

Tell Me More

by Graham Christian

“Tell Me More,” a mini-column about English country dance titles, by dance leader Graham Christian, has been in the CDSS News since 2005.

In English country dance, we often hear questions like these from dancers: “What is the origin of this dance? What does the name of the dance mean?” As the notes to Keller and Shimer’s *Playford Ball** show, English country dances were rich with topical allusion, and gained in meaning by pointed reference to contemporary persons, political events and popular entertainment. Tell Me More will try to address these questions on the basis of recent research, enriching our dance experience by deepening our knowledge of the original contexts of dances of lasting appeal.

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Titles (in order of publication):

Sion House
Anna Maria
Beggar Boy
Red House
Mrs. Savage’s Whim
The Siege of Limerick
Lord of Carnarvon’s Jigg
Orange Nan
Spanish Jigg

Sion House

Syon House (sic) is an English manor with a long and varied history: it was originally the site of the Bridgettine Syon Abbey, one of the last great monastic foundations in England; their last Father Confessor died unpleasantly for refusing to acknowledge Henry VIII’s supremacy over the Church in England. It was at Syon that Jane Grey, daughter-in-law of the then-owner, accepted the crown of England, which she famously bore for only nine days. It later passed to the Percy family, the Earls of Northumberland, who still own it. For the purposes of the dance, I think the key historical moment occurs during the Civil War, when the then-Earl, known for his neutrality, acted as governor to the Duke of York, later to become James II. “Sion House” appeared in 1686, during James’ brief reign (1685-1688), in the seventh edition of *The Dancing Master*.

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Anna Maria

The dance Anna Maria first appears in the ninth edition of *The Dancing Master* in 1695. There was a famous bearer of the name on the Continent, the crushingly learned feminist Anna Maria von Schurman (1607-1678), but I suspect that our Anna Maria was Anna Maria Brudenell (1642-1702),

the daughter of the second Earl of Cardigan. She married the eleventh Earl of Shrewsbury in 1659. He died in 1668 from wounds received in a duel with her lover, George Villiers, the second Duke of Buckingham. According to rumor, Anna Maria attended the duel dressed as a page and held Buckingham's horse. She was forced to break off her affair with Buckingham in 1673 after her son's trustees petitioned the House of Lords (whether because she was embarrassing the family name or because she was drawing too heavily on her son's inheritance sources do not specify: more likely the latter). She promptly entered a convent in Paris in 1674, but returned to England the following year, and by 1677 had married a George Rodney Bridges of Somerset. Anna Maria would have been in her fifties by the time the dance appeared in print, but her beauty remained proverbial well into the eighteenth century. And of course, we don't know by how long the dance's creation preceded its publication—there's nothing about it that says it couldn't have been a dance of the late 1670s. Anna Maria has always struck me as one of those people it's better to know from a distance—at least arm's length; several miles rather better.

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Beggar Boy

Dance historians believe that some early English country dances originated in court entertainments or stage productions, while some made reference to contemporary politics or social life. It seems to me that The Beggar Boy, that lovely set dance with its haunting tune which appeared in the first edition of Playford's *Dancing Master* (or, as it was then called, *The English Dancing Master*) in 1651, may partake of a bit of all of these. In 1640, the Cockpit Theatre was closed for three days for staging Richard Brome's play *The Court Begger* (spelled thus at publication), which treated recent political and social trends in a satirical manner. The specific butt of Brome's satire is what was then called "the projector," what we might now call a speculator or entrepreneur. The last act of Brome's play makes extensive use of music and social dance, including a kind of pseudo-masque in which a Boy (a servant) and a chambermaid take the parts of Cupid and Venus, and several of the principal characters dance together. While the complex plot resolves in the foreground, "the revelers" dance first a dance they have designed themselves, then "Sellengers Round or the like," and then a dance in which five men exhibit themselves to win the hand of a merry widow who joins them for a final dance. In one of these dances, the other characters tear off the outer layers of the projectors' clothing to reveal ragged clothing beneath—hence their genuine "beggary." It is very likely that The Begger-Boy, as it was titled in 1651, had its origins in this play: Brome himself may have devised the dance, since the Epilogue to *The Court Begger* says that he "has made merry pretty jigges that ha' pleas'd a many." Interestingly, the appearance of this dance may have restimulated public interest in Brome, who had struggled in poverty since the closing of the theatres in 1642; his final play, staged in 1641, was at last published the year after *The English Dancing Master*. Brome died in 1652, and *The Court Begger* was printed again with other plays in 1653, lending a renewed currency and poignancy to The Begger-Boy.

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Red House

One of the dances selected by Helen and Douglas Kennedy for their *Country Dance Book, New Series* of 1929 was Red House, which appeared in the ninth edition of *The Dancing Master*. Among the old dances, Red House is remarkably equal in its action, with its partner "chases" initiated by first man and then by first woman and its sequential heys—all motivated by a driving A-minor tune.

But what of the title? A recent gazetteer of the British Isles lists almost a dozen places of this name, most of them easily ancient enough to make them candidates, not to mention innumerable pubs and even the homestead of designer William Morris (far too late for our purposes). The prime clue to the dance's origins may lie not in its name but in its tune. In 1716, the Venetian choreographer Gregorio Lambranzi published—in Nuremberg—a book entitled *Neue und Curieuse*

Theatricalische Tantz-Schul, which showed, with beautifully engraved plates throughout, many scenarios of the *Commedia dell'Arte*: the eighteenth and nineteenth plates show the tune for Red House above four comic dancers. The tune, then, may well have come from the *Commedia*—but again, why Red House? Where the *Commedia* was well established, as in Venice and many other places around Italy, it often used quite elaborate scenic effects, but when the players had to travel, they almost invariably used “flats” on each side that depicted houses of red brick, to suggest those respectable establishments that the players’ antics would soon turn upside down. The creator of Red House, then, may well have seen one of the traveling troupes of the *Commedia* and borrowed one of the repertoire’s best tunes and one of its visual trademarks for a dance that adapted the comic pranks of the Italian Comedy for the social dancers of William and Mary’s England.

(*CDSS News*, issue #188, January/February 2006)

Mrs. Savage’s Whim

One of the dances interpreted and presented by Bernard Bentley for his first *Fallibroome* collection in the early 1960s was this dance, which originated in the second volume of *Playford’s Dancing Master* in 1710. The figures were not new—they had appeared as early as 1698 with a Purcell tune from his semi-opera *Bonduca*—but the tune was, and the title gave the whole an aroma of society *scandale*.

The Savage family history is peppered with noteworthy—and notorious—women, including Elizabeth Savage, Countess Rivers, who flung a box with her treasured pearls into a pond to keep them from angry Parliamentarian rioters, as well as Anne Gerard, mistress of the fourth Earl Rivers, and probable mother of the poet Richard Savage. By far the likeliest Mistress Savage, circa 1710, however, is Elizabeth Savage, daughter of the fourth Earl, who eloped with James Barry, fourth Earl Barrymore in 1706.

The distinctive movements of the dance, with its fickle gestures toward three different dancers in quick succession, must have seemed an apt illustration of the fibs and false promises of elopement and secret marriage, and surely must have come to seem prophetic of Barrymore’s career, who, after Elizabeth’s death in 1714, went on to be viewed as one of the most double-dealing politicians in England: only his advanced age spared him from trial and probable execution in 1745, after the failure of Charles Edward Stuart’s attempt to seize the English Crown.

(*CDSS News*, issue #189, March/April 2006)

The Siege of Limerick

Few English country dances have stories as rich as this longtime favorite of many an annual ball and weekly series, best known in Cecil Sharp’s interpretation of 1922. The tune by Henry Purcell first appeared as part of the incidental music for *The Prophetess*, a big budget musical spectacle with many special effects that enlivened the London stage in 1690. The play itself was an adaptation of a seventy year old work by Fletcher and Massinger, and the renovated version included some very pointed satirical jabs about the current government’s policy toward Ireland.

There was not one siege of Limerick, but two: the first a heartening victory for the Irish loyal to the deposed King James II, and the second a defeat ending in surrender and, for many, exile. The hero of both actions was the dashing Patrick Sarsfield, first Earl of Lucan, who fled to France with his very young wife, Honora de Burgo, and continued to serve King James in France until his death in 1693.

The after-career of his widow reads like romantic fiction. Credited—perhaps in exaggeration—with introducing “les contredanses anglaises” to the French court and hailed as “the first flower of her generation...a nymph,” she fell into dire poverty in the town of Huy, where her husband had died. The young Duke of Berwick happened to see her and her infant son and, struck by her famous beauty, fell in love with her and took her son under his protection. They were married in

1695, the very year this dance appeared in Playford's *Dancing Master*. The Siege of Limerick, like so many dances in the English country dance tradition, is the centerpoint of a knot of politics, destiny, art and love—a complex tribute to an Irish heroine of English dance.

(*CDSS News*, issue #190, May/June 2006)

Lord of Carnarvon's Jigg

This spirited dance for four couples, which appeared in print with the first edition of Playford in 1651, owes its name to Robert Dormer, first Earl of Carnarvon (1610-1643). Carnarvon married into the very wealthy and influential family of the earl of Pembroke, and he is one of the few figures from English country dance to have been depicted by a great painter: he is visible at the right of Anthony van Dyck's group portrait of the Pembroke family, the very picture of a standard-bearer of the *jeunesse dorée* [fashionable and wealthy young people].

When the war came, Carnarvon declared for the King, and was an able and effective commander. After enjoying success at the Battle of Newbury, he rather imprudently returned by some of the Parliamentary forces, where one of the soldiers recognized him and ran him through with a sword. The earl of Clarendon, who wrote the definitive contemporary history of the war, extolled Carnarvon as having devoted himself with as much zeal to soldiery as he had formerly given to travel, hunting, hawking and "the looser exercises of pleasure." Neither the dance's original tune nor Jack-a-Lent with which Cecil Sharp paired it for his interpretation in the third volume of *The Country Dance Book* in 1912, is a jig by our lights, not being in 6/8 time, but the word "jig," in the seventeenth century, meant principally a lively dance or fidgeting movement. The simplicity of this dance's figure, as contrasted to the complexity of dances such as Faine I Would and Lulle Me Beyond Thee from the same collection, suggests a great deal about the energetic and pleasure-loving character of the young man who inspired it, and its publication eight years after the earl's death must have been occasion for an especially poignant kind of joy.

(*CDSS News*, issue #191, July/August 2006)

Orange Nan

One of the most charming historical dances interpreted and presented in recent years by Andrew Shaw is Orange Nan, which appeared in Walsh's *Twenty-Four New Country-Dances, For the Year 1713*, published in 1712, and later taken into the *Second Volume of the Dancing-Master* by John Young. "Orange" refers not to the color of her hair or her clothing, but to her profession—one of them. "Orange-girls," licensed purveyors of fruits and confections, were one of the most colorful features of Restoration theatre. They stood with their backs to the action on stage and hawked their wares rather like modern hotdog vendors or cigarette girls, sometimes competing wittily with the actors for the audience's ear. By far the most famous of the orange-girls was Nell Gwyn, who rose from her place as the employee of "Orange Moll" to actress to mistress of the King himself. Most orange-girls also offered other services to gentlemen for a fee. Orange Nan's name, for instance, turns up in the third issue of a short-lived periodical called *The Wandering Whore* in 1660 among the "common whores," where she jostles for attention with the likes of "Black Bess" (the dedicatee of another dance), "Fair Rosamond" and "Mrs. Bliss." Since Nan would have been at least in her later sixties by 1712, this sweet dance may have been a tribute to her memory—or dedicated to the inheritor of her title, the next Anne or Nancy to delight theatregoers with the fruits of her beauty and wit.

(*CDSS News*, issue #192, September/October 2006)

* *The Playford Ball: 103 Early English Country Dances*, by Kate Van Winkle Keller and Genevieve Shimer, Country Dance and Song Society, 1994 (a collection of classic country dances of seventeenth and eighteenth century England; includes historical interpretations and notes, original instructions

and tunes; ordering information: www.cdss.org/sales.)

Spanish Jigg

This pleasing and straightforward longways dance, with its easygoing jig tune, dates from 1695, and we know it today through Douglas and Helen Kennedy's interpretation in *Country Dance Book New Series* (1929), as well as Jim Morrison's interpretation, recently republished in *Legacy*. Throughout the period of English country dance's first great wave of popularity, the English were at best ambivalent about the Spanish, their most formidable rivals in exploration and international trade, but also arbiters of fashion and artistic style—some scholars even assign a Spanish origin to England's morris dance. The Spanish Jigg likely is to be closely connected with Thomas D'Urfey's *Comical History of Don Quixote* from 1694, the hugely successful first English stage adaptation of Cervantes' smash bestselling novel from earlier in the century. While this tune does not appear in the songbooks published in association with the stage production, it is precisely the sort of dance that would have been performed by the actors in the drama between acts or at the show's conclusion, and its publication for the social dance market the following year capitalized on the show's hit status.

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