

HOW DID YOU THINK IT WAS?

Most people have an idyllic impression of the early days of the revival when in reality it was a very turbulent period. Some may be aware that Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) gave his first public lecture on Folk Song on 26.11.03 and that he crusaded to get Folk Song and then Dance accepted by the Board of Education for use in schools. However the personalities were closely bound up with the burning issues of the time especially Vote for Women. They were portrayed in the six episode BBC Series "Shoulder to Shoulder" in 1974.

Mary Neal (1860-1944) worked with Emmeline Pethick (1867-1954), who had been born in Weston Super Mare and brought up a Quaker, at the Methodist West London Mission from 1890. Miss Neal came from a Manchester manufacturing family. The Mission seemed restrictive and not providing the help needed so they founded the Esperance Girls Club in 1895. It is difficult now to imagine how restricted were the lives of the leisured middle classes in the last decade of the 19th century. The very idea that women should leave their homes and live in the comparative freedom of a community, in order to carry out rather subversive principles of social sharing, was a bombshell to the large mass of conservative, low-church and non-conformist opinion. Both accepted the gospel of Socialism as it was preached then by Kier Hardie.

It is also difficult to imagine the conditions of the poorer classes in London. No canned entertainment, no travel, no access to the country - only the public house and the life of the street. Overburdened motherhood, overcrowded homes, drunkenness, dirt, starvation and brutality were the common experience and gave little chance of happiness. The girls of the Club had the high spirits of the young and the recklessness of the repressed. They were out for any excitement that was to be had - they could not tolerate anything less vivid than the life of the street.

Neal and her friends were pro-Boers, believing, with good reason, that international financiers wanted the Transvaal gold mines and were using British lives and money to get them. They were involved in many rowdy public meetings. The Esperance Club became well known for its "national dancing" and Emmeline met Fredrick Lawrence at a club display in 1899. Neal made all the wedding arrangements at Canning Town Hall in October 1901. Lloyd George came. Herbert MacIlwaine became musical director of the Esperance Club following Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's wedding.

Miss Neal founded the Esperance Club and Social Guild for girls with Emmeline as President, a senior boys club under W.G. Pearse, a junior club under Lady Katharine Thynne (later Lady Cromer), and "Maison Esperance", a dressmaking establishment in Wigmore Street with wages of 15/- per week, nearly double current rates, and a 45 hour working week providing work all the year round. The name with its associations of progress to a better state of affairs was suggested by the battlecry of Henry IV - "Now, Esperance! Percy! and set on!". It was not the custom in the trade to have holidays, but Neal bought in conjunction with a Jewish Girls Club a house at Littlehampton and named it "The Green Lady Hostel" from a reference in the poems of Fiona Macleod. The Lawrences built a guest house for London children next to their own, "The Mascot", Holmwood, near Dorking, Surrey, calling it "The Sundial".

MacIlwaine found that the girls did not enjoy singing the available art music and having read the review of Folk Songs from Somerset and tried the songs out they wrote to Sharp to ask if there were any dances as well. He was only able to give Neal William Kimber's name and a vague address from 6 years earlier. Neal sought Kimber out and invited him and another to London. On his first visit he brought his cousin and on subsequent visits a different dancer each time. The Esperance Club gave a public performance at Xmas 1905 which Miss Margaret Dean Smith, onetime EFDSS librarian and Britannia Book of the Year indexer remembers.

Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958) formed the Women's Social and Political Union on 10th October 1903. Her mother Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst called on Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in February 1906, saying that Kier Hardie, whom Mrs Pankhurst was campaigning for at Merthyr Tydfil, had told her that in her she should find a practical and useful colleague who could develop in London the WSPU founded in Manchester. She went away disappointed, but when approached by Annie Kenney (1882-1960) the militant mill-worker and asked to be Treasurer, she and Neal went to a meeting at Sylvia Pankhurst's lodgings in Park Walk. They there formed the London Committee. A campaign of active intervention in by-elections against government candidates was started and the first arrests occurred, including Annie Kenney on 19th June. The Pethick-Lawrences flat at 4 Clement's Inn became the centre of operations for the next few years and Fredrick who was the editor of several Socialist Publications, including the "Labour Record" became editor of "Votes for Women". Parliament reassembled on the 23rd October 1906 and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence was arrested with the deputation to the House. She was sentenced to two months but nearly had a nervous breakdown and was released after two days and her husband took her away to Italy. Her husband took on her job and acted as adviser to women arrested.

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Public opinion which had at first been outraged, began to change and three distinguished women writers, Elizabeth Robins, Evelyn Sharp and Beatrice Harraden wrote articles defending the actions. A delegate conference in the September formed a National committee with Mrs Pankhurst as Chairman, Mrs Pethick-Lawrence as Treasurer, Mrs Tuke as Secretary, Christab. Pankhurst and Mary Neal and, to represent the outside world, Miss Elizabeth Robins, the novelist and playwright who had made her name as an Ibsen actress.

Evelyn Sharp was Cecil Sharp's youngest sister and she knew well Max Beerbohm, Thomas Hardy and Laurence Housman. She played hockey and went to the gym of the Chelsea Polytechnic. After the death of her father in November 1903 she became a fulltime journalist for the Manchester Guardian. She was reporting the annual Conference of the National Union of Women Workers when the session on women's suffrage fell on the day Mrs Pethick-Lawrence appeared in court on the charge of obstruction outside the House of Commons. She joined the WSPU and became assistant editor of "Votes for Women" in October 1907. She became the editor in 1912 after the Pankhursts ditched the Pethick-Lawrences. Evelyn did not join in the militant activities at first because of a promise to her mother but eventually she got 14 days for breaking windows at the War Office in a militant demonstration in Parliament Square on 11th November 1911 and another 14 days for refusing to disperse from outside the Houses of Parliament in 1913. Unlike most others who had refused to pay taxes without representation she did not pay up at the start of the war and was made a bankrupt. She danced with the Karpeles sisters and the embryo EFDS and went with the EFDS team to the Basque Festival at Bayonne.

Mrs Mabel Tuke had lived in South Africa and met Mrs Pethick-Lawrence when returning to England after her husband's death in 1906. Some months later she wrote to Emmeline and spoke of her loneliness and asked to find something to fill her empty life. She came to stay with Emmeline. Anyone less like a militant could not be imagined. Charming and pathetic she touched the hardest of male hearts. Mrs Tuke collected the Abingdon dances for Neal from the Hemmings family which were published by Neal and she remained an active worker for the Esperance Club to the war.

MacIlwaine and Sharp collected the Bidford dances at Redditch in 1906. Because of the popularity of the morris they published a book of instruction in July 1907, with a dedication to the Esperance Club.

From October 1907 the suffragette campaign intensified. The first stone throwing was on 30.6.08. When Mrs Pankhurst was released from prison in March 1908 there was a massed meeting at the Albert Hall. The government candidates were defeated at Peckham and North-West Manchester (Winston Churchill) due to suffragette action. Rallies were large: 250,000 at Hyde Park (21.6.08), 20,000 at Clapham Common (15.7.08), 30,000 at Nottingham Forest (18.7.08), 150,000 at Manchester (19.7.08), and 100,000 at Leeds (26.7.08). On the 29th July Lloyd George was very effectively heckled at the International Peace Conference in Queens Hall. The colours purple, white and green were adopted to signify justice, purity and hope. But the WSPU were not the main suffrage movement. By the end of 1906 it had lost the working class women and by the end of 1907 the Independent Labour Party. Militancy in 1905 seemed an inspired idea but each act has to be more violent and it only attracts interest not support. On 2nd July 1909 Miss Wallace Dunlop was sent to prison for a month and started the first hunger strike. She was released after four days. It soon became the general tactic. On the 24th September the government instituted forcible feeding.

Lady Constance Lytton (1869-1923) was the second daughter of a Vicar of India. Her godmother died in 1905 leaving some money which Constance decided should do something useful. By chance she heard of a piece of social work that "contained an element of spontaneous joy" which contrasted with the "oppressive jackets" of ordinary philanthropists. She made the acquaintance of Neal and attended the Esperance Club. She was asked to the annual holiday in 1908 at the Green Lady Hostel of friends and comrades of the Esperance Club as a special guest along with the Kenney sisters. It was several days before she discovered she was among suffragettes but one wet Sunday the Club begged Jessie Kenney to tell them of her experiences, having just been released from prison.

There was a sensational government defeat at Newcastle in September and a mass meeting was held in Trafalgar Square. On the 31st October most of the committee was arrested and Lytton no longer held back. She was imprisoned for stone throwing, but being a lady of title she was examined before being forcibly fed and found to have a weak heart and was released. Knowing she had received preferential treatment she disguised herself, cutting her hair short, and threw another stone under the name of Jane Warton through the window of the prison gate. She was forcibly fed after four days; with her weak heart she collapsed. A week or two after release she had a heart attack which left her with a paralysed right arm. She had been a fine pianist.

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Cecil Sharp went to Winster in mid 1908 but did not start to collect the dances effectively till he got William Wells of Bampton to come over to Stow in August 1909. This started a two year intensive collecting period. MacIlwaine left Neal in 1908 because of the Votes for Women campaign, publically pleading ill health, but they remained friends and Mary Neal adopted his son Anthony when he died. MacIlwaine was replaced as musical director by Clive Carey.

Sharp last lectured with Esperance dancers in 1909. That year the Board of Education syllabus of physical exercises recognised morris dancing. Between May 9 to 25 1909 the suffragettes organised a "Woman's Exhibition" at the Princes' Skating Rink, Knightsbridge. There were daily morris dancing displays by Neal's girls. Also in that year at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Cecil Sharp judged the folk dance and song competitions. Cecil Sharp was a theoretical Socialist of the Fabian sort and had sympathy with many progressive movements although cautious in public pronouncements and conscious of social position. He had been able to dedicate the first volume of Folk Songs from Somerset to the Princess of Wales, later Queen Mary and had given musical instruction to the royal children 1904-7. He did support political functions and when he had a mens side in 1911 he had them dance at a Fabian Society Soiree - it was teetotal but served ice-cream!

Mary Neal ran a major dance event at the Kensington Town Hall the night before King Edward died and Sharp sent the first letter of complaint to the press, the Daily News 29.4.10, about Sam Bennett, the Ilmington morris he ran, and the decadence of the Abingdon morris, lack of standards and why it was acceptable for women to dance the morris. Mary Neal ran the vacation school at Stratford in 1910 but Sharp took it over in 1911. There had been classes at the Chelsea Polytechnic and Sharp contacted them which led to the founding of the EFDS in December 1911.

The Liberal's struggle with the Lords led to an election in 1910. A truce existed till November while a bill for suffrage was in Parliament. On 19th November 1910 a procession from a protest meeting at Caxton Hall to the House was met with great brutality by the police. It became known as "Black Friday". For five hours Parliament Square was the scene of battle; 117 were arrested, 50 were laid up with injuries received, 2 died later from heart attacks. All cases were dismissed to avoid the happenings being discussed in court. A memo was sent to the Home Office by the WSPU about the violence, the methods of torture, the acts of indecency and the after effects. The memo was widely reprinted.

When the government put the bill off yet again the Committee decided on 1.3.12 to end passive resistance and at 5.45 pm window smashing started at shops. Mrs Tuke and others went to Downing Street and broke windows there, getting two months imprisonment. On release there started a conspiracy trial. Mrs Tuke was acquitted, others got nine months. In October the Pankhursts disbanded the Committee, drove out the Pethick-Lawrences and started a new policy of even greater destruction.

It is not suprising that Sharp with his ideals and hopes did not want to be associated in any way with the later lunacies but then few people were and certainly not Neal. Many people at the time, except for the hard core of the EFDS, considered that Sharp behaved rather shabbily towards Neal, her efforts and achievements in order to establish the artistic value of the folk tradition. It should be remembered that the revival was made possible because of what both of them did.

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