

'What Morris Means to Me'

I often tell people that I owe Morris my life. It's an interesting question – to ask what it means to owe something your life – but, fundamentally, I mean my parents met through Morris dancing. Born to a Border father and a Cotswold mother, I suppose I was always aware of Morris, though it was something I felt I should be embarrassed about – something strange my mother did that I never told anyone unless they somehow found out. I vaguely remember going with her as a child to Broadstairs Folk Week, though I don't remember any of the dancing; I remember my mother's friend trying to teach me the Bacca Pipes jig when I was about eight, but I only actually became a part of it and started dancing two years ago.

I had just finished my A-levels, for which I received two quite poor grades (I dropped my third A-level when I realised my inability to answer almost every question in the mock exam.) Disillusioned with education, I had decided long ago I didn't want to go to university – I wanted to be a writer. I finished my last year at college with overwhelming optimism: now I had all the time I wanted to write a novel, get published, and I'm on my way! A few months later, I hadn't kept in touch with friends, I stayed in the house every day and had the often-exaggerated daily battle with "the page". However dramatised the writer's battle is, it was a battle I was losing, a dream slowly slipping from my grasp and, for a long time, I simultaneously felt like time had stopped and was running away from me.

So, the Cotswold side that my mother danced with was having a beginners' practice and she urged me to come and try it, knowing how I'd shut myself away and quite reasonably thinking that it would do me good to get out, be social, and get some exercise. I agreed somewhat nonchalantly, knowing I only had to go once and say "it's not for me." The day came and, an hour or so before the practice, I called Mum:

'Mum, I'm really sorry, I've got a headache, so I'll give it a miss tonight.'

'Oh, I knew you'd do this. Why don't you come along anyway? It'll do you some good ...'

I can't remember if I actually had a headache, I think it's more likely I wanted a quiet night in. I felt real anger when she wouldn't allow me to pass it up, though of course it was probably directed inwardly at my inability to give a strong "no". Coming off the phone from her, I threw my phone as hard as I could at the concrete patio outside (I was getting a new phone soon, and it didn't even crack.) I was going to be doing Morris dancing whether I liked it or not. Joy.

I walked into the practice hall with the same timidity as was usual for me at that age. Despite how shy I must have seemed, the members of the side greeted me with surprising warmth and eagerness (though I realise now, the sight of youth would have been very welcome.) I don't remember a great deal of the dancing in the early days. What I do remember is the number of compliments I received on how quickly and how well I was picking it up; how interested people were in me and my education. I distinctly remember, on the drive home, thinking how nice everyone was, how they were always smiling and laughing and trying to engage with me. I returned to practice the next week, not because of the dancing or the music or any

sort of interest in the Morris – I returned because of how lovely everyone had been to me, I couldn't just leave it there. 'I'll do it a bit longer before I quit,' I thought to myself.

Throughout the practice season, there were moments that are hard for me to define – I remember, specifically, sitting on stacked chairs in the practice hall, watching the more experienced dancers dance a Bledington hanky dance called Cuckoo's Nest. I suppose I was mesmerised, I fell in love with the tune and I couldn't help but stare in a daze at the movements of the dancers; these sorts of moments were not infrequent, they felt somewhat magical and I felt there was a kind of profundity in the music and the dancing that is still for me indescribable.

At the end of the practice season, it came as a bit of a shock that I actually had to sign up to go to events and *dance out*. This thing that I had been enjoying every Tuesday in a hall now meant that I had to commit time out of my weekends to go and perform in front of people, and there was recognition in my mind that it was slightly too late to back out of it now – I'd had my fun, but now the thing required my weekends.

I experienced frustration at not being able to pick up traditions that the foreman didn't have time to teach the beginners in the practice season. I'd spend a lot of time at home practising the stepping and thinking out the figures to dances, I can see myself in people who have recently joined the side, and in their anxiety about going wrong and their reluctance to jump in and give it a go – of course, jumping in and giving it a go is how you learn, and the more I learned, the more I jumped in. I found I could remember the figures and details of the dances; I started to dance with competence and it felt good. I had found something that I could be good at, and it's a sweet pleasure when you find something that you can enjoy and progress in, something to master and get more out of the more you put in. I continue to be extremely flattered when people compliment me on my dancing; thinking about it now, I realise I compliment others nowhere near the amount they deserve.

I also found myself in the side's Mummers' Play – 'found' is completely the right verb here, as it turns out for many members of sides that take part in Mumming. As a student of literature and media, acting has always been an interest of mine; when I was twelve, I had a somewhat small part in a school play as Sherlock Holmes, for which I received many compliments. Impressed by my ability to remember lines and deliver them, my mother took me to Stagecoach around that age, and if I wasn't so shy I would have pursued acting as a hobby, but I was a very shy child. The ability to remember lines had apparently stayed with me, and I soon learnt how to project my voice, seeming to impress the side with my performance in the play. Dancing and acting in front of the public gave me a confidence I had never experienced in my life before: it was transformative for me as a person. When it came to delivering a ten minute presentation in my Access to Higher Education course (which I had started, taking the advice of an apprenticeship recruitment officer who could see that Literature was my passion, and a degree was the thing for it,) I delivered it with confidence, projecting my voice as I had learnt – I surprised myself with how easily I composed myself in front of people, and I know I had the Mumming to thank for it.

At the end of my first dance season, I still couldn't really tell how much I enjoyed the dancing; regardless, I joined my mother on the 2017 Madcap Morris Weekend in the Malvern Hills without hesitation. That weekend was the most transformative experience of my life. There was so much music over those three days, more than I'd been exposed to at the dance-outs and pub night music sessions of our side. When I returned home, I found that, when I listened to music, I felt it instead of just hearing it and, not only that, but I was incredibly emotional, like I'd never been before. It's like I'd been living my life in my head and something had opened up my heart and unlocked my emotions, however romantic that might seem. Four months after all that music, and watching people play instruments together to produce something collective and rushing with energy, I picked up a melodeon and decided I wanted to learn how to play it. Five months after that and I can play it pretty competently, for someone who considered themselves to not be musical, had never learnt how to play an instrument before, I now have something I can pick up and play, and that's a wonderful thing – to be able to create music with your fingertips in an idle moment, to have yet another thing to master and share with other musicians, just as I had seen them sharing music at the Madcap weekend which I so wanted to be part of.

I also experienced the sort of dancing attributed to youth – energy and confidence and spirit – it was the first time I'd seen someone put their all into it, to leap that high and exhibit their ability. In the moments that they danced, they became the brightest burning flame in that hall: mesmerising, a spectacle. Once home, I tried leaping as high as I could and found some joy in the faces of the dancers around me as they watched – there's a true joy to putting as much as you can into something, it's not just the exhibition but also the expenditure of energy and the rush of reward obtained. To be, in a moment, immortalised in spectacle; to be witnessed with admiration, however narcissistic it may sound, is incredibly consoling. It turns out there has always been a bit of a performer in me; I had always enjoyed the process of writing, but I also enjoyed being read and being praised for it. I didn't have to wait for my efforts to be read anymore, dancing gave me immediate expression. As far as I can see it, dancing and playing melodeon added two more things to my expressive outlets, because it turns out to be amazing therapy to be able to release some of what's inside you, whether through movement or music or words.

The most notable event at Madcap for me, however, was when we got into sets of four in the hall and the momentary foreman informed us that we would be learning a stick-throwing Border dance; I was to be dancing opposite my future girlfriend, who gave me a nervous smile at the announcement and I reckon I grinned widely in anticipation. I was ready to throw and catch sticks with mastery. We were awful. The sticks, mid-air, seemed to turn on their own and purposely clash in the middle and cause a crash of four sticks flying in indeterminate directions. We exchanged our sticks for longer ones and that seemed to help a bit. You had to throw and catch sticks four times before crossing and clashing with your partner; concentrating hard on my throwing and catching, I might have forgotten to count how many times I was throwing and I may have accidentally thrown a fifth time and sent a stick flying towards what would one day be my girlfriend. I clasped my hands to my face and

apologised eagerly, the image of her arms flailing as she tried to evade my thrown stick burned into mind. We laughed it off and, I think, we did the dance perfectly from that moment onward – we had become pros at stick-throwing. And then it was over; the next day, I looked out for her but she had gone home – we had barely said anything to one other.

After seven months of messaging each other and completing our academic years at college, we met up, and it turns out she didn't hold it against me for throwing that stick at her! (Not that much.) We've been dating for a little over two months now, and we've had a summer of mini-holidays and a lot of dancing. Unlike my parents, I'm the Cotswolder and she the Borderer.

This year I've done so much more dancing than the previous season, I'm currently part of three sides and expecting to dance with more and dance even more next year. My girlfriend's sister is the creator of the Morris zine 'Dance Like a Girl' and I'm so honoured to be part of her team – the team itself being close friends, I treasure having friends my age who are into Morris and folk. I'm continuously being exposed to new styles of dancing, interesting people, and forming strong friendships within the loveliest communities I've ever been a part of. Almost everyone I have met through Morris has done something for me: a Morris friend gifted me a melodeon, a Morris friend persuaded me to set my aspirations higher and she is the reason I've been accepted onto my dream university course, and there are many smaller but very sentimental things that people from my sides have done for me. Not to mention that I've become closer to my parents than I've ever been, and have something we can always talk about, sharing in its delights.

So, what does Morris mean to me? Would it be a cliché to ask what it doesn't mean to me? I can't imagine life without Morris, and it's fitting that I wouldn't have life without it! It's comforting that I will always have Morris, I will always be part of a community that I adore, always have a social life, always have the exercise and the expression – and, even if I have none of that, I wouldn't be who I am today without it, or the memories. Life, love, laughter – I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life right now, exactly where I want to be, and I have Morris to thank for all of it. I can't be grateful enough for the past two years, thank you Morris.

I wouldn't be here, and this wouldn't have been written, if at least two people were not dancing somewhere, sometime, to the sound of folk music and bells, with the clashing of sticks, and the twirl of tatters, and the slowly setting sun.