

THE MORRIS DANCE IN WALES

by Alex Helm

A copy of the following article was sent to me by Alex Helm in the early 1960's. Unlike others prepared by the indexing team I am not aware that this was ever published. It has significance because very little more information has appeared and perhaps its circulation might unearth more.

So little is known of the morris in Wales that any classification of the manifestations as a whole is difficult, if not impossible. The known appearances are confined to the northern and southern coastlines, those of the former being reasonably well described in outline, but those of the latter being very vague and, in some cases, only doubtfully authentic. Separating the two areas is the whole length of Wales: in Merioneth, Montgomery, Cardigan and Breckonshire, no traditional observance of any kind has so far been traced, and in Radnorshire, only the dressing of graves with flowers at Clyro, recorded by Kilvert, 1870, has come to light. In Pembrokeshire the Morris is mentioned twice: at Fishguard, Mary Neal saw some stick dances in a Mummers' Play "very like Shepherd's Aye in form, which had been taught by two Irishmen" (1), and Burton, 1891, quotes the Articles of Visitation and Enquiry for the Diocese of St. Davids, which, in 1662, prohibited, inter alia, morris dancers coming into church to "the disturbance of the congregation".

At best these unsatisfactory references only give doubtful evidence of a ceremonial; at worst, they add some confusion. Miss Neal's observations suggest Morris as found in the Cotswolds, but as no stick dance of this name exists, it is highly likely that she was in error. Her informants told her that this was a "war dance": Kennedy, 1867, gives details of a six-man dance called Dhroghedy's March danced in Wexford, which is probably, in essence, what Miss Neal saw. There was some interplay of custom between Southern Ireland and South Wales, but a dance, Irish in origin, does not further a study of the indigenous Welsh Morris.

If it was necessary to prohibit morris dancers in church in the diocese of St. Davids, it is an argument for the existence of the Morris, but the wide use of the name in describing traditional ceremonies makes it hopeless to even guess what was involved. The Articles, incidentally, only prohibit the morris dancers in church and not generally, but there is no record of their existence at any time after this date.

Further along the coastline in Glamorganshire, E.H., 1819, recorded the appearance of "Merry Dancers" on Old Christmas Day. No exact location is given, but the writer implies that the manifestation was common in West Glamorgan. This involved three dancers, with hats and short jackets decorated profusely with "paper ornaments", who went "from house to house, dancing in each a sort of reel chiefly...peculiar to Wales". Frequently these dancers accompanied Punch and Judy, the former with animal cap and mask, jacket made partly or wholly of the same materials, fox's brush pendant behind, and a concealed bell "about his hinder parts", and the latter a "Female" with black face, enormous broad brimmed, slouched beaver hat, and female attire. This "Female", the tallest man procurable, was belaboured by the rod held by Punch. (2) These are of course the Glamorganshire

Welsh Morris

equivalents of the Fool and his wife, and although they occasionally appeared without the Merry Dancers, they were able, in a joint appearance, to dance a pas de deux to allow the Merry Dancers to rest. This is the only account traced of this type of manifestation in Wales, its nearest parallel being the Border Morris of Shropshire. (3)

More recently, the existence of a Morris in this county depends entirely on the eyewitness accounts of Mrs Thomas of Nantgarw, who described what she saw to members of the Welsh Folk Dance Society. If the dances seen by her were Morris Dances, they were in a very degraded form. Such details as are of interest are as follows: (4)

Rali Twm Sion (5) (Tom John's Rally). Danced by 12 men and women in fancy dress. Bells on fingers. A thirteenth man, dressed in semi-military dress called on the dancers. (6)

Caerphilly Fair Much as Rali Twm Sion, but performers wore Welsh costume. (Caerphilly's important fair was the cheese fair in July).

Dawns y Pelau (The Ball Dance). Danced by six men and women, each dancer having a ball attached to the outside wrist by elastic. Dancers enter in couples and promenade in a circle with girls on the outside; change to (?) 4 rows with men on the inside, ass face partners stepping on spot. During this figure, the men shout "Hi! Hi!" about six times; later they bounce balls out and up in different directions.

Y Caseg Eira (The Snow Horse) (7). Danced by eight men and is suggestive of the Lichfield Morris. (8)

There is no similarity between the account written in 1819 and Mrs Thomas' description, of which only the latter dance appears to be genuinely ceremonial, the other three showing fugitive traces only. Bearing in mind the present state of the Northwestern Morris (9), it is not impossible that something similar to the Lancashire and Cheshire "Fluffy Morris" has appeared in Glamorganshire. The dancers were seen at the local fair, and may have "improved" their dances for the occasion. Whatever their origin, they do not further materially the study of the Welsh Morris.

Turning to the northern counties, in Caernarvonshire, Mellor, 1935, was told of springtime troupes of dancers with ribbons and bells who performed opposite Pen-y-gwrd Hotel at the top of Llanberis Pass. His informant, Mrs Williams, thought they came from Capel Curig, but investigation there was unproductive. Ruth Lewis, (10), writing to Cecil Sharp, said she heard rumours of a May Day Cadi Ha at Caernarvon. (11) With these two references the information from this country comes to an end, but travelling east along the coastline to Denbighshire and Flintshire, the information suddenly becomes richer, though still lacking the completeness which the work of collectors in England has brought to the Morris there. It is on these manifestations that the definition of the Welsh Morris is based.

In Flintshire, this Morris, usually known as the Cadi Ha, has been traced in Bagillt, Holywell, Mold, Mostyn and Rhuddlan, in Denbighshire at Ruthin. No notation of this Morris has survived (12), but reports suggest that the manifestations were identical in broad detail, as given in the definition.

The rector of Llanarmon, the Rev. Peter Roberts, gave a confused description of a North Wales Morris in 1815. In this, the Fool and his wife were known as the Fool and Megan (Jack and Jill), and the dancers, all men, wore ribbons and bells. Roberts, confusing the Morris with the game of Nine Men's Morris, gave the number of performers as nine men, who danced to the music of Country Bumpkins, a social dance for the same number. During the performance, one dancer, helped by two others, turned a 'someset'.

An account published by Hone, 1827, tells how the dancers collected silver articles wherewith to decorate their garland, which they carried with them in their procession, and set in position wherever the dance took place. Although Hone, probably correctly, calls this a garland, later accounts refer to it as Y Fedwen Haf (The summer birch), or Canghen Haf (summer tree). Miss Karpeles, 1932, investigating the Bagillt Morris, was told that this branch (or May Tree) had to be in blossom, and was decorated with ornaments, jewels and watches. (13) The Morris was last reported in 1941, though only as a ragged remnant, and is the only place recorded where personal investigation has been fruitful. The Flintshire Morris appeared in May, and the garland carried by the dancers is almost certainly a May Bush. (14)

It is very difficult to obtain first hand accounts of this Morris: like most Morris Dancers, those in Wales seem to have been peripatetic, and eyewitnesses generally seemed to believe that they 'came from elsewhere'. When 'elsewhere' was named, and enquiries made, information was usually not very useful, and the pursuit of it rather like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp.

Mellor, op.cit., was told that this reluctance to discuss dancing was the result of the great religious revival of the eighteenth century, which swept away all memories of dancing: an informant told him that his grandmother would occasionally invite her friends into the house, pull down the blinds, move back the furniture and begin to dance. Although this does not refer to the ceremonial dance, it is indicative of two things: first, dancing in Wales did persist in spite of an religious veto, and secondly, those who did dance were anxious to avoid observation.

This partly explains the difficulty in obtaining details of Welsh Morris Dancers, but is probably not the whole story. It has already been said that such ceremonials are confined to the southern and northern counties, and a glance at any distribution of population map will show that these areas, the coal mining districts of Wales, are the most thickly, relatively speaking, populated. The mountainous centre of Wales is, even today, only sparsely peopled: in 1700, the counties of Merioneth, Montgomery, Radnor, Cardigan and Brecknock could only show a population of less than fifty to the square mile. Cardigan alone of these could boast an increased population of fifty to one hundred by 1801. (15) These figures suggest that any large scale distribution of ceremonial is unlikely, if not impossible. For comparison, Flintshire shows figures of 50 to 100 in 1700, and 150-200 in 1801. It would be interesting to know whence came this additional population, particularly when it is borne in mind that the earliest account of the North Wales Morris is dated 1815. This suggests that the new population (in which an increasing birth rate and a declining death rate admittedly played an important part), may have brought the Morris into the county.

The affinity of this Morris with the Northwestern Morris could easily lead

Welsh Morris

to the assumption (for it is nothing more) that there was a movement of population from Cheshire; the distribution map shows that the Northwestern Morris in an indeterminate form, reached as far as Chester. The Morris of Flint seems older however than what remains in the Northwest. There is an insistence on what are believed to be the older ingredients of the Morris; the continued existence of the Fool and his wife in an important position - all accounts stress their appearance and participation - make the dancers insignificant by comparison. Looking at South Wales for a moment, it has already been noted that these two could have an independent existence, unheard of elsewhere. The procession from place to place was a ceremonial with a fixed order, first the Cadi ('female') and fool, then the Garland bearer, and behind him the fiddler and last of all the dancers. This is a 'luck visitation' in what must be the oldest recorded ceremonial form.

The closest relation to this Morris is however the Derbyshire Morris, which has been shown to be of some antiquity. (16) The two manifestations have much in common; the use of handkerchiefs, the insistence on and importance of ceremonial personages, and even a suggestion, at Bagillt, of a differentiation between the two files of dancers, one file, according to the observation of two students from Bangor University before 1914, being described as 'maids'. () Unfortunately it is not clear whether these were 'maids' as described, or men dressed as maids, but otherwise, there is no doubt that this was a ceremonial in all other aspects. There may be some yet unexplained significance in the fact that the dancers seem to have been miners.

It is remarkable that no manifestation has been traced on the eastern side of Wales, bordering on England. Whether this is a tribute to the efficiency of Offa's Dyke, or a sad reflection on the failure of collectors to investigate the area thoroughly, is unknown, but it is true to say that political boundaries are non-existent in terms of traditional observance, and there are records of ceremonials in both Herefordshire and Shropshire. (17) It is not considered that much more will come to light from Wales at this stage: the most productive areas in the field of ceremonial dance are now the most populated and urbanised. With this combination the search is usually unproductive, though one hopes that the patient and enthusiastic work of the members of the Welsh Folk Dance Society will yet bear fruit.

SUGGESTED DEFINITION

Welsh Morris. Indeterminate number of dancers traditionally with ribbons & bells. Handkerchiefs are used in the dance, which is a Processional. Dancers accompany Fool and 'Female' (Cadi or Megan) and Garland Bearer. Garland decorated with silver articles. Appeared May Day. Occupation of performers believed to be miners.

-
- (1) Neal, 1910, p.4.
 - (2) cp. Father Christmas belabouring his wife in some West Country mummings' plays.
 - (3) See paper on the Border Morris. Additionally, Mellor, 1935, quotes an account contributed by Cadrawd to the Cardiff Times, 1911, which, in describing a 'Morris Dance' at Llangynwyd which was called the Long

- Dance. From the description given, it is obvious that this is a social dance not a ceremonial, & as such is not taken into account in this paper.
- (4) For this information I am indebted to Mrs Lois Blake, president of the Welsh Folk Dance Society.
 - (5) For the notation see '3 Nantgarw Dances', Llangollen 1954.
 - (6) Mrs Blake views this as a degenerate Processional Morris, though now the Procession is in different directions in the confined space of the dance floor. As the notation now stands, it is difficult to see how the dancers could make any processional progress from one place to another.
 - (7) For details see JEFDSS, 1957, p.103.
 - (8) See paper on Lichfield Morris.
 - (9) See under that paper p.
 - (10) Later Lady Lewis.
 - (11) Cecil Sharp Notebooks - EFDSS Library.
 - (12) Mellor, 1935, gives a suggested notation for this Morris, but it should be noted that this is suggested only.
 - (13) cp. Rushcart.
 - (14) See under May, p.
 - (15) For these figures, the maps given by W.G.East, M.A. in An Historical Geography of England Before 1800, H.C.Derby (ed.) pp 525-5, 1951 (3rd Edn) have been used. These maps are based on estimates contained in the 1811 Census Report.
 - (16) cp. Winster, Derbys.
 - (17) See under Border Morris, p.

COMMENT ON THE ARTICLE

It has to be remembered that Helm was writing before the "revival" of border, NW, Molly and free form street dances and we have a much broader appreciation of what is acceptable today, whereas Helm was conditioned by the knowledge and information available then. The oddest assumption is that teams only had one dance or that what was noticed was all there was.

We do have an Irish mummers dance notation from Wexford as danced at Fishguard, and it differs in key ways from what Helm imagines. Helm is wrong in that there are several Cotswold Shepherds Hey dances with sticks, he should have known of the Badby one at least, but the Bidford dance published by Mary Neal is probably that intended.

There is more information in "Welsh Folk Customs" published by the National Museum of Wales, Welsh Folk Museum.

The Nantgarw dances are properly described in "Dawns" 1973-4, the Welsh Folk Dance Society Journal, all the rest is imaginative rconstruction.

Y Caseg Eira has been reconstructed in increasing amount of detail several times. There does not appear to be anything of Lichfield in it to other people, and in any case the Lichfield dances are highly suspect.

Helm was not aware of the enormous immigration to the welsh mines - quite a few Cotswold dancers made their first fortunes working double shifts, but they never had time to introduce the morris as well.

The early garland description fits that of the Bezant at Shaftesbury and the Milkmaids on May Day in the towns.