

The Inaugural Mary Neal Lecture

HOPE'S SONG

by Lucy Neal OBE

with introduction by
Shirley Collins MBE

Music and dance by Laurel Swift

at

CECIL SHARP HOUSE

FRIDAY 7.30pm FEB 5th 2010

Introduction by Shirley Collins MBE, President English Folk Dance and Song Society

I feel pleased and very honoured to be introducing the first in the series of Mary Neal Lectures, which are to be given annually. It is most fitting that tonight's lecture is given by Mary's great great niece, Lucy Neal. Lucy is well known internationally as an independent arts producer, and she was co-founder in 1981 of The London International Festival of Theatre, and its co-director for 25 years. In 2005 she was awarded the OBE for her services to drama.

I am sure we all know of Mary Neal's remarkable work in the field of what can truly be called 'social dancing', and of her vision, devotion and generosity. We are aware, too, of the injustice done to Mary in the past and the neglect she suffered at the hands of our own Society. That has been acknowledged and put right now. And thankfully Mary Neal's generosity of spirit still lives in Lucy Neal, who bequeathed her great-great-aunt's papers to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. The handing over of that collection took place one year ago, so tonight's lecture can also be thought of as a celebration of that incredibly important, magnanimous and heart-warming act of reconciliation on Lucy's part.

Her lecture is entitled: Hope's Song. Please welcome Lucy Neal OBE.

HOPE'S SONG

Laurel Swift plays 'Three around Three' on the fiddle to open the lecture:

See Image of Mary Neal on a Bus with Children [here](#)

Lucy: Thank-you Shirley.

PART I

The arts have conventions, don't they, for when a character – absent for a while in time travel - tumbles back to the present? This is such a moment. It's 17 years since I inadvertently inherited Mary Neal's papers, (here now in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library), and four since I travelled back in time to find out about her. What pleasure to see all of you here tonight have tumbled back with me.

What treasures do we clasp in our hands? What did we find behind the curtain of history's soft folds? Well, our picture of Mary's life has a few more people in it and things feel a bit more playful and relaxed. When I first came here in 1993, Mary was spoken of in a whisper. As someone said last year 'it feels as though a door has opened'. Hurrah!

See Mary Neal's Portrait [here](#)

I've learnt a lot walking in Mary's steps these last years. I'd like to make a link tonight to her story and that of her Espérance Club and the participatory arts – a broad term I'll explore. It's a field many of you are

involved in in some way and you'll have ideas too about how they change lives and are a catalyst for so much social and cultural innovation. Can the historical evidence of a working class Club for sewing girls at the turn of the 20th century in the Somers Town area of Kings Cross give us a one hundred year perspective on the work we do today - opening out the creative experience to as many people as possible? reinventing and renewing our society and culture in so many ways; engaging people in communities, neighbourhoods, schools, prisons, allotments, parks, streets - the places and spaces of everyday life. This growing area of the arts (although at times, hard to pinpoint) depends on participation, partnerships and yes, some provocation. The provocation bit is important: revealing ways in which the participatory arts go deep, and broad, feed the cultural soil and turn over new ground. I hope the lecture series can create a new platform for those working in the field - inspired by Mary's work and the Espérance Club experiment.

Mary was a remarkable woman: a visionary, a social reformer, a folk revivalist, a suffragette a magistrate and more besides. In her eulogy, her friend, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, described her "practical kindness; genius of helpfulness; loyalty in friendship; hatred of false sentiment; sense of humour; courage; vitality and wit"¹ - though it was best sometimes not to be on the wrong side of her wit. She had a clear vision for social justice and the transforming power of the arts and much of her life was dedicated to children and young people.

See Image of Cecil Sharp [here](#)

¹ Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Eulogy of Mary Neal June 1944. Part of Mary Neal Archive VWML

Over the last 100 years, Mary's original collaborator in the English Folk Song and Dance Revival, Cecil Sharp, with his collection of a staggering 5000 songs and tunes, has of course grown into an iconic figure. It was hard for me at times to resolve the tension presenting itself between honouring Mary's history, bringing her story to light without appearing to challenge the Sharp orthodoxy. There is room now I believe for both their histories as instigators of the Revival. We can start a new practice of re-framing their combined achievements in the spirit of the collaboration they began with. Indeed, there is an incredibly rich canvas to explore between the two of them around how our culture is made; what's at stake in how we do or don't participate in its making; the role of creativity in tradition, and of tradition in our creativity.

See Image of Mary Neal with her dog [here](#)

Mary and Cecil have been caricatured over the years as standing for inclusivity (she) and exclusivity (he). There is truth in this, but the reality is more interesting, more nuanced, and more dynamic. Cecil, having been an original supporter, became less and less happy with the work of the Espérance Club. He insisted on an exact canon for traditional dance whilst Mary identified the impulse and desire in the individual dancer to dance as a pre-requisite of a continuing tradition. "It is almost impossible to state what the exact quarrel was about,"² writes Mary, nearly 40 years on at the age of 80. With the handing over of Mary's papers last year to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, the cultural narrative has been refreshed. We make a bridge, and we get over it, as indeed they had done at the end of their lives.

See Image of the Mary Neal Archive in mid-assemblage [here](#)

² As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography. Mary Neal Archive in VWML

Before I properly begin, I'd like to salute a band of people, some alive some have died, who acted as keepers to Mary's story: keeping papers safe, piecing the story together. It was Roy Judge who persistently pointed me at the task I needed to fulfil but there were many others: Nita Needham, Roy Dommett, Margaret Dean Smith, Malcolm Taylor, Sue Swift, and of course dancers themselves such the New Espérance Morris and Abingdon. More of them later. The University of Winchester, the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund helped me pick the baton up.

So, the lecture has 3 parts: if you like, a kind of past, present and future. The first, the longest, looks at Mary's life; the second how we brought the story to life with living traditions; the third, my own speculations on the future we face, hopefully taking lessons from the past as we go.

As you can see, I'm joined by Laurel Swift: singer, dancer, choreographer and musician.

Mary's life touched on many surfaces. She was a classic boundary breaker crossing between rich and poor, the professional, the non- professional, the country, the city, politics, justice, across the sectors and the arts. For those of us who build similar bridges and connections in our work, we can see that this is an innovative practice.

The thread that connects the stories tonight is my interest as an artist and theatre producer in how things happen. Written history gives us one particular narrative; we have to use our imagination to conjure with what took place between people in the room at the time; how people interacted; what happened when someone saw something in a different way for the first time? At the beginning of this adventure, I was presented with a

conundrum: Mary's was a counter-narrative; she had had her history pretty much actively written out. She was there, but not in focus. As a more complete picture emerged, I experienced pride in her achievements along with a sense of injustice that her story was interesting but 'undertold'. I had inherited her papers with the instruction not to put them in the Cecil Sharp House. I had to sort things out.

See an Image of Mary Neal's Autobiography [here](#)

Her autobiography *As a Tale That is Told*, - which we see tonight for the first time, beautifully bound by Marysa de Veer, narrates a long, spirited life. There are so many stories you have to sit down every now and again and take a breather. (You will get that tonight.)

At an early age, she tired of sitting indoors at home, "watching a stream of men going to daily office work".³ She had to arrange flowers, dust the drawing room, and practise cooking and sewing to fill up her days. She makes a big leap from there. She tells the tale of becoming a Sister of Mercy, a Labour reformer supporting the miners and dockers strikes, a Suffragette taking the first minutes of the London WSPU. Organising exchanges of dances from all over the country (by hand-written notes – no handy email); sharing a pint in the Happy Dick, with singer Sam Bennett. After working on the Isle of Dogs with women and families during the 1st world war she moves to Sussex for a break, but is given two small boys to adopt; she becomes a JP, working with the probation office and juvenile courts. She counsels homosexuals in prison, advocates yoga for prisoners and is not afraid of storming the Home Office to ask for retrials. She's on good terms with local policemen and asks if they'll wait outside houses on her watch - in case she doesn't come out in 10 minutes. She was a pioneer of sea-side holidays for the working classes til the end of her days. She died peacefully in her sleep in

³ As *A Tale That is Told*, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

1944 aged 84. (Phew!...but...“The most interesting part of my life was the time when I was taking part in the revival of English Folk Song and Dance”⁴ and that’s what we will focus on tonight. Here are details of how she got to that.

Clara Sophia was born in Birmingham in 1860, the eldest of three to David Neal, Button manufacturer. Her brother Theodore was my great grandfather. His grandson, my father Michael is here tonight. Last year at the Mary Neal day Michael gave an evocative account of Mary and Theodore’s Warwickshire upbringing, and their shared love of Shakespeare and ‘Arden country.’ Mary didn’t like having to wear pretty dresses. She had cats, dogs, doves, guinea pigs and rabbits. She played outside in the street with her brothers. Indoors they flicked butter through the banisters at butlers and housemaids, and were very naughty. Her education was fragmented. She and Theodore kept in close contact, led public lives and both became justices of the peace. She’s rude about Victorian family life and its restrictions, refers to ‘pageants of snobbery’, but she came from a Wesleyan non-conformist background which must have influenced her. Her father entertained Joseph Chamberlain for supper. She was reading John Stuart Mill, A Bitter Cry of Outcast London and Thoreau’s Walden and Civil Disobedience. She was tall, had large hands and feet, the sharpest of blue eyes and wasn’t going to sit around. She was she said, “a rebel down to the foundations of my life”.⁵

Opportunities for women to play a role in public life were limited. In 1888 (aged 28) she heard of the Wesleyan West London Mission, in Cleveland St - near where the BT Post office tower is now. A few weeks later she

⁴ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

⁵ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

travelled to London and became Sister Mary, a ‘Sister of Mercy’, serving the poor. Her life changed over night.

The slum dwellings of overcrowded central London and their grinding poverty became her world. She remained convinced all her life that anyone who had a part in “legislation of this country should receive their education in this work”⁶. In the ‘rough’ area of Fitzrovia and Soho she made a success of the unpopular task of running the social club for young girls. Dodging dead cats and furniture being thrown into the Club she’s joined by fellow radical Emmeline Pethick (later Pethick Lawrence). They become life-long friends. They talk about setting up new businesses that offer training to the poor.

They see how tired, cold and hungry people of the area are, particularly children, and want to make their lives more bearable. They take them on holidays to see the sea for the first time; to see cows in fields and walk in woods. Over time, Mary and Emmeline became increasingly sceptical of the value of handing out charity at the Mission. Mary gets pulled up on one occasion for suggesting that people need help more than they need Christ.

The poverty Mary saw politicised her, as did involvement with the dockers strikes in the East End and the women she helped during the Yorkshire miners’ strikes. The suffragette movement was on the rise, and Mary and Emmeline decide a more creative plan for life is called for. They would rather encourage people’s desires and dreams than tend to their never-ending needs.

⁶ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

I was tired of interviewing employers, sitting on Committees, soliciting charity, and the coming winter looked very dark and very hopeless. I longed for some life giving wind, which would sweeten these lives and lessen the weariness, and some weapon which would conquer the dirt and the dreariness and the muddle in which these city girls lived. I grudged their youth to the industrial machine their health and strength to the toil which brought so few amenities to the worker. More than anything else I think I hated their always having to take and never having anything to give and they as I knew so generous and warm-hearted.⁷

See an Image of Maypole Dancing [here](#)

A new translation of the life of St Francis by Paul Sabatier had a radical effect on Mary. The idea of dedicating your life to simplicity, and friendship with the poor in the service to them and God was compelling. Life in the mission looked conventional and uninspired. She and Emmeline had success in setting up a kind of Jamie Oliver experiment called Maison Espérance, committed to a living wage and ventilated rooms. They talked about the Girls' Club being a "jumping off ground for attack on the system". They were known as the 'new element'!

See Image of Children Dancing [here](#)

They left the mission in 1895 - not before breaking taboos connected to singing and dancing, by staging a spectacular flower festooned pagan May Day Festival at Cleveland Hall. A hundred girls dressed in white with 'Quaint green caps' performed' to large audiences, including scores of older women from local workhouses and the staff and children from Mary Ward settlement nearby.

The name of the new Espérance Club came from a song sung on a sea-side holiday: "We came singing...up the river to the little quay where we

⁷ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

landed, the 'Song of Hope', from which we named our Club, and which has been ever in our ears"⁸.

Mary and Emmeline calculate how to live off £80 a year, each putting £1 coins into a house keeping box. From a three-room working men's tenement block off the Euston Road, they invite in girls for cups of sweet strong tea in front of the small range fire, along with older women turfed out of the nearby workhouses for the day, for whom pubs on each corner are the only alternative warm refuge. Others come too: Keir Hardie, Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, Lady Constance Lytton, WB Yeats and when they've got a moment, the Pankhursts. They learn new housekeeping, cookery and cleaning skills from the girls.

The Espérance Club opens four nights a week from 8-10pm some times more often. Evening activities include singing, dancing, acting, discussion on topics of the day, the minimum wage, socialism, democracy, a Monday newspaper class, a literary Club, speeches on Folk lore and art. ⁹ Open every week for nearly 20 years, the Club closed on First World War in 1914. Men and boys were called up, children kept off the streets. It was no longer possible for them all to meet. Mary describes the safe space the Club provides:

Anything like a night school or an institution is of no use to the ordinary working girl; her work is...hard during the day, her whole life is...a long grey monotonous drudgery...in the evening she must have life and light - as much merriment and joy as it is possible to give her.

See Image of Girls Dancing on the Rooftop of a Somerstown's Building [here](#)

⁸ Mother Earth, Mary Neal, Fundraising pamphlet. VWML

⁹ Set To Music, p11, Mary Neal VWML

Mary and Emmeline knew the girl's lives and the day to day challenges they faced: long working days, unventilated workrooms, overcrowded homes. One girl is offered a plant to take home but brings it back saying there's no light at home to grow a plant:

Sometimes the realisation would sweep over the girl, that there only stood between her and those so often dependent on her and the in-coming forces of starvation and destitution, a needle, a scrubbing brush, or some other equally frail defence; then we should find her sobbing with uncontrollable grief.¹⁰

They get to know the girls well and greet them in the street: "we....share with them our friends, our interests, our hopes for the future, and have not only lived in their lives, but we have let them live in ours". In time they are to build a house near Dorking for the girls next to the main base for the Suffragettes, the home of the Pethick Lawrences.

See a Morris Drawing in Punch Magazine [here](#)

It is prior to the staging of one of the Club's Christmas parties in 1905 that Mary visits Cecil, her music director Herbert McIlwaine, having read about his song collecting in Somerset. This is all well documented. Mary asks if he has any English songs the girls might learn. He suggested *the Seeds of Love* amongst others and Mary describes the girls as going 'mad for them'. Cecil himself predicts they will learn them as though from a spiritual sixth sense, reclaiming their lost inheritance. Mary returns to see if Cecil knows of any English dances. He does not but mentions a dancer in Headington, Oxford called William Kimber who he had seen dancing at New Year in 1899, six years earlier. Mary jumps in a cab to Oxford and brings William Kimber and his cousin Jo to London to teach the girls *Bean Setting*,

¹⁰ Mother Earth, Mary Neal. Fundraising pamphlet. VWML

Constant Billy and others. From then on, the girls' learning and dancing continues apace and Mary and Cecil have a happy collaboration for several years. Mary's booklets *Set To Music* describing the phenomenon of the folk song and dance revival is dedicated to C#. Cecil joins in staging concerts and speaking about the music and the songs.

As a proficient amateur Mary was setting these concerts and performances up in Halls and public places. The Club becomes renowned for its public displays of English song and dance. As a result, the girls were invited to teach in villages, schools and factories across England. Mary reports in 1907 at The Goupil Gallery Conference, a national gathering taking stock of the revival - of one girl alone who had danced and taught her way around Wales, Devonshire, Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Berkshire, Chelsea, Clevedon, Sussex, Kent and Stratford upon Avon. "We rivalled John Kemp on his jig from London to Norwich"¹¹.

See Image of Dancing in the Haymarket [here](#)

Again from *Set `To Music`*:

From being merely a Working Girls' Club ...we have become part of a national movement, and to-day in the oldest haymarket in London...may be heard the fascinating strains of Shepherd's Hey, Maid o'the Mill, Constant Billy, and other old-time melodies, the tinkle of the morris bells and the clap of morris sticks. The practice of folk dances and songs and games has had a splendid all-round effect on the general conduct and character of the Club members...It has added a certain dignity to the smallest thing we do.¹²

Mary saw the transformation these responsibilities afforded the girls, some of whom had been with the Club since the age of two.

¹¹ Goupil Gallery Conference notes, VWML

¹² *Set To Music*, Mary Neal, fundraising pamphlet. Part of the Mary Neal Archive, VWML

See Image of Thaxted [here](#)

See Image of Walnut Tree Meadow [here](#)

In 1911, Blanche Payling is sent to Thaxted to teach children from the town's sweet factory to dance. That summer, a group of 60 children danced for the Thaxted Flower Show on Walnut Tree Meadow.

It is no small thing" Mary wrote " for a little London dressmaker to stay in the house, as an honoured guest, of a country squire, and ride in his motor car and write letters home at his study table, and feel at the same time that she too has something to give.¹³

Thank-you letters from the country squires and their wives, relayed how pleasant and professional the Somerstown girls were, as though this in itself was a great surprise.

See an Article on the Somerstown Girls and the Club [here](#)

A Holborn librarian helped me locate the spot where Mary had lived in Duke's Road. It was from here she took the girls up to the sixth floor to rehearse for public performances on the roof! This is now a Premier Inn next door to the home of London Contemporary Dance, Place Theatre.

The Victorian social reformer, Charles Booth, colour-coded areas London's streets according to their degrees of vice and misery. Cumberland Market where the Espérance girls came from had poor sewerage, badly ventilated rooms housing four or five people at least, 'mixed up with stables'. They're tinted on maps with the dark colours that warned of 'vicious semi-criminal' inhabitants.

¹³ Set To Music, Mary Neal, fundraising pamphlet. Part of Mary Neal Archive, VWML

See an Image of Florrie Warren and Others Dancing [here](#)

As perplexed as I was as to what Cecil was really objecting to in what the girls were doing I became more fascinated in reports like this. It was hard to keep track of what the arguments were about and a lot seemed to boil down to whether you danced with a bent or a straight knee.

Perhaps, just briefly' Mary summarised "it was that Mr. Sharp wanted to make an exact canon for dancing and I wanted it to follow the traditional freedom of the old dancers...no two sides of dancers did a particular dance in precisely the same way. No two men in the side did the step in the same way, and no one danced it in exactly the same way on two separate occasions."¹⁴

It was this bug picture (**see image [here](#)**), as we called it, which brought me up short. The Espérance Club was clearly a catalyst for something. How did that happen? I believe this was down to the social circumstances out of which it grew. What if Mary Neal was not simply a folk revivalist who 'lost out' to Cecil Sharp, but a woman who recognised the radical potential of the arts to transform lives, particularly those of the young and dispossessed. Maybe historians of the English folk song and dance revival had been asking the wrong question for a hundred years! Not were the Espérance girls dancing the tradition correctly (or should women be dancing Morris at all), but how did London's sewing girls produce a dynamic team of teachers and dancers when their social status would have excluded them from almost everything but servitude or the workhouse? What kind of youth-based arts organisation was the club? The more I learnt about the experiment the more it resembled a youth-based arts organisation of the kind I could recognise with a very contemporary feel: self-organising, disciplined, professional, creative and empowered.

¹⁴ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography. VWML

Wasn't it the buzz of interest in the girls themselves, poor, immigrant, working class, that was credited with instigating the first folk revival of English song and dance - a movement described as having "blazed across the countryside."¹⁵

The club's semi-public performances caused a stir and interest not only amongst the many high profile guests who came to them, but amongst the older dancers who came up to London.

A...folk singer and sailor from Somerset for example comes to London to see two girls dance...He had lived in many lands and seen many things. He said 'This is the dancing of my heart and I would not have missed the sight for two big apples...it's what I call clean dancing.'...He then sang us a song "Watchet Sailor", and with this exchange of the arts, we left him."¹⁶

An interchange between town and country is what we must look for...The musician will go into the country and will set down for us dance and song from the old folks who live there. The town folk will learn from them and add something to them of their own generation, and of the charm and vivacity of the city, and they, in their turn will teach the young folk of the villages¹⁷

See Image of Dancing in the Haymarket [here](#)

An audience gathers, including a policeman:

a native of one of the country villages from which some of the dances come' also an Irish fiddler, a waggoner and family with the girls and boys. I realised once more how absolutely this folk dance and song belongs to the people...it is well we realise this to-day with all the forces of wealth and civilisation are arraying themselves against the workers¹⁸

In Making Learning Work, Shirley Brice Heath - Professor of English and Dramatic Literature, a linguistic anthropologist and pioneer academic - in

¹⁵ by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence in her own autobiography, My Part in A Changing World

¹⁶ Mary Neal, Set to Music, P 8.

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ ibid

recording the might of the participatory arts, describes the characteristics of a dynamic youth-based arts organisations:

they have the capacity to turn young lives around, particularly the lives of young people for whom the arts become a vehicle for their survival from poverty, poor housing, street violence, prejudice, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution and the social ills that can dog the lives of the dispossessed and young.

Self-organising is at their heart. “All the adults can do is provide consistent support, strong frameworks of high demand, professional socialisation, real deadlines, and tough authentic critics”¹⁹. Projects are creative and collaborative in nature, involving problem solving, working in teams, peer-to-peer education, co-created productions and a quality of performance. The requirement, indeed the chance, to play multiple roles is a given: young people take responsibility for acting, dancing, making music, script writing, and the day-to-day administrative work essential to the group’s maintenance. They have contact with people they wouldn’t otherwise meet:

Older members also instruct, coach, mentor, demonstrate, and re-inforce ideas with younger and novice members, laying down the pattern that as individuals grow through the group, they shape the learning environment that supports group product and performance development.

This was exactly what was happening in the Espérance Club. Does this not help explain how 18 year old Blanche Payling of Cumberland Market, travels with confidence to work professionally as a teacher with no qualifications other than the confidence of her peers, pleasure in dancing and a sense of responsibility to the task.

¹⁹ http://shirleybriceheath.net/pdfs/YA_MakingLearningWork.pdf

Hundreds of Espérance girls danced across England but have left few traces. I will end this section with examples of two girls from the Club. The first remains a mystery, the second we learn a lot more about.

One day a girl of sixteen the eldest of a family of six, with no advantages, no money, came to me and said, 'How do you think it would do if I get to the Club early and make some lemonade for the girls, I think it would give 'em courage this hot weather?' I said I thought it was an excellent idea and I lent her half-a-crown for the initial outlay. She used to go every evening after that and make and serve out the lemonade, selling a large glass for a halfpenny. When autumn came again she asked us, 'Couldn't I get in some of the children who are always outside when the juniors are let into the Club, some of the other girls would help and we could teach them songs and games?' Mary says yes and "so began our "Babies Club" since famous through the land²⁰

A cooling glass of lemonade gives 'courage'. Courage for what? Maybe for surviving day to day. Does not a seed of the revival's energy lie in this truth?

Florrie Warren was an orphan when she joined the Club. An excellent dancer; she learnt dances quickly and was able to teach them to other children successfully. She travelled the country for five years or so before being asked by Mary in December 1910 to travel to the US on a lecture tour about the Morris Revival in England. Florrie was 18. The boat covered in icicles arrives in New York in a blizzard. Mary gives lectures, Florrie dances and is considered a star, invited to perform at Carnegie Hall. In Boston, at a tea party held for them, Florrie meets Arthur, a young lawyer. Three months later Mary and Florrie sail back to England. As they board the ship to sail, Arthur jumps on board and asks Florrie to marry him! Yes she says and jumps off. Mary sailed to England on her own, and on Valentine's Day 1911, Florrie and Arthur got married. She has three daughters – more of them later, but she never ever tells them of childhood

²⁰ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography. VWML

in Somerstown – ever. A door of opportunity opened for her, she jumped through and left the streets of slum England behind.

See an Image of Florrie Warren [here](#)

Mary acknowledges how much she learnt from these young women:

I know that the girl who for years was almost our despair, with her rude uncouth manners and her noisy ways is constantly beaten black and blue by a drunken mother, who varies the torture of her daughter by occasionally emptying a pan of live coals on her husband's head. I have learnt that apathy and dullness maybe the result of constant semi-starvation or want of sleep²¹

The trips to the countryside prove as much part of the story about the girl's empowerment as anything else they do. Mary compares this process to the quiet growing of a pine tree, her favourite tree:

We had been for a walk in a pine wood just to listen to the sound of the wind in the tree-tops. There was in the air that mysterious hush and stillness which only the presence of pine trees ever brings to me...they are always changing, softly, silently, as one by one the pine needles fall around. Their strong invisible, ever changing life spoke to me of our girls and taught me how they would change and grow, not suddenly, but gently and persistently²²

Mary knew that culture grows people.

PART II

Laurel Swift: Shepherd's Hey

*'One can whistle, two can play, we can dance the shepherd's hey.
I can dance, I can sing, I can do most anything.'*

²¹ My Pretty Maid, Mary Neal, fundraising pamphlet. VWML

²² Mother Earth, Mary Neal, fundraising pamphlet. VWML.

See Image of a Morris Dancer's Bells [here](#)

How do you re-tell a story from the past? I knew bringing Mary's story to light needed to be participative, collective; enacted as a process. Oral as much as written. So, who knew what? I started off going to folk festivals, meeting people, asking around: Martin Carthy, Shirley Collins, Chris Wood, Paul Sartin, Laurel. People knew nothing or a bit. They referred to Mary's 'spirit' being alive. She was around, but not around. Her spirit of experimentation though remained. "She is a woman after my own heart" said Alistair Anderson brightly. She was a connector, a facilitator, she understood the connection between tradition and innovation.

I was gripped by what had happened in the club; what had been its impact on the girls; the process that had changed their lives. Mary was a social entrepreneur. She recognised the dynamic influence of social interactions at play. She held parties, performances and celebrations. People from all walks of life gathered at the Espérance Club. How did the social mix work? New conversations triggered new possibilities. Maybe there was a clue in this?

The charm of these parties lies always in the atmosphere of social equality which fills the place and to which everyone instinctively responds. One never quite knew what would happen with such an unusual company of performers and such unusual audiences²³

The buzz had had a transformative effect. The girls became a catalyst for the movement. But how do we get at the history of such serendipitous encounters and shifts of perception?

²³ As a Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

So, I decided to try the party approach. A celebratory act – handing over her papers to the public domain - could serve as a catalyst for bringing her story to light whilst initiating new conversations and possibilities within an intercultural frame around the inheritance, excellence and participation in traditions of English song and dance.

Could an undertold story connect spheres of discourse 100 years apart?

The Mary Neal Project would unpack an old box to create something new. Working with Ruth Holdsworth and Ally Walsh, we would involve as many people as possible: artists, children, educators, dancers, historians, singers, and academics. Sticking with Mary's values of inclusivity and participation, if we involved people as she did, in the re-telling, maybe the story could be resolved and celebrated? We could test the participatory arts for their power to transform and create new collaborations along the way.

First up was a day at Sadler's Wells in April 2008 that gathered a rich mix of contemporary art and folk practitioners. Singers, Chris Wood, Tim Van Eyken; dancers, Laurel, Damien Barber, Rosemary Lee, musicians, Paul Brett, Cat Radford, choreographers, theatre artists Paul Clarke, Fabio Santos, Freddie Opoku Addaie, Moussa, Enitan and Abdoul from Project Phakama UK, a youth theatre company, curators, Chris Pentney, Verity Sharp; arts educators, Nikki Crane, Anna Ledgard, amongst others.

See some Images from the Mary Neal Research Day [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)

This was exciting and unnerving in equal measure. (I managed to break my leg the week before. I don't advise anyone to do that if you're about to get serious about Morris dancing). We framed the day with two questions:

- How are English indigenous song and dance traditions inherited and to whom do they now belong?
- How do these traditions connect to a continuum of participatory arts practice today?

Although we wandered from the questions the day explored the possibility of exchange, of giving and gaining: singing, dancing, playing music, teaching, researching, archiving and conversing. It was a successful provocation for an onward project. Connections were made between the two practices of folk singers, musicians and dancers with their generosity and confidence in a deep knowledge of folk song and dance and 'contemporary' performers with a skilled ability to improvise, collaborate, experiment in the moment.

A high point of the day was when Moussa experimented, with snaking knees, dancing to a violin. He said he felt happy dancing Morris Dances and was amazed at the similarities in the roots and basic elements of English and West African dance (BELLS). Abdoul said of West African traditions: there's concern about how we look after and hold traditional dance. We want both the contemporary and the traditional, not one at the expense of the other; they inspire each other. Freddie talked about looking for a universal code to dance, and danced whilst instructing Chris to play two violins at once. A first for both of them.

On a question of to whom do traditions belong, Fabio, who is originally from Brazil, said he'd worked with different cultures all over the world for

20 years, but he felt he'd never "touched Englishness". "I don't feel it is mine." On this day, he was glad he had. "I can play with this". The question of who has ownership of English traditions is important in a diverse contemporary British society. The folk world needs to say this out loud in everything it does.

Anna Ledgard said the day had been valuable for the insights it gave into the timeless tensions that surround participatory practice and what could have happened had Mary been working with a progressive educationalist such as John Dewey who understood the connection between play and learning. The ethics and tensions of power relationships are not so dissimilar to those in Mary's day to those we grapple with today. Possibly these tensions are implicit in any engagement with non professionals in creative processes – almost a condition of the work.²⁴

The parallels between the Sharp/Neal debate and the skills/expression debates in arts education...are...great... all the more relevant now as educationalists acknowledge the value of artistic experiences and expression in the development of learners as people and citizens. This seems to be what Mary Neal was also doing – thus alienating the traditionalists within her art form canon – but in fact very much in tune progressive education thinkers of her time.²⁵

See Image of Children from Bentley Primary School [here](#)

From the day, dancer, choreographer Freddie Opoku-Addaie and dancer, musician Laurel Swift, collaborated for the first time in the work we would do in two primary schools; Bentley in Hampshire and Edith Neville in Somerstown itself, near the Espérance Club site. Bentley had duck ponds

²⁴ Anna Ledgard from Research Day. www.maryneal.org

²⁵ *ibid*

and open fields; Edith Neville was an inner city school crammed into a much smaller space. It made not a jot of difference to the energy and speed at which all the children learnt. They were Laurel said “up for anything”.

The children wrote each other letters making sense of the link that Mary herself had forged between the city and the countryside. They’d learn about Mary and the Espérance Club, English song and dance and, then, with Laurel and Freddie’s help they would make their own dance which they would dance together at the Cecil Sharp House as part of a the Mary Neal day of celebration on Feb 7th 2009.

Laurel and Freddie both played to their own strengths: the result was a brilliant mix of traditional English folk and contemporary dance. Laurel brought her fiddle to each session, the children learnt country-dances and songs, and Morris steps. Freddie explored his idea of a code with the children, which both honoured and transformed the steps into a work led by the caller of the code. Nonny Tabbush joined them on fiddle, as did a whole violin section of Bentley School. There was much to marvel at in the process: How quickly they learnt; how quickly they taught each other; what fun they had; how they loved to dip and dive. Boys overcame inhibitions about holding hands and dancing at all. They threw themselves into it with real welly. I watched a chaotic moment when Class 6 took the reins to teach Class 5 how to do a dance, I remember saying to myself: this isn’t going to work. In 15 minutes it had.

See Image of Children from Edith Neville and Bentley Primary School During the Mary Neal Day [here](#)

Mary knew half the fun (and challenge) of learning is being given responsibility for teaching something you’ve just learnt to somebody else.

She saw young people had an exceptional ability to do this and created the chances for them to do it. "The London girl is as quick to teach as to learn". It was this self-organising and disciplined response to the dancing that gave her the confidence to arrange for girls like Blanche Payling to travel out of London to become teachers of song and dance themselves. In Blanches case she initiated the Thaxted Morris, 100 years old next year.

Mary describes a scene:

The learning of a new morris is an interesting sight. The tune having been taken down, is played on the piano, the old men marshal six girls into the middle of the room; there is a babel of voices, everyone seems to be pushing everyone into her place. The piano stops, a committee is held, all talking at once. The pianist turns to me in despair. "They'll never get the dance, they can't understand the old man's broad Berkshire dialect, it's no use." "It's all right," I reply, "you wait, I've seen all this sort of thing before; in twenty minutes they will have got it." And sure enough in less than that "Sally Luker" is going merrily and to the entire satisfaction of the teachers. The other dances go through the same stages, and in two evenings we know all those which the men can teach us.²⁶

We saw the same thing: picking up on a key quality of learning as an exchange, a 'handing on' of something. After each session Laurel would come out in awe once again of dances and songs that had been handed down from generation to generation - "This stuff works!"

In Edith Neville we watched the children invent a wholly new dance in which you could see a trace of Morris. For me, these Morris steps were visible and powerful, embedded in the new. Here were London children from many different cultural backgrounds jumping, kicking high, joining in the making and recreating of English dance, building on the old and putting something of themselves into it - and thereby owning it. This I realised is how we recognise a tradition as our own: when can see ourselves in it. We

²⁶ The Espérance Morris Book, Part 1, Mary Neal

were learning from one another; exploring indigenous English song and dance traditions and creating something new.

See some Images from the Mary Neal Day [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)

The work culminated in the Mary Neal Day a year ago. Many of you were present. The heaviest snow in 18 years. Laurel and Freddie were first of over 40 artists at a freezing cold Cecil Sharp House along with Benji, Miranda, Azzurra and Chris, a group of contemporary and folk dancers and musicians who'd spent the day, having never met each other before, creating something new! We narrate Mary's life; the children playing a big part. New Espérance Morris, Abingdon Morris. They run a workshop together. A first.

Here is a spirit of collaboration that runs through the day: along with the idea that we make our culture through participating in it. We mark the symbolic start of reconciliation between the stories of Cecil and Mary. Janet removes the 'horrid metal' from the archive and the papers are handed over. Lee, Sid and Tim and John have built a bread oven outside baking bread and inside Mary's cakes arrive. They spell For As Many As Will.

The afternoon is quite a whirl with things going on all over the building. A sewing workshop upstairs, a ceildh downstairs. Connections are made. I introduce Baroness Helena Kennedy to Emmeline Pethick Lawrence's great nephew. On the stairs I pass Sam Lee's singers singing A Nutting Girl in barbershop harmonies. Project Phakama take Polaroid pictures and interview people about English song and dance. The elderly walk slowly

with sticks and children run around. There are talks and debates and its then that someone says 'I feel like a new door is opening'. Alistair Anderson, Jim Moray take over in the evening; Laurel and Freddie's piece is presented: gossamer light and involving three dancers, a viola, and a bacca pipes jig. The Gloworms have us all dancing, Moussa and Alpha re-invent strip the willow. Faces spin past.

From my point of view the children proved central. They appeared to know a story was at stake. Mary had told Club members to imagine they were: 'their great great grandfathers and great great grandmothers dancing on the village green, that there is no audience, but that they are only to enjoy themselves in the best possible way'.²⁷ The way the children threw themselves at the day was magical: proof that the participatory arts give us a wider, deeper perspective on our lives in time - along with the bursts of creative energy that provide life with its moments of inspiration, moments in which however fleetingly, the world can be re-imagined and nothing looks quite the same again.

See Image of Florrie and her Three Daughters [here](#)

Back to Florrie. In an attempt to find out more about Florrie once she had left for the States, I came across Rhett Krause, (googling one night) a Morris dancing physician from Massachussets. He'd spent ten years' piecing together what had happened to Florrie and her husband Arthur Brown. To his delight (and ours) he located Florrie's (then) three surviving daughters.

²⁷ The Espérance Morris Book, Part 1, Mary Neal

When the children last year recounted many of the stories last year Florrie's daughter, Vida, aged 86, I am happy to say was in the audience listening. She was learning too. She was learning about her mother. The visit she said had been the first time "I have ever thought of myself as English."²⁸

The next day Vida spoke at London Contemporary Dance (keep up – building next door to Somerset Terrace where the girls had danced on the roof) about her own dancing life as a member of the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo. She didn't know how to read music. She was George Balanchine's Ballet Mistress at the New York City Ballet. She learnt a ballet a day.

If we put Florrie and Vida together they tell us much about how dance is inherited, learnt and loved. Florrie's steps were taken down by Sharp for his first Morris book and so was the Folk Revival's first dance memory. Vida was Balanchine's – one of the giants of contemporary dance, straddling 19th century Russian Ballet and the contemporary work of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and others.

See Image of one of Florrie Warren's Daughters, Cicely with her great grandchildren [here](#)

How has British dance history missed out on these two amazing women and their dance memories?

Last week I learnt the sad news that Cicely had died on New Year's Eve, but aged 96. She had 18 great grandchildren. Vida had spent Christmas

²⁸ In conversation with LN

with them. She told them all about the visit so they were learning for the first time also about Florrie. Vida's sister's grand-son's wife Bonnie sent me these pictures.

In the image [here](#), Vida is teaching her great niece to dance. Vida is teaching her to dance and Jamie is teaching her the piano. Mary once said "New inspiration and new joy is always best expressed in the music of dance and song". Does this not show how very much is at stake when we learn and that it is possible to learn by heart?

"True education flowers" Philip Pulman once said "at the point where delight falls in love with responsibility". The creative experience re-invents us every day, re-integrates us, shapes us, makes us whole.

Vida sends us all her best wishes.

Last June Abingdon Morris invited me to their Mayor's Day and annual election of the Mayor of Ock Street. At the supper that followed I read from Mary's autobiography about her visit to see the Morris side in Abingdon. How impressed she'd been by the dances 'around a pole on top of which was stuck a bull's head with horns. There are many traces of sun worship.' and yes, she ends up in the Happy Dick arranging for dancers to come up to London. A Hemmings descendant had travelled to London with the men last year.

When I sat down at the supper, an elder man leant towards me and said "I heard about the Abingdon trip to London. I heard too you did well."

I hope you can imagine what that meant to me. It was like the sailor up from Somerset who had seen the girls dance in Cumberland market: “This is the dancing of my heart and I would not have missed the sight for two big apples”.

Laurel Swift: Morris Jig (with references to Morris traditions of Bledington, Kirtlington, Raglan and Fieldtown)

PART III

See Image of Woking Crematorium [here](#)

See Mary Neal’s plaque at Woking Crematorium [here](#)

This is about the future. First I need to go back to Woking. Woking Crematorium was a groovy place to cremated - the place to be seen dead in. I found Mary’s plaque and marvelled at how a crop of pine trees - her favourite tree - grew so close to her final resting-place. I could listen to then wind in them. I placed these leaves along the top of the plaque and made my way home.

“Deep As The Universe is My Life And I Know It”. The phrase is taken from ‘Towards Democracy’, a book Mary admired, by her friend the poet-philosopher Edward Carpenter. As an epitaph to a life that combined deep personal spirituality with constant public service the words initially struck me as awkward and apt. At her cremation, her friend Emmeline gives the eulogy citing her worship of natural rhythm and beauty before her body is committed to ‘our brother fire.’ Mary’s spirituality was shaped by St Francis, the somewhat eccentric saint who forsook material wealth,

believing poverty enriched him: a daily practical application of living in Christ. Everything was his sister and brother and everything in creation belonged to him: the birds, meadows and earth. His Canticle of the Creatures was read at Mary's cremation with its references to Mother Earth, Sister Moon, Brothers Wind, Air and Sun.

I carried this phrase 'Deep As the Universe Is My Life and I know It' around with me, prodding it to understand it better. Mary had had an appreciation of beauty and a mystical sense of the universe since childhood. This account from aged ten:

I never lost a sense of some life, serene changeless, of a different quality from that of every day events. One such experience remains very vivid. I was alone crossing a meadow in the misty evening light. The whole world became luminous from a hidden source of light, unreality vanished into reality and an incredible happiness filled my consciousness.

This belief in a reality deeper than consciousness has never left me down the years. And perhaps the most vivid remembrance of my childhood, beneath the sense of unreality and instability, was a very real consciousness of a deeper life.²⁹

In the 'general dance' she saw the patterns of the Universe: "The dancers and rhythm was the rhythm of nature of wind and waves of the movements of the sun and the stars...solemn deep and irregular as the curves of nature".³⁰

On the visits with the girls to the sea and countryside, Mary was clear about how much a connection to the natural world was of benefit for the girls and how a disconnection from Mother Earth was not good at all:

We seldom realise that those whom we have disinherited from the earth which is their birthright have suffered an irreparable loss...they have lost the healing, the

²⁹ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

³⁰ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography, VWML

comfort and the security of the earth beneath their feet and are adrift in uncertainty and unrest.

She had a sense of the interconnectedness of things: “Isolation is death, only in union is life”.³¹ There is not the time to go into her writing about the need for a balance of feminine and masculine rhythms - anything else she said was a disaster for the human race. Of women: “they must get back to the depths of their being and re discover the hidden springs of their life...only (then) will there be peace and harmony in the world.”³²

Today she might be called a 'deep ecologist,' - someone who recognises how humankind is inseparable from the planet's web of life and that awareness of the fact, brings humility, compassion and great joy. She would have much in common with others such as Rachel Carson, Stephan Harding, Arne Ness, Joanna Macy who, whilst following scientific paths, also express a sense of awe, wonder and belonging, a belief that our deepest experiences lie just below the surface. A slight shift of context can easily make them visible.

We don't need to meet all our teachers in life, and I do feel that Mary has been a great teacher for me, possibly most in reflecting on how an inner journey shapes our outward work and interactions with the world. In this she has given me confidence and courage and comfort.

We live in a time that is much troubled. Our planet is in a crisis. 200 years of fossil fuel use have created floods, famines, droughts. Our globe is heating up, our ice caps are melting. Resources we thought were infinite are not. When you go to check the weather with The Met Office for your

³¹ As A Tale That is Told, Mary Neal Autobiography. VWML.

³² *ibid*

week away in Cornwall you can check up on the latest on Climate Change. It's not good. Even if the planet only heats by two degrees 20-30% of species face extinction. We are desperately in need of the re-invention of our whole societies, technology, economies. How we look at our place, our connection to each other, and yes, our relation to Mother Earth.

A new paradigm is emerging: our biological sciences and spiritual traditions are meeting in the same place. We are connected. A shift of consciousness is happening. James Lovelock put a name to a Gaian universe, our planet is a living being and we are a living part of it. As Joanna Macy says:

The most remarkable feature of this moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying the world – we've actually been on that way for quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up as from a millennia long sleep to a whole new relationship to our world to ourselves and each other.³³

Macy adds that once we have named the phenomena of this historic time, we need to work in groups, use the arts to open the immensity of life that is in us; build courage and connect the past and present to see ourselves in such a deep time continuum. Don't our folk traditions allow us to do that brilliantly? What Macy calls The Great Unravelling of ecologically destructive ways of seeing the world is happening at the same time as what she calls The Great Turning. I like to call it the Great Imagining.

See Mary Neal's Quotation about Artists in the Soup [here](#)

What did Mary say on the eve of the First World War? "The artist is the only hope in the world today for we are all in the soup."

³³ www.joannamacy.net

I am not going to pretend I am an expert in systems theory, but I get the picture: the universe is self-organising and is made up of flow, relationships, everything connects. We live in a participating universe and energy is where the interactions happen. The greatest energy is where things are participating.

Working in the participatory arts, we know this. We have seen the interactions and re-inventions that come from encounters and exchange, the shared learning, the changes that come about. This is a huge opportunity for creativity. “Art”, said Jeff Koons: “is about profundity. It’s about connecting to everything that it means to be alive, but you have to act. If you have an idea, you have to move on it...” What did the suffragettes say ‘Deeds not words’. We have to act.

We are lucky in Britain that we have been building on patterns of participation for years now, maybe longer than we think. We have the language, skilled artists, even a funding system that knows the value of working everyday across communities, through learning, in health in education, across the sectors, with local authorities – the opening up of democratic practices in the arts. If anyone wants a discourse on excellence and radical innovation let them speak to any one of you.

We have what we need to hand: we can create frameworks that allow people to step into them and be hugely creative. The arts make space for our stories, they can help us work out the truth of our place here. Future generations did not know quite what we know now. Future generations will know we knew. This is happening on our watch.

In John Fox's definition of an artist of applied vernacular art I recognise what we have in mind here: "a facilitator, fixer, celebrant, stage manager, visionary, linking past and future, a shamanic poet.... the holder of what used to be called spiritual energy."³⁴

This kind of artist he says "would acknowledge the artist in us all and offer testament to the innate creativity recurring in every generation and every community where the intuitive is given freedom. Where regeneration is of the soul and not of economics. Where a holistic way of being is given credence and where making art is a daily experience".

See Image of Children on a Bus with Mary in the foreground [here](#)

So I would argue that we are all an Espérance Club now and that we should sing and dance as though our lives depended on it. The revival of the participatory arts as a radical re-invention of our society is just beginning. I think we can look forward to them redefining the arts in this country over the next few years, connecting to our lives on a broader, deeper basis, just when we need them most. I have the highest hopes for them. I called this lecture Hope's Song, from a poem by Susa Silvermarie.

1000 years of healing

From whence my hope, I cannot say,
except it grows in the cells of my skin,
in my envelope of mysteries it hums.
In this sheath so akin to the surface of the earth
it whispers. Beneath

³⁴ John Fox 'New Ground Lost Seeds'

the wail and dissonance in the world,
hope's song grows. Until I know
that with this turning
we put a broken age to rest.
We who are alive at such a cusp
now usher in
one thousand years of healing!

Winged ones and four-leggeds,
grasses and mountains and each tree,
all the swimming creatures,
even we, wary two-leggeds
hum, and call, and create
the Changing Song. We remake
all our relations. We convert
our minds to the earth. In this turning time
we finally learn to chime and blend,
attune our voices; sing the vision
of the Great Magic we move within.
We begin
the new habit, getting up glad
for a thousand years of healing.

I learnt the other day that the word opportunity comes from the latin porta - door. An opportunity offers us an entrance, a passage through. I hope this lecture provides a wide enough door for us all of us to jump through together, as Florrie, Blanche, Kate, Daisy, Bertha and all those Espérance Girls did many years ago.



Thankyou.

Laurel Swift on fiddle: 'Lumps of Plum Pudding'

Finale: Laurel gets everyone on their feet to dance 'Circassian Circle' to the tunes of 'Seven Stars' and 'Hullican Jig'.

END.

NB. Mary Neal Bunting made by Tabitha Neal.

Lucy Neal

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www.maryneal.org

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