

Cecil Sharp and dance collecting by Cécile Laye

In 1909, Cecil Sharp published his first book on country dancing: «Country Dance Book, part I» describing twenty dances he had collected in six counties: Devonshire, Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Surrey, Oxfordshire and Somerset.

They include 4 wholeset dances, 9 longways for as many as will – duple minor set and 7 longways for as many as will – triple minor set (4 of which liable to be danced as duple minor set).

In our « Sugar and Spice » CD we recorded « *Speed the Plough* », one of the typical longways collected by Sharp in the early 20th century. They all show signs of an evolution with, in nearly all the chosen dances, progression occurring by couples changing places, with no trace of introductions or set and turns.

Sharp also collected dances in the USA - in the Appalachians - and published them in the fifth part of his «Country Dance Book». He also devoted lots of time and energy to Morris Dancing, a dance for 6 or 8 men in two lines.

Parts 2, 3, 4 and 6 of the « Country Dance Book » are devoted to country dances published by Playford, father and son, reconstructed from the available editions, in particular the dances published by John Playford from 1651 to 1686.

I believe a difference can be made between the two sides of Cecil Sharp's work: his descriptions of the traditional dances he actually saw performed, and his reconstruction of old dances from handwritten pages. There can be no doubt as to the first but what he made up based on Playford's notes may, I think, be examined and sometimes contradicted.

After Sharp, the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) led by Douglas Kennedy went on centralising dance collecting from various parts of Britain, with a few inputs from the USA. The result can be seen in 7 precious leaflets covering 129 dances, the Community Dances Manuals » (CDM 1 to 7). They were prepared between 1949 and 1967 by Douglas Kennedy, EFDSS President, later by Peter Kennedy, then Michael Bell and Jack Hamilton.

In his introduction to CDM 3, Douglas Kennedy wisely reminds us of the dangers of creating stereotypes when writing down dances :

«Dance versions differ from village to village : the sequence of movements may change overnight and an unintentional variation may become the established local practice. The production of a text book of folk material inevitably tends to stereotype performance, but I hope that all those who use this one will be brave enough to interpret the notations liberally. Where there is so much local tolerance of form and style, he is bold indeed who would say – that is right – and – that is wrong... »