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So who was Mary Neal anyway?

JANET DOWLING recounts the story of Mary Neal, the woman who *really* started the morris revival, only to fall foul of Cecil Sharp. First published in the Morris Federation Newsletter.

Most people with a sense of the history of the morris revival will be aware that it is generally dated to 1899, when Cecil Sharp first met Headington Quarry morris dancers. However nothing else seems to have taken place until 1907, when the collecting of the morris dances began in earnest, leading to Cecil Sharp publishing the Morris Books, from which many of the traditions danced today draw their source material. So what happened ?

Sharp recorded the meeting in his notebooks, and took it no further. He was a music teacher to two young members of the Royal Family, which took up most of his time. He developed an interest in folk songs, and joined the group of people collecting them at the time. He felt strongly that the songs were a link to the nation's natural music, and that they should only be collected from people who had been untainted by education and modern music. He had an article published on some songs he had collected in Somerset.

Mary Neal was born in Birmingham, of a well-to-do family. She had been influenced by the publication of "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London", detailing the poor conditions in which people were living. She moved to London and joined one of the Settlement Missions, based on the work of St Francis of Assisi. She set up a club for working girls, and developed a tailoring establishment called Maison Esperance, offering good working conditions. She heard of the folk songs, and approached Sharp asking if they would be appropriate for the girls in her club. Sharp was delighted with this, saying that "by a spiritual sixth sense, these working girls would reclaim their lost inheritance".

The result was electrifying. Mary Neal reported, "It was as if the club had gone mad, they were perfectly intoxicated with the music." Pleased with the effect, Mary Neal then asked Sharp if he knew of any dances to go with the songs. Referring to his notebooks, he was able to give her the address of the dancers he had seen six years previously. She took a train and a Hansom cab, met William Kimber, and invited him to London to teach the dances to her girls. They performed them at the club Christmas party, and encouraged by their reception, presented a public performance of singing and dancing, with Sharp giving a lecture.

The consequence was that the Esperance girls were asked to put on demonstrations around the country and to teach the dances in schools and other places. Mary Neal invited over 30 traditional dancers to come up to London and teach the girls, who in turn taught others. The school boards took an interest, and Sharp collaborated with Herbert MacIlwaine (musical director of the Esperance club), to produce

the first of the Morris Books, dedicated to the Esperance Morris. Sharp noted the music, while MacIlwaine notated the steps from one of the Esperance girls, Florrie Warren.

Having started on a common path, however, Mary Neal and Sharp's views diverged. Influenced by his experience in the folk song collecting, Sharp was keen to preserve the dances untainted, to keep them in the form that "was an expression of their enthusiasms, based on the incidents of a common life and common work." In 1907, the magazine Punch published a cartoon of three male morris dancers and three female morris dancers, led by Mr Punch. Mary Neal saw this as a positive step, advertising their plans to set up a national movement for folk dances. However Sharp saw this as a threat, of the morris dance being sucked in to the ethos of "Merrie England" which presented a saccharine view of the past, and being changed beyond recognition.

In addition, Mary Neal was also developing a political interest. She was at the first meeting of the Women's Social and Political Union, taking the minutes of meeting. Although she was not active herself, the Esperance club danced at many of the Suffragette events. Sharp was unhappy with the suffrage movement (his sister Evelyn was also active and had been arrested on one occasion) and felt that it was not appropriate.

Attempts to set up a national movement failed, mainly because Sharp tried to put too many on how it would operate. During this time Sharp began collecting the morris dances on his own, and published the second volume without reference to the Esperance club. There began an acrimonious relationship between them, with Mary Neal having a more relaxed approach to the dance, to learn from the traditional dancers and pass on both the steps and the spirit of the dance, whereas Sharp felt it needed to be more disciplined, with people trained to teach the dance uniformly. At one point he declined to let the traditional dancers participate in the training of teachers because they were doing it differently from the way he had collected it.

Mary Neal was then invited to the USA to teach morris dancing. Taking Florrie Warren, she set sail with a full programme of engagements. However when she landed she was advised that all her engagements had been cancelled by a friend of Cecil Sharp in New York, "on account of the education authorities having thrown her over". Undeterred, Mary Neal stayed and managed to reinstate the majority of her appointments.

On her return to England she found the education authorities were proposing to follow her approach, but in the meantime, while she was out of the country, Sharp had taken over many of her potential engagements.

With Clive Carey's help, she collected the material for the first of the two Esperance Morris Books, published in 1911.

There followed a period where the argument and counter argument between Mary Neal and Sharp were carried out in the letter columns of National Newspapers and magazines, both trying to put their point of

view, and becoming frustrated with the other. Trying to decide what a traditional dancer was, where Sharp challenged, she would counter using Sharp's arguments against him. In time Sharp, with his social influence, academic standing and publications, established the foundations of the English Folk Dance Society.

With the coming of the war in 1914, Mary Neal turned her attention to other areas, and to all intents and purposes left the arena. Sharp died in 1924.

In 1934 the Morris Ring was founded, and it must have given Mary Neal some satisfaction to have been approached by Francis Fryer for advice on the morris. He said that the attitude of the Morris Ring "was not quite the same as that of the EFDS, and that the latter has had to sit up and take notice of the Ring's policy of going back to Wells and Kimber for information about the Bampton and Headington dances, disregarding where necessary the book versions".

In 1937 Mary Neal was awarded the CBE for services in connection with the revival of folk songs and dances.

In her later years she fell under the influence of Rolf Gardiner, and in trying to understand why she had failed in the revival of the morris, she took on his beliefs that morris dancing was masculine ceremonial, and that "by putting women on to this masculine rhythm I had quite innocently and ignorantly broken a law of cosmic ritual, and stirred up disharmony which became active as time went on... I believe now that this misuse of the morris dance was the reason for the bitter estrangement between my colleagues and myself, the cause of which was as unknown to them as it was to me."

Mary Neal died in 1944.

The contribution she made to the revival of the morris dance outside the existing traditional teams, was very significant. Without her input, organisational skill, enthusiasm and vigour, Sharp may never have been inspired or enabled to take an interest in the morris dance. Although they had a common aim to begin with, they diverged over they wanted to develop the dance. It is unfortunate that Mary Neal felt that she had fallen foul of some cosmic force by introducing women into the dances, rather than recognising some of the social pressures she was working against.

The saddest part is that the issue was not so much which one of them was right, but why one of them had to be wrong. In this day and age both points of view are needed and greatly valued.

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