Book Review

The Story of American Rapper

Krause, Rhett (2024) *Rapper Sword Dance in America.* (Amherst, Ma.: Off the Common), 462pp. ISBN: 979-8-218-41766-6
Available through the Morris Federation for £30 + £5.60 p&p.

At a Sword Spectacular festival in Whitby I was watching one of the young, innovative rapper teams that had come across from Boston, and heard a Grand Old Man of rapper, standing nearby, say “It’s very good, but it’s not rapper”. What, then, is rapper, and what was it that these Americans were doing? If we view it as a part of the coal mining way of life, where does that leave it now that the pits are long gone (and where did it ever leave Beadnell)? Or maybe it’s a specific set of movements, collected from ‘authentic’ dancers? So where does that leave innovation, whether by dancers from America or indeed from Tyneside?

These questions, and many others, are addressed in Rhett Krause’s comprehensive new study. He takes the reader from the visits of English dance teachers travelling to the US at the beginning of the 20th century, right through to the present day, or at least to the pandemic.

The story more or less begins with the rivalry of Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal and, suggests Krause, proceeds with the victory of Sharp. After early visits, some lasting for years, by a number of English teachers of traditional dance, the scene came to be dominated by local (US) branches of the English Folk Dance Society. Traditional dance was seen as a suite of types, including country, morris, and sword - no great distinction was made between longsword and rapper, and dancers saw themselves as generalists rather than specialising in one form. The narrative follows the incorporation of American social dances into the repertoire and the transformation of the local Society into the Country Dance Society of America (later the CDSS).

What is striking, in view of what we see of modern American rapper, is the conservatism the Society demonstrated. The EFDS exam syllabus was taught and the aim was to propagate Sharp’s teachings and maintain his idea of accuracy. Unlike England, where the Morris Ring provided an alternative to the EFDS from the 1920s and independent teams sprang up and flourished, in the US the CD(S)S maintained a near-monopoly on traditional English dance until the end of the 1960s, one notable exception being the teams that operated around Berea College, in the southern Appalachians. May Gadd, the doyenne of the CD(S)S, would have agreed wholeheartedly with our Grand Old Man.

So what happened? Krause gives a lot of credit to Alan Brown and the Monkseaton Morris Men, who visited the US in 1970. They inspired a style which Krause characterises as follows:

> *Stepping came off the heels, flips were introduced, speed and excitement were stressed, along with the assumption that a raucous Betty or other character, dancing at times within the set, should be a necessary part of the dance. (p392)*

So if we want to know who to blame for the modern manic, innovative tendency in American Rapper, it's the men from the English North-East!

Of course, the tale is more complicated than that, and the book demonstrates the constant exchanges which took place between English and American teams from that time on. Independent dance teams sprang up and began to specialise and to innovate. Half Moon Sword began the first regular event specifically for sword dancers, the New York Sword Ale, in 1986, and somewhat later followed DART, the Dancing America Rapper Tournament.

There is, of course, much more to discuss in this substantial book. The diligent reader will follow it from start to finish, while others will find much satisfaction in dipping where they fancy. An index would have been very helpful for such readers.

There is a series of about fifteen appendices which list, inter alia, dance figures, events, teachers, and, as far as can be achieved, a complete list of American rapper teams and the years in which they flourished. There are endnotes but, as noted, no index.

This well-produced book offers a new perspective on the history of rapper and challenges some assumptions which are widely held on this side of the Atlantic. It is to be highly recommended.

Andrew Kennedy