

Music

Morris day



School of folk Mary Neal (top right) and members of the *Espérance Club*

Everyone knows the name of Cecil Sharp, the father of the folk revival. But who's heard of his colleague-turned-rival, Mary Neal? A social worker and suffragette, Mary was written out of cultural history after falling out with Sharp. On Saturday, **Lucy Neal** will donate her great great aunt's papers to Cecil Sharp House in a symbolic resolution of folk's most passionate feud

I knew there was an adventurous spirit in my family's history who had been connected with the folk revival. But I'd always assumed that nothing was known about her. Then, some years ago, I was given a battered box full of my great great aunt's papers, and I discovered what a truly amazing woman Mary Neal had been. People call Cecil Sharp god, because he collected thousands of folk songs and dances. But without Mary, the folk revival wouldn't have been the same. She was born in 1860, and at 28 she went to live and work with the poor in London. She was so appalled by the lives of young women living near

St Pancras that she found a flat in Somerset Terrace, just south of Euston Road, and in 1895 started the *Espérance Club*. *Espérance* means hope.

The *Espérance Club* was a place where seamstresses and prostitutes could go and be warm and safe. And Mary would organise activities, from journalism and worker's rights to dancing and singing. She realised that the singing and dancing had a transformative effect on these women, so she asked the club's musical director – yes, they even had a musical director! – whether there were any English folk songs the girls could sing. He told her about a man called Cecil Sharp who had started a collection. So Mary went to visit Sharp and came back with five songs, including 'The Seeds of Love', 'Lord Randall' and 'Blow Away the Morning Dew'. The girls absolutely loved them, so she went back and got more. And the next time she asked for dances to go with them, too. Sharp gave her the name of a Morris dancer from Headington, and by the weekend she'd arranged for him to come and teach her girls some steps.

One Christmas, the *Espérance Club* threw a party. A real mix of bohemians – famous poets, activists, even Keir Hardie, the grandfather of the Labour movement – turned up to see these women, who would have had no public place at all, dancing Morris and singing

beautiful English folk songs in their white aprons and braids, and with big grins on their faces. Sharp was present that night and he said it was 'as though they were reclaiming a lost inheritance'. Their ability seemed to be intuitive. Although the industrial

Cecil Sharp accused the *Espérance* girls of being 'hoydenish', or unseemly

revolution had moved so many people across the country, a city child could still be part of a folk tradition. They could sing about the morning dew even though they wouldn't have seen a snowdrop in their life.

One of the things Mary discovered was that young people become extraordinary teachers when they're teaching something they've just learnt themselves. She arranged for the girls to teach songs and dances around the country. At first, Mary and Sharp collaborated very closely – and had a ball. But Sharp said that art and philanthropy don't mix, and he became distressed that songs and dances weren't being passed on accurately.

This turned into a big public argument, and they wrote a blizzard of letters to each other in the press. Sharp accused the *Espérance* girls of being 'hoydenish' – unseemly. Mary argued that you can't separate form and content, technique and spirit.

The crunch for her came in 1910 when she was invited to teach in the States. She travelled by boat with one of the *Espérance* girls, Florrie Warren, but when they arrived in New York they found that Sharp had cancelled all their gigs. He'd said she 'simply wasn't an authority'. Mary replied, 'Well, we're here and he's not', set them all up again, and by the end of their stay Florrie was such a huge hit she was invited to perform at Carnegie Hall.

The *Espérance Club* was open for 20 years, but during World War I when the girls couldn't go out any more, Mary moved to the Isle of Dogs and worked with families who were losing their menfolk. Sharp, of course, identified a life mission for himself and went off to collect folk songs in Appalachia. There's a lot of defensive aggression around Sharp's legacy, and some people think Mary Neal is a textbook case of a woman who's been deliberately written out of history. But as human beings Sharp and Mary were reconciled before their deaths. She even donated money to the building of Cecil Sharp House. Their argument was really the two sides of the same coin. Mary called it 'this tiny drama which went to the very foundation of life'. On Saturday, when I hand over Mary's papers and we have a party, we're going to have a performance of 'The Seeds of Love', the first folk song the *Espérance Club* sang. And actually, you can reduce the whole thing down to that: Sharp and Mary both thought 'The Seeds of Love' was a beautiful song, what more do you need to know?

I think Mary's legacy is really a sense of fun. I could have sat down and written a book about it. But the more I thought about it, the more I felt that it would be more suitable to throw a party. Fun is a very silly word, but it's a very productive state.

Interview: Bella Todd
Mary Neal Day, featuring Shirley Collins, Jim Moray and descendants of the Espérance Club, is at Cecil Sharp House on Saturday. If you'd like to know more about the life of Mary Neal (and believe us, there's a lot more to know) as of Saturday you can also visit www.maryneal.org.

timeout.com/london/music