**Sharp, Cecil James (b. 22 November 1859, London, England; d. 23 June 1924, London, England)**

**Summary**

In the short span of about fifteen years in the early twentieth century, Cecil James Sharp ignited a folk revival in country song and dance in both England and the United States that would shape the revivalist song and dance movements into the twenty-first century. The most renowned and prolific folk song and dance collector of his day, Sharp also rediscovered, transcribed and notated the several hundred dances of *The English* *Dancing Master* published by John Playford starting in 1651, a corpus that became the core curriculum of a transatlantic revival in English Country Dance. Ironically, Sharp mobilized anti-modern folk traditions for a modernist project. Imagining the ‘folk’ – simple rural villagers – as carriers of a pristine, idyllic culture, he celebrated English folk song and dance as ‘authentic’ Englishness, as a way of Anglicizing migrants and immigrants to urban life. Occasionally omitting behaviour (e.g., kissing) or language that challenged his sense of propriety, he took the dances and songs of the ‘peasantry’ and reproduced them as a modern middle-class alternative to the popular culture he associated with the music hall. **Early Career**

Sharp, with no formal training in music, led the English revival in folk song and dance in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As an educator (he was principal of the Hampstead Conservatoire of Music), Sharp sought songs to engage and uplift young people. In response to the influx of largely rural migrants and immigrants to turn-of-the-century cities, Sharp’s teaching also was a nationalist project to inculcate ‘respectful’ Englishness. To this end, Sharp embraced anti-modern rural folk traditions, which he imagined (incorrectly) as ‘peasant’, but mobilized them to transform immigrants into modern urban subjects.

Sharp began collecting morris dance and traditional dances of the West Country and Midlands, but took a new direction when he discovered the British Library volumes of *The* *English Dancing Master* published by John Playford starting in 1651. During his career, he also collected nearly 5,000 tunes, typically from poor, rural informants who were vastly different from him. An indefatigable collector, Sharp, who often treated his folk revival competitors badly, was both inspiring to and notably respectful of his informants. His achievement as a folk song and dance collector, and as the leader and inspiration for folk dance in both the UK and US, is unparalleled.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

Sharp’s interpretations gave the modern body in folk dance distinct bourgeois class and gender markers. He and his middle-class allies worried about what they saw as moral and physical dangers for young women and men in un-chaperoned popular dance and music halls with vertiginous and intimate tango and ragtime animal dances. Sharp popularized the Playford social dances as a ‘respectable’ alternative and authorized their ‘authenticity’ through performances by his demonstration team and the policies he implemented as inaugural director of the English Folk Dance Society and director of the influential Stratford Summer School for folk dance. In these roles he dismissed his rivals; in particular, Sharp ridiculed the verticality and athleticism of A. Claud Wright and youthful enthusiasm he saw as lack of discipline in Mary Neal’s Esperance working-class girls, who were young seamstresses in Neal’s St. Pancreas settlement house. In claiming the folk dance mantle, Sharp transmitted instead a more constrained, disciplined body with physical contact limited to holding hands.

**Legacy**

Scholarly debate over the nature of Sharp’s legacy has focussed on the ‘authenticity’ or inventedness animating his transmission of English folk culture. Until the 1980s, Sharp’s devoted followers kept his flame burning bright. The modern English country dance choreographer Pat Shaw has subsequently challenged Sharp’s interpretations, and critiques by folklorist-anthropologists have debunked Sharp’s primitivist construction of the folk. In this context, *Fakesong*, David Harker’s 1985 revisionist book placed Sharp and the revivalists in the historical context of industrial modernization, linking collecting practices with the personal selection strategies of the collector and the oral transmitter. Subsequently, Georgina Boyes detailed how gender as much as class anxieties animated Sharp’s behavior and view of the dancing body. In turn, C.L. Bearman, in defence of Sharp, has derided the revisionists as leftist ideologues. Downplaying the historical context for the revivalists’ work, Sharp’s new defenders have detailed the critics’ factual errors and reasserted the authenticity of Sharp’s interviews. In rebuttal, Vic Gammon has assessed Sharp’s ‘aesthetic Darwinism’ and commitment to ‘national regeneration’ to pinpoint the modern politics of Sharp and the revival he led.

A folk dance revival in the post-Second World War era spawned a transatlantic appreciation of Sharp’s work that extended into the second half of the twentieth century. Vaughan Williams, one of England’s leading composers of the twentieth century (and Sharp’s friend) collaborated with Sharp’s demonstration dancer, the composer John Butterworth, to use the tunes Sharp recovered in their compositions. The resurgence of interest in folk dance continued to be felt after Sharp’s death in the folk-influenced concert dances of American choreographers such as Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Sophie Maslow, Doris Humphrey and Helen Tamaris.

**List of works**

*Book of British Song for Home and School* (1902)

*Folk Songs from Somerset*, with C. L. Marson (1904-06)

*English Folk-Songs for Schools,* with S. Baring-Gould (1905)

*English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (1907)

*The Morris Book*, with H. C. MacIlwaine and G. Butterworth, 5 pts. (1907-14)

*The Country Dance Book*, 6 pts. (1909-22)

*The Sword Dances of Northern England,* 3 pts*. (*1911-13)

*English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, 2 vols., with Olive Dame Campbell(1917)

**References and Further Reading**

Bearman, C. J. (2002) ‘Cecil Sharp in Somerset: some reflections on the work of David Harker’, *Folklore* 113 (April): 11-34.

Gammon, V. (2003) ‘Cecil Sharp and English Folk Music’, in *Still Growing: English Traditional Songs and Singers from the Cecil Sharp Collection*, London: English Folk Dance and Song Society, 2-22.

Harker, D. (1985) *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British Folk Song, 1700 to the present day*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Karpeles, M. (rev. ed., 1967) *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Walkowitz, D. J. (2010) *City Folk: English Country Dance and the Politics of the Folk in Modern America*, New York: New York University Press.

**Archives**

Sharp, C. J. *Diary, Lectures, Miscellaneous Papers,* London: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, [*library.efdss.org/cgi/bin/sharpdiaries.cgi*](http://library.efdss.org/cgi/bin/sharpdiaries.cgi)*.* The library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society has placed Sharp’s diaries and most of his papers on line.

Daniel J. Walkowitz, Ph.D.

**Paratextual Material**

There are many images of Sharp, all owned by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House in London. The Librarian, Malcolm Taylor, will provide permission, typically at a low cost, if at all.

The classic image is below.

