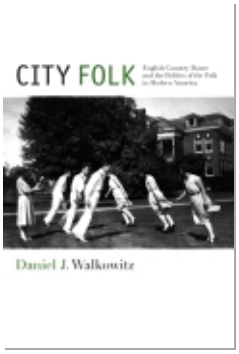
Preface



Preface

Folk dance groups seemingly are in an ever-constant search for new bodies, especially to augment the persistent short supply of male dancers. In that spirit, in March 1993, some friends with whom I was doing Scandinavian dancing every Wednesday evening at a synagogue on East 14th Street in New York City urged me to join them at a Tuesday-evening session of English Country Dancing at the Metropolitan-Duane Methodist Episcopal Church on 13th Street and Seventh Avenue. I had a full day of teaching on Tuesdays, so I thought I would be ready for some relaxation. And the church was very convenient; I lived only a few blocks away.

Other than one or two dances, which had entered the International Folk Dance repertoire, I had never done any English dancing. Still, I suspected that I would enjoy the form. The previous year, while spending a year teaching in Baltimore, I had come to enjoy a kindred dance form: contra dance.

Dancing in numerous folk dance venues was not unusual. As was my custom, wherever I happened to be I joined the local International dance group. In Baltimore, it met weekly at Johns Hopkins University. That spring I also danced with the local Balkan dance performance troupe, Narod. Balkan dance is performed with lines of men and women; sometimes they dance together, sometimes separately. Groups of each are needed, but not necessarily in even numbers. Country dancing, however, is couple dancing (as is Scandinavian), and near the end of my year in Baltimore the women of Narod convinced me to join them at Lovely Lane Church for an evening of contra dancing.

I remember that first venture as exhilarating and intimidating. The musicians—typically a fiddler, a banjo picker, a guitarist, and a piano player—rocked. The music seemed like familiar country square dance music, and the caller zipped through instructions that bore some resemblance to grade-school "do-si-dos" and "left and rights," but the women spun and "twizzled," ad-libbing extra turns and lunges that dazzled me. I dare say I did not leave anyone dazzled the few weeks I danced there, but I did find I loved the music and the dancing.

Back in New York the next year, in the wake of the putative end of the Cold War, the tumultuous breakup of the Soviet Union after 1989, and the consequent resurgence of nationalism, I found the International dance community had become a small uptown dance group focusing on Balkan dance, a relatively difficult, vigorous dance tradition of line dances in often complicated, quick patterns.[1] The location was inconvenient, but I think in retrospect I also did not appreciate that the group seemed to have become more antiquarian and nationalist than internationalist.

My turn away from Balkan dance reflects my interest in the politics of the folk, an interest deeply rooted in my personal history. I have folk danced since I was a young boy. I was introduced to folk dance through my parents and at "red diaper" summer camps in the early 1950s. These were "International" folk dances, dances from many lands that we danced as an expression of international solidarity with "common folk." As such, I grew up feeling the dances were integral to Left political culture and important on a personal and familial level to what I experienced, in the age of Reagan, as an increasingly beleaguered Left political community. The decline and narrowing of the International dance community in New York in the early 1990s, then, coincided with my decision to try English Country Dance (ECD).

Changes in folk dance practice and the dance community have variously bemused and agitated me as a participant-observer. Growing up in a left-wing family and in the folk culture of the 1950s and 1960s—a period that I analyze in the second half of this book—I experienced folk song and dance as part of a vital political culture. I enjoyed folk dancing as part of a Left community that walked picket lines together in the afternoon and sang folk songs "of protest" while doing so. Moreover, when I danced the "Danish Masquerade," I for the moment left the world of affluence and political instability and became the peasant, gentry, or aristocracy that the three parts of the dance aped. Similarly, when I joined a circle that was dancing a Croatian "Kolo Dance" to celebrate a wedding, I joined the men in teasing the women, once again imagining myself in another culture, in another time and place. The dance, then, was a carnivalesque experience in which, as in acting (which was my other passion), dancers became at one with "another" community of the "common people."

In the late 1960s, I believed that the political meaning of this culture was being lost, a notion that was, in retrospect, quite imperfect. Nonetheless, when I turned to English Country Dance in the early 1990s, I looked again for the political and emotional possibilities of folk imaginings in the dance. Interestingly, English Country Dance immediately struck me as embody-

ing different imaginings in quite complex ways. I was hard-pressed to find many historical English dances that celebrated a ceremonial occasion for the community or its members (deaths, war, courting) or seasonal change (harvests, plantings). Rather, dances were named for places or groups ("Drapers' Gardens," "Well Hall") or famous personages such as dancing masters at the time ("Jacob Hall's Jig" or "Mister Isaac's Maggot"), and the choreography and bodily expression rarely had any relationship to the title. To be sure, I did find that some modern choreographers writing new dances in the traditional style were naming dances after current events or special occasions, but for the most part, the cultural expression of ECD came from the carriage, styling, and tempo or the dance—it was in the bodily expression of the genre, not for a "story" it told about an event.

There were, however, two sets of class origins that offered me confusing but fertile ground for taking myself out of the present when dancing. One, advanced by revivalists in the early nineteenth century, represented the dance as "peasant"; the other, which depicted dancers as gentry, shaped the way many people at the end of the century imagined the dance and was seen in the widely viewed mid-1990s television and film dramatizations of Jane Austen novels. Both, however, had very different political valences from the proletarian imaginings I remembered animating International Folk Dance in the 1960s. And it is the difference between International Folk Dance and English Country Dance imaginings that directs my fascination with charting in this book the evocative, multivalent, and changing politics of the folk and left-liberal political culture in the United States.

My role as oral historian and participant-observer, of course, complicates my voice in this story. Since 1999, I have been engaged with colleagues at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (SCFCH) in an ECD documentation project. Stephanie Smith, a folklorist and archivist at the SCFCH, Charles Weber, the SCFCH's ethnographic videographer, and I, under the auspices of the Country Dance and Song Society of America (CDSS), have completed video oral histories with approximately seventy dancers, musicians, choreographers, and callers. I have conducted further, and often quite lengthy, telephone interviews with another dozen people. Moreover, we have dozens of additional hours of footage of these people "speaking" with their bodies, that is to say, dancing. English Country Dance is more restrained than some popular social dances in which people get down and dirty. ECD is usually done at arms' length, and the footage shows participants speaking with their bodies about pleasure, respectability, sexuality, discipline, and the boundaries of sociability. The challenge is to hear what they say.

But folk dancers and, more specifically, those in the English dance community on both sides of the Atlantic, are more than subjects and partners; they are friends for whom I hold the highest regard. I have danced, dined, and shared weekend and week-long dance events with many of these people for the past fifteen years, and Stephanie Smith has done so for many years more. Smith also teaches English Country Dance for the Washington, DC, dance community, and I occasionally call dances in New York City. That is, we interview people with our own informed sense of the dance and often of an interviewee's personal history. Our joint presence in most interviews meant we tried to check our insiders' knowledge and allow interviewees to tell their own story, although as my research evolved, I pressed many of them to think about the questions of race, class, and political engagement that concerned me but that may not have been on their agenda.

Many interviewees have candidly entrusted their views and stories with me, and I believe I honor their perspective in the honest telling of the history's challenges, ironies, and contradictions alongside its delights. I participate quite fully in the cultural forms described and analyzed. (In the late 1990s, I had custom made for myself an elegant circa-1735 gentry costume of chocolate silks to wear to festive dance balls.) I share the dance community's concern for its future. And neither they nor I nor the future of the country dance movement are well served by pieties. The ECD community's joys and pleasure are mine, but so are their contradictions my contradictions, their foibles my foibles.

Finally, I listen to my storytellers but must acknowledge that in editing the text I am the grand narrator with my own experiences: indeed, as a folk dance teacher, performer, and recreational dancer, I could as easily be the subject of the interview as the interviewer. Of course, on a fundamental level, the historian always tells his or her own story in constructing an apparently seamless narrative from diverse data. But the questions I asked, however open ended, reflect questions that have long interested me as a member of the dance community, so my own voice and perspective—indeed, our voices are never silent—implicitly if not explicitly shaped the interviews, much as it shapes the story that follows.