

# Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal

RECOLLECTIONS BY DOUGLAS KENNEDY, as communicated to TOM COOK

Four years ago I was reading again the 'Jubilee History' of the EFDS written by Douglas and Helen Kennedy. Their description of the events leading up to the formation of the EFDS in 1911, which include the story of the collaboration between Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal through the Esperance Club before they parted company, adds the single sentence "(Mary Neal's) pioneer part in the revival was later recognized by the award of the CBE in 1937", and this is a reference to her continuing work along different lines after the parting as well as to her earlier work. For one knew nothing about that, and I wrote to Douglas to see what more he could and would tell me. His response was typically generous, and as, at my request, he confirmed that there was nothing confidential about its contents and I was free to use them as I pleased, it is reproduced in full below. For many of us his death marks the end of an era, and seems to me to create a right occasion for putting on public record not only the historical facts but also his way of expressing them.

"When Mary Neal received her CBE she came to see me at Cecil Sharp House and put the decoration in its case on my desk and said 'You ought to have this'. But first I should tell you that she had subscribed generously to the building fund and I think I remember that she came to the opening of the memorial in 1930. We were always good friends and she did not hesitate to pull my leg. After her generous gesture of 1937 she gave me a lecture on the *Coweney* Dance, not the Morris, declaring that the EFDS had invented or evolved through the years first of all under Cecil himself and later under the Society a form or style of dancing which was 'new' and probably bore little relation either to the rural tradition or to the Assembly Room manner of Playford's era. She of course was right. We had been 'evolving', unconsciously of course, a style, suited to our needs, which had to include the several types from Hursdon House to our *interpretation* of Sharp's and Maud's<sup>1</sup> recollection of the Running Set as they had experienced it in the mountains but which was 'criticised' at once by all the devoted disciples of Sharp at Pine Mountain Settlement School who began periodic visits to England to our summer school after Sharp's death. The divergence between Sharp and Mary Neal was exaggerated by their admirers on both sides. Sharp was chosen by Sir Archibald Flower in the summer of 1911 to adjudicate the country dancing and singing at Stratford-on-Avon in preference to Mary Neal who had done the job probably in a rather slap-dash manner in the summer of 1910. Looking back on my own early 'appreciation' (in the military sense) of the rival leaders I should say that Mary Neal was essentially a 'do-gooder', more concerned with giving enjoyment than with the idea of rescuing a threatened

species. Mary Neal certainly had the support of the 'social' workers. Both she and Sharp were politically of the Left but Sharp had the backing of the 'Establishment' in terms of Education and the Academics; Hal Fisher at the Board<sup>2</sup> and later the Hon. Edward Wood (later Lord Halifax our Foreign Secretary in Chamberlain's 1939 Government). Mary Neal's influential faithfuls were Mr. and Mrs. Pethick-Lawrence who were responsible for her award of the CBE.<sup>3</sup> Cecil Sharp's sister Evelyn, another do-gooder was on Mary Neal's side while Cecil was alive and was also a close friend of the Pethick-Lawrences. After Sharp's death she (Evelyn) came clean over the fence and started vigorously to make herself an authority on 'Folk', writing one or two books.

"Apart from the Esperance Book I don't know of any Mary Neal literature. I saw the 'Esperance' demonstration in the same year (1911) as Sharp's displays of Morris and Sword at the Crystal Palace. His was all men and hers was all women. His was athletic and not graceful. Hers was all impulse and impressionistic but a bit of a mess. Sharp had already decided (that the 'situation' called for an orderly approach through teaching by method and clear description) before I was brought onto the scene by my sister, a student at Chelsea P.T. College which Sharp had already chosen to make his first source of trained teachers. Ever since 1911 I have seen the pendulum swing from side to side sometimes quite extravagantly between 'Form' and 'Content'. My wife Helen was often called a 'Nealite' jokingly by Cecil and Maud (Karples) her sister because she (Helen) was more conscious of the symptoms of Scholasticism than most of us. I realise how hard it must be for anyone who

did not experience the atmosphere and attitudes of the pre-1914 world to understand why Sharp and the early EFDS steered the course we did. When I stand back and survey the 'situation' of Art, Music, Theatre, Dance, it seems that 'Content' has burst all the bonds of 'Form' and there is not enough constraint to give it meaning any more.

"To come back to your question — your suggestion that Mary Neal's 1937 CBE indicates a degree of importance of her work not expressed in appreciation by EFDS today. I always felt that if there had been no M. Neal we should have had to invent one to spur Cecil Sharp on to

- (1) create the Dance Notations used in his text books
- (2) classify and correlate the various 'traditions' of Morris & Sword
- (3) seek sources of kindred tunes to expand the folk repertoire
- (4) create a centre of information and exchange etc. (the Cecil Sharp memorial).

"I think that the Pethick-Lawrences felt that M.N. had been over-shadowed and so used their influence to provide a consolation prize. Everyone seemed to regard M.N.'s CBE as being too high-grade even if it was admitted she had been overlooked in terms of public recognition."

## References

- 1 Maud Karples, Helen Kennedy's sister.
- 2 Board of Education.
- 3 Douglas later suggested that they may have used their influence with 'the young Harold Wilson who was already influential in the thirties but there were other older folks in the Labour Party whose names escape me now — women MPs, suffragettes of pre First World War days."

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Hampstead, N.W. 7. XI. 10.

Dear Kimber,

Miss N. is on the war path. She had two of your Headington men, Trafford and Cox, up to London last Thursday. I hear that she and two friends, Messrs. Clive-Carey and Toye, are going to publish the Headington dances! They say — so I hear — that they find the dances and tunes are quite different from those that you have taught. Now this is a very serious business and it may do you and me a very great deal of harm. Will you put me into possession of all the facts as quickly as you can? Who are these men? Are they two of your own side? Who did you learn the Morris from originally? When did you first dance with them and for how long? Are they to be trusted? Did your father ever dance in the Headington Morris? I hear they say that the straight leg in the Morris step is wrong and that you ought to bend your knee and raise your thigh as the Esperance Girls did at one time. Please answer these questions by return of post if you can and tell me all that you know. If I am to fight the question as I shall have to do I must have all the facts and nothing but the facts. Some of the dances you taught us later on were, I know, gathered by you elsewhere. Will you tell me which these were and where they came from? I would come down and see you but I am tied here till Wednesday and on that day I am going north for 2 weeks or more. If you cannot post a letter to me tomorrow night send it as quickly as you can as any moment the cloud may burst. These people will kill me some day if they go on slandering me in this way! However, we will be even with them yet.

Hope you are well. I am very much overworked.

Dear Mr. Sharp,

I wished you had come to Oxford, I had made arrangements to have a run round with you to all those old dances I mentioned in my last letter, just to clear up and prove honestly to you all I have played and danced to you to be absolutely correct so far as our old side is concerned that learnt me and when ones got his own fathers word that he's correct who was an old dancer. I know you will agree with me. I have nothing to fear, only that I have told the truth.

Hope you all are well.

Yours ever,  
(sgd.) CECIL J. SHARP.

KIMBER.