

The Monthly Journal of the Society for International Folk Dancing

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FIRST PRINCIPLES X: IN THE FOREST (CONTD)

How did the inhabitants of the forests of Northern Antiquity live when they weren't gadding about from one part of Europe to another? The answer seems to be that they lived a communal-type existence on the original collective farms - minus, of course, tractors and commissars. The farm as a self-sufficient agricultural unit is a relatively new development. Life was of the real and earnest variety with little time out for relaxation. There were originally only two seasonal festivals falling roughly at times corresponding to our mid-November and mid-March, that is the beginnings of winter and summer. For some reason winter was regarded as preceding summer. On both these occasions feasts were held and, of the two, the winter feast was the bigger and better. Cattle constituted the centre-piece of the economy and since winter feed was in short supply there was a great slaughter of cattle when the first snows fell.

With the growing importance of agriculture at least three more feasts were added to the calendar: the first ploughing (mid-February); the harvest (mid-September); third, a special feast of prayers for rain or sun at the crucial times of the growing season - this feast only gradually became permanent and its dating seems to have varied from mid-May to mid-July. The word "calendar" is used in a figurative sense since there is little evidence that the early Germans and Kelts possessed a calendar as such. Some authorities have inferred the existence of a calendar of six tides of three-score days deriving from Eastern or Mediterranean sources. Be that as it may, with the adoption of the Roman calendar the feast days were reshuffled, i.e., moved either forwards or backwards to harmonise with the Roman arrangements. And with the coming of Christianity and its many feasts confusion was confounded. At this point, however, we are concerned principally with the pre-Christian agricultural festivals and, in what ways if any, the dance was connected with them.

At the heart of all these festivals was the belief that the god, goddess or spirit of fertility was actually present in the form of greenery, fruits, flowers or crops. The value of direct contact with the divinity was properly appreciated, in healing as well as in fertility magic, and, consequently the worshippers draped themselves in greenery or sheaves of the last crops to be harvested; or they would garland their homes and buildings in like fashion. Often an image of the god well-garlanded and accompanied by "kings" or "queens" or both would be carried in procession through the village. Processions were prominent in these festivals. Tacitus reports that the Germans around the Elbe (circa 200 A.D.) carried Nerthus the Earth Goddess in procession and, at the end of the ceremony she was dipped and her slaves drowned in the lake. At the end of winter in Sweden (Upsala) the statue of Freyr went its rounds. Many processions are preserved in folk customs and, the procession of saints is still to be found today in Roman Catholic countries in sometimes a spirit of realism. In the recent drought in Italy a certain village, in prayer for rain, paraded the wooden image of its patron saint all round the town on a broiling day - and the saint's mouth was tightly packed with salt. Ploughs were frequently "processed" and, in sea-faring communities ships even were paraded.

At those times of years when rain or sunshine were badly needed a variety of rain-charms and heat-charms evolved. Frazer describes most of these as part of "mimetic" or imitative magic. If rain was desired then water would be splashed around; if heat was needed a fire would be built on a wheel (symbol of the sun) would be fired and rolled down hill. From these original rites a number of variants arose. In rain-making magic

water from a well in or near the sacred grove would be used; to these wells we may trace such present-day survivals as wishing-wells, three coins in the fountain etc. Over the course of the years sacramental dipping degenerated into "ducking" and such like horse-play when the original ritual significance of the act was forgotten. The Christian church took over part of the rain-charm ritual with baptism and purification with holy water. Purification with fire is a very old notion and a very widespread one. In Northern Europe humans passed through the fire - the cattle also or smeared themselves with soot or ashes. This may possibly explain the somewhat mysterious apparition of "black-face" in certain old-established rites and folk games. Sometimes instead of rolling fiery wheels down hillsides eggs would be used.

And now we come to the question of sacrifice: animal, vegetable and human. It is not our purpose to get involved in the controversial matters relating to sacrifice, particularly human sacrifice. The earliest sacrificial animals were the food animals of the folk: oxen, sheep, goats, pigs, deer, geese, fowls and horses. Sacrificial animals were regarded as divine and the wearing of the skins or horns (cf antlers at Abbots Bromley) had the same significance as the wearing of green vegetation. In the same way the fertility spirit could be sacrificed in its vegetable form as in bread offerings, Beltane cakes, and, also sacrificial draughts of wine or ale, mead or cider made from the fruits of the earth. As far as human sacrifice is concerned there is evidence to show that it was retained by some Germans and Kelts right up to the time of their conversion to Christianity. In the beginning the king or chief priest was the candidate elected for the sacrifice but as time went on and life became more settled the obvious disadvantages in killing off the number one citizen every year led to the idea of substitutes such as slaves, p.o.w.s, criminals or village idiots. The substitute would be "king for a day" or several days before the event. There are one or two examples showing that that the gods would not always accept a substitute: in Sweden in three successive years of famine the Swedes sacrificed first oxen, then men and finally their king Domaldi himself; then there is the intriguing business of the death of William Rufus in the New Forest in 1100! Eventually and for various reasons the killing became symbolic or animals were again used (cf the story of Abraham and Isaac).

The primitive German word "laikaz" appears to have signified both "dance" and "play". And some of its derivatives in addition included ideas of "sacrifice" and "festival." It is a tricky business drawing conclusions from purely philological evidence but we may safely assume that the inhabitants of the Northern forests did their stint of dancing especially at the agricultural festivals. Other evidence is to be found in eye-witness accounts and in the repeated denunciations by the Church of obscene dances and songs. In form there were two main types of dance: the processional, sometimes serpentine, winding dance through the village; (cf the Helston "faddy dance") and the circular dance round some sacred object, a tree or a fire. The motif of the dance depended naturally on the festival. There were sword dances, victory dances, religious dances, love dances and to a certain extent animal dances, that is dances performed in the guise of animals but not necessarily mimetic. Fertility dances predominated. They were inevitably erotic and it was against them that the anger of the Christian church was chiefly directed. In 500 A.D. Caesarius of Arles describes the Goths dancing after the sacrificial banquet "according to a demoniacal rite to the accompaniment of sexually obscene songs." Our old friend Tacitus writing three hundred years earlier describes a primitive sword dance he witnessed among the Germans: it was part of a public display and was performed by naked young men who leaped about amongst menacing sword points and spears.... sounds rather like the Pyrrhic military dances of Ancient Greece. Other sword dances seem to derive from religious mimes depicting the "death" of the "king" or fool, that is the death and re-birth of the seasons.

Many folk dances still extant had their beginnings during this period but the evidence above should enable us all to do some interesting detective work. Next month we shall discuss: "St Vitus and Friends."

November 25th.

After making sure that each member of the team had a skeleton key the Group assembled at Philip Thornton's flat ready for the long journey to Bethlem Mental Hospital. We started out in a procession of three cars. The leading car, whose driver was the only person who knew the correct way to the Hospital, managed, in a surprisingly short space of time, to lose the two following cars driven by Sheila and Philip. Fortunately they turned up at the Hospital only ten minutes or so later than we did.

Thirteen - the number of the team - proved to be a very lucky number and the evening was a great success. Everybody, including the team, thoroughly enjoyed themselves, and the Croation "Jelly" dance proved to be extremely popular - I think we must have gone through it about six times! Philip, unexpectedly danced a solo item, and his intricate footwork left us gasping.

During the evening Philip announced to all and sundry that there, on the spot, he was going to teach the team a completely new dance as an experiment - so that the audience could see how long it took us to learn a new dance. This did not worry the team overmuch as most of us, during the course of the evening, had already learnt quite a few things we did not know before ...!

It was extremely sad to see several young girls and boys in our audience. They looked just like ordinary, healthy kids and seemed to be enjoying the dances so very much - and yet afterwards we were told that they were more ill than the older patients. We were all impressed by the nurses. They were, in the main, quite young and extremely kind, and are doing a wonderful job.

The skeleton keys very nearly came in handy when we found that we had been locked in as we were preparing to leave the building. Fortunately someone found a side door open and we left much more quickly than we had entered....

Margaret Harris

(We are doubly indebted to Margaret Harris. First for the excellent idea of a feature which would keep us up to date on the doings of our friends and, secondly, for contributing the first article herself. Such initiative is greatly to be admired - and we trust to be imitated. ED)

HELP! S.O.S!! MAYDAY!!!

The Committee are nearly at the end of their rope, tether, or wit's end. They have just about exhausted all the lists of possible halls for the Sunday dances. Would anyone who has any ideas or can give information please ring Whitehall 1212 - sorry, please drop a note to Ken Ward at 4, Robertson Street, London, S.W.8.

NEWS SHEET ADDRESSEES

Will any members who have received their News Sheets incorrectly addressed please inform the enveloped addressing service:-

Miss M.K. Thompson, 44, Boleyn Gardens, West Wickham, Kent.

FESTIVAL DANCE

The English Folk Dance and Song Society are presenting a Festival Dance at the SEYMOUR HALL, Seymour Place, W.1. on Thursday, January 6th, 1955. M.C. Nibs Matthews; Donald McBain's Band. Tickets are 7/6 and are obtainable in advance only from Cecil Sharp House. Evening Dress or Festival Dress Optional.

CANFORD SUMMER SCHOOL

Patron: Charlotte, The Lady Bonham Carter.

I have been approached by Noel Hale F.R.A.M., Director of the Canford Summer School of Music with a request for assistance in combining Folk Dancing with the present curriculum of choirs and orchestras.

Naturally I have given Noel all the help in my power and have insisted on a mention of the S.I.F.D. in his advertising prospectus. The school is held at Canford Public School, near Bournemouth. It attracts many of the most notable personalities in music and we hope in future to couple this with folk dancing.

The dancing programme will be International from August 7th for one week and English from August 14th for one week. Further and more complete details will be published later but for now I may mention that the International Week will comprise: Swedish, Danish and Norwegian by Dr. Cyriax; Estonian, Lithuanian and Finnish by Aili Eistrat; Polish, Silesian and Caucasian by Barbara Slawinska. The English will be covered by Thora Jacques:- Morris, Sword, and Country Dancing.

All members not sure what to do for the middle two weeks of August could well consider a holiday combined with folk dancing, music, tennis, swimming, lazing in the beautiful grounds of this ancient public school. Further information later.

Bert Price.

DEMONSTRATION NOTES

We paid a return visit to the Y.W.C.A., Great Russell Street, on Wed. Nov. 17th. The International Club here meet on Wednesdays so as to avoid clashing with our own classes. It was a bit of a rush for the team: we arrived in costume and were hustled on to the floor. The team danced well and we were congratulated in many different languages by young ladies in national costume who were thrilled to see their native dances in our program. We balanced up the all-female evening by going to the Y.M.C.A. also in Great Russell Street on Sat. Nov. 20th. This was also a return visit. The group here is keen if not very skilful. They concentrate mostly on English dances and American Square, but our dances were much appreciated. Again felt the team danced well. Our reception was overwhelming and I had very flattering letters from the organisers.

Again we sent a team to Guildford to dance for the Cancer Aid Fund. I was unable to go this year so I cannot report from first hand. We contributed Swedish, Ukrainian, and, solo, Spanish items, the last danced by Margaret Harris and Charles Steventon. My thanks to all who have helped in this month's demonstrations.

Margery Latham.

LIBRARY

The Library will be opened on Wednesday, January 12th at Carlyle School and will be open every Wednesday thereafter until further notice. This is experimental and the matter will be reviewed after two months. Library membership is open and free to all paid-up members of the S.I.F.D. Books may be taken out on loan for the normal two-weekly period. If books are not returned within that period fines of 3d per week or part thereof will be imposed. Books mislaid, lost or badly damaged must be replaced.

CORRESPONDENCE

Sir,

Your appeal for ideas on how to increase membership of the S.I.F.D. is to me conclusive evidence of what I have thought for a long time, in fact, ever since I joined the Society. That is that the S.I.F.D. members are very unfriendly to strangers, particularly to lone individuals who come along to the Sunday dances hoping to have an enjoyable evening but finding to their disappointment that there are no welcoming smiles for them, that no-one bothers to speak to them and, if of the fair sex, are rarely asked to dance. Admittedly the "Society is not primarily a social club" but you must agree with me that a stranger will not become interested in international dancing if the more experienced dancers stand around the hall in cliques making no effort to have a chat with him and tell him about the aims of the Society and about the classes etc. I have particularly noticed this lack of cordiality at Cecil Sharp House where I think we lose the chance of many prospective members. I am sure that the majority of members were originally introduced by friends but we cannot rely on this source for future membership. It is up to the members of the Society to go out of their way to welcome newcomers.

Yours etc,

Marilyn Paine
London, N.8.

Sir,

Having returned to the dancing fold after a comparatively long absence I am somewhat surprised at the abundance of poor dancing which is apparent at the various classes. People attending are more eager to learn than ever before and they show a remarkable aptitude in so doing, but the majority of people attending the Wed. class at least are without much idea as to steps etc. Basic step and beginners' classes have been tried before and failed. Nevertheless I herewith offer to attempt another such class if the Committee approve. I am aware that time is a difficulty and suggest that $\frac{1}{2}$ - 1 hour before each Wed. class be devoted to steps only; obviously a whole evening each week is preferable but I realise that this is probably impractical and financially unsound.

Secondly may I suggest that the programme is too varied for the normal type of Wed. dancer. If each nationality were given at least two consecutive weeks members would stand more chance of really learning a dance than at present. It has been recognised that it is necessary to hold two Kolo classes each month in order to get anywhere in that field of dance, similarly it strikes me that other nationalities need continuity too.

Yours etc,

Irene Weller,
S.E.3.

MEMBERSHIP COMPETITION

It has been decided to keep this competition open for another month. Therefore entries will now close on January 20th, 1955. For those whose memories are short or have been softened by the recent festivities, we would remind you that a prize of a book token to the value of one guinea will be awarded to the individual who submits the best series of ideas for increasing membership in the coming year. Entries which should be limited to 100 words should be sent to the Editor by January 20th next.

JANUARY PROGRAMME

Carlyle School, Hortensia Road, Chelsea, S.W.10.

Time: 7.30 - 9.30 p.m.

Admission: Tuesdays Members 1/-
& Wednesdays Guests 1/6
Fridays (invited members only 1/6

Music: Mme Barbara Duleba

- Tuesdays Jan. 11 Kolo Class Phillip Thornton
- 18 ~~Swedish~~ rehearsal for Royal Albert Hall
- 25 Kolo Class by Phillip Thornton.
- Wednesdays: Jan. 12: Danish Class by Irene Weller
- 19: " " " " "
- 26: French Class by Ken Ward
- Fridays: Jan. 14: General Class by Bert Price
- 21: Swedish Class by Dr. Cyriax.
- 28: Ukrainian Class by Irene Weller

SUNDAYS:

Cecil Sharp House, Sunday, January 30th.

Music: The Wallace Collection M.C. Bert Price.

A notice will be sent to all members about other Sunday dances within the next few days.

INVITATION TO A PARTY

The Harrow Green Folk Dancing Group extends an invitation to all members of the S.I.F.D. to come to their Christmas-cum-New Years Party on Wednesday, January 12th, at 7.30 p.m., Trumpington Road School, Ramsay Road, Forest Gate. Nearest Station: Leyton.

PROGRAMME

- Monday January 3rd: Silesian
- 17th: Balkan: Phillip Thorton
- 31st: Balkan: Phillip Thorton
- Wednesday, January 5th: Lithuanian - Ruth Sharp
- 12th: PARTY
- 19th: Austrian - Eileen McGrath
- 26th: Estonian - Barbara Mannock

A sincere apology is herewith offered for both the latness and the reproduction of this months "NEWSHEET". Both are the fault of spiritually willing but fleshly-weak two-finger, hunt-and-peck typist.

HENLEY-ON-THAMES There will be a further week-end at Thamesfield on February 12-13th. The charge is 15/9 (Saturday tea to Sunday tea, inclusive). Send your depository of 3/6 as soon as possible to Jack Richardson (16, Hoodcote Gardens, N.21)