

PART ONE

Anti-Racism and the Folk Revival

By Ezra Fischer

This piece was written and published online by long-time CDSS member, Ezra Fischer. It has been split into two pieces and abridged. This first half is an analysis of the history of the first folk revival and Cecil Sharp. The second half, which will be published in the winter issue of the CDSS News focuses on how our history informs our present and should influence our future. Can't wait? The essay is published in full at ezrafischer.com.

George Floyd's murder and the protests it sparked have forced people to ask themselves important and uncomfortable questions about race and racism. Communities big and small, including some traditional dance teams, have issued statements of solidarity. My team, Still River Sword, met to discuss the issue. We quickly agreed that we wanted to donate money to organizations working for racial justice, issue a statement expressing our beliefs as a group, and invite other teams to match our donation. That was the easy part. The hard part was agreeing on a statement. In particular, we had a range of beliefs about the history of our tradition. To what extent was it racist or white supremacist? How important is it to explicitly recognize any past racism in our statement? Would making provocative claims about our community's past harm our ability to raise money in the present? Is it more important to raise money or to invite other groups to have the same tough conversation that we were having?

In the days after we first met, I did some research and decided to write about what I learned. As members of the wider folk music and dance world, I encourage you to work within your own communities to start similar conversations. My hope is that this can be a helpful companion piece to those discussions. My conclusion is that being members of our particular folk tradition means we do need to be explicit about our past and the ways in which that past continues to affect our present in order to begin to be anti-racist in the future. Here's why.

Modern longsword, morris, rapper, and English country dance traditions stem from a single cultural movement. The most important figure in that movement was arguably Cecil Sharp. Sharp is fairly well known, and I won't try to recap his entire biography here. He went into English towns and collected folk songs and dances. He also came to the United States and traveled through Appalachia, where he again collected songs. His analysis was that these songs were of English origin and had, in the wild mountains of America, been preserved in an earlier form even than those he collected in England.

The context of Sharp's collecting is important. He collected at a time of rapid change in both England and the United States. Both societies were rapidly industrializing and urbanizing. England was involved in the start of imperial competition that would eventually lead to World War I. The United States was at the tail end of the largest wave of immigration in its history.

Sharp and the first folk revival were not music and dance enthusiasts unaffected by their political context. Quite the opposite. The folk revival was a political act. Sharp was a Fabian—a political group in English politics that promoted social reform for the purposes of imperialism. Although this may seem like a strange combination of beliefs, it's not dissimilar from Progressive era beliefs in the United States. We remember the Progressive era for social reform in the areas of education, medicine, and government but it had a dark side as well, including restriction of further immigration and the cementing of demeaning ethnic stereotypes. Similarly, Fabianism mixed a concern for the quality of life of the working class with a determined defense of what they saw as English national and racial purity.

The effort of Sharp and his peers to collect and popularize music and dance had their core motivation in the politics of their time. In fact, the more I read about this, the more I see politics as the primary driver and music as the vessel. In his history of music in the context of the British military during World War I, Nicholas Hiley explains this:

According to Sharp, the peasant had not been touched by the development of urban culture, with its international influences, and thus remained a repository of racial characteristics and a possible source of inspiration for a truly English musical style.

(Ploughboys and Soldiers: the folk song and the gramophone in the British Expeditionary Force 1914-1918 by Nicholas Hiley, Page 63)

Gavin James Campbell, in *Music and the Making of the New South* makes the slightly subtle racism of the phrase, “truly English style” clear as a bell:

[Sharp] asserted that the “national type is always to be found in its purest, as well as in its most stable and permanent form, in the folk-arts of a nation,” but if there were no folk arts, there could be no “national type.” Sharp blamed immigration and modernization for destroying Anglo-Saxon folk traditions, and he recommended that public schools teach “the folksongs and folk-ballads of the race” so that children could “as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance. The songs would, he explained, “arouse that love of country and pride of race, the absence of which we now deplore.” In Sharp’s mind, racial identity and folk music were inseparable, and his commitment to the ballads was both personal and patriotic.

(Music and the Making of a New South by Gavin James Campbell, Page 110)

Sharp saw folk music as a way to solidify the white English Anglo-Saxon people and to stave off the threatening influence of the other. To be clear, this analysis is not the product of modern attitudes being imposed on historical events and people. Sharp’s motivations were no secret at the time. The New York Times covered a memorial for Sharp shortly after his death in 1924 and summarized his career like this:

Cecil Sharp’s work of rescuing the folk songs and folk dances was practically completed before his much regretted death last year...they came into it just in time to save what there was, for the conditions of modern life were steadily obliterating the love and knowledge of the old songs...

In the Appalachians, as in the English countryside, Sharp was fortunate in the hour of his approach. The end is coming in the Southern mountains as it is in the English counties... the irresistible oncoming of the coal miners and the timber hewers and other industrial evangelists, tend to kill the singing of the old songs and the dancing of the old dances. Music hall ditties, “[racial slur] songs” as manufactured on Broadway, fox trots and jazz generally take the places of them.

(“An English Folk Song and Folk Dance Memorial to the Late Cecil Sharp” New York Times, June 14, 1925, by Richard Aldrich)

However real Sharp’s interest in music was, and I believe it was real and significant, his political motivations drove his action and converted them into active racism. Here, narrated by Michael Yates, is an illustrative example from Sharp’s travels in the United States. It contains excerpts from Sharp’s diary and the diary of his colleague, Maud Karpeles:

On 1st August Sharp felt that the time had come for another move, this time back to Kentucky.

It now seems clear that this piece of country had ‘advanced’ too far on the down grade towards sophistication and that we are wasting our time and money in staying here.

There may, however, have been other factors which influenced Sharp in his decision:

We tramped—mainly uphill. When we reached the cove we found it peopled by [racial slur] ... All our troubles and spent energy for nought.

Maud Karpeles described the same encounter in slightly greater detail:

We arrived at a cove and got sight of log cabins that seemed just what we wanted. Called at one. A musical ‘Good Morning’, turned round and behold he was a negro. We had struck a negro settlement. Nothing for it but to toil back again.

(“Cecil Sharp in America: collecting in the Appalachians” by Michael Yates. Berwick-upon-Tweed. 23.12.99)

What is important here is not the use of the slur but rather that Sharp and Karpeles were actively ignoring the music of Black people. Again, context is important. Cultural genocide was an active part of chattel slavery in the U.S.. Enslaved people were intentionally separated from members of their own groups when they arrived and were restricted from singing or playing music except in churches that they were forced to attend. Ignoring Black musicians and claiming that the music they heard from white people was some kind of pure version of English music is a continuation of what slavery began.

As long ago as this history is, it is not remote. The second half of this piece, which will be published in the next CDSS News, explores some of the ways in which elements of Sharp’s political and racial motivation have become integral parts of our folk traditions and communities and how we should respond.