



Lucy Neal and her brother Thomas David Neal, in front of the portrait of their great grandfather, Theodore David Neal (1864-1939), who was Mary's brother.

the not quite forgotten **Mary Neal**

*Mary Neal was the originator of the morris dance revival when she arranged – at Cecil Sharp's suggestion – for William Kimber to come to London to teach the dances to the working class girls of the Espérance Club. The first public performance of these girls was just a hundred years ago – in 1906. From 1907, however, a rift developed between Sharp and Neal over participation in the folk dance movement and the differing interpretations of the dances. **Lucy Neal** explains her personal quest to find out more about her famous ancestor.*

I remember the day clearly. It was Spring 1993. It was my first visit to Cecil Sharp House – a building I had walked past many times, but never been into. I was with a colleague of mine, Alan Read from the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) and we were to meet with Malcolm Taylor, Librarian at the VWML. As director of our Talks and Debates that year for the LIFT Festival (a gathering of innovative theatre practitioners from around the world), Alan was planning a talk at the South Bank Centre called Folklore v. Fakelore and wanted to ask Malcolm for help in tracking down speakers

interested in grappling with the idea of the 'invention of tradition'. Though international theatre was my thing, I had tagged along, bringing my sister Tabitha too. At a personal level we were interested to find out more about a member of the family my father Michael had often talked about: Mary Neal.

My father's descriptions of Mary and her work in the folk revival at the beginning of the twentieth century had always left an intriguing picture in my mind. He described her arriving at the family home in Great Alne in Warwickshire with great drama to view the portrait that had just been

painted of his grandfather, Theodore (her brother). She said it made him 'look like a criminal'.

Though I knew very little about her, I imagined her travelling across the English countryside, gathering people around her from all walks of life with her enthusiasm for the upbeat and the celebratory, traipsing down muddy tracks to chat to farm labourers over gates and in the pub about songs and dances. She was as at home living in working men's flats in London's inner city on the Isle of Dogs, as she was in country villages. She would have believed, I liked to think, in the power of people connecting through singing and dancing, of social exchange and the bursts of creative energy that provide life with its moments of inspiration. Moments in which the world, however fleetingly, can be re-invented, re-imagined, and nothing seems quite the same again.

I was drawn to the fact that much of what she did appeared to resonate with my own work at LIFT, working in the arts in ways that were innovative, adventurous and fun. In short, I liked the sound of her. But what was she like? How did she talk? Was she bossy? Warm? Both? She lived at a time when women were pretty much barred from participating in public life, and yet, at a cutting edge of social, political and cultural change, were capable of achieving so much. What was it like being a woman at that time? She was exactly the kind of person I would have liked to have met.

When Alan introduced my sister and me to Malcolm as relatives of Mary, a puzzled look crossed his face: 'but she had no descendants'. 'Her brother Theodore is our great grandfather,' we said, as though showing our Mary passports. Malcolm welcomed us in. His excitement was infectious. 'Have you seen a picture of her?' We hadn't. He opened cabinets and drawers and pulled out a photo and some articles. The phone rang. Standing by the window of the library he turned to pass the phone to me, 'If you want to learn more about Mary Neal, this is the man who can tell you as much as anybody'. It was Roy Judge. I don't remember the exact conversation I had with Roy, but I do remember an enjoyable sense of the unexpected, of events being on the move. Roy agreed to speak at our talk (in full morris regalia), along with writer and singer, Georgina Boyes, and

recommended that I contact Nita Needham, Mary's goddaughter who had had Mary's papers in her possession since her death in 1944.

As I left the building Malcolm handed me the 1989 issue of the *Folk Music Journal*, pointing out an article written by Roy, 'Mary Neal and the Espérance Morris'. As I travelled home by tube, I became absorbed by Roy's article, mesmerised by the story it told. I read it from beginning to end, sitting on the edge of my seat. From Roy's opening words 'It is not a simple matter to arrive at a proper assessment of Mary Neal's place in the folk revival...' through to the closing words of Mary's obituary written by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, 'To the last day of her life she lost none of her worship of rhythm and beauty, nor did she lose her ardent desire to make them the common heritage of the people. Sensitive to every injustice and to every tragedy she kept a gay and gallant front to life to the very end', I was gripped. Mary Neal was an ancestor indeed.

Climbing off the tube, I felt two emotions: a fierce sense of pride in having a visionary ancestor, and a sense of injustice at, to quote Roy Judge, the 'stern and uncompromising treatment which she had received at (Cecil) Sharp's hands'.

I was to meet the delightful Roy on a number of occasions over the years that followed, learning not only more about Mary, but also about the legacy of the quarrel between Neal and Sharp. It was upsetting to hear about, nine decades later. There were to be remarkable co-incidences though, in the process of bringing Mary's story to light: Roy had unexpectedly located the daughter of Mary's adopted son, Anthony MacIlwaine, working in his aunt's wool-shop in Hastings, and I discovered Mary had organised a 'pageant' at Madresfield Court in Worcestershire in 1928, for the great-great-aunt of my co-director at LIFT, Rose de Wend Fenton, with whom I had been working for fifteen years – one Lady Beauchamp.

In the summer of 1993, my father and I wrote a letter introducing ourselves to Nita Needham and I met up with her a few weeks later in her Oxfordshire garden. She talked about Mary, her kindness, her formidable energy, her wit, and her ability for making things happen. Nita was about to move to Surrey and was pleased to be handing over the possessions she had of Mary's.



I took the armful of papers home and we read 'As A Tale That Is Told', Mary's unpublished autobiography, with a growing sense of admiration and responsibility to her and her story. The folk revival was not all her life. She had pioneered youth hostels and sea-side holidays for the working classes as far back as the early 1890s. Active in the women's movement, she took the minutes of the first WSPU meeting in London for Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and dedicated much of her life as a JP to working for women's rights and in the children's courts. Moving across different spheres of public life, her vision of social innovation and change remained the same. She was a suffragette, a social worker and obviously something of a party girl. In 1937 she was given a CBE in recognition of her work in connection with the revival of folk songs and dances.

In 1999 my sister and me were invited to Hastings to the Jack in the Green Festival by The New Espérance Morris, to see Sue Swift's play *The Forgotten Mary Neal*. So there was, we were to discover, an entire morris side inspired by the work of Mary Neal's Espérance Girl's Club of 1895, working, as the current dancers say, 'to keep the name of Mary Neal alive'. Visits to our home by academics interested in her autobiography gave other insights into her life: her work as a female philanthropist in East London's slums, her connection to country dance in the USA, and her work with the Labour movement. Her vision of engaged social activism was ahead of its time and I decided she deserved to have her story told in its own right.

For the first time in thirteen years, I have the chance to find out more about Mary Neal. I have the great luck of having found a partner in the Mary Neal Project in the University of Winchester. My plan is to bring Mary's story to light in a two-fold process that will finally place her papers in the public realm while engaging with folk and arts practitioners interested to know more about her life and role in the folk revival. Though Mary's portrait hangs in the entrance to Cecil Sharp House, her story is not really known - although her spirit, as Roy Judge has suggested, may 'have considerable appeal to the contemporary dancer'.

In addition to Winchester, where June Boyce-Tillman, Professor of Applied Music, amongst others, will be working with me, I have had great support from Malcolm Taylor, Vic Gammon, Doc Rowe, Ros Rigby, Eddie Upton and others dedicated to a vibrant folk scene in this country. It feels a good time to be setting out on a Mary Neal journey to revisit the events of a hundred years ago.

Whatever Neal and Sharp were to each other, it seems they were first and foremost collaborators and their shared achievements were considerable. How can Mary's part be celebrated? What conversations are there today about how our folk traditions are inherited? There is much I am curious to learn.

In the meantime, I travel next week at half term, with my children, to visit 21 Noel Road in Edgbaston, Birmingham, birthplace of their great-great-great-aunt, daughter of a nineteenth-century Birmingham button manufacturer. We shall pay our respects and pick up the onward journey of Mary Neal's life from there. Any way-markers and signposts from anyone reading this article would be very welcome!

The project is impossible on my own and I'd be grateful if anybody knows of any tracks and information about Mary Neal that may shed light on her story and her legacy. Thank you. I look forward to hearing from you. As the call goes, 'All In!'

Lucy Neal was co-founder/director of the London International Festival of Theatre, 1981-2005. She was awarded an OBE for her services to drama in 2005. She is now a Research Fellow at the University of Winchester, Faculty of Arts. She is a recipient of a 'Grants for the Arts' Award from Arts Council England. Contact: lucy@lucyneal.co.uk

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