

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

'I Ring for the General Dance'

Katie Palmer Heathman

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Katie Palmer Heathman

'I Ring for the General Dance': Morris and Englishness in the Work of Conrad Noel

Conrad Noel, born in Kew in 1869, became infamous as the 'Red Vicar' of Thaxted due to his flying of the Red Flag and preaching of Christian socialism in Thaxted church.¹ Many readers of this paper will recognise Thaxted for its longstanding tradition of morris and the important role the town and its dancers played in the foundation of the Morris Ring. This paper hopes to explain the strong links between the two.

After completing his theological training, Noel was refused ordination, most notably because one bishop believed he was a pantheist, an objection stemming from his insistence that God dwelt within all men and women on earth, sanctifying humanity itself.² His eventual appointment to Thaxted in 1910, where he remained vicar for the rest of his life, came from Daisy Greville, the Countess of Warwick: she was the patron of this and several other livings, and following her conversion to socialism appointed prominent Christian socialists to these positions.³ Before forming his own organization the Catholic Crusade in 1918, Noel had been, along with fellow Christian Socialist and folk revivalist Charles Marson, a member of the Church Socialist League. The CSL was distinctly more rooted in economic socialism than its predecessors the Christian Social Union and Guild of St Matthew, and was more clearly linked with the socialism practised by secular organizations. Noel himself was the chief policymaker. But this sterner, more economically focused socialism did not mean that it had forgotten either its Christian basis, or, as was strongly present in Thaxted, its tradition of aesthetic socialism in the William Morris mould previously embodied in the GSM. The 'democratic common-

¹ Kenneth Leech, 'Conrad Le Despenser Roden Noel, 1869-1942', in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37813>> [accessed 7 October 2017].

² Noel Conrad, *An Autobiography*, ed. By Sidney Dark (London: Dent, 1945), p. 35.

³ Reg Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement: An Adventure in Christian Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1967), p. 190.

wealth' the CSL wished to create would, of course, be a Christian as well as a socialist utopia, but importantly, it would also be one of song, dance, and joy.

Noel's strategy for bringing about such a commonwealth in Thaxted was formed of a drawing together of several key elements: socialism, national identity, and gaiety, all of them intersecting of course with his Christian faith. By gaiety, Noel meant dance, song, colour, art, music, processions, and recreation: in short, a community participating in joyful activity together, as an expression of faith but also of happiness. The folk revival offered all of these things. Miriam Noel's invitation to Mary Neal's *Espérance* Guild to teach morris in Thaxted not only began a long tradition of morris in the town, but also enriched and enhanced Conrad Noel's preaching, aesthetics, socialism, and most of all, the sense of strong community he promoted as both the means and the end of his Christian socialist project to build the Commonwealth of God on earth in a small Essex town.

As well as a fervent hope for a new Socialist International, Noel also professed a love of nationalism, expressed through his flying of the St George and Sinn Féin flags alongside his famed red flag. This may at first seem counterintuitive. Dave Harker wrote in *Fakesong* that vastly different types of nation state shared a common need to reinforce nationhood through state sponsorship of organizations which promoted folk arts, because nationalism was inherently disruptive to the building of 'the only power which can challenge them – international working class solidarity'.⁴ C.J. Bearman, in turn, accused Harker and fellow Marxist assessors of the folk revival of disliking the movement because of its inbuilt cultural nationalism, as Harker and his colleagues had 'a fundamental hostility towards nationalism, and a more generalized antipathy towards the concept of tradition'.⁵ Bearman argued that 'Revolutionaries' 'tend to dislike traditions because established practices of any kind are a bar to the complete

⁴ Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), p. xi.

⁵ Christopher J. Bearman, 'The English Folk Music Movement, 1898-1914' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 2001), pp. 1-2.

transformation of society that they wish to accomplish'.⁶ But the case of Noel contradicts both Harker and Bearman. Noel absolutely saw 'established practices' and traditions, both religious and folkloric, as a starting point for the transformation of society. And for Noel, as it later was for Vaughan Williams, nationhood and cultural nationalism were a basis for internationalism, engaging in a symbiotic relationship in which international solidarity was strengthened by the unity of equal but individual nations, each bringing to the whole the very best they had to offer.⁷

For Noel, folk culture was important to the building of this international community, especially so because it represented an idea of nationhood based upon the history and culture of the people, not of the State. Noel saw the Kingdom of God on earth which he hoped for as a 'Divine International', and had blazoned across the Red Flag which hung in Thaxted church the motto 'He hath made of one blood all nations'.⁸ Noel did not wish to deny the nation a place in the International, and wrote that 'Christ's Co-operative Commonwealth was to be no mere cosmopolitan world, secured at the expense of national variety'.⁹ Noel's situation of English nationhood within a strong International was an ideal configuration shared with the wider British Left of the time: Paul Ward argues that their internationalism was often fitted 'around an affection for English traditions', rejecting 'the Marxist axiom that "workers have no country" [...] in favour of a view of the plurality of national identities'.¹⁰ It was these independent, strong nationalities working in 'comradeship and mutual service' to build an equally strong Socialist International that Noel hoped for.¹¹

Nationhood for Noel was a careful balancing act. It balanced the need for unity and the shared identity of a community, be it parish or a

⁶ Bearman, 'The English Folk Music Movement', p. 2.

⁷ Ralph Vaughan Williams, 'Nationalism and Internationalism' in his *National Music and Other Essays*, ed. by Michael Kennedy, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 154-59 (p. 155).

⁸ Conrad Noel, *The Battle of the Flags: A Study in Christian Politics* (London: The Labour Publishing Company, 1922), p. 62.

⁹ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, p. 63.

¹⁰ Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: England, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), p. 52; p. 57.

¹¹ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, p. 96.

country, with the hope for much wider fellowship amongst the whole human race. Such a bond of national identity between individuals functioned in a similar way to the relationship between strong nationalities in an international commonwealth, each being a communion between a smaller unit and a larger whole that Noel thought to be 'the basis and meaning of all human life' through a 'Social God, in the Blessed Trinity, One-in-Many, Many-in-One, VARIETY IN UNITY'.¹² A revival of dance as a shared heritage could bring about this communion of the individual with the wider community, a small and local beginning upon which to base a wider movement towards the adoption of unity and co-operative living which would grow outward in ever-widening circles to form the Divine International Noel craved. Noel declared that 'the Source of our life is the Triune God, the Comm-Unity, and that the substance of all life is Community'.¹³ It was because of his deep-seated belief in the value of community that Noel poured so much energy into his work in Thaxted. Both his friends and the patron, who had appointed him because she wished for him to use the position as a base from which to tour, lecturing and fighting the socialist cause while a curate did the actual parochial work, were surprised by his efforts. But as John Orens notes, Noel believed that it was 'in the parish that the life of God's Kingdom is born and nurtured'.¹⁴

This balance of local community and global fellowship, of inward-looking social bonds and outward-facing internationalism, was delicate. Both nationalism and internationalism had the potential to become 'evil'. Noel believed that 'Nationality is evil when it denies the International, and [...] the International is evil when it scoffs at Nationality'.¹⁵ The British Empire provided a new host of problems. It was formed by the kind of narrow and insular patriotism Noel eschewed: its relationship with the international was acquisitive, not

¹² Conrad Noel, *The Catholic Crusade, 1918-1936: A Reprint of its Original Manifesto*, with an introduction and notes by Reg Groves (London: Archive One, 1970), p. 9.

¹³ Conrad Noel, *Jesus the Heretic* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1940), p. 219.

¹⁴ John Orens, 'Conrad Noel: Vision and Paradox' in *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. by Kenneth Leech (London: The Jubilee Group, 1993), pp. 23-42 (pp. 29-30).

¹⁵ Noel, *Catholic Crusade*, p. 9.

co-operative. Its own internationality denied the variety and difference of its subject nations, demolishing the harmonious symbiosis of a true International and creating instead a blank uniformity of centralized power. To halt the growth of this catastrophic imperialism, the right kind of nationalism, able to take its place in the Socialist International and the Divine Commonwealth, was needed, and Noel intended to provide it.

Noel became infamous as the Red Vicar predominantly for his hanging of the Red Flag and Sinn Féin flag in his church, and for his refusal to fly the Union Flag. He flew the Sinn Féin flag not only to protest against British dominion over Ireland, but also because of the meaning of the words 'sinn féin', 'ourselves': one of the conditions of membership of the Catholic Crusade was belief in the self-determination of nations. The proliferation of empires precluded the ideal harmony and interdependence of the international preventing the necessary self-determination of each nation.¹⁶ A major strand of the manifesto of the Catholic Crusade was a call to 'shatter the British Empire and all Empires to bits' in order to 'Create a Free England in a Communion of Free Nations'.¹⁷ Instead of the Union Flag, Noel hung in his church the flag of St George, which alongside the Sinn Féin flag attested to his beliefs in nationhood. The Red Flag represented the community of Free Nations which would come to make up the Divine International, the blood of all nations being the same red. Nations could be both Christian and socialist: Empires emphatically could not.

Noel's belief in nationhood as immanent in the people reflected his religious belief that God is within men and women themselves. God and his kingdom dwelt within humans on earth, and so did the potential for the coming of Noel's Divine International: ¹⁸

¹⁶ Noel, *Catholic Crusade*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Noel, *Catholic Crusade*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, p. 48.

the passages of the New Testament which the nineteenth century referred to a life beyond the grave undoubtedly refer to the coming of the Kingdom here. [...] [Christ] laid the stress undoubtedly on what our Evangelical friends call the Millennium [sic], ie, the Golden Age to be established here.

The potential Kingdom was not only to be realized on earth and within the people on earth but was also directly affected by them: it could be 'delayed or hastened' by their actions.¹⁹ In order to hasten the coming of the Kingdom, Christians (and socialists) could take part in preparations:²⁰

The Preparation for Christ's Kingdom meant the conversion [...] of mankind from injustice and greed, impurity and cowardice, to justice, generosity, purity, courage, and the Kingdom itself meant either (a) the natural expression of this common conversion in a New Order of things where all should serve each other in joy and life and peace, or (b) the coming down in some more sudden and miraculous way of just the same order of things in answer to this same preparation. Either the coming on the clouds [...] is [...] poetry or [...] fact, but there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the Kingdom was to be realised here, and was to be enjoyed by those of mankind who had prepared themselves in the above manner for it.

The key here is that these preparations could in fact actually constitute the Kingdom itself, by virtue of the altered behaviour of men and women towards their fellows. Because he and his followers had to be 'impatient' to bring about the Kingdom, and not wait 'complacently', Noel tried throughout his life and especially during his time in Thaxted to undertake as much as preparation as possible.²¹ He, along with his wife Miriam, his followers and latterly his son-in-law, curate and eventual successor Jack Putterill, endeavoured to create a

¹⁹ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, p. 55.

²⁰ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, pp. 47-48.

²¹ Noel, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 60.

small corner of the Kingdom in Thaxted, whether as a preparation for or as that 'natural expression' of a better way of life.²²

The preparations were also to be joyful, to form a fitting prequel to the merry utopia of the coming commonwealth: 'why should not the cry of "St George for merry England" drown the bombastic cry of St Jack for dismal Empire?' and 'why should not the patriot's festival of St George replace, as it does in Thaxted, the new-fangled festival of Empire?'²³ In Thaxted, St George and England had, through flags and festivals, replaced the British Empire, and Noel tried to make his England really a 'merry' one too, and this is why he turned to the folk revival. It offered him a national culture he felt to be based in that of the people, but also fulfilled through its inclusion of folk-dance forms an expression of the gaiety and joy he believed to be implicit in Christian and socialist tradition. One of Mary Neal's articles for Noel's parish magazine, *The Country Town*, also positioned present-day merry-making as a prequel to a coming happier time, that of a new socialistic society full of joy for the youth of England: 'May this May-time in England be a foretaste in all days to come when English youth will be a real May-time both for the girls and the boys'.²⁴ As with preparations for the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth actually constituting that kingdom, so too could happiness now engender future happiness.

The idea of a coming better time anticipated with joyful celebration was itself an historical one, another aspect of the medieval Christianity Noel drew so heavily upon. Noel loved the medieval poem 'The General Dance', also known as 'Tomorrow Shall be my Dancing Day', and sometimes read it from the pulpit instead of giving a sermon.²⁵ The poem describes the ministry of Christ as a dance, to which will call his 'true love', Christian believers who will dance with him in joy. Gustav Holst, a resident of Thaxted between 1914 and 1925, composed a new setting for Noel, dedicated to him as a birthday gift. Dur-

²² Noel, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 60.

²³ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, p. 27.

²⁴ Mary Neal, 'The National Revival of Folk Art. IV: May Day Revels', *The Country Town*, 2.4 (1912), 6.

²⁵ Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 102.

ing this period of residency in Thaxted, Holst was also working on 'Hymn of Jesus', a setting of his own translation of the apocryphal Acts of John, in which the heavenly spheres make music for Jesus and his disciples to dance together in worship on the night of the last supper:

And he gathered us all together and said: 'Before I am delivered up unto them, let us sing a hymn to the Father'. He bade us make, as it were, a ring, holding one another's hands and himself standing in the midst, and said:

The Heavenly Spheres make music for us;

The Holy Twelve dance with us;

All things join in the dance!

*Ye who dance not, know not what we are knowing.*²⁶

Imogen Holst recalls in her account of her father's time in Thaxted his deep involvement in the musical life of the church, and his friendship with Noel.²⁷ The role of music and dance in their religion, both within the Bible and in Christian practice, was a subject in which Noel and Holst shared a strong interest, and which ran as a current through their respective work at this time. Such was Noel's love for the General Dance that it almost had its own altar in his church (Figures 1 and 2):²⁸

We have a version of The General Dance in coloured manuscript, framed in carved wood. It hangs over the chest by the entrance door. This chest was carved by Arthur Brown, with panels, beginning with the preaching of the Gospel from Thaxted pulpit, resulting in the treading down of dynasties and crowns; the hammer and sickle adorn the third panel, the symbol of artisans and labourers coming into their own, and the fourth panel represents the music of the spheres, which will be the music of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. On

²⁶ Gustav Holst, *The Hymn of Jesus*: words translated from the Apocryphal[sic] Acts of St. John: set to music for two choruses, semi-chorus & orchestra, op. 37 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1919).

²⁷ Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst and Thaxted: A Short Account of the Composer's Association with the Town of Thaxted between 1913 & 1925*, repr. by Mark Arman for the Parochial Church Council, 1994.

²⁸ Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 102.

this hutch rest the delicately shaped "Praying Hands" by Eric Kennington, flanked by two shapely candles in black.



Figure 1: The display described by Noel as it currently appears in Thaxted, showing the manuscript of 'The General Dance', carved trunk, and praying hands. Photograph taken by the author in 2016.



Figure 2: Carved panels on the trunk, depicting the hammer and sickle and the making of music. Photograph taken by the author in 2016.

This display demonstrates just how interwoven Noel's religious, political, and aesthetic beliefs were, particularly regarding music and

dance. His successor Jack Putterill continued in this vein, and when four of the church's bells were recast in 1949 they were given names, decorations, and dedications related to the ongoing political and cultural traditions of the Thaxted Movement. The recast third bell was named the 'Justice Bell', and was engraved in large letters with the motto 'I RING FOR JUSTICE IN ALL THE EARTH' (Figure 3). 'He hath made of one blood all nations', the motto used on Noel's Red Flag, was engraved on the shoulder of the bell. The recast fourth bell was paid for by the Morris Ring, and was called the 'Dance Bell', its large motto being 'I RING FOR THE GENERAL DANCE' (Figure 4). This bell was also decorated with a large embossed frieze of morris and country dancers, and a verse from Psalm 150: 'Praise him in the cymbals and dances; Praise him upon the strings and pipes'.²⁹ The bells themselves were music for praise and to call worshippers together, and through their new decorations and dedications, were strongly linked to the political concerns of the Thaxted Movement.

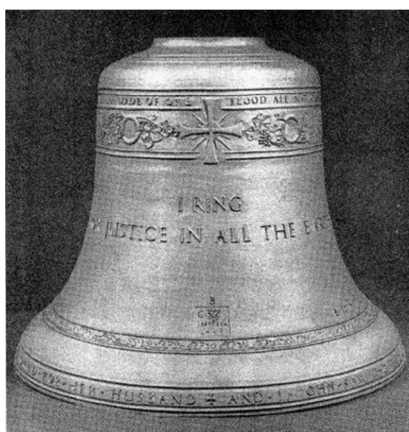


Figure 3 (left): Photograph of the Dance Bell: the motto, psalm verse and frieze of dancers can be seen as described by Putterill; Figure 4 (right): Photograph of the Justice Bell: note the 'blood of all nations' motto. These images from Jack Putterill's pamphlet *Thaxted Bells* are used by kind permission of Sylvia Heath and the officials of Thaxted church. The author is grateful to Sybil King for her help in obtaining this permission.

²⁹ Jack Putterill, *Thaxted Bells* (Linton: Plumridge, 1949), pp. 5-11.

Noel clearly saw dance and music as important to his theology as an expression of the joy of Christian belief, as well as an allegory for the rich harmony of the commonwealth to come:³⁰

And if Variety in Unity, the rich harmony of Being, be indeed our source, it is no dull world of uniformity that we shall be building, [...] In the New World Order then, there will be an infinite variety of types, of persons, of families, of nations - no longer divided and disharmonious, but expressing themselves through their different instruments in the great orchestra of God's will.

It was also a foreshadowing of the happiness and fellowship to be had in the Kingdom to come. So as preparations for coming of the Kingdom would actually constitute the Kingdom itself, either upon the wings of angels or by a change in attitudes and restructuring of society, Noel set about not only foreshadowing the communal joy of the Kingdom but attempting to create it. He transformed the church into the aesthetic expression of his Christian socialism with flags, flowers and poetry, instituting mixed choirs with girls in brightly-coloured headscarves, and processions of colourful banners. His wife Miriam began organizing morris-dancing lessons for the residents of Thaxted in 1910, a development which was a wholly natural fit in a town that was quickly responding to Noel's combination of aesthetic socialism and divine (inter)nationalism.³¹ The people of Thaxted were taught by Blanche Payling, a member of Neal's Espérance Club, despite the fact that Noel knew Sharp and had even lectured on Ibsen at the Hampstead Conservatoire at his request during Sharp's tenure as Director.³² Neal's approach, focused on the joy of communal activity, would have presented a far stronger appeal to the Noels, considering that they, like Neal, were attempting to foster a strong sense of shared community and social gaiety. Noel wrote that alt-

³⁰ Noel, *Jesus the Heretic*, p. 179.

³¹ Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 104.

³² Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 104-5.

though the dancing of Sharp's team was beautiful to watch, both he and his patron Daisy Greville found it spiritually lacking:³³

Lady Warwick [...] was disappointed because I had told her that the dances were for [...] working people, and although the team contained wonderful performers, such as Douglas Kennedy, who [...] is, perhaps, the most blithe and graceful dancer I have ever seen, the team at Easton Lodge was certainly not of the soil, and unkind critics might have said it smacked of Bloomsbury.

Despite the central role later played by the post-war Thaxted men's morris side in the formation of the Morris Ring, the beginnings of morris in Thaxted were firmly rooted in the social ethos of Neal's Espérance Club. As Arthur Burns argues, the encouragement of morris dancing in Thaxted by the Noels should not be 'treated as a mildly risible distraction from more serious matters': Noel's intermingling of politics with his liturgical and cultural interests was a key element in his worldview.³⁴ Rather than 'diluting' the 'message' of Noel's politics, the dancing and other related cultural pursuits 'gave the tradition traction well beyond those who might have rallied to a more narrowly articulated political argument, fostering involvement and commitment'.³⁵ Likewise, Orens notes that Noel's zeal could easily have turned Thaxted into a 'spiritual boot camp' if it were not for the fact that he 'desired more for his parish than stern alarums. There must also be merry music; for God's people do not simply await the Kingdom, exhausting themselves in struggle'.³⁶ The choice to bring morris to Thaxted stemmed from the desire for a communal activity having its cultural and aesthetic roots in English folk culture: a national culture as an antidote to bombastic imperialism, an expression of joy in dance as the rightful inheritance of a medieval English tradition of Christian gaiety, and a socialistic expression of corporate unity in shared activity.

³³ Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 106.

³⁴ Arthur Burns, 'Beyond the "Red Vicar": Community and Christian Socialism in Thaxted, Essex, 1910-84', *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), 101-124 (p. 120).

³⁵ Burns, 'Beyond the "Red Vicar"', p. 120.

³⁶ Orens, *Conrad Noel*, p. 30.

By July 1911 the morris dancers of Thaxted numbered 60 strong, and included a youths' team, girls' team and two children's teams.³⁷ The teams performed to an audience of 2,000 at a flower show in nearby Stisted, and Mary Neal was drawn to visit in spring 1911 by reports of the huge take-up, selecting some of the best dancers to perform alongside her *Espérance* teams at the invitation of Rupert Brooke in Cambridge.³⁸ Groves described the summer of 1913 as being a high-point for the Thaxted Movement in terms of dance, with much of the town participating, if not in morris but in country and social dance. He states that the phenomenon had taken off across all social classes, breaking down barriers between landowners, clergy and sweet-factory workers. Here he quotes Arthur Caton, a Thaxted resident:³⁹

You try to tell people what it was like then, and they don't believe you [...] You say everyone danced, and they look at you. Everyone? Well, it was true, everyone did, [...] - why, I me'self was taught to dance by the two sons of a Tory farmer! People would come here then - and just stare and listen in amazement. They couldn't believe it when they saw it. There was everyone, everywhere in the town, dancing or singing or whistling. It was like a wave running over the town!

It was the joyful and participatory nature of folk dance which made morris perfect for Miriam and Conrad to foster in Thaxted. Noel saw himself as an anti-Puritan (according to Judith Pinnington, he was prone to 'labelling everything he liked as "Catholic" and everything he disliked as "Protestant" irrespective of historical context'⁴⁰). He believed that 'carousing is a Christian duty' and the bright colours, merry-making, and music of morris appealed to his sense of religious

³⁷ Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 74.

³⁸ Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 74; Mary Neal, 'As A Tale That Is Told: The Autobiography of a Victorian Woman', manuscript of unpublished autobiography, London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, MN Box 1, p. 151.

³⁹ Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ Judith Pinnington, 'Gentlemen into Social Democrats: An Anglican Evolution', in *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. by Kenneth Leech (London: The Jubilee Group, 1993), pp. 1-22 (p. 18).

gaiety.⁴¹ After Noel's death, his friend Kingsley Martin described the legacy of his work in Thaxted:⁴²

There was fun [...]: streamers with happy devices; children's drawings; the women wore bright handkerchiefs on their heads, and the congregation was expected to take part in the service. I won't say there was nothing precious about Thaxted. There were odd-looking men in sandals and women in hand-woven costumes, and [...] a certain artiness in the shops. True, Conrad's disciples did dance morris-dances in the road and deliberately revive a medieval atmosphere. But the dancing was fun, and [...] It would be a superficial observer who dismissed Thaxted as 'ye olde'.

Noel himself did not take part in the dancing, but his curates did, including his son-in-law Jack Putterill, who danced into his 70s and played pipe and tabor into his 80s.⁴³ Noel liked the dancing because it was fun, and this was something he increasingly found lacking in the wider British Left. He worried that Marxism would 'imprison the human soul in a regime of grey and joyless uniformity', and despised the 'Fabian Desire for Tidiness, Order, Efficiency', so instead injected colour and raucousness wherever he could.⁴⁴ Groves writes that Noel was disappointed by the 'imaginative and intellectual poverty of Labour's leaders', and felt they would have their followers 'accept a handful of grudgingly-given bribes in place of the bright, generous world which [William] Morris and others had called upon them to win'.⁴⁵ For Noel, the object of socialism was not to manage an economy, but to transform a society, and though these objectives were undeniably related, they were not the same.

Contemporary Marxists and Fabians both appeared to Noel in the guise of Puritans, casting a disapproving eye over the traditional

⁴¹ Orens, *Conrad Noel*, p. 23.

⁴² Kingsley Martin, 'As his friends knew him, I', in Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 125-28 (pp. 125-26).

⁴³ Mark Arman, *Conrad, Miriam, Jack and Barbara: For 63 Years They Influenced Thaxted Church and Thaxted Town* (Thaxted: The Workshop Press, 1992), pp. 1, 12.

⁴⁴ Orens, *Conrad Noel*, p. 37; Noel, *Catholic Crusade*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 75.

merriments of the English, a birthright and heritage he believed to have been stolen before by the first Puritans. Noel, and Neal too in her writing for his magazine, held up their revival of Morris and country dancing as a rejection of Puritanism:⁴⁶

We of this generation have changed these scruples and we see in the dancing feet the merry song and happy laughter of the children and of the young men and women, that which will make England a land of which we can be proud.

An England that Noel and Neal could be proud of was one in which all could be happy. The rightful heritage of merry traditions, stolen by Puritans and seen as unimportant by modern-day Marxists, was bound up with Merrie England's other heritage of freedom, justice, and fairness. These joint inheritances could not thrive independently:⁴⁷

IF, while you believe in dancing, colour, merry-making, you are not deluded into thinking that these things can be restored, while Justice, Comradeship, and Liberty are refused, HELP THE CRUSADE.

While dancing and merriment would help the socialist cause, the true goal of happiness, and likewise the Kingdom of Heaven, could not be achieved without the establishment of the right conditions: a society anchored by the principles of justice, comradeship, and liberty.

Along with the potential for joyous activity in building God's Kingdom in Thaxted, Noel was attracted to the folk movement because it so strongly aligned itself with nationalism and put its music and dance forward as a national art. Noel seemed very drawn to Ireland as an example of a nation in touch with its cultural identity, holding it up as a model for what England could hope to achieve in self-recognition and celebration. By the time Noel came to hang the Sinn Féin flag in Thaxted church, the cause of Ireland and Irish independence had become a representative of the idea of national identity it-

⁴⁶ Neal, 'May Day Revels', 6.

⁴⁷ Noel, *Catholic Crusade*, p. 11.

self, and Noel used this as a symbol to demonstrate his political and theological views on the freedom and independence of nations:⁴⁸

The [...] tricolour of Ireland hangs in Thaxted church as a symbol of the right to freedom of Ireland and of all oppressed nations. [...] The Sinn Fein flag is, then, the emblem of the principle of self-determination, for which we are supposed to have fought the war.

The English, via Noel's reasoning, had also to embrace such self-determination, not only politically but culturally. Claiming ownership of a shared cultural heritage, including folk songs and dances, would be also to claim a stake in society itself: self-definition would lead to self-determination. Mary Neal's letter to the Thaxted dancers makes clear this link:⁴⁹

When you dance the Morris Dances and sing the folk songs I want you to feel that you are part of the truest and best movement towards righteousness and sincerity and upright dealing. And I want every boy and girl to realise the inspiration which only comes from this consciousness of communion with the whole nation, with the universal and with God.

If the nation's culture were to be determined by the communal cultural inheritance of the people, then so too could its society and its politics be determined by its people.

The Noels made use of the material and the associations of folk revival in a way which was intended to be socially useful. Conrad Noel believed in a deep intersection between cultural movements and social change, with the expression of communality through shared culture and the revivifying effects of joyful dance and song helping to drive social change through the building of a strong community of active and engaged individuals. Folk song and dance strongly appealed to Noel's politics and his religion, because he believed in both a culture and a God which were embodied in the common people. Noel's commitment to his preparations for the Kingdom of Heaven

⁴⁸ Noel, *Battle of the Flags*, pp. 28-9.

⁴⁹ Mary Neal, 'To the Thaxted Morris Dancers', *The Country Town*, 1.9 (1911), 8-9 (p. 9).

on earth may not have brought about the Divine International, but they did lay a strong foundation for an ongoing religious, cultural, and political tradition in his own parish, and the flourishing of the morris in Thaxted in turn had a strong effect on the history of morris in Britain in the twentieth century.