

Introduction to the 2nd Edition of
Roy Dommett's Morris Notes

In February of 1984, I taught a class on the Morris dances of the Cotswold village of Kirtlington for the Country Dance Society of Boston. After one of the classes, a dancer approached me with a ninth or tenth generation photo-copy of a set of notations of Kirtlington dances and pointed out that there were some differences between what I had taught and what was vaguely discernible on these blurred sheets. Recognizing these notes as being an early issue from Roy Dommett's typewriter, I asked the dancer where he had gotten them. "Oh," he said, "they were a copy of a copy that a friend got from someone else."

Over a period of almost thirty years, Roy Dommett has been issuing sets of notes based on his research with the field notebooks of other collectors, his extensive 8mm film archive of contemporary morris dance teams, and his own thoughts enriched and informed by active collecting, teaching, discussing, and lecturing on the English morris. The influence and impact of these notes has been widespread but largely anonymous. Lionel Bacon, editor of the Handbook of Morris Dances (published by The Morris Ring, 1974) gives full credit for Roy's invaluable contribution to the preparation of the widely used manual. In the Foreword, he wrote:

...this book is to be seen as the work of many men: but among them one man stands out as the main researcher of the manuscripts and is the main source of my information on unpublished dances. This is Roy Dommett, whose work on the manuscripts has been indefatigable, and his generosity in making the material available to me has been absolute. (p. ii)

This collection (especially Volumes 1 and 5) includes most if not all of the information given by Roy to Lionel Bacon to assist in the preparation of the "Handbook." But they contain far more than materials culled from the notebooks of field workers. Roy Dommett is almost unique among morris scholars in that his interests are as much for morris dancing as a contemporary phenomenon as they are for the historical aspects of the dance. Roy has notated interpretations of "traditional" repertoire as danced by new or "revival" teams and also contemporary performances by "traditional" teams. The notes contain newly composed dances from many sources including American sides, from women's sides, and also from Roy's own choreographic activities. Perhaps the most significant influence has been the reconstruction of whole dance repertoires from meagre information provided in field workers' notes. Roy has had a hand in developing Cotswold-style traditions which many dancers now use as a basic repertoire. The Ducklington dances as people know them, for example, are almost entirely the result of Roy's collaboration with the Bath City Morris Men over a period of years. The revival of interest in the Border Morris owes a great deal to Roy's careful and deliberate distribution of manuscript materials and ideas as to what to do with them to selected individuals and groups.

In the USA, Roy's approach could be compared to the activities of the folk hero, Johnny Appleseed, who is said to have traveled around the North American continent planting apple trees grown from quality seeds. Once planted, they become the property of the individuals who live with them and nurture them and this has been Roy's strategy. Hence the anonymity of the notes and my motivation for editing my collection together. It is in part a way for me to express my gratitude for Roy's generosity with his work. Based in the USA, I could not have pursued my own activities as a dancer, teacher, and scholar without the 6" high stack of notes given to me by Roy over a period of ten years. Other teachers in this country have been able to avail themselves of the resource because of his willingness to have them copied. In the past, Roy himself only occasionally published any of these materials. The pages of Morris Matters, a publication edited by a very active women's team in England, Windsor Morris, now regularly feature articles of the sort which once would have been mimeographed and handed out at a Halsway Manor weekend in England

or at Pinewoods Camp in the USA. Whether in England, Australia or the US, Roy has encouraged and nurtured dancers whoever they are and wherever he has found them. Through his teaching, knowledge and unlimited enthusiasm, he has left the dancing better than before he came, the clubs healthier and more motivated, and the team leaders better informed.

My sense of fairness was offended by the dancer in Boston who produced a set of Roy's notes without having any idea who was responsible for them. When Brad Foster, Director of the Country Dance and Song Society, asked me soon afterwards if I had an index to Roy's notes, I decided to organize them so that credit would be directed in the right place when copies were circulated. A set of Dornett notes lies in a pile of single sheets in a cardboard box in the headquarters office of CDSS in New York City and I half suspect that if Roy himself has a complete set, it is scattered somewhat randomly around his work room at home.

Published in a limited edition for Pinewoods Camp in August, 1984, the original five volumes represented all of the notes which had made their way onto this side of the Atlantic on the many trips that Roy has made either by way of his business as a senior civil servant or by way of his visits as an ambassador for the Morris. After receiving a copy of that edition of his papers, Roy promptly sent me a package containing about 120 sheets which I had not previously seen. This second edition, then, is the result of merging the new material with the old. The primary effect of this has been on Volume 1 which has been bound in two parts. Much of Roy's recent work has been concerned with commentary on the history and revival of the Morris of the South Midlands. The scholarly efforts to unravel the history of the Morris have increased in the past few years under the guidance of luminaries such as Keith Chandler, Mike Heaney and Tess Buckland. In this context, Roy has tried to keep pace with the need to relate the plethora of new information on what it was like to what is going on today.

The Morris in America suffers in a more severe form from a disease which is surprisingly rampant in England: Ignorance. Most American teams, however, are aware of their lack of knowledge and are desperate for film, video, and written materials which will help them in their efforts to start and maintain Morris dancing in their own communities. I hope this collection of Roy's notes will make it easier for dancers to get access to ideas and information which can help them in their task.

The reader should venture further with a few words of warning and advice from the editor, who has almost made a profession of finding his way around his congeries of Dornettiana. First, they were intended primarily for use by dancers. Roy has not always included references to sources of notations or historical and biographical information. I have not tried to provide the "missing" details. Second, the notes were created over a large number of years, for several different purposes, and on several different typewriters. Where the notes were unreadable for one reason or another, I have had them re-typed. For this service, I am grateful to Edna Newmark and Ann Marie Folan of the University Professors Program at Boston University, who have labored mightily over the eyesight-ruining problem of deciphering complex Cotswold morris notations often from faint photocopies. Almost all of the original notes have been reduced from peculiar English paper sizes to fit the American 8 1/2 x 11 standard. There were times when I considered issuing a magnifying glass with each volume. Third, do not treat these notes as "gospel;" they are intended to challenge misconceptions arising from limited knowledge and to stimulate by providing a pool of good dance ideas.

It is not easy to work one's way through the mass of historical, musical, and choreographic details which are packed into Roy's notes. The dancer or teacher who tries earnestly to become familiar with the contents of these volumes will be rewarded with a taste of the way Roy has been able to strike a productive bargain between the Morris as living phenomenon with a valuable place in contemporary life and its historical and traditional existence.

The volumes are organized with the American dancer in mind. Volume 1 covers what, in England, is now sometimes called the "Morris of the South Midlands" rather than "Cotswold Morris." Roy has talked of it as "Wychwood Morris" after the royal forest in which most of the complex repertoire was located. Essentially, it is the Morris of Whitsun, of short set dances, and of white costumes, ribbons and bell pads. Part I consists of the commentary, background information, and general useful discussion of the practice and teaching of the Morris. Part II contains the dance notations organized alphabetically by the location with which the repertoire is associated. It is now generally acknowledged that the practice of identifying a "tradition," consisting of a single style and a cluster of set dances, with a particular town or village in the South Midlands counties is a potentially misleading and inaccurate fiction. The dancing, as is partly illustrated by the multiple teams currently in Bampton and Abingdon, seems to have been more the property of individuals or families than of towns or villages. Sharp, reflecting the prevailing view of his times, preferred to publish folk songs and dances under a county, town or village label and, for the Morris dances, the labels stuck. Bearing all this in mind, however, dancers have found this practice useful in developing club repertoire and I have used it as the main organizing principle for that reason. The lengthy studies of the Morris at Longborough, Bucknell, Sherborne, Bampton, and Stanton Harcourt and the multiple notations from different time periods in the life of the Ilmington Morris merit special attention in this regard. Part II contains an extensive collection of manuscript information on the Headington Quarry Morris. Included is a draft copy of Kenworthy Schofield's attempt to provide an updated replacement for Sharp's published Headington notations.

The North-West Morris of Cheshire and Lancashire (Volume 2) has received less attention in North America, but this morris of urban parades, of clogs, of rush-carts and of bass drums has begun to attract interest. Roy taught an extensive workshop on these materials in Putney, Vermont in 1978 and prepared a set of notations for that event incorporating Garland dances with the dances of Cheshire and Lancashire. This package of information with its boldly emblazoned title page declaring it to be a collection of "Garland Dances and the Lancs and Cheshire Morris" was the centerpiece of one of my favorite anecdotes about Dommett the peripatetic dancing master. Roy travels on a diplomatic passport because his work with the Royal Aeronautics Establishment involves frequent contact with foreign governments. It is not usual for customs officials to question the personal effects of officials traveling on government business. When Roy opened his briefcase on arriving in New York to reveal nothing but these hefty packages of notations, there was a brief hesitation and a raised eyebrow while the customs officer tried to figure out the relationship between Morris dancing and the governments of Britain and the United States.

Volume 3 on the Garland dances reflects the establishment of several teams specializing in the performance of this repertoire which is from the European continent as well as from England, from women's teams as well as from men's. I have felt free in Volumes 2 and 3 to list repertoire either by town of origin ("tradition"), where possible, or by the name of the club from which it was recorded. Roy's output on the Sword dances (Volume 4) is limited, but nevertheless deserves its own volume because it attracts a different set of dancers.

Volume 5 ("Other Morris") merits a little more discussion. One of the most important ideas I obtained from conversations with Roy and from trying to absorb the consequences of the information contained in his notes is the immense diversity of the Morris. It is not confined exclusively to men; it does not consist entirely of pretty, graceful dances pleasing to the heart of those with delicate sensibilities; it is sometimes very simple and crude. As Roy puts it:

One must not judge all morris by the yardstick of the Cotswold dances which after all is only one flower on the folk tree. Any custom is only as elaborate as necessary to fill the need which occasions it in its community. (Section on Reels, Volume 5: Other Morris, p.3)

The set of notes which I have labelled with Roy's term "Other Morris" reflects the diversity of the English Morris. It includes display dances which are basically recreational country dances partly because they needed to be included somewhere and partly because many of them make fine dances for a display and may actually get used by groups putting on a seasonal or ceremonial dance performance. It includes the "Border" Morris of Herefordshire and Worcestershire and morris forms from locations other than the South Midlands or the North-West or dances from those locations which are not consistent with the prevailing genre. This goes against the trend established by Lionel Bacon in his Handbook, since I have separated the Border Morris, the Lichfield Morris, the East Anglian Molly Dances and the Derbyshire Morris from the Cotswold group of dances. It makes no sense to me to interpret any of the above mentioned repertoire in the same breath as the Cotswold dances because they are variously different contextually, choreographically, and in movement quality from the Morris of Whitsuntide in the Wychwood Forest.

Another editorial decision which is perhaps more controversial and, therefore, in need of explanation is the inclusion in Volume I, Part II, of detailed notations and tunes for the Morris at Chipping Campden and at Abingdon. They were excluded from the Handbook of Morris Dances edited by Lionel Bacon on the grounds that these are "living traditions" and the "men from those towns claim copyright on the dances and prefer that they remain unpublished." I have chosen to re-issue Roy's documentation of these repertoires for three reasons. First, omission of these notations would severely diminish the usefulness of this collection for scholarly research especially when films and printed descriptions of the dances have been publicly available for several years. Teams from both towns have encouraged Roy and myself and probably others to make visual recordings of public Morris occasions at which they were performing. Roy has, in fact, with the teams' permission, filmed the dancing from both towns over a twenty year period or more. Much of this work at Abingdon was conducted while he was dancing with the Abingdon Traditional Morris Dancers. Given his reputation and personal frankness, it must have been with the knowledge that his purpose was one of documenting the dancing. In the summer of 1979, I was welcomed at practices and tours of the Chipping Campden team and Mr. Hemmings' Morris Dancers in Abingdon to film all of the teams' repertoire to add to my own research archive and to include in a series of videotapes designed to show American dancers the range and high level of performance possible within the Morris.

The second reason, then, is that the evidence shows, I believe, that other teams have largely shunned or avoided performing any of the dances from Chipping Campden or Abingdon out of respect for the wishes of the dancers in those towns rather than because there are no notations available. Other teams who would rather that their dances were not performed by anyone else, such as the Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers, have actually led public workshops or instructionals in which explicit details of performance have been taught. If people chose to perform dances over which a team makes proprietary claims, the lack of available notations would not stop them any more than the French Maginot Line stopped Hitler's single-minded advance. A public performance of a Morris team is not a state secret and anyone with a little knowledge of Morris dancing, a pencil, and paper could make their own notations from watching the relatively uncomplicated choreography in Abingdon or Chipping Campden.

The third and final reason for including this material along with that from all other locations is that the details of what to dance are only a small part of the network of interactive factors which shape a Morris performance or custom. Who dances, how they dance, when they dance, where they dance, why they dance, and for whom they dance all contribute to the way it looks and to what it means. Has the fact that hundreds of teams perform the "Bampton" dances made the dancing of all three teams in Bampton any less special? Any performance style is like a good wine in that it can only be achieved through a careful process of aging. It is possible that someone may seek to

train a team to imitate or emulate the dancers at Chipping Campden or Abingdon. It would take so long and so much effort to accomplish what has been achieved in those teams that personal and environmental idiosyncracies would inevitably have made it into its own unique Morris, quite likely unrecognizably different from the original. This is the story of the process of learning a craft, skill or art form by imitation whether in a traditional folk context, in the folk "Revival," or in the so-called "fine arts."

This is a lesson I learned in great measure from Roy Donnett. He has never been especially tolerant of any efforts to restrict the dissemination and availability of dance ideas. His notes and his workshops have served to inspire more dancing and better dancing. He would agree, I think, that a film can do little more than inspire a team to practice harder. A notation on a printed page can only be at best a starting point in the long difficult process of creating a dance performance which is satisfying to the dancers, entertaining for the audience, and a source of pride for a community.

Finally, I fully anticipate that Roy already has two or three dozen new offerings which will necessitate additions to this collection. I welcome suggestions and criticisms from any reader.

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Boston, Massachusetts
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