

Introduction

This book has been growing and developing in my head for over thirty years, although I was not really aware of what I was embarking on when I first began collecting and sorting primary materials. At the outset I started gathering snippets of source materials unsystematically just for the fun of having the information. What I really wanted was a great big book that had the whole history of morris dancing laid out in it in exquisite detail, backed up with copious exotic quotations, my odds and ends of data being a poor substitute for me until the real thing should show up. Quite early in the process of collecting I realized that the book I was looking for did not exist, but it was only about ten years ago that I decided that I had to write it myself. Thus, what I have done here is to write just exactly the kind of book that, had I not written it, I would love to read and reread.

Yet in a strange sense I did not exactly write the book. Other scholars will understand me when I say that great sections of this book wrote themselves, with me simply acting as the vehicle for getting the ideas on paper. The fact is that the primary sources tell their own story when they are probed deeply enough. What I have tried to do here is put those sources together in a way that they belong naturally, and put a framework around them so that they can tell their own story.

It was the sources themselves that first pulled me away from that old chestnut, ‘What are the origins of morris dancing?’ — which is not a very good question anyway — to the much more interesting study of how morris dances have evolved and developed over the centuries. In fact, trying to discover the ‘origins’ of any longstanding and complex tradition is undoubtedly a lost cause from the outset.

Most important, the problem of ‘origins’ is almost impossible to formulate in such a way that makes sense. What counts as the ‘origin’ of any traditional custom? Is there such a thing as an ancestorless ancestor? What criteria does the scholar use to say, ‘Further back I need not go’? And even if these questions had answers, what ultimately would be the point in finding some remote forebear of painting eggs at

Easter or hanging up mistletoe at Christmas? We cannot justifiably argue that people paint eggs at Easter, for example, *because* the egg was sacred to Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. This is patently not true. Most people have never heard of Eostre. There may be a temporal link between the two but not a causal one. There may be cultural links as well – the egg can symbolize regeneration and renewal for the modern Christian and the pagan of antiquity – but there are as many differences in the meanings of the customs of the two eras as similarities.

Modern anthropologists and folklorists avoid the problem of origins by focusing their efforts on discovering the meaning of contemporary customs (the ‘texts’) by virtue of their place in their current social and cultural milieu (the ‘context’). This text-in-context approach has been extraordinarily successful in exploring the riches of symbolic behaviour, but just because of its evident achievements we need not tip the balance all the way to one side, concentrating all our energy on the present to the complete exclusion of the past. There is a considerable theoretical and methodological difference between seeking *the* origin of custom and tracing its development over time.

Nor need a developmental approach to customs be at odds with the text-in-context school; on the contrary, it can benefit from the methods. There is no theoretical impediment to studying the role of eggs at Easter in 1990, 1890, 1790 ... and so on (or 1990, 1980, 1970 ...) as far back as one wishes to go, noting changes in the ‘texts’ and ‘contexts’ along the way, and perhaps suggesting mechanisms to explain the changes. Such an approach must inevitably provide fresh insights into the nature of customs and their role in society, and contribute to a better understanding of human history. Many anthropologists do this as a matter of course, returning to the field at regular intervals so as to add a temporal dimension to their works.

In analysing customs developmentally the problem is not theoretical but empirical: the data simply do not exist, at least not in any convenient form. The would-be student of Easter egg history has too many gaps to fill between 1990 and 599 AD to make the project more than a speculative fantasy. To be sure there is a glimpse here or there – maybe a diary entry made by a visiting prelate from Rome in 1520 noting an example of egg rolling on his perambulations, or a line in a domestic account book for 1635 for egg dye – but these are paltry in comparison with the ocean of ignorance.

Such was the case for morris dancing in Britain for most of this century. The date of the earliest reference to a dance called ‘morris’ has long been set at 1458, but data for the next 500 years are sparse and hard to come by, with almost all the detailed information belonging to the period 1890 onward. Thus, attempts in the past to recreate anything approximating a developmental history have been woven from fine gossamers indeed. To rectify the data shortfall I began to rationalize my collection of odds and ends into a formal database of all known primary sources,

whatever their quality or size. After several years of conflating bibliographies, searching old documents, and scanning likely texts, it became clear that a complete listing from 1458 to the present was beyond my individual resources; the period would have to be divided up somehow.

In the end it was the source materials themselves that suggested a chronological division in the middle of the eighteenth century. After around 1750 the dances and their contexts described in the sources tend to be like the forms that are familiar to contemporary researchers. Prior to that time they are generally quite different, even though some strands are reasonably continuous. Basically the dances prior to 1750 are considerably more diverse in form and context than those afterwards. Thus began the 'Early Morris Archive and Database' – a listing and bibliography of all sources from 1458 to 1750. In the process of compiling sources I discovered that Michael Heaney of the Bodleian Library was attempting something similar, and so we pooled our resources and worked jointly to produce *Annals of Early Morris* (Heaney and Forrest 1991).

Although primary sources will no doubt continue to trickle in forever (right now they appear at the rate of about one per month), it is clear that the archive is comprehensive enough to begin the task of creating a developmental history of morris dancing that is founded on a solid base of primary materials, and not, as in the past, dependent more on imagination than on empirical substance.

Because of these data riches I can set certain critical goals for the current work. First, I can avoid all anachronistic analysis. It has been common in past histories to use descriptions of the dance from one era to flesh out sources from another. This approach would be legitimate only if it could be definitively proven that the dance had not changed from century to century, but because *changes* in the dance are the principal subject of inquiry, it is ruled out. All data are to be rigorously confined to supporting descriptions and analyses within appropriate time periods. Second, I can generalize concerning dance forms without being simplistic. In some eras the data suggest a complex picture, and I intend to explore this picture without the kind of harmful reduction that eliminates inconvenient data for the sake of a neat hypothesis.

Beyond these methodological aims my concerns are straightforward. I wish to chart the flow of dance ideas in time and space. Most particularly I wish to document the passage of dance ideas between groups of people who are conventionally thought of as quite distinct when talking about folk customs. There is no question that in the sixteenth century, for example, dance ideas passed between nobles and peasants. The study of the mechanism for the transmission of these ideas, and how they were changed in the process, ought to be of intrinsic interest to all historians.

Yet this study is much more than an exploration of the diffusion of a dance. To begin with, even a cursory examination of the database shows that there was

never a time when one could speak of *the* morris dance (nor is this true today). Under the rubric morris' have been included solo jigs, country dances for couples, maypole dances, sword fighting dances, and mimes, to name a few. Thus a simple analysis of the geographic spread of 'morris' would not be appropriate. Rather, what is needed is a detailed investigation of the evolution of each dance idea and how these strands affected one another. Furthermore, a simple spatial diffusion model would miss the critical importance of the social contexts of the dances, which varied from royal courts to village streets, but not in absolute correlation with dance types. There were probably at least three different morris dance types performed on the stage in the early seventeenth century, for example.

Following the many threads and their contexts reveals a rich tapestry woven into England's history and, just as important, elaborates and often challenges a number of cherished ideas concerning English culture at critical junctures. Therefore, this work spreads its analytic and empirical net well beyond the mere recounting of the evolution of choreographic forms. It is often necessary to delve deeply into the form and function of the contexts of the dances in order to understand fully the ways the dances are structured into these contexts, and to gain further clues from this contextual information concerning the nature of the dances. As such, the work is as much about the social history of dance contexts as of the dances themselves.

Above all these specific goals, I wish to use the fine-grained details of the developmental history of morris dancing as a case study for reflections on a much more general and analytic plane concerning the cultural transmission of ideas over time and space, evolution in the arts and aesthetic forms, the sources of creativity and innovation in culture, and the interplay between aesthetics and other arenas of cultural life. These reflections permeate the work and are drawn together at the end. My hope is to show, in principle, how the most exacting dissection of the smallest events on the most local of scales can open out into visions of the universal.