

NEW DIRECTIONS

As I grow older, I sometimes regret the wilder extravagances masquerading as morris today.

Developments in the morris world last century have been based on some false impressions of the past whose impact are only now being appreciated. Collectors concentrated on the oldest, playing down the creative elements in the idioms, recognising the urge to improve as part of the traditional process, although obviously denying it for the "inexperienced" revival, but not seeing the variations found between teams as showing the equally important desire to be different, even though this was evident in the Cotswold villages where the morris had stops and starts. "Modern" dances and tunes, such as *The Rose Tree* at Bampton, were ignored by Cecil Sharp as untraditional, as, in effect, were all young dancers and their performances. From older dancers their long familiarity brought an apparent stability for which there is little hard evidence.

Nevertheless the received traditions include many dances which have been well honed for performance and this root material can only be distorted or ignored at our peril. However they are not intended to be only for museum-like reproduction. Today we do not know how accurate is our knowledge, we do not know how complete are the surviving repertoires or what were the popular dances, and we do not know how satisfied the older dancers were with each of their individual dances as remembered. Our judgement should be based on a perception that the really great material for the performing arts is that which allows of continual regeneration and new insights within an accepted framework.

It is the nature of "new" things to be explored in many ways, eg the Border Morris since its recreation in 1975, not necessarily all successfully. When a dance tradition was still "living", eg as in the North West, the variety was found to develop over a relatively short period. Once the "novelty" stage is passed, dance idioms settle down, as did country dance formations by the 18th C, and as has Carnival Morris and Formation Dancing more recently, often within self imposed limitations and having an emphasis on quality not freakishness.

Living dance is not static but adjusts to today's needs, which cannot closely match those of the past. Modern performances are built around shows which hardly existed in the 19th century. Unfortunately the number of recorded dances are insufficient to produce satisfying repertoires for the many attention competing clubs that now exist. Repertoires also need "light and shade", ie contrast.

Where might the "leading edge" be pointing?

Cotswold : Introducing a new chorus only changes about one third of a dance and its style still remains within the local idiom. Good dance ideas are invariably simple but hard to find. It is all too easy to be complex, making it slow to learn, difficult to practice and seldom "borrowed" by others. Part of the future has to be with the "new traditions", probably with fresh easy patterns rather than novel steps. For them, the problem in achieving any impact remains with providing documentation and workshops, otherwise they die with their club.

Border : This is still evolving and remains largely raw and frequently inward looking and self indulgent. There will be more ordinary public resistance to the excesses of behaviour, especially to the yelling and the more ridiculous dress. In general the dances need to be shorter, with more structure and greater attention to dance and presentation skills. The successful sides seem to be those built around "themes" or "house styles", which brings them into line with minstrelsy and street entertainers rather than the morris.

North West : The tradition was of a single processional/stage dance. The problem today is of having several in a contrasting repertoire. The dances often appear to come "by the yard", appropriate to unstructured procession performances, but not to more static audiences. Unfortunately most older dances use common movements and appear repetitive in performance, but introducing a few "Gee Whiz" figures is not enough compensation, although that was the traditional style. Because of the technical limitations of the idiom, novelty will always be important in order to keep the interest up in dance rather than event orientated groups.

Long Sword : This appears as only a limited idiom whilst the dancers remain linked, although in fact not many of the possibilities have been explored, especially with regard to timings within movements. This is one area where

insights from European analogues could be most illuminating. While there are some fresh dances being created, new lock forms or methods of their assembly have been little explored. It is possible to form one with only four rigid swords and there are many proper possibilities for greater numbers which are not so symmetrical as those with which we are familiar or that are patterns within patterns. Dances which depend more on the manners of forming and the patterns of swords displayed may well have been within our tradition.

Rapper : This is a dance idiom which like step dancing cries out for some systematic work on establishing and cataloguing the possibilities, as most collected dances are sets of contrasting figures, and this does not highlight what can or cannot be done within the limits of the linked topology.

Molly, Stave, Garland and the Rest : These are weak English traditions with material akin either to the other traditions or which have been largely dependent on country dances. They depend for their survivability on contrast with other idioms and in having a unique style. There is considerable printed dance material out there from which choreographies can be quarried, and that was the traditional approach! Who can compose fugues, in which pairs of dancers perform the same steps and patterns but several bars delayed?

Music : Band skills are still minimal. There is a need to think about how the Irish tradition was used in Riverdance. Also, to consider the inspiration that can be gained from the "early music" of up to the end of the 17th century.

We need an honesty about the past, but also a respect, and a recognition that inexperience usually leads to mistakes.

Remember to take a long view, if it is not very good it will not last.