

Review Essay: *The Imagined Village*, by Georgina Boyes (Second, Illustrated, Edition, 2010)

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Georgina Boyes. *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*. Revised illustrated edition, Leeds: No Masters Co-operative, 2010. xiv + 283 pp. ISBN 978-0-9566227-0-9.

The name of Georgina Boyes will forever be imprinted in the annals of English Cultural Studies, thanks to her provocative book *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*, first published in 1993, and now newly available in a second edition, the subject of this review.

On the surface, *The Imagined Village* in both editions is an examination of the restoration of English vernacular performance arts, including morris dance (my particular interest), from the time of the First Revival during the Edwardian Era to the dawn of the Second Revival in the 1950s. But in its depths it is a record of inspired visionaries who set out to preserve England's cultural heritage under the weight of their own biases, partly formed by class, the Merrie England movement, Rational Recreation, Music Nationalism, Freudianism, and a host of other "isms".

The principal protagonists in Boyes' book are that very Edwardian gentleman Cecil Sharp and the ardent suffragette Mary Neal.¹ Both came from privileged backgrounds and both were socialists who were motivated partly by the social injustices they witnessed in the working classes, as well as a new-found respect for the performance arts of the proletariat, such as morris dance. Even though Cecil Sharp was the first to "discover" morris dance in 1899, and Mary Neal was one of the first to benefit from his insights in 1904, Neal was the first to institutionalize the teaching and dissemination of English folk dance. Sharp founded the English Folk Dance Society in 1911, one year after Mary Neal's establishment of her national organisation, the Guild of Morris Dancers.² Both Neal and Sharp eventually catered mostly to women whose teaching careers in the formal school systems and informal clubs for children would most benefit from their work.³

Despite their common goal of sharing their discoveries of folk music and morris dance with the general population (i.e., middle class), Sharp and Neal had a severe and very public difference of opinion, sometimes called "the quarrel". They were fundamentally divided in their philosophical view of the manner in which morris dance (and folk song) should

be taught, and their general attitude towards its performance.

Sharp favoured strict pedagogy, using the music and dance conservatories such as the Royal Conservatory of Music and the secondary education system as his model, with their grade levels and their certificates of success awarded by examiners. He also believed that the folk dances should be performed with a kind of *gravitas*, or quiet dignity, as he was later to describe.⁴ An echo of this approach is still alive today in the character dances, including morris dance, incorporated into the grade levels of national schools of ballet. This approach is perfectly understandable, given the general public attitude towards the rural people and their general disdain for the performance arts of the *peasants*, as opposed to Western Art Music and Dance. Whereas the original dancers may have been rough and ready, Sharp would have wanted their choreographies to attain legitimacy in the worlds of ballroom or ballet, and *gravitas* may have been just the right medium of expression to allow this new middle class perception to come about.

Mary Neal stated that technique should clearly be subordinated to pleasure. Like Sharp, her goal was to re-enact the alleged spontaneous and joyful spirit of the original village dancers in her classrooms, as seen, for example, in the wedding feasts and peasant dances in Pieter Brueghel's paintings. But unlike Sharp, she wanted the atmosphere in the folk dance studios to resemble clubs, not conservatories, with dance movements full of exuberance and happenstance stepping.⁵ The end-game in Sharp's pedagogy was certification and mastery, whereas in Neal's world it was general competency among equal enthusiasts.⁶ To put it in another way, familiar to modern readers, she objected to the "gentrification" of English vernacular folk arts.

As both organisations grew, as well as their differences of philosophy, along came the flamboyant Rolf Gardiner who rebelled against Sharp's strict pedagogical approach in favour of Mary Neal's casual recreation model. However, Gardiner differed with Neal in one very crucial point. He believed that the "joyful" choreographies of morris dance were exclusively a male prerogative, as seen in the source dancers interviewed by Sharp and Neal, and therefore totally inappropriate for women to perform. Given the vast number of women teaching and dancing

Morris Dance, this pronouncement was somewhat of an earthquake. Even Sharp was inclined to have morris dance performed by men, as seen in his demonstration group, but he welcomed women and children.⁷ Whether Gardiner presaged Robert Bly's Iron John men's movement, or whether he was acting out deep feelings of misogyny, is a matter of debate. What we do know is that the shock waves of this new approach are still felt today, including the constantly recurring accusations of sexism and misogyny.

It is truly the stuff of a great novel! In all three cases, the major players were extracting elements of England's historical record of popular song and dance, and constructing "Imaginary Villages" filled with invented townfolk and rural workers exhibiting elements of English revelry in either bridled or unbridled form. Of course, I am not doing justice to the nuances of the many adjunct themes and tropes throughout the book, so consider my brief synopsis a teaser.

Ms. Boyes' book was originally published by Manchester University Press as one of a challenging series of books innocently titled *Music and Society*. *The Imagined Village* was in the company of many other thought-provoking titles ranging all the way from *Così? Sexual politics in Mozart's Operas*, by Wilfred Mellers, to *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Popular Music*, by David Hatch and Stephen Millward. The series challenged preconceived musicology with fresh insights born of the Cultural Studies movement initiated by the likes of E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, then crystallized by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964, subsequently directed by Stuart Hall. The CCCS is no longer with us, having been disbanded by the administration of the University of Birmingham in 2002, but not before it sowed the seeds of its unique brand of discontent and critical theory in many other universities in England.⁸ Be that as it may, Boyes' book was awarded the Katherine Briggs Folklore Award in 1993, a tribute to the rapid impact of her controversial scholarship, no matter how accurately she interpreted her mountain of facts.

An earlier title from 1985 (not in the series mentioned above) that raised many of the same hackles was Dave Harker's incendiary book *Fakesong* (Open University Press). It was (among other things) a scathing re-examination of Cecil Sharp's fieldwork and conclusions. Harker's inflammatory opinions have since been tempered by academic rebuttals, neatly summarized by James Porter in his 1991 essay, "Muddying the Crystal Spring: From Idealism to Realism to Marxism in the Study of English and American Folk Song".⁹ But no matter the hot and cold opinions of the book, *Fakesong* is such a landmark of scholarly opinion that used copies of the \$35

paperback are going for a whopping \$100 (CAD) on Amazon.ca, an indication of its ongoing resilience.

Ms. Boyes' book is as confrontational as Harker's *Fakesong*.¹⁰ And like Harker's book, *The Imagined Village* has been tempered by an extensive number of reviews in outstanding journals (see the bibliography, below). Elaine Bradtke (1995) provided a well-written overview of the book. Vic Gammon (1994) objected to the book's overall negative tone and the absence of an appreciation for the tenor of the times, which sanctioned and welcomed its songcatchers and dance collectors. Derek Schofield took issue with Ms. Boyes' accusations of misogyny by outlining the important contribution of many women who worked tirelessly and happily on behalf of the EFDSS (English Folk Dance and Song Society). Simon Frith composed a very perceptive essay doubting Boyes' bleak view of the revivalists and comparing their efforts with the reality of today's folk music scene with all its contradictions and pleasures. However, it was Chris Bearman (2009) who took the greatest exception to her book and wrote a particularly scathing rebuttal of her condemnations. In regard to the misogyny and sexism consciously or unconsciously exhibited by Sharp *et al.*, particularly towards Mary Neal, he finds fault instead with Ms. Neal. According to Bearman, Neal was not so much a First Wave feminist as a New Age idealist with her own blinkered views of morris dance that diminished the respect the dance deserved.

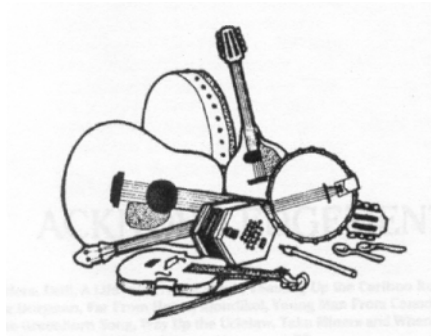
I first encountered *The Imagined Village* during a tour of Northern England in 2000 with my fellow morris dancers, collectively called the Vancouver Morris Men. We had a free morning before our scheduled visit with local male morris dancers in Whitby (North Yorkshire), so I wandered the quaint hillside shops in search of an interesting book. When I asked for a recommendation from a bookseller at one particularly cozy nook, the shop-keeper suggested I might be intrigued with "this tidy little paperback" on her shelf. It was Ms. Boyes' book. Despite her cheery nature, the bookseller's face betrayed a momentary flash of mischievous pleasure. When I arrived at the downtown pub full to the brim with local and Vancouver male morris dancers, I sat down at the crowded table and proceeded to pull out my new treasure from its brown paper bag. It was instantly met with looks of feigned horror and fingered signs of the cross. The local morris men knew the book only too well, and were quite aware of its accusations of misogyny.

Up to this year, you would have had to retrieve this controversial book from a library or pay an outrageous sum for a used copy. But not now. The book has been wholly reprinted by No Masters Cooperative Limited, the same people who have been produc-

ing the excellent recordings of Coope, Boyes and Simpson, a male trio of folk singers now enhanced with three female voices, including the author, Georgina Boyes. (Yes, that second name in the trio is the same surname as the author's name; I understand they are husband and wife.)

Although the text is largely unchanged (at least, as far as I could tell), there is an addition of 28 historical photographs that illuminate and support the author's claims. I recommend having a close look at plate 9, where we see two handsome working-class women step-dancing in the streets of London circa 1900. My one small quibble is that the paper is glossy white, making the print rather difficult to read, although perhaps I am revealing my age.

If you already own the book, it might be that the bonus of the photos may not be quite the motivator to push you to own the second edition. But if you don't own the book, and you are just learning about it through my book review, then you are having a bout of good luck. A second chance to buy the book has arrived, and its photographs make it even more complete than the last. Aside from being a critical resource in the understanding of the perils and pleasures of re-enactment and renaissance, it can also be read as a cautionary tale for Canadianists currently in search of Canada's Intangible Cultural Heritage.



Notes:

1. Cecil Sharp has been the subject of a biography and several studies, but Mary Neal is somewhat new to the academic sphere. She now has an excellent .org website entitled *Mary Neal...an Undertold Story*. The first scholarly study of the work was Roy Judge, found in his journal article "Mary Neal and the Esperance Story," in *Folk Music Journal*, volume 5, number 5 (1989), pp. 545-91.

2. Sharp later was instrumental in combining the Folk-Song Society, founded in 1898, and his English

Bibliography of Reviews from 1994 to 1996:

Bradtke, Elaine

Ethnomusicology, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), p. 500-502

Bearman, Chris J.

"The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Mary Neal and Rolf Gardiner," in *The Morris Dancer on the Web*, volume 4, number 1 (January, 2009)

Duesenberry, Peggy

"*The Imagined Village* by Georgina Boyes, and *The British Folk Scene: Musical Performance and Social Identity* by Niall L. Mackinnon" in *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 5, (1996), pp. 155-156

Frith, Simon

"*The Imagined Village* by Georgina Boyes, *The British Folk Scene. Musical Performance and Social Identity* by Niall MacKinnon, and *Transforming Tradition. Folk Music Revivals Examined* by Neil V. Rosenberg" in *Popular Music*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Australia/New Zealand Issue (Oct., 1994), pp. 345-353

Gammon, Vic

Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 390-392

Schofield, Derek

Folk Music Journal, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1993), pp. 511-513

Shields, Hugh

Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung, 39. Jahrg. (1994), pp. 228-229

Folk Dance Society into the English Folk Dance and Song Society in 1932.

3. See Anne Bloomfield, "Drill and Dance as Symbols of Imperialism," in *Making Imperial Mentalities: Socialisation and British Imperialism*, edited by J. A. Mangan (Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 74-95, and "The Quickening of the National Spirit: Cecil Sharp and the Pioneers of the Folk-Dance Revival in English State Schools (1900-26)," by Anne Bloomfield, in *History of Education*, volume 30, number 1 (2001), pp. 59-75.

4. "The movements though forceful, masculine and strong, must nevertheless be easily and gracefully executed, with restraint, too, and dignity, even solemnity at times." Cecil Sharp, *The Morris Book*, volume 1, revised, 1911, p. 43.

5. "No, if we do not admire vigour, stamping, virile open-air dancing, with thick shoes and tinkling bells, the clash of sticks, and the bright colours of the ribbons and rosettes we must go elsewhere for our dances and to subtler people than the English peasant." Mary Neal quoting one of her patrons in her book *The Esperance Morris Book*, Volume 1 (ca. 1910), p. 3. Note that Mary Neal required her dancers to wear historical costume during their performances, in a bid to re-enact the gaiety of the villagers. Cecil Sharp's dancers wore gym slips.

6. Maud Karpeles shared the same lofty ambitions as Mary Neal and also turned to morris dance as a source of recreation for poor working girls in London. Like Mary Neal, she had seen morris dance performed under the direction of Cecil Sharp in 1909 and had the same kind of epiphany. However, she adopted Sharp's model of performativity and eventually became one of his most valued dancers and collaborators.

7. "The Morris is, traditionally, a man's dance. Since, however, it was revived a few years ago it has been freely performed by women and children. Although this is not strictly in accordance with ancient usage, no great violence will be done to the tradition so long as the dance is performed by the members of one sex only." Cecil Sharp, *The Morris Book*, Volume 1, revised, 1911, p. 42.

8. See Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post-war Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 1997), and Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 2003, 3rd edition).

9. In *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music*, edited by Bruno Nettl and Philip Bohlman, University of Chicago Press, 1991).

10. We look forward to the publication of David Gregory's fascinating paper "Fakesong in an Imagined Village? A Critique of the Harker-Boyes Thesis", presented at the annual conference of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ont, May 23-25th, 2002 [See next article for a revised version of this, Eds.].



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