Great Aunt Mary's Tune:

By Lucy Neal

A year or so ago I decided to look into the life of my great great Aunt Mary, a suffragette, a social reformer and a folk enthusiast. Imagining hushed hours in research libraries with verses of *Blow Away The Morning Dew* thrown in, I was unprepared for the rollercoaster ride through English cultural history that awaited me: hidden stories, unresolved public controversies, a new sense of my own Englishness and a conundrum I have yet to solve.

If Byron once said of Shelley that 'sometimes the dead have not finished their living' he could definitely have been describing my Aunt Mary Neal. In bringing her story to light, I was going to have to surrender to where it wanted to take me.

To a lot of morris dancing for a start. 25 years as director of the London International Festival of Theatre made me familiar with the traditions and innovations of world cultures: from Indian theatre of the Punjab and dance dramas of Western Africa to the topical humour of shadow puppetry in Indonesia. Connecting to the indigenous art forms of my own country proved a new experience for me, all the more so for realising I'd been almost culturally programmed, in some ways, to ignore them. The gentle tread of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance in Thaxted, North Essex and the neat galleys - dance step, with leg swivelling out sideways from the knee - of the traditional Bampton Morris this summer, lured me in. Their forms were ancient *and* fresh. Both occasions were an hour or two from my front door and foreign.

The impulse to watch Morris dancing emanates from a box in my house containing the archive of my ancestor aunt. Born in 1860, Mary Neal was the daughter of a Birmingham button manufacturer. She joined the West London Mission and came to London in 1888 to serve the poor as a 'Sister of Mercy'. Sitting in the box, her unpublished autobiography tells the story of a dramatic life taking the first minutes of the Women's Social and Political Union in London, becoming the first female magistrate on a county bench and as a

spirit behind the Folk Song and Dance Revival at the turn of the twentieth century. Hence the Morris Dancing.

Her vision for social justice found expression in work as founder of The Espérance Club – Espérance as in hope – set up for working class sewing girls in the notorious Victorian slum of Somerstown, around Kings Cross. She believed in the joyous effect of dancing and singing in people's lives, particularly of the young and dispossessed.

Open 4 nights a week for nearly 20 years, the club became renowned for its public displays of English Song and Dance from 1905 on. The girls were soon invited to villages, schools and factories across England to teach singing and dancing to others. The energy and interest generated by these assignments has been credited with instigating the Folk Revival of English Song and Dance, a movement that 'blazed up throughout the countryside, as though a match had been applied to a furze on a parched heath'.

By 1907, in one year alone, a girl was reported to have danced and taught her way around Wales, Devonshire, Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Berkshire, Chelsea, Clevedon, Sussex, Kent and Stratford upon Avon. Wanting to free working class women from the grim realities of poverty and servitude, Mary took pride in the transformative affect dancing had on both the girls and their outlooks. Some as young as 16 gained reputations as competent arts educators:

"It is no small thing" wrote Mary in 1910 " for a little London dressmaker to stay in the house, as an honoured guest, of a country squire, and ride in his motor car and write letters home at his study table, and feel at the same time that she too has something to give"

Mary's story though, as well as the Espérance girls', has been written out of history books. The revival has been credited almost exclusively to the song collector, Cecil Sharp, to whom she had gone for songs in the first place. To anyone who knows anything about the English folk landscape, Sharp is an iconic, if controversial figure. In the past year I have heard him referred to as 'God' and Morris websites refer to toasts, drunk in silence, to 'the immortal memory of Cecil Sharp'. In the history of England's indigenous arts, the stories of Mary and the Espérance girls (along with other folk revivalists of the time) get the

barest mention. Realising Mary's papers are what is known as an historical 'counter narrative', I look nervously to check they're still on the shelf.. They clearly shouldn't be there at all. They should be in a national archive. But here's the conundrum.

Like many family legacies, the papers came into my hands with strings attached, in the form of a request *not* to place them in a very appropriate national archive: The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at the Cecil Sharp House. The reason, I learnt, lay in an historic controversy 100 years old.

A happy collaboration between these two English song and dance enthusiasts developed a big rift, traces of which remain today. Articles in national newspapers flew back and forth between them. Sharp accused Neal's girls of 'hoydenish dancing'; Neal of Sharp's 'pedantry'. In a nutshell, (if one can speak of nutshells in a terrain riven with class and gender divisions, national identity debates, notions of tradition and modernity and whether Morris dancing involves a bent or straight knee) Cecil Sharp prioritised a strict canon for England's traditional dances and songs, whilst Mary Neal identified the impulse and desire in the individual dancer *to dance* as a pre-requisite for a continuing tradition. I'm biased, but Mary's view that cultures evolve through constant innovation, reflects how continuity *and* change shape traditions the world over.

What to do with her papers then? How to create space for 'her-story'? I set off to see what was known of her. Malcolm Taylor at The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library had nervously hung a picture of her in the corner of the entrance hall at Cecil Sharp House. Roy Judge's writings and Sue Swift's play *The Forgotten Mary Neal* by The New Espérance Morris, showed she was certainly a presence for some. People spoke of her conspiratorially as though a Cecil Sharp police was ready to jump out with jingling bells if she were talked of too readily. It was most peculiar. Some spoke boldly: 'If Mary Neal's work had been allowed to continue, there'd have been no need for Folkworks' said Alistair Anderson, director of Folkworks at The Sage Gateshead brightly. Blimey.

I met living legends of folk England: Shirley Collins in the South; Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson in The North. I met a newer

generation of folk practitioner, robustly re-inventing what Bellowhead's Paul Sartin calls the 'vernacular music of England': Eliza Carthy, Chris Woods, Tim Van Eyken and others. I met a Morris dancer re-inventing Morris dancing, Laurel Swift and contemporary dancers with a love of Morris dancing, Jonathan Burrows and Rosemary Lee. I was urged to re-instate Mary's story. It created a fresh perspective on how English performance traditions had and were evolving.

The question at the bottom of the Sharp/Neal fandango is intrinsically interesting today: what is an indigenous English culture? Where are its positive *inclusive* celebrations? Is it owned by a cultural diversity of people in Britain who claim, however hybridly, Englishness as their own?

English history has some hard chapters for the people of this country, and its songs and dances carry stories of both individual and community suffering, loss, connection to land, love or simply survival. The songs and music I heard along the way were beautiful. I couldn't believe I'd lived in England all my life, and never heard them, never gone looking for them. I gained a deep respect for musicians and dancers I met. Watching performances re-enacted by them, I could connect with how the folk revival had 'blazed across the land'. Sharp ascribed the success of the Espérance girls to the claiming of a 'lost inheritance'. Maybe a collective 'folk' memory of tunes and rhythms exists in us all, greater than we realise.

I went to see where Mary and the girls had lived. Most of the buildings had been pulled down. A Holborn librarian helped me locate where Mary lived in a 3- roomed apartment, with her best friend Emmeline Pethick Lawrence in Duke's Road, WC1. They'd invite in old ladies turfed out of the nearby workhouse, offering hot sweet tea in front of the fire - along with a bohemian mix of politicians, poets (WB Yeats was a neighbour) suffragettes and the Espérance girls. Standing where the building used to be, I realised it was next door to what is now The Place, home of London Contemporary Dance. Mary would take the Espérance girls up onto the 6th floor of the building to rehearse. Maybe histories move in circles and hold energy even when their protagonists are long dead.

My imagination went into overdrive late one night reading about the history of Kings Cross on the internet. The words ‘potato sheds’ appeared again and again, along with ‘abattoirs’, ‘stables’, ‘cowsheds’ and ‘hay markets’ . I began to wonder what these girls’ homes had been like. Googling ‘Victorian London Social History’ I came across Charles Booth’s notebooks in which, after walking the streets at night with local policemen, he colour-coded areas according to their degrees of vice - gambling, drunkenness, prostitution, fighting- and vermin. The streets around Cumberland Market that the Espérance girls came from had poor sewerage, poorly ventilated rooms housing 4 or 5 to a room, often ‘mixed up with stables’, and were graded purple, light blue, dark blue and black, the darkest of all warning of the ‘vicious semi-criminal’.

This was the seed-bed of the English Folk Revival? Crowded slums filled with immigrant populations and sewing girls for whom prostitution would have been a needle and thread away?

As I explored the housing realities of post-industrial revolution London a new thought occurred to me. What if Mary Neal was not the folk revivalist who ‘lost out’ to Cecil Sharp. What if she was one of the pioneers of arts education, who saw the radical potential of the arts to transform people’s lives, particularly the young and the dispossessed?

Maybe the Espérance girls were not choosing to take up English singing and dancing for the sheer fun of it, though fun there was clearly to be had. Maybe their lives depended on it. Maybe the history of the English folk song and dance revival has been asking the wrong question for one hundred years. Not, ‘were the Espérance girls dancing the tradition correctly’ (or ‘should women be dancing the Morris’, a question that occurred to Mary herself in later life) but ‘how did a group of young inner-city working class girls become a dynamic team of arts educators at a time when their social status would have excluded them from every situation bar servitude or the workhouse.’ What kind of youth based-arts organisation was The Espérance Club? and which arts organisations engaging with the economically and socially disadvantaged today, would consider themselves inheritors of the same self-organising discipline, creativity and

professionalism? Would these broader questions influence the placing of the archive?

On a grey London day, I try to find a shape to all these questions. If Sharp stood over the years for exclusivity and control, and Mary Neal for inclusivity and participation, what could reconciling their stories bring about?

Great Aunt Mary's Tune broadcast on Radio 4 on Nov 2nd at 11am begins a process of putting not only Mary's story back into English cultural history, but also those of the Espérance girls. What do we know about Florrie and Nellie Warren, Blanche and Grace Payling, Bertha Maas, Kate Leahy, Daisy Jackson and the other hundreds of Espérance girls who danced the length and breadth of England? Few are known about. Florrie Warren, travelled to the US with Mary in 1910, stayed and married an American. I tracked down her 2nd daughter, Vida Olinick Brown on the phone the other day: she became a ballet dancer with the Ballets Russes, and was one of George Balanchine's principal dancers. Aged 85, she was off to play golf in Florida.

So, if the living have not finished their living, let alone the dead, expect a few more rounds of *Blow Away the Morning Dew* and *Jockey To The Fair* from Mary Neal and the Espérance Girls.

Great Aunt Mary's Tune, presented by Lucy Neal, can be heard on BBC Radio 4, Nov 2nd at 11am. Produced by Beaty Rubens.