

Song and Dance in Scotland

This year the Traditional Music and Song Association (TMSA) of Scotland celebrates its 50th anniversary. It is interesting to think about the differences between the different organisations in Scotland and England which preserve our dance and song traditions.

In the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th there was an increased awareness of nationhood and cultural traditions Europe-wide. Politically, both Italy and Germany only became countries as we know them today in 1871. Norway gained its independence from Sweden in 1911. Gladstone introduced an Irish Home Rule Bill in the 1880s but it failed. In May 1913 the House of Commons passed the second reading of the Scottish Home Rule Bill by 204 votes to 159. It did not proceed further due to the First World War.

Culturally, here in Scotland, An Comunn Gàidhealach was founded in 1891. The Royal National Mod dates from 1892. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser started collecting Gaelic songs in 1905 on the island of Eriskay. Cecil Sharp in England became interested in traditional English dance when he saw a group of Morris dancers at the village of Headington Quarry, just outside Oxford, at Christmas 1899. At this time, Morris dancing was almost extinct, and the interest generated by Sharp's notations kept the tradition alive. Sharp went on to publish books of Morris Dances and the Sword Dances of northern England before the outbreak of the First World War. By 1923 the Scottish Country Dance Society was a relative latecomer on the British cultural scene.

The English Folk Song Society (founded in 1898) and the English Folk Dance Society (founded in 1911 by Cecil Sharp) came together as the English Folk Dance and Song Society in 1923. (EFDSS), the same year that the Scottish Country Dance Society was founded. Cecil Sharp died in 1924 and in 1930 Cecil Sharp House was opened as a lasting memorial to him. It is a multi-functional building on a prime site near Regent's Park, housing the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, admin offices, an impressive ballroom and several dance studios. In 2009 EFDSS became an Arts Council England Regularly Funded Organisation (and in 2012 a National Portfolio Organisation). The RSCDS, on the other hand, has always been self-funding, now with a large international membership base. We own our own offices, but in my memory the only person ever to suggest that the RSCDS exchange Coates Crescent for a dual-purpose office and dance space was Bill Clement, who was familiar with the number of old 'drill halls' becoming vacant in Edinburgh.

In my own experience Cecil Sharp House is a vibrant place which dancers value. In 2012 the Heritage Lottery Fund, National Folk Music Fund and Folklore Society supported 'The Full English', to create the world's biggest online portal of English folk music, song and dance manuscripts – as well as a national programme of workshops, lectures, training and community events. The large financial reserves of the RSCDS more or less rule out any public funding.

Given the shared roots of our country dance traditions – often the same dances and music – it is strange how little contact there has been between the RSCDS and the EFDSS.

In Scotland the dance and song organisations have remained separate. The RSCDS is this year 94 years old. The TMSA is only 50. For many of us it is a little known organisation. With a membership of over 1000 it organises hundreds of events across Scotland every year: festivals, workshops, competitions, and folk sessions. According to Karin Polwart “there would not be this wealth of music we now have in Scotland,” had it not been for the TMSA. In a recent article in *The Times*, Sheena Wellington is quoted: “The TMSA has kept the flame alive, and the essence of the tradition has been handed down. There’s a value in singing the pure, uncomplicated song; playing the pure uncomplicated tune. It is important to be able to go back to the original source.” If we were to do this for country dances, we would have to re-write all the books containing historical dances. One recurring criticism of Jean Milligan in her lifetime was that she had lost this idea of the ‘uncomplicated original’. We have complicated a dance form which used to be uncomplicated and the culture out of which it grew no longer recognises it. The price of internationalism?

The patrons of the TMSA are Dr Aly Bain MBE, Dr Margaret Bennett PhD, Dr Phil Cunningham OBE, Dr Sheena Wellington, Dr Barbara Dickson OBE, Archie Fisher MBE. All the TMSA patrons are distinguished tradition bearers in their own right with a high public profile. There are many RSCDS members who are justly proud that our patron is HM the Queen, but there are also many who find the idea of a royal patron an anachronism in 2016. May I not be struck down on the spot for voicing this!

The following extract is worth considering from the TMSA website:

TMSA Aims & Policies Mission

To promote, present and preserve the traditional music and song of Scotland.

Vision

Our vision is that:

- Scotland’s vibrant living indigenous heritage of traditional music and song is recognised and valued within and outwith Scotland as an intrinsic part of our national identity
- there is equal and widespread access to opportunities for people within Scotland to learn, teach, attend and participate in Scottish traditional music and song at a range of levels, thus laying solid foundations for development and innovation whilst at the same time safeguarding the grassroots of our diverse heritage
- people globally can access information about Scottish traditional music and song, its practitioners past and present, and opportunities to participate in related activities.

Values

We value:

- the diversity of Scotland’s indigenous music and song heritage that stems from the cultural, agricultural, industrial and political history of Scotland
- the inclusiveness of our heritage which unites each community, crosses generations and enables a shared understanding between communities nationally and globally.
- the grassroots traditions (intrinsically and as a source for new interpretations)
- the contribution that participants at all levels of ability make to maintaining and developing Scotland’s traditional arts

- the financial and social contribution that Scottish traditional music and song makes not only to local communities but also nationally and globally.

Strategic Aims

- To ensure that the indigenous traditional music and song of Scotland continues as a vibrant living heritage
- To gain national and international recognition of Scotland's traditional music and song as an intrinsic part of our national identity
- To ensure that information about Scotland's music and song is globally available

Compare that with the current statement on the RSCDS website:

The Society exists to promote and develop Scottish country dancing worldwide for the benefit of present and future generations.

In its aims and objectives the TMSA sees Scotland as central and itself a part of Scottish identity. The reasons why the RSCDS has moved from a Scoto-centric to an international view of Scottish country dancing are many and various. At the 2015 AGM there was a discussion session on our new aims and objectives. We could do a lot worse than look at those of the TMSA. What do you think?

If you would like to know more about the TMSA, go to: TMSA.org.uk

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