

Recollections of Cecil Sharp

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Transcript of the text from Martin Nail:

Recollections of Cecil Sharp

BY ALLEN BROCKINGTON.

I have been asked to prepare the way for a real forward movement of the English Folk Dance Society in the Island by saying something of my friend, Cecil Sharp, who founded the Society. I share the regret of others that Cecil Sharp did not visit the Isle of Man and devote his wonderful skill to the collection of Manx traditional tunes and the figuring out of the Manx dances. I am aware of the splendid efforts of the late Mr W. H. Gill and his brother, who together with Dr Clague, collected and published "Manx National Songs" and "Manx National Music" about 30 years ago. But Cecil Sharp was a genius. If only he had taken up the task of collection! I can see him going through the Island without leaving untouched any corner of it where there was a chance of hearing an old song sung or seeing some islander dance in the old traditional way.

He had developed an almost uncanny ability for noting down tunes. I remember going with him to the house of Mr John Short, in 1914, only a few weeks before the war broke out. Mr John Short was then the Town Crier of the little Channel port of Watchet in Somerset. He had been a sailor in old-fashioned sailing ships. During the course of three visits on three successive days, John sang 57 sea chanteys, 46 of which are included in Cecil Sharp's book of English Folk Chanteys. Cecil Sharp noted down the tunes more quickly and with greater certainty than I could write down the words. I saw Mr Short again last month. He is nearly ninety but his voice is as strong and as flexible as ever and his sight and hearing are unimpaired. He fell on my neck for joy of the meeting. He spoke with enthusiasm and affection of Cecil Sharp, "Ah, those were days! Mr Sharp was a gentleman, if ever there was one." I am not able to say precisely what he meant by calling Cecil Sharp a "gentleman," but I do know that Somerset country folk have no higher term of praise. Cecil Sharp would have impressed the Manx people in the same way. They would have wondered at him for the magical ease of his annotation; they would have taken to him because of his deep respect for human qualities and his sympathy and consideration in his dealings with them.

A strange thing to me is that Cecil Sharp saw the Morris danced at the Christmas Festival of 1900, in the village of Headington, near Oxford, and did not hear "The Seeds of Love" until the autumn of 1903. I will try to explain the significance of both these experiences. Seeing the Morris was really the beginning of the English Folk Dance Society. I was at the Chester

Vacation School in Easter week of this year, and sat entranced — I had almost said “enchanted” — by the demonstration of Country, Morris, and Sword Dances given by Mr and Mrs Douglas Kennedy and other talented members of the staff. The Town Hall was packed to suffocation, but none of us thought of that or gave way to fainting. We were witnessing the most delightful dancing possible, accompanied by the wheedling old musics our forefathers loved. And all this originated when Cecil Sharp found his way to Headington, and saw his first genuine Morris dance.

It was not, however, until! 1907 (or thereabouts) that he perceived the full possibilities of the folk dance. Meanwhile (in 1903) he had heard the parsonage gardener at Hambridge sing “The Seeds of Love.” I wonder if you can imagine what that hearing meant to him. Cecil Sharp’s father, a musical enthusiast, named him Cecil after Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The name was entirely apt. Cecil Sharp was musician to the very vital heart of him. And when he heard “The Seeds of Love,” he made up his mind to give himself to the preservation of the true English music. With incredible industry and undeviating persistence he “combed” Somerset (as we say) and by 1912 had collected there and elsewhere, but mostly there, more than 3,000 tunes.

The members of our own Royal Family were among the first to recapture the traditional songs and dances. Cecil Sharp was called upon to teach them. I read that Queen Mary watched the Folk Dancing in Hyde Park the other day. She must have thought of the man with the hawk-like face and the dear old wheezy voice — he suffered from chronic asthma — who came years ago to let them in to a new world. I remember the first time I saw him. I had been preaching at St. Mary’s Church in Taunton (the church the people of the countryside call “Meglen”) and he walked into the vestry and said, “I want to know you.” He said something about a book of mine which like other books of mine has not been a best-seller. If the hook, brought me the friendship of that great man, and I suppose in a way it did, no piece of writing has ever been more fruitful. He is the man who has made available for us the songs and dances that belong to the very genius of our race.