk Song Society and lasted until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The second began in the 1950s, manifest in a proliferation of folk clubs, which took inspiration from Ewan MacColl and A.L. Lloyd. For a critical appraisal of the second revival, see Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 196-252.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 255.

write a criticism of morris dance as disseminated through didactical literature, this work is concerned with the meanings attached to dancing rather than the dances themselves. The following discussion attempts to analyse the symbols projected onto the revived morris, amidst the rhythmic clangour of bells. This is not a story of people performing dead dances, but one of a contested relationship between past and present. The central portion of the thesis is taken up with a sequence of three intellectual biographies, each pertaining to a certain theme. Whilst Rolf Gardiner has received considerable attention from scholars of the morris dance movement, the influences of Alec Hunter and Joseph Needham have remained largely overlooked.

The opening chapter offers a timely reappraisal of the first decade of the folk dance revival, from 1905 to 1914, analysing the attitudes of Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp towards the dancer's body, and the spirit of the performance. The beginnings of the national revival lay in the *Espérance Club*, an evening club for girls and young women of the working class communities around Somers Town in north London, established and overseen by Neal in partnership with Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. Despite amicable beginnings, Neal and Sharp later differed over their approaches to its dissemination and performance. Neal was principally interested in its potential to ameliorate urban squalor through joyous exercise, as a dance transmitted through imitative and intuitive learning. However, from 1909 Sharp put the task of collection and instruction over everything else, constructing a corpus of dance, to sit alongside art, music, and literature as ideal representations of the English national character. The dancer became a site for debates over morris. Whilst Sharp's dancers were subservient to form, Neal's dancers were themselves the very source of its authenticity. Though Sharp's EFDS survived the Great War and Neal's *Espérance Club* did not, the debate over the primacy of dance or dancer remained unreconciled, and it was this discourse which influenced later protagonists.

Rolf Gardiner was the Angry Young Man of the early folk dance movement in England. The chapter on Gardiner examines the importance of place to his ideas about morris dancing, enacted through 'pilgrimages to holy places', informed by his

belief in the potent efficacy of ‘inter-locality’, an exercise in patriotism and fellowship. In the wake of the Armistice, Gardiner reconciled his Englishness with a romantic attachment to Germanic nations through his identification as a member of the post-war generation. A self-declared opponent of intellectuals and their abstract posturing, he placed practice over principles: it was in the constructive act of manual work, in bonds communicated and reinforced by song and dance rituals, that Gardiner demonstrated and tested his ideas. Rejecting Sharp’s EFDS for adhering to ‘a rigid formal quality, falsely known as traditional,’ Gardiner posited an alternative framing of authenticity, more akin to Neal’s intuitive expression.<sup>100</sup> From 1923, he vehemently repudiated the legitimacy of women’s morris, which he considered an offence both to historical precedent and to femininity, simultaneously promoting the peculiarly masculine qualities of the dance. Gardiner’s enthusiasm for morris was a constituent element of his peculiarly English organo-fascism, which combined ideals of agriculture as husbandry with a championing of aristocratic authority over the land and people.<sup>101</sup> Thus, he sought to subjugate morris to the social and economic needs of an England in crisis, an attempt at establishing an ordered society of a pseudo-feudal composition. Much to his dismay, he found most of his compatriot dancers were less interested in agrarian economics than they were in simply having a good time. From 1927, Gardiner planted himself in Dorset where he spent the rest of his life championing organic farming. Whilst morris continued to perform a central role in these activities, his influence on the national movement was constrained by his uncompromising lofty idealism.

The third chapter introduces a direct link with the Arts and Crafts movement. Alec Hunter was an artist, designer, and weaver, who in 1934 was elected as the first Squire of the Morris Ring. Raised in Haslemere and Letchworth — crucibles of Peasant Art revivals and the Garden City movement respectively — by

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<sup>100</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘The English Folk Dance: Some Constructive Considerations, Part I’, *Youth*, vol. 2, no. 11, (1923), p. 54 and p. 52.

<sup>101</sup> For an introduction to organo-fascism and its centrality to English versions of far-right ideologies, see Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 159-164.

parents with an interest in occult religion and magic, as a child Hunter was conscious of various attempts at invoking a 'New Jerusalem'. Hunter's advocacy of morris dance was influenced by his belief that it remained exempt from the arbitrary modern distinctions of 'high' and 'low'. Instead, he believed it represented the social art of England, which was common to all. Whilst he accepted Sharp's assumption that it was the product of unconscious creation, Hunter nevertheless recognised the historic influence of conscious artistry over time. However, he also had to reconcile his belief in the democratic potential of art with his elitist tendencies. Hunter resembled a kindly aristocrat of Guild Socialism, espousing morris for men of all classes, on the condition its style and form remained dignified, its development moderated by a mutually-defined elite. To this high churchman, morris represented an embodiment of an ideal Christian Englishness, and an evocation of a joyous medievalism through ritual performance. For Hunter, morris was a social art akin to a sacramental act. In both Letchworth and Thaxted, Hunter promoted morris dancing as a 'living activity', conducive towards fomenting a 'happy social atmosphere' in keeping with Christian ideals.<sup>102</sup>

The next chapter analyses the role of Joseph Needham's socialism in the founding of the Morris Ring. Unlike his contemporaries, Needham came to morris as an adult, but nevertheless fell for its enchanting qualities, which reinforced his belief in transcendental Christianity. As a life-long 'bridge-builder', Needham was preoccupied with facilitating exchange between otherwise disparate groups and entities. On this basis, his identities as biochemical scientist and Christian were not oppositional but complementary, permeated by his socialism. Like Hunter, Needham believed in the potential of morris as sacrament. He shared in Conrad Noel's belief that 'Good music, bright colours, and lively music were necessary to life,' best represented through morris and country dancing, vestiges of medieval England.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Needham believed these dances had a potential for bringing people together, transcending class barriers. The Morris Ring encouraged the

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<sup>102</sup> R. Kenworthy Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter, 1899-1958: Founder Squire of the Morris Ring* (Letchworth: Hive, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>103</sup> 'Dancing and Religion: Folk Dancers at Thaxted', *Essex Chronicle*, 23 June 1933.



proliferation of semi-autonomous men's morris clubs, each with their own respective local identity, appropriate to their membership. In addition to his role in furthering the practice of morris dancing, Needham also conducted research into the molly dances of Cambridgeshire, hitherto shunned by collectors who deemed them degenerate forms.

The final chapter is an attempt at understanding the condescension towards the morris dance, not only from scholars but also the general public. Perceived as the reserve of 'cranks', devotees of morris and folk dancing were stigmatised as misty-eyed fanatics, intent on turning back the clock — enemies of progress. The likes of Gardiner, Hunter, and Needham were perceived as reactionary idealists, ambivalent towards the material reality of England. Whilst morris dances and folk music satisfied a cultural proclivity for a rural landscape, apparently undefiled by modern industrialism, they remained minority pursuits. Many writers of the early twentieth century were hostile towards that which was considered quaint. Kingsley Amis and Evelyn Waugh in particular both criticised the inverted snobbery of middle-class revivalists as an egregious corruption of taste and morality. Furthermore, the sight of grown men performing dances, which they thought to be relics of a past age, also invited ridicule. Resisting the rising tide of commercial leisure, morris dancers were derided both for their earnestness and their introverted chauvinism. A more balanced appraisal was made by Owen Barfield, a member of the Oxford Inklings. A dancer in his youth, Barfield argued that whilst the methods and principles of its revival might have been misguided, it was better than losing it all to oblivion.<sup>104</sup> Overall, whilst morris enjoyed some popularity as an icon of Englishness, the majority of the population continued to look down on its participants as risible eccentrics.

This thesis utilises primary source materials from a number of archival collections. Wherever possible, the narrative is grounded in evidence gleaned from these sources, particularly in letters of correspondence and autobiographical

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<sup>104</sup> Owen Barfield, 'English People', p. 258. Transcript copy, edited by Tiffany Brooke Martin and John D. Rateliff, <http://www.owenbarfield.org/englishpeople/>

writings. It is therefore important to note the significant disparity in available primary source material. On his death, Sharp's papers were safely deposited in the custody of the EFDS and his *alma mater*, Clare College, Cambridge, overseen by his literary executor and long-term amanuensis, Maud Karpeles.<sup>105</sup> The entirety of his collection, including facsimile copies of the manuscripts held in Cambridge, are available at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, housed in Sharp's memorial building in Camden Town. Regrettably, Neal's effects were not so well provided for, and so only a relatively small proportion of her letters and manuscripts survive. The most valuable articles of Neal's are a small sample of her letters — incorporated into the collection of her collaborator, Clive Carey — and the typescript of an autobiography, entitled 'As a Tale That is Told', both of which now reside alongside Sharp's papers at the VWML.<sup>106</sup> It is probably due to this lamentable paucity of material that a comprehensive biography of Mary Neal has yet to appear, though the work of Roy Judge is invaluable in recording her involvement in the nascent revival movement.<sup>107</sup>

The papers of Rolf Gardiner and Joseph Needham are both held by the Manuscripts Department of the Cambridge University Library. Gardiner was an inveterate writer of letters, producing an enormous volume of correspondence characterised by a literary style which was at once florid yet compelling. His close friend, Arthur Heffer, once described Gardiner's writing as 'excellent rhetoric, but bad prose.'<sup>108</sup> Among his collection is a draft of a semi-autobiographical novel, entitled 'David's Sling', written largely in the period immediately after going down from Cambridge University in 1924-1925, and added to later in life.<sup>109</sup> Together with his letters, and a considerable number of published articles, the unpublished novel

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<sup>105</sup> 'Mr. Sharp's Bequests', *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 8, (1924), p. 238.

<sup>106</sup> Lucy Neal, 'Poverty Knock', *The Guardian* (online), 7 February 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/07/morris-dancing-lucy-neal-victorian>.

<sup>107</sup> Roy Judge, 'Mary Clara Sophia Neal, 1860-1944', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/40485>.

<sup>108</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, [n.d., October/November 1925], Gardiner Papers J/3/7, CUL.

<sup>109</sup> David Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920-c.1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 48.

provides considerable insight into how Gardiner saw himself as a young man. Needham's letter-writing was not so prolific, though his output of articles and papers was still prodigious. A man of various interests, morris dancing occupied a relatively small proportion of Needham's attention. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect common themes and beliefs throughout his articles, concerned with working class cultures, and the place of religion in modern society.

As a visual artist, Hunter sadly left very little written documentation. Aside from the few personal diaries which remain, kept in the custody of the Warner's Textile Archive in Braintree, the Morris Ring Archive holds a sequence of letters written during his tenure as Squire of the organisation (1934-1936). This study attempts to piece together the remnants of his written record, together with an evaluation of his art and designs. The emphasis of this thesis is towards activities at a local level, based on the clubs of Cambridge, Letchworth and Thaxted. I have not used any official sources from the EFDSS, save for their periodicals and journals. Further archival materials from Arthur Peck's collection at Christ's College, Cambridge, Conrad Noel's papers in Hull, the Morris Ring archive in Chelmsford, and a number of smaller, private collections all provided further contextual evidence, manifest in rich seams of correspondence and minutes of meetings.

Dance is ephemeral and itself leaves no physical record. Though a glaring truism, it is nevertheless important to be mindful of this when approaching such a study. This thesis captures glimpses of dance through the scrutiny of personal papers, and as such more attention is given to the personal resonances evoked by dance than to the activity itself. The autobiographical papers of Neal and Gardiner are extraordinarily valuable for their reflexivity, but just as important are the letters, which, studied in series, elicit insight into the development of an individual's thoughts and feelings over time. In terms of correspondence, wherever it was ordered by date, I initially limited my researches to the known periods of high activity in the movement. Similarly, where they were sorted by correspondent, I limited my searches to those names with a known link to the folk and morris dance movement. However, my sampling methods were subject to constant revision, and

were only a guide rather than a strict rule. These personal writings tended to view the dance as a process rather than a product, providing important evidence for the emotional response to dance. To complement the personal accounts, I turned to pedagogical literature — such as Cecil Sharp’s *Morris Book* — as well as essays and articles on the dance itself, for an ostensibly more objective view. Whilst the partiality of these sources is sometimes frustrating, it is these very subjectivities and omissions which give these sources their value to the historian, as they elucidate the meanings and significance of the morris dance.

Writing to Ewart Russell, then Bagman (secretary) of the Morris Ring, in March 1971, Rolf Gardiner reflected on the virtues of record-keeping: ‘I hope that some literary- or historically-minded member of the Morris Ring may someday peruse these singular records and perhaps commemorate them. I should be sad were they to pass into dusty oblivion.’<sup>110</sup> Situated inside the community, as a dancer, I was granted privileged access to a number of private archives, otherwise inaccessible to other researchers. In many cases, these collections are simply unknown by scholars outside of the fraternity. Indeed, some custodians considered my own personal history of participation a vital element in my understanding of the materials. They deemed me a ‘responsible’ person, capable of treating the subject with respect, not because I was a doctoral researcher but because I was a dancer. Nevertheless, I was conscious at all times of the need to maintain a scholarly objectivity and a critical distance from the sources. This work follows a long precedent for dancing scholars: Chandler, Forrest, and Heaney were all morris dancers, and so too were Bearman and Judge. This trend shows little sign of abatement in the current scholarship as new researchers continue to arrive with established links to the dance fraternity.<sup>111</sup> In light of the persistence of condescension towards folk dance and music in popular discourse, the dancer/

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<sup>110</sup> Letter from Rolf Gardiner to Ewart Russell, 26 March 1971. Morris Ring Archive MR/1766, Essex Record Office.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Chloe Metcalfe, ‘Why do Morris Dancers Wear White?’, Katie Palmer Heathman, ‘“I Ring for the General Dance”: Morris and Englishness in the Work of Conrad Noel’, Lucy Wright, ‘This Girl Can Morris Dance: Girls’ Carnival Morris Dancing and Politics of Participation’, all in Michael Heaney, ed., *The Histories of the Morris in Britain: Proceedings of the 2017 Conference* (London: EFDSS, 2018).

scholar continues to play an important role in scrutinising and celebrating the morris dance, providing depth and nuance largely ignored by outsiders.

# Chapter I

## MARY NEAL and CECIL SHARP

‘I see a great land poised as in a dream - waiting for the word  
by which it may live again.  
I see the stretched sleeping figure - waiting for the kiss and  
the re-awakening.  
I hear the bells pealing, and the crash of hammers, and see  
beautiful parks spread - as in toy show.  
I see a great land waiting for its own people to come and take  
possession of it.’<sup>1</sup>

On the evening of 15 December 1905, Mary Neal and some two hundred friends of all social strata met together in the Hall of the Passmore Edwards Settlement, on Tavistock Place, for the Espérance Club’s Christmas party. For their guests, the Club had arranged a special entertainment, which was to be the highlight of the event. Neal later reflected how ‘that night there awoke, after generations of sleep, a little stir of an older life, an older rhythm, an older force, in tune with a simpler life, a sweeter music.’<sup>2</sup> The programme included a sequence of folk songs, gleaned from the collections of Cecil Sharp, interspersed with morris dances learned from three members of the Headington Quarry Morris side. The spectacle proved a revelation to the assembled audience of artists, writers, politicians, as well as friends and family of the Club members. According to Neal, it was Laurence Housman, brother of the poet, A.E. Housman, who was the first of her guests that evening to envisage the beginnings of a national movement in embryo, and prophesied a great revival of song and dance throughout England.<sup>3</sup> Another early devotee of morris was E.V. Lucas, a journalist for *Punch* magazine, who recognised the capacity of these dances to invoke elegy alongside joy, excitement, and hope: ‘These morris dances alone

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (1883).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Neal, ‘As a Tale That is Told: the Autobiography of a Victorian Woman’, p. 145. Neal Manuscript Collection, MN/1/1, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (hereafter VWML) (online).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

would draw me by invisible threads to any hall where they were given - not only for their own unusual alluringness and gaiety, but for their essential merrie Englandism.’<sup>4</sup>

What began as an amicable relationship of mutual assistance later deteriorated into acrimony and resentment, as Neal and Sharp disagreed over how the morris dances should be taught. Ostensibly, their discord originated in disagreements over “Form and Content”, “Technique and Spirit”, onto which one might also graft ‘Democracy and Autocracy’.<sup>5</sup> Their relationship has been portrayed as an irrevocably oppositional one. It is often argued that Sharp’s insistence on technical accuracy was ‘defined against’ Neal’s encouragement of a looser form of dance and expression.<sup>6</sup> However, in pursuing such an essentially antagonistic narrative, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the differences which separated Sharp from Neal, obfuscating the similarities in their respective endeavours. This chapter offers a timely reappraisal of the early years of the national morris revival, with reference to the hotly-debated ideals of authenticity and the struggle for authority. Their divergence is best described according to differing attitudes towards dissemination rather than starkly contrasting ideologies. Previous analyses have tended to overlook the initial period between 1905 and 1907 when Neal and Sharp worked in close harmony, together with their respective colleagues and peers. This was not merely some *antebellum* period, before the inevitable break-up, but an important period of intense creativity and heart-felt comradeship in pursuit of a common cause. In 1912, Reginald Buckley summarised the division of the time: ‘Misguided partisans have decried the one method as pedantic, and the other as indifferent to technique.’<sup>7</sup> To Sharp, the morris dances were instruments in the cultural project of nation-building, to be revered and preciously guarded through faithful replication. To Neal, on the other hand, these dances were agents in the

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<sup>4</sup> Unknown source, cited in Neal, ‘As a Tale That is Told’, p. 142. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>5</sup> Roy Judge, ‘Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris’, *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 5, no. 5, (1989), pp. 545-546.

<sup>6</sup> Gammon, “Many Useful Lessons”, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> W. G. McN., ‘The Cult of Folk-Song and Dance’, *The Musical Times*, vol. 53, no. 835, (1912), p. 602.

civilising project of community, a means of self-improvement, by which the individual was socialised. Though the differences between dance as an article and agent should not be exaggerated, it is perhaps a useful starting point in understanding their respective attitudes towards morris. They differed in their respective priorities. Whereas Neal was principally interested in exploiting the potential of morris dancing to alleviate the condition of the working classes through joyous exercise, for Sharp, the work of collection and dissemination took precedence over everything else.

Attempts at restoring a balance in the historiography have produced results of varying quality. Perhaps the most frequently-cited of works on their relationship is that of Roy Judge's, published in the *Folk Music Journal* in 1989.<sup>8</sup> Judge argued their relationship was best interpreted as one of tension rather than dichotomous opposition, and warned against the blind alleys of caricatures and simplification. This chapter follows a similar approach, examining their respective appeals to authenticity, or rather to 'truth', articulated through the dancers' body and the debated spirit of tradition. As an emotional as well as a physical activity, their dispute was not simply a matter of technical expertise versus joyous self-expression, but one of a contested embodiment of English character. However, in this instance, there are two identifiable modes of 'spirit', namely that of an embodied emotional response, and that of a disembodied myth of forgotten symbolism. In their theorising of morris dance, both Sharp and Neal deliberately confused the boundaries between personal emotions and national mythologies to offer their performances the impression of a deeper, more profound resonance. For Neal, this was articulated through a language of racial stereotyping and unconscious expression, as though each body contained a latent spirit which required only the right occasion and space to display. On the other hand, Sharp believed that agency resided in the dances themselves, so their true meaning could only be unleashed through a perfect replication of the repertoire.

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<sup>8</sup> Judge, 'Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris', pp. 545-591.



The body of the dancer was a site for disputes over this contested authenticity. According to Sharp's rubric, the ideal dancer was a vehicle for the disseminating of a refined performance, akin to an art form. However, Neal's dancers were vectors of a new spiritualism, with an innate potential for transcending past and present, achieving an enhanced sense of selfhood. Whilst for Sharp the crux of authenticity resided in the *dances*, for Neal it was the *dancers* themselves who represented the genuine articles. The former assumed morris was an artefact of English culture, which required careful and exacting arbitration. By contrast, Neal's morris was an intuitive dance, transmitted through imitative learning. Sharp's view privileged a corpus of art, music, and literature as representative of the English national character. It was as though by adherence or otherwise to these standards, an individual's Englishness could be measured. Neal's sense of national identity was based on the consciousness of the individual in relation to others, their place, and a shared spiritual experience. For Sharp, Englishness was a duty, for Neal, it was an opportunity. Though Sharp's version arguably triumphed, enshrined within the English Folk Dance Society, the divergence represented in the conflict between these two early protagonists was never finally reconciled, and continued to permeate debates over the authenticity and legitimacy of revival morris throughout the twentieth century.

## **Sharp**

Cecil James Sharp was born on 22 November 1859, the feast day of St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, chosen for his namesake. The third of ten children born to James and Jane Sharp, Cecil was their first son. The family lived in Denmark Hill, a small district of Southwark, but later moved to Cornwall Gardens, South Kensington. Together with Ethel, the second of his elder sisters, Sharp enjoyed playing the family's piano, drawing largely from the popular classical canon, Handel and Mozart being among his father's favourite composers.<sup>9</sup> After suffering two 'ignoble' years at a preparatory school in Brighton, Sharp's parents chose for him

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<sup>9</sup> Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 1.

Uppingham, where he entered the lower school in 1869.<sup>10</sup> According to his biographers, the choice was ostensibly based on the recent pioneering developments of its headmaster, the Reverend Edward Thring.<sup>11</sup> At this time, Uppingham was a school where music was treated seriously, and considered an integral part of a pupil's association with the place.<sup>12</sup> It was a means through which boys and young men could develop and sustain a real, emotional bond with their school. Sharp later reflected on the influences of his music master, Paul David, who regularly demonstrated 'how important a place the choir may hold in the life of a Public School.'<sup>13</sup> Though music was a constant element throughout his formative years, Sharp's parents never intended it to be his vocation.

Considering his opportunities, and his family's evidently high expectations, Sharp's academic successes were relatively modest. Sharp passed his senior examinations with the aid of personal tuition from a family friend, who ran a coaching establishment in Weston-super-Mare. In the autumn of 1879, he went up to Clare College, Cambridge, to read Mathematics, a subject for which Sharp demonstrated some degree of aptitude, but a marked lack of interest. After three years of serious rowing and music-making, Sharp left Cambridge with a third-class degree. It might have been his disappointment at wasted opportunities that motivated James Sharp to exhort his son to strike his own path. Seeing no future in professional music, he encouraged Cecil to find a career in a more conventional industry.<sup>14</sup> In October 1882, Sharp set out for Australia with a little money in his pocket as a farewell gift from his father, who also paid his fare.<sup>15</sup> Arriving in Adelaide with his Cambridge degree and a relative ease with his social standing,

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<sup>10</sup> A.H. Fox Strangeways and Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance Malcolm Tozer, *The Ideal of Manliness: the Legacy of Thring's Uppingham* (Portscatho: Sunnyrest, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Fox Strangeways and Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *A Book of British Song for Home and School* (London: John Murray, 1902).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Heaney, 'Cecil James Sharp', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, (2008) [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36040>].

<sup>15</sup> Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, p. 8.

Sharp's personality suited the office of a gentlemanly civil servant.<sup>16</sup> Initially, he took clerical work at the Commercial Bank of Australia, before becoming assistant to the Chief Justice of South Australia in April 1884, a position he held for four years.<sup>17</sup> In this capacity he was well placed to make many acquaintances and form close friendships, some of which came to influence his later musical activities. Perhaps the single most significant of these friends was Charles Latimer Marson, who Sharp first met in 1889, when Marson was working as a curate in a suburb of Adelaide. Some fourteen years later, he prompted Sharp to start collecting folk songs from Somerset singers, beginning with John England, the Marsons' gardener.<sup>18</sup>

Soon after his arrival in Australia, Sharp joined the Adelaide String Quartet club, and became their musical director in 1883. He resigned from his work for the Chief Justice in January 1889, and at last made music his full-time vocation, becoming co-director of the Adelaide College of Music. It was here, over the winter of 1890, that he conducted the music for a comic opera entitled *Sylvia: or, The Marquis and The Maid*, which featured a grotesque 'Moorish Dance' — strictly a satirised morris — in the second act, apparently an anti-masque for a 'Graceful Dance', which followed some six items later in the programme.<sup>19</sup> Though well received in Adelaide, where it was performed at the Theatre Royal, Sharp's attempts to take the operetta to London failed.<sup>20</sup>

Sharp finally returned to England in January 1892, disillusioned by frustrated efforts but nevertheless sad to leave behind his colleagues and friends in Adelaide.<sup>21</sup> Soon after his return, in early 1893, he was appointed as music master at Ludgrove Preparatory School, a feeder institution for Eton, where he taught three or four

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<sup>16</sup> Hugh Anderson, 'Virtue in a Wilderness: Cecil Sharp's Australian Sojourn, 1882-1892', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 6, no. 5, (1994), pp. 626-627.

<sup>17</sup> Heaney, 'Cecil Sharp', *ODNB*.

<sup>18</sup> David Sutcliffe, *The Keys of Heaven: the Life of Revd. Charles Marson* (Nottingham: Cockasnook Books, 2010), pp. 122-126, pp. 226-228.

<sup>19</sup> Judge, 'Merrie England and the Morris', p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Heaney, 'Cecil Sharp', *ODNB*.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, 'Virtue in a Wilderness', pp. 645-647.

days a week.<sup>22</sup> Sharp enjoyed working at Ludgrove, and remained there for the next eighteen years. Three years later, in 1896, he became Principal of the Hampstead Conservatoire, a supplementary role of two and a half day's work a week, on an initial salary of £100 a year as well as a house in Hampstead.<sup>23</sup> These illustrious posts supported his 'chief aim of composing', and whilst his compositions were not very successful, Sharp nevertheless became a renowned figure of the English musical profession.<sup>24</sup>

In spite of his credentials as a music teacher of the establishment, Sharp disliked the snobbery of the upper- and middle-classes. In particular, he despised their condescension towards English arts in favour of European classical composers. This was especially apparent in the musical tastes of his parents.<sup>25</sup> He later argued for folk song — as the idiom of the people, reproduced unselfconsciously — as the basis for a future national school of music, which would both influence and reflect 'the expression of the national character.'<sup>26</sup> However, in his rejection of one vein of condescension, Sharp only replaced it with his own. He joined the newly-formed Folk Song Society on 23 May 1901, which was already weakened by a lack of clear vision as to its objectives and remit. Two years later, Sharp referred to the Society as 'moribund', a damning criticism for a society only five years old.<sup>27</sup> He later came to argue that the business of collecting and disseminating folk music, as a matter of national importance, should be taken under state control, lest it suffer at the hands of irresponsible amateur antiquaries.<sup>28</sup> From the outset, Sharp entered the fray as a determined and single-minded enthusiast, who was not afraid to express his forthright opinions.

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<sup>22</sup> Fox Strangeways and Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Heaney, 'Cecil Sharp', *ODNB*.

<sup>25</sup> Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Colls and Dodd, eds., *Englishness*, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> 'Music in Schools: Its Place in Education', *The Morning Post*, 29 July 1905, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Fox Strangeways and Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>28</sup> Francmanis, 'National Music to National Redeemer', p. 6.

Arguably the most momentous incident in Sharp's life occurred during a visit to his mother-in-law's house, Sandfield Cottage, in Headington Quarry, near Oxford, during Christmas 1899. This is an event so well known, though misrepresented, it has been justifiably termed the 'Sharp mythology'.<sup>29</sup> It is often claimed that this was Sharp's first encounter with a side of morris dancers, and that it was this serendipitous meeting which precipitated the later revival of folk dance. Sharp later recalled how

'the sight of them ... affected me so profoundly that without exaggeration I must say it changed the whole council of my thoughts, provided me with a new occupation, led to the publication of a large number of books and eventually brought about a small revolution in the social life of England.'<sup>30</sup>

His romanticised account informed a popular narrative of myth-like qualities, which requires careful qualification. Whilst this may indeed have been his first sighting of a side of morris dancers, he was not exactly ignorant of their existence. Sharp had previously been an accessory in the fashion for invoking a dramatised 'Merrie England' on the stage, so he was already aware of morris, albeit by a proxy of theatrical caricature, which scarcely resembled that of the vernacular Oxfordshire type. Similarly, the Headington Quarry dancers were no strangers to earnest middle-class observers, as the side was itself the product of the external interference of an Oxford-based antiquary, Percy Manning. At the request of Manning, earlier in 1899, Thomas Carter arranged for a revival of the Headington side to accompany a lecture on Oxfordshire customs at the Oxford Corn Exchange in March 1899.<sup>31</sup> It was this side, together with a newly-recruited musician, William Kimber junior, that Sharp saw. Though he noted five of the tunes from Kimber on 27 December, he did not at this stage take any further steps to collect information on the dances.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gammon, "Many Useful Lessons", p. 78

<sup>30</sup> Cecil Sharp, Notes for a lecture 'Collecting Stories (Lecture to Girl Guides)', Sharp Manuscripts, Box 5, Item 61, F.4, VWML, cited in Paul Burgess, 'The Mystery of the Whistling Sewermen: How Cecil Sharp Discovered Gloucestershire Morris Dancing', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, (2002), p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Heaney, 'Percy Manning, Thomas Carter and the Revival of Morris Dancing', in Heaney, ed., *Percy Manning*, pp. 156-162.

<sup>32</sup> Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, p. 25.

In his combined role as philosopher and artist, Sharp came to adopt perhaps the single most influential position as translator-in-chief for the folk dance movement: 'he had an ideal and he kept that ideal ever before him'.<sup>33</sup> In 1911, Sharp founded the English Folk Dance Society, and in 1919, he was appointed by H.A.L. Fisher, President of the Board of Education, as Occasional Inspector with a responsibility for reporting on the teaching of folk song and dance. Between 1905 and his death in 1924, Sharp published instructional books on morris, sword, and country dancing, which extended over fourteen parts, many of which appeared in revised editions. Together, these volumes constituted a 'record and manual' for dancer and scholar.<sup>34</sup> However, the true beginnings of Sharp's interest in morris came at the instigation of Mary Neal and Herbert MacIlwaine in 1905, who converted that which was hitherto something of a minor consideration, 'more or less dormant' in Sharp's mind, into a project of national immediate importance.

## Neal

It may be said that Mary Neal was twice born. Clara Sophia Neal was born on 5 June 1860, to David and Sarah Ann Neal of Edgbaston. In February 1888, at the age of twenty-seven, she joined the Methodist West London Mission, engaging in work towards the amelioration of social conditions of the poor in the districts of Soho and Marylebone. Atoning for the 'pageant of snobbery', endemic throughout her prosperous upbringing, Clara thereby became 'Sister Mary', and she remained committed to the cause of social justice for the rest of her life.<sup>35</sup> In her unpublished autobiography, Neal declared that her memories of early childhood were mostly unhappy ones. Her father, David Neal, was in the family business of button manufacture, run in partnership with one Thomas Tonks on Great Charles Street in

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Kennedy, 'Lecture Given at the Cambridge Vacation School', *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 8, (1924), pp. 235-238.

<sup>34</sup> Phillips Barker, 'Cecil James Sharp', p. 208.

<sup>35</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 14. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

Birmingham.<sup>36</sup> Her parents seemed not to care for their children's interests, and resisted constant pleas for games and stories. As an adolescent, she felt her mother's company an insufferable burden.<sup>37</sup> Young Neal's primary source of amusement was in the playing of practical jokes at home and outside in the street. Such incidents provided precious moments of levity to young Clara and her siblings, who were usually expected to perform the role of good middle-class Victorian children, and suppress their instincts for mirth and mischief. Neal resented this sham of social expectation and the preoccupation of those around her in keeping up appearances. It was, as she described it, symptomatic of 'the utter unreality of everyday life,' a self-delusion maintained by wilful ignorance.<sup>38</sup> As an adolescent, her desire to gain knowledge about sex resulted in embarrassment and chastisement by her elders. To be punished for asking such questions, she later reflected, was 'to be severely reprimanded for an offence I had no idea I had committed.'<sup>39</sup>

Neal's schooling was conventional enough for a girl of the aspirational middle-class, attending institutions which explicitly marketed themselves as places exclusively for 'the daughters of Gentleman.'<sup>40</sup> Two years in a local mixed 'Dame School' offered scant preparation for a girls' day school in the City of London. At the age of thirteen, she was sent to a boarding school in Malvern, 'utterly miserable' in comparison to the freedoms and opportunities of Miss Barker's City school. After one or two unedifying years at this expensive school — suffering poor food, inadequate heating, and 'grotesque' teaching — Neal returned to Birmingham with the resolution never to return to any sort of formal education. It was due to the unwelcome interference of a cousin that Neal was later sent to a school run by two sisters, 'highly educated in the modern Girton and Newnham way,' which provided a fair and progressive style of teaching catered to prepare pupils for the local

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Tonks passed his share to his son in April 1875. David Neal retired in July 1879, whereupon Thomas Tonks junior took sole control of the business. See: *The London Gazette*, 16 April 1875, p. 2159; *The London Gazette*, 22 July 1879, p. 4605.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 18. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 30-33

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 20-29.

Cambridge examinations. In spite of her initial difficulty in adjusting to the serious scholarly discipline — somewhat different from her previous experiences — after two years, Neal passed the Senior Cambridge Examination with a distinction in English, though she did not take up a place at a university.<sup>41</sup>

Even in adolescence, Neal's actions resembled a socially-minded individual fighting against the ignorance and inequity of her own middle-class upbringing. In particular, she rallied against chauvinistic social mores, especially those imposed exclusively on the lives of women: 'We were the victims of clichés, taboos, conventionalities, prohibitions.'<sup>42</sup> In adulthood, Neal made it her mission to counter these injustices by providing women with the means to achieve transformation, agency, originality, and liberty. These aspirations made Neal a fitting candidate in furthering the cause of women's suffrage, a campaign with which she became closely associated.<sup>43</sup> In 1906, she took the minutes of the inaugural London meeting of the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union.<sup>44</sup> Her friend and ally, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence also quickly became one of the WSPU's most devout and loyal campaigners, especially as editor of the suffragette newspaper, *Votes for Women*. In February 1914, Neal and Pethick-Lawrence became founder members of the United Suffragists, a group populated by those disillusioned by the existing suffrage campaigns.

Whilst in her autobiography, Neal claimed her interest in labour politics was 'merely intuitional and instinctive', as a young woman she sought a literary basis for these early feelings, absorbing the works of Edward Carpenter, Mary Johnson, and Mark Rutherford.<sup>45</sup> She admired their brazen style and clarity, which must have been not so much a reaffirming tonic as a call to arms against the punctilious norms

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<sup>41</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', pp. 28-29. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> For an overview of Neal's involvement with campaigns for women's suffrage, and details of the links between the WSPU and the Espérance Club, see Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>44</sup> Judge, 'Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris', p. 558.

<sup>45</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 101. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).



of so-called polite society.<sup>46</sup> It was Carpenter who had a significant influence on Neal's later writing and theorising of morris dance. As an adult, she described him as a 'Mystic, reformer, lover of all things beautiful, his friendship is one of the happiest memories I have.'<sup>47</sup> Carpenter's designs for a socialist utopian state of the future was one where freedoms were sustained by a common responsibilities and obligations: 'The only society which would ever really satisfy would be one in which he was perfectly free, and yet bound by ties of deepest trust to the other members.'<sup>48</sup> Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Neal was in want of such intimacy, and it was not until her late twenties that she found the conditions conducive to such a kind socially-minded bond of duty. When Clara stepped into the West London Settlement one February morning, she made a decisive attempt to depart from the unreality of bourgeois society. In doing so, she was confronted by some of the most appalling symptoms of urban degradation and acute poverty known to Britain in the late nineteenth century.

Established in 1887 by the Reverend Hugh Price Hughes, the West London Settlement began with only three 'Sisters of the People', growing to a community of some forty women followers within eight years, all 'ladies of leisure, culture, refinement and devotion'.<sup>49</sup> Bringing together the ideals of the house settlement movement with a politically-conscious Methodism, the mission was based on a belief in the symbiosis between spiritual development and social reform.<sup>50</sup> Price Hughes posited a Christian activism performed through communal endeavour, defined in opposition against the hitherto individualistic modes of Victorian evangelism and philanthropy, 'not merely to save our own souls, but to establish a

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<sup>46</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 34. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Carpenter, *Forecasts of the Coming Century* (Manchester, 1897), p. 186, cited in Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 76-77.

<sup>49</sup> Philip S. Bagwell, *Outcast London, a Christian Response: the West London Mission of the Methodist Church, 1887-1987* (London: Epworth, 1987), pp. 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Martz, 'Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick: From Mission to Activism', *Women's History Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, (2014), pp. 621-624.

Kingdom of God on earth.’<sup>51</sup> Here, Neal met Emmeline Pethick, who became a life-long friend and ally. Together, they organised a Girls’ Club in Soho, which provided a programme of activities for young working class women, for two hours every evening during the week.<sup>52</sup> By 1895, Neal and Pethick were dissatisfied with Price Hughes’ reluctance to allow the Sisters to live too close to the slum areas, and also ‘chafed at the orthodox Methodists’ opposition to drama and dancing.’<sup>53</sup> After some seven years at the Settlement, they left to pursue a mission of their own, free from the ‘narrow Evangelicalism’ of Price Hughes.<sup>54</sup>

In November 1895, Neal and Pethick established the *Espérance* Club, initially based in their own home, a small flat behind St. Pancras New Church. Here, they welcomed a constant stream of working-class girls, as well as notable politicians and writers, all invited as friends. The name, *Espérance* — taken from the French for hope — reflected the mission of the Club, to provide a ‘spiritual influence’ through communal activity, a panacea for the ‘sordid materialism’ of the City, saving young women from the very worst conditions.<sup>55</sup> It followed a similar regime to that of the earlier Soho club, with an increased focus on song, dance, and drama. Their work was financed in part by Neal’s occasional writings, supplemented by donations from Mark Guy Pearse, a Methodist author who achieved fame through a series of books about Christianity and life in his native Cornwall.<sup>56</sup> However, the Club soon outgrew their small flat, and in 1896 they took two rooms off the Euston Road for a rent of eight shillings a week, though this also proved insufficient for their rapidly growing membership.<sup>57</sup> For its inaugural year, the Club

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<sup>51</sup> *The Methodist Times*, 1 January 1885, cited in Bagwell, *Outcast London*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Bagwell, *Outcast London*, p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London: Gollancz, 1938), p. 95, cited in Theresa J. Buckland, ‘Pioneering England’s Dances Among Late Victorian Youth: on the Early Work of Mary Neal and Grace Kimmins’, in Anne Margaret Fiskvik and Marit Stranden, eds., *(Re)Searching the Field: Festschrift in Honour of Egil Bakka* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2014), p. 324.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Neal, “*My Pretty Maid*” (London: Headley Brothers, n.d.), p. 3. Neal Manuscripts, MN/3/2, VWML (online).

<sup>56</sup> Martz, ‘Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick’, p. 625.

<sup>57</sup> Neal, ‘As a Tale That is Told’, p. 83. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

was governed by an elected committee, a laudable project in democracy, but one which Neal thought ultimately obstructive and wasteful, due to ponderous meetings and fragmented leadership. From here on, Neal and Pethick-Lawrence took matters pertaining to the running of the Club back into their own hands. However, the older members still retained a significant degree of agency in the organisation of activities, and it was at the recommendation of one of these young women that songs and games were first introduced to the Club's programme.<sup>58</sup> There was also an overtly political element to their activities, as members were encouraged to report any infringements of working conditions perpetrated by their employers, so that Neal or Pethick may take appropriate action by alerting the Home Office of these illegalities.<sup>59</sup> From 1897, they established a commercial enterprise of their own, a tailoring co-operative called 'Maison Espérance,' situated in Wigmore Street, and later Great Portland Street. An advert described a working day of eight hours, in 'good well-ventilated workrooms', offering 'a living wage' and 'regular work'.<sup>60</sup> Firmly installed in north London, and a member of the Independent Labour Party, Neal's network of friends and contacts included various socialist intellectuals and politicians, including Kier Hardy.

The Espérance Club was but one body in a diverse plurality of privately-funded endeavours designed to bring about an improvement of the self, through an admixture of communal activities.<sup>61</sup> Drawing on the long-established traditions of liberally-minded voluntary association, Neal's scheme was part of a 'Co-operative Commonwealth', deemed preferable to the heavy and clumsy hand of the state.<sup>62</sup> Her political views were very similar to those espoused by Robert Blatchford, editor of *The Clarion*, a weekly socialist newspaper, and author of *Merrie England*, originally

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<sup>58</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 83. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp. 88-89.

<sup>60</sup> 'Maison Espérance' advertisement in Neal, "*Pretty Maid*", p. 9. Neal Manuscripts, MN/3/2, VWML (online).

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, the work of Jonathan Rose (2001), recently summarised in Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid, 'Other Worlds of Labour: Liberal Pluralism in Twentieth-Century British Labour History', in Peter Ackers and Alastair J. Reid, *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Ackers and Reid, 'Other Worlds of Labour', p. 9.

published in 1894. Blatchford argued that ‘emancipation’ from industrial capitalism could be achieved through a revival of national identity, recognising one another not by their rank or social standing but by their shared nationality. This he made explicit in calling out ‘We want England for the English’.<sup>63</sup> Blatchford appealed to the ‘natural’ and the ‘whole’: ‘To ensure good health we must lead a ‘natural’ life. The farther we get from nature ... the worse is our health.’<sup>64</sup> This appealed to Neal’s desire for holism and sympathy between people, as the very source of political renewal. Blatchford’s invocation of an English socialism, couched in medievalist imagery, proved enormously popular among many of Neal’s peers and colleagues, and the ideals of a socialist ‘Merrie England’ were in turn refracted by the *Espérance* in their morris dancing. Similarly, in 1901, Sidney Webb delivered an address to the Fabian Society, which announced a rejection of individualism in favour of ‘thinking in communities’, which as Katie Palmer Heathman argued, characterised the very impulse at the centre of the folk dance revival.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Neal was situated in-between the sort of idealism espoused by the groups such as the Fellowship of the New Life and the more pragmatic Fabian Society, bridging a fault-line in the socialism of the London middle classes.<sup>66</sup> Neal’s philanthropy was predicated on a basis of ‘popular social work’, with an emphasis on active participation. It rejected old-fashioned moral judgements of the ‘deserving/undeserving poor’, and engendered a certain amount of agency in its beneficiaries, through the encouraging of imaginative, creative activities.<sup>67</sup> As an erstwhile colleague, Lady Constance Lytton, wrote of Neal, ‘one feels she does it all for her own fun, not for the good of her soul, and to join in with, and really appreciate the lives of those she befriends, rather than to ‘save’ them.’<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (London: The Clarion Press, 1908), p. 243. See also Robert Blatchford, *Britain for the British* (London: The Clarion Press, 1902).

<sup>64</sup> Blatchford, *Merrie England*, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival’, p. 206.

<sup>66</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: a Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 89-90.

<sup>67</sup> Sven Hesse, *Global Social Transformation and Social Action: The Role of Social Workers: Social Work-Social Development*, Volume 3 (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 72.

<sup>68</sup> Letter from Constance Lytton to Adela Smith, 10 September 1908, in Betty Balfour, ed., *Letters of Constance Lytton* (London: Heinemann, 1925), p. 136.

## Espérance

The Espérance Club's concert of December 1905, which fomented the beginnings of the modern revival of morris dancing, was based on an existing precedent for putting on shows for friends and family at Christmastime. In 1903, the Club dropped Cantatas — which had, until then, been the accepted form of performance — for expositions of national song and dance, initially taking up a Scottish repertoire. The following year, influenced by the arrival of Herbert MacIlwaine to the post of musical director, an Irish canon was learned. In both instances, initial tuition was provided by experienced performers of the respective arts.<sup>69</sup> Knowledge was imparted through interpersonal exchange, rather than through the impersonal written word. It was MacIlwaine who, in the summer of 1905, recommended Cecil Sharp's work to Neal, having read an interview printed in the *Morning Post*.<sup>70</sup> In this feature, Sharp was quoted as saying how 'music is unique among the arts in ... that it can be practiced without the acquisition of any previous technical knowledge.'<sup>71</sup> Neal deemed such an attitude perfectly suited to the Espérance Club's existing methods, and she was excited by the opportunity to impart song and dance of an English flavour upon her city girls and women. Sharp recommended she contacted William Kimber, from whom he had collected dance tunes six years earlier. After an inauspicious beginning to their correspondence, Neal was finally able to convince Kimber and his cousin, Richard, to instruct the Club in morris dances, in return for their train fare and a compensatory payment for their time away from labouring work.<sup>72</sup>

The first truly public performance of morris dances and folk songs by members of the Espérance Club took place at the Queen's Hall — then home to Sir Henry Wood's annual promenade concerts — on 3 April 1906. Their dancing was interspersed with short speeches by Sharp, a format which became the standard

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<sup>69</sup> Frank Kidson and Mary Neal, *English Folk-Song and Dance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 161.

<sup>70</sup> 'Music in Schools: Its Place in Education', *The Morning Post*, 29 July 1905, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Derek Schofield, *Absolutely Classic: the Music of William Kimber* (London: EFDSS, 1999), pp. 12-13.

mode of presentation over the next two years. At the time of this inaugural presentation, Sharp's knowledge of morris was limited, and he offered only elementary details of the dances performed, giving their titles and a brief description of their form.<sup>73</sup> Over the next three years, however, Sharp worked hard to expand his knowledge of the dances, their history and their survivals.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, Neal's dancers acted as ambassadors for morris, taking it the length and breadth of the country. By 1907, members of the Club were recorded as having taught morris in eight counties at least, in addition to London, including Monmouthshire, Derbyshire, Devon, and Norfolk, as well as others closer to the metropole.<sup>75</sup> At this time, two young women were employed as full-time dance instructresses, with another working part-time, and a further eight employed in evening work.<sup>76</sup>

Notwithstanding the growing number of satellite clubs, the activities of the Espérance Club remained largely rooted to their London headquarters, which determined both the content and scope of the taught repertoire as well as its general form. However, there are very few sources which attempted a description of the dancing style as performed as opposed to one born out of a preconceived idea of morris. An article of 1911 from the *Manchester Guardian* reviewed a performance by Salford schoolchildren as 'quaint without being grotesque, lively without violence, graceful without posturing, but above all manifesting a spontaneity of joyousness which was irresistible.'<sup>77</sup> A similarly evasive review was offered by a journalist writing in *The Times* a year earlier, 'Miss Warren's dancing, as artless as it is artistic, is as wonderful in its way as anything accomplished by the world-famous artists of the ballet.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Judge, 'Sharp and the Morris', p. 195.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pp. 195-228.

<sup>75</sup> Cecil J. Sharp and Herbert MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I (London: Novello and Co., 1907), pp. 10-11.

<sup>76</sup> Bearman, 'English Folk Music Movement', p. 96.

<sup>77</sup> 'Morris Dancing in Salford', *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 September 1911, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Espérance Club', *The Times*, 7 May 1910, p. 17.

In a somewhat wistful tone, Neal later reflected on how the English folk songs and morris dances provided not only a 'weapon' against the 'dreariness' of the girls' everyday life, but also a restorative agent, disrupting the usual dynamic of charity given and received. The dances constituted a breaking up of the dichotomous relationship between the givers and recipients of aid: 'More than anything else I think I hated their always having to take and never having anything to give and they as I knew so generous and so warmhearted.'<sup>79</sup> Typical of all activities provided by the Espérance Club, it was the young women who took a principal role in leading the dances, and in teaching their junior counterparts. Neal reflected, 'I have always been struck with the amazing cleverness of the London working girl, her alertness and inventiveness and her capacity for handing on to others anything she has learnt herself.'<sup>80</sup> Transcended by their new-found identities as dancers, these young women of the Espérance Club enjoyed their unprecedented opportunities, which afforded both agency and status. Neal selected a chosen few to carry out work in teaching and demonstrating across the country. Their participation in the revival guaranteed them an investment in a project of national significance, in which they were the chief protagonists: 'It is no small thing for a little London dressmaker to stay in the house, as an honoured guest, of a country squire, and ride in his motor car and feel at the same time that she too has something to give.'<sup>81</sup> By contrast, an attempt at introducing morris dances to Neal's boys' club, St. Christopher's, proved short-lived, and this was soon dropped to allow energies to be directed towards the national campaign led by Espérance.<sup>82</sup>

Neal's movement enjoyed the support of numerous philanthropic organisations, all sharing a common aim to provide services to ameliorate the social conditions of the working class. For instance, a speech of Neal's reproduced by the *Oxford Chronicle* in the autumn of 1908 stated, 'The Quakers had taken up the

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<sup>79</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', pp. 137-138. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Neal, *Set to Music* (n.d. [c.1906/7]), p. 10. Neal Manuscripts, MN/3/3, VWML (online).

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and Esther Knowles, conducted by Margaret Dean-Smith, 18 October 1957, p. 2. Mary Neal Online Archive, <http://www.maryneal.org/file-uploads/files/file/alnealpgr-sm.pdf>.

movement with enthusiasm and everyone on Mr Cadbury's estate at Bournville had been taught.<sup>83</sup> Espérance also provided entertainments for concerts organised for the benefit of kindred causes, such as the Young Helpers' League, as well as rallies for the women's suffrage campaign.<sup>84</sup> Inevitably, therefore, the morris of the Espérance Club became inextricably linked with these philanthropic and political missions, which Sharp later came to consider a distraction from the work of collecting and disseminating folk music and dance.

The combined labours of Herbert MacIlwaine and Cecil Sharp bore fruit in the first volume of *The Morris Book*, published in 1907 with a dedication 'To our friends and pupils, the members of the Espérance Girls' Club.' In particular, the authors expressed grateful acknowledgement for the assistance of 'Miss Florence Warren, whose work was simply invaluable' to the formulation of a tabulated notation for dance.<sup>85</sup> Later, Sharp and MacIlwaine thought it necessary to remind the reader, 'that Miss Mary Neal ... not only made the venture possible in the beginning, but, with her powers of help and organization, gave it a reach and strength that neither of us could have given.'<sup>86</sup> This book was a celebration of the happy coming-together of minds and efforts towards a common cause of restoring 'some fresher and sincerer melodies' to the consciousness of the English.<sup>87</sup> It was offered as a testament to the Club and its dancers, and in many respects it was *their* manual.

A turning point in the relations between Sharp and the Espérance Club came in late 1907, on the eve of a meeting called by Neal on the subject of 'English Folk-Music in Dance and Song'. On 13 November, *Punch* magazine featured a cartoon by Bernard Partridge, entitled 'Merrie England Once More', accompanying

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<sup>83</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 16 October 1908, cited in Bearman, 'English Folk Music Movement', p. 104, fn. 111.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Young Helper's League', *The Times*, 11 January 1909, p. 12.

<sup>85</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, p. 3 and p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.



a short article conferring good wishes on the progress of Neal's club.<sup>88</sup> In her memoir, Neal recalled the moment Sharp first saw the cartoon: 'I took it straight to Mr. Sharp and as he looked at it I saw a sort of blind come down over his face.'<sup>89</sup> Though evidently well-meaning in its intentions, Partridge's cartoon encapsulated Sharp's very worst fears, that quaintness was the greatest insult to art. Presided over by Neville Lytton, the conference took place at the Goupil Gallery on Regents Street, London, and proposed a resolution to establish a 'Society for the further development of the practice of English Folk-Music in Dance and Song'.<sup>90</sup> Following a brief preamble by Lord Lytton, Neal was invited to make the opening statement, followed by MacIlwaine, and finally Sharp. All three speeches were in broad agreement as to what the functions of such a society should be: namely, a popular movement, for the dissemination of dances and songs to children through the conduit of national education, whilst maintaining a distinctly amateur culture. Neal announced support of influential people and organisations, including the Dean of Durham Cathedral, the chairman of the London County Council and even the proprietor of *Punch* magazine.<sup>91</sup> Sharp praised the enthusiasm of the Espérance Club, who realised his prophecy beyond his greatest expectations:

'I have only one grievance against the Espérance Club and it is this: Before Miss Neal called upon me, I was flourishing in the role of prophet ... then the Espérance Club proved me correct and ruined me as a prophet and I have had to retire. It annoys me that I did not pitch higher, because the Espérance Club not only proved me correct but I might have added thirty or forty per cent.'<sup>92</sup>

Here, it was Neal rather than Sharp who called for measures 'to guard the purity of the Folk-Music' from the corruptive influences of modern commercial forms: 'we should send out all teachers under the auspices of that Guild or Society, and grant certificates; we should not allow anyone to use our name unless they taught really

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<sup>88</sup> 'Merrie England Once More', *Punch*, 13 November 1907, pp. 345-347.

<sup>89</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', p. 157. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>90</sup> 'English Folk-Music in Dance and Song: Report on Conference Held at the Goupil Gallery, 5 Regent Street, Thursday November 14 1907'. Mary Neal Online Archive, <http://www.maryneal.org/file-uploads/files/file/1907s1b.pdf>.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

Folk-Music.’<sup>93</sup> The meeting recommended the formation of a provisional committee, which included old allies of the Espérance Club, as well as representatives of the LCC and county education inspectors, to constitute the ‘Association for the Revival and Practice of Folk Music’. Sharp was conspicuous by his absence on the list of twelve members, and he was the only speaker at the meeting not to be included. Whilst he later accepted an invited to join in the planning for the Association, his involvement was brief with a minimal influence on the course of its gestation. At this time, Sharp’s exclusion both symbolised and affirmed the beginnings of his breaking-away from Neal and her idealised vision for a morris evocative of a joyous expression, which she considered uniquely English.

There followed a protracted series of disputes, and with each new accusation of wrong-doing the division between Sharp and Neal widened. As early as 1908, the frontiers between them were drawn. Their wrangling was conducted through a public exchange of diatribes, published in journals and newspapers, as well as through especially acrimonious personal correspondence. With each recrimination and counter-recrimination, the clarion call was sent out for ‘simplicity’. In spite of this increasingly hostile public relationship, they continued to work together until 1910. MacIlwaine, however, resigned from the Espérance Club in November 1908, publicly citing health problems, though Neal confidentially informed Sharp that he had objected to her involvement with the Women’s Social and Political Union.<sup>94</sup> Neal and Pethick Lawrence were both present at the first meeting of the WSPU in London in 1906. Sharp was also hostile to the women’s suffrage movement, though this was arguably rooted in personal anger at the involvement of his younger sister, Evelyn in violent protests.<sup>95</sup>

Emanating from Neal’s London headquarters, carried out by a chosen band of young women, the morris dances were disseminated by an informal mode of organisation. Perhaps it was this slightly haphazard arrangement that secured for

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> Judge, ‘Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris’, p. 558.

<sup>95</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 80-81.

the morris and country dances such an endearing appeal in certain communities. As one sympathetic observer of the time reflected, 'Here the people had to take part themselves, or the thing was a failure.'<sup>96</sup> In 1910, Neal rearranged her movement under the banner of the Espérance Morris Guild, a new title which afforded the movement a semblance of age, as though a venerable institution legitimated by precedence. In the October of that year, Neal publicly announced her plans to make a permanent home for the Guild in Stratford-on-Avon, from which she could take a commanding role in influencing the course of the revival.<sup>97</sup> However, in the spring of 1911, Sharp ousted Neal as artistic director at the Stratford folk dance festival, an appointment sealed with the award of a civil list pension.<sup>98</sup> By this time, the two protagonists appeared to occupy two separate territories. However, at the local level, the allegiance of dancers to either party tended to be pragmatic rather than partisan.

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<sup>96</sup> Victoria de Bunsen, *Old and New in the Countryside* (London: Longmans, 1920), p. 41.

<sup>97</sup> 'Morris Dancing', *The Times*, 14 October 1910, p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Judge, 'Mary Neal', pp. 567-568.



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# MERRIE ENGLAND ONCE MORE.

Bernard Partridge, 'Merrie England Once More', *Punch*, 13 November 1907, p. 345, as reproduced in Mary Neal, *The Espérance Morris Book*, Part I (London: J. Curwen and Sons, n.d. [c.1912]).

## **A Sweetened Life? Blanche Payling and Thaxted**

According to the popular narrative, it was Miriam Noel who first wrote to Neal late in 1910, seeking assistance with establishing a team of morris dancers in Thaxted. Having arrived in the town only recently, Conrad and Miriam Noel were anxious to ‘start some activity that would interest everyone,’ in keeping with their socialist Christianity.<sup>99</sup> Neal appointed to the job one Blanche Payling, scarcely nineteen years old, from a family of working-class tailors in St. Pancras.<sup>100</sup> Payling first arrived in Thaxted in late December 1910, and in the week following Christmas, she led three classes a day in the town’s palatial Public Hall, all of which were reportedly well-attended.<sup>101</sup> Palmer Heathman argued that in approaching the Espérance Guild, Noel made a deliberate choice in favour of an attitude to morris ‘focussed on participation and joy, [which] presented a far stronger appeal’ than that of Sharp’s rubric, but this is not entirely accurate.<sup>102</sup> Whilst Conrad Noel was perhaps honest in stating that they were at the time ignorant of Sharp’s folk dance movement, the suggestion of a *preference* in favour of Espérance requires qualification.<sup>103</sup> According to Reg Groves’ account, Conrad Noel first met Sharp when he was curate to A.L. Lilley at St. Mary’s church, Paddington Green.<sup>104</sup> Further encounters occurred during his curacy at St. Mary’s, Primrose Hill, under Percy Dearmer — which Noel later described as ‘the church of unpopular causes’ — where he also regularly met Stewart Headlam and Charles Marson.<sup>105</sup> In 1910, however, Sharp was known principally as an expert in folksong rather than dance. The English Folk Dance Society had not yet been born, and so Sharp’s morris was still popularly viewed as complementary or even synonymous with Neal’s. It was, therefore, the Espérance

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<sup>99</sup> Barbara Putterill, ‘I Remember: I Remember Thaxted, 1910-1914’, notes for a lecture given in 1969. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Clifford Payling to Lucy Neal, 9 July 2007. Mary Neal Online Archive, [www.maryneal.org/artist/6127](http://www.maryneal.org/artist/6127).

<sup>101</sup> Miriam Noel, ‘The Local Morris Dancing: a Retrospect’, *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 8, (1911), pp. 10-11.

<sup>102</sup> Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival’, pp. 78-79.

<sup>103</sup> Conrad Noel and Sidney Dark, *Conrad Noel: An Autobiography* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1945), pp. 104-105.

<sup>104</sup> Reg Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement: an Adventure in Christian Socialism* (London: Merlin, 1967), p. 69.

<sup>105</sup> Noel and Dark, *Conrad Noel*, p. 84.

Guild that possessed the necessary resources for providing instruction in dance, and the only agency at work in promoting morris and country dances as wholesome recreations for young people at a national level. Therefore, Miriam's contacting Neal was less a choice than a default.

Of all of the rural communities infected by the influences of the Espérance Morris Guild, Thaxted in Essex is perhaps the best known. The principal reasons for its fame are the longevity of the town's morris side, and its associations with the Reverend Noel's peculiar brand of Christian socialism and programme of social activism. Furthermore, Thaxted is but one example where dancing survived the demise of Espérance in 1915, and precipitated a postwar revival aligned with Sharp's EFDS in the 1920s. In the town's folk-memory, the arrival of a teacher from the Espérance Guild in 1910 was seen as less a new beginning than a revival of a formerly popular type of activity familiar to the place, as country dancing and broom dancing were until recently both ubiquitous elements of social occasions in the town.<sup>106</sup> Whilst there was without doubt a precedent for dancing to the music of a fiddle in the various pubs, later allusions towards traditions of morris or molly dancing in the town were founded more on wishful thinking than actual fact.<sup>107</sup> Such aspirations, however, indicated a strong desire amongst the most enthusiastic of locals to incorporate morris dancing to the social fabric of the town, through which people could act out their relationship with place and community. Moreover, Thaxted was not simply a net importer of revival folk activity, but also contributed towards the national repository of folksong as local singers hosted Clive Carey, who in turn wrote down their songs and tunes.

Many of the dancers who attended these early classes in Thaxted worked in George Lee's sweet factory, which in 1911 employed some 200 people, mostly women and adolescents from the age of fourteen. The youngest workers generally entered the firm as packers, which, like many of the finishing jobs, was piece work.

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<sup>106</sup> George Chambers, 'Folk Traditions at Thaxted', *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 9, (1911), pp. 5-7.

<sup>107</sup> See, for instance, Harry de Caux, *Thaxted: 'a Desperate Morris Place'* (Thaxted: Thaxted Morris Men, 1983), pp. 3-4.

On average, these boys and girls took a weekly wage of three shillings, sixpence. Adult male workers were largely employed in the boiling process, for which he could expect a weekly wage of sixteen to eighteen shillings. Women, on the other hand, could make twelve shillings a week, but only if they maintained a brisk rate of work.<sup>108</sup> However, the opening of this factory did serve to alleviate the worst deprivations of a town hitherto dependent on agriculture.<sup>109</sup>

Neal considered Payling's work in the town to be an unconditional success, a model for other places to follow: 'in a week Thaxted was alive again with the practice of folk dance ... as if there had never been a century or so of interruption.'<sup>110</sup> Responsibility for following up on Payling's introduction was taken on by Miriam Noel. She organised classes at the Vicarage, partly for the instruction of the council school teachers, who in turn trained the children. Dancing was suspended over Lent, but soon restarted again after Easter. By the summer of 1911, the small country town boasted two teams of adolescent dancers — one of young men, and the other of young women — as well as two younger teams drawn from a large pool of local children. The Thaxted side made their debut public performances at local celebrations marking the occasion of the coronation of George V, on 22 June 1911. The Noels being absent, it was George Chambers, their curate, who took charge of the activities, and who also wrote to Mary Neal declaring, 'It is a triumph [which] firmly establishes the Morris movement in Thaxted.'<sup>111</sup> Together with sports competitions, processions of schoolchildren, speeches, all to the 'merry peal' of church bells, the festivities were said to have 'recalled something of the old time holidays of England.'<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Conrad Noel, 'How Essex Lives, II: The North Essex Sweet Factory', *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 11, (1911), p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Till, 'Preface', in Lucy Brown, *Power, Charity and Brotherly Love* (Thaxted: Thaxted History Project, 2018), p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Mary Neal, 'The National Revival of Folk Dancing, IV: Town and Country', *The Observer*, 7 January 1912, p. 13.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from George Chambers to Mary Neal, 27 June 1911. Carey Manuscripts, CC/2/20, VWML.

<sup>112</sup> Anon., 'Coronation Day at Thaxted', *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 7, (1911), p. 2.

At the invitation of the Noels, Mary Neal first visited Thaxted on 7 July 1911 for the town's inaugural festival for members of the League for the Defence of the Faith. She obliged in giving a speech to the assembled members of the League, and her talk was accompanied by morris and country dances by the nascent team.<sup>113</sup> The following day, Neal took a side of Thaxted dancers to Cambridge, joining her London company at an entertainment hosted by the Marlowe Society, organised by the poet, Rupert Brooke, and Steuart Wilson, a musician and friend of Clive Carey's. The Thaxted side performed alongside their peers from London, unified by common repertoires and a shared enjoyment in the activity. After their performances, the dancers enjoyed tours of the colleges and punting trips along the Cam, before sitting down to 'a sumptuous tea.'<sup>114</sup> For the young members of the Thaxted team it was a revelation, as many had not even travelled by train before.

By the November 1911, the 'Folk Song and Morris Company', as they were officially known, met for regular practices in the newly-refurbished coach-house alongside the Vicarage driveway, placing them at the very centre of the town's social and religious network.<sup>115</sup> Early in the summer of 1912, Neal selected three Thaxted dancers to join the cast of a programme of public entertainments, part of an exhibition of 'Shakespeare's England' at Earl's Court, organised by Mrs. Cornwallis West.<sup>116</sup> This great exposition of a 'merrie England' was ostensibly a fundraising effort for the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, but proved a financial embarrassment. For three months, Clifford Yeldham, Edward Bassett, and Dora Bassett lodged at the Cumberland Market headquarters, cohabiting with other young dancers from Suffolk, Manchester, and Hull. The company put on shows of morris and country dance twice daily, accompanied by ballads and songs. Occasionally, in the absence of Clive Carey, seventeen-year-old Yeldham was called upon to sing the solo parts.<sup>117</sup> Having been excused from work by their employers,

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<sup>113</sup> Noel, 'Local Morris Dancing', p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Neal, 'As a Tale That is Told', pp. 151-152. Neal Manuscripts, MN/1/1, VWML (online).

<sup>115</sup> 'Notes', *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 11, (1911), p. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Groves, *Thaxted Movement*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 117.



the dancers received a stipend from the sponsors of the exhibition at a rate commensurate with that of their ordinary employment. Aside from these landmark opportunities for temporarily earning an income through dance and song, George Chambers boasted how morris had inspired in the young people of Thaxted 'a zeal, which showed more than mere passing interest'.<sup>118</sup> Arthur Caton, who first danced in 1911, later recalled how the arrival of morris in the town 'was a revelation' for the young people, who previously 'had nothing' for their own.<sup>119</sup>

The example of Thaxted represents a fairly typical model for the partial autonomy of morris dancing disseminated through the channels of the Espérance Guild. Whilst the dances performed were largely determined by visiting teachers from the metropolis, and costumes provided by headquarters, the dancers were given a relatively free hand in deciding on how the classes should be run, and where they should perform. However, these decisions were largely made by the Noels and George Chambers on behalf of the dancers. As folksong collectors knew and later devotees of morris dance came to understand, if there was a dependable and sober entry into a particular community it could most likely be found in the clergy. Though dancing in Thaxted ceased during the First World War, local enthusiasm was sufficient enough to precipitate a self-made revival in 1920 under Miriam Noel. These post-war classes mostly consisted of young women and girls, who performed both morris and country dances. In 1925, Noel convinced the women they should confine themselves to the country dances, leaving morris for men alone, in deference to a growing feeling within the EFDS that it should be the reserve of male dancers. Unfortunately no evidence exists to illustrate the reception of this sudden alteration of practices in the town, but it is worthwhile noting that the Thaxted Morris remains to this day an exclusively male club. This change in policy was partly aided by the arrival of two new protagonists — namely Jack Putterill and Alec Hunter — who introduced a new programme of public performances in the town based on exclusively male morris, and instilled a new group identity to the

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<sup>118</sup> George Chambers, 'Folk Traditions at Thaxted', *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 9, (1911), p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Notes from an interview with John Hunter, conducted by Steve Hollier, 13 April 1996. Michael Goatcher Archive.

Thaxted team, therefore distinguishing the cohort of morris dancers from their country dancing colleagues. This is discussed at length in subsequent chapters.

## **Bodies**

Sharp and Neal came to think of the agency of dancers' bodies in very different ways. Whereas Sharp perceived the dancer as a transmitter — the conduit of tradition — Neal's dancer was framed as the source of authenticity, as though the essence was in the act of performance itself. Neal was chiefly concerned with the business of *reminding* people of their inheritances, rather than explaining them: it was the difference between teaching the steps and giving them the space to interpret the dances. These attitudes were supported and influenced by their respective attitudes towards the substrate material, that is the dances and tunes. Sharp's morris was universal, permanent, unchanging, and pure. Conversely, Neal's was contingent, dynamic, evolving, and syncretic. The next two parts of this chapter discuss the tension between what was considered natural, truthful and verifiable, inexorably linked to the dancers' body and a contested discourse over the true 'spirit' of morris. In this section, the notion of an embodied authenticity is discussed in relation to that of national character, self-conscious choreography, and the gendered criterion.

Both protagonists drew extensively from notions of Victorian chivalry — a concept which imbued their own schooling — centred on a mutually recognised idea of 'natural dignity.'<sup>120</sup> For Sharp, such an attitude was manifest in his bringing together of 'grace and strength' in dance: 'The movements, though forceful, masculine and strong, must nevertheless be easily and gracefully executed, with restraint, too, and dignity, and even solemnity at times.'<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Neal celebrated

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<sup>120</sup> Anne Bloomfield, 'An Investigation into the Relationship between Philosophical Principle and Artistic Practice with Reference to the Role of Dance in Education', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Hull, (1986), pp. 203-204.

<sup>121</sup> Cecil J. Sharp and Herbert MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, second edition (London: Novello & Co., 1911), p. 43.

the ‘slow, dignified rhythmic movement’ of the Bampton morris in Oxfordshire.<sup>122</sup> They shared a common belief that the morris dance was a physical representation of an essentially English temperament, an embodied national character, which they perceived as one determined by racial as well as cultural factors. Sharp already had something of a reputation as a champion of teaching national music to children, an early marker being the publication of his *Book of British Song for Home and School* in 1902, a collection combining some folk songs with patriotic anthems gleaned from printed sources.<sup>123</sup> However, by the time he met Neal and MacIlwaine, Sharp was already convinced that it was the folk idiom, rather than modern composition, that possessed the real potential to effect a visceral response within the English people. Through teaching morris, he hoped that its invocation of ‘the subtle bond of blood and kinship’ would inspire in the child’s formative consciousness sympathies which would make them ‘a better citizen, and a truer patriot.’<sup>124</sup> To Sharp, morris dance possessed an embodied sensibility which was at once English and respectable, as well as muscular and graceful, and which could be readily mobilised in the cause of promoting an improvement in national fitness.

Both Sharp and Neal tacitly agreed that morris dance was the corporeal equivalent of folksong, and shared the same belief in its potential to inspire in its performance an emulation of the best of England. Using the school curriculum as his chief conduit from 1909, Sharp aspired to provide ‘training in English characteristics’. He sought to exploit folk dances in their capacity to represent ‘a wholly national and, at the same time, a wholly spontaneous expression.’<sup>125</sup> Of course, this was strictly a contradiction: it was impossible to teach people how to be spontaneous, especially within the context of an otherwise disciplinarian system of education. However, Sharp’s contradiction was sustained by his insistence on the

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<sup>122</sup> Kidson and Neal, *English Folk-Song*, p. 102.

<sup>123</sup> Francmanis, ‘National Redeemer’, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Novello and Co., 1907), p. 136.

<sup>125</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, ‘Morris and Country Dances’, *Journal of Scientific and Physical Training*, vol. 3, (1910), p. 21, cited in Anne Bloomfield, ‘The Quickening of the National Spirit: Cecil Sharp and the Pioneers of the Folk-Dance Revival in English State Schools, 1900-26’, *History of Education*, vol. 30, no. 1, (2001), p. 59.

balances endemic to traditional dance, which Anne Bloomfield summarised as the ‘counteraction of discipline and restraint.’<sup>126</sup> The 1914 circular issued by the Board of Education explicitly described the central significance of folksong to a national curriculum, arguing how ‘the knowledge of a common body of traditional song’ was conducive to developing a sustainable corporate identity.<sup>127</sup> Neal shared in common many of these assumptions, and also appealed to members of the Board of Education to adopt her interpretation of a folk pedagogy, but ultimately lost out to Sharp.<sup>128</sup> However, in August 1909, a letter written by Neal was published in *The Observer*, which attempted to claim the inclusion of folk dance in the new scheme of physical education in schools as the victory of her own methods.<sup>129</sup>

A vital prerequisite to such civilising performances was the ensuring of a faithfulness to what had gone before: morris necessarily had to be arbitrated and moderated by those deemed to command sufficient responsibility in its transmission. Early pedagogical literature was imbued with a language of racial types, which implied only those of ‘English blood, or even of Anglo-Saxon sympathy’ could ever perform the morris step with any facility.<sup>130</sup> Both Sharp and Neal were complicit in promulgating such racial qualifications, influenced in part by contemporary discourses of eugenics and national fitness. Whilst in some instances, ‘race’ was taken to be synonymous with the political ‘nation’, there are examples where their idealised English ‘folk’ explicitly referred to that of white people exclusively. In an early interview with the *Daily News*, Neal declared, ‘I never would have a cake-walk in the Club, for I don’t think we ought to depend for our songs

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<sup>126</sup> Bloomfield, ‘National Spirit’, p. 69.

<sup>127</sup> *Board of Education Circular 873* (London: Board of Education, 1914, reprinted, 1923), p. 106, cited in Howkins, ‘Discovery of Rural England’, p. 101.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Pethick-Lawrence and Knowles, conducted by Dean-Smith, 18 October 1957, p. 1. Mary Neal Online Archive, <http://www.maryneal.org/file-uploads/files/file/alnealpgr-sm.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> Mary Neal, ‘Morris Dances and Education’, *The Observer*, 29 August 1909, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, pp. 32–33.

and dances upon niggers.’<sup>131</sup> In espousing such ideals couched in explicitly racial terms, Neal was especially prone to merging culture with race, though Sharp also used similar terminology, reflecting the pervasiveness of eugenicist ideas at this time.

In the wake of the Goupil conference, Neal explicitly declared she had no particular interest in the work of collecting further dances and songs.<sup>132</sup> Sharp, on the other hand, remained committed to a conviction that it was by fieldwork that a revivalist earned their necessary credentials. Throughout 1908, however, Sharp and Neal continued to work in co-operation, albeit a slightly uneasy one, conducted at arm’s length. According to Roy Judge, it is unlikely that Sharp had very much involvement at all in the initial compilation of the second part of *The Morris Book*, which instead appears to have been largely the product of MacIlwaine, derived from the dancing of Florrie Warren. The proofs were submitted to Novello on 21 June, only to be unilaterally revoked by Sharp a week later.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, Sharp was concerned about the conflation of Espérance attitudes with the nature of his collecting work. In the summer of 1908, he set out on his first research visits independent of MacIlwaine, taking in the processional morris of Winster (Derbyshire) and the first of several evidences of the Sherborne (Gloucestershire) morris from George Simpson, then living near Didcot.<sup>134</sup> He felt a widening disparity between his ideals and those attributed to him in the press. Flanked by a characteristically flamboyant style of morris emanating from Espérance and a continued fashion for theatrical styles of an elaborated morris championed by Nellie Chaplin, Sharp found his own artistic project caricatured by frivolous and

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<sup>131</sup> *Daily News*, 23 March 1906, cited in Mary Neal, ed., *The Espérance Morris Book*, Part I, third edition (London: J. Curwen and Sons., n.d. [c.1912]), p. 59. The cake-walk was a dance form which originated in communities of black slaves working in plantations of the southern states of the USA, and popularised through music hall entertainments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performed principally by minstrel acts.

<sup>132</sup> *Saturday Review*, 11 April 1908, cited in Fox Strangeways and Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, p. 75.

<sup>133</sup> Judge, ‘Cecil Sharp and the Morris’, pp. 205–208.

<sup>134</sup> Judge, ‘Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris’, pp. 555–556.

extravagant performances of a 'Merrie England' writ large, though he refused to accept he was complicit in its making.<sup>135</sup>

For Sharp, a white smock, handkerchieves, and bells did not the morris dancer make. The true substance to the performance lay in the choreographic detail. He believed that salient matters of style and technique were 'questions for the expert':

'if our folk-dances are to be revived amongst the lettered classes it is of supreme importance that they should be accurately taught by accredited instructors and that only those dances should be disseminated which are the survivals of genuine and unbroken tradition.'<sup>136</sup>

Only through achieving perfect accuracy in artistic execution did the dancer become a capable and worthy transmitter of an ideal Englishness. Mediocrity was not to be tolerated, and personal idiosyncrasies were strongly discouraged. The establishment of Sharp's school was announced in an advertisement printed in the *Journal of Scientific Physical Training*, and presented a brief statement describing the founder's rationale: 'it is feared that, owing to the dearth of competent instructors, many have already learned to dance the Morris in ways not sanctioned by tradition.'<sup>137</sup> However, faithful replication of steps and figures was but the necessary foundation for excellence in performance: Sharp's ideal morris was aesthetic as opposed to athletic, embodying the natural and healthy expression of the unselfconscious dancer, practiced in a straightforward, but nevertheless accurate, fashion.<sup>138</sup> An early handbill outlining the proposed activities of the school, articulated his aspirations: 'The purpose of his school ... is primarily to conserve the Morris Dance in all its traditional purity; and, secondly, to teach it as accurately as possible to those who desire to become dancers themselves or professed teachers of it.'<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Judge, 'Cecil Sharp and the Morris', p. 207.

<sup>136</sup> Cecil Sharp, *Morning Post*, 1 April 1910, cited in Fox Strangeways and Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp*, p. 81.

<sup>137</sup> Anon., 'School of Morris Dancing: Folk Songs, Children's Games, Country Dancing', *Journal of Scientific Physical Training*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1909).

<sup>138</sup> Gammon, "Many Useful Lessons", pp. 88-92.

<sup>139</sup> cited in Roy Judge, 'Cecil Sharp and the Morris', p. 223.

Sharp's methodology was founded upon scholarly enquiry, akin to ethnomusicological investigations into the truest, most enduring, forms of national culture. Furthermore, he sought to efface from the product all evidence of his own personality and prejudices. Unlike Elgar, who once arrogantly declared 'I write the folk songs of this country', Sharp's art was one founded upon extensive empirical research, the results of which became the basis for his repertory of morris dances.<sup>140</sup> However, this repertoire was defined by his prejudices and those of his chief informants. When it came to forming the canon, an inevitable process of rationalisation took place, which in some instances reduced complex matrices of various possibilities into one neatly-packaged dance, presented as *the* authentic article.<sup>141</sup> Sharp's prejudices were those of Kimber consolidated: the Headington Quarry style remained the exemplar of Cotswold morris, and any evidence of dances seen to deviate from this norm were usually dismissed as 'degenerate' or inauthentic.<sup>142</sup> Its perceived quality alone was considered justification enough to support a revival based on the best examples of these survivals. However, in many places the evidence was sparse — with complete morris sides 'rarer than the bittern' — so Sharp and his colleagues were forced to extrapolate from the 'floating spars of a wrecked tradition' the basis of a reconstructed dance.<sup>143</sup>

Sharp's mission was the collection and dissemination of precious artefacts of an English plebeian culture, and he made appeals to his followers to go about their important work 'with the idea that the things being passed on were arts.'<sup>144</sup> The perceived beauty was in the detail, and could only properly be communicated by adhering to a prescribed style and format, which could then be replicated through teaching and performance. In an article of December 1911, Neal took Sharp head-on with a critique which argued the folk dance was *not* an art dance, and so required no formal training — she believed it was a matter of intuition rather than

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<sup>140</sup> Geoffrey R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 599.

<sup>141</sup> Forrest, 'Here We Come A-Fossiling', pp. 29-31.

<sup>142</sup> Wortley, 'Early Morris Revival', p. 13.

<sup>143</sup> Phillips Barker, 'Cecil James Sharp', pp. 205-206.

<sup>144</sup> McN., 'Cult of Folk-Song', p. 602.

instruction.<sup>145</sup> As Sharp's pupils of the Chelsea classes were trained in technique, they were not, by Neal's definition, folk dancers: 'the dancing was beautiful, graceful and charming ... and must as such be criticised by those accustomed to write of artists such as Genée or Mordkin'.<sup>146</sup> Sharp's dancers tended towards an academic, self-conscious style of dance, monitored and censored by rigorous methods of teaching, examination, and selection. As a result, the dance was highly refined, though sometimes starchy and priggish. Conrad Noel sympathised with those critics who argued the officially-endorsed dancing of the EFDS 'smacked of Bloomsbury'.<sup>147</sup> However, in considering morris from a 'purely artistic standpoint,' Sharp and his Society deliberately established themselves as a bulwark against the 'ravages of the Philistines on every side.'<sup>148</sup> In short, it was an attempt at fomenting a movement free of those who saw 'philanthropy in it and nothing else.'<sup>149</sup>

Neal's conception of folk dance and music left no space for self-consciousness or artistically-minded choreography. Through Espérance, she espoused a morris of various styles, united by common characteristics of 'vigour and virility', despising the 'posturing with pointed toe' of modern art dances.<sup>150</sup> Further admonishing Sharp for his elitism, Neal remarked, 'any average person of intelligence can collect a Morris-dance.'<sup>151</sup> The dance was enacted in the body rather than the mind. Whilst Sharp was certainly not ignorant of the evident heterogeneity endemic among some extant morris sides, he chose to discount this as evidence of degeneration. Neal, on the other hand, promulgated a relatively unreformed morris, and made little attempt at disguising apparent inconsistencies. Some years later, she explained 'All this showed that a strict canon cannot be made,

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<sup>145</sup> Mary Neal, 'The National Revival of the Folk Dance, No. III: Present Day Interpreters of the Folk Dance', *The Observer*, 3 December 1911, p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Noel and Dark, *Conrad Noel*, p. 106.

<sup>148</sup> 'Revival of the Folk Dance: an Artistic Movement', *Morning Post*, 7 December 1911, cited in Derek Schofield, "Revival of the Folk Dance: An Artistic Movement": The Background to the Founding of The English Folk Dance Society in 1911', *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, (1986), p. 215.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Kidson and Neal, *English Folk-Song*, p. 127.

<sup>151</sup> 'Occasional Notes', *The Musical Times*, vol. 51, no. 808, (1910), p. 365.



and that a certain latitude must always be allowed to modern as well as traditional dancers.<sup>152</sup> Fundamentally, it was impossible to identify a single step common to every morris dance: ‘The dancing, the same in spirit and form, varies in each locality and with every interpreter, as to the actual step.’<sup>153</sup> It was a matter of human fallibility, and a symptom of a dance which had hitherto evaded rigorous formal codifying. Neal described how William Kimber, especially, ‘danced differently every time he came up to Town.’<sup>154</sup> Alternatively, however, the devising of a style distinct to a particular morris set was integral to the nature of a dance recently associated with competing local patriotisms. A passage by Blanche Payling published in the Thaxted parish magazine well exemplifies the championing of a contingent choreographic style in the Espérance morris:

‘Some of the traditional performers dance with straight knees, others from other villages bend the knee; some never put the foot out at the back; others disregard this, but the traditional dancers have always plenty of spring and lightness about them.’<sup>155</sup>

On the matter of gender, it is perhaps surprising that Sharp and Neal eventually seemed to share a common view, that morris was historically the reserve of men, and the choreography was thus peculiarly suited to the male body. Indeed, Neal came to be the more vociferous in promulgating the peculiarity of maleness in morris, claiming its roots in masculine ceremonials of forgotten religion — vindicating man’s conquests in war and sex — meant it could not adequately be performed by female dancers.<sup>156</sup> For Sharp’s discerning eye, the principal criterion was that of aptitude and expertise rather than gender. By the time of Sharp’s death in 1924, morris dancing in England was still a predominantly female activity. After the First World War, however, the question of gender assumed a greater prescience than before. By 1921, the debate over the appropriateness of women dancing morris

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<sup>152</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The Folk Dances of Old England’, in J.A. Hammerton, ed., *Wonderful Britain: its Highways, Byways and Historic Places*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1928), p. 45.

<sup>153</sup> Cited in Roy Dommett, ‘Miss Neal’s Notes and Experiences’, *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 13, (1982), p. 16.

<sup>154</sup> Cited in Roy Dommett, ‘Miss Neal’s’, p. 16.

<sup>155</sup> Blanche Payling, ‘The Revival of the Morris Dance’, *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1911), p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The Broken Law’, *The Adelphi*, vol. 16, no. 4, (1940), p. 149.

in the EFDS was heated enough for one commentator to refer to it as ‘the vexed question’.<sup>157</sup> The following year, in 1922, Douglas Kennedy established weekly morris classes in London exclusively for men, and by 1925 the failure to encourage greater male participation in dance was described as an ‘urgent’ problem.<sup>158</sup>

Neal’s remarkable reversal of attitude towards women’s participation in morris was largely due to her belief in theories of pre-Christian origins, explained in detail below, which informed her value-judgements in observing the dancing body. Whilst Sharp continued to publicly express a preference for morris as a men’s dance, he never sought to preclude women from participating. In the first volume of the revised *Morris Book*, he stated his case for inclusivity out of pragmatism:

‘The Morris is, traditionally, a men’s dance. Since, however, it was revived a few years ago it has been freely performed by women and children. Although this is not strictly in accordance with ancient usage, no great violence will be done to tradition so long as the dance is performed by members of one sex only; none but the pedant, indeed, would on this score debar women from participation in a dance as wholesome and as beautiful as the Morris.’<sup>159</sup>

By this understanding, Sharp acknowledged the right of women to perform morris, whilst still denying them the legitimacy enjoyed by the men. In a qualifying statement that fundamentally questioned the legitimacy of their dancing, Sharp seemed less precious that women should adhere to the ‘traditional’ discipline: ‘At its best a woman’s Morris must always be of the nature of a free translation rather than an exact reproduction of the traditional dance.’<sup>160</sup> Sharp candidly displayed a belief in inexorable gender disparities of physique, and argued women could not be expected to attempt a dance learned from a man. Another critic, writing after the EFDS Festival at the King’s Theatre, Hammersmith, in July 1921, argued that whilst ‘The women’s Morris was beautifully done, accurate and full of life’ it would

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<sup>157</sup> Anon., ‘The Festival’, *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1921), p. 22.

<sup>158</sup> Anon., ‘London Men’s Classes’, *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 10, (1925), p. 295; Anon., ‘Publicity and Man-Power’, *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 10, (1925), p. 297.

<sup>159</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, p. 42.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

inevitably be ‘however charming in itself, a new thing, quite different from the traditional Morris.’<sup>161</sup>

Imbued with the vestigial power of a forgotten ceremonial, Neal’s dancing bodies were not simply metaphors but agents in effecting social and political change: ‘In fragments of a folk religion ... we may find an inspiration which may help us to make England, the country of our love, a better and fairer land for the generations coming after.’<sup>162</sup> More explicitly, in the autumn of 1911, she appealed to the dancers of Thaxted: ‘When you dance the Morris dances and sing the folk songs I want you to feel that you are part of the truest and best movement towards righteousness and sincerity and upright dealing.’<sup>163</sup> Through the direct transmission of morris dances and folk songs from the native custodians to urban cohorts, Neal hoped these encounters would also convey the ‘age-long wisdom’ embodied in the folk.

## **Spirits**

Neal’s *Espérance* morris was treated more like an idiom, characteristic of English characteristics and temperament. By comparison, Sharp’s morris of technique was tantamount to a canon of national art. Though Sharp depended on the discipline of the trained dancer’s body, Neal appealed to essences and contexts. Accessory to this was a supporting theory of origin, which further validated the performances in accordance with historical precedent. Both Neal and Sharp were irresistibly drawn to the popular ‘survivals in culture’ thesis, initially propounded by E.B. Tylor and popularised through the work J.G. Frazer, E.K. Chambers, and members of the Folklore Society. They agreed the dance’s origins were based in the rituals of primitive religion. Having survived the death of its original context and purpose, morris resided in the unconscious social expression of England’s peasantry. Sharp

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<sup>161</sup> Anon., ‘The Festival’, p. 22.

<sup>162</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The National Revival of Folk Dancing, II: The Morris Dance’, *The Observer*, 5 November 1911, p. 15.

<sup>163</sup> Mary Neal, ‘To the Thaxted Morris Dancers’, *The Country Town*, vol. 1, no. 9, (1911), p. 9.

believed it was by its survival, having undergone processes of historic evolution, that the dance came to embody a quality comparable to that of high art. Departing slightly, Neal argued that frontiers between origin and present function were closer than imagined, morris representing a transcendence of time, the physical expression of a deep-rooted, and explicitly racial, identity. Neither could accept morris developed as a mere recreation, but sought a deeper meaning, which would both legitimise its revival and govern its modern usage. In making these appeals, both Neal and Sharp made archaic literary allusions implicitly supported by a framework of eugenicist ideas concerning the physical health of the English nation.

Roy Judge cited a performance given to a reception party hosted by the London County Council, on 27 June 1907, as a turning point in the presentation of revival morris and its discourse. The programme for the entertainment offered a ‘probable supposition’, that ‘the Morris Dances owe their origin to the old ceremonial dances.’<sup>164</sup> Whilst the influences of Frazer were already apparent in the Folklore Society, Sharp and Neal had hitherto eschewed such theories of surviving religious ceremonials. From this moment on, the aesthetics of ‘Merrie England’ gradually became suffused with talk of origins in sacrificial rites and priesthood rituals. In October 1907, Mary Neal addressed a meeting of the Southern Cooperative Education Association, and delivered a summary of the dance which married ‘Merrie’ with a ‘Mystic’ England: ‘The old Morris dancing on the village green, with its accompanying singing and acting, probably formed part of the religious life of the community.’<sup>165</sup> In a serialised account of the revival movement, published in *The Observer* over four instalments in late 1911, Neal claimed the origins of the dances was ‘inspired naturally from the rhythm of earth and sea and the wavering moon.’<sup>166</sup> It was the ‘outward and visible sign’ of a primitive religion, latterly inherited by rural labourers, ‘whose daily toil brings them in touch with the

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<sup>164</sup> Judge, ‘Cecil Sharp and the Morris’, p. 203.

<sup>165</sup> *Co-operative News*, 26 October 1907, p. 67, cited in Judge, ‘Cecil Sharp and the Morris’, pp. 202-203.

<sup>166</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The National Revival of the Folk Dance, No. III: Present Day Interpreters of the Folk Dance’, *The Observer*, 3 December 1911, p. 20.

earth and all natural and growing things.’<sup>167</sup> Elsewhere, she referred to her dancers as the transmitters of ‘the deep and orderly rhythm of the music which is the inherited tradition of the English race’.<sup>168</sup>

In both protagonists it is possible to trace an evolution of thinking and writing about morris dance, from initial agreement on a Moorish origin, to Sharp’s rejection of this preliminary thesis, and a later espousal of a more overt ‘survival’ ideology. In the introduction to the first part of Sharp’s *Morris Book*, the dance is described as ‘the ordered expression of a national spirit’.<sup>169</sup> More likely the words of MacIlwaine than Sharp, the author went on to proclaim, ‘we have restored to our own people a rightful inheritance, a means and method of self-expression in movement, native and sincere’.<sup>170</sup> The bibliography does not include any reference to Frazer, instead most sources are antiquarian studies, such as those of John Brand, Francis Douce, and William Chappell.<sup>171</sup> By the time of the second edition, however, Sharp had absorbed E.K. Chambers’ *The Mediaeval Stage*, a work which viewed morris in relation to sword dances and mumming plays, manifestations of ritualistic ‘folk drama’. Chambers borrowed extensively from the antiquarians listed above, interpreted through a framework informed by Frazer and Tylor.<sup>172</sup> After citing Chambers, Sharp went on to provide a brief summary of the survivals theory: ‘it was one of the seasonal pagan observances prevalent among prevalent amongst primitive communities and associated in some occult way with the fertilisation of all living things, animal and vegetable.’<sup>173</sup> Further details of the vestiges of sacrificial rituals were provided in the introduction to *The Sword Dances of Northern England*, which provided the basis for Sharp’s summaries in *The Morris Book*.<sup>174</sup> Together with sword dancing and folk drama, morris emerged ‘out of the debris of ancient faith

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>168</sup> Neal, ‘To the Thaxted Morris’, p. 9.

<sup>169</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, p. 7.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, pp. 23–24.

<sup>172</sup> E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, Volume I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

<sup>173</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, p. 11.

<sup>174</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *The Sword Dances of Northern England* (London: Novello and Co., 1911).

and cult'.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, he rejected hypotheses of 'Moorish' origins, rebuked by all 'highest authorities' on the subject— by which he meant Chambers — in favour of an English provenance.

Notwithstanding the occasional reference to superstition in recent practice, Sharp largely distinguished this historical narrative from his recommendations for contemporary performance. He acknowledged that morris had already long since departed from its overtly religious connotations, and in modern society existed as 'a mere form of healthy amusement, and social entertainment.'<sup>176</sup> He maintained a relatively sober conservatism, stressing dignity and restraint.<sup>177</sup> Sharp explained the dances had undergone a reformation, raised above superstition, and became articles of holiday entertainments, which in the context of their decline were perceived as embodying features of a civilised art. Neal, on the other hand, was more prone to deliberately conflating historical theory with contemporary performance, as though each dance was suspended in time, spanning past and present.

For Neal's contribution towards the discourse of origin theses, one must turn to *English Folk Song and Dance*, which she prepared in partnership with Frank Kidson. Neal believed the morris dancers of the south midlands were among the last custodians of an occult mysticism:

'To-day in England curious hints still survive which show that the simple country folk never altogether lost the feeling that these dances were not altogether quite ordinary, but represented some sort of magic charm with which it would be unsafe to interfere.'<sup>178</sup>

Apart from the evident influences of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, from which she borrowed extensively, a Glossary of 1887 also informed Neal's theories of remnant magical rites. The Glossary was compiled by one Dr. C. Mackay, and argued for a 'Keltic' origin, the noun morris deriving 'from 'Mor,' great, and 'uasal,' noble and dignified.'<sup>179</sup> Mackay also partnered these dances with the Druidical festival of

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<sup>175</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, pp. 10-13.

<sup>176</sup> Sharp, *Sword Dances*, p. 16.

<sup>177</sup> Bearman, 'English Folk Music', p. 69.

<sup>178</sup> Kidson and Neal, *English Folk-Song*, p. 107.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

Beltane: ‘The solemn and mysterious dance around the fire thus kindled appears to have been the origin of the Morris of Mor-uiseil dance.’<sup>180</sup> Neal therefore believed the dances embodied vestiges of pre-Christian ritual, which came alive in performance, even if they were disguised by the spectacle of the event.

Furthermore, Neal also argued it was imperative that, wherever possible, the dances were learned directly from the source, those people perceived as having ‘direct contact with nature and with the spiritual and moral forces which play upon life and conduct.’<sup>181</sup> This was central to her belief in the transcendental potential of the dance, reproduced through imitation. Following in the path of Frazer and Chambers, Neal believed in the centrality of an innate mimetic instinct to the diffusion of ritual.<sup>182</sup> Religious rituals and practices, copied by laypeople, percolated down through society and formed the basis for dance and drama. It was therefore congruent with historical precedent, in the context of oral transmission, that morris dances should be taught by demonstration, rather than by notation from a book. The *Espérance Morris Book* was perceived as a necessary compromise in satisfying the inordinate demand for instruction materials. Neal thought transcription and publication were agents of disenchantment and counteraction, inimical to the spirit of morris, removing them from the plebeian cultures. Learning by example avoided the problem of mediation, ensuring the dances remained the possession of the folk, allowing the new generation to ‘be their own interpreters of the long tradition,’ without the interference of ‘professional teachers’.<sup>183</sup>

By comparison, Sharp resisted attempts to subsume morris to superstition: ‘wherever it is found, the Morris is nearly always associated with certain strange customs which are apparently quite independent of the dance itself and contribute

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>181</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The Revival of Folk Art: the Wisdom of the Folk’, *The Country Town*, vol. 2, no. 2, (1912), p. 6.

<sup>182</sup> Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 199-200.

<sup>183</sup> Mary Neal, ‘The National Revival of Folk Art: The Possession of the Folk’, *The Country Town*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1912), p. 5.

little or nothing to the fun or beauty of it.’<sup>184</sup> He explained how the dances had survived through processes of evolution, culminating in the nineteenth century rural morris, the apogee of an art expressive of the English people.<sup>185</sup> It was not only a survival, but the *best* of survivals. In the concluding part of *The Morris Book*, Sharp emphatically declared, ‘Aesthetically considered, the Morris is incontestably the most highly developed of the folk-dances of this country.’<sup>186</sup> Compared to Neal’s fanciful array of superstition and ceremony, Sharp’s theorising was relatively prosaic.<sup>187</sup> In 1912, Neal wrote, ‘The living link between the present and the past will be the actual dances of these traditional dancers ... gathered, not from dancing schools or drawing rooms, but from factory, and field, and workshops.’<sup>188</sup> She believed the basis of revival lay in the spirit embodied in the dancer, which would triumph over the self-conscious performance of Sharp’s art dances.

Neal’s fervour for morris dance was predicated on her confidence in its potential to evoke spiritual regeneration, which was to be a revival of ‘a Catholic acceptance of joy and of beauty as our national inheritance’, quite a departure from her early beginnings in the missions with their spartan, plain-speaking Methodism.<sup>189</sup> The question of religion in modern England was to be solved not through the ‘wordy disputations of theologians’ but by awakening an instinctive spiritualism, embodied in old rituals.<sup>190</sup> When Sharp wrote of a ‘spirit’, he was alluding to desirable attributes of the dance and the performer: ‘To be able to reflect the true spirit of the dance is, no doubt, largely a question of technique.’<sup>191</sup> He believed the innate beauty of the dance, and its necessary discipline and

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<sup>184</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, p. 10.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 11–14.

<sup>186</sup> Cecil Sharp and George Butterworth, *The Morris Book*, Part V (London: Novello & Sons, 1924), p. 7.

<sup>187</sup> Christopher J. Bearman, ‘Up to a Point, Dr. Hutton: Fact and Myth in the Folk Music Revival’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 59, no. 3, (1997), p. 3.

<sup>188</sup> Neal, ‘Possession of the Folk’, p. 6.

<sup>189</sup> Mary Neal, ‘Folk Art’, in Reginald R. Buckley, ed., *The Shakespeare Revival and the Stratford-upon-Avon Movement* (London: George Allen and Sons, 1911), p. 215.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>191</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, p. 44.



restraint, would be sufficient agents in effecting the improvement of English physical and artistic culture. Indeed, appeals to a romanticised barbarism, of the like espoused by Neal and Espérance, were often met with suspicion by those who considered them inimical to a sober Anglicanism. In 1909, a teacher from Nottingham responded to the news from the Board of Education, saying they did not 'see any good reason for reviving Pagan ceremonies in this so-called Christian age.'<sup>192</sup>

## Childhood

Initially, Neal and Sharp shared a common aim to introduce folk dances and songs into the regular programme of education throughout English schools.<sup>193</sup> Neal's arguments were explicit enough at the Goupil conference of November 1907, described above. However, it was in their attitudes towards the nature and purpose of teaching that they differed significantly. On the one hand, Sharp was complicit in perpetuating a widespread disregard for childhood as a complete experience in itself, perceiving it as the act of *becoming* rather than *being*.<sup>194</sup> On the other, Neal celebrated the opportunities for self-made learning through creative play and performance. Her aim was to imbue childhood with the qualities of childishness again, combating the squalor and seriousness of work as well as the priggishness of polite society. Morris dances and folk songs brought about a re-enchantment of the child, offering transcendence from the harshness of urban sprawl. The activities provided by the Espérance Club offered children and adolescents space in which they could perform new identities, and momentarily escape from the outside world where they were perceived variously as problems to be resolved or workers to be bound. It was Sharp's rubric that eventually won favour in the Board of Education, and dances became an activity practiced in physical education classes in the style of drill.

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<sup>192</sup> *Retford Times*, 5 November 1909, cited in Bearman, 'Up to a Point, Dr. Hutton', p. 3.

<sup>193</sup> Bearman, 'Sorcerer's Apprentice', p. 22.

<sup>194</sup> Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3-4.

Survivals in culture and childhood memories were kindred concepts, which in the adult were necessarily fabricated and imagined. Naturally, the child's knowledge was largely oral in transmission, and memories were perceived as survivals of a personal kind, an imprint from a time before. That childhood possessed a special kind of knowledge, unintelligible to the adult, was a trope common to romanticists and revivalists alike. According to Neal, the virtue of morris was in its evocation of 'the Elizabethan reveller, to the days when England was merry England because her heart was young'.<sup>195</sup> A celebratory report in the *Westminster Gazette* chimed with Neal's own attitudes to such an extent it was reproduced in the preamble to the second part of *The Espérance Morris Book*. The author, one Philip Macer-Wright, described the joyful cohort:

'They are common children, from mean streets. And they seem to confront you as small prophets, telling of a promised land in which the child shall be paramount, a land in which the lives of children shall be singing games. When they grow up, of course, they will dance the morris.'<sup>196</sup>

In common with the later interwar youth movements, Neal's Espérance Club proffered a model for a 'liberated' education, 'designed to evoke the powers of the child rather than imposing adult standards upon him.'<sup>197</sup> To dance as a group, it was inferred, was to familiarise yourself with your neighbours — it was a civilising activity, at least insofar as it aimed to inspire good behaviour in young people, the parents to the citizens of a future generation. The freedoms that were proffered were not themselves so free or open-ended, but rather a key to a responsible citizenship. According to Neal, the expression of dancing was 'a joyful orderly procession of those whose steps are ever climbing upwards.' Her 'pilgrims' were expected to adhere to social mores, and Neal permitted 'no wanderers from the ranks.'<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Neal, *Espérance Morris Book*, Part I, third edition, p. 3.

<sup>196</sup> Philip Macer-Wright, 'England-to-be: the Espérance Guild of National Joy', in Mary Neal, ed., *The Espérance Morris Book*, Part II (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1912), p. xv.

<sup>197</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Establishment, Volume II: The Age of Irrational* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1981), pp. 403-404.

<sup>198</sup> Neal, 'To the Thaxted Morris', p. 9.

As demonstrated above, the crux of Neal's morris lay in the performance of dance interpreted as the vestige of a forgotten religious ceremonial. She warned that morris as a drill exercise, enshrined in the school curriculum, 'will destroy the meaning and beauty of the revival of the use of folk music.'<sup>199</sup> In an article for the Thaxted church magazine, published in January 1912, Neal argued for the congruence of ceremonial in dance and religion with that of inculcating in the unlettered people a belief and attachment to good conduct: 'To the artist, whether gentle or simple, the eternal verities are living truths, and as such are worshipped in spirit and in truth and translated into the life and practice of everyday.'<sup>200</sup> Thus, 'The revival of folk art is the revival of folk religion'.<sup>201</sup> By framing morris dance as a plebeian art imbued with religious symbolism, Neal hoped it would appeal to the basic emotional responses of children and young people. It was a way of promoting imitation as a pedagogical tool for influencing responsible citizens in their formative years, founded upon the celebration of wonder and mystery. As she wrote in 1912, 'I often think when I see young men dancing with prudence and vigour how impossible it will be for them ever to become the slouching, miserable, unemployed of our great cities'.<sup>202</sup> Neal believed that morris as a pedagogical tool was best when it facilitated creativity through imitation and exploration, so drill exercises were anathema.

Writing in 1910, Sharp argued, 'in order that a boy or girl may become a good Englishman, or a good Englishwoman, training in English characteristics must be a prominent feature in education'.<sup>203</sup> This assumption provided the basis for the rationale behind the inclusion of folk dance in the national curriculum. However, if Sharp was 'by temperament an educationalist,' he was an educationalist of a

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<sup>199</sup> Neal, *Espérance Morris Book*, Part I, third edition, p. 12.

<sup>200</sup> Mary Neal, 'The Revival of Folk Art: The Faith of the Folk', *The Country Town*, vol. 2, no. 1, (1912), p. 6.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>202</sup> Mary Neal, 'The National Revival of Folk Art: May Day Revels', *The Country Town*, vol. 2, no. 4, (1912), pp. 5-6.

<sup>203</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, 'Morris and Country Dances', *Journal of Scientific Training*, vol. 3, (1910), p. 21.

different sort to Neal.<sup>204</sup> Sharp believed in the absolute authority of the teacher as a custodian of incontrovertible truths. Moreover, by insisting on an adherence to a canonical morris, Sharp's promotion of dance in schools was essentially one based on a disciplinarian routine of standardised instruction through repetitive copying. Again, the authority resided in the institution — the dance, the teacher, the school, the nation state — which the pupil, as a citizen and dancer, was to respect and obey.

In many respects, the *Espérance* Club was Neal's response to her own childhood, which she characterised as one governed by an 'unbroken facade of family devotion, no matter what the reality,' based not on love but 'money, our social position, [and] the good opinion of relatives and neighbours'.<sup>205</sup> In 1911, Mabel Tuke, an enthusiastic member of the *Espérance* Guild and erstwhile suffragette, wrote how 'love and childlikeness, happiness and healthy merriment are the foods of the perfect physical body, as well as the inspiration and life of the soul.'<sup>206</sup> One particularly glowing review of Neal's *Espérance Morris Book* summarised it as one 'that takes play seriously'.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, the article went on to argue that the importance of such a volume was so profound to the health of the nation that readers should look upon it 'as an act of patriotism.'<sup>208</sup> Allied with folk songs and traditional games, morris dancing for children was perceived as offering unparalleled opportunities for creative expression. An article in *The Times* described the programme endorsed by *Espérance* as 'exactly as children ought to be in their games. Merrily and unselfconsciously (for all their public performances) they are playing at being grown up.'<sup>209</sup> Having benefitted from the tutelage of the old dancers, Neal's band of working-class London girls were apparently well qualified

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<sup>204</sup> Lucy Broadwood, 'In Memoriam: Cecil James Sharp', *Folklore*, vol. 35, no. 3, (1924), p. 287.

<sup>205</sup> Mary Neal, 'A Victorian Childhood', *The Adelphi*, vol. 16, (1940), p. 278.

<sup>206</sup> Mabel Tuke, 'The Magic of The Morris', *Votes for Women*, 15 September 1911, p. 795.

<sup>207</sup> *The Beau*, November 1910, cited in Mary Neal, 'The *Espérance* Morris Book', *The Musical Herald*, no. 759, (1911), p. vii.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, p. vii.

<sup>209</sup> 'Espérance Club', *The Times*, 26 October 1909, p. 14.

for taking on the responsibility of transmission, owing to their ‘youth, simplicity, and their extraordinary vitality and charm.’<sup>210</sup>

## Conclusion

In November 1906, an agent of the *Musical Herald* attended a performance of dance and song organised by the Espérance Club, at Clare Market in Haslemere, Surrey. Later that evening, at the railway station, he overheard a conversation between a number of the ‘factory girls’, who had taken part in the performance. One posed the question, ‘Do you think the people really liked the dances?’ Her colleagues made a dubious reply, apparently vindicating the reporter’s supposition that ‘dancing for amusement and companionship is one thing; dancing as an exhibition for the public another.’<sup>211</sup> According to the sympathetic analysis of Victoria de Bunsen — a cousin of Conrad Noel — writing in the wake of the First World War, Mary Neal succeeded in fostering a common enjoyment in dance, which was real and palpable enough, though it was nevertheless doomed to fail so far as it was considered a ‘panacea for the abuses of village life.’<sup>212</sup> Whilst thickly overlaid with philanthropy, morris dancing of the Espérance sort maintained a vital life of its own, which existed quite independently of Sister Mary’s guiding mission. Indeed, the very fact that in many cases dancing restarted after the First World War, under the auspices of the EFDS, demonstrated how infectious the activity proved to some communities. What began as the instrument of a social experiment soon took a hold of the dancers’ imaginations, who later took it upon themselves to effect grassroots revivals in the 1920s. Having songs to sing and dances to perform offered such communities an accessible template for making their own entertainment. Mediation — through collection, interpretation, and publication — was widely accepted as a necessary evil by those who enjoyed a wholesome activity which was free of charge at the point of use. The dances soon departed from the cradle of

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<sup>210</sup> Neal, *Espérance Morris Book*, Part I, third edition, p. 5.

<sup>211</sup> Anon., ‘Morris Dances at Haslemere’, *The Musical Herald*, 1 December 1906, p. 367.

<sup>212</sup> Victoria de Bunsen was the daughter of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton and Victoria Noel, sister of Roden Noel, Conrad Noel’s father. Victoria de Bunsen, *Old and New in the Countryside* (London: Longmans, 1920), p. 42.

social consciousness in which they were nurtured, and ultimately failed in realising the most lofty aspirations of Neal and her colleagues. However, they proved popular among those groups who recognised the virtues of dancing together for the benefit of the self and that of the group.

Neal believed the revival of folk dance and music was an activity capable of teaching sociologists, artists, and even students of eugenics how the problems of civilisation could be solved.<sup>213</sup> Whilst the morris dance ultimately failed as a panacea for society's ills, it did succeed in attracting a small but loyal following of enthusiasts, who derived significant satisfaction from dancing. Particularly for those of the working class, morris offered status and agency, and their dancing gave them a right to perform new roles in their communities: 'The Squire's daughter and the dairy-maid established a new relationship, genuine, if superficial. It was shorn to some extent of condescension on one side, of obsequiousness on the other.'<sup>214</sup>

Both Sharp and Neal shared a tacit belief in 'cultural primitivism', a longing for a more stable, ordered society as an antidote for a seemingly unstable, ever-changing present.<sup>215</sup> Sharp argued that the creative identity of the nation could be found in the folk, as true arbiters of an English music and dance. This was a virtue of living in small communities, and sharing in a vernacular culture, which was the product of intergenerational borrowing and remembering. Neal was prone to using more explicit languages of race in her explanations, describing the qualities of folk expression — exemplified by morris — as an English inheritance. Her writings suggested these activities corresponded to a recessive genetic code, which needed only to be identified and triggered. These differences were overlaid with more obvious disagreements over choreography and authority, which ultimately precipitated their divergence.

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<sup>213</sup> Neal, 'Folk Art', pp. 214–215.

<sup>214</sup> de Bunsen, *Old and New*, p. 40.

<sup>215</sup> Theresa J. Buckland, 'Dance and Cultural Memory: Interpreting *Fin de Siecle* Performances of 'Olde England'', *Dance Research*, vol. 31, no. 1, (2013), p. 32.

The scale of Sharp's proselytising and theorising was such that it could justifiably be termed 'a belief system', which attracted both its devoted adherents and similarly vocal objectors.<sup>216</sup> However, the EFDS never resembled an exemplar of obedient discipline.<sup>217</sup> Rather, the Society contained a certain amount of dissent, which only became more apparent in the early 1920s. In this context, there was no such thing as a perfect orthodoxy, and the basis for later divergences originated in the suspended tensions already evident in the Society before the First World War. In his courting of official endorsement for his project, Sharp tacitly posited a bringing together of state with nation. These ephemeral artefacts of oral vernacular culture comprised the unwritten constitution of English social art, through which people shared their common experiences rooted in place and time. The curation of a repository of national arts represented an opportunity for the functions of state to incorporate popular expression, offering through the national curriculum a diet of dances, songs, tunes, which embodied and promoted a national spirit. Their success depended on securing a popular consensus which recognised the nation as congruent to the state. As patrons of folk culture, policymakers of central government sought to imbue their national education programmes with the aesthetic purity of English dance and song.

For critics of the pre-war folk dance revival, there is a tendency to ascribe its failings to Sharp's hubris and its successes to Neal's vision. Whilst the former's contributions seemingly came from a distinctly Victorian mould of rational recreation and a sort of scholarly kleptomania, the latter's were inherently liberal and egalitarian, an exemplar of progressive Edwardian philanthropy. It is inferred that Sharp relied on the devotion of his 'acolytes', whereas Neal enjoyed the support of colleagues.<sup>218</sup> Such stereotyping belies the underlying complexities of this early pioneering movement. Both Sharp and Neal aspired to reveal certain truths in their activities, which they hoped might engender societal change. Such revelations, it was implied, would only come apparent through the best

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<sup>216</sup> Francmanis, 'National Redeemer', pp. 18-19.

<sup>217</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 65.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

performance, adhering either to technical accuracy or personal feeling. Whereas Sharp believed in an truthfulness implicit to the *dance* quite independent from the individual, Neal argued the potential for a genuine authenticity resided in the *dancers* themselves. Thus, we might adjust the spectrum along axes of emotional expression and suppression: Neal strived to effect a change at a fundamentally personal level. It was perceived as a revival of the spiritual realm, and an emancipation of the body from the stiffness of modernity. Neal's mission aimed for a resonance far beyond that of Sharp's insistence on good taste



## Chapter II

### ROLF GARDINER

*'Cleanse us, O Spirit, England's heartbeat leaping  
In bodies young and lithe with muscled bone.  
Do we sow corn, or are we merely reaping  
The after-harvest of great pasts? Alone  
We learn the pure religion of the dance,  
The prayer of perfect movement which imparts  
No starry personal feats, since they enhance  
Escape from self in our hot-burning hearts.'*<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1920s Rolf Gardiner, a young man of boyish good looks, styled himself as a saviour figure for the English nation in the wake of the Great War. Too young to have served in the war, he identified himself with an aristocracy of youth who would be responsible for rebuilding a new society. Gardiner's aspirations for the revival of morris dancing were founded in a desire to achieve a sense of rootedness, 'to relate the dance to the occasions and needs of a local community.'<sup>2</sup> He aspired to lead a 'creative vanguard' towards the restoration of 'a more natural way of life, and a more fully natured society.'<sup>3</sup> Gardiner was, to use his own words, 'a radical of the spirit', intent on subsuming the dance to social and economic ends.<sup>4</sup> However, his unwavering sincerity and weakness for high-minded ideals made Gardiner a target of mockery and ridicule. His peers at Cambridge University nicknamed him 'Bluefin', in reference to his pale blue blazer jacket; his nephew referred to him as 'Nazi Uncle Rolf'; and the composer, Michael Tippett, knew him as that 'crazy

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'The Morris 1920', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 4, no. 6, (1968), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Comments upon the Chipperfield Report, for the Morris Ring, 1965'. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/42.

<sup>3</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Occasions for the Ceremonial Dance', (1938). Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/46.

<sup>4</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'D.H. Lawrence and Youth Movements of the 'Twenties', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1959), p. 39.

Morris dancer'.<sup>5</sup> Even his fellow dancers had a name for his peculiar behavioural traits, which they termed 'Rolfery'.

Gardiner was a man of various talents and myriad interests, a 'farmer, forester, folk dancer, poet and visionary.'<sup>6</sup> His work, by pen and by plough, was influenced by numerous esteemed writers and critics, including at various junctures, W.H. Auden, H.J. Massingham, J.B. Priestley, and D.H. Lawrence.<sup>7</sup> To quote Andrew Best, the editor of an anthology of his essays and poems, published posthumously in 1972, 'Rolf Gardiner was a rare person. When very young he had a clear knowledge of what he had to do and the courage and tenacity of purpose to do it.'<sup>8</sup> He was a practical man, who lived his life in accordance with principles of responsibility both to himself and his community, colouring these ideals with dance, song, and drama, not simply as decoration but a vital integrating force.<sup>9</sup> Gardiner also reconciled a peculiar dual patriotism, with attachments to romantic visions of the English and the German, both peoples and landscapes, as well as the politics and culture of other north European countries. He believed that international cooperation could be achieved only by a celebration of 'interlocality', as opposed to any sort of globalist 'World Culture'.<sup>10</sup> For much of his life, Gardiner exercised his Englishness by participating in and promoting morris dancing, which he perceived to be the product of a cultivated topography: 'Our folk dances, even as our

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Bernal, *Geography of a Life* (self-published, 2012), p. 31; Malcolm Chase, 'Hearbreak Hill: Environment, Employment and 'Back to the Land' in Inter-War Cleveland', *Oral History*, vol. 28, no. 1, (2000), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Moore-Colyer, 'Rolf Gardiner, English Patriot and the Council for the Church and Countryside', *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, (2001), p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, David Bradshaw, 'New Perspectives on Auden: Rolf Gardiner, Germany and The Orators', *W.H. Auden Society Newsletter*, no. 20, (2000), online edition [<http://audensociety.org/20newsletter.html>]; Richard J. Moore-Colyer, 'Back to Basics: Rolf Gardiner, H.J. Massingham and "A Kinship in Husbandry"', *Rural History*, vol. 12, no. 1, (2001), pp. 85-108.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Best, 'Editor's Introduction', in Andrew Best, ed., *Water Springing from the Ground: An Anthology of the Writings of Rolf Gardiner* (Shaftesbury: Springhead Trust, 1972), p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Wright, *The Village That Died for England: The Strange Story of Tyneham* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 151-152.

<sup>10</sup> Clare Button 'A Very Perfect Form of Discipline': Rolf Gardiner, Folk Dance and Occult Landscapes', in Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, eds., *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 65.

language, our poetry and music ... are a direct expression of our English landscape.’<sup>11</sup> His dancing was both an affirmation of his patriotism and an integral part of his programme of agricultural revival, which he believed was the crux of national health and identity.

Gardiner sought to instigate an agrarian revolution in England based on a quasi-feudal hierarchy led by new aristocrats of the soil. His idealism was actually founded on a political world-view derived from practical experience rather than abstract ideology.<sup>12</sup> As he wrote in 1938, ‘revolt in the name of various current “isms” is in England a tepid business.’<sup>13</sup> Appeals to the ‘natural’ did not solely offer an alternative or challenge to the omnipotence of the modern scientific method, but also ‘afforded a form of knowledge about the human organism’s place in a greater, natural world.’<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he perceived the morris dances to represent both talismanic and festive rituals, and sought to relocate them in the organic soil of an ordered society. Gardiner lamented that morris dancing and its associated folk customs had through its revival become the respectable pursuit of a polite, urban middle-class clique, uninterested in matters of agrarian economics or the condition of rural England more generally. Though revived, he feared morris was doomed to a half-life as a respectable museum piece. This was anathema to young Gardiner, who feared ‘respectability in England is the death warrant of any vital enterprise.’<sup>15</sup> Gardiner’s role in the revival was to provide a defiant, though nevertheless foolhardy, oppositional stance to Cecil Sharp’s style of dancing, disseminated through the teaching of the EFDS.

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<sup>11</sup> Rolf Gardiner’s Notebook, 1923-1924. Gardiner Papers, B/2/I, Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL).

<sup>12</sup> Moore-Colyer, ‘Rolf Gardiner, English Patriot’, p. 188.

<sup>13</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘Postscript 1938’, *North Sea and Baltic*, vol. 2, no. 4, (1938), p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Fensham, ‘Nature, Force and Variation’, in Alexandra Carter and Rachel Fensham, eds., *Dancing Naturally: Nature, Neo-Classicism and Modernity in Early-Twentieth Century Dance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Rolf Gardiner, *The English Folk Dance Tradition: an Essay* (Dresden: Neue Schule Hellerau, 1923), p. 29.

In spite of a growing body of scholarly literature on Gardiner, he still remains largely misunderstood by scholars who capitulate to the convenience of neat politico-ideological definition. He was undoubtedly a complex individual, whose beliefs appear, at least from the distanced perspective of the historian, ‘frequently contradictory’.<sup>16</sup> Georgina Boyes has reduced his personality and work to ‘a bountiful array of paradoxes,’ a convenient proxy for the intricate nuances and dissonances of his world-view.<sup>17</sup> The breadth of Gardiner’s interests and sympathies, reflected in his voluminous writings, make it difficult to reach a single conclusion on his outlook, so conventional political descriptors of left and right seem insufficient. Gardiner has been frequently employed as a principal case study in the history of a ‘Fascist Folk Revival’, which has severely reduced the scope of historical work on his involvement in the movement, as he has been shackled to the trappings of narrow ideological definition.<sup>18</sup> Following the suggestion of David Fowler, in his work on nascent youth culture, ‘Rolf Gardiner is probably best seen as a countercultural figure in British cultural life between the Wars rather than as a British Nazi.’<sup>19</sup> Though he was at times a ‘ready apologist’ for Nazism, and befriended both German National Socialists and Mosleyite British Fascists, Gardiner did not ever join such a party. Though fascistic, it is wrong to label him a Fascist. As a morris dancer, Gardiner is best understood as an ‘imprudent enthusiast’, who eschewed the dignified, urbane style of the EFDS in favour of a looser expression.<sup>20</sup> This chapter examines the self-professed iconoclast with reference to his belief in the morris as an embodiment of man’s connection with place, and its potential to evoke a rooted, earthy Englishness.

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<sup>16</sup> Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival’, pp. 155-156.

<sup>17</sup> Georgina Boyes, ‘Potencies of the Earth’: Rolf Gardiner and the English Folk Dance Revival’, in Matthew Jeffries and Mike Tyldesley, eds., *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain* (London: Ashgate, 2011), p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance: Georgina Boyes, ‘The Lady that is With You’: Maud Pauline Karpeles and the Folk Revival’, in Georgina Boyes, ed., *Step Change: New Views on Traditional Dance* (London: Francis and Taylor, 2001), pp. 185-192; Eamon Kevin Byers, ‘Folk kan synge hit bet than I: The Medievalism of English Folkmusic, 1750-2013’, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, (2014), pp. 135-144.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 154.

## Uprooted and Transplanted

Henry Rolf Gardiner was born in Fulham, London, on 5 November 1902. His father, Sir Alan Henderson Gardiner, was a distinguished Egyptologist and linguist, who declined the offer of an Oxford chair to pursue projects of his own choosing, outside the formal jurisdiction of any single college. Soon after the birth of his first son, he moved the family to Berlin, where he was chiefly employed in the preparation of an hieroglyphic dictionary.<sup>21</sup> Gardiner's mother, Hedwig von Rosen, was born to Austrian and Swedo-Finnish parents, establishing an ancestral link to northern and central Europe of which he was always conscious.<sup>22</sup> In 1911, the family returned to England and settled in Holland Park, a nineteenth century residential development in west London, synonymous with upper-middle-class intellectuals.<sup>23</sup> Gardiner received an privileged education, albeit of uneven quality. For most of his early childhood, he was cared for by English nurses and governesses. Living away from home as a boarder, he was able to actively pursue various interests, both intellectual and extra-curricular.<sup>24</sup> At the West Downs preparatory school he was 'very much a patriotic scout,' participating avidly in war work and giving lectures on the virtues of Scouting to his fellow pupils.<sup>25</sup> Gardiner particularly admired Lionel Helbert, the school's founder and headmaster, whose vigorous yet nurturing teaching methods inspired his pupils to realise that 'Life was a race to be run, not slouched through.'<sup>26</sup> Following his lead, from early adolescence Gardiner made himself a man of action. At fourteen, he went to Rugby school, where he was mocked by his peers for his being a Boy Scout. Gardiner was largely unfazed by this bullying, and kept up his participation in Scouting throughout his time at the school. Soon after his arrival, he began reading widely in history and foreign affairs,

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<sup>21</sup> R.S. Simpson, 'Sir Alan Henderson Gardiner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, (2009), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33322>], accessed 20 Nov 2017].

<sup>22</sup> Springhead Trust, *Rolf Gardiner of Springhead, Fontmell Magna: a Chronology of his Life and a Harvest Thanksgiving Sermon* (Shaftesbury: Springhead Trust, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Bernal, *Geography of a Life*, p. 30

<sup>25</sup> David Fowler, 'Rolf Gardiner: Pioneer of British Youth Culture, 1920-1939', in Jeffries and Tyldesley, eds., *Rolf Gardiner*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Lionel Helbert, Scouting, and the First World War', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1959), pp. 29-31.

aligning himself to the cause of Home Rule for Ireland, and writing a paper on Finnish politics.<sup>27</sup> These early hints of an emerging political consciousness represent the beginnings of a commitment to action at home, with an eye on the world. Furthermore, Gardiner's enthusiastic participation in the Boy Scout movement also provided a solid foundation for his world view. As Robert MacDonald argued, the early Boy Scout movement in England was aimed at improving the state of the nation through physical and mental training in young men — preparing them to 'be real men', and responsible patriots — not only for the benefit of England, but the British Empire as well.<sup>28</sup> Such movements, as elsewhere, shared a common belief in the importance of the outdoors in achieving these objectives, as a space representing good health and natural order. Though Gardiner later fell out with Baden Powell's vision for youth, many of his future initiatives were inspired by this same impulse to return to the land.

After two unhappy years at Rugby, Gardiner asked his parents for a transfer, and in July 1918 he was sent to Bedales co-educational school, situated near Petersfield in Hampshire, joined shortly afterwards by his younger sister, Margaret.<sup>29</sup> Even by the standards of other progressive public schools of the early twentieth century, Bedales was highly unconventional, not only in its liberal attitudes towards the freedom of pupils to roam freely at weekends, but also in its experimental teaching methods. Here, Gardiner thrived under the 'loose curriculum,' which allowed him to develop an idiosyncratic literary style, but apparently failed to develop in him a scholarly rigour.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, he exploited the intellectual freedoms of Bedales to develop his own ideas about the arts and literature, and was awarded with high marks for his essays on subjects such as 'Atmospheres' and 'Dreams'. 1919 proved an eventful year for Gardiner, particularly with regards to his interest in morris dancing. It was in this same year that Gardiner

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<sup>27</sup> Fowler, 'Pioneer of British Youth Culture', pp. 22-24.

<sup>28</sup> Robert MacDonald, *Sons of Empire: the Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1914* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 3-28.

<sup>29</sup> Gill Hedley, 'Margaret Emilia Gardiner, 1904-2005', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (2017), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/94500>, accessed 20 Nov 2017].

<sup>30</sup> Fowler, 'Pioneer of British Youth Culture', p. 24.

also first read *Sons and Lovers*, discovering D.H. Lawrence, who soon became a guide and mentor.<sup>31</sup> In the autumn, Gardiner wrote a dissertation on 'Modern Drama' in England and Europe, arguing that art which excluded the working-class could not be considered representative of the true culture of the nation.<sup>32</sup> Finally, whilst at home over the Christmas holiday, Gardiner attended a school of the EFDS in Chelsea, where he first participated in country and morris dancing, and also met Arthur Heffer, who later became a close friend.<sup>33</sup> Returning to school in the new year, he assisted in setting up a folk dance group.<sup>34</sup>

Gardiner emerged from Bedales with a firm belief in the efficacy of the deed over the idea. On leaving the school, he spent several months travelling, in an attempt to 'come to terms with immaturity in some remote solitude.'<sup>35</sup> In the winter of 1920, he took up work as a farm hand in north Wales, but the draw of his European forebears soon led him on a solo trek across the continent to Carinthia in Austria, a destination apparently chosen at random by blindly sticking a pin through a map. Gardiner admired the venerability of the Alpine peasant economies, which he described as 'combining physical hardihood and handsome good-looks, Catholic piety fused with pagan carnality, and an unusual and unfailing artistic talent.'<sup>36</sup> He returned home enamoured of central Europe, but with an even greater feeling that the decadence of middle-class England would surely precipitate its downfall.

In the autumn of 1921, Gardiner went up to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he read medieval and modern languages. Whilst he later denounced 'the false gaiety of undergraduate society,' his time at St. John's was marked by even greater

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<sup>31</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'D.H. Lawrence and Youth Movements of the 'Twenties', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1959), p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Fowler, 'Pioneer of British Youth Culture', pp. 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Folk Dancing', *The Bedales Record*, no. 32, (1919-1920), p. 70. Bedales School Online Archive, [[http://bedaleschools.daisy.websds.net/Filename.ashx?systemFileName=BEDAR1919-1920\\_Iss\\_032.pdf](http://bedaleschools.daisy.websds.net/Filename.ashx?systemFileName=BEDAR1919-1920_Iss_032.pdf)].

<sup>35</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Changing Carinthia', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 4, no. 5, (1966), p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 155

freedoms than he had enjoyed before. As he reflected, ‘unlike a public school or regiment, Cambridge was tolerant. It accepted a certain amount of eccentricity.’<sup>37</sup> Here, Gardiner further developed his protean world-view, and initiated contact with likeminded individuals, through membership of various special interest groups and societies. He attended meetings of the Heretics Society — a crucible for modernist intellectuals, who exchanged subversive ideas about religion and authority — mixing with ‘free-spirited females’ and socialist friends.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Gardiner assumed the image of a post-war Rupert Brooke, frequently riding out across the fens on horseback, dressed in his distinctive sky blue jacket.<sup>39</sup> Throughout his three years as an undergraduate, he also regularly attended morris classes at the Malting House. These undergraduate years crystallised Gardiner’s political outlook, marking a transition from ‘unconventional’ adolescent to ‘countercultural’ young man.<sup>40</sup> Most of his time was devoted to political work, primarily carried out through the writing of articles and letters, and from 1923 in the editing of a student journal entitled *Youth*, which he appropriated to suit his own interests and campaigns beyond the university and the town.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst he evidently enjoyed the freedoms proffered by collegiate life, Gardiner was disillusioned by the insularity and self-regarding nature of academic society. Soon after going down from Cambridge in 1924, he reviewed his time at St. Johns: ‘His friends were vaguely sympathetic, but sceptical. Cambridge society was sophisticated and intellectual, Oxford’s epigrammatic and aesthetic.’<sup>42</sup> Gardiner soon recognised that the university was not conducive to realising his political ambitions for social experiments, and elected to operate outside of the academy, whilst exploiting the networks available to him through its institutions. He even found some of the ex-service students, who he hoped would introduce a broader

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<sup>37</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘David’s Sling: a Young Man’s Prelude, 1918-1925’, p. 54. [p. 177]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>38</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Bernal, *Geography of a Life*, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Fowler, ‘Rolf Gardiner: Pioneer of British Youth Culture’, pp. 26-27.

<sup>41</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>42</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘David’s Sling’, p. 97 [p. 220]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.



outlook to the university culture, frustratingly conservative.<sup>43</sup> Gardiner later recalled how he was once ‘flattened’ by the reproach of J.B. Priestley, who said ‘Yung man, all ye want is jest a few reforms! [sic]’.<sup>44</sup> Following the reluctance of these older students to engage in discussions about social and economic renewal, Gardiner found himself all the more convinced the responsibility for future action lay with his own generation. He believed it was their duty ‘to represent those who never came back and build the ‘land for heroes’ promised them.’<sup>45</sup> Gardiner left Cambridge with a lower-second-class degree, and ‘an extreme contempt for academic types.’<sup>46</sup>

Gardiner was clearly influenced by the anti-urban and anti-capitalist writings of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, as well as those of Edward Carpenter.<sup>47</sup> Like Carpenter, he distrusted state forms of socialism and resented bureaucrats.<sup>48</sup> Instead, he adhered to a kind of guild socialism, expressed through kinship, fraternity, and brotherhood. Furthermore, Gardiner shunned ‘overt political activism’ in favour of practical action.<sup>49</sup> Whilst still a student at Cambridge, he joined the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, an enigmatic ‘all-ages, co-educational and pacifistic society for the promotion of camping and handicraft’, centred on its founder, John Hargrave.<sup>50</sup> The experiences of war distilled pre-existing social anxieties, and crystallised previously fractious or loosely-bound groups into organisations fuelled by exigencies of socio-political agitation. The result was a new wave of orders and societies, established with a common belief that their objectives were crucial to the salvation of modern civilisation.<sup>51</sup> Gardiner was introduced to

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<sup>43</sup> Fowler, ‘Rolf Gardiner: Pioneer of British Youth Culture’, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Gardiner, ‘Lawrence and Youth Movements’, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> Gardiner, ‘Changing Carinthia’, p. 154.

<sup>46</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: a Life of Liberty and Love* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 444.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Jefferies and Mike Tyldesley, ‘Introduction: Rolf Gardiner; Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain’, in Jefferies and Tyldesley, eds., *Rolf Gardiner*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Annebella Pollen, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* (London: Donlon, 2016), p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Establishment, Volume II: The Age of Irrational* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1981), pp. 87-89.

Hargrave by Mary Neal in 1923, during a time when they were in correspondence over their shared anger over Sharp and the EFDS.<sup>52</sup> It was Neal who convinced Gardiner to join the Kindred that same year, an incident described by Mark Drakeford as ‘the last significant contribution which the suffragette members were to provide from their extensive network of contacts’.<sup>53</sup> For all its other-worldliness and occult superstition, the Kibbo Kift shared a common root with that of the pre-war Espérance activities, especially in the attention afforded to the nurturing of young people through adolescence. Gardiner’s forthrightness was admired by his fellow kinsmen and women of the Kibbo Kift:

‘Rolf Gardiner was a very gorgeous and magnificent young man. He brought to us something of what the Wandervogel were doing and that, at the time, was entirely idealistic. It was peace, better education and the breaking of various taboos; the taboo against discussing sex, the taboo against throwing off your clothes in camp and the taboo against discussing anyone else’s religion ... We broke the seals and brought them into the daylight.’<sup>54</sup>

Taking the title, ‘Rolf the Rover’, Gardiner was an enthusiastic member of the Kindred, and in 1925 performed the role of Glee Master (master of ceremonies) at the Althing (annual assembly).<sup>55</sup> Soon after this occasion, he left the Kibbo Kift, frustrated at Hargrave’s anti-German tendencies.<sup>56</sup> Following his departure, Gardiner sought to realise his ambition to lead a vanguard of European youth by striking out on a path of his own making.

Throughout the 1920s, Gardiner maintained a lively correspondence with his literary hero, D.H. Lawrence, who encouraged him to ‘smash a few big holes in European suburbanity, [and] let in a little real fresh air.’<sup>57</sup> Their friendship not only inspired Gardiner’s actions, but also his prose. Soon after going down from

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<sup>52</sup> Bearman, ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Drakeford, *Social Movements and Their Supporters: the Green Shirts in England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Vera Chapman (Kibbo Kift alias: ‘Lavengri’), conducted by Mark Drakeford, cited in Drakeford, *Social Movements and Their Supporters*, pp. 67–68.

<sup>55</sup> Cathy Ross and Oliver Bennett, *Designing Utopia: John Hargrave and the Kibbo Kift* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, pp. 47–49.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from D.H. Lawrence to Rolf Gardiner, 9 August 1924, in *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 606.

Cambridge in the summer of 1924, Gardiner began writing an autobiographical novel, entitled 'David's Sling: a Young Man's Prelude, 1918-1925'. Dressed in the clothes of his picaresque alias, David, he fired projectiles charged with a youthful iconoclasm upon the Goliath of middle-class urban England. The highly embellished prose seemed imitative of Lawrence, combined with the forthrightness of T.S. Eliot, and traces of Thomas Hardy. In July 1926, Lawrence wrote to the young man, expressing his enthusiasm for a forthcoming dancing and hiking tour to Yorkshire: 'I should like even to try a sword-dance with iron-stone miners above Whitby. I should love to be connected with something, with some few people, in something.'<sup>58</sup> Whilst he was actually ambivalent towards the idea of the folk revival, Lawrence sympathised with Gardiner's attempts at fomenting communities through dance. Disillusioned by the narrow conservatism of middle-class society, Gardiner 'clung to Lawrence', with an instinctive trust that in following him, he might realise his ambitions for a wholeness of soil and soul.<sup>59</sup>

After many unsettled years, in the summer of 1927, Gardiner wrote to his sister, expressing a desire to find a permanent home: 'nowadays I look helplessly for England everywhere, perhaps looking for a part of myself; or maybe it is I have had enough of roving and want to grow roots in homely soil'.<sup>60</sup> Later that year, he moved to Gore Farm, in Dorset, purchased in 1924 by his uncle, Balfour Gardiner, from the breaking-up of the baronial estates of Fontmell Magna and Iwerne Minster.<sup>61</sup> Here, Gardiner's tasks were various, but each shared a single guiding principle 'to restore it from the herb to the hymn'.<sup>62</sup> It was an exercise in land management and agricultural economics, husbandry and craftsmanship, permeated by a promotion of communal festivals and rural arts. Upon his arrival, Gardiner immediately set about a programme of extensive afforestation, ultimately planting

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<sup>58</sup> Letter from D.H. Lawrence to Rolf Gardiner, July 1926, in *Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 667.

<sup>59</sup> Gardiner, 'D.H. Lawrence and Youth Movements of the 'Twenties', pp. 38-39.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Rolf Gardiner to Margaret Gardiner, July 1927, cited in Clare Button 'A Very Perfect Form of Discipline': Rolf Gardiner, Folk Dance and Occult Landscapes', in Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, eds., *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *Village That Died*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>62</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Prologue', in Best, ed., *Water Springing from the Ground*, pp. 7-8.

some three million trees across the estate in an attempt to improve the condition of the soil.<sup>63</sup> Based on this practical experience, learned at Gore Farm, Gardiner became a notable writer on organic husbandry.

Following the expansion of his estate in 1933, again funded by his uncle's investment, Gardiner formed the Springhead Ring, an informal group of close friends and allies, agriculturalists, dancers, and intellectuals. Here, Gardiner exercised his practical abilities, informed and influenced by his visionary ambitions, using tradition as a guide rather than as an orthodoxy.<sup>64</sup> Though he had initially planned to establish a 'rural university' at Springhead, this ambitious scheme was thwarted by a lack of funds.<sup>65</sup> Instead, Gardiner turned to the work camp model, advocating hard, though meaningful, manual labour in programmes of communal activity. He derived much inspiration from the *Wandervogel*, a popular trend among German youth groups of the early twentieth century, manifest in a wide diversity of separate movements of various political colours, all sharing in a common appreciation for hiking, camping, and comradeship.<sup>66</sup> Gardiner believed these young Germans comprised a modern Dionysian band of intellectuals, organised in a 'scoutlike formation', standing against both the perceived emasculating effects of the modern nuclear family and the refraction of liberal individualism.<sup>67</sup> He perceived these loosely-organised federation of young people to represent a version of the boy scouts without the overt militarism, which he disliked in Baden Powell's leadership.

Gardiner borrowed extensively from these German youths, and taught members of the Springhead Ring to emulate their form and discipline. As such, he

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<sup>63</sup> Wright, *Village that Died*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance: John Field, 'An Anti-Urban Education? Work Camps and Ideals of the Land in Interwar Britain', *Rural History*, vol. 23, no. 2, (2012), pp. 213-228; Moore-Colyer, 'Rolf Gardiner, English Patriot', pp. 187-209.

<sup>65</sup> Richard J. Moore-Colyer, 'Rolf Gardiner, Farming and the English Landscape', in Jefferies and Tyldesley, eds., *Rolf Gardiner*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler, 'Rolf Gardiner: Pioneer of British Youth Culture', p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> Stefan Arvidson, *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 233.

and his followers wanted ‘to mend the clock and not just to put it back.’<sup>68</sup> This sense of order in clock-mending was reflected in the observance and celebration of seasonal events, such as Plough Monday in January, Spring and Harvest festivals, and Christmas gatherings, incorporating folk and morris dancing, as well as singing and mumming plays.<sup>69</sup> Naturally, the estate soon had a morris side of its own to lead the Whitsuntide festivities, and the Springhead Ring Morris Men were formally admitted into the Morris Ring in March 1937.<sup>70</sup> Gardiner’s vast estate at Springhead — which by 1939 incorporated 500 acres of farmland and 800 acres of woodland — continued to be the incubator for his projects, and a trysting point for likeminded idealists.<sup>71</sup>

In the Edwardian period, Baden Powell’s Boy Scouts provided an alternative ethic, fashioned to address the perceived cultural crises of the era, as demonstrated by MacDonald in *Sons of Empire*. The general characteristics of the early Boy Scout, which MacDonald describes as instilled

### **Angry Young Man**

By the time of his graduation from Cambridge in the summer of 1924, Gardiner’s reputation as a rude, forthright iconoclast was well-known among the membership of the folk dance movement. Much to his frustration, Gardiner found Sharp and the EFDS resembled elements of the same vapid emptiness he loathed most in university life. From the outset of his involvement, Gardiner was frustrated by the ‘pedantry’ exercised by Sharp and his appointed examiners, and resented the institutional obsession with assessment by examination. As mentioned above, Gardiner was supported in his criticisms by Mary Neal, albeit from an arm’s length. Writing in September 1923, she explained, ‘I must adhere to my resolution not to

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<sup>68</sup> Wright, *Village That Died*, p. 153.

<sup>69</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘Seven Years at Springhead’, in Best, ed., *Water Springing from the Ground*, pp. 143–152.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Meeting at Cecil Sharp House, 13 March 1937’, in Walter Abson, ed., *The First Log Book of the Morris Ring* (The Morris Ring, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> Springhead Trust, *Rolf Gardiner of Springhead*, p. 2.

take part publicly with your fight with the EFDS simply because it is my fight over again ... But I am with you in spirit and shall do my bit in private.’<sup>72</sup>

Gardiner asked Sharp, “Why did you go to the Board of Education, and allow your courses to be swamped by elementary school teachers?”<sup>73</sup> According to Gardiner, the true revival was a religious and economic one, a revolution from below and within. He wanted to employ morris in the service of rescuing the farming communities of England hollowed out by the tyranny of cheap food production. Its fullest potential to effect and foster cultural change in modern agriculture was, to Gardiner’s mind, frustrated by Sharp’s urban classroom style, which denied the dance of its earthy credentials. Worst of all, he despised the propensity for sections of the urban bourgeois to appeal to the quaintness or barbarity of morris dancing as a curious relic: ‘what he saw as a stale museumizing tendency in which decommissioned culture was neatly tagged and displayed to the bemused delight of onlookers.’<sup>74</sup> Perhaps contrarily, Gardiner joined with the critics who mocked folk revivals as risible symptoms of an effete and shallow sentimentalism. He said, ‘To dance the Morris dance ... under such circumstances must seem the crankiest of crankdoms. And so it is unless it is somehow connected with the purposes of life and the future.’<sup>75</sup> Sharp’s concentration on the replication of choreographic detail, carried out in a quasi-academic fashion, offended Gardiner’s anti-scholarly prejudice as well as his desire to evoke a more visceral spirituality. He considered it introspective, self-regarding, and as part of the ‘folk’ idiom, bracketed apart from other English communal customs. Worst of all for Gardiner, it was unimaginative and dull.

In spite of virulent opposition, voiced by Sharp and echoed by many members of the Society, in September 1922, Gardiner led a contingent of twenty-

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<sup>72</sup> Letter from Mary Neal to Rolf Gardiner, 19 September 1923. Gardiner Papers, C/3/1/30, CUL.

<sup>73</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘David’s Sling’, p. 98 [p. 221]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>74</sup> Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), pp. 184-185.

<sup>75</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘Postscript 1938’, *North Sea and Baltic*, vol. 2, no. 4, (1938), p. 106.

five dancers, musicians, and singers on a fortnight's tour of German provincial towns and cities. It was intended as 'a political gesture of the younger generation', mimicking 'the half-remembered tradition of the English strolling players, musicians and dancers,' ubiquitous throughout Europe in the sixteenth century.<sup>76</sup> They called themselves the *Englische Volks-Musikvereinigung* (English Folk Music Company), and in this context, morris, sword, and country dances became the principal articles for communication and exchange, 'a guest offering which we brought and in return for which we received the hospitality of a foreign people and an insight into their culture and the things which concerned them most.'<sup>77</sup> Gardiner and his followers shared examples of English folk arts with 'the young people in German towns as a gift more potent than political discussions.'<sup>78</sup> The company performed in Cologne, Dresden, Frankfurt, and Rothenburg. In doing so, Gardiner knowingly defied the wishes of Sharp, who recommended they confined themselves to villages, avoiding 'places of any civic importance'.<sup>79</sup> In spite of a significant financial loss, exacerbated by German monetary inflation, Gardiner was buoyed by the experience. On returning home, he wrote, 'We have had an adventure and made an experiment. We have brought a light into dark places ... We have blazed a trail. Let us put by all ugly regrets and live in hope.'<sup>80</sup> By taking morris to Germany, he aspired to test his ambitions for the revival, free from the restraints of the domestic frustrations of class-consciousness, and Sharp's omniscience, at least for a couple of weeks. Furthermore, considering the Germans to be a people more in touch with their organic roots and identity, Gardiner courted the plaudits of commentators in Germany to vindicate his endeavours at home in England.

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<sup>76</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'David's Sling', p. 87 [210]; Rolf Gardiner, 'The Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men: Speech at the 38th Feast of the CMM, Christ's College, Cambridge, on 28 October 1961', p. 5. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/3.

<sup>77</sup> 'Occasions for the Ceremonial Dance', transcript of a speech given by Rolf Gardiner to a meeting of the Morris Ring at Cecil Sharp House, n.d. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/46.

<sup>78</sup> Springhead Trust, *Rolf Gardiner of Springhead*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Cecil Sharp to Rolf Gardiner, 9 July 1922. Gardiner Papers, C/3/1/9, CUL.

<sup>80</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Last Circular with Financial Statement', October 1922. Gardiner Papers, D/2/2/35, CUL.

The following year, Gardiner instigated his progression from dissident rebel to outright iconoclast. On the occasion of Sharp's honorary degree from Cambridge in the summer of 1923, Gardiner submitted an article to *The Challenge*. It was a scathing diatribe, the blows scarcely softened by the lukewarm congratulations of the opening paragraph. He derided the activities of the EFDS as constituting a false dawn, which mistook 'the apparatus for the functioning'.<sup>81</sup> The concluding passage aimed squarely at Sharp himself, arguing that when it came to deciding upon a future trajectory for the movement, 'they are blind.'<sup>82</sup> By this time, the Secretary of the Society had already written to Gardiner, requesting he did not attend the summer meeting, after previous criticisms had caused offence to members.<sup>83</sup> However, the publication of a further polemical essay in October 1923 finally confirmed his status as *persona non grata* with the EFDS.<sup>84</sup> Entitled 'The English Folk Dance: Some Constructive Considerations', deliberately mimicking Sharp's seminal work of 1907, Gardiner had his sights directed at upsetting the established authority by attacking the authority of their esteemed leader. Combined with another extended essay, printed by a publishing house in Dresden, these articles were not simply rebuttals of Sharp, but comprised a manifesto for an alternative course of revival. Gardiner nailed his document to Sharp's door: its thoroughness and exigency can only be interpreted as a declaration to pioneer a new movement. It was his 'magna charta'.<sup>85</sup>

Gardiner thought the insistence on the replication of a standardised form was flawed, placing undue emphasis on 'uphold[ing] a scientific body of technique, [and] a purity of tradition' at the expense of spontaneous, intuitive expression.<sup>86</sup> He despised the 'education policy of [a] pseudo-traditional dance curriculum,' based on the reproduction of 'a rigid formal quality, falsely known as traditional.'<sup>87</sup> According

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<sup>81</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'The English Folk Dance Society', 6 July 1923, *The Challenge*, p. 292.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Bertram Gavin to Rolf Gardiner, 21 June 1923. Gardiner Papers, C/3/1/8, CUL.

<sup>84</sup> Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part I', pp. 52-54.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>86</sup> Gardiner, *English Folk Dance Tradition*, p. 28.

<sup>87</sup> Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part I', p. 54 and p. 52.



to Gardiner, Sharp's universalist doctrines, perpetuated by the assumption of 'a fixed and standardised technique,' infected morris dances with 'the germ-killer of a spurious traditionalism.'<sup>88</sup> Among other things, he argued for the 'strongest possible discouragement to be given to Women's Morris,' and the discontinuation of 'demonstration' performances. This marked a significant turning point in Gardiner's attitudes towards the dance. Less than a year before, women's morris had featured in the programmes of the German tour.<sup>89</sup> However, Gardiner's new movement was to be male-led, occupied in proselytising and artistic work, inspiring festivals and pageants, which would take place 'in public parks, places and buildings, even in churches and cathedrals, at the right and proper seasons.'<sup>90</sup> Reminding his reader that these were not recommendations, but a series of policies, Gardiner concluded 'compromise is utterly useless and unsatisfactory ... The air is thick with expectation.'<sup>91</sup>

Gardiner believed the accumulation of knowledge as an end in itself was an inherently perfunctory and selfish act. Once removed from the conditions in which they were created, 'facts' were dead articles, void of cultural life and practical use, doomed to a purgatory overseen by academics and scholars. He considered the fetishising of academic scholarship banal, cynical, and ultimately uncreative. The academy was isolated from the 'real' England, and cherished knowledge as A Good Thing beyond question. Likewise, Sharp's classrooms in London made claims to know things about England that were impossible to properly obtain or comprehend fully from such an isolated location. These were national observatories, which observed communities and retrieved articles of insight, packaged and traded as 'facts', inscribed in a secret language designed to keep out non-initiates. The intangible property of communities was given a new half-life, as articles of curiosity or intrigue, or simply to add decoration to pageants and stage productions.

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<sup>88</sup> Gardiner, *English Folk Tradition*, p. 28; Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part I', p. 52.

<sup>89</sup> 'Englische Volks-Musik-Vereinigung: the English Folk Music Company presents a Programme of Dance and Song'. Gardiner Papers, C/3/1, CUL.

<sup>90</sup> Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part I', pp. 53-54.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

Gardiner asked, 'But how could flowers uprooted from the earth of England survive stuck in the vases and jam-pots of suburban civilisation?'<sup>92</sup> He despised the arrogant construction of knowledge by institutions of the establishment, and preferred to exercise his own intellectual enquiries in the fields and communities of rural England, with a view to capturing true moments where real essences appeared to be there for the taking.

Dance, as an embodied performance, was a living thing, which sought connection with a carnal world. Gardiner sought to restore an identity of place to morris, planting the dances once more in the communities which had nurtured them. In the summer of 1924, Gardiner published the second part of his critical appraisal, in which he emphasised the potential of morris dance as a vital instrument of renewal, 'suited to our own age; not the age which is dying but that which is coming to birth.'<sup>93</sup> He further rejected the 'battalions of academic uniformity', in favour of a version of morris performed out of doors, subsumed to 'the growth of new forms of social relationship and a new conception of life'.<sup>94</sup> According to Gardiner, classroom examinations and ballets were 'ephemeral' and dead-ends, concerned only with matters at the surface level.<sup>95</sup> He wanted to put morris to work in connecting people, revivifying communities through cooperative endeavour.

## **Pilgrimage**

Whilst Gardiner occasionally cited the Kibbo Kift as a potential vanguard body for steering an alternative revival, he turned to more prosaic, though dependable allies in Cambridge to fulfil his prophecy.<sup>96</sup> This band of dancers was drawn principally

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<sup>92</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Speech given to the Annual General Meeting of the English Folk Dance and Song Society', 11 November 1960. Gardiner Papers, C/3/2/1, CUL.

<sup>93</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'The English Folk Dance: Some Constructive Considerations, Part II', *Youth*, Summer 1924, p. 196.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 194 and p. 196.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 195.

<sup>96</sup> Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part I', p. 54; Gardiner, 'Some Constructive Considerations, Part II', p. 196.

from a small group of middle-class men, their identity partially disguised by an arcane alias, the Travelling Morrice. Their objective was to return the morris dances to the places where they were purported to belong. Of Gardiner's friends at Cambridge, Arthur Heffer was undoubtedly his closest. According to a memoir written by Gardiner in 1961, plans for the Travelling Morrice first emerged in the spring of 1924, out of a meeting between the two men:

'I ran into the bookshop one day and laying my plans on the table fervently appealed to Arthur: 'Won't *you* lead the thing?' A smile of acceptance and glowing affirmation was the response. Arthur took the lead. The decision was momentous.'<sup>97</sup>

Coinciding with Gardiner's final term at St. John's and his going down from Cambridge, Heffer took on the full onus of organising this inaugural tour, and infiltrated the locality through judicious use of the *Crockford's Clerical Directory*, familiarising himself with the resident clergy of the north east Cotswolds.<sup>98</sup> Though ostensibly a joint enterprise, the majority of the work carried out in the preparation and running of the tour was done by Heffer. Gardiner's involvement was restricted principally to the marshalling of campsite paraphernalia and the cooking of breakfasts. Most importantly, it was Heffer who apparently approached an ailing Cecil Sharp to seek his approval, though no explicit evidence of this request is known to have survived. However, he wrote in the closing pages of the 'Log Book' of the Travelling Morrice tour, 'It is a comfort to think that even on his death bed Mr Sharp gave his blessing to the tour - without which no such venture would have been possible.'<sup>99</sup> Gardiner was obviously conscious of his own unpopularity in the EFDS, and found a willing conduit and advocate for his plans. Heffer, however, was himself not entirely comfortable with his friend's ambitions for effecting cultural change within the Society and without, and ran the tour with a predication towards bringing people of a like-mind together, rather than forcing an opposition movement. In 1926, he wrote to Gardiner, 'The process of cementing friendships nay more of founding a fellowship of sterling people who matter ... was my main

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<sup>97</sup> Gardiner, 'Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men', p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> John Jenner, 'The Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men: History and Influences During the Twentieth Century', (2004), p. 8, <http://tradcap.com/archive/histtrav.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Arthur Heffer, 'A Morris Tour in the Cotswolds done by the Travelling Morrice'. Log book of the first tour of the Travelling Morrice, (1924), p. 85. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

object (I don't know about yours) in founding the TM'<sup>100</sup> Though their true motivations varied, these two men shared a desire to experiment, motivated by a common frustration with the current state of affairs.

The first tour of the TM commenced at lunchtime on Wednesday 18 June 1924, convening at the house of Captain R.W. Kettlewell in Burford, a keen supporter of the folk dance movement. For five days, the group of eight dancers and one fiddler visited towns and villages in the Windrush valley, a particularly picturesque region of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. They performed in many of the places made infamous by the folk dance movement, having yielded information on their morris dances and their tunes to Cecil Sharp, George Butterworth, Mary Neal, and other collectors before the war. Thus it was considered the most appropriate territory for making a statement about the state of revival dancing, and where Gardiner thought it possible 'to dance the Morris in its real context, not in a precious or academic one.'<sup>101</sup> For Gardiner, it was an opportunity to initiate one facet of his experiment, getting a 'taste of the real thing': 'They poisoned the imagination of their followers with the charmed names of Longborough, Bledington and Sherborne. It was like talking to a home-stranded Crusader about Jerusalem and the Holy Land.'<sup>102</sup> Dancing along the market streets and village greens, it appeared possible to Gardiner to commune with the deep spirit of these places, and capture in a moment essences of a countryside laid to waste by the excesses of modernity. The 1924 tour, and those which followed in subsequent years, 'satisfied a great nostalgia for an England rapidly being engulfed by suburbia.'<sup>103</sup> Moreover, these hallowed sites became spaces where notions of tradition and revival could be momentarily transcended.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 28 July 1926. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Best, 'The Travelling Morrice', in Andrew Best, ed., *Water Springing from the Ground: An Anthology of the Writings of Rolf Gardiner* (Shaftesbury: Springhead Estate, 1972), p. 53.

<sup>102</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'A Brief Account of the Travelling Morrice', *North Sea and Baltic*, vol. 2, no. 4, (1938), p. 77.

<sup>103</sup> Gardiner, 'Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men', p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Button, "A Very Perfect Form of Discipline", p. 59.

The dancers' costume consisted of a white shirt and flannels, varying little from that of the ordinary EFDS morris attire, save for their green baldrics decorated with a conspicuous sun-like 'totem' at the front crossing. However, the white plimsols to which revival dancers had become accustomed were jettisoned in favour of black leather-soled shoes, providing them with better protection against the hard road surfaces of asphalt and tarmacadam. In a reflective account of the first tour, written in 1928 and published ten years later, Gardiner ascribed to the footwear an even greater symbolism: 'Our technique changed. It was no longer the technique of rubber-shod amateurs in the Chelsea Polytechnic, but the knowledge of leather-sheathed feet that had beaten the ground of the English earth.'<sup>105</sup> White plimsols were considered representative of the urbane morris of Sharp's Society, more appropriate to the college gymnasium than the rural street. Whilst there were undoubtedly perfectly reasonable pragmatic reasons for their change in footwear, Gardiner exploited the opportunity to emphasise their separation from the accepted standards of performance.

The Travelling Morrice, as conceived by Gardiner and Heffer, was an attempt to incorporate the post-1919 generation of dancers into the continuum of history, affirming their status as the legitimate custodians of morris in the twentieth century. Reflecting on the events from a distance of some fifteen years, Gardiner wrote: 'We believed that through taking members of our own generation and class back to the country *via* the dances we might engender a movement of real power and constructive inspiration.'<sup>106</sup> In returning morris to the places which had until the latter part of the previous century supported the dance, Gardiner staked his claim as the leader of a new way of revival that was sympathetic to the past, whilst also making an impression on the present. Moreover, it was a covert suggestion that Sharp's work was considered complete, and that the conditions were ripe for furthering morris by narrowing its scope and delving deeper, down into the soil:

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<sup>105</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Brief Account of the Travelling Morrice', pp. 77-78.

<sup>106</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'Music, Noise and the Land', *Wessex: Letters from Springhead*, vol. 3, no. 3, (1951), p. 53.

‘We could not help feeling that at that moment in time something might have come full circle, and that the torch which Sharp had kindled from the lighted eyes of the old people of Somerset, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire had been passed confidently into our hands.’<sup>107</sup>

The local press acknowledged notions of inheritance, and wrote favourably of the visit of these revival dancers: ‘showing their prowess and agility before admiring crowds ... the dances come to life again.’<sup>108</sup> However, such reports did not simply concede a transference away from the resident populations of the Cotswolds, but conspired to promote an interest amongst the locals too: ‘Let us hope it may lead to the local revival of an art which had been so nearly lost.’<sup>109</sup>

The Travelling Morrice did indeed achieve local notoriety, and their visits were successful in initiating local revivals pioneered by the inhabitants of these exalted places. In her book on Cotswolds folklore, Katharine Briggs recognised their contribution towards rekindling a fondness amongst the populace for their own customs: ‘Excellent work in the encouragement and preservation of local Morris dancing is done by the Cambridge Morris Men [as the Travelling Morrice] who made a summer dancing tour of the Cotswold villages.’<sup>110</sup> Most significantly, the young men of the TM met with many of the surviving morris dancers and musicians of the region, and exchanged with them their youthful enthusiasm for glimpses of supposedly primitive knowledge. These meetings, spanning generations, were central to Gardiner’s experiment, as reparative gestures by dancers of the nascent revival era to those who had shared with the collectors the very stuff of their birthrights. The ‘spirit’ and ‘feeling’ of morris was embodied in these old men, and it could not be transmitted in any way other than through a personal meeting.

One particularly celebrated character was Henry (Harry) Taylor of Longborough, a small village some two miles north of Stow-on-the-Wold. Arthur Heffer’s Log Book, written that same day, chronicled the meeting:

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>108</sup> *The Banbury Guardian*, 26 June 1924, p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Katharine M. Briggs, *The Folklore of the Cotswolds* (London: Batsford, 1974), p. 45.

‘Mr Taylor was high in his praise in fact all swelled with pride - ‘Just right quite’ was his actual sentence. [sic] ... a small suspicion that even Longborough people might get tired of Longborough dances was quickly dispelled. Then a wonderful thing happened: old Henry Taylor bless him came up to Arthur and said confidentially ‘Pardon me larding in young sir but may an old man what knows what he’s talking about suggest that you do Constant Billio a new way to rest you.’<sup>111</sup>

The TM actively invited such local authorities as ‘Harry’ Taylor to pass judgement on their revival morris, and welcomed their criticism as enthusiastically as they drank in their praise. Indeed, to Gardiner, criticism of the refined, self-conscious style of their performance vindicated his predilection for dancing with spirit rather than with technical accuracy. In particular, he recalled a comment from one John Hitchman of Bledington that ‘our dancing was too fussy.’<sup>112</sup> As Kenworthy Schofield summarised, ‘in the anxiety to acquire the necessary control, the vigour of the dances had been rather overlooked’.<sup>113</sup> However, through these meetings the TM not only developed an alternative style of dance, manifest in a looser yet more vigorous expression, but also collected further information on alternative tunes and sequences, which was later absorbed into the repertoire of clubs across the country.<sup>114</sup>

Throughout these tours to the Cotswolds, the aspiration was towards reciprocity, between peoples and places, as Gardiner sought to establish the historical and geographical coordinates of the morris tradition. His efforts to reconnect the dances with an identity of place reflected contemporary discourses of epistemology and religious belief. In common with his sometime correspondent and colleague, H.J. Massingham, Gardiner despised the secularism of modern industrial society, which he believed severed a ‘connection with their true Englishness’.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Arthur Heffer, ‘A Morris Tour in the Cotswolds done by the Travelling Morrice’, (1924). Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>112</sup> Gardiner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> R. Kenworthy Schofield, ‘Morris Dances from Field Town’, *The Journal of the English Folk Dance Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, (1928), p. 22.

<sup>114</sup> Schofield, ‘Dances from Field Town’, pp. 22-28; R. Kenworthy Schofield, ‘Morris Dances from Long-borough’, *The Journal of the English Folk Dance Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1930), pp. 51-57.

<sup>115</sup> Claire Palmer, ‘Christianity, Englishness and the Southern English Countryside: A Study of the Work of H.J. Massingham’, *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2002), p. 36.

From Gardiner's perspective, the EFDS was a secular body concerned with technical proficiency rather than freedom of expression, which deliberately removed from the dances any potent spiritual power. It was his disdain of academic society and its suppression of emotion which motivated Gardiner to form the Travelling Morris.: 'The magic of localities and districts where the dance once thrived can still nourish our souls, and stir us out of our intellectual and moral ruts.'<sup>116</sup> Frustrated at the preoccupation with control and mediation by examination in the EFDS, Gardiner persistently asked, 'Is not the need of our modern civilisation the pursuit of this wholeness?'<sup>117</sup> In returning the morris dances to the Cotswolds, Gardiner sought communion with ghosts of the past, resident in the landscape and its communities.

### **Dancing Gods, Labouring Men**

Whilst Sharp aspired to train dancers in 'every step and movement ... precision and finish ... to the highest pitch of excellence', Gardiner's aspirations were directed towards the promotion of an ideal masculinity, which rendered the male body fit for work as well as dance.<sup>118</sup> He abhorred the feeble, emasculated performances of the EFDS, which he said typically consisted of 'wimply young men of the suburbs jingling, eyes downcast, in a decadent Bampton version of morris.'<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above, he also rejected the participation of women in public shows of morris, arguing for the primacy of men's dance, exercised by small cohorts of dancers unified by an informal brotherhood. Male fellowship was a subject which received significant attention from German scholars of the interwar period, especially amongst sociologists. In particular, Gardiner's ideas resembled those of Herman Schmalenbach, who argued that male kinships were natural but nevertheless consummated by the voluntary and willing recognition of association. These fellowships were sustained by 'a common 'emotional experience' of an almost

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<sup>116</sup> Gardiner, 'David's Sling', p. 5h [p. 257]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>117</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'The Need is Wholeness', *English Dance and Song*, vol. 3, no. 2, (1938), p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *Morris Book*, Part I, p. 44.

<sup>119</sup> Gardiner, 'Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men', p. 1.



religious character.’<sup>120</sup> Gardiner’s ideal man was one that was fit for the physical needs of work and sensitive to his environment, who lived a holistic life, attuned with the rhythms of nature and the passing seasons. Gardiner sought to remedy the modern ‘problem’ of leisure by restoring dance and rhythm to regular patterns of work. He believed there existed in morris an essence of Englishness, which could be revealed through performance: ‘the spirit seeks a body, not the body a spirit.’<sup>121</sup>

The morris dance was, according to Gardiner, a ‘masculine ritual of soil fertility and local tradition.’<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the ‘determined ruralist’ believed there was embodied in the performance of the dance,

‘a clue to the rediscovery of the real England and the roots of its culture. He hoped to convert his fellow-dancers to this conviction, to make the Morris a starting-point, not only for poetry, but for a modern husbandry, for a political attitude.’<sup>123</sup>

According to Gardiner, the old village teams were never ‘solely a morris side’, as they were often ‘called upon’ by their supporting communities to provide an ‘integrating factor’ in local and regional events. Towards the end of his life, in 1967, he wrote: ‘The ceremonial dance is a form of benediction of the environment: a celebration of the *genius loci* and a rededication and reinforcement of its spirit and power.’<sup>124</sup> Gardiner believed that dancing was not simply a mode of escapism, but an integral part of the functioning of communities and their economies. Here, he borrowed extensively from Tylorian and Frazerian survival theories, which combined with his proclivity for action and performance, in constructing an enchanted morris with myths of the past. The revivification of morris as a fertility rite practiced by small groups of men was to be a central function and consequence of a revival of national agriculture, part and parcel of a return to an ordered society along medieval lines.

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<sup>120</sup> Arvidson, *Aryan Idols*, p. 234

<sup>121</sup> Gardiner, ‘Music, Noise and the Land’, p. 51.

<sup>122</sup> Gardiner, ‘Postscript 1938’, p. 106.

<sup>123</sup> Gardiner, ‘David’s Sling’, p. 6 [p. 259]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>124</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘Ceremonial Dance and the Right Environment’, (1967). A draft copy sent in a letter to Ewart Russell, 28 September 1967. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1760, Essex Record Office (hereafter ERO).

Whilst the picturesque landscape of the Cotswolds provided an agreeable setting for morris dancing, it also offered a perceived and actual distance from Cambridge and their urbane self-consciousness. Gardiner hoped the men of the TM would rid themselves of the restraints of polite bourgeois society and its censorious norms. Heffer broadly agreed, and wanted the tours to be ‘without any freemasonry or John-o-London atmosphere’.<sup>125</sup> However, Gardiner tended to overstate his case, embellishing his accounts of the tours with a colourful, romanticised ebullience: ‘Usually we pitched our tents on the glebe of the local parson, not infrequently desecrating his front lawn with the Rabelaisian quaffing of beer and cider much needed for the masculine exertions of the morris.’<sup>126</sup> Beer, though largely a classless drink, was consumed in quantities only reasonably permissible on a holiday, and was regarded by Gardiner and Heffer as the vital ‘nectar’ for the men’s activities.<sup>127</sup> Beer drinking, as an activity carried out in semi-public spaces, principally by men, was also a significant element of homosocial bonding, which appealed to men of all classes, so long as they remained in their respective spaces. However, it was the rural plebeian culture, of which beer drinking was considered an integral part, rather than the drinking itself, that Gardiner especially wanted to experience. In entering local pubs and inns, he desperately wanted to eschew class prejudice, both that of his own and that of the inhabitants of the villages, and encouraged the other dancers from Cambridge to do likewise. The strictly-mediated centres of class and community identity, however, guaranteed that these middle-class visitors were kept at an arm’s length.<sup>128</sup> Ultimately, they never became members of the communities to which these drinking establishments belonged, but neither did the majority ever want to be.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 20 January 1926. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7/4, CUL.

<sup>126</sup> An undated summary report of the first tour of the Travelling Morrice by Rolf Gardiner, circa 1924. Gardiner Papers, C/3/4, CUL.

<sup>127</sup> Arthur Heffer, ‘A Morris Tour in the Cotswolds done by the Travelling Morrice’, (1924), pp. 51–53. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>128</sup> Ben Clarke, ‘The Poor Man’s Club’: The Middle Classes, The Public House, and the Idea of the Community in the Nineteen-Thirties’, *Mosaic*, vol. 42, no. 2, (2012), pp. 39–41.

<sup>129</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 268–270.

Nevertheless, the 'quaffing' of ale remained an integral facet of the morris man's activities, and drinking houses remained important sites for local communications.

Although morris dance was, according to Gardiner, the product of a solely and consistently male invention, it was not sexless or chaste. Indeed, the dance was seemingly an expression of heterosexual desire, as articulated in Lawrencian mode in one particularly explicit passage in 'David's Sling':

'The choreography of the dance evoked passionate excitement. The music is gathered up into plunging chords of antiphonal melody. David felt a lump in his throat and tears filled his eyes. The glory of old England was expressed by this dance, the nostalgia for the England of the Cotswold countryside doomed to die. He could feel Ruth beside him, the fur of her coat brushed him softly; and between them passed a fluid electric current of sympathy and ecstasy, communicated to his heart with the music of the dance.'<sup>130</sup>

If dance communicated a man's physical prowess and poise to the spectator, it also appealed to a basic emotional response, described in the above by a heady admixture of the passionate and the sentimental. By sharing in a common spectacle, Gardiner's fictionalised self experienced an epiphany which conjoined sexual desire with a fear for a landscape and community under threat of eradication, the common basic emotional response being one of urgency and immediacy. In discourses of 'feeling' and 'spirit', Gardiner was prone to criticising Sharp and his colleagues for constructing 'prettified and sexless interpretations' of morris.<sup>131</sup> By participating in a communal performance, and sharing in adventures, Gardiner hoped the men would develop affection and mutual respect for one another: 'the love of the dance bred love among ourselves.'<sup>132</sup> This feeling of sympathetic bonding with fellow men was constitutive of a masculine *bonhomie*, which reinforced identities pertaining to gender and also generation.

To Gardiner, Arthur Heffer embodied the exemplar masculine qualities of the morris dancer. He was described in numerous essays and speeches invariably as 'a magnificent-looking man, indeed like a Greek god, the head noble as the Hermes

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<sup>130</sup> Gardiner, 'David's Sling', pp. 51-52 [pp. 172-173]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>131</sup> Byers, 'Medievalism of English Folkmusic', p. 134.

<sup>132</sup> Gardiner, 'Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men', p. 4.

of Praxiteles, but indeed grander.’<sup>133</sup> Classical notions of masculinity were buttressed by an unwavering adoration of his poise and strength: ‘His erect carriage, masculine grace and splendid arm-movements evinced an Attic power’.<sup>134</sup> It is in the unpublished manuscripts of ‘David’s Sling’ that some of the most explicit descriptions can be found. Of Endymion, his literary alias, Gardiner wrote in frank admiration of Heffer’s physical appearance and bodily strength, achieved by participation in sports and pursuits suited to the gentleman:

‘At the Perse [School] ... he had started his career as a morris-dancer of outstanding athletic agility and grace. He was nobly built, with a magnificent head of classic ‘equine’ beauty, an erect torso of manly shape, and well toned masculinity. He was a fine horseman, swimmer and oarsman, a young Greek god.’<sup>135</sup>

It was not only his physical appearance, and brilliance as a dancer that so intoxicated Gardiner, but also the fact that in 1918 Heffer was seriously wounded in France whilst serving in the Royal West Surrey Regiment, and invalidated home. He maintained that Heffer contained the many ideal attributes of the dancing male, whilst also possessing the distinction of incurring a wound whilst in military service. Gardiner’s ideal masculinity was based on classical notions of physical appearance and aristocratic leadership, as well as a practical outlook, founded in bodily strength and emotional sensitivity. In the autumn of 1925, Gardiner presented his friend with a remarkable gift, a horse called ‘Glorishear’, appropriately enough named after a morris tune.<sup>136</sup> Heffer later wrote to Gardiner, expressing his gratitude, and described the horse as ‘a noble animal’ with the ‘limbs of a Norse God’, concluding ‘you don’t realise the intense pleasure you are giving me with Glorishear’.<sup>137</sup> From their lengthy correspondence, it is clear that Gardiner and Heffer shared an intimate friendship, charged with a candid homoeroticism, and an admiration of each other’s physicality and intellectual verve.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Gardiner, ‘David’s Sling’, p. 46 [p. 167]. Gardiner Papers, A/2, CUL.

<sup>136</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, n.d. [September/October 1925]. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, n.d. [December 1925/January 1926]. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

Gardiner's expositions on the potential of morris, and the ideals represented by its performance, embodying 'potent elements of redemption', were far-ranging.<sup>138</sup> Its manliness was not described solely in relation to physical attributes, but was also inextricably tied to mental wellbeing. The feeling and emotional mind permeated all. When considering the nature and extent of Gardiner's championing of masculinity in morris, the emotional ramifications of such a performance should not be neglected, so integral were they to his construction of the ideal male dancer. To be thoroughly trained, Gardiner claimed the body must be subjected to tasks that were at once 'manual, mental, and emotional.'<sup>139</sup> Such an approach, he understood, opposed the dominant culture in England, which was 'self-conscious' and 'compartmental,' particularly amongst his academic peers at Cambridge.<sup>140</sup> Gardiner was not coy in expressing himself, and often employed a vocabulary of the emotions when articulating his views. Furthermore, his descriptions of the aesthetics of morris were frequently supported by appeals to emotional response and feelings. The dance, as a transient event experienced by an individual as part of a group, defied objectivity, and Gardiner emphasised the effect of participation upon the emotional self. In a speech given to a meeting of the Morris Ring in 1938, he reflected: 'History is not a railway journey from A to Z, but an eternal endeavour to achieve completeness, harmony, balance, or however you may wish to describe perfection.'<sup>141</sup> In a 'fully natured society', to be built in the present upon historical forms for the benefit of future generations, Gardiner aspired for a civilisation more sympathetic not only to the environment in which it lived, but also to its own psychological and physical requirements.<sup>142</sup>

Gardiner's conceptions of masculinity were to an extent informed by contemporary discourses of perceived physical degeneration. Often expressed in

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<sup>138</sup> Transcript of a speech given by Rolf Gardiner to an Annual General Meeting of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, 11 November 1960. Gardiner Papers, C/3/2/1, CUL.

<sup>139</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'National Service: Basis of Voluntary Camps', *The Times*, 4 February 1938, p. 10.

<sup>140</sup> Gardiner, 'Postscript', p. 106-107.

<sup>141</sup> 'Occasions for the Ceremonial Dance', transcript of a speech given by Rolf Gardiner to a meeting of the Morris Ring at Cecil Sharp House, (n.d.). Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/46.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

terms of health and fitness, disproportionately pointed towards the conditions of the working-class, time spent at work and ‘leisure’ became a contentious subject for criticism. These concerns were echoed by F.R. Leavis, and his circle of cultural critics based on Cambridge. As Alexandra Harris cogently summarises, ‘Imported from elsewhere, the jazz rhythms and film scenarios had nothing to do with practical life in England - which meant that entertainment was now fatally removed from daily work.’<sup>143</sup> For Gardiner, this separation of work from life, and the rising popularity of new ‘leisure’ activities, facilitated by changes in working culture and practices, constituted a loss of ‘order’:

‘English dance and song are patterns of English order. The principles of that order should inform the whole of life, social, economic, political. Only so can we recover that National Fitness which we are enjoined to seek. The need is wholeness.’<sup>144</sup>

Purported to be a vestige of a pre-modern communal celebration — formerly incorporated into the culture of places and, inextricably, to their cultures of work and industry — morris dance was believed to encapsulate some clues about how men’s bodies should function, and how they should be displayed. Gardiner’s objection of women’s morris, which he sometimes pejoratively called ‘Werris’, was predicated on a belief that it offended both historical precedent and his view of femininity.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, it was symptomatic of a rejection of equality in all matters, morris was considered more a matter of privilege and duty, than of entitlement. Gardiner’s perception of physical degeneration was therefore also founded upon a belief that a dilution of gender roles would have grave consequences for the male body.

To Gardiner, and his contemporary polemicists H.J. Massingham and F.R. Leavis, the salvation of the English countryside lay in the maintenance and dissemination of human physical knowledge, exercised by hard agricultural labour and skilled craftsmanship: ‘Until we realize that the most important crop of the land are its men and women, our measures for its protection and revival will be

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<sup>143</sup> Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>144</sup> Gardiner, ‘Need is Wholeness’, p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Gardiner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, p. 2.

inessential.’<sup>146</sup> They thought industrial technologies should be subsumed to the *service* of humans — as products of human genius, they were to act as servants rather than masters, in the alleviation of ‘uncreative drudgery’.<sup>147</sup> In this context, morris was an expression of man’s dominion over the earth, and his role in the cultivation of the land. Gardiner’s ideal morris man, based on a bringing together of classical masculinity and a veneration of pre-industrial work cultures, was to dance freely and naturally. The conventional style and context of revival dancing was, according to Gardiner, ‘emasculating’ and ‘meaningless’: it had been separated from its proper social and communal context, and suspended in time, as an ahistorical remnant of a forgotten civilisation.<sup>148</sup> Gardiner’s morris was to serve as a panacea for cultural crises: ‘to be a living art form, a great instrument of health and purification, a communal dynamic.’<sup>149</sup> Through the improvement of the single unit, embodied in the male body, and disseminated through communal activity and ritual, Gardiner’s New (morris) Man possessed a capacity to rescue modern civilisation from its own malaise of artifice and individualism.

### **Patriot?**

Throughout his life, Gardiner demonstrated attachments to both England and Germany. As he reflected in later life, ‘I was of mixed ancestry, and a European Englishman pulled by roots in several countries.’<sup>150</sup> From the 1920s of his youth until his death in 1971, Gardiner worked to foster meaningful and productive cultural exchange which bridged not only England with Germany, but which also sought to foment a wider northern European identity of common endeavour. These initiatives were predicated on Gardiner’s belief in what might be termed

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<sup>146</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘Labour for the Land: Science Versus Man’, *The Times*, 12 July 1937, p. 18.

<sup>147</sup> Richard J. Moore-Colyer, ‘A Voice Clamouring in the Wilderness: H.J. Massingham and Rural England’, *Rural History*, vol. 13, no. 2, (2002), p. 204.

<sup>148</sup> Gardiner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, p. 5.

<sup>149</sup> Gardiner, *English Folk Dance Tradition*, p. 29.

<sup>150</sup> Gardiner, ‘Changing Carinthia’, p. 154.

‘interlocality’ or the ‘transnational global’.<sup>151</sup> His advocacy of a North European community of nations emphasised the differences as much as it did the similarities between nations and peoples. This commitment to facilitating dialogue between youth movements later became the source of his ‘largely uncritical stance towards Nazism’, which in the context of heightened international tensions aroused the suspicions of the British security services.<sup>152</sup> Moreover whilst ‘patriotism and pro-Nazism’ may have been compatible in peacetime, as Richard Griffiths argued, the declaration of war in September 1939 ‘presented a stark choice to those who once held them’.<sup>153</sup>

Whilst he appeared to many of his fellow countryman in England to display inherently foreign habits, Gardiner’s endeavours to initiate meaningful intercultural links across Europe were constantly saturated with ‘quintessentially English’ motifs.<sup>154</sup> In many respects, his patriotism appeared apparently beyond question, demonstrated by his veneration of traditional music and dance, and his work to conserve the southern English landscape, which from 1927 existed side-by-side at Gore Farm. Of particular significance to Gardiner’s influence on revival morris were the tours to Germany in 1922, 1926, and 1928, which incorporated both English and German participants. These events were both reciprocal exchanges of cultural capital and an opportunity for Gardiner to further promulgate the virtues of dancing naturally, as an embodiment and expression of a cultured Englishness. The tour of 1922 was solely the product of Gardiner’s initiative and planning, facilitated by an exploitation of contacts both in England and in Germany, as well as his family’s wealth, which permitted him to consider such a financial liability without the risk of embarrassment. This inaugural tour was self-consciously fashioned in the

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<sup>151</sup> Button, “‘Very Perfect form of Discipline’”, p. 65; Dan Stone, “The Ultimate Cross-Cultural Fertilizer: the Irony of the ‘Transnational Local’ in Anglo-German Rural Revivalism”, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, (2018), pp. 1–13.

<sup>152</sup> Malcolm Chase, “‘North Sea and Baltic’: Historical Conceptions in the Youth Movement and the Transfer of Ideas from Germany to England in the 1920s and 1930s”, in Stefan Berger, et. al., eds., *Historikerdialogue: Geschichte, Mythos und Gedächtnis im Deutsch-Britischen Kulturellen Austausch, 1750–2000* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), p. 327.

<sup>153</sup> Richard Griffiths, ‘The Dangers of Definition: Post-Facto Opinions on Rolf Gardiner’s Attitudes towards Nazi Germany’, in Jeffries and Tyldesley, *Rolf Gardiner*, p. 149.

<sup>154</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, pp. 50–51.



idiom of English travelling performers from the time of Shakespeare.<sup>155</sup> The later tours, of 1926 and 1928, were conducted through the embryonic network of the Travelling Morrice, at the invitation of the *Geestlander* and the *Zentralinstitut für Erziehung und Unterricht* (Institute for Education and Teaching) respectively.<sup>156</sup> In 1926, the TM joined with the *Markische Spielgemeinde*, a group of men and women who came together for play-acting and singing, based on Berlin and organised by one Georg Götsch, as well as the *Geestlander Tanzkreise*, a group of young middle class people with an interest in dance and song, under the conductorship of Anna Helms. Together, they gave shows in Hamburg and Lubeck, in which the TM performed morris and country dancing, interspersed with singing and musical renditions by both German and English parties. As with the earlier tour, most shows took place in an enclosed space, such as theatres, halls and even on several occasions in sports stadia, rather than on the street. In spite of this apparent separation of performer and spectator, Gardiner maintained the ethos of the tours was founded on interaction and exchange, which he believed ‘undoubtedly gave life and harmony to what might otherwise have been a one-sided demonstration, or a purely dramatic performance.’<sup>157</sup> Their performances, usually described as ‘Masques’, were quite apparently attempts towards presenting ‘a highly developed traditional dance.’<sup>158</sup> However, Gardiner attempted to deliberately and thoroughly divorce himself from Sharp’s morris at home, in England, a ‘complete break-away from the old, stiff, toe-pointing classical tradition’. It was an opportunity for framing morris as a vestige of a premodern ritual — framed only by a spartan presentation in the style of sixteenth century wandering minstrels — with the potential for inspiring European fraternal unity: ‘Clad in our white Morris men’s costume, dancing on that big, bare stage with the sun smiting down on us, there came the feeling of some ancient quality inherent in the ritual dance, a stark,

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<sup>155</sup> Gardiner, ‘Brief Account of the Travelling Morrice’, pp. 76-77.

<sup>156</sup> Arthur Heffer and Arthur Peck, ‘An Account of the Visit of the Travelling Morrice to Germany, June-July 1926’; Arthur Heffer, ‘A Dancing Tour Through Germany’ [1928]. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>157</sup> Gardiner, ‘Summer Tour in Germany’, p. 83.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83, p. 85.

vigorous masculinity.’<sup>159</sup> In bringing together English and German performers in one space, Gardiner sought to instigate moments of unity based on a sharing of physical and musical culture, celebrating their respective types and manifestations.

In common with the domestic tours of the Travelling Morrice, Gardiner’s aspirations to articulate political comment and effect cultural change through dance aroused some suspicion and misunderstanding, even among his closest of allies. Writing in the spring of 1926, while planning the second tour of English dancers to Germany, Heffer expressed his doubt for the fuller political schemes of the tour:

‘About the general policy of the TM in Germany that I must leave to you, for I’m hanged if I’ll know what the purpose in visiting Germany is beyond dancing ... all I would vouchsafe is that the TM an essentially English product is going to Germany to dance its dances and to make friends with its hosts there.’<sup>160</sup>

Whilst befriending young Germans was something which appealed to many of Gardiner’s hopeful generation, Heffer’s reservations symbolised an underlying unease and reluctance to subsume their dancing holidays to the service of international relations.

Through the dissemination of a pan-European theory of origin and development for the morris dance, Gardiner attempted to reconcile national and cultural differences within a framework of interlocality. He promulgated a narrative of north European cultural unity, which linked the English morris to medieval German sword dances, by a common ancestor.<sup>161</sup> His dissemination thesis, first outlined in an essay of 1923, actually expanded little on the revised historical theories of Sharp, presented in the introduction to the second edition of the first part of *The Morris Book*, in which he stated: ‘the Morris-dance, in various forms, is found very widely distributed - pretty nearly all over Europe.’<sup>162</sup> Indeed, Gardiner’s theory did

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 11 April 1926. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

<sup>161</sup> Gardiner, *English Folk Dance Tradition*, pp. 9-17.

<sup>162</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, *Morris Book*, Part I, second edition, p. 10.

not present any new information, but utilised the same literary sources as Sharp.<sup>163</sup> However, his intention was to expound a founding theory upon which to base his practical intercultural endeavours, rather than contributing towards the corpus of knowledge. This geo-historical thesis attempted to prove ‘a vision of northern European ... cultural and historical unity’, manifest in the commonalities of sword dances across Germany, Scandinavia, and Britain.<sup>164</sup>

Gardiner’s bifurcated patriotism was a symptom of a wider European internationalist outlook. His sights were not set exclusively towards Anglo-German exchange, but also incorporated other parts of central and northern Europe, particularly the Netherlands and the Scandinavian nations. One of his most ardent admirers was a Dutch folklorist, and devotee of morris dancing, Elsie van der Ven-Ten Bonsel, who since 1927 taught English morris and country dancing at her house, known as *De Meibof*, in the village of Oosterbeek, near Arnhem.<sup>165</sup> Influenced by Sharp’s writings and Gardiner’s enthusiasm, in 1932 Elise van der Ven-Ten Bonsel founded the Netherlands Central Bureau of Folk Dancing, a rival organisation to the Netherlands Institute for Folk Dance and Folk Music, which she had originally helped in founding only two years earlier.<sup>166</sup> She believed only English folk dance, and morris in particular, possessed the ‘cultural ‘authenticity’ required to inspire a movement reacting against perceived degeneration of national art and culture.<sup>167</sup> Ven-Ten Bonsel’s use of English morris in her folk dance programmes, facilitated by her translations of Sharp’s *Morris Books*, was motivated by a dissatisfaction with the poor quality of the surviving folk customs in the Netherlands. Her belief in morris as a potential conduit for reconnecting modernity with a rootedness of time and place resembled many of Gardiner’s characteristic ambitions, and they shared in

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<sup>163</sup> Stephen D. Corrsin, ‘The Historiography of European Linked Sword Dancing’, *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, (1993), p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> Stephen Corrsin, ‘English Sword Dancing in the European Context’, in Boyes, ed., *Step Change*, p. 32.

<sup>165</sup> Rob van Ginkel, ‘The Dangers of Dancing: Foreign versus Folk Dances and the Politics of Culture in the Netherlands, 1918-1955’, *Ethnologia Europaea*, vol. 38, no. 2, (2008), p. 53.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

each other's enthusiasms.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, her commitment to the promotion of English folk dance in the Netherlands was so apparent, even by the late 1920s, that on the occasion of the visit of the Travelling Morrice to *De Meibhof* towards the end of the 1928 tour, she was able to supply them with the requisite antlers to perform the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance.<sup>169</sup>

Like Georg Götsch and Anna Helms, Elise van-der Ven-Ten Bensel was a confirmed Anglophile. They were all receptive to Gardiner because of their predisposition towards English folk dance and song customs, which either complemented or reinforced their own domestic movements. They perceived Gardiner as representing the genius of English patriotism, embodied in an enthusiastic young man who was similarly predisposed towards sharing in the culture of another nation. By the early 1930s, Gardiner was a significant internationalist figure in European youth movements — he was the fulcrum point for numerous exchanges and tours, which continued throughout the decade. However, by this point he had already lost a significant amount of support from amongst his fellow Englishmen, who accused him of becoming overbearing and autocratic. In 1929, Tommy Adkins, a Cambridge dancer who had participated in the two TM tours to Germany, published a letter criticising Gardiner's German preoccupation: 'I do believe you will take the wrong course if you try to mould those of us whom you take to Germany to the German model, it will make our position too artificial and we can give nothing.'<sup>170</sup> Similarly, in private correspondence, Heffer also criticised his friend's esoteric manner: 'do please try to be a little more English ... for in your rhapsodical and *'Wunderschoen'* [beautiful] flights of fancy I lag behind.'<sup>171</sup> Thus, Gardiner's English correspondents were prone to describing his eccentricities in terms of a forthrightly German sensibility, deemed incompatible with the liberal English temperament.

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<sup>168</sup> Boyes, "Potencies of the Earth", pp. 83-88.

<sup>169</sup> John Jenner, 'Notes on the Helmond Morris Men', (c.1978). Cambridge Morris Men Archive, 8/6.

<sup>170</sup> Tommy Adkins, 'German and English Differences: A Letter', n.d. [1929/1930], unknown publication. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/24.

<sup>171</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 23 March 1927. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

By 1933, Gardiner had abandoned the Travelling Morrice, or rather they had abandoned him. In the spring of 1932, he announced a proposal to conduct a tour spanning the North Sea, based on Goathland in North Yorkshire, and the Danish peninsula of Jutland, to incorporate the TM, the North Skelton Rapper Sword Dancers, and a band of German dancers and singers. However, the men of the TM were soon deterred by the panoply of fantastical arrangements as well as inflated costs, and instead they planned another tour based on the Cotswolds.<sup>172</sup> In an international political context of increasing unrest, the TM ‘ceased to follow the lead it had given,’ and Gardiner sought a new English group, drawn from a wider scope, to carry out his projects, based on his expanding Springhead estate in Dorset.<sup>173</sup> Even here, however, his schemes aroused suspicion.

So uncompromising and diffuse were his ideals that by the mid-1930s Gardiner was in a sense, ‘politically homeless’.<sup>174</sup> His interest in mainstream politics remained limited, and affiliations were usually short-lived. Though he corresponded with several prominent Mosleyites, including Henry Williamson, Gardiner was left cold by the British Union of Fascists, which he considered superficial.<sup>175</sup> Whilst his bridging of English and German youth movements was predicated on his belief in a common racial and cultural history, full of fascistic tropes, Gardiner was not himself a Fascist.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, his politics were not simply a version of German National Socialism, but a peculiarly English outlook.<sup>177</sup> However, from 1927 until 1951, he was a subject of interest to the British security services, who considered him a potential threat to the nation. The threat of war caused an escalation in their suspicions, and on 30 August 1939, they issued an interception order for all postal packets and

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<sup>172</sup> Jenner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, pp. 18-19.

<sup>173</sup> Gardiner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, p. 6.

<sup>174</sup> Frank Trentmann, ‘Henry Rolf Gardiner, 1902-1971’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, (2009), [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/94500>, accessed 20 Nov 2017].

<sup>175</sup> Moore Colyer, ‘English Patriot’, p. 196.

<sup>176</sup> Dan Stone, ‘Ultimate Cross-Cultural Fertilizer’, p. 6.

<sup>177</sup> Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain, 1933-1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 159-161.

telegrams addressed to Gardiner.<sup>178</sup> In June 1940, he was particularly upset by his exclusion from the Local Defence Volunteers (which later became the Home Guard). Whilst some of his employees were invited to join the platoon, Gardiner was not.<sup>179</sup> Rumours of allegedly harbouring Nazis and fifth columnists abounded, and he thought that some of his neighbours even wanted him dead.<sup>180</sup> Gardiner considered himself the victim of gross misunderstanding, and was gravely offended by the suspicions of his compatriots.

Throughout the 1930s, Gardiner was in correspondence with Dr. Richard Wolfram, an Austrian folklorist and member of the so-called 'Vienna Ritualists', a close-knit core of academics working on the subject of 'militant, secret men's unions.'<sup>181</sup> Since 1932, Wolfram had been a member of the Nazi Party, an affiliation which later delayed his professional development as the Party was banned in Austria in the mid-1930s.<sup>182</sup> He nevertheless enjoyed some notoriety outside of Austria, and in 1936, the first part of *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* (*Sword Dance and Men's Unions*) was published by a German publisher. Gardiner was evidently buoyed by Wolfram's monograph, and celebrated his foresight in the pages of *English Dance and Song*, quoting, 'We want life and not a museum'.<sup>183</sup> Though Wolfram's theories of the *Männerbund* impressed Gardiner, they didn't so much influence him as they did lend clarity to existing feelings. After the Nazi annexation of Austria in March 1938, Wolfram was soon elevated to a central position in the *Abnenerbe*, a scholarly wing of the Nazi SS working on ancestral inheritance, and even served on Heinrich

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<sup>178</sup> Secret order to the Postmaster General, 30 August 1939. Security Service Papers, KV/2/2245/13a, National Archives (hereafter NA).

<sup>179</sup> Letter from Superintendent of Sherborne Police Station to Major L.W. Peel Yates, Chief Constable of Dorset, 3 June 1940. Records of the Security Service, KV/2/2245/45b, NA.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Stephen Corrsin, "'One Single Dance Form like the Sword Dance Can Open Up a Whole Lost World': The Vienna Ritualists and the Study of Sword Dancing and Secret Men's Unions between the World Wars", *Folklore*, vol. 121, no. 2, (2010), p. 214.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

<sup>183</sup> Richard Wolfram, *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* (Bärenreiter, 1936), cited in Rolf Gardiner, 'Mixed Morris Sides', *English Dance and Song*, vol. 1, (1936), p. 27.

Himmler's personal staff.<sup>184</sup> Gardiner was not alone in his admiration of Wolfram. In 1932, he was hosted by the EFDSS, and in 1935 participated in the International Folk Dance Festival convened by Maud Karpeles.<sup>185</sup> Even Joseph Needham was impressed, and spoke in praise of Wolfram's work on men's secret societies, hoping the CMM would adopt further ritual practices, such as drinking from a loving cup.<sup>186</sup> Thus, Gardiner was not unique in praising researchers with links to the Nazi Party.

From the outset in 1933, Gardiner interpreted the ascension of Nazism in Germany as an expression of the *zeitgeist*, the fulfilment of the people's will rather than a political coup: 'Right and Left are no more; the political parties are vanishing.'<sup>187</sup> He refused to believe, as G.K. Chesterton and many thousands of others did, that it constituted a revival of militant 'Prussianism'.<sup>188</sup> In a letter published in *The Times* soon after Hitler was appointed Chancellor, Gardiner argued that 'The new German nationalism is intensive and integrative, not extensive and expansive.'<sup>189</sup> He was one of a number of English idealists who shifted between appeaser and apologist. However, Gardiner's admiration of National Socialism in Germany was directed towards specific aspects of the regime, and sustained by a keen interest in a small number of projects targeted primarily at agriculture and youth movements, whilst ignoring the more abhorrent manifestations. In cases such as the *Wandervogel*, for instance, the initiative had been long-established before its appropriation by the Nazi party. Indeed, Gardiner believed the significance of such movements 'ran far deeper than the merely bureaucratic arrangements of the Weimar Republic'.<sup>190</sup> He understood these youth movements

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<sup>184</sup> Georgina Boyes, 'Dancing Spies: Nazi Attempts to Infiltrate the English Folk Revival', in Barbara Segal and William Tuck, eds., *Ballroom, Stage & Village Green: Contexts for Early Dance* (Early Dance Circle, 2014), pp. 89-90.

<sup>185</sup> Corrsin, "'One Single Dance Form'", p. 223.

<sup>186</sup> Minutes for a meeting on 22 April 1933, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>187</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'To the Editor of The Times', *The Times*, 6 April 1933, p. 10.

<sup>188</sup> G.K. Chesterton, 'The Return of Prussianism', *The Times*, 8 April 1933, p. 8.

<sup>189</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'To the Editor of The Times: German Nationalism', *The Times*, 31 March 1933, p. 10.

<sup>190</sup> Wright, *Village that Died*, p. 180.

not as principally political initiatives, but as conduits of historical and cultural forces, embodying ‘a living tradition, to be the conscience of the younger generation.’<sup>191</sup> Although he arguably viewed Nazism ‘almost as the triumph or fulfilment of the ideas of the Youth Movement,’ his views of the national government overall, and of Adolf Hitler in particular, were altogether less clear.<sup>192</sup> To most sensitive observers in the mid-1930s, the project that had begun as a well-meaning ‘attempt to nurture a new commonwealth at the grassroots of England and of Europe which would stem the tide of war and economic self-interest,’ was in very real danger of straying into something rather more sinister.<sup>193</sup>

In a tribute to Gardiner, Professor Alwin Seifert described him as ‘the most complete European that I have ever met.’<sup>194</sup> Conversely, H.J. Massingham believed he was ‘almost more English than the English.’<sup>195</sup> In the melee of economic depression and political uncertainty, Gardiner considered himself a builder of bridges, and an instigator of reparative networks. Later in life, he referred to himself as a ‘barbed wire cutter’, removing post-Versailles prejudice between England and Germany.<sup>196</sup> However, by the mid-1930s, he seemed to be ensnared in the wire, as it was replaced at a rate faster than he was able to remove it. During the Second World War, Gardiner’s Anglo-Germanicism isolated him from both nations, and left him emotionally and politically homeless. The trauma and betrayal in the failure of his efforts to develop good relations between the two nations, a central tenet of his youth and early adulthood, was exacerbated by his preclusion from active participation in the British war effort, which he expressed in a ‘patriotic rage’.<sup>197</sup> Gardiner’s peculiar admixture of romantic visions of England and Germany, and his aspirations for their future growth in an interdependent Europe, were from

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<sup>191</sup> Mike Tyldesley, ‘The German Youth Movements and National Socialism: Some Views from Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 1, (2006), p. 28.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>193</sup> Anon., ‘A Tribute to Rolf Gardiner’, n.d. [1971]. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/50.

<sup>194</sup> Alwin Seifert, ‘Tributes to Rolf Gardiner’ [1971]. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/49.

<sup>195</sup> H.J. Massingham, *Remembrance: an Autobiography* (London: Batsford, 1941), p. 140.

<sup>196</sup> Wright, *Village That Died*, p. 179.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 157.



the outset a cause of suspicion and unease in his involvement with the nascent morris revival.

### **Rolfery**

Throughout his life, Gardiner was defined by a confident fundamentalism and unwillingness to compromise. So far-sighted were his ideals, literary metaphor and real-world policy objectives were often fused in Gardiner's attitudes to the restorative potential of a revived morris tradition, to such an extent that some of his activities appeared strange to all but his closest and most devout followers.<sup>198</sup> Whilst it was true that 'Gardiner's bonhomie and frankness were attractive,' his unremitting and unwavering enthusiasm was apt to make his company overbearing.<sup>199</sup> According to Molly Hopkinson, a Cambridge-based dancer and musician who participated in a number of tours throughout the 1920s, 'Rolf was alright for a fortnight, but not much longer.'<sup>200</sup> Indeed, so distinctive were his idiosyncratic habits that fellow Cambridge dancer and erstwhile Squire of the Morris Ring, Arthur Peck, coined terms to describe Gardiner's activities. Using Dr. Peck's argot, members of the Cambridge Morris Men and the Travelling Morrice came to refer to his odd behaviour and esoteric schemes as 'Rolfery' or 'Rolfian practices', emphasising his detachment from the sensibilities of the majority.<sup>201</sup> Whilst, as has been demonstrated above, Gardiner was a man of protean energies and interests, who exercised a charismatic influence, the extent to which his schemes and ideas received assent were circumscribed by his imprudent and often exuberant behaviour.

Principally, for the majority of the morris dancers, Gardiner's constant desire to put the dance to work as an agent of social and cultural change remained a risible

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<sup>198</sup> Palmer Heathman, 'Revival', pp. 201-209.

<sup>199</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 163.

<sup>200</sup> Letter from John Jenner to Ivor Allsop, 16 January 2002, quoted in Ivor Allsop, 'Rolf Gardiner', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 3, no. 11, (2004), p. 349.

<sup>201</sup> Entries for 9 October and 24 December 1929 in Arthur Peck Diary, 1929. Fellows' Papers, 182/vii, Christ's College Cambridge Archives.

or problematic gambit. In his own words, they were inherently ‘sceptical of mixing up the morris with other things.’<sup>202</sup> From the very beginnings of his involvement with morris in Cambridge, he actively and persistently campaigned for the reinvigoration of a masculine ritual tradition that served the needs of modern society: ‘the dance is to be a living art form, a great instrument of health and purification, a communal dynamic.’<sup>203</sup> Such proclamations were tantamount to calling for new ways of living, not just different attitudes to dancing. Whilst for the majority, the simple transcendence of dancing holidays, spent with friends in unfamiliar surroundings, was sufficient enough as an exercise in sampling a different, though transient, experience, Gardiner wanted to use this as a springboard for inspiring the postwar generation to foster a new civilisation. Furthermore, for the majority of his fellow dancers, morris was only one of a number of activities they enjoyed as part of their leisure time. Very few of his compatriots were as enthusiastic or as far-sighted as Gardiner. Douglas Kennedy, a friend of nearly half a century, in an obituary wrote: ‘The swiftness of his vision often carried him too far ahead of his fellows leaving him solitary, almost at times a voice crying in the wilderness.’<sup>204</sup> From 1927, Gardiner was established in Dorset, and it was here that he was able to attract the few likeminded individuals who shared in his aspirations. Although several of these were dancers involved with the wider morris movement, Gardiner’s influence on the further development of the revival remained limited, largely confined to his own confraternity at Springhead.

Even during the early tours of the Travelling Morrice, Gardiner seemed to stand out as an eccentric figure, characterised by a wild enthusiasm for the outdoors. Heffer, in the Log Book of the inaugural tour, referred to him as ‘a fresh air fiend’, camping under canvas adorned with the insignia of the Kibbo Kift Kindred and bathing naked in nearby rivers and streams.<sup>205</sup> Whilst his fellow

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<sup>202</sup> Gardiner, ‘Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men’, p. 5.

<sup>203</sup> Gardiner, *English Folk Dance Tradition*, p. 29.

<sup>204</sup> Douglas Kennedy, ‘Rolf Gardiner, 1902-1971’, *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 2, no. 3, (1972), p. 258.

<sup>205</sup> Arthur Heffer, ‘A Morris Tour in the Cotswolds done by the Travelling Morrice’, (1924). Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

dancers appeared to enjoy, or at the very least endure, camping and its petty hardships, nobody seemed to match his zealotry for outdoor life. For the majority of the TM, the enjoyment lay in the dancing, meeting with the old morris men of the villages, and drinking ale in picturesque settings. Reminiscing over his involvement in the 1924 tour more than fifty years later, George Cooke wrote:

‘It was a marvellous experience and great fun was had by all. We avoided behaving as if we were on a holy pilgrimage, although inside of us we knew we were. The beer was very good. So was the music of Alan Richards.’<sup>206</sup>

In the main, the tours of the TM did not require the participants to conform to any singular worldview or aspiration. They were strictly holidays rather than spiritual gatherings, which resisted all attempts by Gardiner to subsume them to his esoteric schemes. Heffer, in particular, seemed ambivalent about his colleague’s wider political aims: ‘About the general policy of the TM in Germany that I must leave to you, for I’m hanged if I’ll know what the purpose in visiting Germany is beyond dancing.’<sup>207</sup> Gardiner’s ‘Rolfery’, as understood by the men of the TM encapsulated both his political ostentatiousness and his personal eccentricity.

In a letter written in 1970, Gardiner displayed a remarkable consistency in his views of the ideal objectives and functions of Morris dancing. Writing to Ewart Russell, Bagman of the Morris Ring, in 1970, he said: ‘I believe that all Morris Men ought to be members of the Soil Association or something similar. One cannot isolate the Morris from fertility. And fertility is being drained away by the present polluted machine age.’<sup>208</sup> This hopeful message reveals considerable insight into a man whose friends and followers considered revered him as a prophet in advance of his time. Gardiner, it is true to say, was ‘one of those rare men whose lives matched their beliefs’,<sup>209</sup> for which he paid the price of experiencing disappointment and misunderstanding: ‘All the prophets come before their time.’<sup>210</sup> Gardiner, as an

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<sup>206</sup> Letter from George Cooke to John Jenner, 10 April 1980. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>207</sup> Letter from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 11 April 1926. Gardiner Papers, J3/7, CUL.

<sup>208</sup> Letter from Rolf Gardiner to Ewart Russell, 30 April 1970. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1763, ERO.

<sup>209</sup> Tribute to Rolf Gardiner from J.W.A. Calver [1971]. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/49.

<sup>210</sup> Funeral Address for Rolf Gardiner by the Bishop of Salisbury [1971]. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/49.

habitual self-publicist, produced a significant volume of writing relating to the Morris, which appear disproportionate to the actual extent of his influence on the nature and style of revival morris. Whilst he was for a short time in the 1920s justifiably considered a charismatic ambassador for men's morris, his quixotic and esoteric ritual practices appear to have alienated him from a movement which was generally rather more conservative and reserved by comparison.

## Conclusion

Rolf Gardiner embodied an oppositional Englishness, manifest in a desire to effect social revolution based on a synthesis of past and present. This constituted a return to models of economic and political governance based on pre-modern guild principles. However, tradition was not a limiting or prescriptive agent of Gardiner's conservatism, it was to provide the basis for progress. Both tradition and technology presented opportunities for affecting change, but they could only be of service to modern civilisation when combined together, especially when the latter was derived from the former. He thought tradition without purpose produced empty performances of romantic idylls, and science without history was fickle and self-serving. Many of Gardiner's more ambitious schemes were not realised in his lifetime, and so his legacy is sometimes described as one resembling the frustrated potential of a prophet among mortals.<sup>211</sup> However, his influence over the form and content of the morris revival in England has been misunderstood, and often exaggerated. Though Gardiner's ideas in their fullest and purest forms never achieved popular ascent within the movement, some of his contributions towards the literature of an imagined past and the rituals of an enchanted present did meet with some approval. Whilst it is true that the Travelling Morrice, of which he was a co-founder, constituted the first alternative paradigm to the revival as conceived by Sharp, Gardiner was definitely not 'chief theoretician and moving spirit behind the exclusively male Morris Ring,' as purported by Georgina Boyes.<sup>212</sup> In actual fact,

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<sup>211</sup> Moore-Colyer, 'Back to Basics', pp. 94-95.

<sup>212</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 155; Georgina Boyes, 'The Lady that is With You': Maud Pauline Karpeles and the Folk Revival', in Boyes, ed., *Step Change*, p. 185.

Gardiner's involvement in the revival was constrained by his own imprudent behaviour, idealistic fundamentalism, and questionable political allies, which meant his views never gained a significant following among the dancing confraternity. Bernard Aylward — a design teacher from York, recruited by an ally of Gardiner's to assist with the provision of work for the unemployed in East Cleveland in 1932 — described him as 'too earnest, he took it all too seriously, it was a sacrament almost, this dancing of country dances, a religious significance.'<sup>213</sup> Gardiner was a principled man, but in his defiant, unwavering commitment to the causes he adopted, Gardiner was particularly prone to devastating hubris.

Gardiner believed the morris dances — conceived as ritual dances — required the abandonment of individuals' self-consciousness and a submission to the corporate whole. He shared Mary Neal's belief that the morris dances depended on a context to be made intelligible. The minutiae of choreographic detail was, therefore, secondary to its setting and wider purpose. It was the dancers who mattered, for a 'spirit' could not survive in manuscripts alone - it needed a body. They were not only capable of transmitting goodwill and bonhomie, but also presented the young performers in their true unadorned states, dancing freely and naturally. In the context of Anglo-German exchanges, the dances transcended language barriers: 'We needed to show ourselves as we were in our real characters; and here folk dance and song offered a language in which we could communicate with foreigners and foreign places.'<sup>214</sup> These were not in the name of a global internationalism, but an expression of Gardiner's belief in a North European fraternity of kinship, transcending though not disrupting nation state borders. The tours of English dancers to Germany and their reciprocal visits to England were predicated on his conviction in the efficacy of the 'interlocal' in fomenting understanding between places and peoples — as an alternative to official statist diplomacy — which celebrated both difference and commonalities. This

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<sup>213</sup> Chase, 'Heartbreak Hill', p. 37; 'The History of Boosbeck: 1930s', <http://www.newboosbeck.com/1930s.html> [accessed 3 April 2019].

<sup>214</sup> A circular letter from Rolf Gardiner, entitled 'Last Circular with Financial Statement', October 1922. Gardiner Papers, D/2/2/35, CUL; Rolf Gardiner, 'The Travelling Morrice', *The Springhead Ring News Sheet*, no. 55, (1961).

‘transnational local’ became the defining motif of his efforts to lead a renewed fellowship between the youth of England and Germany in the wake of the first mechanised total war.

Viewing industrialism as a symptom, rather than cause of the perceived crisis of modernity in the early twentieth century, Gardiner believed the remedy was buried deep in the culture of civilisation and its societies. Whilst his involvement in morris dancing may appear to have been directed at making superficial change, he aimed at a more fundamental revolution, from out of the soil. Even in later life, Gardiner’s determination to encourage the morris dancers of England to realise their potential of fomenting cultural change showed little sign of diminishing. Though his views changed over time, Gardiner’s chief motivating impulse remained remarkably consistent.

## Chapter III

### ALEC HUNTER

*Laugh and be merry together, like brothers akin,  
Guesting awhile in the rooms of a beautiful inn,  
Glad till the dancing stops, and the lilt of the music ends,  
Laugh till the game is played; and be you merry my friends.<sup>1</sup>*

On the northwest side of Town Street in Thaxted, adjacent to the Guild Hall, stands the Market Cross, an imposing fourteenth century house with a grand Georgian facade.<sup>2</sup> Above the fireplace in the drawing room, buttressed by two fluted pilasters, is a mural framed by a border of hand-painted tiles. It depicts a woman lying atop an escarpment, overlooking a cove. Reminding us that beauty resides in the eye of the beholder, she invites us to sit awhile beside her. It is a dreamy landscape of an almost languorous quality, encapsulating the benign inertia of balmy midsummer. When we follow the gaze of our clifftop observer, we notice the King's Lynn Customs House and Christopher Wren's Christ Church, adjacent to an imposing cathedral and a gambrel-roofed warehouse. This varied architectural landscape comprises a coastal city, suspended between the sea and sky. On closer inspection, the cathedral's detail appears to fade like a recently forgotten dream into the azure landscape. Stepping back from the wall, that which we thought might have been the white caps of surf become cloudy tendrils, and the towers of the city seem to recede further still into the deep blue. Painted by Alec Hunter in the mid-1950s, it is an exposition of a New Jerusalem, consisting of a heavenly city in beautiful harmony with the natural world. Between the ecclesiastical architecture is an important-looking building with a neoclassical portico, representing the combined authority of religion and state. Likewise, the customs house and warehouse on the quayside, beside the cargo ships at dock, stand for commerce and

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<sup>1</sup> John Masefield, 'Laugh and Be Merry', cited in Jack Putterill, *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice: Autobiography of Jack Putterill, Turbulent Priest and Rebel* (Marlow: Precision, 1977), p. i.

<sup>2</sup> 'Short History of Thaxted', <https://www.thaxted.co.uk/index.php/tourism/ten-centuries-of-history/short-history-of-thaxted>, [accessed 13 February 2018].

trade. Between the city and the cliff is a second grass-covered promontory hosting a side of morris dancers, who bend meaningfully to their task. Whilst the architecture of the buildings demonstrate that government and commerce need not be opposed to high quality art in design, the dancers represent the social art, a corporeal embodiment of all that is Good.

Alec Hunter was a direct link to the Arts and Crafts movement, from which the folk dance revivalists drew much inspiration. They shared in an assumption that morris dancing represented a highly-developed example of the nation's social art, an 'unconscious product' of the native genius and an expression of God's glorious creation.<sup>3</sup> Like the weaving of a fine silk brocade, the dance itself was analogous to a sacramental act, and expressive of national culture. Moreover, Hunter recognised how morris and its kindred dances were made all the more precious by their transience, bringing dancers and audiences together in the moment. Utilising his talents as an artist, designer, and organiser, he orchestrated performances as though pageants in miniature. By promoting dancing in the streets and other public spaces, Hunter promulgated a spectacle which invoked enchantment in the everyday, incorporating onlookers as well as dancers to enact an imagined timelessness. This enchantment was inspired by his commitment to high church Anglo-Catholicism, which he shared with Joseph Needham and to a lesser extent Rolf Gardiner. Though clothed in mysticism, the invocation of England through a common symbol, embodied in morris dancing, represented a version of the nation which was readily accessible, and sustained by appeals to a vaunted past.

Though it was at Thaxted where Hunter achieved notoriety as a leader and exponent of the dance, based on his expansive personality and showmanship, he began his dancing in the new Garden City of Letchworth, some thirty miles to the west of the Essex market town. In his youth, Hunter made regular visits to Thaxted accompanied by his younger brother, Ralph, to hear Noel's sermons and delight in the spectacle of his Anglo-Catholic Mass.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it appears likely that Hunter

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<sup>3</sup> Alec B. Hunter, 'Back to Merrie England', *Labour Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 4, (1923), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> Groves, *Thaxted Movement*, p. 250.



always aspired to live in Thaxted, as it appealed to his own religious beliefs and philosophies.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, however, he had confidence not only in the Church but also in the people of the town who since 1922 had hosted parties of dancers from Letchworth and elsewhere at Whitsun. Hunter recognised the popularity of morris dancing at Thaxted to represent not any form of social division, nor symptom of repressed socio-economic development, but a proud communal identity, predicated on a shared enjoyment of dance. Under his guidance, this small, picturesque town became synonymous with the morris and country dance movement in England, sustained by a diverse cast of dancers and musicians drawn from all classes of people.

In spite of his notoriety as the first Squire of the Morris Ring (1934-1936), Hunter remains largely unknown to scholars of the English folk dance movement. Those historians who have acknowledged his significance in the morris revival have provided at best a cursory adumbration of the man. Eclipsed by his more loquacious contemporaries, Hunter has remained a denizen of the footnotes. Whilst his parents, Edmund Arthur Hunter and Dorothea Butler Hunter, have received some attention from scholars of design and literature respectively, this chapter represents the first detailed biography and appraisal of Alec Hunter.<sup>6</sup> Referring to an article submitted to the *Labour Magazine* by Hunter in 1923, Duncan Hall described him as ‘a pure mouthpiece for the Revival’, whose adherence to ideas of an unconscious expression through folk dance revealed his belief in ‘total passivity on the part of the worker-artist.’<sup>7</sup> This analysis, which rests entirely on a brief summary article written as a young man, belies Hunter’s own influences on morris, which included the promotion of excellence in performance, sustained by fraternal bonds between dancers, associating with each other in localised

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<sup>5</sup> John Hunter, ‘Alec Hunter, 1899-1958’, *Thaxted Parish Magazine*, (2000).

<sup>6</sup> For his father, Edmund Arthur Hunter (1866-1937), see Vivien Best, ‘Edmund Arthur Hunter and St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works’, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Central England, (1998). For his mother, Dorothea Butler Hunter (1868-1958), see Warwick Gould, ‘The Music of Heaven’: Dorothea Hunter’, in Deirdre Toomey, ed., *Yeats and Women* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 73-134.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Hall, *‘A Pleasant Change from Politics’: Music and the British Labour Movement Between the Wars* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2001), pp. 141-142.

autonomous clubs. As the first Squire of the Morris Ring, Hunter popularised a model of organisation where men of all classes danced together, predicated on a belief that fine art should not be the reserve of the educated middle-class. However, whilst some agency was invested in working-class dancers, the tacit assumption was that leaders were drawn disproportionately from his own rank, maintaining a certain elitism, in line with his Guild Socialism.

Amongst many other talents, Alec Hunter was renowned for excelling both as a designer and a craftsman in weaving: ‘He knows as well how to select yarns and how to construct a cloth and weave it, as to originate its motif and its colouring.’<sup>8</sup> It was not surprising, therefore, that many were prone to comparing his skills as a dancer to those as a craftsman and artist. Indeed, his expertise as designer of cloth often informed his teaching of morris dance, manifest in an ability ‘to break down the whole into its component parts and make sure that each of these was exactly right.’<sup>9</sup> In return, his dancing inspired numerous textile designs, including a silk damask entitled ‘Briar Dance’.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by his father’s artwork — based on a vast knowledge of occult and religious symbols, and inspired by the works and writings of William Morris and John Ruskin — Hunter aspired to design and produce works bearing ‘personal expression, both within the artistic rendering of a design, as well as in its method of production.’<sup>11</sup> Art, design, dance, drama, and theatre permeated his life in all aspects, and inspired many of those around him. Hunter’s enthusiasm for morris was sustained throughout his adult life, right up to his untimely death in 1958. Whilst his professional work was to some degree informed by his experiences as a dancer, and an inherited fascination in ritual and performance, Hunter also employed his art and design to literally colour his fellow morris dancers. By the late 1930s, the Thaxted Morris represented his keen artist’s eye not only in the precision of their dancing, but also in their costumes, consisting of bespoke waistcoats

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Hunt, ‘Decoration’ (1938), cited in Hester Bury, *Alec B. Hunter: Textile Designer and Craftsman* (Braintree: Warner & Sons, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter, 1899-1958*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Best, ‘Edmund Arthur Hunter’, p. 7.

designed by him and produced by his wife, Margaret.<sup>12</sup> His aesthetic and practical ideals epitomised a continuing desire in some factions throughout the 1930s to integrate art and industry more closely, bringing workers and artist-designers into regular contact with each other.<sup>13</sup> Dancing was, similarly, a team effort: Hunter strongly felt the best results were attained by a close ‘communion of spirits’ inspired in apprentices learning from ‘the masters of the craft.’<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he was largely responsible for imbuing Morris Ring practices with a sense of ritual ceremony, learned from his parents’ interests in mystic religion, secret societies, and the Arts and Crafts movement. As a distinctive and popular Squire of morris at Thaxted he was known to call, “Come on, lads, all together in the dance.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Geoff Walker and Michael Goatcher, *Thaxted Morris Men’s Centenary Weekend of Dance: Souvenir Programme with the Story of Thaxted Morris* (Thaxted: Thaxted Morris Men, 2011), p. 9; Kate Butters, ‘Some Memories of Being Musician in Chief to the Thaxted Morris Men’, *Thaxted Bulletin*, vol. 43, (1989), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Alec Hunter, ‘The Spring Meeting of the Morris Ring’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 16, no. 6, (1952), pp. 199–200.

<sup>15</sup> Pam Croom, ‘Alec Hunter: His Two Lives’, *Braintree and Witham Times*, [January 1958]. Michael Goatcher Archive.



Alec Hunter, untitled mural, Market Cross, Thaxted (c.1955).

Hunter Family Archive, Cambridge.

## New Jerusalems

Born in Chiswick in the spring of 1899, Alec Butler Hunter was the younger son of Edmund Arthur Hunter (1866-1937) and Harriette Dorothea Butler (1868-1958). His father initially trained as an artist in Munich, and in 1884 was apprenticed to Arthur Silver's design studio in west London. During his time at the Silver Studio, Edmund Hunter attended numerous lectures on design given by William Morris, and by the time of his younger son's birth was a registered member of the Society of Designers.<sup>16</sup> In 1901, the family moved to rural Surrey, attracted by the potential to establish a weaving firm among the Peasant Arts Movement in Haslemere, regarded as an important centre of handicraft revival, under the guidance of two influential couples, Godfrey and Ethel Blount, and Maud and Joseph King.<sup>17</sup> After a short time spent working under Luther Hooper, in 1902 Edmund Hunter established the St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works—after the historic name for Bury St. Edmunds, his birthplace and namesake—as a firm for the manufacture of high quality textiles of 'bright primary and ecclesiastical colours with modern designs' for a principally ecclesiastical market.<sup>18</sup> His style was influenced by early Italian and Persian designs, combining a symbolism drawn from a broad repertory of early and pre-Christian iconography.<sup>19</sup> Within only a few years, Hunter's StEWW at Halsemere received many plaudits for the high quality of its fabrics. Furthermore, it was a venture in a revival of a national artistry, as an entry in *The Homeland Handbook* stated: 'His work is thoroughly English and his weavers are from among those whose families have been employed for generations in carrying the best traditions of weaving in England.'<sup>20</sup>

Hunter was introduced to his father's work at a very early age, allowing him to develop an intuitive understanding of textile design and manufacture. He later

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<sup>16</sup> Gould, "Music of Heaven", pp. 100-101.

<sup>17</sup> Best, 'Edmund Arthur Hunter', pp. 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, p. 4. For a recent summary of the Peasant Arts Movement, see Amy Palmer, 'Radical Conservatism and International Nationalism: the Peasant Arts Movement and its Search for the Country Heart of England', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 15, no. 5, (2018), pp. 663-680.

<sup>19</sup> Best, 'Edmund Arthur Hunter', pp. 31-32.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Homeland Handbook' (n.d.), cited in *The St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works* (Stevenage: Stevenage and Letchworth Museum Service, 1981), p. 1.

recalled, 'As a young child I was continually in this small works and by the age of seven had a really good idea of all the processes and some idea of the working of the scale harnesses.'<sup>21</sup> From his mother, Dorothea, born into a family of 'fierce Unionists' of the Irish minor aristocracy, Hunter learned an appreciation for dance, music, poetry, and theatre.<sup>22</sup> Both his parents were Theosophists, and erstwhile members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 'a revival of a mediaeval Christian order of mystics' with a strong presence in Bedford Park, an 'Aesthete's Elysium' in west London, where Dorothea spent the early part of her adulthood.<sup>23</sup> She was recruited to the Golden Dawn through a chance encounter at a meeting of the Theosophical Society in 1892 with W.B. Yeats, who turned out to be a distant cousin. For the young Dorothea Butler, apparently under the spell of Yeats, the Order was instrumental in her formative years as a young adult: 'the Order was my university. In it were collected, classified and edited the great traditions of occultism and mysticism - from which we could deduce that of which we were capable.'<sup>24</sup> Edmund Hunter arrived later, and was admitted to the Order in 1895.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the Theosophical Society and Order of the Golden Dawn were drawn from various religious denominations.<sup>26</sup> They were not religions in their own rights, but forums for mystics and magicians who shared in a common belief in 'old rites, traditions, or myths'.<sup>27</sup> Both Butler and Hunter families had long-running Christian traditions, which transcended the generations — the Hunters had bishops and archbishops among their cousins. Similarly, several members of the Butler family, including Dorothea's father, worked for the church, both in Ireland

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<sup>21</sup> Best, 'Edmund Arthur Hunter', pp. 4-6.

<sup>22</sup> Gould, "Music of Heaven", pp. 74-81.

<sup>23</sup> Draft letter from Dorothea Hunter to Richard Ellmann, 15 November 1946, cited in Gould, "Music of Heaven", pp. 82-83.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Gould, "Music of Heaven", pp. 82-84.

<sup>26</sup> For a recent summary of the beliefs and practices of the Golden Dawn, see Susan Johnston Graf, *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W.B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 7-15.

<sup>27</sup> Draft letter from Dorothea Hunter to Richard Ellmann, 15 November 1946, cited in Gould, "Music of Heaven", pp. 82-83.

and in England. Thus, their membership of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was not oppositional, but complementary to their Christianity. However, the Hunters' involvement in the Golden Dawn effectively ceased in 1901 after their move to Surrey, though Dorothea remained an active Theosophist throughout the majority of her life. Hunter inherited from his parents an intimate knowledge of the occult, which he translated into a sympathy for the enchanted life and ritual practices. Whilst he did not actually join such a society, the enthusiasms of his mystic parents influenced his own spirituality and inspired a penchant for religious ceremonial.

In 1908, the family moved to Letchworth, England's first Garden City, built in accordance with the vision of Ebenezer Howard, first laid out in his 1898 essay, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*.<sup>28</sup> The inhabitants found themselves living in houses along streets loosely based on an imagining of the ideal English village, reconciling rural spaciousness with the social advantages of an urban community. The town's chief architects, Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, employed 'a reusable past' in the planning of their new, improved built environment, which combined the best of the old with the comforts of the new.<sup>29</sup> Letchworth was quickly populated with families and businesses, invited into the new community as 'denizens of a new way of life.'<sup>30</sup> For families such as the Hunters, however, the town offered not so much a 'new way of life' than an affirmation of an existing one, and so their assimilation into Howard's civic culture was relatively quick. Edmund Hunter's StEWW borrowed from the ideals of William Morris and John Ruskin, which informed the firm's management and designs. Hunter's work resembled J.H. Muirhead's appraisal of Ruskin's influence on art and culture, interpreted as

'the first effective protest against the ugliness, the monotony, and the grime which accompanied the expansion of manufacturing industry during the nineteenth century. Art,

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (London: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 31.

for Ruskin ... meant the life and purpose and surroundings which make possible the creation of undying beauty.’<sup>31</sup>

Ostensibly motivated by a calling greater than that of monetary gain, Hunter’s weaving works strived to return to their employees pleasure in daily work, assured by a confidence in the quality of fabrics manufactured and relatively generous working conditions. Here, the StEWW received national acclaim for the high quality of its fabrics, and local popularity as an ideal firm in the Howard model: ‘Mr. Hunter was a good, kind, and very considerate manager of this small but unique and well-known factory, and he treated his work people in such a manner that he was appreciated and loved by them all.’<sup>32</sup> His workers were also given paid holidays.<sup>33</sup>

Upon their arrival in the newly-established Garden City, the Hunter family soon adopted active roles in the associational culture, including art, dance, drama, politics, and music. With a population of nine thousand, the vibrant associational life nurtured an intimate society of people who felt as though everybody knew everybody else, or at least those who shared similar interests. By 1910, there were no fewer than ninety societies in Letchworth.<sup>34</sup> The proliferation of special interest clubs was satirised by John Betjeman in ‘Group Life: Letchworth’, which began with a question and response,

‘Tell me Pippididdledum,  
Tell me how the children are.  
Working each for weal of all  
After what you said.’

Betjeman referenced the practicing of alternative medicine, arts and crafts, as well as music for dancing, taken as representative of the leisure pursuits of the Garden City inhabitants:

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<sup>31</sup> J.H. Muirhead, *Reflections on a Journeyman in Philosophy* (1942), pp. 9-10, cited in Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts, 1884-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.72-73.

<sup>32</sup> Ethel Henderson, ‘The Ideals of Letchworth, the First Garden City’, manuscript, cited in Meacham, *Regaining Paradise*, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> *The St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works* (Stevenage: Stevenage and Letchworth Museum Service, 1981), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Meacham, *Regaining Paradise*, p. 140.



'Sympathy is stencilling  
Her decorative leatherwork,  
Wilfred's learned a folk-tune for  
The Morris Dancers' band.'<sup>35</sup>

However, Letchworth was not without its problems, manifest in industrial unrest and antagonism between the working-class and middle-class inhabitants. Whereas families of the middle-class, like the Hunters, usually moved there out of choice, the majority of the working-class residents simply followed their jobs, and were often less enthusiastic about 'alternative' ways of living than were their employers.<sup>36</sup> In spite of this apparent conflict, the quality of accommodation and basic amenities was good, and by the early 1920s Letchworth was 'a home of dancing, singing and a community life,' championed by the Hunter family, among others, apparently impervious to satire or ridicule.<sup>37</sup>

In the Garden City, Ralph and Alec Hunter grew into adulthood. Together they attended St. George's co-educational school in nearby Harpenden, established by the Reverend Cecil Grant in 1907, who had 'migrated' from Keswick, bringing his staff and pupils with him.<sup>38</sup> It was considered a remarkably progressive institution, taking both male and female pupils of all ages from infancy to maturity, 'in an atmosphere closely related to family life and based on Christian principles.'<sup>39</sup> Hunter flourished at St. George's, and was 'precociously talented' from the very outset, demonstrating skills as an artist, scholar, and sportsman.<sup>40</sup> He was evidently fond of the school, and later returned as an adult to give lectures on folk dance. In collaboration with his father, Hunter also designed a mural at St. George's, in commemoration of the seven school captains lost in the Great War, which

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<sup>35</sup> John Betjeman, 'Group Life: Letchworth'.

<sup>36</sup> Meacham, *Regaining Paradise*, pp. 128-139.

<sup>37</sup> Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter*, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> 'St. George's School: School History', [<http://www.stgeorges.herts.sch.uk/About-Us/School-History>, accessed 14 February 2018].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Smith and Michael Goatcher, 'Alec Hunter: Master Craftsman in All He Touched', *Thaxted Bulletin*, vol. 97, (2016), p. 4; Email communication from Richard Hunter to Matt Simons, 19 February 2018.

combined symbols of crafts and husbandry united by an overarching Christianity.<sup>41</sup> Hunter shared with his brother a common interest in the liturgy and philosophy of Conrad Noel, and throughout their teenage years they regularly cycled together to Thaxted to attend High Mass. Influenced by their parents, reinforced through their schooling, and further inspired by Noel's decorative Anglo-Catholicism, the Hunters possessed a belief in the efficacy of the ceremonial in religious worship.

The outbreak of war in Europe in the summer of 1914 revealed one major difference between the Hunter siblings, as their responses to the conflict were opposed to each other. In March 1916, nineteen-year-old Ralph Hunter — by then an undergraduate at Oxford — faced a Military Service Tribunal where he applied for absolute exemption from active participation in the war on conscientious grounds. He cited his religious convictions as the principal motivating factor, arguing 'war is altogether un-Christian. It is against the Holy Spirit.' Furthermore, he refused to accept any part in the war effort: 'I object to the taking of any non-combatant service, and that I consider in preparation for my Holy Orders I am doing work of national service.'<sup>42</sup> His younger brother, on the other hand, frustrated by his insufficient years, was desperately eager to play an active part in the war. Their father, Edmund, was a keen amateur boxer, who had occasionally been called upon to test his mettle in difficult situations. In April 1900, he assisted W.B. Yeats with evicting usurper, Aleister Crowley, from the Vault of the Adepti, a small chamber located at 36 Blythe Road, Hammersmith, deemed sacred by members of the Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>43</sup> Taking his father's lead, Hunter was an enthusiastic boxer, and also possessed a patriotic compulsion to assist in the war effort. His elder brother appeared to deviate from his kinsmen in disapproving of all use of physical force, whether as individuals or as armies. After three months of deliberations, Ralph agreed to continue in his work for the east London poor at

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<sup>41</sup> Christine Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art, 1840-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 113.

<sup>42</sup> 'Hitchin Rural District Tribunal Record: Ralph Butler Hunter', 10 March 1916. LBM/4102/11, Garden City Collection (hereafter GCC), (online).

<sup>43</sup> Gould, "The Music of Heaven", pp. 101-104.

Toynbee Hall, which the tribunal agreed was of national importance.<sup>44</sup> As a patriotic young man, Hunter was eager to prove his loyalty in serving his nation. Though he originally wanted to enlist in the Navy, in 1917 he was conscripted into the Fourth Depot Company of the Royal Artillery at Woolwich.

At the end of the war, Hunter went up to Wadham College, Oxford, to read History, but stayed for only two terms. Motivated by a desire to exercise his artistic talent through design and craftsmanship, he returned to Letchworth where he took partnership of the StEWW alongside his father. Hunter actually began designing patterns for textiles as a teenager, and his first tapestry in silk and cotton, executed by the St. Edmundsbury firm, was exhibited at the eleventh exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, at the Royal Academy's Burlington House in 1916.<sup>45</sup> To aid his design work and further his training, in 1925, he attended the Byam Shaw School of Art, where he studied figure drawing under Ernest Jackson.<sup>46</sup>

Soon after his return to the Garden City, Hunter's name first became entwined with that of Margaret Perkins, a teacher at the Norton Road Primary School. By the time of their wedding in February 1921, they were both recognised as significant actors in the life of the town. The wedding took place at St. Mary's Church, Letchworth, officiated by Alec's old headmaster, the Reverend Grant. A press report of the wedding ceremony began with the following dedication:

'The Letchworth Folk Dancers and the Folk Song Choir have established a much more than local reputation in the rapid revival of the very delightful element of English country life at its happiest, and to no one is that local revival more indebted than to Mr. and Mrs. Hunter and family ... and (as far as the schools are concerned, besides the larger circle), Miss Margaret Perkins.'<sup>47</sup>

The folk and morris dancers played a pivotal role both in local festivities as well as in national demonstrations organised by the EFDS Monthly parties took place at

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<sup>44</sup> 'Pearce C.O. Register Transcription: Ralph Butler Hunter', [<https://search.livesofthefirstworld-war.org/record?id=GBM/CONSOBJ/8893>, accessed 21 June 2017].

<sup>45</sup> Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, *Catalogue of the Eleventh Exhibition* (1916), p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, p. 7

<sup>47</sup> 'Unique Wedding: Happy Revival at Letchworth Church', *Letchworth Citizen*, [February 1921], Hunter Family Archive.

the Church Hall, where mixed programmes of country, morris, and sword were danced.<sup>48</sup> More occasionally, the Hunters invited a select group of dancers for gatherings at the family home, St. Brigid's.

Throughout the 1920s, Hunter played a central role in the establishment and organising of the Hertfordshire Branch of the EFDS Through the Letchworth Centre, allied to this county Branch, he promoted dancing as an 'enjoyable, healthy, and artistic activity,' fitting for the inhabitants of the Garden City.<sup>49</sup> Under his direction, morris was not simply a respectable exercise class, but an attempt at nurturing an art form, which would ultimately serve to bring people together in mutual appreciation of its timeless beauty. In around 1920, he was selected by Cecil Sharp to join the EFDS demonstration morris team at their annual summer vacation school, which had recently transferred to Cheltenham School.<sup>50</sup> Though a relatively new recruit to the Society, Hunter was chosen as the seventh man in the side, and served as understudy to highly celebrated dancers, such as Douglas Kennedy and Arthur Heffer.<sup>51</sup> As an evidently talented dancer, he trained the dancers of Letchworth to perform with a similarly exacting accuracy and skill. One press report from 1925 described the dancing of the Letchworth side as embodying 'a delightful sense of pure beauty and rhythm.'<sup>52</sup> Another article report from June of the following year commented on the exalted acclaim of Hunter's team, playfully suggesting that 'The Letchworth Folk Dancers ... have won so many prizes that in future they should be heavily handicapped, or it will be the second place only which is competed for.'<sup>53</sup> Under the tutelage of Alec and Margaret Hunter, the morris and country dancers of Letchworth gained national fame, at least within folk dance

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<sup>48</sup> 'Letchworth Folk Dancers', (1924), a pamphlet advertising meetings of the Letchworth District of the EFDS Hertfordshire Branch. Hunter Family Archive.

<sup>49</sup> 'Branch News', *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 16, (1928), p. 85.

<sup>50</sup> Simona Pakenham, *Singing and Dancing Wherever She Goes: A Life of Maud Karpeles* (London: EFDSS, 2011), pp. 138-142.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas Kennedy, 'Notes on the Immediate Post-WWI Period', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 14, (1982), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> 'Folk Dancers', April 1925. Newspaper cutting from unknown source. LBM/3001/139, GCC (online).

<sup>53</sup> Unknown publication, cited in 'Branch News', *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 12, (1926), p. 401.

circles. William Palmer, an early member of the club, later recalled with no little humility, how Hunter had ‘trained one of the best Morris sides of the revival; their performance of Brackley ‘Shooting’ will be remembered by all who ever saw it.’<sup>54</sup> Like the family weaving works, morris was instilled with ideals of high art mixing together with skilled craftsmanship, guided by strong leadership.

In the mid-1920s, Hunter served as treasurer for the League of the Kingdom of God, a Christian Socialist society formed out of the Church Socialist League in 1923. The League, which had a base in the Garden City, was a Catholic society for ‘the repudiation of capitalist plutocracy and the wage system; and [stood] for a social order in which the means of life subserve[d] the common weal’.<sup>55</sup> The League espoused a Guild Socialism, following the writings of its co-founder, Maurice B. Reckitt, who had previously worked in the Fabian Research Department alongside G.D.H. Cole.<sup>56</sup>

Following a favourable business proposition from James Morton, of Morton Sundour Fabrics Ltd., in January 1928, Alec and Margaret Hunter moved to Edinburgh, where they established a small workshop designing and producing textiles, rugs, and embroideries, which came to be known as ‘Edinburgh Weavers’.<sup>57</sup> The following month, Edmund Hunter agreed the sale of all StEWW assets to Morton. However, weaving continued at the Letchworth works until 1931 when a sudden decline in orders precipitated by financial depression forced a consolidation of production.<sup>58</sup> The departure of Alec and Margaret was marked in the *EFDS News* as ‘a great loss for folk dancing in Letchworth.’<sup>59</sup> Their relocation to Scotland did not, however, keep them away from morris dancing. Almost immediately after their arrival in Edinburgh, Hunter assembled a group of ‘mixed Scots and Sassenachs’

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<sup>54</sup> Arthur Peck, ed., *Fifty Years of Morris Dancing, 1899-1949* (Cambridge: The Morris Ring, 1949), p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Nesta H. Webster, *The Socialist Network* (London, 1926), pp. 130-131.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Branch News’, *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 16, (1928), p. 85.

together in a hall on Princes Street to practice morris, forming a club that survived many years after his departure.<sup>60</sup> During family holidays, Douglas Kennedy often visited the Hunters, and also occasionally danced with these Edinburgh Morris Men.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Alec Hunter made frequent return visits to Letchworth and to the Thaxted morris weekends, where in 1929 a local press feature of the gathering recognised his commitment, reporting of ‘one enthusiast having ridden from Scotland to be present [sic]’.<sup>62</sup> Their time in Edinburgh was short-lived, ending in early 1932 after several months of antagonism between the Hunters and James Morton over the running of the firm, principally centred around Morton responding to the poor financial climate with concessions to production quality and a relocation to Carlisle. Renowned for the production of high-quality textiles, Hunter was not prepared to make such compromises - fine cloth justified the expense, it was not for the market to decide.

In 1932, the family returned to eastern England, where Alec Hunter was offered a position as designer for the Warner and Sons weaving firm in Braintree.<sup>63</sup> Initially, the Hunters lived in a house called ‘The Woodman’, at Howe Street, a hamlet between Dunmow and Chelmsford. However, in March 1935, Hunter finally realised his ambition of moving to Thaxted. Following Mass one Sunday, the Hunters took lunch with Conrad and Miriam Noel, where they were told of a farm house in the town that was available at an annual tenancy of £40. Within a week, Hunter had agreed with the farmer, Richard Hingston, to take on Rails Farm house, and the family eventually moved in to their new home in early September 1935.<sup>64</sup> The following month, Dorothea Hunter visited, and the family were most pleased that she was indeed ‘very delighted with Thaxted.’<sup>65</sup> Soon after his arrival in Thaxted, Hunter became the Vicar’s Warden — working for Conrad Noel and Jack

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<sup>60</sup> Peck, *Fifty Years*, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas Kennedy, ‘Morris in Scotland’, *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 12, (1982), pp. 2-3.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Morris Dancers: Festival Visit to Thaxted’, *The Essex Chronicle*, 7 June 1929, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Bury, *Alec B. Hunter*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Entries for 10 March, 17 March, 5 September, 6 September, and 7 September 1935. Alec Hunter Diaries, Warner Textile Archive (hereafter WTA).

<sup>65</sup> Entry for 6 October 1935. Alec Hunter Diaries, WTA.

Putterill, alongside fellow Warden, Stanley Wilson — a role which he maintained until 1946.<sup>66</sup> By the time of the outbreak of war in 1939, the Hunters were among the most active of the town's inhabitants, not only in their avid promotion of folk dance but also in their support for Conrad Noel's Christian socialist movement, which was expounded from the pulpit and exercised in the streets. Following the death of Noel on 22 July 1942, Hunter was largely responsible for securing a successor who would not upset the precedents laid down by Noel.<sup>67</sup> In the appointment of Jack Putterill, previously curate under Noel, the future of the Thaxted tradition was secured for the next thirty years.<sup>68</sup>

Hunter was known for his enthusiasm, leadership, and 'love of all beautiful things.'<sup>69</sup> His appreciation and understanding of beauty was informed by his enduring Christianity: 'Alec was a man of great faith, and this was the touchstone of his character.'<sup>70</sup> Whilst his religion was indeed a lifelong conviction, it did not in anyway preclude an 'enjoyment of all the fruits of life.'<sup>71</sup> Reflecting on his directorship of Warner & Sons and the family's wine merchant firm, Hunter described them as promoting 'the two best gifts of the earth - silk and wine.'<sup>72</sup> Following a short but severe illness, Alec Hunter died on 10 January 1958, in Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, the very same day as his mother, then living in a nursing home in Bexhill-on-Sea. His coffin, draped with a cloth of his own making, was transported to Thaxted Church on 12 January, and members of the Thaxted Morris stood vigil throughout the night until the funeral took place the following morning, conducted by Jack Putterill. On 1 February, at Holy Trinity,

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<sup>66</sup> List of Vicars and Wardens of Thaxted Church, 1859-1989, compiled by Michael Goatcher. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>67</sup> Arthur Burns, 'Beyond the 'Red Vicar': Community and Christian Socialism in Thaxted, Essex, 1910-84', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 75, (2013). pp. 116-117.

<sup>68</sup> See Putterill, *Thaxted Quest*.

<sup>69</sup> Pam Croom, 'Alec Hunter: His Two Lives', *Braintree and Witham Times*, [January 1958]. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>70</sup> Hubert Worthington, 'Letter to the Editor of the Times: Mr. Alec Hunter', *The Times*, 16 January 1958, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Email from Richard Hunter to Matt Simons, 19 February 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Alec Hunter, 'We Must all be Planners if we Value Beauty', *Braintree and Witham Times*, 2 May 1957.

Hoxton, the Reverend Kenneth Loveless — also a morris dancer and concertina player — led a memorial service, which included songs from the English Hymnal, and a ‘most moving performance’ of ‘Tomorrow Shall be my Dancing Day’ by the Imogen Holst Singers, to the arrangement by Gustav Holst, originally dedicated to Conrad Noel.<sup>73</sup> During the 1962 meeting of the Morris Ring at Thaxted, Margaret Hunter was presented with a gold badge of the EFDSS, the highest award conferred by the Society, in posthumous recognition for the contribution of her late husband to morris dancing in England.

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Death of Alec Hunter, First Squire of the Morris Ring’, 6 September 1958, in the Log Book of the Morris Ring, Volume 3, pp. 101-103. [<http://www.tradcap.com/archive/Ring%20Documents/Log%203/3log13.htm>, accessed 22 March 2018].





Alec Hunter, 'Briar Dance', (1926), as reproduced in *The St. Edmundsbury Weaving Works* (Stevenage: Stevenage and Letchworth Museum Service, 1981), p. 5.

## Merry Meetings

In 1922, Hunter first attended morris classes at the Malting House in Cambridge, organised under the auspices of the local EFDS Branch.<sup>74</sup> He quickly became intoxicated by the ideas gestating amongst the corpus of male Cambridge morris dancers at this time, principally that morris should stand alone as an art in its own right, and took inspiration from these visits to guide the leadership of his own club. Morris and country dancing were inherently sociable activities, which appealed to Ebenezer Howard's ideal of engendering civic pride through cooperative endeavour, which underpinned the Garden City project. Hunter's promotion of morris dancing was but one thread of many in his myriad schemes in Letchworth, which included amateur dramatics and political activism. Whilst the morris dancers regularly performed in public, they were usually just one of many elements in a civic procession or political rally, subsumed to the service of another cause. His relationship with Letchworth was one of an idealised reciprocity between person and place. In contributing towards the nexus of leisure activities in Letchworth, Hunter affirmed his association with the community. The Hunter family resembled William Guest's appeal in the closing lines of *News From Nowhere*: 'and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.'<sup>75</sup>

However, Hunter was evidently conscious of the criticisms made against the Garden City which pointed to its superficial jollity and virtuousness, imposed by the well-intentioned but chauvinistic middle-class on the workers. Since the summer of 1913, classes in folk dance took place intermittently at The Cloisters, an open-air residential school for students of psychology, established and governed by Annie Jane Lawrence, elder sister to Frederick Pethick Lawrence.<sup>76</sup> Combining an exotic mixture of architectural styles, The Cloisters was a vaguely neo-classical 'folly', built to uphold the garden city pillars of 'fresh air, light, freedom and

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<sup>74</sup> Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter*, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> William Morris, *News From Nowhere* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970 [1890]), p. 182.

<sup>76</sup> V.W. Miles and Charles R. Graham, *The Cloisters: Letchworth, 1907-1967*, revised edition (Letchworth: Lawrence Cloisters Trust, 2007), p. 38.

progress'.<sup>77</sup> Here, one commentator, imitating the style of Samuel Pepys, described a pageant of morris and country dancing:

‘there [were] no monks nor nuns nor any such thing, but a gay company of townsfolk and children all prettily arranged. Anon there came out upon a sort of platform many youths and maids who did dance in the prettiest and merriest sort that ever I saw in all my life.’<sup>78</sup>

The folk and morris dancers also participated in civic processions and in public shows on Howard Park — the principal garden of the Garden City — where they sometimes featured alongside demonstrations of Eurythmics, a practice of rhythmic movement designed to hone awareness of music in students, developed by Émile Jacques-Delcroze. Morris dance in Letchworth resembled one manifestation of an enlightened way of living, borrowing from representations of the past in contemporary practice. Like the teetotal pub at Letchworth, the idealised life championed by Garden City architects was all skittles and no beer. In an earlier critique of these ideals, G.K. Chesterton wrote, ‘our life to-day is marked by perpetual attempts to revive old-fashioned things while omitting that human soul in them that made them something more than fashions.’<sup>79</sup> Morris dance could also resemble a quaint but shallow exposition of Englishness, but Hunter sought out something more fundamental. Living was the stuff of tradition, maintained in accordance with contemporary needs to serve an ongoing function. From his mid-twenties until his death, he aspired to invoke a ‘team soul or consciousness’ among morris dancers, promulgated through informal gatherings, which he believed would restore a sense of dynamic life to the revived dance.<sup>80</sup> Hunter perceived such team consciousness and corporate identity as the basis for expressing an ideal Englishness, embodied both in the performance of the dance and the relationships between dancers and their communities. As such, the morris dance constituted both a metaphorical representation of harmonious endeavour as well as a real manifestation of a collective grouping.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> Anonymous manuscript report on ‘The Letchworth Folk Dancers’, 8 May [1921]. Letchworth Folk Dancers Album, ACC/106, VWML.

<sup>79</sup> W.G. Furnston, *The Skittles Inn* (Letchworth, 1914), pp. 10–11, cited in Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise*, p. 136.

<sup>80</sup> Alec Hunter, ‘The Morris Ring and the Society’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 17, no. 2, (1952), p. 44.

In the early 1920s, a series of exchange visits between dancers from Letchworth and Thaxted took place, based on the existing contacts established primarily between the Hunters and the Noels. Through these excursions, ideals of the new Garden City citizen mingled with those of the Christian socialist. A brief report from *The Manchester Guardian* suggests the first occasion on which morris dancers participated in a Whit Sunday church procession at Thaxted took place in 1922. The article described how ‘a number of folk-dancers from Letchworth, with gay dresses, bells, and their banner, joined in the procession.’<sup>81</sup> This apparent departure from church custom was of special interest, occurring in the midst of the ‘Battle of the Flags’, which had reached a climax only a couple of weeks before on Empire Day, when the church and vicarage were under siege by hundreds of people in opposition to Conrad Noel’s socialist campaigns at Thaxted, which included his refusal to fly the Union Flag.<sup>82</sup> The visit of the Letchworth dancers was integral to Noel’s vision to incorporate religion once again into the daily life of the town, its inhabitants and visitors: ‘as frivolity is a not unimportant part of life, religion must take notice of it.’<sup>83</sup> In 1923, a visit by a contingent of Letchworth dancers caught the attention of the union of ‘Architects and Surveyors’ Assistants’, who celebrated the bonhomie and charm of the event in their journal: ‘The sunshine, the perfect lawn, the picturesque head dresses, and the general harmony of colours ... made altogether a delightful scene.’<sup>84</sup> Although the exigencies of the ‘Battle of the Flags’ had been mostly quelled, the occasion was still considered noteworthy, expressing both virtues of beauty and cooperative spirit. The town was quickly acknowledged as a natural country home for the morris revival, safely distanced from urban sprawl, whilst still within easy reach of London, set against the backdrop of the striking late-medieval church.

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Folk-Dancers in Whit-Sunday Church Procession’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1922, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Groves, *Conrad Noel*, pp. 254-293.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Folk-Dancers in Whit-Sunday Church Procession’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1922, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Here and There’, *The Journal of the Architects and Surveyors’ Assistants*, vol. 1, no. 3, (1923), p. 17.

Writing to the Hunters on behalf of the Thaxted dancers in June 1923, Mark Caton reflected on a recent visit to Letchworth, a reparative gesture in return for their own hospitality given at Whitsun: ‘it is a time we shall always remember, and we hope it is only the first of many merry meetings.’<sup>85</sup> Thus, an exchange took place between people and places, sharing in a common enjoyment of the dance as a social activity, which was also tantamount to an art form. Although no records exist of visits by morris and country dancers to Thaxted and Letchworth in the mid-1920s, it is likely that they continued to take place on a regular basis. It was Hunter’s own attitudes towards the dance, spanning these two places, that inspired and sustained these occasions. He believed that morris was best performed by dancers who knew each other personally, and were thus able to develop corporate sympathies. Writing in the first edition of *The Yaffle* in 1926, a magazine for Letchworth boy scouts, Hunter extolled the benefits of morris in developing and reaffirming bonds between individuals: ‘It is a fine form of team work as there cannot be a really good side until a team has worked together for a long time as friends.’<sup>86</sup> In Hunter’s mind, Howard’s Letchworth and Noel’s Thaxted — ideas as much as they were places — had both raised citizenries acutely conscious of the efficacy of cooperation through activities such as dance and song.

Thaxted was at this time a popular destination and setting for singers and musicians, as well as dancers, students of architecture, amateur photographers, and of course worshippers, each welcomed by the ever-keen Conrad and Miriam Noel. In 1916, sometime resident of Thaxted Gustav Holst began Whitsun music festivals at the church, bringing his pupils from Morley College in Lambeth and St. Paul’s Girls’ School in Hammersmith to join with the local choir. His daughter later recalled him saying to a friend, ‘We kept it up at Thaxted about fourteen hours a day, and I realise now why the bible insists on heaven being a place where people sing and *go on singing*.’<sup>87</sup> One of Holst’s Morley College students was Jack Putterill,

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from M.R. Caton to Mr. and Mrs. A Hunter, 13 June 1923. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>86</sup> Alec Hunter, ‘The English Morris Dance’, *The Yaffle*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1926). Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Imogen Holst, ‘Gustav Holst and Thaxted’, (Thaxted: Mark Arman, 1994), pp. 1-2.

who later became curate and eventually vicar of Thaxted, as well as a morris dancer and musician.<sup>88</sup> Another devotee from Morley even coined a new expression to describe the town's uniqueness in late spring: 'Thaxuntide': 'Thaxted and Whitsun are henceforth not two ideas but one; their identity is completely fused, and it is impossible to conceive of one apart from the other.'<sup>89</sup> The town, at the centre of which was always the church, appeared an elysium for morris and folk dancers, student architects and historical societies, artists and designers, as well as singers and musicians. Acting on behalf of the Letchworth Folk Dancers, in May 1928 Montague Young wrote to ask Conrad Noel for permission to camp in the vicarage garden over the coming Whitsun weekend, adding 'we always feel so at home there'. He announced that the Hunters would not be able to attend, but 'this should give us more incentive to carry on that which they started years ago.'<sup>90</sup> By 1930, arrangements had become more formal, and two motor coaches were chartered to bring dancers and worshippers from Cambridge and London for Whit Sunday.<sup>91</sup> In establishing a link with Letchworth and its dancers, Alec Hunter contributed to the expansive network which connected Thaxted with other places, and also reinforced the town's own dancing activities.

In April 1925, Hunter attended the first Feast of the Cambridge Morris Men, which took place at Trinity College. Alongside Douglas Kennedy, director of the EFDS, he was invited by Arthur Heffer and Kenworthy Schofield as guest of honour in recognition of his contribution to morris at Letchworth. Later that same year, Hunter participated in the second and third tours of the Travelling Morrice. For two weeks in midsummer, Hunter believed to have 'lived the Morris, not dancing it in halls or in formal settings, but in the market places, street corners, and inn yards.'<sup>92</sup> Inspired by this epiphany, Hunter discussed with Heffer and Schofield

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<sup>88</sup> Putterill, *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*, pp. 19-22

<sup>89</sup> W.S.P., 'Thaxuntide', *Morley College Magazine*, vol. 28, no. 1, (1918), p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Montague Young to Conrad Noel, 4 May 1928. Noel Papers, UDNO/2/2, Hull History Centre (hereafter HHC).

<sup>91</sup> 'Parish Notes', May 1930, p. 6. Noel Papers, UDNO/6/3, HHC. The fare from Cambridge and London was three shillings, and five shillings and sixpence, respectively.

<sup>92</sup> Hunter, 'Morris Ring and the Society', p. 43.

the possibility of a meeting of morris dancers at Royston Heath, approximately halfway between Cambridge and Letchworth for later in the summer.<sup>93</sup> As esoteric interest groups, allied to a national organisation, these small branches of morris dancers were linked to many other places, and it was Hunter's wish, in symphony with his Cambridge peers, to bring dancers into more regular contact outside of the formality of EFDS vacation schools and demonstrations.

His participation in the two tours of the Travelling Morrice in 1925 were occasions of revelation for Hunter. The first, which began on 29 June, took place in the Forest of Dean, historically 'as fertile a ground for Morris dancing as was the Forest of Wychwood in Oxfordshire.'<sup>94</sup> On this expedition, Hunter was perhaps the most extrovert of the seven dancers, and especially enjoyed capturing the attention of audiences. In one instance, he was accused of showing off by 'flicking his handkerchief in the sidestep right under the noses of the only two flappers present.'<sup>95</sup> Sadly, however, the men found very few people with knowledge of local dance and music customs, but it was still declared a greater success than the original tour of the previous year, because it further proved the potential for morris as a piece of street performance. The second tour of 1925, which took place in late August, returned to the Cotswolds, based on Stow-on-the-Wold and Burford, 'the sacred land of Morris.'<sup>96</sup> During this tour, Hunter met many of the old custodians originally encountered by the Travelling Morrice the previous year, as well as some others, including George and Ned Hathaway of Bledington and Longborough respectively.<sup>97</sup> A talented dancer and confident showman, Hunter was undoubtedly an asset to the side. Furthermore, the addition of his car permitted the other men to rid their bicycles of excess baggage, and allowed for the transportation of Charles Benfield, an old Bledington musician, to view the performance. The

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<sup>93</sup> Walter Abson, 'The Early Morris Revival', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 4, (1979), p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Heaney, 'The Dean Forest Traditions', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 12, (1982), p. 12.

<sup>95</sup> Arthur Heffer 'The Second Tour of the Travelling Morrice: The Forest of Dean, 1925', pp. 6-7. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>96</sup> Conway Waddington, 'An Account of the Third Tour of the Travelling Morrice, 24-29 August 1925', p. 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

experiences of these tours epitomised for Hunter, 'the right setting and the right approach to the Morris,' and set an example for the future trajectory of the revival.<sup>98</sup>

Inspired by his participation in these two tours, in 1926 Alec Hunter first instigated public shows of morris dancing in the streets at Thaxted, which took place on the three spring and summer public holidays as designated by the 1871 Bank Holidays Act, namely Easter Monday, Whit Monday, and the first Monday in August.<sup>99</sup> Hunter was assisted in this by Conrad Noel's new curate, Jack Putterill, who had arrived in Thaxted the previous year. These holiday festivities consisted of a mixed show of morris and country dancing, with dancers and audiences intermingling freely. It is worth quoting Putterill at length, for he provides a good account of the experience:

'assembled outside the church in what is called the bull ring will be a crowd of people, many of them sitting on the low wall of the churchyard. They will be watching the colourful spectacle of English folk dancing. Twenty or thirty couples will be taking part in one of the easy "longways" dances in which almost anyone can join, especially with an experienced partner. And for those who know the figures there will be more complicated dances. You will see, too, a display of morris dancing, given by the Thaxted team ... Six men and a "fool" make up the side, all dressed in traditional costume with coloured ribbons and bells on their legs and often flowered hats ... All this continues until noon. Then three cheers are given for the police to thank them for their protection from passing traffic, and the dancers make for the inn to quench their thirst, for dancing is strenuous business. At the inn there will be a short sing-song, a tune on the accordion, then home for lunch.'<sup>100</sup>

The format of these street shows in Thaxted was directly informed by Hunter's own experiences as a member of the Travelling Morrice in 1925, and appealed to his predilection for making such things as dance and music available to all in a popular, accessible fashion. As with all of Hunter's endeavours, however, this was not sheer spontaneity, but a carefully devised performance led by a specially trained group of dancers. These occasions were described by Putterill as embodying 'the expression

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<sup>98</sup> Hunter, 'Morris Ring and the Society', p. 44.

<sup>99</sup> Jack Putterill, 'Thaxted Morris, 1911-1961', a fiftieth anniversary brochure, p. 2. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>100</sup> Jack Putterill, 'The Folk Dancers of Thaxted', *East Anglian Magazine*, March 1950, pp. 340-341.



of corporate joy and the holiday spirit,' which truly brought the dances and dancers to life.<sup>101</sup> By the late 1930s, the holiday dancing at Thaxted attracted large crowds, consisting of locals and visitors, and even won the attention of the national press.<sup>102</sup>

After the third tour of the Travelling Morrice, Alec Hunter and Kenworthy Schofield began planning a second attempt at convening a men's morris meeting in Hertfordshire, after their initial efforts for a meeting in the summer of 1925 failed to transpire. This scheme gave rise to a highly successful gathering of dancers at Ardeley — some ten miles south of Royston — where during the previous summer, the Letchworth Morris had given a show on the vicarage lawn.<sup>103</sup> The success of this venture was founded in Hunter's close family friendship with the vicar at Ardeley, Frederic Percy Harton, incumbent from 1922 until 1926. Harton, also known less formally as Francis, later gained notoriety as a theologian, largely due to the popularity of *The Elements of the Spiritual Life*, published in 1932. He was also a fellow devotee of English folk dance and music, which his erstwhile friend, John Betjeman, thought risible, privately mocking him as 'Father Folky'.<sup>104</sup> Both Harton and his wife were members of the EFDS as well as the Folk Song Society, and in November 1924 he collaborated with Alec Hunter in organising a fundraising event in Letchworth in aid of the Cecil Sharp Memorial Fund.<sup>105</sup> An anonymous informant, interviewed some thirty-five years later by Arthur Caton of Thaxted, described the Hartons as 'very enthusiastic dancers and [Mrs. Harton] ... a great organiser.'<sup>106</sup> The meeting took place in May 1926, and attracted dancers from Ashwell, Emberton, Letchworth, and Thaxted, whilst Schofield was the sole representative for the Cambridge side, the others being mostly occupied with the events of the General

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<sup>101</sup> Jack Putterill, 'The Magic Thread', *English Dance and Song*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1938), p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> 'Easter Sunshine: Holidaymakers in Town and Country', *The Times*, 11 April 1939, p. 14.

<sup>103</sup> William Palmer, 'Some Early Memories of the Morris', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 14, (1982), p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> A.N. Wilson, *Betjeman* (London: Random House, 2011), p. 127.

<sup>105</sup> 'English Folk Dance Society, North Herts. Branch: Cecil Sharp Memorial Fund', (1924). LBM/3001/142, GCC (online).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with an anonymous female speaker, conducted by Arthur Caton, c.1965. Michael Goatcher Archive.

Strike.<sup>107</sup> Aside from an anecdote based on the nocturnal card-playing by the men of the Emberton club, virtually no record is known to have survived of this meeting. However, it was successful enough to warrant a repeat venture the following year. The morris men depended on the support of a sympathetic vicar to find a village that would permit visiting dancers to use local amenities and who would also allow them to perform on Sunday, which was important to Hunter's belief that religion and folk dancing should be congruent and reinforcing of one another, rather than conflicting.

By the summer of 1927, Harton had departed from Ardeley for Ceylon, where he spent a year at St. Paul's in Colombo.<sup>108</sup> In his stead, Hunter attempted to organise a weekend in nearby Ashwell, where one Mrs. Fordham had raised a men's team some years previously, but there was local objection to dancing on a Sunday.<sup>109</sup> Consequently, Hunter turned to Conrad and Miriam Noel, who proved keen to support the venture, on the condition that dancers attended Mass on Sunday morning before dancing began.<sup>110</sup> This stipulation should not disguise the reality that the primary objective of these gatherings was to improve the quality of men's revival morris, 'to enable men to meet together and to learn more about the dance.'<sup>111</sup> The church was meant to be the facilitator and host, a setting rather than a focal point. The 1927 meeting took place on the weekend of 23 and 24 July, and was attended by dancers and musicians from Cambridge, Letchworth, and London, as well as some from the other Hertfordshire clubs. On the Saturday afternoon, shows of morris dancing took place in the streets, and in the evening wives and partners joined the men for a Country dance party. The following day, morris men took part in the church procession and attended Mass wearing their white flannels, ribbons, and bells, before a short lunchtime performance of morris. The Hunters,

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<sup>107</sup> Letters from Arthur Heffer to Rolf Gardiner, 9 May 1926, 27 May 1926. Gardiner Papers, J/3/7, CUL.

<sup>108</sup> 'Obituary: Very Rev. F.P. Harton', *The Times*, 4 November 1958, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Greener, '1913 May: Events from the Pages of the Royston Crow', [http://www.ashwellmuseum.org.uk/page\\_id\\_497.aspx](http://www.ashwellmuseum.org.uk/page_id_497.aspx) [accessed 22 March 2017].

<sup>110</sup> Harry de Caux, *Thaxted: "A Desperate Morris Place"* (Thaxted: Thaxted Morris Men, 1983), p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> 'Men's Morris Week-End', *EFDS News*, vol. 3, no. 2, (1930), p. 58.

together with Arthur Heffer and Arthur Peck from Cambridge, took lunch with Imogen Holst and her mother at Little Easton, and so ended the first Thaxted men's morris weekend.<sup>112</sup> The expectation that it should become an annual event was testimony both to the town and to the organisation of Alec Hunter, supported by Conrad and Miriam Noel, Kenworthy and Joan Schofield, and of course Margaret Hunter. In Thaxted, Hunter found an environment and community conducive to bringing the dance alive, akin to a handicraft, whilst still retaining the dramatic spectacle of the dance, at all times overseen by the kindly patronage of the Noels.

It was the opportunity to dance morris out in the streets that made the Thaxted weekends so popular, as a report of the 1928 weekend in *EFDS News* described, 'the dancers enjoyed their short experience of "traditional" dancing even more than the onlookers.'<sup>113</sup> Although the early meetings did not attract a large number of men, the promotion of 'traditional' performances resonated with a particular group of revival dancers, who aspired to exercise their abilities as *genuine* morris dancers, before public scrutiny. Furthermore, it was the beauty of the town, and especially the church, that secured the town's fame among morris enthusiasts. William Palmer later recalled another unique quality of these gatherings, which attracted dancers to return on an annual basis, who came to experience 'the pageantry of the Church and of the Morris, and ... haunting music of the Church and of the Morris and Playford dances.'<sup>114</sup> Responding to this appetite to take the dance out of the classroom and into rural towns, similar weekend events for morris men were organised elsewhere, and in the summer of 1928 forty dancers met at Fordingbridge in Hampshire.<sup>115</sup> The following year, in addition to these two existing meetings, men's weekends took place in Haslemere and at Kelmscott, near Oxford.<sup>116</sup> Douglas Kennedy, in his official capacity as Director of the EFDS, was in

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<sup>112</sup> Entries for 23 July and 24 July in Arthur Peck Diary, 1927. Fellows' Papers 182/vii, CCC.

<sup>113</sup> 'Men's Morris Meetings', *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 18, (1928), p. 117.

<sup>114</sup> Palmer, 'Early Memories of the Morris', p. 16.

<sup>115</sup> 'Men's Morris Meetings', *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 18, (1928), pp. 116-117.

<sup>116</sup> 'Men's Morris Meetings', *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 19, (1928), p. 165.

full support of the Thaxted weekends, as they allowed participants to ‘enjoy the teamwork and other qualities which are inherent in the Morris,’ though what these were he did not quite say.<sup>117</sup> Prospective candidates were not expected to have attained proficiency, but, as a notification for the 1933 meeting said, ‘the only qualification is a desire to dance.’<sup>118</sup> By the mid-1930s, owing largely to the efforts of Hunter, Thaxted was a site of pilgrimage for morris men, and a trysting place for folk dancers, contributing to Conrad Noel’s ideals of a jovial, medieval Anglo-Catholicism.

### **Lads, Together**

Soon after the Hunters return to eastern England in the winter of 1933, they resumed their prior roles as organisers of morris and folk dance in the region. Within two years, Hunter was Squire of the Thaxted Morris Men and the Morris Ring, the ‘Master Squire’ of England. At the inaugural meeting of the Morris Ring in October 1934, hosted by the EFDSS at Cecil Sharp House, Douglas Kennedy, acting as chairman, introduced the Squire-elect to the assembled company. He said Hunter’s election to the post was unanimous: ‘the invitation was given with a real sense of appreciation of what Alec Hunter had done for men’s morris, and ... there was obviously no one better suited to foster the new offspring.’<sup>119</sup> Hunter acquitted himself to his new role with ease, employing his ‘natural ability as a leader and a flair for showmanship’ in the management of dancers’ meetings and public shows, evincing a ‘big personality’.<sup>120</sup> Working in collaboration with his friends, Schofield and Kennedy, who in turn succeeded him in the role, Hunter’s tenure established a precedent for the future development of men’s morris. Borrowing from existing precedent at Thaxted, and informed by his formative years as a dancer in Letchworth, Hunter promoted an integration of performance with social bonding

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<sup>117</sup> Douglas Kennedy, ‘A Week-End of Morris Dancing for Men’, *EFDS News*, vol. 3, no. 7, (1933), p. 234.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p. 234.

<sup>119</sup> ‘The Morris Ring’, *EFDS News*, vol. 4, no. 5, (1935), p. 151.

<sup>120</sup> Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter*, p. 5; Eddie Dunmore, ‘An Interview with Geoffrey Metcalf’, *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1993), p. 32.

and ritual practices, in the form of Feasts modelled on the formal meals of the Cambridge Morris Men, complete with speeches and toasts. However, whilst he sought to inspire the morris men to join together in sharing a mutual enjoyment of the dance, Hunter still considered a dancer's technical skill a prerequisite rather than a desirable trait in promoting the very best performance. In January 1934, he wrote to Joseph Needham with his thoughts on the embryonic organisation's future trajectory: 'Lately I have been feeling more and more strongly that we must insist more and more on dancing skill and obtain a really high technical accomplishment.'<sup>121</sup> Indeed, considered by many of his peers a dancer of exemplary talent — one of the most distinguished of the post-1919 generation — Hunter expected all his fellow morris men to similarly aspire to achieve such standards.<sup>122</sup> Kennedy later referred to him as one of the 'master craftsmen' in traditional English dance, a deliberate reference to Hunter's professional vocation.<sup>123</sup> Under his guidance, the nascent Morris Ring promoted an attitude towards dancing that placed emphasis on technique and excellence in performance, reinforced by a glue of fraternal ceremony, and an insistence on the masculinity of the dance.

The early years of the Morris Ring were characterised by some confusion over the actual role of the organisation in supporting the dance, and what kind of relationship it should have with the EFDSS. Principally, these were questions of authority in preserving and disseminating the technique of morris. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it remained the norm for the majority of newcomers to learn their dancing by enrolment in EFDSS classes before joining an affiliate club of the Ring.<sup>124</sup> Thus, the Society remained the authority generally recognised for 'the style and content of the Morris.'<sup>125</sup> As a long-standing member and champion of the Society, Hunter had no desire to challenge this position. Instead, he hoped the

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<sup>121</sup> Letter from Alec Hunter to Joseph Needham, 13 January 1934. Morris Ring Archive, MR/753, ERO.

<sup>122</sup> Kenneth Constable, 'Encounters with Folk', *English Dance and Song*, vol. 33, no. 3, (1971), p. 92.

<sup>123</sup> Douglas Kennedy, 'Letters to the Editor of The Times: Mr. Alec Hunter', *The Times*, 20 January 1958, p. 14.

<sup>124</sup> Walter Abson, 'Meetings of the Morris Ring', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 1, no. 5, (1979), pp. 16-17.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

Morris Ring would serve as a complementary body, to ‘recapture the spirit of the English Morris dance,’ by inspiring men to conspire together in clubs to share in a camaraderie based on dancing for the enjoyment of the activity.<sup>126</sup> The implication was that the EFDSS would teach men how to dance, and the Morris Ring would teach them to *perform* as morris men, with an emphasis on the ‘ceremonial and presentation.’<sup>127</sup> For the majority of the time, this division of responsibilities worked well, and was beneficial to both organisations, leaving them able to concentrate on their respective aims. From 1935, the Society even made six places available to the Morris Ring at its biannual vacation schools free of charge, which were allocated at the discretion and choosing of the Squire.<sup>128</sup> Of course, the Morris Ring only represented men, and so the EFDSS maintained the monopoly in catering for female dancers. Furthermore, at the inaugural meeting of the Ring, Hunter made an appeal to the member clubs, ostensibly calling for equality of opportunity among dancers: ‘The Squire said that newcomers should be allowed to dance with the club, even if not very good, as it was in the club and not the class that Morris was learnt.’<sup>129</sup> However, Hunter still continued to champion the refinement of skill and technique. At the Thaxted meeting of 1938, he precluded men who had not attended the Saturday morning classes from performing in the afternoon tours.<sup>130</sup>

Like Rolf Gardiner, Hunter believed that when danced in the proper fashion, the morris dance constituted an expression of an ideal male corporeal strength. In a passage redolent of Cecil Sharp, he explained how ‘morris, which requires great skill in its performance, is a splendid example of pure masculine beauty, very strong and yet always restrained.’<sup>131</sup> In another article, produced much

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<sup>126</sup> Minutes of the Meeting at Thaxted, 5-7 June 1936, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> Dunmore, ‘Interview with Geoffrey Metcalf’, p. 32.

<sup>128</sup> Letter from Alec Hunter to Walter Abson, 27 November 1935. Morris Ring Archive, MR/812, ERO.

<sup>129</sup> Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting, 20 October 1934, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 7.

<sup>130</sup> Letter from Kenworthy Schofield to Walter Abson, 10 May 1938. Morris Ring Archive, MR/872, ERO.

<sup>131</sup> Hunter, ‘Back to Merrie England’, p. 157.

later in life, Hunter employed the dance as an allegory for encouraging better practices in architectural planning: ‘Here is an art which is strong and vigorous: nothing of the “pretty pretty” or “folky,” but pure and strong melodies as beautiful as any melody may be, and dance movements that require considerable skill if they are to be properly performed.’<sup>132</sup> In common with other advocates of the peculiarly male genesis of morris, Hunter believed this ‘strong and vigorous’ dance was suited exclusively to the male body: ‘It is ... something much more than a physical exercise: it is an art, being the expression of music through the dance ... it is a genuine man’s dance. All the movements are essentially masculine and require men’s physique, and in dancing this is a rare thing nowadays.’<sup>133</sup>

The frank insistence on the masculinity of morris dance caused some ill-feeling within the membership of the EFDSS, resulting in the publication of a scathing satirical ballad in an edition of the *EFDS News* by an anonymous author, suspected to be Joan Sharp, which included the following verse:

‘What we want is Morris,  
And what we want is a Ring,  
Where neither our Sweethearts  
Nor Mothers can come,  
Nor our Wives even get a look in.’<sup>134</sup>

Even though the Society, under Sharp and subsequently Kennedy, implicitly prioritised men’s morris, the enshrinement of men’s dancing within an autonomous organisation aroused suspicion and caused upset. Hunter, believing he was acting in the custodian of tradition, chose to ignore what he described as ‘frustrated feminine emotions.’<sup>135</sup> The unwritten inference was that women’s morris would continue as a more-or-less domestic practice, performed indoors, whilst men’s morris became the sole public representation of the dance. Resembling the

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<sup>132</sup> Alec Hunter, ‘We Must all be Planners if we Value Beauty’, *Braintree and Witham Times*, 2 May 1957. Hunter Family Archive.

<sup>133</sup> Alec Hunter, ‘The English Morris Dance’, *The Yaffle*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1926). Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>134</sup> Anonymous [Joan Sharp], ‘The Morris Ring: A New Ballad’, *EFDS News*, pp. 359-360; Letter from Alec Hunter to Walter Abson, 4 March 1936. Morris Ring Archive, MR/825, ERO

<sup>135</sup> Letter from Alec Hunter to Walter Abson, 4 March 1936. Morris Ring Archive, MR/825, ERO.

grapplings of Ruskin and C.R. Ashbee with the perceived feminising of handicraft, Hunter and his colleagues sought to remove men's morris from the private, insular classrooms of the EFDSS and hold it up as representative of man's communion with his environment, embodying a sympathy with precedent and tradition, framed by an understanding that morris had always been a male dance.<sup>136</sup>

In 1935, Hunter altered the established format of the Thaxted Morris gatherings to accommodate for the newly-formed Morris Ring, combining the existing public shows with a Saturday evening Feast and its attendant rituals. At the suggestion of Jack Putterill, Saturday afternoon was given over to shows of dancing in nearby villages.<sup>137</sup> Transported by 'a noble phalanx of motor cars,' the sixty dancers and musicians divided into three tours, which between them visited six locations throughout the afternoon before returning to Thaxted where more dancing took place in the streets, and outside the various inns and public houses.<sup>138</sup> As Putterill succinctly declared, 'nowhere suits the Morris so well as an inn yard. Morris and beer go naturally together.'<sup>139</sup> The dancers eventually converged together to give a massed show before convening in the recently-commissioned church hall for a Feast. This remained the standard format of the Thaxted meetings for some time, and also influenced meetings of the Morris Ring hosted in other parts of the country. Hunter led the speeches, which began with the toast to the 'Immortal Memory of Cecil Sharp', a dedication that he had established at the inaugural meeting in October 1934.<sup>140</sup> Whilst the programme continued to include country dancing, where men's wives and partners were invited to participate, the inclusion of the Feast further emphasised the exceptionality of men's morris by fomenting a kinship between dancers.

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<sup>136</sup> See Alla Myzelev, 'Craft Revival in Haslemere: She, Who Weaves...', *Women's History Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, (2009), p. 598.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from Alec Hunter to Walter Abson, 4 February 1935. Morris Ring Archive, MR/601, ERO.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Abson, 'The Thaxted Morris Weekend', 3p. report of the 1935 Meeting of the Morris Ring. Morris Ring Archive, MR/603, ERO.

<sup>139</sup> Putterill, *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*, p. 43.

<sup>140</sup> Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Morris Ring, 20 October 1934, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 7.



In addition to the custom for formal dinners, another novelty of the Morris Ring was the increased use of official regalia, deemed to represent the office of the executive leader and the association of member clubs to the whole organisation. The Squire's staff of office was a pole measuring 35 inches in length, decorated in white and red with a silver-plated spiral embellishment, designed by Hunter himself, 'being both simple but effective in its visual impact.'<sup>141</sup> According to Douglas Kennedy, it was designed as a totem of the fertility rites associated with pre-Christian ritual: 'the barber was the medicine man as well as the barber ... the moving shape denotes fertility - think of the hey.'<sup>142</sup> The totem was presented to Hunter by Kennedy at the inaugural meeting of the Morris Ring, a gift from the EFDSS conferring their formal blessing on the new organisation.<sup>143</sup> From the outset, the staff was imbued with the symbolism of authority. From 1935, member clubs of the Morris Ring were presented with tokens of association, in the form of miniature totems, resembling the 'offspring' of the Squire's staff.<sup>144</sup> Various other suggestions were mooted during the preceding year for suitable regalia, including tankards, decorative coats, or even metal rings worn on the hand of the Squire of each club.<sup>145</sup> However, it was Douglas Kennedy who suggested the wands. Undoubtedly influenced by his parents' knowledge of the occult and mystical symbolism, Hunter gave to the Morris Ring emblematic paraphernalia, which was a sign and token of the federation whilst also providing a semblance of venerability and precedent. Furthermore, Hunter actively employed the Squire's wand during his term of office, gesturing with abandon and occasionally using it as a prop in a jig, 'wield[ed] in so exemplary a manner.'<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Letter from Walter Abson to Ewart Russell, 24 January 1973. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1723, ERO.

<sup>142</sup> Extract from a reply to H. Mousdell by Douglas Kennedy, September 1969, in Ewart Russell, 'The Staffs of the Morris Ring', 1974 manuscript. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1712, ERO.

<sup>143</sup> Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Morris Ring, 20 October 1934, in in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 6.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Abson, 'The Thaxted Morris Weekend', 3p. report of the 1935 Meeting of the Morris Ring. Morris Ring Archive, MR/603, ERO.

<sup>145</sup> Walter Abson, 'The First Log Book: Preface', in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 5.

<sup>146</sup> Abson, 'The Thaxted Morris Weekend'. Morris Ring Archive, MR/603, ERO.

Gatherings of the Ring were almost pageant-like in their appearance, featuring a cast of notables who commanded the shows. During the meeting of the Morris Ring at Wargrave, a Berkshire town on the Thames, Hunter was particularly inspired by the street theatre of William Wells of the Bampton team, as his alter-ego, 'Billy Wells the Fool.' It was a decisive event for Hunter, as he realised 'how essential the Squire or Fool [was] to the Morris':

'He is not just a clown to entertain the crowd, though this he must do ... he must stimulate, steady and inspire his men ... The more we watched and listened ... the more we comprehended the skill and quality of [the] performance.'<sup>147</sup>

Hunter first learned of the supposed importance of the Fool to performances of morris dance whilst on tour with the Travelling Morrice in the summer of 1925, but it was Wells who finally inspired him to develop his own alias. Already possessing a distinctive rag waistcoat — tailored in early 1936 to resemble the costume of the nineteenth century Ruardean Morris — and the confidence of a skilled raconteur and leader of men, Hunter's showmanship was further styled on that of Wells the Fool. Hunter became known as a showman and an organiser, responsibilities that he was able to bring together in a persona that also appealed to the sense of tradition bestowed upon the Morris Ring.

### **'The Triumph'**

Morris dancing in Thaxted was interrupted, though not entirely halted, by the Second World War. Whilst most of its inhabitants were occupied in new responsibilities and tasks, mobilised in the war effort, the Hunters ensured that there was still time for morris and country dancing, a welcome relief from the seriousness and austerity of total war. Naturally enough for a patriotic man of action, Hunter also quickly prepared himself for service in war work, and enlisted in the town's Air Raid Precautions section. Furthermore, their family home at Rails Farm became the headquarters for soldiers billeted in the town, and the farm yard

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<sup>147</sup> Hunter, 'Morris Ring and the Society', p. 44.

their parade ground.<sup>148</sup> Despite these disruptions, on 10 August 1941, Hunter and Noel organised a Sunday festival of music and dance, which included all the usual elements of a Thaxted morris gathering, with the addition of a Bach chorale in the church, conducted by Imogen Holst. Folk and morris dancers were invited to participate in the event, which was advertised in *English Dance and Song*.<sup>149</sup> Throughout the war years, morris dancing on Easter Monday and at Whitsun continued, aided by the regular attendance of William Palmer and Russell Wortley of the Cambridge Morris Men and Morris Sunderland of Letchworth, who all travelled to Thaxted to ensure a quorum of dancers.<sup>150</sup> The precedent for dancing on public holidays had so quickly become an established feature in the town's calendar, neither the dancers nor their audiences were prepared to sacrifice their Easter and Whitsun festivities, war or no.

In 1947, the town returned to the prewar calendar of morris and country dancing, as 'people wanted to put the war behind them.'<sup>151</sup> By this time, the Hunters had relocated from Rails Farm house to the Market Cross at the western end of Town Street. They were thenceforth installed at the centre of Thaxted in all respects. The first post-war meeting of the Morris Ring at Thaxted was made all the more auspicious by a performance of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance by the town's morris men to conclude the Saturday evening show, a feature which remains an integral part of the event to this day.<sup>152</sup>

The influences of Hunter's professional work on morris were most obviously manifest in the unique attire of the Thaxted dancers. According to John Hunter, the only child of Alec and Margaret, there was a desire among some of the local dancers

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<sup>148</sup> Bruce Munro, 'WW2 People's War: Thaxted at War', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/41/a4486241.shtml>, [accessed 24 May 2017].

<sup>149</sup> 'Dancing at Thaxted', *English Dance and Song*, vol. 5, no. 6, (1941), p. 75.

<sup>150</sup> Arthur Peck, *The Cambridge Morris Men: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, April 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge Morris Men, 1949), p. 6; Transcript of an interview with Peter King, conducted by Michael Goatcher, (2017). Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>151</sup> Transcript of an interview with John Hunter, conducted by Steve Hollier, 13 April 1996. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>152</sup> De Caux, *A Desperate Morris Place*, p. 17.

to remove themselves from the ‘Baldrick tradition of the Cotswolds,’ and establish a costume that was peculiar to Thaxted.<sup>153</sup> In 1938, the side turned out for the first time in their new waistcoats, ‘of glazed floral chintz trimmed with red woollen braid and fastened with toggles,’ designed by Alec Hunter, and produced by Margaret Hunter, with the aid of Kate Butters, a local schoolteacher.<sup>154</sup> This was not, as Michael Garland summarised, simply a manipulation of the typical costume of a revival morris dancer ‘overlaid with a William Morris veneer’, but an assertion of their identity, projected to the national movement.<sup>155</sup> The Thaxted Morris were now immediately recognisable, and not only for their prowess as dancers. In 1952, Alec Hunter introduced a second new costume for the club, made of a cloth designed by Marianne Straub, a designer whose talents he acquired through the recent buying out of her ailing firm, Helios, in 1950.<sup>156</sup> Originally designed for the curtains of R.M.S. Caronia — a Cunard White Star Line passenger ship — in 1947 whilst she was managing director at Helios, Straub’s ‘Norwich’ cotton fabric consisted of a vermillion base and overlaid with white stripes created from cuts to the weft.<sup>157</sup> Straub later became associated with the Great Bardfield Artists, a community of figurative artists based around a small village some four miles to the west of Thaxted, which boasted many notable artists, including Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious.<sup>158</sup> The work of Straub, and of the Great Bardfield Artists more generally, appealed to Hunter’s preference for simple design informed by tradition and an invocation of distinctly English motifs.

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<sup>153</sup> Transcript of an interview with John Hunter, conducted by Steve Hollier, 13 April 1996. Michael Goatcher Archive. By ‘Baldrick tradition’, Hunter was referring to the crossed bands worn across the abdomen, known as baldrics, which became the default costume for male morris dancers of the revival period, popularised through the EFDSS.

<sup>154</sup> Kate Butters, ‘Some Memories of Being Musician in Chief to the Thaxted Morris Men’, *The Thaxted Bulletin*, vol. 43, (1989), p. 10.

<sup>155</sup> Michael Garland, ‘The Thaxted Morris Weekends’, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Essex, (2012), p. 55.

<sup>156</sup> Mary Schoeser, *Marianne Straub* (London: The Design Council, 1984), pp. 68–69.

<sup>157</sup> ‘Design Council Slide Collection’, <https://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=112969&sos=0>, [accessed 26 February 2018].

<sup>158</sup> Schoeser, *Marianne Straub*, pp. 102–107.

On 7 July 1951, Thaxted hosted a celebration of folk dance as part of the Festival of Britain, one of three events in rural Essex to mark the occasion. In many respects, the festival constituted the apogee of Hunter's talents of showmanship and pageantry, and ratified his credentials as a vital figure in the town's social culture. The Thaxted dance festival incorporated the existing customs of morris and social country dancing in the streets and yards, as well as the Castleton Garland processional and Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, integrated with theatrical composition. It was devised with the aid of Hunter's 'craftsman's patience to break down the whole into its component parts' so that each could be thoroughly scrutinised and finely honed through repeat practice.<sup>159</sup> It was to appear a spontaneous and loosely-framed show — an unselfconscious expression of the town's innate enthusiasm for dance — but of course to be convincing this required meticulous preparation by Hunter. In some respects, it resembled an historical pageant, a genre and model very popular in the interwar period, and it is worthwhile giving some context to a number of pageants that took place in the vicinity of Thaxted that involved Hunter and morris dancers from Letchworth and Thaxted, not only to compare the form but also the content and personnel.<sup>160</sup>

Parallel to the regular gatherings of morris and country dancers at Thaxted throughout the 1920s and 1930s — at which relatively unadorned shows of dancing formed the nucleus — was a series of pageants, orchestrated by A.A. Thompson and a rather enigmatic and eccentric figure, who styled himself as The Marquis d'Oisy. Known locally as 'The Marquis', he claimed to be a French aristocrat of Brazilian descent, but was in actual fact a failed monk and refugee from bankruptcy, and spoke with a strong cockney accent.<sup>161</sup> His colleague, on the other hand, was altogether more conventional: Arthur Alexander Thompson was a well-known cricket commentator and authority, who lived nearby, and obliged in penning scripts

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<sup>159</sup> Schofield, ed., *Alec Hunter*, p. 5.

<sup>160</sup> See, for instance, Angela Bartie, et. al., 'Historical Pageants and the Medieval Past in Twentieth-Century Britain', *History of Education*, vol. 133, no. 563, (2018), pp. 866-902.

<sup>161</sup> His full assumed name was Amand Edouard Ambroise Marie Lowis Etienne Phillipe d'Sant Andre Tournay. For a biography, see Julian W.S. Litten, *The Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy* (London: Society of the Faith, 2015).

for the Marquis.<sup>162</sup> The first of the pageants at the Marquis' adopted home situated in the hamlet Pledgdon Green, five miles southwest of Thaxted, took place on 10 July 1926. A notice in *EFDS News*, written by the Marquis himself, ran as follows:

'An old fourteenth century Monk (Mr. A. A. Thompson) has written a chronicle of St. Thomas of Canterbury ... Folk Dances led by Miss Morris will be shown in medieval dress. The Letchworth Morris team, in traditional costume will dance to the pipe and tabor played by Mr. K. Schofield. Miss Imogen Holst is arranging and conducting the old music which accompanies the play. After tea we will return to the twentieth century and have a folk-dance party'<sup>163</sup>

It was advertised as a fundraising effort, organised under the auspices of the Essex Branch of the EFDS, in aid of the Cecil Sharp Memorial Fund, though the financial success, or otherwise, of the venture is unknown.<sup>164</sup> A year later, in July 1927 — a week before the Thaxted morris meeting — the Marquis conducted a second pageant, for the benefit of Lady Warwick at Little Easton Manor. Once again, the Letchworth Morris, led by Hunter, danced to the music of Kenworthy Schofield. In all, this performance involved more than fifty actors as well as thirty dancers and musicians. Among the audience was the local Member of Parliament, and H.G. Wells, a regular guest at Little Easton.<sup>165</sup> However, this effort was dwarfed by the final pageant, which took place in July 1936 involving more than six hundred performers, though the basic premise of the spectacle remained the same.<sup>166</sup>

In addition to Hunter, Schofield, and the Letchworth Morris, the Marquis also conscripted several members of the Thaxted Morris to take roles in the pageants, including Arthur Caton, Ernie Drane, and Jack Putterill.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, for a short time, the Marquis was himself a member of the Thaxted Morris, so the two companies overlapped considerably. During the morris weekend of 1931, he was invited to direct a short pageant play during the country dance party on the

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<sup>162</sup> Litten, *Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy*, p. 26.

<sup>163</sup> 'A Fourteenth Century Miracle Play', *EFDS News*, vol. I, no. II, (1926), p. 343.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p. 343.

<sup>165</sup> Litten, *Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy*, pp. 26-28.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 38-42.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

Saturday evening. For Thompson's script, entitled 'Ann Hathaway', the Marquis cast Jack and Barbara Putterill to the leading parts.<sup>168</sup> In addition to organising the rehearsals, managing promotions, and directing the play, the Marquis was also responsible for the costumes. In 1933 he produced for the Thaxted Morris bespoke red tabards for the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, which they wore together with embroidered mitres made by Alec Hunter.<sup>169</sup> By the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951, the Marquis was too old and impecunious to take on any further major projects, and was resigned to a supportive role. Inspired by his participation in these earlier pageants, as well as those he had been a part of in Letchworth, Hunter took the onus of orchestrating the festival pageant, combining ritual and spectacle, and mobilised by community participation. He aspired to restore to the country dances a sense of joyfulness and spontaneity, to be performed alongside morris, which was the pinnacle of English expressive folk art.

As *Picture Post* magazine declared on the cover of its first 1951 edition, 'The Festival Begins at Home'.<sup>170</sup> This event marked the end of prolonged austerity, and 'set out to provide a sense of place for a British people in need of location'.<sup>171</sup> Notwithstanding the focus on modern architecture and design, the Festival encouraged Britons to celebrate their land in all its forms. It was a manifestation of a dynamic conservatism, borrowing from idioms of the past as well as a representation of the present. The various exhibitions were designed to reconcile the population to modern ways of living, centred on urban conurbations and new technologies. Nevertheless, the festival used traditional motifs and national icons to colour these novel designs with a familiar essence.<sup>172</sup> Whilst the main exhibition on the South Bank in London was intended to represent 'a great shop window' onto the nation, places like Thaxted were offered up as 'a living stage'. Journalist and

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<sup>168</sup> 'Thaxted Folk Dance Festival', *The Essex Chronicle*, 12 June 1931, p. 7.

<sup>169</sup> Litten, *Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy*, p. 37.

<sup>170</sup> Cited in Gillian Darley, 'Essex, 1951', London Review of Books Blog, [<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/07/18/gillian-darley/essex-1951/>], accessed 27 February 2018].

<sup>171</sup> Harriet Atkinson, *The Festival of Britain: a Land and its People* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>172</sup> Sarah Street, 'Cinema, Colour and the Festival of Britain, 1951', *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 13, no. 1, (2012), pp. 97-98.

broadcaster, James Fyfe Robertson described how ‘the audience can walk among the players, and the players will be village people going about their daily work, or combining in their normal recreations.’<sup>173</sup> A brochure for the Essex ‘Village Festival’ enticed visitors to see how these places ‘live and work and create their own amusements.’<sup>174</sup> Exhibited alongside a selection of documents and maps from the Essex Record Office, housed in the Guild Hall, the people of Thaxted became living artefacts, representing a window onto a way of living outmoded in most other parts of the country.<sup>175</sup>

David Edgerton argued that in addition to the importance of the Festival in inspiring a confidence for a better times yet to come, it was also novel in promoting a British nationalism on a grand scale as opposed to a British imperialism. It represented a break away from Empire, and a turning towards the British Isles.<sup>176</sup> Whilst the exhibitions of the metropolises heralded a new age of technology, the people of Thaxted were expected to play the role of the enduring, timeless community, going about their crafts and performing their morris dances. The Festival promoted an ideal vision in which technology and tradition coexisted happily, which was an example for post-war nation to follow.

Naturally enough, at the Thaxted pageant Hunter took the role of master of ceremonies, and a report from *English Dance and Song* praised his infectious enthusiasm, expressed through his command of the show:

‘Mr. Hunter has the supreme gift of being able to persuade an onlooker, in spite of himself, on to the dance floor. On this occasion and on his “own ground” he was irresistible. Reluctant and bewildered members of the crowd found themselves making up sets and dancing with keen enjoyment.’<sup>177</sup>

Hunter staged the show on Town Street, in the shadows of the Guild Hall, and seated the musicians on a four-wheeled farmer’s wagon parked outside the Market

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> ‘1951 Village Festival’ leaflet. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>175</sup> ‘Festival of Britain: Thaxted’ poster. Materials for a history of Thaxted, T/P 99/1, ERO.

<sup>176</sup> Edgerton, *Rise and Fall*, p. 29.

<sup>177</sup> G.I. Ginn, ‘Dancing in Thaxted’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 16, no. 3, (1951), p. 83.



Cross. The programme interspersed morris with country dances, mixing the spectacular with the social together in an environment in which boundaries of participants and performers were softened, although the morris dancers still remained a something of an elite status among them. Once more, the Thaxted Morris were joined by their colleagues from Letchworth.<sup>178</sup> There were two processions, which marked the beginning of each part of the proceedings, appropriately enough led by Marquis d'Oisy and a young local man named Stanley Moss, performing the roles of Castleton 'King' and 'Lady' respectively.<sup>179</sup> John Hunter recalled how the Marquis had 'emerged in style magnificently in 1951 in velvet attire and tricorn to dignify our dancing festivities'.<sup>180</sup> The dancing carried on into the evening, and concluded with the Horn Dance by the Thaxted Morris, which was 'especially impressive in the half-light reflected from the white front of the Guildhall,' dressed in new red coats made by Margaret Hunter for the occasion.<sup>181</sup> This was the offering of the people of Thaxted to the Festival year, establishing their place in the narrative as a centre of music and dance.

By the time of the Festival, Thaxted was already well-known for its morris and country dancing, particularly in association with the legacy of Conrad Noel, who died in 1942. The fame of the Thaxted Morris dancers was reflected in their portrayal in a painting by R.T. Cower, commissioned by British Railways in 1950 for a brochure aimed at promoting increases in passenger traffic on rural Essex lines, including the five mile branch from Elsenham to Thaxted.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the town's morris dancers were coopted as a marketing ploy, invested with representative power at a commercial level. Appropriately, at the head of the procession of dancers is Alec Hunter dressed in his distinctive Forest of Dean waistcoat. In 1951, Hunter returned to the national executive committee of the EFDSS, a role he held some years before, and remained until 1957, serving alongside Jack Putterill and former

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<sup>178</sup> Letter from Alec Hunter to Jack Thompson, 4 February 1952. 2012/35/190, GCC, (online)

<sup>179</sup> Litten, *Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy*, p. 53.

<sup>180</sup> John Hunter, 'Reminiscences of John Hunter', *The Thaxted Bulletin*, (1990), p. 12, cited in Litten, *Mystery of Marquis d'Oisy*, p. 72.

<sup>181</sup> Ginn, 'Dancing in Thaxted', p. 83.

<sup>182</sup> 'British Railways: Essex' leaflet, (1950). Materials for a history of Thaxted, T/P 99/1, ERO.

Travelling Morrice peers, Peter Fox and Kenworthy Schofield.<sup>183</sup> Throughout the postwar years, Hunter continued to manage the running of the annual meeting of the Morris Ring, as well as leading the Thaxted Morris through the regular programme of bank holiday shows and other local engagements.

Douglas Kennedy later described Hunter's approach to morris as one 'with due regard to ritual and a respect for local tradition.'<sup>184</sup> At the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951, morris dancing in Thaxted had a history of just forty years - it was the product of twentieth century revivalists, and had little grounds for direct historical precedence in the locality. However, through the efforts of Alec and Margaret Hunter the dances gained a life of their own, installed as a feature of holidays and festivities, celebrating the communal life of the small town. Framed in the picturesque setting of Town Street, the pageant of 1951 must have appeared almost as fantastical as the vision painted above the fireplace in the family home. Hunter's initiatives were all based on an understanding that to achieve sustainable progress, one had to look behind as well as before: 'the best modern design is never divorced from the past'.<sup>185</sup> Similarly, in revivifying a communal form of entertainment, he was able to appeal to an essence of an Englishness that restored a sense of order and place to communities. Ambivalent towards commercial forces, morris dancing represented to Hunter the expression of an innate aesthetic impulse, with the potential to act as a harbinger for the dissemination of art and beauty across all classes.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> 'English Folk Dance and Song Society Report, 1 April 1951 - 31 March 1952', Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>184</sup> Douglas Kennedy, 'Letters to the Editor of The Times: Mr. Alec Hunter', *The Times*, 20 January 1958, p. 14.

<sup>185</sup> Alec Hunter, 'History of a Weaving Mill in Braintree', *The Essex Review*, vol. 62, no. 247, (1953), p. 24.

<sup>186</sup> Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: a Study in British Socialism and the Arts, 1884-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 257



Old and new Thaxted Morris costume: Ernie Drane, Dick Johns, and Rev. Jack Putterill wearing striped jackets made of Marianne Straub's 'Norwich' fabric, woven by Warner and Sons at Braintree; Peter Heywood (second from left) in older style floral chintz waistcoat. Cover illustration to a magazine, *Coming Events in Britain*, May 1955.

Morris Photograph Album, Hunter Family Archive.

## Conclusion

On the evening of 8 July 1955, several hundred dancers and musicians converged at Cecil Sharp House to mark the ‘coming-of-age’ of the Morris Ring, as well as the fiftieth meeting of member clubs since 1934. The presentation of a silver medallion, a gift from the EFDSS, by Ralph Vaughan Williams to the Squire of the Morris Ring, Donald Cassels, made the event all the more momentous. The brooch — which became the ‘Squire’s Badge of Office’, worn on the chest of the bearer, suspended by a ribbon around the neck — was made by A.H. Guise, a student at the Royal College of Art.<sup>187</sup> The design was taken from a drawing by Hunter, ostensibly based on a figure from his much earlier work, ‘Briar Dance’, framed in a solid ring of oak leaves intertwined, and decorated with six small bells in the shape of acorns, representing the six founding clubs.<sup>188</sup> Together with the Squire’s wand of office, present at the inaugural meeting in October 1934, twenty-one years later the art and vision of Alec Hunter continued to permeate the ritual culture of the Morris Ring.

Hunter’s enthusiasm for the morris dance was sustained by his belief in the efficacy of collective endeavour, underpinned by his guild socialism and Christian beliefs. He perceived the revival movement as serving the cause of ‘true nationalism’, which he interpreted as ‘the recognition and love of the good things of your own country’.<sup>189</sup> To Hunter, the secular and the divine were inseparable, and the morris dance represented a potent agent in the re-enchanting of a disillusioned England. Like Gardiner, Hunter interpreted nationalism as something which should be celebratory but not chauvinistic. He believed that the development of an aesthetic nationalism would in time contribute towards ‘true internationalism’, facilitating better understanding between peoples and nations.<sup>190</sup> This concept of a multiplicity of nations moving towards an internationalism of variety and difference

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<sup>187</sup> Donald Cassels, ‘The Morris Ring: Morris Dancing Through London’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 20, no. 1, (1955), pp. 6-7.

<sup>188</sup> Donald Cassels, ‘The Squire’s Badge’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 20, no. 1, (1955), pp. 7.

<sup>189</sup> Hunter, ‘Back to Merrie England’, p. 157.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, p. 157.

will be expanded in the following chapter with particular reference to Conrad Noel's mission at Thaxted church.

In promoting morris dance as an expression of the very best sort of English social art, Hunter emphasised its similarities to vernacular handicraft. He believed it was the natural product of man's relationship with his environment, based on the embodiment of a knowledge accrued through generations of innovation. It was believed that craftspeople were in more intimate sympathy with 'the essential England because they held it in their hands.' They knew instinctively the form and properties of its substrate.<sup>191</sup> Influenced by his parents' religious mysticism and a progressive upbringing in England's new Garden City, he promoted morris dance as a symbol of a unity of art, industry, and community. Hunter believed morris revealed to dancers and audiences alike various truths about England, which were otherwise unintelligible, having been paved over by urbanisation. The dancing required teamwork, as individuals subsumed themselves to the common purpose of the group. However, teams needed their leaders, and Hunter was a member of a small number of aristocratic-type dancers, who ensured the dances were transmitted responsibly. As he wrote in 1952, 'leading dancers are deeply concerned in the preservation of our knowledge of the various traditions and are continually striving for the more perfect performance of the dances.'<sup>192</sup> Just as in his weaving, where careful attention was given to the detail of design and production of textiles, the crux of authenticity in dance resided in the moment of performance. Conversely, Hunter also used his artistic talent to make articles which represented the intangible in physical form, manifest in the Morris Ring paraphernalia and regalia, as well as his various textiles depicting dancers and folk dance motifs.

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<sup>191</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 291-292.

<sup>192</sup> Hunter, 'Morris Ring and the Society', p. 44.

## Chapter IV

# JOSEPH NEEDHAM

*'Doctor Joseph Needham,  
Dances with philosophical freedom.  
You must mind your toes if  
You chance to dance with Joseph'<sup>1</sup>*

Were it not for his frequent attendance at Thaxted church, or the many dinner parties in Cambridge with Arthur Peck, the Heffers, and the Cornfords, Joseph Needham might never have given any consideration to morris dancing at all. As a gregarious individual, he learned much from his friends — it was largely through these friendships that the world became familiar to him. He believed professional relationships were impotent without a close understanding between people. Likewise, as a biochemist, he understood research as not merely a series of experiments, but the consummation of shared experience and knowledge. Only when shared did knowledge have a potential to invoke change: 'The consideration of man and his experiences as an individual led in the end to contemplation; the consideration of social man and his experiences leads to action.'<sup>2</sup> When Needham danced his first steps in the autumn of 1929, it was the latest manifestation of a socially-conscious Christianity, and an exercise in demonstrating corporate responsibility through physical activity. As a member of the Cambridge Morris Men, Needham found himself dancing with many fellow adherents of a high church Anglo-Catholicism, who also believed in the efficacy of morris in promoting a communal ideal. Whilst this was evidently not an exercise in overt, flag-waving activism, the dance was nevertheless conscripted as an agent in the foundation of

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<sup>1</sup> A clerihew of unknown provenance, quoted in Maurice Goldsmith, *Joseph Needham: Twentieth Century Renaissance Man* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Metamorphoses of Scepticism', in Joseph Needham, ed., *Time: the Refreshing River* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1989), p. 27.

God's Heaven on earth.<sup>3</sup> Morris dancing possessed a cathartic potential, which suited his own theological and social philosophies.

Needham's career as a morris dancer was relatively short, though his participation was nevertheless defined by a frenetic enthusiasm. His most active period as a member of the CMM was the 1930s, a decade which began auspiciously for Needham with the publication of his seminal work on the chemistry of embryos.<sup>4</sup> Within only a few years, Needham became a competent morris dancer and musician, learning to play the melodeon, which he referred to as his 'squiffer'. He also published two important research articles in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, served a term as Squire of the CMM, and instigated the foundation of the Morris Ring in partnership with his long-term friend, Arthur Peck. In Winchester's popular biography, Needham's morris dancing is portrayed as the fleeting dalliance of a brilliant man prone to eccentricity — dancing was the 'other', a risible aberration set apart from a narrative of otherwise laudable and worthy activities. To Winchester, who seems to have made no attempt at understanding Needham's true motivations for participating in the morris, it was an embarrassment. He chided his subject for indulging in such 'ungainly and unusual dances'. Worst of all, it made the great man appear 'foolish'.<sup>5</sup> However, a more sympathetic and cogent summary of Needham's interest is available in the biography written by Maurice Goldsmith for UNESCO, published soon after his death in 1995: 'The morris dance linked up with those wide, democratic, socialist and populist elements which determined his lifelong political outlook.'<sup>6</sup> Far from being a departure from his worldview, morris was an extension of it, inspired by Needham's colleagues and allies.

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer Heathman, 'Revival', pp. 63-85.

<sup>4</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Winchester, *Bomb, Book and Compass: Joseph Needham and the Great Secrets of China* (London: Viking, 2008), pp. 32-33, and pp. 120-121.

<sup>6</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 67.

Needham's dancing was not merely some curious manifestation of eccentricity, but an expression of a life-long interest in music, and a tenet of his socialist activism. He believed music possessed a unifying potential, an exercise in demonstrating the commonwealth of man, and laying the foundations for a Kingdom of God on earth. It is with this propensity for 'bridge-building' that his biography must necessarily begin. Informed by his Christianity, and driven by an insatiable curiosity, Needham possessed an ability to assimilate otherwise disparate peoples, places, concepts, and subjects. In a short autobiographical essay, written under his literary pseudonym, Henry Holorenschaw, Needham described his various syntheses of apparently 'irreconcilable contradictions'. These he termed the 'antithesis of science and religion', 'the antithesis of religion and politics', and 'the antithesis of East and West'.<sup>7</sup>

## **A Bridge**

Noel Joseph Terence Montgomery Needham was born on 9 December 1900 in Clapham Park, a desirable South London suburb. From the very beginning of his life, which would extend over some ninety-four years, Needham assumed the role of a bridge-builder, a vital link in sustaining otherwise fractious and unlikely relationships. This instinct was perhaps learned in childhood, derived from feelings of isolation as an only child, reinforced by his parents' evident marital discord. As a young boy, his time was usually spent with only one of his parents at any given time, as both jealously claimed him as their own and spent little time together.<sup>8</sup> His mother, Alecia Adelaide Montgomery — the daughter of a town clerk from County Down and a French gentlewoman — was described by one of Needham's biographers as a 'flame-haired Irishwoman ... of wild, childlike exuberance,' prone to erratic and violent outbursts.<sup>9</sup> She was a composer and musician, whose song *My*

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Holorenschaw [Joseph Needham], 'The Making of an Honorary Taoist', in Mikulas Teich and Robert Young, eds., *Changing Perspectives in the History of Science: Essays in Honour of Joseph Needham* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1973), pp. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, pp. 19-23; Winchester, *Bomb, Book and Compass*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Winchester, *Bomb, Book and Compass*, p. 13.



*Dark Rosaleen* was considered for the official anthem for the Irish Free State.<sup>10</sup> His father, on the other hand, was an altogether more ‘steady, unexciting, reliable man,’ who was a respected anaesthetist on Harley Street.<sup>11</sup> From his father, Needham derived a ‘scientific mind’, and from his mother, ‘a certain largeness and generosity in action and initiative’.<sup>12</sup>

Needham’s early years were largely spent apart from other children, and his parents entrusted his care to a humourless Parisian governess. Later, however, in adolescence, the young man enjoyed the nurturing tutelage of his father, who ‘cultivat[ed] an intellectual openness.’<sup>13</sup> Aside from gaining instruction in scientific and mechanical principles, Needham was encouraged to read widely, benefitting enormously from unfettered access to his father’s extensive library, the necessary foundation to the polymath he became.<sup>14</sup> It was his father — for a short time, a prominent figure in the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement — who also first introduced Needham to a socially- and politically-engaged Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Together, they attended sermons delivered by the Master of the Temple in London, E.W. Barnes, who later came to be known as ‘the radical Bishop of Birmingham,’ which established in the young boy the beginnings of a theological outlook that was to serve as his philosophical guide for the rest of his life.<sup>16</sup> His mother’s influence was not entirely absent, however, as Needham later recalled that she had been the inspiration for his admiration of music, a prerequisite to his participation in morris.<sup>17</sup> In spite of the apparent domestic enmity of his parents, Needham was reluctant in moving away. His years at Oundle School, in Northamptonshire, were

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to Stanley Clark, 30 July 1993. Needham Papers, A/851, CUL.

<sup>11</sup> Winchester, *Bomb, Book and Compass*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Holorenschaw, ‘Honorary Taoist’, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Blue, ‘(Noel) Joseph Terence Montgomery Needham’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58035>.

<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Erik L. Peterson, *The Life Organic: The Theoretical Biology Club and the Roots of Epigenetics* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to Stanley Clark, 30 July 1993. Needham Papers, A/851, CUL.

characterised by nostalgia for the family home and feelings of isolation from his peers.

Homesickness and bullying did not prevent Needham from exploiting his time at Oundle to further his myriad scholarly interests, whilst also developing a sympathy for communal endeavour, even across the frontiers of socio-economic class. The school won great acclaim for the reforming influence of its headmaster, Frederick William Sanderson, who encouraged boys to develop independent minds with a corporate consciousness, or at least to nurture a professional responsibility for one's colleagues in the pursuit of knowledge. The pedagogic method was tailored to foster creativity by granting pupils greater freedoms in following their own lines of enquiry: Sanderson, as he himself described, 'began to replace teaching [with] finding out.'<sup>18</sup> Needham particularly admired his 'spacious conceptions in history and life.'<sup>19</sup> One of Sanderson's most notable devotees was H.G. Wells, whose two sons were contemporaries of Needham at Oundle, and wrote a biographical history of the school under his lead.<sup>20</sup> Wells summarised the efficacy of promoting teamwork 'in the spirit of co-operation', arguing that in any society or group 'a failure at any point means a breakdown in all.'<sup>21</sup> Needham was himself an admirer of Wells' fiction and philosophy, having eschewed the classical authors favoured by his parents, and first met the man during one Speech Day whilst still a pupil at the school.<sup>22</sup> Even as an adolescent, Needham possessed a demeanour that was at once authoritative and friendly, although at school he preferred the company of his elders to that of his peers.

In the autumn of 1918, Needham went up to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He arrived as a student of medicine, following the path of his father, but soon converted to natural sciences. He chose biochemistry, influenced by the

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<sup>18</sup> W.F. Sanderson, unknown source, cited in Noel and Dark, *Conrad Noel*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Holorenschaw, 'Honorary Taoist', p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Story of a Great Schoolmaster: Being a Plain Account of the Life and Ideas of Oundle* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924).

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *Story of a Great Schoolmaster*, p. 40, cited in Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 27.

suggestion of his director of studies, Sir William Bate Hardy, who stressed, ‘The future lies with atoms and molecules, my boy, atoms and molecules.’<sup>23</sup> Needham obtained his B.A. in chemistry and anatomy-physiology in the summer of 1921. After a year working under Professor Koop in a laboratory in Freiburg im Breisgau, in Germany, Needham was awarded the Ben W. Levy studentship, and admitted to the Cambridge Biochemical Laboratory, which was to be his ‘home’ for the next two decades.<sup>24</sup> He quickly became a leading researcher in the biochemistry of embryonic development, and was awarded his M.A. and Ph.D. in 1924. In the September of this same year, he married a fellow student working at the laboratory, Dorothy Mary Moyle, known to her friends as ‘Dophi’, an expert in muscle contractions. During the following year, 1925, Needham published his first edited book, *Science, Religion and Reality*, the product of a two year tenure as secretary to the Cambridge branch of the Guild of St. Luke, a theological society primarily for practitioners and students of medicine.<sup>25</sup> Such activity was symptomatic of his polymathic scholarship, with a developing interest in unifying different realms of knowledge and experience. Over the next six years, Needham continued his work towards an understanding of chemical embryology, culminating in 1931 with the publication of *Chemical Embryology* — a true *tour-de-force* of more than two-thousand pages, contained within three volumes — for which he was awarded a Sc.D. the following year, in 1932. Whilst he and Dorothy rarely collaborated in academic work, they shared many common interests, particularly an ‘unshakeable commitment’ to Christianity and a kindred socialism.<sup>26</sup>

Needham had many friends in Cambridge, both within the University and, increasingly, outside of it. He met regularly with Arthur Peck, a Christ’s College classicist, as well as Arthur Heffer, introduced in an earlier chapter.<sup>27</sup> Together they

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<sup>23</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 33-35.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Needham, ed., *Science, Religion and Reality* (London: Sheldon Press, 1925).

<sup>26</sup> N.G. Coley, ‘Dorothy Mary Needham (nee Moyle)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/56147>.

<sup>27</sup> Julie E. Bounford, *This Book is About Heffers: The Bookshop That is Known All Over the World* (Cambridgeshire: Gottahavebooks, 2016), pp. 23-24.

shared conversations over meals in Cambridge, visiting each other's houses, and going out for drives into the fens. In the summer of 1927, the Needhams moved to 'Clement's End', a sizeable house located on Conduit Head Road to the west of the town, where they operated an 'open-door' policy for friends and colleagues. Among their neighbours were Francis and Frances Cornford, well-established members of the Cambridge literati, and friends of Peck. Professor Francis Macdonald Cornford was a member of the so-called 'Cambridge Ritualists', a small pre-war group of classicists and anthropologists who collaborated in studying ancient Greek religion and drama, influenced by the work of J.G. Frazer.<sup>28</sup> In July 1908, Cornford played the eponymous character in a performance of John Milton's *Comus*, directed by Rupert Brooke in commemoration of Milton's tercentenary year. This took place at Christ's College, and featured a sequence of morris dances, masquerading as the 'country dancers' at the beginning of the third and final scene.<sup>29</sup> Like the Needhams, their friends were all known beyond their academic circles — these were important characters in Cambridge's town-and-gown culture of the interwar period.

It was in the autumn of 1929 — having returned from a year spent in California as visiting professor of biochemistry at Stanford University — that Needham first attended morris classes in Cambridge. He was at this time almost thirty, unusual for a club such as the CMM, which typically recruited undergraduates as novices. Peck, two years Needham's junior, was already revered as a leader figure in the morris club. He was a founder member of the club, and had first danced as a boy at the Perse School under the guidance of Henry Caldwell Cook, a pioneer of 'natural education' through play.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it was most likely Peck who convinced Needham to attend a morris class in the first instance. After participating in the tour of the Travelling Morrice to south Devon in June 1930, Needham was formally admitted as a full member of the CMM at the eighth feast

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<sup>28</sup> Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School*, pp. 119-157.

<sup>29</sup> Roy Judge, 'The "Country Dancers" in the Cambridge *Comus* of 1908', *Folklore*, vol. 110, (1999), pp. 25-38.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Caldwell Cook, *The Play Way: an Essay in Educational Method* (1917).

in April 1931, proposed by Arthur Heffer.<sup>31</sup> He immediately became an active member of the club, and on 10 June 1932 the Needhams hosted an 'Ale' for the morris men at Clement's End, where dances were performed in the garden.<sup>32</sup> In the spring of 1933, Needham was elected Squire, which was to be an auspicious and momentous tenure, as he quickly became an enthusiastic exponent and advocate of morris.

Soon after joining the morris club, Needham became a close friend of Conrad Hal Waddington, referred to by members of the CMM as Conway. Like Needham, he was taught from an early age to think broadly, ignoring the arbitrary distinctions imposed by professional scholarly disciplines. In adolescence, Waddington had been a keen amateur chemist and geologist with a specialist interest in palaeontology. In 1926, he took a first class degree in geology, despite spending most of his time in the preceding months reading philosophy.<sup>33</sup> A chance encounter transferred Waddington's attentions to botany and plant genetics, though he is best known as the originator of epigenetics.<sup>34</sup> Waddington and Needham were natural allies, and for six weeks in 1931 collaborated, together with Dorothy Needham, in an examination of 'Spemann's organiser' — identifying the locus of cells in an embryo that determined morphological development — at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Biology in Berlin.<sup>35</sup> Thus, morris was for Needham an important extension of his professional and social network.

Along with Dorothy, Needham was an active member of the Labour Party, both within the University and across the town. His politics were anti-capitalist and anti-individualist, which he considered congruent with academic life. At a meeting of the Cambridge branch of the Labour Party, he explained how scientists 'gave up' on capitalism more than 400 years ago. Though modern science was undoubtedly a

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<sup>31</sup> 18 April 1931, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume I. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>32</sup> 10 June 1932, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume I. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson, *Life Organic*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Robertson and L. Wolpert, 'Conrad Hal Waddington', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/31790>.

<sup>35</sup> Peterson, *Life Organic*, pp. 93-103.

vital tool for capitalist expansion, Needham argued it should be resisted, with scholars identifying with one another in terms of a ‘worldwide Socialist commonwealth’.<sup>36</sup> Cloaked in the ceremonial regalia of collegiate tradition of Cambridge, Needham eschewed the impatient demands of industry on modern industrial science in favour of pursuing a more independently-minded, but always socially-conscious, scholarship. As Martin Bernal reflected, the ‘feudal college sheltered him from the capitalist university.’<sup>37</sup> This was not to say he shirked from social responsibilities. To the contrary, his politics were always rooted in action over discourse, influenced by the Reverend Noel at Thaxted. In 1935, Needham became the chairman of the Cambridge branch of the Socialist League, and for many years he sat on the Cambridge Trades Council as a representative for the Association of Scientific Workers, a ‘union ready to be of service to all scientists’.<sup>38</sup> The Needhams were also active members of the Cambridge Scientists’ Anti-War Group, and also established the Cornford-McLaurin Fund to provide aid for families of members of the International Brigade who died fighting in the Spanish Civil War, named after two men from Cambridge who had given their lives to the cause in Madrid in 1936.<sup>39</sup> John Cornford, a 21 year-old poet, was the son of the Needhams’ friends and neighbours.

Needham’s fascination with China — its people, and its history — began in 1937 with the arrival of Lu Gwei-Djen, a Chinese doctoral student who took up collaborative research with Dorothy Needham at the Biochemical Laboratory.<sup>40</sup> Gwei-Djen inspired his interest in the history of Chinese technology and science, becoming his chief collaborator, and an ‘arch which sustains[ed] the bridge’ between east and west.<sup>41</sup> Through a stirring of feeling for this young woman,

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Notes for Labour Party meeting, 25 October [1931]’. Needham Papers, K/1, CUL.

<sup>37</sup> Bernal, *Geography of a Life*, p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from “H.G.” to Joseph Needham n.d. [c.1934]. Needham Papers, K/15, CUL; Goldsmith, *Needham*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> Holorenschaw, ‘Honorary Taoist’, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 69.

Needham in turn fell in love with China. He is best known for the so-called ‘Needham Question’, which asked, in light of the significant technological advancements in ancient China, ‘why did modern science, the mathematization of hypotheses about Nature, with all its implications for advanced technology, take its meteoric rise only in the West at the time of Galileo’?<sup>42</sup> Needham set about answering this question in *Science and Civilisation in China*, the first volume of which was first published in 1954. The series currently stands at 27 volumes, the most recent of which was published in 2016, 21 years after his death.

In spite of Needham’s various commitments, and the additional demands of the war effort, his active involvement with the CMM survived the first half of the Second World War, and he even resumed the onus of Squire for 1941–1942. During his tenure, members of the CMM attended two Anglo-Soviet social evenings, in autumn 1941 and winter 1942, taking place only a couple of months after the termination of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>43</sup> The latter event took place on the evening of Saturday 3 January, in Trinity College Hall, with a programme devised and compered by Needham himself. The centrepiece of the evening’s entertainment was a farcical procession around the hall led by Sydney Smith of the CMM dressed as King George VI, with Hermann Lehmann — a colleague of Needham’s from Hopkins’ laboratory — as his consort. The dancers of the Cambridge Morris Men joined the retinue, with Alec Hunter at their head, to the music of Needham’s ‘squiffer’ (melodeon).<sup>44</sup>

After years of campaigning for active opposition against European fascism, however, Needham was keen to take an active part in the war effort. In early 1942, he was invited to act as a representative of the Royal Society in China, which was then under partial occupation by Japan. He accepted and set about doing ‘everything in [his] power to renew and extend the cultural bonds between the

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> 14 September 1941, 3 January 1942, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>44</sup> 3 January 1942, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

British and Chinese peoples.’<sup>45</sup> One evening at the Baillie School, Needham gave a spirited performance of English folk songs, culminating in a series of morris jigs, which according to one of his biographers, left ‘the schoolboys open-mouthed with astonishment.’<sup>46</sup> On his return to Britain, following the end of the war, Needham did not return to an active role in the Cambridge Morris Men, though he continued to attend Feasts on an occasional basis for the rest of his life.

### **The Thaxted Tradition**

Joseph and Dorothy Needham first attended Mass at Conrad Noel’s church in Thaxted in the late 1920s. Only twenty miles southeast of Cambridge, Thaxted and its ‘Red Vicar’ were already well-known by people of the University and town, attracting both admirers and critics, particularly during the height of the ‘battle of the flags’ in 1921.<sup>47</sup> The origins of the ‘battle’ were in Noel’s rejection of empire-building, and his support for the sanctity of independent nations.<sup>48</sup> He removed the Union Flag from the church tower, and replaced it with the St. George’s cross. By the chancel arch, he placed another St. George’s cross alongside a Sinn Féin tricolour and a red flag on which was written, ‘He Hath Made of One Blood All Nations’. Noel believed imperialism was the enemy of nationalism. His ideal of a ‘unity of the international’ was to be ‘built up by the variety, distinction and individuality of the nations’.<sup>49</sup> Thus, he asked, ‘why should not the cry of “St. George for merry England” drown the bombastic cry of St. Jack for dismal Empire?’<sup>50</sup> The Needhams were drawn to the church this peculiarly English socialism, which was combined with a ‘liturgical beauty learnedly yet informally

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<sup>45</sup> Cited in Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Winchester, *Bomb, Book and Compass*, pp. 120–121.

<sup>47</sup> Dark and Noel, *Conrad Noel*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival’, pp. 70–72.

<sup>49</sup> Conrad Noel, *The Catholic Crusade, 1918–1936: a Reprint of its Original Manifesto with an Introduction and Notes by Reg Groves* (London: Archive One, 1970), p. 10, cited in Palmer Heathman, ‘Revival’, p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> Conrad Noel, *The Battle of the Flags: a Study in Christian Politics* (London: Labour Publishing Company, 1922), p. 27, cited in Katie Palmer Heathman, ‘“I Ring for the General Dance”: Morris and Englishness in the Work of Conrad Noel’, in Michael Heaney, ed., *The Histories of the Morris in Britain: Proceedings of the 2017 Conference* (London: EFDSS, 2018), p. 121.



based on medieval English precedents.<sup>51</sup> Thaxted Church probably represented to Needham an ideal marriage between the devout religion of his father and the artistic liberty of his mother. It was, according to fellow admirer, John Betjeman a 'joyous religion' emanating from a 'lovely incense-laden, banner-hung, marigold-decorated church'.<sup>52</sup> This decoration was itself an important facet in the town's socialist Christianity, as Noel himself stressed, 'It is easy enough to clear out dirt and rubbish and unwanted things. It is another matter to bring in beauty and fragrance.'<sup>53</sup> A later custodian of Noel's mission described the effect of a decorated worship on those who experienced it: 'Thaxted has a tradition of colourful demonstrations which shock people into the realisation of the truth.'<sup>54</sup> The brightness of the church — itself a deliberately rebellious act — was juxtaposed with a searing political liturgy, which aimed to bring about not only a socialist commonwealth of nations, but also a Heaven on earth.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, according to Noel, 'morris [was] an exercise in the sociality of God.'<sup>56</sup> Together with Alec Hunter, Needham was part of a group of enthusiastic laypersons whose commitment to the Thaxted tradition was vital to the maintenance of its unique admixture of aesthetics and activism.<sup>57</sup> So central was Needham to the religious and social life of the town that Arthur Burns recently described him as an 'honorary Thaxtedian'.<sup>58</sup>

According to Leonard Pepper, Noel hoped Thaxted would become 'not simply 'Merrye Englande' [sic], but ... the prototype of the socialist homeland, and,

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<sup>51</sup> Hollorenshaw, 'Honorary Taoist', p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> John Betjeman, *Ghastly Good Taste, Or a Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of British Architecture* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1933), p. xx.

<sup>53</sup> 'Conrad Noel and Thaxted: A Village Revolution', *The Church Times*, 22 July 1938, p. 95. Needham Papers, L/360/A, CUL.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Elers, 'Father Jack, R.I.P.', *The Thaxted Bulletin*, (1981).

<sup>55</sup> Palmer Heathman, 'Revival', pp. 63-85; Jack Putterill, *Conrad Noel: Prophet and Priest, 1869-1942* (Linton: Plumridge, 1976).

<sup>56</sup> Rolf Gardiner, 'The Travelling Morrice and the Cambridge Morris Men: Speech at the 38th Feast of the CMM, Christ's College, Cambridge, on 28 October 1961', p. 6. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, RG/3.

<sup>57</sup> Burns, 'Beyond the 'Red Vicar'', p. 116.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

moreover, a *Christian* socialist homeland.’<sup>59</sup> Together with his curate and successor, Jack Putterill, Noel taught his congregation to ‘look for the coming of the Kingdom of God *on earth*, not in some airy-fairy place elsewhere.’<sup>60</sup> For guidance, they looked to history for prophets of a class struggle from before the time of the proletariat’s making, populating their sermons with exemplar characters of English revolutionaries. Noel often invoked Stephen Langton, the thirteenth century Archbishop of Canterbury considered largely responsible for Magna Carta; and John Ball, martyred priest of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, who once proclaimed ‘things will not go well in England till all be made common’.<sup>61</sup> They stood for justice and comradeship in action, proof that religious conviction could effect positive change within the material world. Needham was particularly impressed by Noel’s talent for combining an extensive knowledge of history and poetry. Reflecting on the later influences of Putterill, Needham described how he taught ‘If your aim is love for your neighbour, then the only way you can give effect to it, within [politics], is by working for justice.’<sup>62</sup> Set against the gothic arches of the fourteenth century church, the past was mobilised in the service of the present.

Needham also recruited political allies from history to serve his own political ends, granting a legitimacy and precedent to his efforts. In 1939 he published a history of the seventeenth century Levellers entitled, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*.<sup>63</sup> This monograph was written under a pseudonym, Henry Holorenschaw, apparently a ploy to evade detection by the Royal Society, which he feared would threaten his chance of a fellowship, and deny him recognition for his work in embryology.<sup>64</sup> His expressed aim was to demonstrate ‘the ideals of Socialism and Communism [were] not ... something of foreign origin ... alien to the

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<sup>59</sup> Leonard Pepper, *Conrad Noel, 1869-1942* (London: Church Literature Association, 1983), p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Address at the Requiem Mass for Father Jack Putterill’, 26 November 1980, typed mss., p. 2. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Putterill, *Thaxted: Quest for Social Justice*, p. 101.

<sup>62</sup> Needham, ‘Requiem Mass for Father Jack Putterill’, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Holorenschaw, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939).

<sup>64</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 46.

genius of the English people'.<sup>65</sup> Needham explained the Levellers were a movement of their own time responding to the 'ancient concepts of social justice and freedom'.<sup>66</sup> In an earlier essay, he defined them as the 'true socialists on the left wing of the revolutionary party ... a smaller body desirous of pushing on towards what we would now call a Socialist State.'<sup>67</sup> His political outlook and history writing existed side-by-side reinforcing one another, founded on a belief that socialism had an English history. Similarly, in a 1944 pamphlet entitled *The Church and Common Ownership*, Jack Putterill cited a letter from the Reverend Frederick Denison Maurice to a Mr. Ludlow, which argued the religious continuities in modern communism: "I think they should be made to feel that Communism, in whatever sense it is a principle of the New Moral World, is a most important principle of the Old World."<sup>68</sup>

From the late sixteenth century, puritanical reformations in their myriad forms suppressed many customs and seasonal festivities hitherto enjoyed by the masses. In a 1937 essay, Needham described how morris was perceived as inimical to the interests of the land-owning classes:

'The two great theophanies of the bourgeois, the Puritan and the Businessman, both hated the Morris, the Maypole, the Plough-Stots, and the Mummers. They wanted to make the world safe for the profit of godly industry, and they succeeded, although with time, it became, as we have observed, much less godly and distinctly more profitable.'<sup>69</sup>

A precursor to the advent of modern scientific enlightenment, puritanism precipitated the fragmentation of society into the secular and the sacred, placing an emphasis of the individual over the communal. Needham believed this censorious instinct was an agent in the breaking of religion from its long-running association with popular celebrations and festivals, of which morris had once been an integral part. Of course, the reality was rather more complicated than Needham sometimes

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<sup>65</sup> Holorenschaw, *Levellers and English Revolution*, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Laud, the Levellers, and The Virtuosi', in Needham, ed., *Refreshing River*, p. 78.

<sup>68</sup> Jack Putterill, *The Church and Common Ownership* (Birmingham: Council of Clergy and Ministers for Common Ownership, 1944), pp. 12-13.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Thoughts of a Young Scientist on the Testament of an Elder One', in Needham, ed., *Refreshing River*, p. 130.

made out. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, episcopal preoccupation with the maintenance of a dignified clergy led to the piecemeal ejection of dances and other entertainments from church property.<sup>70</sup> Even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, considered the zenith of church-sponsorship for morris, patronage could quickly be overturned by proscription.<sup>71</sup> Elizabethan Puritanism was therefore less of a novelty than sometimes inferred, and even some moderate bishops signed legislation against dancing, with a hope to quell zealous factions.

Influenced by Noel's preaching and his programme of social activism in the community, Needham came to interpret morris dancing as 'the spiritual protest of the oppressed creature', akin to a numinous religion.<sup>72</sup> The dance was a social art of a medieval peasantry, which embodied both essences of a sanguine corporal expression and the frustration of a people lacking representation in the political realm. According to Needham, morris had evolved not just as an occasional vent for the woes of oppressed peoples, but as a truly plebeian art. As such, it was incorporated into a history of class struggle as an expression of the peasant's creative agency, rather than just as an ameliorator of depression and a safety-valve for moderating popular unrest. In the introduction to his short pamphlet on *Folk Dancing and Religion*, Putterill argued 'dancing and music are social arts as old as humanity itself and have always played a large part in religious worship.'<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he believed morris and country dances depended on a 'social thread which gives the colour and the gaiety' to the performance, conferring upon it a 'magic quality which is the secret of life.'<sup>74</sup>

Needham's 1931 essay on 'Religion in a Scientific Age' concluded by presenting the conception of the 'Harmonious Man', ostensibly a personification

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<sup>70</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: a History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 245.

<sup>71</sup> Forrest, *History of Morris Dancing* p. 186-214.

<sup>72</sup> Needham, 'Thoughts of a Young Scientist', p. 128.

<sup>73</sup> Jack Putterill, *Folk Dancing and Religion*, (Linton: Plumridge, n.d.), p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Putterill, 'Magic Thread', p. 1.

for the author's own attempts to reconcile modern professional science to religion: 'He may not be honoured in his generation, but ... he stands as the only guardian of [human nature's] wholeness.'<sup>75</sup> Needham was aware of the conspicuousness of his religiosity among a cohort of young atheistic scientists at Cambridge. Writing later in life, he reflected 'he alone started out as a man of definite commitment to liturgical religion and alone ... held to it throughout his life.'<sup>76</sup> He perceived the arbitrary separations of 'secular and sacred' — in its modern capitalist form 'succeeded by the power of the owner' — as the inheritance of 'the acquiescence of the early christians in their failure to transform the human society of their own time into God's Kingdom on earth'.<sup>77</sup> He warned his kinsmen scholars against subjugation of all natural forces to human agency, a central tenet in what he termed the atheism of a 'scientific age'.<sup>78</sup> This anthropocentrism had percolated down through society, lending to political doctrines of all sorts 'a popular version of the state of mind natural to the scientific thinker' in which the religious and spiritual were discredited for their irrational superstitions. The paradigm of the scientist had become omnipotent, and served to legitimately 'sever all living connection' with the forces of Nature.<sup>79</sup> This version of rational scientific enquiry, depended upon by industrial modernity in the service of its own ends, nurtured a fetish for the quantifiable and measurable, discrediting the intangible qualities of human experience, once the products and agents of religion.<sup>80</sup> Needham perceived revivals in folk dance and music not only as subversive agents in defiance of the so-called rationalist ideals enshrined by modernity, but symptomatic of an innate tendency, latent in 'the mass of mankind ... quite unconscious of the direction in which it is being pushed'.<sup>81</sup> Morris and its associated customs were associated with that which was considered 'natural' and 'authentic', opposed to the unwelcome impositions of modernity and its selfish contrivances.

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<sup>75</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Religion in a Scientific Age', *The Nineteenth Century*, November 1931, p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Science, Religion and Socialism', in Needham, ed., *Refreshing River*, p. 43.

<sup>78</sup> Needham, 'Scientific Age', p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

In spite of his evidently left-wing credentials, Needham also levelled criticism against twentieth century Communism, especially Stalinism. In a 1931 essay, he argued the figure of the Communist was but the nineteenth century scientist wearing an opaque veil of modern political ideology — both shared a disdain for ‘mystery’, and were ‘determined to control the material world in the interests of men.’<sup>82</sup> He perceived such phenomena as agents in a ‘hollowing out’ of culture, which served to dismantle social and personal responsibility. The insidious forces of the modern industrial, scientific age meant ‘The emptiness will probably go on getting emptier.’<sup>83</sup> Morris was considered a medium through which a latent mystical spirituality could be reached, not through sorcery but through the revival of a communal art of pre-reformation England. This was an attempt to initiate cultural regeneration through physical action, which would inspire change by the imagining of a ‘spirit’ quality in the dance. The morris in Thaxted was a manifestation of what Needham termed ‘the essential materialism of Christianity’.<sup>84</sup> If folksong was ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature’, then an assembled mass of morris dancers may have constituted a harbinger of a new age of Socialism, in which minds, bodies, and spirits coalesced.<sup>85</sup>

From 1932, during morris gatherings at Thaxted, Needham regularly joined with Arthur Peck in staying at 32 Newbiggen Street, home to Rachel King and her husband Edward, a bricklayer from Saffron Walden. In spite of her being a Tory, Mrs. King was a loyal friend and supporter of Conrad and Miriam Noel, and frequently took in visitors to Thaxted at their request, at a cost of half a crown for a weekend stay, with meals provided.<sup>86</sup> In fact many of the Noels’ supporters, like the Kings, were not always in sympathy with their political stance, though legions came

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<sup>82</sup> Needham, ‘Scientific Age’, p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Address at the Requiem Mass for Father Jack Putterill’, 26 November 1980, typed mss., p. 1. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>85</sup> Needham, ‘Thoughts of a Young Scientist’, p. 129.

<sup>86</sup> Notes from a conversation with Peter King, made by Michael Goatcher. Michael Goatcher Archive.

to their defence when their lives were under threat during the battle of the flags in 1921.<sup>87</sup>

In November 1933, Needham's collaboration with Noel aroused state suspicion, when a letter from Needham to the Secretary of the Marx Commemoration Committee was intercepted the security services. In this communication, Needham stated how he was acting at the request of Noel, who suggested he may have in his collection books and articles suitable for depositing in the workers' Marxist library.<sup>88</sup> Needham's response was negative, stating he 'could not discover any that [he did] not actually use for research and teaching purposes,' and instead enclosed a donation of one pound.<sup>89</sup> Following this initial interception, Needham remained under official surveillance until 1959. The files lodged in the archive of the security services appear to yield little evidence to support claims that he was to any considerable extent a threat to national security, and an informant's note of April 1941, stressed Needham's commitment to fighting against European fascism:

'Nazism, he holds, is in its turn opposed to the two great "Internationals" of the world, the "White International of Science" and the "Red International of Labour". It is because of Hitler's attempt to destroy these two that we must oppose and fight him ... Science must reign supreme.'<sup>90</sup>

When the British Council applied on Needham's behalf for clearance to leave for China in August 1942, accompanying the positive reply came the following justification: 'there is little doubt that with him science comes before politics.'<sup>91</sup> This, however, should not call into question the conviction of Needham's political views, which he evidently defended with a passion — only, with the exigencies of wartime, he was keener still to serve the benefit of his nation by fulfilling his duties as a scholar.

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<sup>87</sup> Burns, 'Beyond the 'Red Vicar'', p. III.

<sup>88</sup> Intercepted letter from Joseph Needham to Secretary of the Marx Commemoration Committee, 4 November 1933. Records of the Security Service, KV/2/3055/2A, NA.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from E. Croft Murray to Major C.E. Dixon, 10 April 1941. Records of the Security Service, KV/2/3055/12A, NA.

<sup>91</sup> Minute Sheet, 18 May 1942. Records of the Security Service, KV/2/3055/28, NA.

A principal tenet of the Thaxted tradition was a belief in the interdependence of ‘material welfare’ with ‘so-called spiritual welfare’.<sup>92</sup> This was integral to the promulgation of a ‘wholeness’, with appeals to a rooted Englishness. Needham believed these endeavours served to reconnect with forgotten modes of shared community for the mutual interest of all stakeholders in a society. Noel’s distinct brand of an English Christianity was predicated on a desire for a international commonwealth of multifarious nationalisms, in which, like the holy trinity, ‘none [was] afore, or after other: none [was] greater, or less than another.’<sup>93</sup> Strictly speaking, Noel, Putterill, and Needham were cultural nationalists, and so too were Sharp, Neal, Gardiner, and Hunter. This belief in a shared English culture — perceived as the basis for modern identity-making — was at the very root of the impulse to collect and disseminate folk song and dance.<sup>94</sup> Through knowing each other, and recognising as a group their shared interests and inheritances, couched in terms of nationhood, Needham believed it was possible to gain a familiarity with the world, and work towards the ideals of a socialist internationale. His socialism was predicated on a belief in action over doctrine, though this was not to suppose that politics should be conducted by intuition alone. The Thaxted tradition was perpetuated through physical demonstrations of shared corporate endeavour, of which morris was perhaps the most obvious example. In the words of Stanley Wilson, ‘Father Jack didn’t only preach, he acted.’<sup>95</sup> The dances were also believed to possess a magical quality, evocative of an older, Catholic spirituality.

### **Despised Knowledge**

Needham was a man of various, and sometimes recondite, interests. His curiosity was guided by an unwavering commitment to an expansion of his own

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<sup>92</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Address at the Requiem Mass for Father Jack Putterill’, 26 November 1980, typed mss., p. 2. Michael Goatcher Archive.

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Dark and Noel, *Conrad Noel*, p. 110.

<sup>94</sup> For a discussion on cultural nationalism regarding the folksong and dance revival, see Boyes, *Imagined Village*, pp. 22–36.

<sup>95</sup> 18 November 1980, Log Book of the Morris Ring, Volume 7. Morris Ring Archive.



understanding of the world, and he inspired others to follow suite. Throughout his life, Needham remembered a maxim of his father's that 'no knowledge should ever be wasted or despised.'<sup>96</sup> Moreover, in his researches into traditional English dance — which produced two noteworthy articles in the *Journal of the EFDSS* — he attempted to restore balance to a scholarship, which had hitherto occasionally been hindered by class prejudice and condescension.

In 1930, Needham penned an allegorical story, based on his time spent talking with Jacob Palmer, a goods guard on freight trains based at Cambridge. The two enjoyed sharing conversations in Palmer's brake van, which was parked in a siding, whilst express passenger trains 'swooped by' with apparent indifference. Palmer thought the root cause of many problems in modern society lay in the failed communication between its constituent groups, which gave rise to misunderstandings, perpetuating negative stereotypical attitudes and prejudices. It was the agents of capitalism that had broken up communities and resulted in alienation, allotting groups of people to their respective classes, of which the segregation of passenger accommodation on a train was but one more obvious commercial manifestation. The likes of Jacob Palmer — a working class intellectual — were not known to 'the old gents in the first class compartments,' and they did not wish to know him, for he lacked 'class'.<sup>97</sup> Viewed obliquely through the 'glitter of dining car windows,' the ruling classes would never witness for themselves the true conditions of the working class. The landscape was too refractory, too abstract, for the 'steel magnates and the patriotic old women' to care. Needham agreed with his friend, and joined in criticising his academic colleagues for their unwillingness to 'say anything in words of less than four syllables for the benefit of chaps like you,' guarding their privilege by use of an argot unintelligible by those outside the academe.<sup>98</sup> It was analogous to what John Desmond Bernal, a colleague of

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<sup>96</sup> Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 29.

<sup>97</sup> Joseph Needham, 'Conversations in a Brake Van', 6p. manuscript, (1930). Needham Papers, F/89, CUL.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

Needham's, termed 'arrogant ignorance'.<sup>99</sup> The conclusion to the story was characteristic of another of Needham's lifelong convictions: 'So long as we hang together, we shall be all right.'<sup>100</sup> Such a mantra was characteristic of his unwavering commitment to the pursuit of intellectual enquiry free from class-consciousness. This, however, could only ever be an aspiration, and in spite of his tendency to style himself a member of the proletariat 'by adoption', Needham remained throughout his life absorbed by the culture of college society.<sup>101</sup> Ironically, later in life he was known to always buy a first-class ticket whenever he travelled by train, 'not because of any snob value' but because he had space to spread his books and papers around him.<sup>102</sup>

On Tuesday 1 July 1930, returning from a tour of the Travelling Morrice in south Devon, Needham, together with Joe Coales and Arthur Peck, made a detour through Gloucestershire with the intention of visiting old dancers and musicians previously met on earlier tours. To their dismay, they found that two of the three had died during the past year, and the third was himself very ill.<sup>103</sup> Absorbed by their sadness, the Cambridge men returned solemnly home. This disappointment must have inspired Needham to seize the opportunity to record a form of dance hitherto neglected by folk collectors, which was apparently peculiar to the fens. Later that same week, on the morning of Saturday 5 July 1930, Needham met with Peck to deliver a letter containing information on the 'molly' dances of Girton, a small village to the northwest of Cambridge, home to the eponymous women's college established in 1869.<sup>104</sup> It was a momentous occasion, and one of the very first events in the revival of the Cambridgeshire molly dance, of which Needham and Peck were the progenitors. Cecil Sharp and his contemporaries were aware of

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<sup>99</sup> John Desmond Bernal, *Science in History*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969) p. 311, cited in Leon Antonio Rocha, 'How Deep is Love? The Engagement with India in Joseph Needham's Historiography of China', *BjHS Themes*, vol. 1, (2016), p. 15.

<sup>100</sup> Needham, 'Conversations in a Brake Van'. Needham Papers, F/89, CUL.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Arthur Peck to Ewart Russell, 21 April 1966. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1704, ERO.

<sup>102</sup> Wang Ling, 'Reminiscences of Joseph Needham', in Goldsmith, *Needham*, p. 134.

<sup>103</sup> Arthur L. Peck, 'Two Cotswold Morris Men', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1932), p. 71.

<sup>104</sup> Entry for 5 July 1930 in Arthur Peck Diary, 1930. Fellows' Papers, 182/vii, CCC.

the East Anglian molly as a dance of agricultural labourers, synonymous with the observance of Plough Monday, historically the Monday following Old Christmas Day or Epiphany. Although Sharp interviewed one Jonathan Clingo of Little Downham, near Ely, in September 1911, about Plough Monday dancing, he did not conduct any further research into molly.<sup>105</sup> In fact, he dismissed the practice as derivative, based on popular social dances, and often too closely associated with unruly behaviour and cadging, sometimes by aggressive and violent means.<sup>106</sup> To pursue further enquiry seemed to Sharp both an unrewarding and undesirable prospect. Thus, Needham alighted upon a hitherto ‘unrecorded form of folk-dance,’ and so, with his father’s old maxim in mind, set about collating as much information as he could garner from surviving practitioners. It is noteworthy, however, that he was careful to manage the expectations of his colleague: ‘I feel what we have found is more interesting than exciting. I think it may very well be a form of dance intermediate between country and morris, but I doubt whether it will be very thrilling to do.’<sup>107</sup>

Though evidently dissatisfied with the quality of the material, Needham believed it was evidence of ‘a truly degenerate form’ of a dance previously commensurate with morris.<sup>108</sup> However, he was able to convince Peck and himself of their responsibility as custodians of tradition, and so should cast aside their aesthetic prejudices:

‘I feel that it is positively our duty to go into the matter as thoroughly as possible, and it would always be worth while to dance the Girton tradition now and again, if only as a pure matter of local patriotism.’<sup>109</sup>

For the next three years, Needham and Peck — occasionally joined by William Palmer, also of the CMM — endeavoured to collect as much as possible from

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<sup>105</sup> Cecil Sharp’s mss notebook ii, p. 39, cited in Joseph Needham and Arthur L. Peck, ‘Molly Dancing in East Anglia’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1933), p. 83.

<sup>106</sup> Elaine Bradtke, *Truculent Rustics: Molly Dancing in East Anglia Before 1940* (London: Folklore Society, 1999), p. 23.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to Arthur Peck, 4 July 1930. Cambridge Morris Men Archives, 4/1.

<sup>108</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘The Geographical Distribution of English Ceremonial Dance’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1936), p. 18.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to Arthur Peck, 4 July 1930. Cambridge Morris Men Archives, 4/1.

surviving exponents of this peculiar fenland dance. The first fieldwork visit to Little Downham took place on the afternoon of 28 July 1931, when Needham and Peck sought out likely informants. They visited the Anchor public house and the village cobbler's shop, and from these places constructed an overview of the Plough Monday custom in the village, also learning the name of Frederick Shelton — leader of the 'gang' — who they were successful in finding in Ely later in the day.<sup>110</sup> These earnest collectors were most gratified by references to its forgotten meanings, lost to antiquity ('The younger people don't understand it, don't know what it's for, but they do it for a bit of sport'), and to its implied significance in the calendar of observances ('necessary to keep up the day').<sup>111</sup> Afterwards, they went on to Littleport to seek out the vicar there, who was thought to know something of the dancers, but he was found otherwise engaged, so the two men returned home. Following this preliminary mission, it appears that little more was done until the following January, when Needham and Peck were joined by William Palmer in an expedition to Little Downham on Plough Monday, 11 January 1932. They first saw the molly dancers performing in the backyard of the 'Spade and Beckett' pub, and then followed them onto Ely where they danced on West Fen Road, and by another pub, the 'Red White and Blue'.<sup>112</sup> From these encounters, none of the men were able to glean anything substantial about the dances executed, only that 'The four who danced engaged in couples, and jigged to and fro, with occasional waltzing.'<sup>113</sup> In their research article, published in 1933, Needham and Peck lamented the perceived poor quality of remaining knowledge: 'In the living tradition here described, the dancing has unfortunately degenerated so much that all clues to its original form are lost.'<sup>114</sup>

Notwithstanding this disappointment, they were successful in collecting from Samuel Asplin and Richard Prior a small representation of dances and tunes

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<sup>110</sup> Entry for 28 July 1931 in Arthur Peck Diary, 1931. Fellows' Papers, 182/vii, CCC.

<sup>111</sup> Needham and Peck, 'Molly Dancing', p. 84.

<sup>112</sup> Entry for 11 January 1932, in Arthur Peck Diary, 1932. Fellows' Papers, 182/vii, CCC.

<sup>113</sup> Needham and Peck, 'Molly Dancing', p. 84.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

performed by the molly dancers of Girton and Histon, which they published in the article. It was probably their ‘enthusiasm for the complex skills of Cotswold morris’ that informed their negative judgment of the molly, and so, with the findings published, the project became moribund.<sup>115</sup> Whilst Needham did fulfil his stated aim of pursuing the matter ‘as thoroughly as possible,’ the material remained dormant and unused for more than forty years until Russell Wortley — who was at the time of their earlier researches a junior member of Gonville and Caius — instigated a revival of the Cambridgeshire dance on Plough Monday 1977.<sup>116</sup>

From late 1934, Needham began work on a study of the geographical distribution of English ‘ceremonial’ dances, which was published in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* in December 1936. The article was seminal, and formed the basis for the work of later scholars — especially Christopher Cawte, Alex Helm, Roger Marriott, and Norman Peacock — in the 1960s.<sup>117</sup> His research compiled a provisional database of evidence for nineteenth century dancing ‘survivals’ in some three hundred locations. From this data, Needham posited a thesis of discrete zones of regional activity, each with their own peculiar choreographic motifs, distinctive of the locality. Towards the end of the paper, he stressed the implied resemblance between the problems of traditions and those of biology: ‘These dances are, in effect, sociological organisms obeying their own curious laws of persistence, and we are faced with the necessity of classifying them into species and genera.’<sup>118</sup> Needham argued that the proper home territories of the sword and the morris dances were in Danish Mercia and Saxon Mercia respectively, separated by a frontier settled in the late ninth century by the Treaty of Wedmore and the Peace of Alfred.<sup>119</sup> Most interesting was his postulation on the influence of Celtic and Roman processional dances on morris, which he claimed were of greater

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<sup>115</sup> Jon Brockbank, ‘Plough Monday Traditions Around Cambridge: Survival and Revival’, *The Cambridge Review*, 25 October 1983, p. 184.

<sup>116</sup> Walter Abson, ‘Russell Wortley, 1912-1980’, *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, (1980), pp. 73-74.

<sup>117</sup> E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm, R.J. Marriott, and Norman Peacock, ‘A Geographical Index of the Ceremonial Dance in Great Britain’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, (1960), pp. 1-41.

<sup>118</sup> Needham, ‘Geographical Distribution’, p. 38.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23-24.

direct influence than the sword dances of north England, contrary to the hypotheses of Dr. Wolfram.<sup>120</sup>

Needham's study was a landmark in the scholarship of English traditional folk customs, in being the first systematic analysis of the known incidences of dancing to have 'survived' into the nineteenth century. However, the credibility of his argument was hindered by an exclusion of all references prior to 1800 — Needham was exclusively concerned with modern survivals. Moreover, the application of ninth century frontier settlements to dances of the nineteenth was a glaring anachronism, and he also ignored more immediate sociopolitical and geographical factors.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, the basic zonation principles demonstrated in this paper still resonate in contemporary attitudes to the performance and scholarship of morris dancing in England, and Needham has yet to be superseded by an alternative explanation.

Of Needham, Walter Abson, later recalled how 'a young student could approach him knowing that his questions would be treated with courtesy and respect.'<sup>122</sup> He was forever keen to share his various research interests with his dancing colleagues, and similarly delighted in learning new things from others of differing backgrounds and professions. Needham's meeting with Alec Hunter at the Feast of the Cambridge Morris Men on 18 April 1931 was a case-in point. He invited Hunter to lunch at Selwyn College, where Needham spoke about the history of Clare College — Cecil Sharp's own *alma mater* and the place to which his collection of manuscripts was bequeathed — and historical efforts to cultivate the silkworm in England, a subject of particular relevance to Hunter's own professional interests.<sup>123</sup> Needham was also evidently sceptical of the existing state of education provision, writing in November 1935 on behalf of the Cambridge University Labour Party that they were 'not impressed by the optimism of those who praise the English

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, pp. 32-39.

<sup>121</sup> Forrest, *History of Morris Dancing*, p. 23.

<sup>122</sup> Walter Abson, 'Joseph Needham', *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 3, no. 3, (1996), p. 86.

<sup>123</sup> Entry for 19 April 1931. Alec Hunter Diaries, Warner Textile Archive.

“educational ladder”.<sup>124</sup> A chief cause for his complaint was the implied prejudice against ‘those who develop late, as so many do.’<sup>125</sup> The influence of his father, combined with a sincere sympathy for the working-class, continued to motivate Needham to persistently examine the world, seeking new ways of disseminating information, which he believed to be a Good thing.

### **Ringstead**

Needham’s tenure as Squire of the Cambridge Morris Men, from 1933 to 1934, probably marked the apogee of his active participation in morris dancing. During this year, he was chiefly responsible for setting out the rationale for the foundation of the Morris Ring, an organisation for the mutual encouragement of men’s morris clubs. In collaboration with Arthur Peck, Needham invited ‘groups and clubs as corporate bodies to join with [the CMM] in forming a sort of informal federation,’ with the expressed aim of ‘enabl[ing] the various groups of morris men in different parts to keep in closer touch with each other and occasionally to join together for dancing.’<sup>126</sup> According to Abson, writing in 1991, it was Needham, above anybody else in the early 1930s, who may be reasonably considered ‘the prime architect of the Ring.’<sup>127</sup> The origins of its formation can be found in his socio-political and religious convictions to unite people together in such a way as to incorporate difference without causing embarrassment or unease. As Needham himself described many years later, he realised that a national organisation for morris dancing ‘would evidently have to be something which would overcome the social differences between the men.’<sup>128</sup> In a letter to William Ganiford of the Greensleeves Morris, written in April 1934, Needham quoted at length from an earlier communication distributed to four other clubs, the rationale for the formation of

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<sup>124</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Labour Party Policy and the Coming Elections’, *The Cambridge Review*, 1 November 1935, pp. 67–68. Needham Papers, K/6, CUL.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>126</sup> 2 November 1933, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>127</sup> Walter Abson, ‘Joseph Needham: a Celebration’, *The Morris Dancer*, vol. 2, no. 12, (1991), p. 201.

<sup>128</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Speech at the Golden Jubilee Dinner of the Morris Ring, Birmingham, 12 May 1984’, typed manuscript. Needham Papers, A/850, CUL.

such a national federation, which included the following passage: ‘The value of the Morris Ring would, we hope, be to give greater solidarity to the Clubs which belong to it, thereby helping the cause of morris dancing generally’.<sup>129</sup> Needham was following a long-standing campaign of the EFDSS to promote an increase in male participation. This initiative was ostensibly aimed at restoring the gender balance of dancers in a Society disproportionately populated by women, though it was also predicated on a belief in the primacy of men’s morris.<sup>130</sup>

It was arguably Needham’s meeting with Alfred Cobb, a fiddle player and dancer from the Gloucestershire village of Sapperton, during the eleventh tour of the Travelling Morrice in July 1932 that finally convinced him of the need for an informal network of morris men at a national level. A tiler by trade, Cobb learned his dancing from Emily Gimson, wife of Ernest, the Arts and Crafts architect.<sup>131</sup> Together, the Gimsos ‘taught Sapperton to enjoy itself’, orchestrating plays, as well as leading instruction in folk song and dance.<sup>132</sup> Apart from his musicianship, the log book of the tour celebrated Cobb’s motorcycle ‘acrobatics’, first witnessed by the men ‘as he drove up the stubbly hill to the camp’ in the village of Avening, on a misty Sunday morning.<sup>133</sup> Peck recognised that Needham was impressed by Cobb’s ebullient nature, considering him ‘an outstanding member of the “proletariat”’.<sup>134</sup> However, Needham was frustrated that without considerably increasing the number of honorary members admitted to the CMM, there was no way of incorporating the various individuals who had participated in tours of the TM

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<sup>129</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to William Ganiford, 16 April 1934. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, 16/5.

<sup>130</sup> For an early example of discussions towards such a campaign, see ‘Publicity and Man-Power’, *EFDSS News*, vol. 1, no. 10, (1925), pp. 297-299.

<sup>131</sup> 19 March 1966, Morris Ring Log Book, Volume 5. Morris Ring Archive. Emily’s name is misspelt as ‘Jimpson’.

<sup>132</sup> Jane Bingham, *The Cotswolds: a Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 120.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur L. Peck, ‘Eleventh Tour of the Travelling Morrice in the Cotswolds, 11-16 July 1932’, p. 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>134</sup> Arthur L. Peck, ‘The Origin of the Morris Ring’, summary document in mss. form, 21 July 1934. Needham Papers, A/848/5, CUL; Letter from Arthur Peck to Ewart Russell, 21 April 1966. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1704, ERO.



Needham and Peck agreed that a morris club should belong to a defined locality, and neither thought it desirable to expand the size of the CMM's membership for the sake of incorporating these disparate men. It was club policy to annually nominate an individual to attend a feast as the guest of the club, and in this way honorary membership was conferred, limiting the scope for outsiders. As Peck admitted, 'with one guest a year we could never do justice to all the people we should like to have as honorary members.'<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, according to Peck writing some years later, there was a concern felt by some members of the CMM, himself included, that Cobb 'might feel a little bit out of water at a dinner with men in stiff shirts and that the situation might be embarrassing.'<sup>136</sup> Indeed, Cobb may not have been the only uncomfortable diner. An alternative was required to address this need for celebrating fellowship without the risk of social unease.

The first conversation known to have taken place between Needham and Peck on the subject of unifying morris men occurred on the afternoon of 5 October 1933, during a return journey to Cambridge in Needham's car. They had been to north Norfolk to inspect an old six-sail tower windmill in the village of Ringstead, near Hunstanton, which belonged to Professor Cornford. He purchased the disused mill in 1927, by which time it had been dormant for some thirty years, and together with his wife, Frances, they used it as a place of occasional retreat.<sup>137</sup> The Cornfords also made the mill available to others for a rent of twelve guineas a week in the summer and two guineas in the winter.<sup>138</sup> The 'old windmill at Hunstanton' became something of a rural outpost for an exclusive group of intellectuals.<sup>139</sup> In June 1936, Needham organised another meeting at the Cornfords' mill, for the Theoretical Biology Club, an informal association of scientists and philosophers jointly formed by Needham in 1932, described by one historian as something of a 'scientific

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<sup>135</sup> 19 March 1966, Morris Ring Log Book, Volume 5. Morris Ring Archive.

<sup>136</sup> Letter from Arthur Peck to Ewart Russell, 21 April 1966. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1704, ERO.

<sup>137</sup> 'Literary Norfolk: Ringstead', <http://www.literarynorfolk.co.uk/ringstead.htm>.

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Peck's 1932 Diary, 21 March 1932. Fellows Papers, 182/vii, CCC.

<sup>139</sup> Hans-Joachim Niemann, *Karl Popper and the Two New Secrets of Life* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), p. 15.

Bloomsbury group.<sup>140</sup> It was at this 1936 meeting that the philosopher Karl Popper gleaned further material for his book, *The Poverty of Historicism*, principally from Waddington, whose naturalistic approach in conflating evolution with ethics most provoked the philosopher.<sup>141</sup>

In October 1933, Needham and Peck first visited the mill to assess its suitability as a venue for a future instructional meeting of the CMM, to be held the following spring. Having inspected the six floors, with bedding enough for sixteen inhabitants, they agreed it was ‘a good place’ and set about planning their tenancy.<sup>142</sup> Peck was particularly impressed to find a woman living in the adjacent cottage had a knowledge of morris, having lived in a village near Bampton in Oxfordshire, where the dancing was still very much alive, and held in high esteem by revival dancers.<sup>143</sup> On their return journey, they visited churches at Castle Rising, Kings Lynn, Walsoken, Wisbech, and Upwell, finally returning to Cambridge across the fens. Just north of Ely, Needham and Peck halted at the Blank Bank level crossing whilst the Harwich boat train passed them, and it was at this point that Peck later referred to as marking the beginning of discussions about a national organisation for morris clubs, which became the Morris Ring:

‘Black Bank the Place: well may that Name be noted,  
Place where high Plans and Policies were mooted,  
For there, beside that fen-surrounded Station,  
Uprose a deep and pregnant Conversation,  
Speech that ere long should issue into Act,  
Thought into Deed, and Figment into Fact.’<sup>144</sup>

The Ringstead instructional meeting took place during the week of 8-13 April 1934. Some fourteen men took part in learning parts of the newly-published

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<sup>140</sup> Pnina G. Abir-Am, ‘The Biotheoretical Gathering, Trans-Disciplinary Authority and the Incipient Legitimation of Molecular Biology in the 1930s: New Perspective on the Historical Sociology of Science’, *History of Science*, vol. 21, no. 1, (1987), p. 1, p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> Niemann, *New Secrets of Life*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>142</sup> Canvas notebook with entries from 1930-1936. Fellows’ Papers, 182/viii, CCC.

<sup>143</sup> Canvas notebook with entries from 1930-1936. Fellows’ Papers, 182/viii, CCC.

<sup>144</sup> Arthur Peck, ‘The Morris Ring: A Poem’, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 56.

Royton dance, the Newbiggin sword dance, and a few Sherborne dances, under the guidance of Kenworthy Schofield.<sup>145</sup> During this week, further informal discussions took place about how the Morris Ring should be instituted, and later inaugurated. According to the recollections of Peck, it was Conway Waddington who first proposed the name, ‘The Morris Ring’, though this is not recorded in the minutes of the November 1933 meeting.<sup>146</sup> Waddington was also responsible for proposing the embryonic organisation be formally brought into being, at the meeting of 14 April 1934, following their return from Norfolk.<sup>147</sup> However, whilst the nascent Morris Ring was born out of a small number of the CMM, Needham did not intend for the organisation to be cast in the Cambridge mould. Prescriptive policies enforced at a national level were considered inimical and ‘contrary to the ethos of Morris teams,’ which each should have ‘a local habitation and a name.’<sup>148</sup> Even before 1933, Needham and Peck had both proposed amendments to the local and national organisation of the EFDSS, to allow the smallest unit of personnel — manifest in the club — a greater degree of self-determination in organising its own programme of teaching and performances. A letter was drafted to Douglas Kennedy and the National Executive of the Society, arguing ‘a considerable degree of independence has existed and must exist if the clubs are to make their full contribution to the promotion of folk dancing.’<sup>149</sup> Needham first conceived the Morris Ring as a loose federation working in parallel to the established organisation of the EFDSS, in the belief that it would not trespass on the functions of ‘being a learned society, or repository of information relating to folk-dancing, or that of being a central arbiter of technique, or that of conducting technical or pedagogical examinations.’<sup>150</sup> The Ring was to exist only through the activities of its constituent

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<sup>145</sup> ‘Morris Week at Ringstead’, April 1934, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>146</sup> Abson, ‘Preface’, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 3.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Tenth Annual Morris and Feast’, 14 April 1934, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1, Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>148</sup> Joseph Needham, ‘Speech at the Golden Jubilee Dinner of the Morris Ring, Birmingham, 12 May 1984’, typed manuscript. Needham Papers, A/850, CUL.

<sup>149</sup> Draft of a letter from Joseph Needham to the Headquarters of the EFDS, n.d. [December 1931]. Needham Papers, F/525, CUL

<sup>150</sup> Letter from Joseph Needham to William Ganiford, 16 April 1934. Cambridge Morris Men Archive, 16/5.

member clubs, without which it had no identity of its own. What followed was an unplanned process of standardisation in accordance with the Cambridge model, which became tacitly accepted as an ideal paradigm of the morris men's club.

For those clubs that elected officers to run their business, most simply employed the plain yet functional titles of 'chairman' and 'secretary'. The CMM, on the other hand, favoured a 'Squire' and a 'Bagman.' Unsurprisingly, many of these early clubs found the terminology of the Cambridge Morris Men, *via* Needham and Abson, quite odd. However, in time the majority of member clubs voluntarily adopted these esoteric terms, and an informal process of standardisation commenced, though it had never been the explicit intention of either Needham or Peck to instigate this. By 1935 at Letchworth, for instance, Jack Hannah was the 'Bagman of the Morris Men', a status which this club perceived simply to confer on him 'a new name for the chap that writes letters.'<sup>151</sup> More fundamentally, for clubs such as Letchworth, based around one key individual, they lacked any conception of a democratic infrastructure. Whilst the Cambridge club had, since 1924, elected its officers on an annual basis, for the Letchworth side, Morris Sunderland recalled, 'the idea of a Squire was new to us': Alec Hunter acted as their unelected leader, and though he left the side in 1928, they 'still thought of him as [their] boss.'<sup>152</sup> Another facet of the CMM customs assimilated into Morris Ring practice was the drinking of a toast to 'The Immortal Memory of Cecil Sharp', which had, since the first feast of the CMM in April 1925, been a constant feature in formal gatherings of the Cambridge club.<sup>153</sup> Though it was not formally encouraged or promoted, member clubs of the Morris Ring began styling themselves in the image of the Cambridge Morris.

The Morris Ring, as formulated by the combined intelligence of Needham and Peck, was intended to bring the men's clubs into closer contact, without

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<sup>151</sup> Letter from Morris Sunderland to Ewart Russell, 4 April 1974. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1742, ERO.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> 25 April 1925, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

prejudice against their social backgrounds. They ‘hope[ed] to include all clubs in the community.’<sup>154</sup> In doing so, the national body would be a fillip to the promotion of semiautonomous morris men’s clubs. A short summary document of the gestation of the Morris Ring written by Peck in the summer of 1934 stresses Needham’s desire to bring men of all classes together: ‘Joseph was very anxious to get these men attached in some way.’<sup>155</sup> Sharing in Needham’s corporate consciousness, in 1949, Peck reflected on the relationships between member clubs, and their connection to the national organisation:

‘through its association in the Ring each Club contributes to the well-being of the others ... if the Clubs ever begin to feel that the Ring is something over and above and superior to themselves, then it will be failing of its purpose.’<sup>156</sup>

The counsel offered by the Morris Ring to its member clubs was advisory rather than prescriptive, and each constituent side was encouraged to maintain its own local distinctiveness. It was not to be a “super-Club”: it claim[ed] no right to prescribe policy for the Clubs that belong[ed] to it.’<sup>157</sup> Echoed by Kenworthy Schofield, who was chiefly responsible for mediating between the EFDSS and the Morris Ring executive, ‘the essential qualification for membership is that the club or group shall meet regularly for the purposes of dancing the morris.’<sup>158</sup> The Morris Ring was intended to ‘supplement and subserve’ the existing functions of the Society, rather than to usurp them.<sup>159</sup>

In proposing a toast to the Morris Ring at the inaugural meeting of 20 October 1934, at Cecil Sharp House, Needham conferred his blessing on the fraternity, the Squire, and the Bagman.<sup>160</sup> The organisation was established, and so his active part in it was at an end. For his collaborator, Arthur Peck, the situation

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<sup>154</sup> Notes on the formation of the Morris Ring, jotted on a brown foolscap envelope, by Joseph Needham, April 1934. Needham Papers, A/842, CUL.

<sup>155</sup> Peck, ‘Origin of the Morris Ring’.

<sup>156</sup> Peck, *Fifty Years of Morris Dancing*, p. 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>158</sup> R. Kenworthy Schofield, ‘The Morris Ring’, *EFDSS News*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1934), p. 79.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>160</sup> Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting, 20 October 1934, in Abson, ed., *First Log Book*, p. 7.

was entirely different. In 1936, Peck was appointed by Kenworthy Schofield — successor to Alec Hunter as Squire — to act as ‘recorder’ of the Morris Ring, and in 1946 he was himself elected to the office of Squire. In 1939, Alfred Cobb was invited to attend the fifteenth feast of the CMM, the last invited guest to attend such an event before the necessary restrictions of war took effect. In spite of their earlier reservations, the men of Cambridge were most gratified to welcome him in ‘his stiff clothes,’ and thought his ‘first class speech’ edifying, proving their initial ‘fears were unjustified.’<sup>161</sup> Writing in the club’s minute book, with the formal record of the event, Arthur Peck reflected:

‘The presence of Alfred Cobb marked this Feast as an historic occasion, as, though for many years himself unaware of the situation, he is the real origin of the now well-known Morris Ring, of which several other men now erroneously suppose themselves to be the sole initiators.’<sup>162</sup>

Just as the first tour of the Travelling Morrice in 1924 was considered a completion of a cycle, in returning the dances to their native land, so too was Cobb’s presence in Cambridge deemed to confer upon the CMM an affirmation of their legitimacy. In 1951, Ethelind Fearon, an author native to Thaxted, published a novel entitled *Me and Mr. Mountjoy*, which included a passage descriptive of a meeting of the Morris Ring in the town that succeeded in capturing a scene befitting of Needham’s ideal: ‘So they danced the evening through, men of all occupations, stations and creeds, one team after another’.<sup>163</sup>

### **Conclusion: Dancing with Philosophical Freedom**

Abson later recalled how upon his election to the CMM, Needham compared morris to ornamental ironwork, ‘in that they both consisted of doing complicated things with refractory material.’<sup>164</sup> A successful performance depended on good teamwork, with dancers sharing a common objective. However, Needham did not expect morris dancers to think alike or subjugate themselves to any particular socio-

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<sup>161</sup> Letter from Arthur Peck to Ewart Russell, 21 April 1966. Morris Ring Archive, MR/1704, ERO.

<sup>162</sup> 22 April 1939, Cambridge Morris Men Minute Book, Volume 1. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>163</sup> Ethelind Fearon, *Me and Mr. Lovejoy* (London: The Country Book Club, 1952), p. 211.

<sup>164</sup> Abson, ‘Joseph Needham’, p. 85.

political orthodoxy. Teams of individuals were by their nature prone to be 'refractory', but morris brought them together in a common endeavour. Moreover, the morris club was malleable enough to incorporate differences in outlook. A constant theme in Needham's work was his preoccupation with understanding the 'major forms of human experience,' by which he broadly meant the religious and the scientific.<sup>165</sup> Of course, this also extended to promoting an understanding between societies and their constituent parts. Morris, as an artefact of a popular culture imbued with a medievalist ideology, was offered as an ameliorative for the abstraction of modern industrial capitalism. Needham enrolled the dance as a metaphor of own socio-economic appraisals. It was an attempt to connect with an idea of feudal England, a return to an economy based on interpersonal transaction at a regional level, in which the marketplace was governed in accordance with local needs, by a supposedly beneficent and mutually-rewarding system of barter and exchange.<sup>166</sup> However, dance was not simply a metaphor but an active part in exercising his religion and political world view. In bringing together dancers of all classes and backgrounds in the loose federation of the Morris Ring, he demonstrated tradition did not equate to dogma, but it could also be the basis for new ways of fomenting communities.

Needham's socialism was one of practical action over abstract orthodoxy. His worldview was principally informed not by digesting ideological texts, but out of his own experiences and friendships — his socialism probably owed more to H.G. Wells than to Karl Marx. Whilst for Needham, morris was indeed a manifestation of his particular admixture of ideology, he did not wish to 'subordinate' the functions of the dance to meet overt political and religious ends in the way encouraged by Gardiner. In Needham's dancing, as in that encouraged by the Noels at Thaxted, morris always had a place outside of their particular socialist activism. The dance did not require an absolute orthodoxy of purpose — it could survive independently from Needham's Christian socialism, just as it did from Gardiner's agrarian revivalism. In founding the Ring in 1934, Needham tacitly

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<sup>165</sup> Blue, 'Joseph Needham', *ODNB*.

<sup>166</sup> Wiener, *Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, pp. 116-117.

accepted that whilst the success of a morris revival and that of bringing about a Heaven on earth were linked, they were not perfectly symbiotic.

Whilst he derived much inspiration from his religion, and from his reading and writing of history, it was his belief in the efficacy of a shared, communal activity that maintained his interest in morris. Of his dancing, Needham later recalled that ‘what he lacked in elegance he made up for with historical accuracy and gymnastic enthusiasm.’<sup>167</sup> However, it was not solely a matter of dancing *with* philosophical freedom, but dancing *towards* freedom too.

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<sup>167</sup> Winchester, *Needham*, p. 121.



## Chapter V

### MERRIE ENGLAND NO MORE?

“The point about Merrie England is that it was about the most un-Merrie period in our history. It’s only the home-made pottery crowd, the organic husbandry crowd, the recorder-playing crowd, the Esperanto...”<sup>1</sup>

In April 1934, one Leonard Bardwell of the East Surrey Morris wrote to Joseph Needham with his thoughts on the proposals for the Morris Ring. His criticism of the intervention of women in morris dancing was unequivocal: ‘As regards men’s morris, my feeling is that it should be entirely man-managed. Women should have nothing to do with its management at all.’ This was a particularly emphatic and candid example of the sort of prejudices held by a substantial proportion of male dancers at the time. Bardwell went on to argue that such an organisation should strive to ‘concentrate the masculinity of the folk dance movement’, denying access to women and thereby preventing ‘a definitive weakening — watering down — of the traditional morris.’<sup>2</sup> Some two decades later, from the pen of his son-in-law, Kingsley Amis, Bardwell’s likeness formed the basis for one of the best known caricatures of the English antiquarian enthusiast, Professor Welch, adversary to the feckless Jim Dixon, the eponymous anti-hero in *Lucky Jim*. Whilst madrigals took the place of morris, Welch’s character appears closely based on Bardwell, a comic puppet for Amis’ mockery. Though Bardwell was ostensibly the object of his scorn, the subject of Amis’ criticism was the English predilection for that which was deemed ‘quaint’. In a letter written to his friend Philip Larkin in May 1949, Amis delighted in describing the moment during ‘some lunatic folk-fandango in which the men swung a lot of staves about and ducked and jumped over them’ when ‘old B takes one hell of a crack on the brain-box’.<sup>3</sup> Amis later told his confidant how he

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<sup>1</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1954]), p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Leonard Bardwell to Joseph Needham, 11 April 1934. Morris Ring Papers, MR/754, ERO.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Kingsley Amis to Philip Larkin, 9 May 1949, in Zachary Leader, ed., *The Letters of Kingsley Amis* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

desired to deliver his newly-acquired father-in-law a blow of his own, which would be both devastating and humiliating. Bardwell was seen not only as an insufferable crank and a snob, but also an ‘ape-man’, venerating the barbarism of olden times, which was clearly anathema to his ebullient and hedonistic son-in-law.<sup>4</sup> However, it was apparently Bardwell’s earnestness which most appalled Amis. Eccentricity was one thing, but the thought of a ‘wooly-headed’ type as public moralist was a joke of the poorest taste.

Throughout the twentieth century, the folk movement was something of a ‘specialist enclave’, the preserve of enthusiasts, intoxicated by images of a prelapsarian England.<sup>5</sup> Amis was part of a widespread literary rejection of this rural idyll in all its manifestations. So too was Evelyn Waugh. Writing from Italy in the late 1920s, Waugh reflected on ‘The detestation of ‘quaintness’ and ‘picturesque bits’, an insular prejudice ‘felt by every decently constituted Englishman.’<sup>6</sup> He considered the impulses to preserve and revive symptoms of a pathological naivety, enemies of ‘English taste’. Distrust for such practices, he argued,

‘developed naturally in self-defence against arts and crafts and the preservation of ancient monuments, and the transplantation of Tudor cottages, and the collection of pewter and old oak, and the reformed public house, and the Ye Olde Inne and the Kynde Dragone and Ye Cheshire Cheese, Broadway, Stratford-on-Avon, folk dancing, Nativity plays, reformed dress, free love in a cottage, glee singing, the Lyric, Hammersmith, Belloc, Ditchling, Wessex-worship, village signs, local customs, heraldry, madrigals, wassail, regional cookery, Devonshire teas, letters to *The Times* about saving timbered alms-houses from destruction, the preservation of the Welsh language, etc.’<sup>7</sup>

The veneration of an article simply for the sake of its supposed antiquity was not to be encouraged. By obstinately venerating the outmoded and the marginal, these folk enthusiasts were deemed not only out of touch, but lacking in sound moral judgment, infected with ‘crankiness’.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bradford, *The Odd Couple: the Curious Friendship between Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin* (London: Biteback, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher J. Bearman, ‘Who Were the Folk? The Demography of Cecil Sharp’s Somerset Folk Singers’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 43, no. 3, (2000), p. 753.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Labels: a Mediterranean Journal* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

The English ‘crank’ of the early twentieth century belonged to an unfashionable elite populated by irrational chauvinists and high-minded idealists, offered as legitimate targets for mockery.<sup>8</sup> Nobody identified themselves as a ‘crank’, and neither did anybody want to be thought of as one. It was unremittingly pejorative, akin to a pathological term. The disease of the English middle-class idealist, ‘crankiness’ carried a doubtful prognosis. Inexplicably tied to the rose-tinted spectacle type, the morris revival was subject to this same condescension, discarded as a risible side-effect of modernity’s malcontents. The ‘crank’ was perceived as an antithesis to the desirable personality traits of the English, representing an excitable ‘other’ against the cool reserve and restraint of the unexcitable Englishman, who was also ambivalent towards the majority of working-class people.<sup>9</sup> Projecting his contempt for socialists upon a couple of red-shirted men in shorts returning from a meeting of the Independent Labour Party in Letchworth in 1936, George Orwell compiled a partial list of these most despised types, consisting of the ‘fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist, and feminist.’<sup>10</sup> Just as these represented the worst image of the socialist in public imagination, one could well imagine the likes of Gardiner, Hunter, and Needham joining a similar roll-call, as the back-to-the-lander, artist weaver, and thurible-swinging. Though Orwell’s list is often referenced, few have commented on his preceding comment that this ‘typical socialist’ would have also probably ‘converted to Roman Catholicism’.<sup>11</sup> As high church men all, our three dancers’ cards were definitely marked. Whilst they sought nourishment in associating with members of the working-class, it is worth noting that none of our middle-class men actually desired to unreservedly sacrifice the privileges of their own upbringing.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Laity, ‘A Brief History of Cranks’, [<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/laity.php>, accessed 12 March 2019].

<sup>9</sup> Robert Colls, *George Orwell: English Rebel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959 [1937]), pp. 173–174.

<sup>11</sup> Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 173.

Whilst the protagonists of the interwar men's morris movement attempted to save the dance from the jeers and ridicule of their contemporaries, in some instances the products of their interventions only further crystallised the negative public stereotype. Following Rishona Zimring, it is important to understand folk dance as 'both activity and exhibit'.<sup>12</sup> Whilst morris attracted only a small number of participants, it enjoyed some popularity as a public spectacle. This chapter examines the widespread condescension towards the morris dance and its advocates, addressing its perceived or actual dissonance with contemporary society with reference to popular attitudes towards matters of landscape, citizenship, leisure, and patriotism. However, the separation of landscape from people and society is nothing other than an academic convenience, and should not imply that any one of them could exist in isolation from the other two. Similarly, patriotism was less a discrete feeling or activity than it was a more general descriptor of one's association to their national identity. The morris revival was caught in a double-bind between enthusiasts who doubted the authenticity of the revived form and a public who thought it a risible pastime for the out-of-touch. Whilst the likes of Gardiner complained about the revival's urbane nature, critics from outside the movement also rejected its naive and fanciful posturing. Condescension towards morris dancing was based upon a reaction against the earnestness of its enthusiasts. Just as the dancers spurned the supposed superficiality of modern England, and looked for a cultural panacea in morris, society in turn rejected their idealism too.

## **Landscape**

Though it claimed to speak for a whole nation, Englishness was neighbourly. The state was much too abstract to inspire direct allegiance, and appeared 'high up and far away'.<sup>13</sup> It was through their neighbours and communities, post offices and publicans, that the English realised their identities. Local, parochial claims to belonging were not oppositional to, but constitutive of a multifarious English national identity. Since at least the Putney Debates of 1647, land was fundamental

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<sup>12</sup> Rishona Zimring, *Social Dance and the Modernist Imagination* (London: Ashgate, 2013), p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 211.

to ideas of Englishness, ‘as the guarantor of liberties, as the basis of patriotism, as the means of life, as the embodiment of self.’<sup>14</sup> However, it was *landscape* more specifically which came to occupy a central position in cultural imaginings. Following Alun Howkins and David Matless, it is now widely acknowledged in the historiography of modern England that the rural landscape has nearly always been at the centre of ideological constructs of national identity.<sup>15</sup> Matless argued that it was not simply the subject of disputes, but the site in which they took place, inhering ‘economic, social, political, and aesthetic value, with each embedded within and not preceding the other.’<sup>16</sup> More recently, Paul Readman has demonstrated how landscape provided a physical space where connections between past and present could be negotiated.<sup>17</sup> It was places which grounded identities, and these were in turn spaces to which meaning was ascribed.<sup>18</sup> The relationships between people and place were vital to their understandings of their identity. However, these romantic portrayals of country life clashed with the harsh economic realities of agricultural depression and rural depopulation, making for deceptively harsh landscapes. Whilst the majority of the population did not seek a return to a rural economy, the allure of the open air nevertheless remained a popular draw for holiday-makers.

In 1927, H.V. Morton wrote, ‘Never before have so many people been searching for England.’<sup>19</sup> Most of these searches led urban seekers into the countryside, from a dominant core to a periphery area.<sup>20</sup> Judged in opposition to the metropolis, the rural landscape was perceived as relatively stable and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: a Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003); David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, second edition (London: Reaktion, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Readman, *Storied Ground: Landscape and the Shaping of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 301.

<sup>18</sup> Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, ‘Introduction’, in Erica Carter, *et al.*, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), p. xii.

<sup>19</sup> H.V. Morton, *In Search of England* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 258-272

conservative, a natural incubator for folk culture.<sup>21</sup> Critics perceived urbanisation as ‘an accident, a concession to progress or even a spiritual sham,’ in stark contrast to the rural.<sup>22</sup> With a bias towards the undulating patchwork fields of southern England, virtues of ‘purity, decency, goodness, honesty, [and] even ‘reality’ were projected onto, and derived from, this culture of pastoralism.<sup>23</sup> In 1938, John and Roy Boulting produced a short documentary film, under their newly-established firm, Charter Film Productions, based on the harvest at Rails Farm in Thaxted. Entitled *Ripe Earth*, it began with an explanation of what was to follow, evocative of a precious survival: ‘There are today parts of England, which unspoilt and little influenced by this industrial age, retain intact, the customs and traditions of the centuries past.’<sup>24</sup> In spite of its romantic overtones, the film deftly incorporated modern technology with an enchanted past, combining footage of mechanical harvesting with that of farm labourers stacking sheaves, and lunching on bread and cheese. Though the golden corn represented ‘a live symbol of health and fertility’, the mechanical tractor ‘crept into the work of harvesting, abolishing much that was there drudgery for man and beast’. However, the viewer is reminded this sole tractor represented ‘the Thaxted farmer’s only working link with industrialism’. In celebration of the successful harvest, the morris men turn out, dancing to the music of the Reverend Jack Putterill. The narrator explains ‘the age-old movements seem expressive of man’s affinity with the ripe earth. The dance is one of happiness, the crops are safely in’. After further jubilant scenes of the harvest dinner, the film closes with footage of Mass led by the Reverend Conrad Noel: ‘as the offerings are placed on the altar, to the people of Thaxted, the harvest has once again come home.’<sup>25</sup> This film incorporated all elements of what Clare Palmer described as the ‘God-man-nature hierarchy’, espoused by many of those who desired a return to the land, especially Rolf Gardiner.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David Lowenthal, ‘British National Identity and the English Landscape’, *Rural History*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1991), pp. 212–218.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Scruton, *England: an Elegy* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> Alun Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, in Colls and Dodd, eds., *Englishness*, pp. 86.

<sup>24</sup> *Ripe Earth* (1938). [Film] Directed by Roy Boulting. London: Charter Films.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, ‘Christianity, Englishness and the Southern English Countryside’, p. 36.

The irony was that those who portrayed rural England as *the* 'essential' landscape did so largely through an authority grounded in the metropolitan centres, with little or no experience of rural life at all.<sup>27</sup> The Boultings' narrator, for instance, spoke with the placeless accent of the authoritative broadcaster of the establishment. Set against a picturesque backdrop of southern England, standing as the proxy landscape for a prevailing idea of the nation, the 'rural' was one increasingly removed from the day-to-day experiences of the majority of the population.<sup>28</sup> As Waugh observed, 'the craze for cottages and all that goes with them only began as soon as they had ceased to represent a significant part of English life.'<sup>29</sup> Thus, advocates of folk revivals offered rural answers for urban problems, especially apparent in the work of Neal's Espérance Club in north London.<sup>30</sup> A particularly outspoken critic of these idealists was J.W. Robertson Scott, founder editor of *The Countryman* journal. He resented those who sought nourishment in the rural, with their minds 'set on the impossible - on emancipation from life's discipline, on gaining what cannot be found, 'happiness' outside themselves'.<sup>31</sup> Robertson Scott pejoratively termed these people 'leaners': 'They have been leaners on London, and now they would lean on 'Nature'.'<sup>32</sup> These were the types who thought changes to extrinsic conditions had the potential to alter personal happiness. What constituted for some an unlimited freedom resembled to others a self-imposed purgatory. Robertson Scott explained that rural poverty continued to be a very real and urgent problem, and the continued preoccupation with an idyllic countryside deliberately and cruelly effaced this reality. As Gardiner found, much to his chagrin, morris dancers were not especially interested in the economics of rural England.

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<sup>27</sup> Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and the National Culture', in Colls and Dodd, eds., *Englishness*, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914-45* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 29-30.

<sup>29</sup> Waugh, *Labels*, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> Freeman, 'Folklore Collection and Social Investigation', pp. 53-54.

<sup>31</sup> J.W. Robertson Scott, *England's Green and Pleasant Land: the Truth Attempted*, revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), p.39.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

The first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed some of the greatest changes to land use and ownership ever seen in England, as about one-fifth of the total land area changed hands, and home ownership rates increased.<sup>33</sup> By the late 1920s, approximately two-hundred thousand new houses were built each year, of which a third were owner-occupied by the outbreak of war in 1939.<sup>34</sup> For a growing number of people, particularly in the midlands and the southeast, their lives were increasingly semi-detached and suburban, symbolic of a bargaining between 'genteel aspirations and cost-effective accommodation'.<sup>35</sup> Whilst the urban area in England and Wales increased by 26 per cent during the interwar period, the population increase in towns and cities was only 15 per cent, indicative of a more spacious urban expansion.<sup>36</sup> The 1909 Town Planning Act had already turned the tide on an apparently inexorable growth of densely populated cities, as planners shifted their attention to suburban development.<sup>37</sup> However, these new suburbias were perceived as a threat to the purity of rural England. It is noteworthy that Rolf Gardiner's most hated types were not city-dwellers but suburbanites. In December 1926 the Council for the Protection of Rural England was established as a pressure group with the expressed aim of campaigning against the 'spoiling of undefiled landscape by what is called ribbon development'.<sup>38</sup> However, it is notable that the founding president, Lord Crawford, deliberately sought to differentiate their objectives from the romantic pastoralism of Edwardian society and 'the sort of arid conservatism which tries to mummify the countryside'.<sup>39</sup> The misty-eyed nostalgia which hoped for a turning back of the clocks was not widely supported. Whilst the majority of the population had their misgivings about the state of urban conurbations, relatively few actively supported any attempt to return to a rural economy. As J.B.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Thompson, 'The Land Market, 1880-1925: a Reappraisal Reappraised', *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, (2007), pp. 296-297.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900-2000* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 145-150.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.

<sup>36</sup> John Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside', in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change: a New View of the 1930s* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 258.

<sup>37</sup> Tristram Hunt, 'England and the Octopus', *History Today*, vol. 56, no. 7, (2006), p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Hunt, 'England and the Octopus', p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.



Priestley pointed out, a return to such a state would in the first instance necessitate 'killing off nine-tenths of our present population'.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the English had to come to terms with their England. As one commentator of 1937 wrote, in celebrating the landscape of Constable's England, 'his counterpart to-day must celebrate pylons and aeroplanes and concrete' in the same spirit of acceptance.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, there remained certain hardy strains of idealism in planning and development, as well as in the communities themselves. As Ken Worpole summarised, 'Somewhere between the idyll and the reality of daily life, there is a need to create new forms of neighbourhood and community.'<sup>42</sup> In a passage redolent of Ebenezer Howard and fellow garden city architects, Mary Neal argued for the necessity of meaningful exchange between people and place: 'We can never go back to the days when country life sufficed for everything. The town has come too near for that, but an interchange between town and country is what we must look for in the future.'<sup>43</sup> Peter Mandler argued that in the 1920s England became the 'world's first post-urban country', by which he was referring to the bleeding of urban into rural and vice versa, manifest in suburban development.<sup>44</sup> However, whilst suburbs provided more spacious settlements, they were essentially 'rootless': their uniformed architecture, copied in towns and cities across the country, was void of local distinctiveness.<sup>45</sup> Whilst they were generally pleased with the good quality of the houses, the middle-classes continued to lean on other people's communities for visions of an ideal England.

Commodified through popular literature, the countryside increasingly became an 'extra-urban service centre,' a space for leisure and reflection. J.B.

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<sup>40</sup> J.B. Priestley, *English Journey*, (London: William Heinemann, 1934), p. 398.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., *John Constable, 1776-1837* (London: The Studio, 1937), cited in Pyrs Gruffudd, 'Reach for the Sky: Cultural Nationalism', *Landscape Research*, vol. 16, no. 2, (1991), p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Ken Worpole, *New Jerusalem: The Good City and the Good Society* (London: Swedenborg Society, 2017), p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> Neal, *Set to Music*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 7, (1997), p. 171.

<sup>45</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, pp. 217-218.

Priestley described this landscape of leisure as the ‘Old England’, inhabited by ‘cathedrals and ministers and manor houses and inns’, navigated by ‘guide-book and quaint highways’. It represented the interface between history and heritage, ‘a country to lounge about in,’ largely unsuited to modern living.<sup>46</sup> However, urban ‘weekenders’ sought only ‘hurried glimpses’, which required minimal contact with locals.<sup>47</sup> Most familiar to the cohorts of morris and folk dancers were those who promoted a sort of ‘neo-Paganism’, evoked through outdoor activities, full of fresh air and free from trappings of motorised modernity. Camping and hiking represented transient access to ways of living in accordance with ‘a primitive state’.<sup>48</sup> Even the family camping holiday constituted a sun worship of a secular kind, exposing the body to the open air, and walking for leisure was one ubiquitous manifestation of a desire to find spiritual nourishment and physical exercise in the countryside.<sup>49</sup> Another evident example of this fresh air ‘neo-Paganism’ was manifest in the various youth movements in England and other parts of Europe, which particularly appealed to Gardiner.

Allied to the popularity of camping and hiking, and in apparent contradiction to the continued attachment to place in images of Englishness, was a romanticised veneration of the vagrant, which continued into the 1920s. Ralph Vaughan Williams sought inspiration and insight from gypsies, and even Kenneth Grahame’s Mr. Toad had a caravan phase.<sup>50</sup> When H.V. Morton encountered his first ‘obvious’ tramp in Norfolk, after relinquishing with initial disgust, he concluded they seemed ‘happier than any millionaire; happier in fact, than most of us.’<sup>51</sup> An avid wanderer, Rolf Gardiner also imbued the early Travelling Morrice tours with a covert ‘Gypsophilia’, manifest in his veneration of the peripatetic life,

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<sup>46</sup> Priestley, *English Journey*, pp. 397-398.

<sup>47</sup> Lowerson, ‘Battles for the Countryside’, pp. 262-263.

<sup>48</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>49</sup> Bourke, ‘The Great Male Renunciation’, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 9, no. 1, (1996), pp. 24-25; Chad Bryant, Arthur Burns, Paul Readman, ‘Introduction: Modern Walks’, in Chad Bryant, Arthur Burns, Paul Readman, eds., *Walking Histories, 1800-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Roger Savage, ‘Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes, and the Cambridge Ritualists’, *Music and Letters*, vol. 83, no. 3, (2002), pp. 383-384.

<sup>51</sup> Morton, *In Search of England*, p. vii.

in which he ironically sought a closer affinity with the spirit of place. However, the placeless-ness of the nomad traveller was still to that of the suburban dweller. Whilst traces of a ‘Gypsophilia’, popular in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, survived into the interwar period, the romanticisation of the unencumbered traveller eventually lost currency in the face of mass unemployment from the late 1920s. An increasing number of people subject to forced leisure took to walking as both a necessity in finding work, and protest.<sup>52</sup>

In constructions of an authentic England, the rural landscape was both a product and producer — Morton and his fellow travellers interpreted the countryside as a liminal space, transcending past and present.<sup>53</sup> The enduring success of this sustained tension lay in its effectiveness in positing a direct and empirical link between landscape and national character. Narratives of a ‘Green and Pleasant Land’ survived because they appealed to the evocation of an idea, based on a desirable English personality.<sup>54</sup> Whilst the ideology of pastoralism, as a corrective for the excesses of urban industrialism, officially failed in fomenting any real kind of ‘back-to-the-land’ impulse in economic planning, it did succeed in colouring popular imagery and iconography with the verdant palate of England’s countryside.<sup>55</sup> The furious interwar diatribes targeted at the destruction of local distinctiveness by suburban development ultimately failed to win popular assent — the promotion of restoring old ways of rural life was not palatable in discourses of modern development.<sup>56</sup> Whilst Neal and Sharp used morris dances and folk songs to invoke an imagined spirit of the rural in urban settings, the Travelling Morrice sought to restore to the dances an identity of place. However, their attempt was largely superficial, and the separation between native and interloper remained

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<sup>52</sup> Bryant, Arthur Burns, Paul Readman, ‘Introduction: Modern Walks’, pp. 11–12.

<sup>53</sup> Sharif Gemie, ‘Visions of Albion: Ancient Landscapes, Glastonbury and Alternative Forms of Nationalism’, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 23, no. 2, (2017), p. 329.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: the Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England, from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet, 1982), pp. 245–248.

<sup>56</sup> Patrick Wright, ‘Local Distinctiveness: on the Curiosities and Perils of the English Approach’, in Sue Clifford and Angela King, eds., *Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity* (London: Common Ground, 1993), pp. 41–42.

largely intact, reinforced by accents and sensibilities. Perhaps surprisingly, Robertson Scott played a small part in aiding the inaugural tour of the Travelling Morrice, by hosting the dancers at his house, Idbury Manor, and even throwing a garden party.<sup>57</sup> Gardiner wrote that whilst he was ‘much intrigued by our passion for the Cotswold morris ... one felt his uncertainty as to the serious value of the revival of traditions derived from pagan magic and fertility rights’.<sup>58</sup>

## Society

Folk revivalists mourned the loss of the so-called organic community, and tried to mimic its functioning by the restoration of its most obvious expressions, such as crafts, dance, and music. This organic community had supposedly been one articulated and reproduced unselfconsciously in ‘folk knowledge’ which resided in individuals, unintelligible outside of its context. It was, according to George Sturt, both ‘coherent and self-explanatory’.<sup>59</sup> The people of these communities took their identity for granted, and their exclusivity lay in a self-regarding parochialism. They were deemed ‘creators of their worlds rather than users or consumers’, and this is what the revivalists sought to emulate.<sup>60</sup> Cultural organicists perceived industrialisation as an inherently refractory process, giving rise to a panoply of ‘multiple alignments and allegiances’, which divided people according to their class and occupation.<sup>61</sup> However, these novel sources of identity actually contributed towards a diversification rather than a dismantling of Englishness. As Linda Colley reminded us, ‘Identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several

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<sup>57</sup> Arthur Heffer, ‘A Morris Tour in the Cotswolds done by the Travelling Morrice’, (1924). Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

<sup>58</sup> Rolf Gardiner, ‘An Account of the First Tour of the Travelling Morrice’. Gardiner Papers, C/3/4, CUL.

<sup>59</sup> George Bourne, *Change in the Village* (1912), p. 223, cited in F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: the Training of Critical Awareness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1942), pp. 73–4.

<sup>60</sup> Roger Deacon, ‘A Local Habitation and a Name’, in Sue Clifford and Angela King, eds., *Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity* (London: Common Ground, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Keith Robbins, *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 290.

at a time.’<sup>62</sup> However, that does not imply all identities were equal, or that their relative importance remained constant over time. In the context of political revolutions and economic turmoil across Europe, the interwar period witnessed some of the most serious social unrest of the twentieth century, which, combined with an expansion of the franchise in Britain, gave rise to heightened class consciousness.<sup>63</sup> To varying degrees, all of the protagonists discussed in the preceding chapters sought to eschew the class divide by appealing to a common sense of Englishness, based on their shared culture. However, in most instances boundaries of class remained largely intact, with transgressions the exception rather than the rule. Though Victoria de Bunsen was perhaps unfair in regarding the new friendships between dancers of the working class with their middle class counterparts as ‘superficial’, her analysis on the limited successes of morris dancing to bring about any fundamental softening of class antagonism was justified.<sup>64</sup>

Though class arguably remained the single most important identifier of an individual’s relative position within the nation throughout this period, the exact definitions or indicators of class were myriad and often confused.<sup>65</sup> The working class was consistently the largest group, though their agency was marginalised by an increasingly confident middle-class, which grew out of a burgeoning white-collar service economy. The accepted parameters of this ‘middling sort’ was constantly subject to revision according to changes in work and leisure, and attitudes surrounding domesticity.<sup>66</sup> However, in strictly monetary terms, McKibbin argued the middle-class began at an £250 a year, representing around fifteen per cent of the population.<sup>67</sup> Whereas education elsewhere in Europe proved a solvent for class inequity, in England it continued to reinforce divisions.<sup>68</sup> The participation rate in

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<sup>62</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, pp. 178-181.

<sup>64</sup> de Bunsen, *Old and New*, p. 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-4.

<sup>66</sup> Light, *Forever England*, p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 44-45.

<sup>68</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (London: Pelican, 1970), p. 225.

universities remained proportionately lower in England than anywhere else in the continent.<sup>69</sup> Though the admission of some 27,000 ex-servicemen to universities after the end of the Great War did provide an influx of working-class students with accents hitherto largely unknown in the halls of Cambridge and Oxford, after a few years these institutions returned to business as usual.<sup>70</sup> Officially, they remained among the most exclusive of the nation's educational institutions, though they incorporated some unconventional trends, manifest in the nascent countercultural movements championed by Gardiner in the early 1920s.

Since the eighteenth century, voluntary association became increasingly central to the idea of community in England, with clubs and societies for all, according to an individual's gender, class, locality, profession, and schooling. Membership of such an organisation offered both 'social ease' and status.<sup>71</sup> The function of controlled membership, according to predetermined criteria for entitlement, was social differentiation, a corollary of which was inevitably social exclusion.<sup>72</sup> Class divisions in leisure were maintained by an insidious social conservatism, which preserved exclusive spheres of identity, acknowledged by insiders and outsiders alike. Of course, there were occasional attempts to catch a glimpse of a different kind of social life, usually middle-class romanticists seeking a more authentic and organic community in that of the working-class. The pub continued to be a site for a predominantly male working-class sociability, fetishised by idealists seeking a model of organic communities. The middle-class observer could 'enter the public house but [couldn't] become part of it.'<sup>73</sup> Thus, leisure represented an important space for the expression and consolidation of identity, contributing towards notions of class and political consciousness. Though the friendships between middle-class and working-class morris dancers were often

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<sup>69</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 248.

<sup>70</sup> Fowler, *Youth Culture*, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 95.

<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 137.

<sup>73</sup> Clarke, "The Poor Man's Club", p. 49.

undoubtedly sincere and edifying, class consciousness remained an unspoken demarcation, manifest in education, profession, and accent.

George Orwell was a great advocate of voluntary association, and argued the ‘most truly native’ of leisure activities in England were those which existed outside the boundaries of the ‘official’: ‘We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fanciers.’<sup>74</sup> Since at least the eighteenth century, voluntary association defined leisure practices, a product and agent of an English liberal tradition.<sup>75</sup> In the twentieth century, Orwell’s motifs of Englishness resided in ‘the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the “nice cup of tea”.’<sup>76</sup> J.B. Priestley also celebrated the quotidian, which he thought might provide a material basis for national renewal from the grassroots up.<sup>77</sup> However, the interwar period was the harbinger of a mass commercial leisure, manifest most obviously in the cinema and the dance hall, particularly important to the working-classes not only as sites of entertainment but also as meeting places.<sup>78</sup> During the Second World War, the government recognised leisure pursuits as one of the few indicators of what constituted “good’ civilian morale’.<sup>79</sup>

In 1946, Douglas Kennedy, director of the EFDSS, acknowledged a satirised stereotype of the folk dancer, in a similar vein to Orwell’s socialist: ‘folk dancing is “nuts”, is sissy, is kid’s stuff, is the gymnasium when it’s too wet for lacrosse, is sandals and beards or jibbabs, is a hundred girls and a man, etc.’<sup>80</sup> Folk dance, and

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<sup>74</sup> George Orwell, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, in George Orwell, *George Orwell: Essays* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 141.

<sup>75</sup> Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, pp. 130–132.

<sup>76</sup> Orwell ‘Lion and the Unicorn’, p. 141.

<sup>77</sup> John Baxendale, *Priestley’s England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 76.

<sup>78</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 186–187.

<sup>79</sup> Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> Douglas Kennedy, ‘An Open Letter from the Director to the Members of the Society’, *English Dance and Song*, vol. 10, no. 4, (1946), p. 44.

morris in particular, was a minority interest, perceived as the reserve of eccentrics with a predilection for fetishising the ‘genteel and nostalgic’.<sup>81</sup> One reporter, writing in 1926 for the *Sheffield Telegraph*, described the folk revival movement ‘as the daftest thing in crazes since the aestheticism of forty-odd years ago’.<sup>82</sup> However, many dancers of the interwar period were at pains to further distance themselves from antiquaries and the romanticised idols of a ‘Merrie England’. One correspondent wrote to the *EFDS News* magazine, arguing for a greater need on the part of members of the Society to place greater public emphasis on the relevance of morris and folk dance to modern society: ‘The aspect we need to stress is surely this: Why is folk dance immortal, why is it just as apt to the life of to-day and to-morrow as to the life of yesterday[?]’<sup>83</sup> To the initiates — the dancers themselves — this was quite apparent, even if they couldn’t always articulate their thoughts. There was an essence irreducible to the written word. However, essences didn’t hold much appeal for a younger generation intent on exploiting their new-found identities as consumers of leisure. Notwithstanding the hopeful assertions of dancers to the contrary, the popular imagination of the late 1930s continued to associate morris dancing and folk music with ‘cranks’, women, and children.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout the interwar period and into the post-war years, folk dance and music continued to enjoy public sponsorship, particularly under the aegis of the Board of Education. It was perhaps among the most unconventional of conventional activities. In London, morris classes took place across most levels of society. In addition to the EFDSS classes — from 1930 increasingly centred on Cecil Sharp House in Camden — morris was also taught at Morley College in Lambeth, established originally in 1880 by Samuel Morley as an institution for working class men and women.<sup>85</sup> From 1937 until 1939, Jack Putterill organised a

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<sup>81</sup> Boyes, *Imagined Village*, p. 169.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Morris Dancing’, *Sheffield Telegraph*, 28 September 1926, cited in ‘Press Cuttings’, *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 13, (1927), p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Constable, ‘To the Editor of *The EFDS News*’, *EFDS News*, vol. 2, no. 14, (1927), p. 43.

<sup>84</sup> Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer’, p. 22.

<sup>85</sup> Hazel James and Sally Phillips, *The Dancing Years: Ninety Years of Folk Dancing at Morley College* (self-published, 2002), pp. 11–12.



men's club in Plaistow, called the Greengate Morris Men. They danced on bank holidays in the streets across the East End, sometimes even performing to the music of a barrel organ.<sup>86</sup> On occasion, they were joined by men of the Morley side as well as dancers from the Balgowan School in Beckenham.<sup>87</sup> Their dances appeared particularly incongruous, against a backdrop of terraced houses and shopfronts of east London, but they nevertheless attracted sizeable crowds. Towards the higher echelons, even the British Museum had its own men's morris side, and the Royal College of Music put forward teams of women country dancers to EFDS Festivals. Whilst morris dancing attracted only a thin minority of people, it was nevertheless a layer that intersected all levels of society.

Ostensibly one important aspect of popular suspicion over the morris dance was the tendency of dancers to conflate aesthetic revivals with the improvement of the nation's material and intellectual welfare. In doing so, they were thought to be denying the agency of the common people to decide for themselves what was best.<sup>88</sup> Though not hostile to morris and similar performances, Victoria de Bunsen identified its limitations as an instrument for moral salvation:

‘The intellectuals of the middle-class are as far removed, and further in natural sympathy from the villagers, as are parson and landlord, and will make no deeper impression on village life. Mediaeval revivals will effect no radical improvement. Morris-dancing is a palliative; it is not a cure. Nor even are co-operative pigs.’<sup>89</sup>

Notwithstanding the early confidence of Mary Neal and her supporters in the potential of folk dance to bring about improvements in the conditions of the working class, from the 1920s such arguments became increasingly unpopular. Though morris evidently had a profound effect on those individuals who danced, as well as on some of those who observed, it was a revolution with the economics left out. It is worthwhile pointing out that whilst each of the middle class protagonists discussed in this thesis were at the very least sympathetic to the plight of their working class contemporaries, their support for socialism varied. The folk revival

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<sup>86</sup> Jack Putterill, ‘The Greengate Morris’, in Peck, ed., *Fifty Years*, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> D.H. Harding, ‘The Balgowan Morris Men’, in Peck, ed., *Fifty Years*, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 301.

<sup>89</sup> de Bunsen, *Old and New*, p. 42.

was an attempt to ‘reconstitute rural life without that corresponding revolution in the social and economic sphere which alone could substantiate them’.<sup>90</sup> The likes of Neal and Gardiner waited in vain for this revolution from the grassroots, only to be disappointed. Thus, the folk dancer idealist was not only derided but ‘pitied for not having something better to do’.<sup>91</sup>

According to Ross McKibbin, the closest to a ‘genuinely popular’ activity in early twentieth-century England was the consumption of commercial music: ‘It was difficult for anyone to escape popular music and dance.’<sup>92</sup> The advent of mass commercial leisure in the interwar period, incubated in the cinema and dance halls of towns of all sizes throughout the country, in many places superseded the role previously performed by music halls. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a growing proportion of the population developed an interest in social dancing as a leisure pursuit.<sup>93</sup> Dance boomed after 1919, attracting far more people than ever before, and offering a broader range of forms. By the early 1920s, jazz was so popular that one newspaper recorded ‘the shimmy was ‘shaking suburbia’’.<sup>94</sup> However, people didn’t necessarily need access to a dance hall to enjoy the latest music and styles. In Thaxted, for instance, morris and country dancers vied with jazz and ballroom dancers over access to the town’s communal halls. In 1938, writing from his new appointment in Plaistow, Jack Putterill attempted to reason with the appeals of modern dance:

‘The Lambeth Walk has conquered for the moment because, although inferior to most folk tunes, yet it has in its performance something of the magic thread; it has ease and abandon, and the people lose themselves in it: but they would lose more of themselves in the Morpeth Rant.’<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. v.

<sup>91</sup> W.D. Croft, ‘Fifteen Years’ Progress’, *Journal of the English Folk Dance Society*, vol. 2, no. 13, (1927), p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 390–391.

<sup>93</sup> Theresa Buckland, ‘From the Artificial to the Natural Body: Social Dancing in Britain, 1900–1914’, in Carter and Fensham, eds., *Dancing Naturally*, p. 62.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: a Social History of Great Britain, 1918–1939* (London, 1991 [1940]), p. 42.

<sup>95</sup> Putterill, ‘Magic Thread’, p. 1.

However, this commentary was a rare exception in EFDSS literature, which tended only to make fleeting and terse references to other forms of popular dancing.<sup>96</sup> For the most part, the folk dance fraternity largely ignored what was going on in the ballrooms and dance halls. However, in a marketplace of huge variety, most people demanded that which was new, with fresh music and bands arriving at an accelerating rate. Folk and morris dance, with its limited repertoire of dances and tunes, quickly wore thin.<sup>97</sup> Advocates of modern social dancing celebrated the new freedoms proffered by the ballrooms and dance-halls, as sites for the performance of 'authentic, natural emotion'.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, these spaces increasingly attracted not only those keen on dancing, but also an increasing number of recently-enfranchised young people for whom 'picking up' a romantic partner was the primary objective.<sup>99</sup>

Whilst men's morris defied trends for an increasingly mixed sociability, it was far from exceptional in doing so. Moreover, in spite of the relatively equal opportunities offered in commercial forms, women were still marginalised in spaces of working-class leisure, such as the public house. In spite of the increased presence of women in bars and lounges throughout the 1920s and 1930s, pubs remained a predominantly male space, and a 'site of masculine ritual'.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, in middle-class leisure there were sites where women were formally prohibited, such as Freemasons' Lodges, indicative and constitutive of a 'predominantly masculine and almost coercive middle-class sociability'.<sup>101</sup> Dancing outside pubs seemed an obvious thing to do, for they had always been associated with sports of all kinds.<sup>102</sup> Whilst pubs offered spaces for spontaneous and democratic leisure, the Morris Ring feasts,

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<sup>96</sup> Zimring, *Social Dance*, p. 150.

<sup>97</sup> Graves and Hodge, *Long Week-End*, p. 49.

<sup>98</sup> Theresa Buckland, 'From the Artificial to the Natural', p. 64.

<sup>99</sup> Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: the Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 93-95.

<sup>100</sup> Tony Collins and Wray Vamplew, *Mud, Sweat and Beers: a Cultural History of Sport and Alcohol* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 25.

<sup>101</sup> McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 519-520.

<sup>102</sup> Collins and Vamplew, *Mud, Sweat and Beers*, p. 5.

usually conducted in private, away from onlookers, maintained to ritual forms of behaviour which provided a fraternal glue to their association. The Ring took middle class forms of association and grafted them onto working class ones, with a view to foment a culture of mateyness, which attempted to transcend the class divide.

Ironically, the insistence on informal, public performance was intended to attract men who were otherwise coy about dancing. Aside from the continued gender divisions throughout leisure practices, it is also important to note that men were generally less enthusiastic dancers than women. As Theresa Buckland observed, all-male groups appealed to men for whom 'being cramped inside stuffy London drawing rooms late at night, under the watchful eye of young women and their chaperones' did not elicit much excitement.<sup>103</sup> Reflecting a wider cultural assumption that dancing was a predominantly feminine activity, men's participation in morris remained at a rate below that of their women counterparts. The men's morris clubs, nurtured by the Morris Ring, attempted to encourage a greater male participation in dance by imbuing the activity with a male sociability, manifest in pub-going and semi-formal gatherings which precluded women.

Critics damned the revivalists' fetishising of impoverished entertainments, which they claimed were cradled not by a desire for simplicity but affectation. Nevertheless, a small number of committed enthusiasts persisted in activities which reproduced the plain modesty of their rural forebears. They shared in Robert Blatchford's ideal of the English socialist promoted in *Merrie England*, based on a '*frugality of body and opulence of mind*'.<sup>104</sup> However, as de Bunsen recognised, morris dancing and folk music had little resonance on the majority of the rural population, who coveted the experiences readily available to urban consumers of leisure:

'As yet there has been no genuine yearning on the part of the countryman for his long-lost arts. What Hodge wants is the cinema and the gramophone ... But when the time comes

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<sup>103</sup> Theresa J. Buckland, *Society Dancing: Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 135.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (London: Clarion Press, 1908), p. 16. Original italics.

and with greater leisure and security he revives his native art, he will create it himself; it will depend on no benevolent squire nor academic enthusiast.’<sup>105</sup>

Apart from, and in spite of, these undesirable associations to eccentricity, the folk dance movement was also considered a respectable activity, a wholesome exercise patronised by churches and community organisations, as well as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.<sup>106</sup> In 1912, Frank Kidson had warned the revivalists that by using folk music and dance as an instrument in national education, they risked placing it in a ‘ghetto’, the reserve of schoolchildren.<sup>107</sup> His prophecy appeared to come true, as the continued association of morris and folk song with organisations for the instruction of children and adolescents served to infantilise the dance, as it became synonymous with traditions of patrician rational recreations. One journalist, writing in 1926, concluded ‘Morris dancing has undoubtedly its value as a healthy recreation for school children. But it would be very much better left to the children.’<sup>108</sup> Compared with a growing market place of various leisure forms, morris dance and folk music appeared stuffy and dull.

The promotion of men’s morris clubs was an attempt to ally the dance to male bonding, removing it from the confines of the classroom, which was considered a predominantly feminine space. The promotion of the peculiarly male qualities of morris received some assent from public commentators. An article from *The Musical Times* in 1926 hoped morris dancing would become ‘a contributory exercise for the village cricket and football teams,’ presumably filling the gaps between the respective sporting seasons, whilst also promoting an appreciation for music and rhythm.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, a journalist for *The Dancing Times*, writing in the same year, celebrated the performance of the Oxford City police side at the All England Festival as proof ‘that the Morris is not only a man's dance but a manly

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<sup>105</sup> de Bunsen, *Old and New*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>106</sup> Snape, ‘Continuity, Chance and Performativity’, p. 306.

<sup>107</sup> Francmanis, ‘National Music to National Redeemer’, pp. 12–13.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Morris Dancing’, *Sheffield Telegraph*, 28 September 1926.

<sup>109</sup> Excerpt from *The Musical Times* (n.d.), cited in ‘All England Festival: The Press’, *EFDS News*, vol. 1, no. 11, (1926), p. 355.

one.’<sup>110</sup> Whilst women’s morris continued to be associated with the state endorsement of folk dance and music, the men’s movement consciously attempted to distance itself from the mediated spaces of classroom and dance-hall. However, the sincere desire of middle-class dancers to familiarise themselves with working-class peers and communities was often viewed with disbelief and suspicion, and ultimately did little to close the social divide in England. Nevertheless, there developed a fraternal identity which was real enough, and brought together individuals in pursuit of a common endeavour. For all its pomp and ceremony, the Morris Ring provided the basis for understanding and comradeship between men of sometimes disparate backgrounds, sharing in dancing and the ritualised practices attendant to Feasts.

### **Patriotism**

A sympathetic voice for the morris dancer’s cause in the 1920s was that of Owen Barfield, a friend of C.S. Lewis and fellow member of the Oxford ‘Inklings’. Between 1927 and 1929, he wrote a novel entitled *English People*, not so much a pure fiction as an intellectual autobiography, reminiscent of Gardiner’s own *David’s Sling*. It was a story in search of greater meaning derived from experience. Though his biographer described it as his *magnum opus*, it nevertheless remains unpublished.<sup>111</sup> The relevant chapter for our enquiry comes at the beginning of part four. Into the social milieu of a middle-class summer garden party, Barfield introduced a morris side, which excited in Gerald Marston, the main protagonist, a sympathetic emotional response:

‘The plaintive little melody from the fiddle, set against the angular childlike springings and hoppings of the male dancers, seemed to produce such a blend of humour and pathos with a rare elusive kind of spiritual grace, as made him feel that he had peeped for an instant right into the open heart of England.’<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Simon Blaxland-de Lange, *Owen Barfield: Romanticism Come of Age, a Biography* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge, 2006), p. 203.

<sup>112</sup> Owen Barfield, ‘English People’, p. 257. Transcript copy, edited by Tiffany Brooke Martin and John D. Rateliff, <http://www.owenbarfield.org/englishpeople/>

However, Gerald's epiphany was spoiled by his discovery the dancers were not 'natives' of the village but 'young men from the University'. He had fallen for an illusion, a romantic conceit, betrayed by his own preconceived expectations. Disappointed, Gerald immediately thought the 'lugubrious expert' of a leader grim, 'mournful and dogmatic', and he was particularly appalled to find these young men had apparently jettisoned the older members of the village team. Though one of the old dancers did join their classes, they said 'he *couldn't do it!* He never got higher than Grade 3.'<sup>113</sup> Needing to share his disappointment and find consolation, he turned to Margaret, the wife of a close friend, to whom he was growing fond. However, Gerald found she 'simply would not listen to any disparaging remarks'. For Margaret, pedantry and narrow-mindedness were minor vices. She explained, 'without that movement, in a few years more *everything* would have been lost.'<sup>114</sup> Wishing to save face, Gerald quickly dropped the subject and allowed the remainder of the party to pass him by. However, later that afternoon, his mind returned to the morris dancers, which he came to realise embodied a recurring 'inexpressibly touching vision':

'The stupidity — and the grace! Ariel ... Bottom ... Tears rose to the brink of Gerald's eyes, as for a moment he beheld, whole and incarnate in his imagination, that shadowy Figure, which he *knew*, however thickly it might be overlaid with the corpulent philistinism of one generation or the sexual fiddle-fiddle of another, to be the core and living spirit of England.'<sup>115</sup>

It was irresistible, a realisation of his fate. Similarly, Barfield wrote of his own dancing at Oxford in the early 1920s, 'I had a very strong experience of the music flowing through me, so to speak. I was motionless, but the music was flowing through me'.<sup>116</sup> Likewise, Gerald too felt this was something happening to him, rather than something in which he was an active participant. It represented a coming to terms with his identity, a glimpse of an inner truth.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 260.

<sup>116</sup> Blaxland-de Lange, *Owen Barfield*, p. 22.

As the nations of Europe counted their losses, with many facing new wars at home in the form of political revolutions, the popular idea of England appeared to distance itself from that of Empire. The English turned their backs on the world and looked inward, and in doing so they dug themselves in the soil of home. Notwithstanding campaigns for the expansion of the political franchise and for houses fit for heroes, the most common desire was to seek out that which was familiar, safe, and homely. As Alison Light summarised, during the interwar years, popular conceptions of England were ‘at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private’ than their Victorian and Edwardian forebears.<sup>117</sup> A response to the emotional and ideological tumult which followed the Armistice in 1919, Englishness became an important oppositional identity to imperialist visions of a Great Britain. Even in the late nineteenth century, the typical attitude of the working-class Englishman or woman towards the business of imperialism — as opposed to the idea of empire — was typified by one of ambivalence, and a latent mistrust of the army.<sup>118</sup> However, that was not to say the English were unpatriotic, but rather for the majority, ‘their love of England stopped at Dover.’<sup>119</sup> Moreover, acting out of repugnance for the devastations of the Great War of empires, the English ‘shrank from nationalism’.<sup>120</sup> In 1934, J.B. Priestley allied himself to the cause of the ‘Little Englander’, whose patriotism began at home, contrasted against the ‘Big Englanders’, who were ‘red-faced, staring, loud-voiced fellows, wanting to go and boss everybody about all over the world.’<sup>121</sup>

Morris dancing and folk music provided ideal expressions for this insular tendency, and the period immediately after the end of the Great War was one of significant growth for the EFDS. As long-standing dancer, W.D. Croft, wrote in the late 1920s, ‘the war left behind it an atmosphere entirely favourable to a Society

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<sup>117</sup> Light, *Forever England*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Julia Stapleton, ‘Political Thought and National Identity in Britain, 1850-1950’, in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young, eds., *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 262-263.

<sup>119</sup> Tombs, *English and Their History*, p. 588.

<sup>120</sup> Kumar, *Making of the English National Identity*, p. 232.

<sup>121</sup> Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 416.



which believed in its ability to co-operate in the task of building a new Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.'<sup>122</sup> However, Croft was probably over-stating the case, as Joanna Bourke has demonstrated how continuity rather than revolution characterised men's return to civilian life in 1918.<sup>123</sup> Whilst they did not desire a return to the old imperialist drum-banging of the Edwardian period, neither did they wish for revolution. There was glory in the 'idea of a land and people living together softly and naturally.'<sup>124</sup> According to Krishan Kumar, the absence of English nationalism was accounted for simply 'because there was no need for it'. By the twentieth century, Englishness was already firmly established, manifest in social structures and political systems.<sup>125</sup>

After 1919, the English felt less comfortable about overt expressions of imperialist fervour. Throughout the interwar period, popular responses to Empire Day — which began in 1904 as an occasion for the celebration of expansionist fervour across Edwardian Britain and its Empire — represented a growing discourse of ambivalence towards England's status as the foremost imperialist nation.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, that Empire Day didn't become a public holiday, as it did in Australia, Canada, India, and South Africa, reflected the fact that the Empire meant far more to those living away outside of the British Isles than it did to those at home.<sup>127</sup> However, it was not just a retreat from Empire, but a warming to home that fostered the impulse to look in at themselves. Improvements in living conditions, through the clearing of slum accommodation and developments in public health, laid the foundations for greater opportunities to celebrate the homely and the parochial, without the need of reassurance from the old lie.

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<sup>122</sup> Croft, 'Fifteen Years' Progress', p. 9.

<sup>123</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>124</sup> Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 204.

<sup>125</sup> Kumar, *Making of English National Identity*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>126</sup> Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1, (2006), pp.

<sup>127</sup> Keith Jeffrey, 'British Isles/British Empire: Dual Mandate/Dual Identity', in Keith Robbins, ed., *The British Isles, 1901-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 25.

During the Second World War, Englishness donned battledress. As Angus Calder summarised, celebration of the efforts of those working in service on the home front as well as abroad ensured ‘the people of Britain were protagonists in their own history in a fashion never known before.’<sup>128</sup> The most enduring of popular caricatures of the English at war remained those of the admittedly ‘lethargic nation raised to genius by emergency, and saved by heroic, aristocratic pilots and shy boffins.’<sup>129</sup> England’s ‘lethargy’ was manifest in its ambivalence towards affairs of the state, preferring instead the parochial ‘petty disasters’ of the home, family, and self — the workaday concerns of Orwell’s Hilda Bowling.<sup>130</sup> However, the popular narratives of the Blitz and Dunkirk constituted new foundation myths for post-war narratives, in which the people were invested with a ‘moral authority,’ forged out of adversity.<sup>131</sup> Through the broadcasting of the BBC, the ‘responsible citizen’ of wartime — embodying both optimism and restraint — was fed with a diet of ‘simple patriotic nationalism,’ informed by existing notions of tradition and precedent.<sup>132</sup> Motifs of Englishness were refracted through the prism of a ‘people’s war,’ which justified allusions of heroism and just rewards after 1945.<sup>133</sup> The election of a Labour government in 1945 slightly narrowed the pre-war disparity between the classes. Selina Todd argued this marked the transition of the working class from ‘our people’ to ‘*the* people’.<sup>134</sup> George Orwell prophesied that after the Second World War, ‘England will still be England ... having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same.’<sup>135</sup> As such, he believed patriotism was not a

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<sup>128</sup> Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain, 1939-1945* (London: Random House, 1969), p. 17.

<sup>129</sup> Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, p. 97.

<sup>130</sup> George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, (London: Penguin, 2000 [1939]), p. 7.

<sup>131</sup> Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 5 and p. 89.

<sup>132</sup> Sian Nicholas, ‘From John Bull to John Citizen: Images of National Identity and Citizenship on the Wartime BBC’, in Abigail Beach and Richard Weight, eds., *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 39-41.

<sup>133</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 181 and pp. 271-272.

<sup>134</sup> Selina Todd, *The People: the Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2014), p. 148.

<sup>135</sup> Orwell, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, p. 159.

conservative agent: 'It is devotion to something that is changing but is felt to be mystically the same'.<sup>136</sup>

## Conclusion

Condescension towards morris dancing continued, sustained by persistence to a faint embarrassment at the sight of adult men in white flannels and ribbons. In 1999, Jeremy Paxman offered a contemptuous appraisal in a style redolent of Amis': 'The closest thing the English have to a national dance, Morris-dancing, is a clumsy pub-sport practised by men in beards and shiny-bottomed trousers.'<sup>137</sup> Maureen Duffy later wrote glibly of 'the despised morris ... that can always be relied on for a mocking laugh'.<sup>138</sup> These are but two more recent examples of a long-established tradition in popular culture, which confined morris dancers to the peripheral. Offering a more gentle appraisal of its marginal status, Robert Tombs recently argued that throughout the twentieth-century morris dancing 'remained a fad, the butt of jokes, an imposition on unwilling schoolchildren', a defensive mechanism which ensured that 'prancing about in fancy dress never attained patriotic status.'<sup>139</sup> Notwithstanding this enormous condescension, whilst the majority of the public scoffed at it, pouring scorn and mockery on its keenest advocates, there nevertheless remained a general sympathy and weakness for the dance's plaintive evocation of an England lost to modernity. Nostalgia was the opiate of the people, and the majority were consistently passive consumers. Whilst the majority were reluctant to participate themselves, most recognised some glimpse of a familiar English icon in morris.

Performances of an idealised authenticity were not necessarily the same as those which were considered natural or genuine by performers. As a drill exercise in

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<sup>136</sup> Orwell, 'My Country Right or Left', in Orwell, *Essays*, p. 137

<sup>137</sup> Jeremy Paxman, *The English: a Portrait of a People* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>138</sup> Maureen Duffy, *England: The Making of the Myth from Stonehenge to Albert Square* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), p. 220.

<sup>139</sup> Tombs, *English and Their History*, p. 490

schools, as well as a rational and healthy activity championed by the church, the Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides, the dances appeared more instruments for inducing conformity rather than one permitting freedom of expression. It appeared an imposition of constraints rather than a positive opportunity. Beyond the school curriculum, morris and folk dance competed with other commercial leisure forms for people's time, money, and efforts. If practices could not speak for themselves, they were inert and lifeless. As Patrick Wright argued, 'cultural traditions [did] not (except in the very crudest of reductions) exist only to be explained and administered as ideology.'<sup>140</sup> Not even the earnest devotee, waxing lyrical on the virtues and meanings of their chosen enthusiasm, could save them. If people had to be told what something was, then it could not be authentic.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, with morris dancing, most people seemed happy to accept the stories of ancient origin and recent salvation, but it failed to inspire mass participation on a voluntary basis. Attempts to close the social divide between dancers achieved only limited success, inhibited on both sides by a persisting class consciousness. Just as Sharp was insistent that dance should not become embroiled with political campaigns and philanthropic missions, subsequent protagonists were similarly ambivalent about the potential of morris dance to radically subvert the class system through invoking a common English culture. Indeed, the type of guild socialism common to Neal, Gardiner, and Hunter tacitly reinforced the existence of hierarchies, whether it was on the floor of a textile mill or the organisation of a morris club.

In spite of the best efforts of reformist dancers to escape from it, morris dancing remained ensnared in the trappings of 'Merrie England'. A common trope in writings of the early twentieth century was the narrative of recent decline: that which was understood to be a commonplace in childhood had disappeared by middle-age. In 1932, Edmund Blunden wrote, 'It is something to lived out of one epoch into another.'<sup>142</sup> Conservative writers were especially prone to invoking such

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<sup>140</sup> Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 76.

<sup>141</sup> Wright, *Old Country*, p. 128.

<sup>142</sup> Edmund Blunden, *The Face of England: in a Series of Occasional Sketches* (London: Longmans, 1932), p. 108.

a cultural millenarianism, even before the horrors of total war were unleashed. However, there was nothing new about perceived decline in moral and aesthetic standards. In the 1820s for example, the Northamptonshire poet, John Clare, mourned the loss of ‘old and beautiful’ songs to ‘senseless balderdash’.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, since the beginnings of revivalist fervour in the late nineteenth century, the morris dance appeared to be locked into ‘a race with the undertaker’.<sup>144</sup> However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this perceived declinism was afforded an even greater currency by the quickening pace of industrial modernity. Like Margaret in Barfield’s ‘English People’, many admired the work of revivalists in retrieving the remnants of a quickly-disappearing custom in the face of modernity’s ruination. Some of the folk movement’s most loyal devotees even argued the restoration of morris dance was every bit as important as the revival of the Gothic mode in ecclesiastical architecture.<sup>145</sup> However, whilst the act of rescuing was generally perceived to be a Good Thing, the matter of performance was quite a different matter altogether.

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<sup>143</sup> Cited in Alison Brackenbury, ‘The Water is Wide’: Did English Folk Song Sink?, *PN Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, (2005), p. 39.

<sup>144</sup> John Cutting, *History and the Morris Dance: a Look at Morris Dancing from its Earliest Days until 1850* (Alton: Dance Books, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> Phillips Barker, ‘Cecil James Sharp’, p. 205.

## CONCLUSION

Writing to Miss M. de Culpepper in February 1924, Rolf Gardiner professed the naturalness of morris, claiming ‘the dance is a pure form, unadulterated by ideas, instinctively evolved, not composed, and in accordance to the rhythm quality and climate in which it grows up’.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to his idealism, the dance was actually awash with ideas, and itself the subject of much debate. The morris dance movement of the early twentieth century was a site of a contested Englishness rather than one of consolidation.<sup>2</sup> The dance itself possessed a capacity to both produce and reflect essences of Englishness. Whilst the subversive potential of an alternative vision of national culture embodied in folk practice appealed to those of socialist leanings, it could also be subsumed within a right-wing belief in a singular racial nation. As a symbol, it was capable of sustaining various meanings, representing a multitude of ideals. The interpretation depended on the framing of the dancer’s outlook and the gaze of the onlooker. A continued preoccupation with a ‘polarization’ of politics in the interwar period in historical literature has in many instances exaggerated ideological differences, obscuring many of the evident similarities between the left and right, born out of responses to the demise of liberalism.<sup>3</sup> After 1919, the political landscape in England was not so much divided between two opposing polarities as it was splintered into many hundreds of distinct, but nevertheless interconnected, strands. Similarly, the men’s morris dance movement should be understood not as a singular reactionary faction, but as a crucible of a sometimes fierce debate over the contested authenticity of dance.

These morris men sought to enchant their present with performances of an apparently timeless quality, nevertheless cradled between ideas of the past and future. This imagined ‘timelessness’ was a product of their own peculiar temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rolf Gardiner to M. de Culpepper, 13 February 1924, Gardiner Papers, C/3/1, CUL, cited in Button, “Very Perfect Form of Discipline”, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), pp. 21-141.

and cultural setting, predicated on a questioning of the principal tenets of enlightened modernity, namely materialism, individualism, and rationalism.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the motivations of dancers were not wholly reactionary, neither were they entirely progressive. Moreover, their claims for authenticity were always contested, faced with opposition not only from those outside of the folk movement, but their fellow dancers too. This study demonstrates the importance for scholars to not simply flag incidences of invention, but strive to achieve an understanding of the underlying motivations, assumptions, and resulting consequences.

For all the value judgements, historical and contemporary, it is difficult to establish a basis on which to objectively assess the authenticity of morris dancing in the context of the twentieth century revival. Any such evaluation is bound to be contingent on the parameters of the analysis. Whilst dancers stressed its genuine qualities in opposition to the burgeoning commercial leisure activities of the time, nearly always referring to the inherent virtues of its Englishness, the criteria by which authenticity was evaluated varied significantly. Morris had a potential to be authentic to ‘custom’, ‘history’, or ‘tradition’, in aspiring to faithfully replicate the received steps and figures. Alternatively, it could be made authentic by its setting, being a dance well-suited to performances out of doors, located in the natural rather than the built environment. A tension between the dance and the dancer persisted throughout the twentieth century — it was impossible to reconcile once and for all. Cecil Sharp’s authenticity was universal and, provided the dancer was fastidious in their training, he believed the dances could be reproduced indefinitely, regardless of the occasion or context. He insisted on the faithful replication of an agreed repertory of steps and sequences. Sharp’s veracity was defined against Mary Neal’s celebration of the intuitive dancer, who she perceived to be the very source of authenticity. Direct transmission, from dancer to pupil, was central to Neal’s belief in an egalitarian cultural form, influenced by her belief that culture was racially-determined. As she wrote in her instructional manual, the dances ‘must from time to time be learnt direct from the peasant, and be handed on by the

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent example of a sociological study into the Englishness of English folk song, see Blackstone, ‘Aural and Moral Idylls’, p. 576.

simple-minded, the musically unlettered, the young and the happy.’<sup>5</sup> Both Sharp and Neal referred to the ‘spirit’ of the dance, which was in most instances a euphemism for the defining attributes of its authenticity. Sharp’s spirit was more a matter of learned attitude than of emotional feeling, it was a matter of discipline and dignity.

Whilst loyal adherents remained committed to the respective ideals of Sharp and Neal, men’s morris of the interwar period sustained tenets which transcended the pre-war divisions. Through the organisation of dancers coming together in independent clubs, based within a locality, men’s morris moved away from the state-sponsored forms of folk dancing, and assimilated it within traditions of voluntary association. The dancers themselves were the makers of their own authenticities, though they were still permanently situated within a long history of literary allusion, which coloured their performances. In presenting the dance within informal public spaces, the morris men of the post-1919 generation sought to restore to the dance identities of place and community, which they hoped would in turn reflect an essence of the locality to its inhabitants. Though the efforts of the Espérance Club and later the EFDS successfully introduced morris to every county in England, the dances did not take root unless they were coloured with the flavour of the region. Whilst the genius of meaning-making resides in the embodied human intelligence, it is often inexorably linked to its environment: ‘Physical place, in terms of one’s immediate environs, cradles social action.’<sup>6</sup> In the early 1920s, dancers began to recognise the importance of place and community, not just as a source of dancers, but integral to the performance of identity.

However, only in a few exceptional places could a morris club claim to perform dances which were truly of their locality. Though Needham tried to encourage the Cambridge Morris Men to take up the local molly dances, they ultimately found it lacked the aesthetic appeal of their usual repertoire of morris dances. Most men’s clubs of the revival continued to perform those dances gleaned from the pre-war collections, learned from *The Morris Book* and the teaching of the

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<sup>5</sup> Neal, *Espérance Morris Book*, part I, third edition, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Blackstone, ‘Aural and Moral Idylls’, p. 563.



EFDSS. Though the Travelling Morrice were successful in capturing a number of significant glimpses into the communities and individuals who had danced during the previous century, they continued to be identified with Cambridge and its University, remaining outsiders and tourists. The Morris Ring encouraged clubs to develop an friendly bond among their dancers, conducive towards fomenting a unity of technique which distinguished their performance from that of their neighbouring counterparts. However, the continuation of teaching at meetings of the Morris Ring meant the style of its member clubs actually remained quite similar. Thaxted remained an important trysting place for male morris dancers, combining a picturesque setting with a local enthusiasm for and identification with folk dance. In many respects, Thaxted became the locus point for the men's morris revival, though it continued to be a space of divergence as well as harmony.

Whilst the Morris Ring represented Gardiner's ideal 'organic body of flourishing units ... implanting [morris] in vigorous local clubs and traditions', its formation owed more to Needham's desire to incorporate men of all classes together in one informal federation than it did to Gardiner's enthusiasm for brotherhood.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, common to all three case studies was the prominent influence of progressive educations, which was central to their conceptions of fraternity and kinship. Whilst the demarcations of class were sometimes blurred within the morris clubs, the dancers actually did relatively little to challenge the hierarchies of the English class system. Though the sides at Letchworth and Thaxted included artisan labourers, for instance, Alec Hunter remained in charge by mutual consent, resembling an aristocrat among men. Indeed, Hunter and Gardiner both trusted in the efficacy of autocratic leadership, exercised through a Guild socialism, redolent of Ruskin's belief in 'the eternal superiority of some men to others, sometimes even of one man to all others; and ... the advisability of appointing such persons or person to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Rolf Gardiner to Arthur Peck and Joseph Needham, 17 April 1934. Cambridge Morris Men Archive.

and subdue, their inferiors'.<sup>8</sup> Their kinship did not reconcile difference, but incorporated it instead.

Morris dancing embodied a dialectical enchantment, in which old myths were replaced with new ones, or rather repackaged in new forms.<sup>9</sup> Gardiner, Hunter, and Needham were all dissatisfied with conservative Anglicanism, and found in high church Anglo-Catholicism a more visceral religion, based on the symbolism of ceremonial and ritual. Influenced by their religious beliefs, they perceived morris dancing as a sacramental act, which could in turn lay the foundations for a Heaven on earth. Though not all dancers were religious, let alone high church Christians, morris was nevertheless imbued with a certain spiritual potency. The combination of medievalism with occult mysticism served to justify the dance's supposed ancient origins, influenced by Tylor, Frazer, and Chambers.

Folk dancers and revivalists remained the subject of ridicule from society at large. The movement was caught between the stultifying effects of respectability — characterised as the preserve of school children and their teachers — and the much loathed 'cranks', bent on halting the advance of progress, or even turning back the clock. As Edmund Blunden observed, there was an important difference between indignance and elegy.<sup>10</sup> Whilst many found reassurance in appealing to a romanticised past, very few sought a return to the old ways. Similarly, though most people found the performances of morris quaint and charming, the practice of dancing remained a minority pursuit. Just as English identity was negotiated through constitutional efficiency overlaid with 'dreampower', morris provided a semblance of continuity and order.<sup>11</sup> However, morris was not a myth in itself, but sustained by a multitude of other myths, quite outside of the folk movement,

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<sup>8</sup> John Ruskin, "*Unto this Last*": *Four Essays on the Principles of Political Economy* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1907 [1860]), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment: a Historiographic Review', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 3, (2006), pp. 698-700

<sup>10</sup> Blunden, *Face of England*, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Orwell, 'Lion and the Unicorn', (1941).

though nevertheless vital to it. Thus, symbols of Englishness were engaged in a reciprocal process of representation and interpretation.

It is sometimes argued that the methods of folk revivalists, and Sharp in particular, represented a 'covert modernity' in so far as they employed modern technologies in the pursuit of their aims: 'Primitive England was exalted through processes that relied upon mass communication, universal education and the effective lobbying of government.'<sup>12</sup> In a context of ubiquitous 'borrowing' from historical precedent to instil in contemporary practice a semblance of venerable longevity, such practices were not unusual. Even in contemporary fiction writing, the most fantastical of mythical worlds had their respective 'impedimenta of maps, languages, histories and archaeologies', sympathetic parodies of modern epistemology.<sup>13</sup> Modern media forms were not necessarily at odds with older ideas and legends: print capitalism failed to eradicate myth and superstition from the consciousness of the people. As Oscar Wilde wrote, 'A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing.'<sup>14</sup> Paul Readman has recently argued that contrary to Weiner's thesis, cultural nationalism actually 'went with the grain of modernity, integrating the contemporary with the traditional, the past with the present.'<sup>15</sup> The morris dance was one such product of this combining agency, which was constitutive of its Englishness, bringing images of the past together with hopes for the future.

This study has focussed exclusively on the morris dance as defined by Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal in the period immediately before the Great War, with a focus on the activities in the southeast of England. Though the Morris Ring was

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<sup>12</sup> Featherstone, *Englishness*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Wickstead, "'Wild Worship of a Lost and Buried Past': Enchanted Archaeologies and the Cult of Kata, 1908-1924', *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, vol. 27, no. 1, (2017), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', *De Profundis and Other Writings* (Baltimore, 1973 [1891]), p. 34, cited in Evans, 'Folklore as Utopia', p. 268.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Readman, *Storied Ground: Landscape and the Shaping of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 310.

ostensibly a national organisation, with a broad if uneven geographical membership, it remained essentially southern in character. However, a different perspective may be gleaned from an examination of the activities of the EFDSS in other parts of the country. Whilst passing references have been made to sword dances and country dances, space did not allow for mention of the so-called North West processional morris, which actually enjoyed considerable growth during this period, incubated by grassroots endeavours, quite apart from the aegis of the folk movement.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, I have focussed exclusively on morris sides formed out of the revival, neglecting those at Abingdon, Bampton, and Chipping Campden for instance, which were based on longer established local formations.<sup>17</sup> It is also worthwhile noting the recent proliferation of ethnographical studies into contemporary morris dancing, beyond the remit of this thesis, which indicate a growing scholarly interest in the subject.<sup>18</sup>

The examples analysed in this thesis demonstrate that an appeal to tradition did not mean the adherence to plain convention.<sup>19</sup> Their Englishness was sometimes oppositional to official versions, presenting alternatives which disrupted those endorsed by the state. This was particularly apparent in the case of Conrad Noel's disdain for the British Empire, expressed through his English nationalism, which formed the basis for his promotion of morris and country dancing at Thaxted. The folk dance movement brought people and ideas together in a setting that accommodated diversity, whilst still presenting a harmonious coherence in

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Pruw Boswell, *Morris Dancing on the Lancashire Plain: the Horwich Inquiry* (Preston: The Morris Ring, 1984); Pruw Boswell, *Morris Dancing on the Lancashire Plain: the Preston Tradition* (Preston: The Morris Ring, 1981); Theresa J. Buckland, 'Institutions and Ideology in the Dissemination of Morris Dances in the Northwest of England', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 23, (1991), pp. 53-67.

<sup>17</sup> Chandler, "Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles", pp. 207-224.

<sup>18</sup> Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins, 'Morris Dancers, Matriarchs and Paperbacks: Doing the Village in Contemporary Britain', *Ethnography*, vol. 17, no. 3, (2016), pp. 309-325; Simon Keegan-Phipps, 'Identifying the English: Essentialism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary English Folk Music', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 26, no. 1, (2017), pp. 3-25; Karl Spracklen and Stephen Henderson, "'Oh! What a Tangled Web we Weave": Englishness, Communicative Leisure, Identity Work and the Cultural Web of the English Folk Morris Dance Scene', *Leisure/Loisir*, vol. 37, no. 3, (2013), pp. 233-249; Lucy Wright, 'Girls' Carnival Morris Dancing and Contemporary Folk Dance Scholarship', *Folklore*, vol. 128, no. 2, (2017), pp. 157-174.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer Heathman, 'Revival', p. 208.

performance, 'gather[ing] up all the threads.'<sup>20</sup> Morris dance was restored to the culture of the English, as an integral facet of holiday celebrations and a recreational activity, rather than an article for antiquarian curiosity.

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<sup>20</sup> Putterill, 'Magic Thread', p. 1.

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