## Folk Dancing by Erica M. Nielsen

reviewed by Tony Parkes

Erica M. Nielsen. <u>Folk Dancing</u>. Series: The American Dance Floor (Ralph G. Giordano, series editor). Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2011. xx + 153 pages, 23 illustrations. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-313-37688-9 (\$35.00); E-book: ISBN 978-0-313-37689-4 (\$19.25).

FOLK DANCING

ERICA NIELSEN

The term "folk dance" in American English is often taken to mean international dance. If your main interest is contra, square, or English country dance, you might well pass over Erica Nielsen's new book after seeing its title. You would be making a big mistake, as Folk Dancing deals with all these forms and their place in American recreational dance history—and for the most part, deals with them quite well.

Nielsen's aim is at once generic and specific. In one slim volume she treats several dance forms, each of which alone could easily fill a much larger book. But she keeps the task manageable by focusing on folk dance as recreation in schools and community groups. Thus, you will not find much about the origins of folk, square, and contra dance, or more than a few words about their choreographic evolution. But there is a wealth of information about how and why these dances were revived, who promoted them, and to whom they were taught.

It may come as a revelation to some readers that the revivals of the three dance forms are closely intertwined. The nationwide square dance revival that began in the 1920s was a direct outgrowth of the promotion

of English country dance and European folk dance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And of course, the contra dance revival that continues to this day had its roots in the square dance scene of the 1940s and 1950s, when Ralph Page's work inspired Dudley Laufman. These facts are well known to dance historians, but Nielsen may be the first to present the big picture concisely to a lay audience.

Nielsen briefly enumerates the European dances that gave rise to today's squares and contras and to the early international folk dance repertoire. She describes the origins of the folk dance movement among educators and social reformers in the late nineteenth century, the successive revivals (folk, square, contra) of the twentieth, and the large

recreational dance communities that coalesced around these forms. Seeing different dance styles as equally valid expressions of the human need for recreation and connection, Nielsen makes no judgments of their relative merits.

The book has been a labor of love for Nielsen: she immersed herself in the folk dance world for three years, doing research in libraries and at dance events

nationwide. She conducted hundreds of interviews and consulted many books, including some of the latest and best. As a result, her work strikes a nice balance between "book larnin" and first-hand acquaintance. Unlike some previous authors who based their suppositions on the views of a few opinionated leaders, Nielsen has talked to enough people to develop a well-rounded picture of the recreational dance world.

Sources are cited for a large percentage of the author's statements; I would have liked to see even more of her assertions substantiated, but she has taken more care in this respect than many of her predecessors. Some of her conclusions (and even some of her facts) are open to question, but the book makes no pretense of being a primary source, and one would hope

Alas, Nielsen's publisher has not served her well. There is at least one error on nearly every page, and multiple errors on many. Names are misspelled, dates and locations are wrong (Pinewoods Camp is placed in western Massachusetts), words are missing or repeated, spaces between words are doubled or omitted. This would be annoying in an \$8 paperback; it is hard to excuse in a \$35 hardcover that aspires to be a college text. Most of this housekeeping is the publisher's job; even when the author is at fault, the publisher ought to allow time for repairs. This book shows signs of having been rushed into print; if it sells well enough to justify reprinting, Nielsen should demand a thorough edit.

Do I recommend *Folk Dancing*? As a source to be cited by future researchers—no. As an overview of

twentieth century group dance for the interested layperson—definitely. Nielsen has gone where scholars fear to tread, and emerged nearly unscathed.

(Full disclosure: I am listed in the Preface as one who enhanced the author's understanding of square dance, and I appear briefly in the contra dance chapter. I am also a professional proofreader and copyeditor.)

Tony Parkes is the author of <u>Contra Dance</u> <u>Calling: A Basic Text</u>.

Erica Nielsen has been busy dancing and selling books on several book/folk dance tours the last few months; read about her travels on her blog. She'll be in New England this spring selling books and giving a presentation about square dance at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference in Boston, April 11-14, and she and her husband plan to visit regional dances as much as possible; her schedule is on her blog.