

**One Musician, Two Collectors, Different Results: Sam Bennett
as collected by Cecil Sharp and James Madison Carpenter
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Sam Bennett was born in Ilmington on 5 November 1865, to James and Martha Bennett, the 6th of 12 children. He lived in his native village to the venerable age of 85. Bennett was a fruit grower and seller by trade and he diversified into related work such as ladder-building and hauling. Small of stature and bow-legged, he was nevertheless vigorous throughout his life. He was famous locally for his ability at mowing, and he demonstrated his continued robust health by dancing a jig at his eightieth birthday party.¹ At seventeen he was given a second-hand fiddle and he immediately began to seek out people who could teach him tunes. The local pipe and tabor player taught him the Ilmington morris tunes,² and Bennett also learned the Bampton morris tunes from an itinerant Oxfordshire fiddle player. Bennett became an active member of the Ilmington morris dancers in the 1887 revival and continued to perform, teach, and accompany the display dances of the region for many decades. During his long life, he played the fiddle, sang, danced, and taught traditional dancing in Wales, Devon, and London.³ He instructed children in maypole, social and morris dancing, and could be found performing at most local celebrations. Bennett could not read music, but had an excellent memory. He took a lively interest in village life and customs, and sought to learn material from other tradition bearers. In addition to Carpenter, Bennett's songs, tunes, and dances were collected by Cecil Sharp, Mary Neal, Percy Grainger, R. Kenworthy Schofield, Clive Carey, Alfred Williams

and Peter Kennedy. He traveled widely, freely spoke to the press and wrote letters to friends and the editors of newspapers. Bennett was a consummate performer and tireless promoter of the local traditions.

James Madison Carpenter (1888-1983) was a Harvard-trained collector who, between 1928 and 1936, amassed a vast horde of British songs, stories, tunes and customs, notable for its breadth and diversity. During the Spring of 1933,⁴ Carpenter made approximately sixty recordings of dance music from a handful of musicians, primarily in the English South Midlands. He did not notate or otherwise collect the steps and figures of the dances, though he wrote down generalized descriptions of some of them. Chief among his dance music informants was Sam Bennett, the subject of approximately 52 recordings of morris and social dance music, ballads and other songs and several photographs. From the sheer bulk of Bennett's material in this collection, it is easy to see that Sam Bennett was an extraordinary performer, a rare find.

Cecil James Sharp (1859-1924) was an Englishman who studied mathematics and music at Clare College, Cambridge. He made music his career, first as an educator, then as a collector, arranger, author, and public speaker on the subject of traditional music and dance. He believed in the value of vernacular arts, for musical, social and educational purposes and became a leading proponent of their preservation and dissemination. His first collecting trips, publications and lectures were restricted to songs. He later became interested in dance. By 1911 he helped found the English Folk Dance Society, a body that advanced his ideas on how traditional dance should be collected, taught and performed. He also published several volumes of

instructions and music for social and display dances, and wrote endless letters to various newspapers, promoting his ideas.

Cecil Sharp first met Bennett in January of 1909, while out looking for morris dances to publish. It is astounding then, that despite Bennett's large active repertoire, Sharp collected fewer than twenty items from him. Upon closer inspection, Bennett did not fit Sharp's particular notion of a model informant, one whose "faculties have undergone no formal training whatsoever, and who have never been brought into close enough contact with educated persons to be influenced by them."⁵ Although not formally trained in music, Bennett had gone out of his way to learn tunes and dances, rather than soaking them up by osmosis. Bennett's magpie-like tendencies of enthusiastically acquiring repertoire were suspect in Sharp's eyes. He also read books and newspapers, thus absorbing modern ideas. In his middle age when they met, Bennett was much younger than Sharp's ideal informant who should have been born before 1840.⁶

I should have called this "Three Collectors and one informant" because there is another person in this equation who must not be ignored. Mary Neal (1860-1944) was a social worker who became a folk-dance collector. In 1895 she helped establish the Espérance Girls' Club, a socialist project that used music, drama and dance to enrich the lives of young working class women. In 1905 the girls learned some folk songs collected by Cecil Sharp. The songs proved so popular that Neal asked Sharp if there were any dances in a similar vein. Sharp put her in contact with William Kimber a musician and dancer with the Headington Quarry Morris men, and through him she met several other dancers and musicians, including Sam Bennett. The enthusiasm of the young

women for these dances prompted Sharp to begin his own research into traditional display dance, something he had known about since 1899, but had ignored in favour of songs.

On the 3rd of April 1906, a public concert was given by the Espérance Club, preceded by an introductory lecture by Sharp. This was a turning point, the beginning of the 20th century revival. Roy Judge wrote “Both Sharp and Neal felt that they had become instruments in a direct and transforming restoration of a lost English heritage”.⁷ Their collaboration prospered, the Espérance Club providing a demonstration group for Sharp’s lectures, and material for his publications. Sam Bennett became an instructor for the Espérance girls, who in turn taught the Ilmington dances to others. Bennett also performed with the Espérance Girls in London. Differences of opinion arose between Sharp and Neal over the performance and teaching of the dances. The division came to a head in 1910-12. A war of words was waged between Mary Neal on the side of a natural evolution in the transmittal of dance, what we might call today 'the folk process' and Cecil Sharp with his emphasis on absolute faithfulness to the 'correct' version. Their battles were made public via a heated exchange of letters to the editor of the *Morning Post*. Sharp dismissed the Espérance Club as 'philanthropic' and he was criticized for being 'pedantic'.⁸ Sam Bennett joined the fray in support of Mary Neal. The rift between Sharp and Neal (and possibly Bennett by association) was never mended.

Sharp published his first *Morris Book* in 1907, and from then on took an evangelical and proscriptive interest in the revival of the dances. He developed strong views about the legitimacy of the dances, and in the second

edition (1911-1924) he deleted dances that had been published in the first edition, “because, on further investigation, we found that the traditional authority upon which they rested was less trustworthy than we had believed it to be”.⁹ A roundabout way of saying certain performances did not meet his narrow definition of tradition, and were therefore not worthy of publication. Sharp believed he was preserving the dying heritage of a nation, and focused his attentions on elderly performers, who were less tainted with the stains of modern life and whose songs and dances had, in his eyes, an unimpeachable pedigree.

By the time Sharp collected from Bennett in 1909, he was a published authority on the morris and his idea of the dance was based on the performances of William Kimber and the Headington dancers. Sharp described Bennett and the Ilmington dancers that Neal brought to London as “very uncouth as well as untraditional.”¹⁰ Their style differed greatly from that of Headington and he considered it degenerate. Cecil Sharp had a reputation to uphold. He could not afford to risk publishing material that was not absolutely ‘authentic’ in his eyes. His position as an expert (and thus his livelihood) was under threat from Mary Neal and the Espérance Girls. Bennett was one of her main informants, and Sharp was wary of him. These enthusiastic amateurs were encroaching on his territory and Bennett’s association with, and defense of Neal in the papers did not endear him to Sharp.

Cecil Sharp bypassed Sam Bennett and his active set of dancers in favour of the recollections of older men. Sharp wrote of the Ilmington tradition thusly: “the pipe and tabor player, James Arthur, son of the original player,

became too old to play, and as there was no one to take his place, the dancing came to an abrupt conclusion. Since then there has been no *serious attempt* [my italics] to revive the ancient tradition at Ilmington.”¹¹ Sharp ignored the fact that Bennett learned the tunes from this same pipe and tabor player and led a revival six years prior to this publication. Bennett pointed out these omissions in a letter to the editor giving his own history of the Ilmington morris dances which he later showed to Carpenter.¹²

Carpenter, who came to Britain after Sharp’s death, had an expansive approach to collecting. “Naturally I took what seemed worth collecting, but centered attention successively upon the first four groups listed below”: [Chanteys, Ballads, Folk Plays, Children’s Songs and Singing Games]. “All other groups turned out to be valuable by products.”¹³ Although he marked many pages with the phrase ‘never saw in print’ he did not automatically pass judgment songs that may have come from books or the stage. He was influenced by the work of earlier collectors, and made a point of following in their footsteps, but his all-encompassing, non-judgmental method allowed him to reap a fuller harvest, more songs, more tunes, and more verses than his predecessors.

A search through extant folk music collections has turned up a total of sixty-seven different titles in Bennett’s repertoire. Sharp collected fourteen songs and dances, four of which Carpenter did not collect. Carpenter collected fifty items, often in multiple recorded and typescript iterations. Of these, ten had been collected previously by Sharp. A further thirteen items were not collected by either Sharp or Carpenter, but were picked up by other collectors.

Comparing Bennett's songs and tunes as collected by Sharp and later Carpenter leaves us pondering some interesting questions. For instance, where did Bennett learn the Playford tune 'Gathering Peascods' which only appears in Carpenter's collection? Did he pick it up in the intervening years, perhaps from hearing Sharp's students performing at the nearby Stratford on Avon festival? Why is 'Maid of the Mill' absent from Carpenter's collection? It was Ilmington's signature morris dance, and its distinctive use of linked handkerchiefs was documented in two extant photographs. That Sharp collected three more morris dances than Carpenter indicates Sharp's focus on the morris. As further proof of his targeted approach, he neglected Bennett's stock of Child ballads that Carpenter later recorded. Obviously, an informant's repertoire may change over time. There are always new tunes to learn, old ones to forget and the occasional unintentional merging and transformation of half-remembered melodies. But this does not completely explain the differences in the two collections. The working methods of each collector profoundly impacted their results:

1) Searching for the source:

Cecil Sharp relied on mediators to help him find informants; usually the local parson or squire, or an acquaintance of his in the area. For instance, while looking for sword dance material, he wrote to vicars to ascertain if they had dances in their parish before he ventured out to collect them. To increase the song to mile ratio, he frequented work houses where he was bound to find older, unsophisticated members of the rural working class, precisely the type of informant he preferred.

Carpenter approached the parson and the squire as he had been

instructed by Kitteridge, but found them to be out of touch with the tradition bearers.¹⁴ Instead he frequented pubs, festive occasions, or asked locals if they knew any old songs or tunes. He often avoided the problem of searching in uncharted territory by following the routes of earlier collectors. Sharp cleared new ground and Carpenter came along later to glean items that had been missed in the first harvest.

2) Transportation:

Cecil Sharp did not have an automobile. Instead he traveled by train and thence by bicycle or on foot. For a man who suffered from asthma and other ailments, he had impressive endurance, but the lack of independent motorized transport was a limiting factor in how far or widely he could travel.

Carpenter had his own automobile, and was able to travel quite far off the beaten track if he chose. He was not limited by rail timetables and routes, or the need to get back to London for non-collecting work.

3) Time factors:

In the early stages of his collecting, Sharp could only make field trips during holidays from his position as a music educator. In later years when he abandoned the security of a paid position, he had to balance his collecting trips with publishing, teaching and lecturing work, so he could support his growing family.

Carpenter on the other hand was only in the UK for a limited time. Surviving largely on grant funding, he was unencumbered by the need to support anyone but himself. He had the advantage of being able to devote himself wholly to his fieldwork, following leads while they were still warm.

4) Collecting techniques:

Sharp preferred not to use recording equipment on his collecting trips as it was too cumbersome to transport, and he feared it would frighten his informants. He was well- practiced in the art of music transcription, and would take down the tune while it was sung. Like other collectors who used this method, he did not take down every note of every verse, but instead distilled the essence of the melody and notated interesting variations. In later years, he was assisted in his work by Maude Karpeles who wrote down the words while he captured the tune. Collecting songs by hand is a time consuming process, often requiring much patience on the part of the informant who may have to repeat themselves several times.

Carpenter lacked the musical facility of Sharp, but had a significant technological advantage. He recorded his informants with a dictaphone machine. With his car he had the means to transport the machine and its blank media. A portable typewriter, quicker and more legible than handwriting, was used for the texts. He could have easily recorded and typed several songs in the same amount of time it took Sharp to write one down.

Carpenter made no attempt to collect detailed choreography. He was content with the tunes, customs and songs associated with the dances, plus any brief contextual information that an informant was willing to provide during the recording process. His very few forays into choreography appear to be transcriptions of his informants' sketchy descriptions of sword dance figures, and are of insufficient detail for reconstruction.

As part of Sharp's method of collecting dances, he notated both steps and tunes plus historical details. He wrote down the movement as it was performed or described, and then repeated the steps under the scrutiny of the

informants, in order to verify his notes. This complicated collecting and feedback process would have greatly increased the amount of time it took to acquire one dance.

5) Selection:

Given the laborious methods Sharp used, was it any wonder that he was selective in the material he gathered? He targeted specific genres and performers that would fit into his plans for teaching and publication and that could be collected in his limited time in the field. Because of these constraints and requirements, he passed over items or informants that did not meet his self-imposed standards.

Carpenter seems to have cast a much wider net, hauling in all sorts of odd fish. He had no immediate need to use what he collected, though there was always a long term goal to publish it. In the process of collecting for collecting's sake, Carpenter apparently gathered up nearly everything in Sam Bennett's extensive repertoire, missing very few items that were collected by others.

6) Relationship with the informant:

Cecil Sharp clearly distrusted Sam Bennett as a source. In his letter to Miss Mayne in 1910, he calls Bennett a "rotter", an "inaccurate collector", and a "nuisance".¹⁵ These disparaging remarks occurred in the midst of Sharp's public disagreement with Mary Neal, and were perhaps tinged by a sense of rivalry with both Neal and Bennett.

There was unquestionably conflict between Sharp and Bennett which would have influenced their interaction. Carpenter on the other hand, was as yet unpublished, had little knowledge of the morris dance, no concern for the

steps and their alleged authenticity, and nothing to prove. Bennett was not his competitor. Bennett's widespread and very public promotion of the Ilmington traditions made him easy to locate and amenable to recording. By the time Carpenter came to the field, Sharp was dead, Neal retired, and Bennett was still going strong.

In Summary:

James Madison Carpenter encountered Sam Bennett about a quarter of a century after Cecil Sharp. He had the advantage of technological innovation: an automobile that made travel faster and more convenient and a cylinder recorder and typewriter that made the collecting process quicker and more accurate. Cecil Sharp's medium was pencil and paper, a slower, more labour-intensive means to a similar end. When Sharp met Bennett, he was specifically looking for the morris dances, and he felt Bennett was an unreliable source for these. Thus Sharp ignored most of his songs, and ruled out most of Bennett's dance repertoire as inauthentic. Carpenter was primarily interested in four particular genres, but was willing to collect anything that was related to these, and so reaped social dance tunes, ballads and humorous songs. Unlike Sharp, he did not collect the dances themselves, or much in the way of historical information; employing a less detailed, more general technique. Sharp had limited time and a specific purpose for his collecting trips, forcing him to be highly focused and to some extent pre-judge the tradition and its bearer. Carpenter had the luxury of fully immersing himself for several years in the collection process and gathered vast amounts of raw material for later transcription and analysis. These factors combined to limit the number of items Sharp collected from Bennett compared to Carpenter's

haul.

Because of their different agendas, these two collectors interacted in different ways with the same informant, with discrepant results. To Cecil Sharp, Sam Bennett was a challenge to his authority, a friend to his adversary, and not to be trusted; but to James Madison Carpenter, Bennett was just one prolific source among many.

- ¹London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Library Collection, AL Bennett, *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 12th November 1948 [no page number on cutting].
- ²London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Library Collection, AL Bennett, letter to Douglas Kennedy, 28 January 1948.
- ³London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Library Collection, AL Bennett, letter to Douglas Kennedy, 22 Nov 1949.
- ⁴The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, MS p. 13501.
- ⁵Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*, (London: Simpkin, 1907), p. 4.
- ⁶*English Folk-Song Some Conclusions*, p. 119.
- ⁷Roy Judge, 'Neal, Mary Clara Sophia (1860–1944)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online ed, May 2006.
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40485>, accessed 17 Oct 2008].
- ⁸Steuart Wilson, 'Cecil Sharp: A Man of Zeal', *The Musical Times*, 100 (Nov., 1959), pp. 584-585.
- ⁹Cecil J. Sharp, and Herbert Macilwaine, *The Morris Book: With a Description of Dances as Performed by the Morris Men of England*, 2nd revised ed., (London: Novello, 1912), Part 1, p. 8.
- ¹⁰London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil J. Sharp MSS, Correspondence box E-G, letter to Alice Gomme, 28 April 1910.
- ¹¹*Morris Book* vol 1, 2nd ed 1912, p. 102.
- ¹²Carpenter Collection, AFC 1972/001, MS p. 09833.
- ¹³Carpenter interview with Alan Jabbour conducted 27 May 1972 in Booneville, Mississippi. Carpenter Collection AFC1972/001 Reel Tapes AFS 14,762-14,765.
- ¹⁴Carpenter Collection, AFC 1972/001, MS p.09833.
- ¹⁵London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Library Collection, AL Bennett, letter Sharp to Mayne, 3 September, 1910.