

COPY

MARY NEAL

Notes of an interview with Rt.Hon.Lord Pethick-Laurence & Miss Esther Knowles, Oct.18th, 1957 (Miss Dean-Smith)

Miss Esther Knowles is one of Lord P-L's secretaries; as a small child, she and her sisters, at school in the St.Pancras neighbourhood, were among those who demonstrated 'baby-games' (i.e. singing-games); see p.53 of the Esperance Book. Miss Knowles, it would appear, has remained in intimate association with Mary Neal, Emmeline Pethick, and the latter's husband, now LordPethick-Laurence, throughout their lives.

Miss Neal was a 'sister' in the West London Mission (Fitzroy Square off Euston Road); she fell seriously ill and was sent to Weston-Super-Mare for treatment, her place at the Mission being taken by Emmeline Pethick. Miss Neal, contrary to expectation, recovered and returned to the Mission, and on some disagreement with the Mission arising, she and Miss Pethick left and formed two social clubs for young London workers on their own account - one, the Esperance Club for Girls in Grafton Street (borders of St.Pancras and Kentish town) and St.Christopher's (St.Kit's) in Fitzroy Square. A dress-making establishment was also set up in connexion with the Esperance Club. Miss Pethick's family were people of some standing and substance, and through her (whether only largely or entirely is not clear) Miss Neal was able to carry out her work, supported by the influence and good will of the aristocracy (particularly Lord & Lady Lytton and Neville Lytton) and the landed gentry).

from Sharp

There seems to be no doubt that Miss Neal heard of Kimber¹, herself investigated the report, and invited Kimber to the Club - as she says in the Esperance Book. Lord P-L and Miss Knowles said 'discovered': I think this must be taken in the sense of Miss Neal's own words - 'she was given the names' of Kimber and his cousin - by Sharp (see p.70 of Life - orig.edition). In this particular Lord P-L and the Life bear out each other. Kimber taught the girls in the Club, who, so Miss Neal² argued, were only a generation removed from country dwellers, and who quickly learned them because these dances were their 'natural heritage' - i.e. were a 'true peasant tradition' which the educated could only imitate.

1. from unpubl.Autobiography, C.1935, it is known she heard of Kimber from Sharp.

2. This was in fact MacDhaine's argument.

* Life of Sharp . Fox Skangways & M. Kapelis .

There seems no doubt that in Florrie Warren, Miss Neal had a natural genius in dancing, singing, teaching - and, as appeared in her marriage and later life - a woman of great social address and ability. There seems also no doubt that in Miss Neal's mission of reviving a peasant heritage, the success and speed with which this was accomplished was the outcome of the sympathy and practical assistance of the aristocracy. What became a national 'movement' happened at what used to be called the 'psychological moment': it could not have happened earlier, and the social structure and atmosphere in which it occurred came to an end in the first world war.

When If you notice, from the Life, Sharp, as a young man, 'went much into Society', although entirely different in outlook and purpose in life, the paths of these two people ~~was naturally to have~~ converged. * 3. among common friends and acquaintances ~~before~~ they came together in a common interest concerning recovering and reviving the dances. It is only if this background of upper class interest and support is understood that the circumstance, publicity and acrimony of the dispute, together with its far-reaching effects, can be understood.

Herbert MacIlwaine's connexion with the Esperance Club was very clearly recalled, though it was not discovered or remember how this connexion arose. (I am personally inclined to think it was through the Passmore-Edward - now Mary Ward - Settlement, opened in 1897: MacIlwaine and my step-father, who for some time lived at the Settlement, between 1897 and 1903, were close friends at the period in question - 1905-7 - and my stepfather had been drawn into the ambit of the Esperance Club by the rules governing residence at the Settlement). MacIlwaine did not, as I surmised, return to Australia; he married his housekeeper, and later died at Windsor Road, Ealing. The Life (P.76) puts his death as in 1916. He had a son, Anthony MacIlwaine. This boy (and another) was adopted by Mary Neal. [Miss Knowles has offered to communicate with him. If this bring nothing forth, I do not think any good would come of trying to pursue him]

The work done in teaching the dances and singing games was noted by the London School Board, and from thence arises the interest and support given to the idea of teaching dances and games in schools by the School Board, Board of Education and Ministry of Education successively. In West Sussex where Miss Neal especially remarks on the success of her teaching, she had much help from ~~an~~ H.M.I., Mr. Burrows (see Life, p.74 n) & p.77'.
(The chief)

* 3. (op.cit) MacIlwaine had read in the Morning Post an 'interview' with Sharp on his collecting of songs and spoke of this to Mary Neal during a discussion of Autumn plans for the Club at the conclusion of the girls' holiday in Sussex.

Later Burrows seems to have played a vital part in the B. of E.'s^{* 4.} acceptance of Sharp, and their 'rejection' of Mary Neal. Herein almost certainly lies one of the bitterest elements of the quarrel, since Mary Neal, with strong and influential support behind her, had worked greatly to gain recognition of 'morris dancing' by the Board.

At the same time that the Board accepted the dances on to its syllabus (Autumn 1909) the Esperance Club, now established in Cumberland Market (north of Euston Road and east of Regent's Park) formed the Esperance Morris Guild: and in September 1909, Sharp became Director of the School of Morris Dancing at Chelsea. Leaving aside everything else - the fact that a nation-wide movement already existed (brought into being by Miss Neal) and that public support at high level could be given to two distinct schools where the dances were taught, indicates the considerable interest in the subject aroused in the general public, in the four years 1905-9.

Miss Neal also had the dances taught in her boys' club - St. Christopher's: this had not the same success as the Esperance, and petered out. The teaching on a national scale was carried out by the Esperance Girls only.

Miss Neal, in the last years of her life, removed to Gomshall, in Surrey (Sussex border) where also the Pethick-Laurences lived. It was there that she died. She had removed from London (Silvertown) after the great Silvertown explosion in ? 1917, and thereafter lived at various places in West Sussex, still concerning herself with social work, and particularly with the holiday-house (Green Lady Hostel) founded at Littlehampton by Emmeline Pethick-Laurence.

Miss Neal was appointed C.B.E. in the Coronation (George VI) Honours List 'for services in connexion with the revival of folk dance and song'.

In the Autobiography, she sets down the story of the quarrel between herself and Sharp objectively and without any personal recrimination. For two years, 1905-7, she, MacIlwaine and Sharp worked 'in perfect harmony' - they sought out and brought traditional dancers to London - in all about 30 morris and sword dancers were brought up to teach the girls: during the 'concerts' Sharp's song-collections were sold 'as never before', and Sharp gave short talks. The Morris Books were compiled from the dancing of the girls and the traditional dancers who taught them, and were sold

* 4. 4 op.cit. A report of this 'rejection' was put about in 1910-11 when Miss Neal was invited to lecture in U.S.A. and found on arrival her engagements cancelled through the intervention of a friend of Sharp's. On her return to England, after an eventually successful tour, she was told by the Director of Education that acceptance of Morris dancing on to the school syllabus had been made 'to cover her work'.

all over the country. On the eve of the Conference at the Goupil Gallery, (see Life of Sharp) Punch published the cartoon 'Merrie England Now' with a notice of the Conference. On being shown the cartoon, Sharp declared he would not attend the Conference, but eventually did so and though 'obstructive' was elected to the Committee. When the Committee met, Sharp, who was then in dispute with the Folk Song Society, advocated a Constitution "so strict that it would be possible to control the Society (for furtherance of Morris dancing) in a way impossible with the simple Constitution of the Folk Song Society."

The Committee eventually disbanded as it was impossible to reach agreement, and from that day began a bitter attack by Sharp on the work Miss Neal was trying to do. Although until then there had been no criticism of the dancing of the girls, when Sharp severed his association with the Club, and its teachers, he sent round a circular in the text books then in use all over the country in which he said that "hithertothere had been no organised teachers". Miss Neal, with a few friends, formed her own Association, made investigations concerning dances, and with the help of "qualified musicians" brought out her own two books of dances, songs and singing games.