

**In Search of the Quintessential English Folk Dance:
English Country Dance in the Eyes of International Folk Dancers**

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The Italians have their *Tarantella*, the Russians have their *Alexandrovska*, the Highlanders have their *Fling*, and the English have their.....er, what *do* they have? Drum roll, please. The answer: *The Oslo Waltz*!

Not exactly the expected answer, is it? Most English Country Dance (ECD) groups in the U.S. today are probably unfamiliar with this waltz-mixer first introduced circa 1954 by Michael and Mary Ann Herman as an English/Scottish “old-time” dance set to a Norwegian tune. Yet an examination of the dances specifically identified as “English” found in 25 folk dance manuals published in the U.S. from 1908 to 1994 shows that *The Oslo Waltz* is the most numerically represented English dance, with eight mentions. The runners-up are *The Black Nag*, with six mentions, and a Sicilian circle dance called *Green Sleeves*, also with six. *Gathering Peascods*, the *Sailor’s Hornpipe*, and *Three Meet* all earned four mentions each.

1908 saw the publication of the first American collection of international folk dances, that is, a collection purporting to present representative or typical dances of various countries. A spate of publications followed: first from physical education specialists and later, after World War II, from community dance enthusiasts. It is

¹ This article first appeared in Country Dance & Song Society’s *News*, No. 187, Nov/Dec, 2005. It may not be reproduced without permission from the author who may be contacted at allisonthompson (AT) junodot (DOT) com.

interesting to see how the vast range of English folk and historical dance is represented in these books.

The 25 international folk dance manuals examined included 66 unique English dances mentioned a total of 116 times: seven couple dances, 23 Playford/historical dances, 17 traditional dances, five morris dances, two sword dances, ten singing games, and two maypole dances. (This un-scientific study is flawed by the fact that quite a few international folk dance manuals contain no English dances at all (these are not represented in the survey); while in others, dances like *The Boston Two-Step* are occasionally identified as American, rather than English. I used each compiler's definition.)

The question of what is the most representative English dance is an interesting one. During the nineteenth century, until Cecil Sharp and others published their works on traditional, ceremonial and Playford dance, one candidate for the quintessential English dance—its “characteristic” dance—was the *Sailor's Hornpipe*. For example, in her 1910 *Guild of Play Book of National Dances*, Englishwoman Grace Kimmins described the *Sailor's Hornpipe* as the dance most characteristic of Englishmen, “a race of brave sailors.” She averred that the Englishman does not perform his dance with many gestures and facial expressions (like the lively Italian or Spanish dancers), but “solemnly and sedately, keeping his arms mainly in one position.” Another candidate was the Old English Morris, a highly-variable spectacle choreographed by dancing masters for the theater stage.¹

This concept of a characteristic or character dance needs explanation. In the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth, there was a distinction—

clearer than now—between folk dance, national dance, and character dance.

Character dances, or characteristic dances, were the terms used for dances that had been composed, using movements that were felt to be characteristic or representative of a “race” (nationality). Thus, for example, the second act of Tchaikovsky’s 1891 ballet *The Nutcracker*, choreographed by Marius Petipas, displays the characteristic dances of Chocolate (the Cossacks), Tea (China), and Coffee (Arabia). Character dances could depict common features of folk dances, or they could be simply romantic dances (often with appropriate props) expressing the characters or occupations of shepherds, milkmaids, falling leaves, spring daffodils, etc.

By contrast, the folk dances that began to be collected in America at the turn of the last century from recent immigrants were defined to be those that had developed in various regions of a given country. Some of them were felt to express emotions or ancient agricultural pastimes (love, harvest, weaving, war). Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick, about whom more later, observed that “these folk dances have grown up gradually, not only embodying in themselves racial characteristics of movement, but representing in symbolic form race ideas, just as does the folk music.”² That is, the folk dances of, for example, Spain, depicted a different national character than those of Scotland: languid sensuality versus energetic precision. (Writers of this period did not generally agree as to what characteristics were being expressed by these folk dances—were Spanish dances fiery or languid? Were the vigorous dances of the Russians youthful or degenerate?—but most of them united in finding the Scottish dances to be the best of the lot. It is possible, though not explorable in this article, that they did so in part because they felt that Scots possessed the desirable attributes of Protestantism, thrift and hard-work.)

National dances, on the other hand, were defined as those dances that typified an entire country; a dance that all its inhabitants would know: the Italian *Tarantella*, the Spanish *Cachuca*, the Highland *Fling*. In 1910 Grace Kimmins fine-tuned this distinction between folk and national dances, a distinction that Gulick also espoused:

The national dances are far more elaborate, even in the simplest forms; just as the National Anthem of any country is vastly more ornate and impressive than any of its folk-song melodies. The folk-songs and dances are a natural growth of the life of a people, and preserve in many instances racial characteristics, whilst in the national dances and music are found the similar notes and steps, elaborated by skilled artists to more uniform expression. The beauty of the national dances needs nothing written in its praise or honour.³

An American writer, Esther Willard Bates, agreed, further clarifying in 1925 that national dances were intricate and highly-dignified, “beautifully performed by gifted and practiced soloists,” as opposed to the simple folk dances of the children or even the “richly-colored, beautifully-costumed dances to which men and women have laughed in their native lands over the sea.”⁴ Thus, to some extent, the national dances were felt to be codified, while the folk dances were mutable. As even the above quotations show, however, these distinctions were not always well articulated, and certainly lacked more than a handful of defining examples.

While some American ballroom dance manuals of the late 1800s and early 1900s had included instructions for dances such as the *Cachuca* or the *Tarantella*, the first true multi-national folk dance manual was published in the U.S. in 1908: *Folk Dances and Games* by Caroline Crawford, who, according to the book’s forward had made a special study of folk dancing for many years and taught the subject to teachers at Chicago

University and Teachers College, Columbia University. More an *aide memoire* than a practical manual, its usefulness is highly suspect, however. For example, in the section on English dances, Crawford provided flawed instructions for a 3-couple set of *The* [sic] *Goddesses*, a three-couple set of *Trenchmore*, the music (but no dance instructions) for *The Cobbler's Jig* and *My Lady Carey's Dump*, and instructions but no music for *Sir Roger de Coverley*.² It would take the many manuals of the acclaimed folk dance leader Elizabeth Burchenal to present a clearer dance notation system that later compilers used or built upon.

Burchenal, who received her silver certificate in English dance from the hands of Mr. Sharp in 1915, did not include many English dances in her numerous collections of folk dances, the first and second editions of each of which vary slightly. It may be that she felt that Sharp's manuals were both clear and available for those who wished them. But another reason for the relative avoidance of English country dances (unlike morris) is that they did not, in theory, fit the pedagogical theories of Burchenal and her mentor, Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick (founder of the Camp Fire Girls). In 1905 these educators began to promote vigorous folk dance and mimetic singing games for young children and girls in New York City public schools as an efficient and pleasing form of physical hygiene.

Gulick, a student of prominent psychologist G. Stanley Hall who argued that the physical and social development of children mirrored the progression of civilization from barbarity to the modern world, was very specific about the types of folk dances that would provide the greatest hygienic, social, moral, and democratizing value to these girls,

² It is unclear where Carolyn Crawford obtained her English materials. It is possible, since the directions for the English dances do not conform to Sharp's re-creations, that she may have seen or obtained information from another early British dance re-creator, Nellie Chaplin, whose works were rapidly subsumed by Sharp's.

mostly recent immigrants or daughters of immigrants. He recommended dances in which most of the children were vigorously active most of the time; arguing that a dance such as *The Virginia Reel* (the *Sir Roger de Coverley*) though socially beneficial, was unsatisfactory for hygienic purposes, since so many “players” stood still during it. He felt that certain dances, such as some of the Russian ones, were too vigorous for growing bodies, while others required too much of the scarce and precious playground space to perform. He recommended dances with large movements of the trunk and limbs, excluding, as he said, dances from Java, which emphasized small motions of the hands. He picked dances that would reinforce aesthetic principles, noting that: “[a] consideration is that the body positions in the dances shall be graceful and such that do not tend in any way to the forming of habits of movement or posture that are disadvantageous from the standpoint of health.” This principle excluded as a whole the dances of the American Indians, “in which ... the body is bent forward, the individual dancing with bent knees and in a crouching position.”⁵ He and Elizabeth Burchenal picked dances according to the democratic principal of “eliminating the element of personal display and choosing those dances in which large numbers can take part, and which have, in addition to a social element, the virtues of (one) simplicity, (two) vigorous action, (three) wholesome, natural, out-of-door spirit.”⁶

Following Hall’s theories, Gulick also preferred dances that incorporated symbolic movements (particular favorites being the weaving dances of northern Europe) to those that lacked these “racial” and symbolic characteristics. Dances had to stress principles of democratic inclusion and improve the girls’ moral values as well; girls who enjoyed folk dancing were believed to be less subject to the evil influences of jazz music

and the perils of the dance hall. Folk dances also had to be simple enough for children to learn and enjoy quickly, in part because their time on the playground was limited, and in part because Gulick was sympathetic to the need for the activity to be fun. Finally Gulick rejected a large number of folk dances that were unsuitable from the moral or emotional standpoint, such as, for example, “the love dances of the East, [which] however beneficial they may be from the standpoint of the bodily movements involved, are entirely unsuited from the standpoint of their emotional content and their relation to the morals of our civilization.” With all of these constraints, as Gulick ingenuously remarked, only a small number of folk dances were suitable for pedagogic purposes.

Once folk dances from any nation entered the repertoire after the turn of the century, they tend to appear again and again in various folk dance manuals, many of which were compiled over the next thirty years by physical education faculty at various universities and teachers’ training colleges. After World War II, as the recreational international folk dance scene expanded, we find many manuals compiled by recreational dance leaders, each containing his or her favorites.

Given the bounty of English dances from which to choose, especially in the last twenty-five years as a result of the explosion of reconstructed and newly-composed materials, the comparatively limited list of 66 dances below requires some explanation. There are several possible answers, starting with the simple observation that until the 1970s, the rate of research and new choreography was limited, compared with the flow of materials today. The Sharp canon, later augmented by the traditional village dances found in the EFDSS’ *Community Dance Manuals*, predominated.

Another compelling answer is the lack of availability of recorded music, at least from 1915 through the 1970s. During his trips to the United States in 1915 and 1916, Cecil Sharp oversaw recordings of English country and morris dances by both the Victor Gramophone Company and the Columbia Gramophone Company.⁷ By 1924, more than 100 dance tunes had been recorded by the Victor Military Band, all under Elizabeth Burchenal's direction, plus thirty English morris, longsword, and country dances recorded under the direction of Sharp. "These records are played by full military band, and give all the pauses, accents and peculiarities of the dances as Miss Burchenal and Mr. Sharp use them," noted a pamphlet issued by the Victor Gramophone Company.⁸ Vinyl recordings like these are the ones that most folk dance clubs used for decades; I certainly remember dancing *Gathering Peascods* to that silver band sound in the late 1970s. In the last 25 years, however, there has been an explosion of recordings, corresponding to the explosion in the repertoire. But this greater availability also brings with it problems; it requires that the international folk dance leader have a much greater knowledge than before of the types or styles of English dance (and a willingness to buy books and CDs) in order to present new material to her club.

Another reason for the comparatively limited choice of dances is that many international folk dance leaders learned and still learn from each other, either at a folk dance camp or from a specific teacher. This relative insularity encourages a more restricted repertoire. From time to time, however, new dances entered the collective international folk dance repertoire: for example, the 1953 syllabus of the Maine Folk Dance Camp of Michael and Mary Ann Herman includes five English dances in the community dance style, all of which are attributed to the teaching of May Gadd. None of

these five (*La Russe*, *Childgrove*, *Christ Church Bells*, *Three Meet* and *Waltz Country Dance*) had appeared in international folk dance manuals prior to this publication, while several of them appeared in other collections thereafter. Similarly, the seventh edition of *Dance Awhile* (1994) includes 11 English dances, including *The Ragg*, attributed to the teaching of George Fogg, and *Nonesuch* attributed to the teaching of Tom Kruskal in 1973. The extent to which ECD leaders are invited (or not) to teach at international folk dance weekends and camps clearly affects the rate and type of transmission of new materials into this market. In fact, it is the great influence and popularity of the Hermans, rather than any intrinsic merit of the dance, that may explain the popularity of the *Oslo Waltz* in international folk dance circles.

Four final weaker arguments might include, first, the fact that English dance manuals are already accessible in English: there are no translation problems. International folk dance leaders who want more ECD material can easily find it in stand-alone publications. Second, unlike ring dances that can accommodate any number of participants, English dances have the limitation of requiring specific numbers of dancers (a minimum of 10 for a longways set, for example), and usually in couples, both factors that may present challenges to recreational dance leaders or teachers of young children. Third, the relative ease of most of the English dances already in the familiar repertoire listed below might be off-putting to some international folk dancers who seek a challenging dance experience: perhaps they think that all English dances are slow and easy and lack the energy or intricacy of the foot-stamping Balkan dances. And, finally, international folk dancers may be perfectly happy with this limited list of familiar dances! After all, there are only so many dances one can do in an evening.

Is this myopic view of the historical and folk dances of England a problem? In one sense, no: international folk dance manuals then and now are compiled by prominent international folk dance teachers who pick their favorites and whose disciples enjoy having access to their teaching tips. Each leader has the right to present his or her favorite dances. It is unfortunate that the dances are usually presented with no context—no discussion of who danced them or when or why. But this is true of other countries' folk dances as well: all have been prised like jewels out of their original settings and thrown helter-skelter into the dusty and anonymous treasure box of the folk dance manual. For historical and ethnographic material one has to look elsewhere.

However, this myopia with regard to English folk and historical dances (and especially ceremonial dance) is indeed an issue in the broader sense in that many public and college libraries continue to hold these old folk dance manuals as well as copies of Sharp's works and those of other early folklorists like Violet Alford, whereas they are less likely to hold more recent publications, especially those published in journals. While the early works remain romantic, appealing and easy to read, their arguments have now been decisively supplanted by more rigorous recent research that refutes these early writers' dreamy opinions (for to call them conclusions is too generous). Yet the high school or college student assigned to write a paper on English folk dance or folk customs will, unless unusually diligent and lucky, end up regurgitating this outdated information that the academy has now severely modified or rejected.

Anglo-American folk and historical dance has been well-served lately within its community as shown by the recent spate of new choreographies, recordings, and dance re-creations. It has been well-served by researchers, who have greatly expanded our

understanding of the origins and practice of morris and sword dances, folk customs and historical dance practices. However, this second Renaissance of creativity and the exciting conclusions of researchers are not well-represented on the shelves of libraries, in the more recently-published international folk dance manuals, or in the minds of the general public.

English Dances Found in 25 International Folk Dance Manuals

Couple Dances	Playford	Traditional	Morris/Sword	Games
Boston Two-Step (2) La Rinka (1) Oslo Waltz (8) Square Tango (1) St Bernard's Waltz (3) Tango Waltz (1) Teddy Bear's Picnic (1)	Aurette's Dutch Skipper (1) Black Nag (6) Chelsea Reach (1) Childgrove (1) Christchurch Bells (2) Constancy (1) Cushion Dance (1) Dargason (1) Dover Pier (1) First of April (1) Gathering Peascods (4) Goddesses (2) Greensleeves (1) Hunsdon House (2) Nonesuch (1) Northdown Waltz (1) Ragg, The (1) Row Well Ye Mariners (1) Rufty Tufty (2) Sellengers Round (3) Sir Roger de Coverley (1) Sweet Kate (2) Trenchmore (1)	Boscastle (hornpipe—1) Butterfly Hornpipe (1) Circassian Circle (3) Cornish May Day Dance (2) Cumberland Square Eight (2) English Harvest Dance (1) Galopede (2) Green Sleeves (6) Hornpipe (2) Hunstman's Chorus (1) La Russe (2) Ribbon Dance (2) Rifleman, The (1) Sailor's Hornpipe (4) Three Meet (4) Waltz Country Dance (2) Willow Tree, The (1)	Ampleforth Sword (1) Sleights Sword (1) Bean-Setting (2) Blue-Eyed Stranger (1) Bobbing Joe (2) Laudanum Bunches (2) Country Gardens (1) Maypole Dance (2)	English May Game (1) Jinger Ring (1) Jolly Miller (1) London Bridge (1) Looby Loo (1) Muffin Man (1) Oh, Dear, What can the matter be? (1) Pop Goes the Weasel (1) Roman Soldiers (2) Round and Round (1)

The Oslo Waltz
Tune: Kristiana Valsen
Recording: Folk Dancer 3016-A

Introduced circa 1954 by Michael and Mary Ann Herman as an “old-time” dance set to a Norwegian tune. While pattern, or couple dances with a set sequence of steps and figures (called “old-time” to distinguish them from amateur and professional ballroom dancing) were very popular in England and Australia in the inter-war period, Ron Houston of the Society of Folk Dance Historians finds no provenance for this dance in old-time dance manuals. It is unknown at present where the Hermans collected it. Ron notes, however, that the tune is sometimes called *Oslo Vals* or *Kristiana Valsen*, and that it was apparently composed circa 1910 by Gotthard Erichsen [1882-1964]. As a note, Sweden ruled Norway from 1814 to 1905, and the Swedes referred to the Norwegian city of Oslo as Kristiana.

Formation: Couples join hands in a ring, all facing the center.

- A 1-2 All waltz-balance forward and back (starting on the outside foot).
 3-4 Man balances in place while drawing the left-hand woman in front of him to the right, while the woman makes one complete turn clockwise under his arm in two waltz steps.
 5-16 Repeat measures 1-4 three more times; end with men facing their new partners on their right.
- B 1-2 Partners joining hands, waltz-balance towards the center and away.
 3-4 In one waltz step (bar 3) plus two walking steps (bar 4) turn single, turning towards the center and out (men counter-clockwise; women clockwise). Hold the last beat of bar 4.
 5-8 Repeat bars 1-4, moving away from the center.
 9-12 With both hands joined, take two step-draws towards the center and two away. End the figure with the man’s back to the center.
 13-16 Waltz around to reform the ring.

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