

## Rev. Conrad Noel, 'The Red Vicar', 1869-1942

Noel caused controversy by hanging the Red Flag and Sinn Fein Flag in his church in Thaxted, where he aimed to create a communist, nationalist, Christian enclave. The Red Flag symbolised a new International, which could only be created through the unity of free, self-determining nations (hence the Sinn Fein flag).

Nationalism was an antidote to Imperialism, the enemy of the International (Noel refused to fly the Union Flag). As national identity was thought to be immanent in the workers themselves, Noel looked to folk culture for the aesthetic basis of his vision, and along with singing, processions and arts and crafts, set up a Morris side in Thaxted.



One of two painted, carved wooden village signs in Thaxted, featuring Morris dancers. © Katie Heathman 2014.



Detail from cover of *The Espérance Morris Book* (London: Curwen, 1910). © Eric Foxley 2014.

## Mary Neal, 1860-1944

Mary Neal can be credited with reviving the performance of Morris dancing after asking Cecil Sharp for material suitable for her *Espérance Club* (a social club for young seamstresses).

Neal became embroiled in a dispute with Sharp over the purpose of Morris. Neal believed that the dance should be enjoyable as recreation and fellowship for young people rather than technically perfect in performance; and that these young people should hold ownership of the dance. She had dances taught directly to her girls by traditional dancers, and in turn the girls taught around the country. Sharp, however, wished for a professionalised approach with graded standards, mediated by middle class teachers.

## Introduction

The English Folk Revival, which took place around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is often thought of as conservative or nostalgic. I argue that to many of the people involved, this revival was in fact progressive and offered a potential for social change.

I focus on revivalists' use of folk material to aid their work in other progressive movements, notably Christian Socialism and Social Work. I also examine their interactions with the movement's leader, Cecil Sharp.

The Folk Revival's claim to have discovered 'true' English culture allowed it to influence and construct English national identity. Studying it allows us to see how national identity is created and defined, useful today when national identity is a political battleground at home and abroad.

'this Commonwealth is to be no mere flat, unvariegated world, but the rich harmony of a Community of families and nations.'

## Christian Socialists

### Rev. Charles Marson, 1859-1914

'our clergy [...] should study humbly and patiently the lives of the poor, which they do a little; and the views of the poor, which they never do. They must themselves explain those views to the class to which they belong (in the ugly worldly sense of this word class).'

Marson collected and published *Folk-Songs from Somerset* with Cecil Sharp.

His interest in folksong came partly from enjoyment and a wish to share it; and partly from his conviction that it was a vicar's duty to know and stand up for his parishioners. Marson believed that to advance the Socialist cause, more people of his own class needed to understand the lives and opinions of the working classes. He believed that the appreciation of folksong could go towards a celebration of the working classes, which could in turn be developed into a better understanding of political concerns.



Marson's cut paper silhouette of John Moore, a musician in his parish, about which he published a memoir. Charles Marson, *Village Silhouettes*, 2nd edtn., (London: Society of SS. Peter & Paul, 1916), p. viii.

'Is it to be a real expression of the life of the people, a setting free of the best aspirations and ideals of those who toil for daily bread? Is it to bring back to them some dignity, the self-possession, and the joy which is their birthright?'

## Social Workers

### Grace Kimmins, 1871-1954

'True play is the carrier of social traditions, not only those traditions which carry the form of play, dances, ceremony and games, but even more than this, those [...] which prevent the strong from trampling on the weak.'

Kimmins was a pioneer in childhood social work, as well as a campaigner for the inclusion of disabled people in civic and professional life. She set up The Guild of the Brave Poor Things, to provide opportunities for socialising and skills training for disabled people; and the Guild of Play, aimed at giving citizenship, recreation and exercise through play to children in London slums.



Guild of Play members performing an English Hornpipe. Grace Kimmins, *The Guild of Play Book of National Dances* (London: Curwen, 1910), p. ix.

Both Guilds made use of folksong, dance and traditional games. They saw national identity and tradition as an important aspect of citizenship, a right to their heritage which Kimmins felt had been denied to slum children.