

An Early Australian Article on: 'English Folk Songs and Dances': Part III

Clive Carey

Eds: This is the third survey article on the features of the English Folk and Country Dances and their development.

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'English Folk Songs and Dances'

Mr Clive Carey, B.A., Mus.Bac., of the Elder Conservatorium, Adelaide, concludes his interesting of the rescue from oblivion of the ancient English Folk Dances which he has introduced to Australia. A master of many arts, Mr. Carey is in the forefront of the renaissance which is bringing back the old stately dances and displacing the Charlestons and Black Bottoms and all that unruly ilk.

The Country Dance

The Country Dances are of a very different type. Here there is no special significance. The dances are not spectacular, but exist purely as a form of social enjoyment. Up to the present time, some of these dances still exist in the country, and not very many years back every ball concluded with one, the well-known 'Sir Roger de Coverley.' Cecil Sharp preserved to us many of these traditional dances, but his chief work was to bring before the public a number of dances gathered from a collection printed when Country Dancing was in its hey-day.

This notable book is entitled 'The English Dancing Master,' edited by one John Playford. It first appeared in 1651, and ran through 17 editions, which went through various changes, the last one appearing in three parts, published in 1721 and 1728. The earlier forms were Rounds, Squares, and Longways for four, six, and eight dancers, but as the editions succeeded one another these forms were gradually superseded by the 'Longways for as many as will' (of which 'Sir Roger' is an instance). In these the men and women stand opposite one another in two long lines. The popularity of this type was probably due to the fact that it is simpler to dance and employs as large a number of people as the dancing space will allow. This form, too, was more suitable to the

drawing-room, and as these dances gained popularity with the upper classes during the 17th and first half of the 18th century it gradually succeeded in ousting entirely the other forms. The Square form of the dance found its way over to France, where it was called the Contredanse, later returning to us in the shape of the Quadrille and the Lancers. The Longways for Six is particularly interesting in that many of the figures used are identical with those which are found in the Morris Dance.

In Playford's 'Dancing Master' are to be found the tunes of each dance and the notation of the figures danced to each phrase. Many of the dances are by no means easy to decipher. No steps are given, but it is clear that simplicity is the keynote, though the dancers no doubt used their own individual taste to some extent. The right mode of execution is probably indicated by 'A Lady of Distinction,' who is quoted in a book on dancing published in 1818 as saying: 'The characteristic of our English country Dance is a gay simplicity. The steps should be few and easy, and the corresponding motion of the arms and body unaffected, modest, and graceful.' Miss Nellie Chaplin, a well-known authority on ancient music, to whose enthusiasm we owe the rescuing from oblivion of these beautiful dances some years before Sharp turned his mind to them, used a number of elaborate steps which producing a charming effect did not seem to give us the real atmosphere of the country dance. It was left to Sharp to show the public the dances in a form imbued with that simple grace which seems to accord most nearly to Playford's descriptions. After considerable study of contemporary writings on the subject he came to the conclusion that the most suitable steps to be used were the perfectly simple walking, running, and skipping steps.

In contrast to this the Morris has a definitely fixed series of steps and hand movements, often complicated, and by no means easy to acquire perfectly. The accompanying music is now generally played on the fiddle, sometimes the concertina or penny whistle, but in old days a fife and tabor (or little drum) were used, popularly called the whistle and dub. A more or less elaborate dress was worn, varying in different places, and the dancers were picked men, for the dancing of the Morris for a whole day calls for considerable endurance. There are few traditional teams still in existence, so that the number of dancers in their prime was by no means great, when Sharp set out on his task. The difficulties may be imagined when one considers that many of the dances were recovered from old men, the one or two survivors in a village who had previously formed a part of a traditional set abandoned for perhaps twenty years or more. In the case of the Morris Jigs, danced by one man alone, or by two men who repeated in turn the same figures, this was not so difficult, though the age and physical disability of the dancer often made accurate notation almost impossible, but in some cases a set for six had to be constructed from the dancing of one man. Obviously Sharp's

experience and knowledge, gathered from complete sides that he had previously seen, alone enabled him to attain success in this most tantalizing and elusive work. That the work was undertaken only just in time will be realized when we consider that most of the separate dancers from whom he gathered whole series of dances must if not dead be approaching ninety years of age now. In these villages within another decade all memory of the traditional sets will have faded out—it has indeed probably passed away already. Cecil Sharp's achievement, then, is one which we cannot estimate too highly. Even at the eleventh hour he rescued from oblivion and presented to us in a manner accessible to the whole nation a heritage of which we can be justly proud.

Nothing can be more fitting than that the first sign in Australia of participation in this great folk-dance revival has come from Adelaide, the city where Sharp worked for many years. Strangely, too, the idea had its birth in the Girls' Clubs, just as it did at home twenty years ago. Towards the end of last year a few enthusiasts got together, and with great good luck they found in Adelaide a member of the English Folk Dance Society, on a visit from England. A lecture was given, and with her help a large number of dances were performed in illustration. The success which attended it was beyond the hopes of the promoters of the movement, and shortly afterwards a social gathering was arranged in which all present were asked to join in the songs and dances.

The floor of the little hall was soon crowded, and few of those who started dancing let a single dance pass without joining in. Those of us who had the good fortune to be present at the last Folk Dance Festival in London last January realize how fully to what this can lead. On that occasion the immense Albert Hall was full to overflowing with some 5000 spectators, while teams from every county in England gave exhibitions of Morris Country and Sword Dancers took part, and even a set of dancers from Holland in their picturesque national costume. Two days afterwards a Country Dance Ball was given at the Imperial Institute, and over two thousand dancers took the floor and disported themselves in Gathering Peascods, Rufty Tufty, Black Nag, and the like. There is something in the blood of all Anglo-Saxons that beats high to those infectious tunes, that answers happily to those exhilarating movements. Not a few of us are praying that in the natural simplicity and the unaffected gaiety of these dances may be found some kind of antidote to the exotic and generally unbeautiful girations that have captured the dancing halls of to-day.

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EDITORS:

This 'Part III' text follows the order of the three segments in which it had occurred in *Advance Australia* in 1927. Those issues were dated July 1, August 1, and September 1, each with a form of summary to the whole, and each of these is given in the head position where they were placed.

There were no sub-headings in the original which was given in a rather dense text and too tightly spaced. Accordingly, we have made the reading of the text much easier.

In *Australian Folklore*, this early research was/is reproduced in Numbers:

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The Contributor of these Researches

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