

What do we really know about our dances ?

J. F. and T. M. FLETT

ask some pertinent questions

WE were very pleased to read the letters (in E.D. & S., July/August, 1956) from Bill Cassie and E. C. Cawte protesting against the use of the term "Northumbrian" in the name of a dance having no Northumbrian characteristics. Their letters, however, made us realize just how little we know about the local dance traditions of England, and we feel there may well be other members of the Society in a similar state of ignorance.

Nowadays, of course, the various traditions have intermingled, but we imagine that fifty years ago they were in a fairly pure state. Transport in country districts was not then such an easy matter as it is now, and a dance, or a style of dancing, would not spread far from the place where it developed. Considering then the period up to the first World War, the sort of question one might ask would be— to what districts did the various traditional dances belong ? Again, where did one find the Northumbrian polka step fifty years ago ? Did it extend into Cumberland and Durham ? Was it used in the sheep country near the Scottish border, or was it restricted to the more industrial areas further south ? And if the latter, was its use in any way connected with the wearing of clogs ?

Another query concerns the number of couples in a longways set. Among traditional dancers just north of the border in Scotland, "four couples were plenty." Did this also apply in some parts of England, or was "longways for as many as will" always the rule here ? We know the latter applied in Playford's time, but it seems somewhat out of place with the more vigorous traditional Country Dances with as many as twenty or more couples in a line.

Again, how was a knowledge of the various traditional dances disseminated ? To what extent were they taught by professional dancing-masters ? We have in mind here the itinerant dancing-teachers of Scotland, who travelled from place to place, settling in a village for eight or ten weeks at a time, and teaching there on two or three evenings a week. If there were other villages not too far distant, they would also hold classes there on the remaining nights of the week. If no hall was available, they used a barn. They were almost invariably fiddlers, and it was part of their stock-in-trade that they could both dance and play at the same time. The dances they taught included all those in common use, Reels, various Quadrilles and Country Dances, and the couple dances now known as "Old Time dances." They also taught a number of step-dances, such as the Highland Fling, and Shan Trews.

Most of these itinerant teachers taught only in a particular region, where they had few, if any, competitors. Thus it frequently happens that the repertory of dances of a particular region in Scotland is that of the one or two dancing-masters who taught in that region, with the addition of a small number of folk dances preserved from time immemorial by the processes of oral tradition.

We find it difficult to believe that these teachers, so common a phenomenon in Scotland up to about 1920, would have been unknown in England. Indeed, Miss Gilchrist has told us (*Journ. E.F.D.S.*, 2nd series, 1931, pp. 22-36) that in former times they were common in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Northern Lancashire. But were these the only parts of England where they taught? And is all memory of them now gone, or did some survivors of the race still practise their art within living memory? What districts did they cover? And what was the repertory of each?

Did these dancing-masters sometimes teach elaborate set dances? For example, was the dance "Derry Down Derry" collected in New Zealand by Miss Munford (*English Dance and Song*, Vol. 5, Feb., 1941, p. 33) a dancing-master's exhibition piece? Miss Munford has told us that she learnt it from a Cumberland man. Can she tell us where he learnt it, and from whom?

Again, the itinerant teachers mentioned by Miss Gilchrist taught step-dances. Were these clog-dances? And what were their names? In this connection we should mention an interesting advertisement in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* for September 4th, 1819, in which a dancing-master, Mr. Howard, advertises that he teaches "the Cumberland style of dancing which no other master in Edinburgh can teach, viz., the Sword Dance, Horse to Newmarket etc." What were these Cumberland dances? Were they the step-dances mentioned by Miss Gilchrist, or were they couple dances of a type mentioned by Riddell in his *Collection of Scotch, Galwegian, and Border tunes* (Edinburgh, 1794). Of the tune "Symon Brodie" Riddell says, "that tunes of this measure were in use formerly to be danced by two persons. Generally a Man and a Woman—on the west-border, these dances were called Cumberlands, in the Midland Counties (of Scotland) they were called Jigs, and in the Highland and Northern Shires, Strathspeys: and when danced by two men, armed with sword, and Target, they were called the Sword dance." Was then Mr. Howard's Cumberland style Sword Dance a dance of this type? And has all memory of it long since gone?

We have mentioned clog-dances here. Many of us have seen Jackie Toaduff's wonderful exhibitions of this art, but there our knowledge stops. In what parts of the country was (or is) clog-dancing practised? And are there definite named clog-dances? We have heard, for instance, of the Liverpool Hornpipe and the Lancashire Clog Hornpipe. Are versions of these dances still known? And what dances are used in competitions? Are they

named dances, or are they simply labelled as hornpipes, jigs, etc., each performer setting his own step to a suitable tune? And how are clog-dancers judged? What are the important points to look for? Were there regional differences in style? Was it only practised by men and boys? And here again, were there professional dancing-teachers who taught clog-dancing?

We are sure that most of the questions which we have asked here can be answered immediately by the Society's experts. Others may take a good deal of research to answer. But perhaps the Editor would commission a number of people up and down the country to tell us of their local traditions, so that we can have a picture of traditional dancing in England as far back as living memory will take us.

It seems to us also that there is much food for thought in Mr. Cawte's remarks that in Northumberland dances such as "Morpeth Rant" and "Roxburgh Castle" form part of normal dance programmes. We in the south (and in Scotland too) may well ask ourselves whether in the recent past we have stressed too much the distinction between modern ballroom dancing on the one hand, and folk dancing (or national dancing) on the other, and, in so doing, have given the impression that folk dancing is an esoteric cult, something you have to join a club to do.

In former times people did not distinguish one dance from another in this way. Dance programmes contained all sorts of dances, from old folk dances such as Reels, and not quite so old society dances such as the Quadrilles and "La Russe," to couple dances newly imported from the Continent or America. The Northumbrians seem still to have preserved this happy state. Is it possible that we might have greater success in spreading a knowledge of our national dances if we returned to it?

Morris Ring Announcement

Morris dancers unattached to any club are asked to note the new address of the correspondent for Unattached Dancers:—W. A. Newall, Anglefield Plomer Hill, High Wycombe, Bucks.

Miss G. A. Hall has sent this extract from a letter from the Rev. L. R. Melling, now a Missionary in Borneo, previously a very keen Member of the Scarborough Group:

"For many weeks now we have had a session of English Folk Dancing in the School on Tuesday evenings. Our numbers are small but well mixed. You would love to see the Yorkshire Square Eight being done by a set made up of Chinese, English, Burmese and Dayak. For music, they have to put up with my 'Squeeze Box' and a guitar and drum. I wonder if history was being made when, on the Queen's Birthday, we put on an English Morris dance with a team of Asian young men."