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DANCE HISTORY SCHOLARS**

Twentieth Annual Conference  
Barnard College  
New York City, New York  
19 - 22 June 1997

Proceedings

Society of Dance History Scholars

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**Reflecting our Past;**

**Reflecting on our Future**

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Twentieth Annual Conference

Barnard College  
New York City, New York  
19 - 22 June 1997

This collection of papers has been compiled from camera-ready copies provided by individual authors who wished to contribute their papers as a record of the 1997 Society of Dance History Scholars conference. In order to achieve a volume speedily available to the group, no editing, a time consuming process, has been done.

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# CONFERENCE PAPERS

Twentieth Annual Conference  
19 - 22 June, 1997

Barnard College  
New York City, New York

Linda J. Tomko, Compiler

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LABAN IN YORKSHIRE:  
INTERROGATING THE GRAND NARRATIVES OF DANCE SCHOLARSHIP  
Ramsay Burt

My title 'Laban in Yorkshire' is intended to be slightly tongue in cheek. Readers might be expected to know what Jefferson was doing in Paris, why Lotte was in Weimar, or what Hannibal was doing crossing the Alps – but Laban in Yorkshire? Those reasonably familiar with Twentieth-century dance history will know of Laban's early work in Munich before the 1914-18 war, his courses at Ascona and his school in Zürich during the war, and of the part he played in the development of modern dance in Germany during the Weimar period. A certain amount of controversy surrounds Laban's work for the Nazi regime and his subsequent dismissal. After this he settled in England, where he applied his theoretical work on movement analysis in industry and helped to develop what came to be known as Modern Educational Dance for the British Ministry of Education. It was to teach on short courses for teachers in Modern Educational Dance that Laban made a number of visits to Yorkshire during the 1940s and 1950s. The chances are, however, that even some people involved in what we might loosely call the dance world in Yorkshire might not even know that Laban had been there. So why, you may be wondering, should this be considered a sufficiently important topic to discuss at a prestigious international conference? My intention in addressing this topic is to raise questions about what is and what is not generally considered important in the field of dance history.

This is a complex issue and in discussing it I shall be more wide ranging than my title might suggest, covering a lot of theories in addition to dance in education and travelling in the process far from Yorkshire. My own involvement in the subject is as follows: I have lived in Yorkshire since the early 1970s (1), and during the 1980s, with Patricia Mitchison and Jean Williams, I was involved in creating an archive of tape recorded interviews that documented an oral history of dance in the region. When the group Yorkshire Movement and Dance (YMD) held a Celebration of Four Decades of Dance at Woolley Hall in 1991, we took our tape recorders there and recorded not only the speeches people made looking back at the organisation's past but also conducted individual interviews with some of the older members. It was there that I first heard of Laban's visits to Yorkshire.

The group held another event last month. This looked back to 1947 when a group of physical education teachers and advisors working for the Education Authority of the West Riding of Yorkshire came together for a residential weekend dance course taught by Diana Jordan. This was the first of many, highly popular dance courses and these teachers and advisors became known as the West Riding Movement Study Group. Now called Yorkshire Movement and Dance the group have just spent a day commemorating fifty years of teaching, learning and dancing by its members and celebrated its achievements. There appears to be a homology between the 1997 SDHS conference which celebrates eighteen years of dance scholarship and the commemoration of fifty years of dance in Yorkshire. Both events commemorate the continuity of an organisation, celebrate its past and present achievements and use these to reflect upon its potential future contribution to the field of dance.

For a booklet printed to accompany this recent event in Yorkshire I was asked to write an essay that presented an overview of dance in Yorkshire in relation to a broader dance history. In this I discussed Laban's place in dance history and the continuities between the work Yorkshire dance teachers were doing from the mid 1940s to the mid 1970s and Laban's early career in Munich and Switzerland and his mature work in Weimar Germany. I then looked at the changes that came about in Yorkshire as a result of a five week educational residency in 1976 in Yorkshire schools and colleges by Robert Cohan and the London Contemporary Dance Theatre. Cohan had been a dancer and later a director of the Graham company from the 1940s to the 60s.

While presenting an overview of historical information about these events in this conference paper, my aim is to use this as a test case to examine *why* things look different when looked at from a marginal position. I shall use the West Riding Movement Study Group as an example through which to interrogate the relationship between the processes through which the institution of dance studies establishes canons, and the means through which dance traditions are transmitted between different groups and generations of dance practitioners. Two central issues come out of this: first

a false dichotomy that has been created between theatre dance and dance in education which I argue is produced by the methods of dance history; second a tension between the memory of dance practice and what happens when this is put into discourse as dance history. It is the problematics of these which I shall interrogate, and in doing so draw on recent critical and post-structuralist theory, in particular Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard's work on the legitimation of knowledge, and Lyotard's notion of grand narratives. This paper therefore proceeds as follows. First it gives brief accounts of Laban and Cohan in Yorkshire. It then examines the way narratives of legitimation within these accounts limit our potential to make sense of the present through constraining our understanding of the past. Discourses give structure to the narration of events, and in doing so are spoken by subjects. My objective is therefore to discuss both the effects of grand narratives on the way events develop and are retrospectively perceived, and on the way individuals are constrained through becoming the subject of discourse.

Dancing as part of primary and secondary education was not an area that Laban and his German followers had taken any interest in during the 1920s and 30s. At that time they were more interested in choreography for the large amateur movement choirs and for companies of professional dancers, and in notation. The idea that the British did not take an interest in modern dance is sometimes over stated. Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, Ruth St Denis, Mary Wigman and other early modern dancers performed in London before or after the First World War. The Ballets Jooss, who became Britain's first resident modern dance company toured regularly during the 30s, significantly they visited several theatres in Yorkshire. In Britain, as in Germany, modern dance as a performance form did not, however, survive the Second World War. The area in which it did take root was education. Some English women, many of them lecturers in Colleges of Physical Training (as it was then called), travelled to Germany and Switzerland to study at schools of dance and to attend summer schools. Leslie Burrows trained with Wigman and then set up a studio in London where in 1937 she was joined by Louise Soelberg, who had danced with Jooss, Joan Goodrich did courses with Wigman and more extended work with Burrows before returning to her post at Bedford College of Physical Training. Diana Jordan, who later taught the first teachers' course for what became the West Riding Movement Study Group, was one of those who had travelled to Germany in the 1930s to learn about modern dance. Jordan also trained with Burrows and Soelberg, as did many others at the time. In 1938 Oxford University Press published Jordan's book *The Dance as Education*. This established the philosophical credibility within English education that allowed Laban and Ullman to establish Modern Educational Dance during the war years.

By the mid 1930s 'Central European Dance' was beginning to be taught in England. The title 'Central European Dance' was a euphemism. Although Laban was Hungarian, it was in Germany that his work had taken strongest root; and at that time there was a need in both Britain and the United States to distance modern dance from any association it might otherwise have had with the National Socialist regime. It was at this time that first Kurt Jooss and members of the Ballets Jooss, Laban himself and other Germans who had experience of Laban's work were leaving or escaping from Germany and settling in England. Many of these people subsequently played an important role in the development of Modern Educational Dance and became regular teachers on the West Riding Movement Study Group's programme of courses. Among the most important of these were Lisa Ullman who had trained in one of the many Laban Schools in Germany, and Sylvia Bodmer who had been a dancer in Laban's dance company TanzBühne Laban during the 1920s and co-principal of a Laban school in Frankfurt. Bodmer settled in Manchester in 1942.

It was Alec, later Sir Alec, Clegg who brought modern dance to Yorkshire when he was appointed as Director of the West Riding Education Authority in 1945. He had previously worked in Birmingham. There he had first met his future wife, a young Physical Training teacher, as he observed evening classes in Central European Dance. Jesse Clegg subsequently took a diploma in this with Goodrich at Bedford. Alec Clegg brought Diana Jordan to the West Riding as adviser in Physical Training with special responsibility for dance. He also appointed Margaret Dunn, a friend of Jordan and Goodrich's who had been on the staff of St Gabriel's Teacher Training College where she taught Central European Dance. St Gabriel's had been evacuated from London to Doncaster during the war. Shortly after the College returned to London Alec Clegg brought her back as another adviser in Physical Training.

Clegg's appointment in Yorkshire coincided with a broadly based political shift towards the establishment of a welfare state which included a desire to give all children, irrespective of their social background, equal opportunities



through education. British educationalists came to subscribe to a child-centred view of education that recognised the importance of creative work including dance movement as an important part of children's education. Laban's ideas about dance and the development of the individual were therefore very much in tune with the wider social climate then prevailing in Britain. In the 1990s a very different philosophy of education now holds sway, and politicians now demonise 'trendy' educational ideas to which many progressive teachers and educationalists devoted their lives from the 1940s to the 1970s. It was a belief in the need to develop the whole person, physically, creatively and intellectually that underlay the introduction of Laban's ideas to English schools, including those run by the West Riding Education Authority.

The general consensus among those we interviewed is that Laban was not a great teacher. People didn't get to know him, although they felt 'enormous respect for the great man' as one interviewee put it. Laban seems to have preferred to feed his ideas to others like Lisa Ullman and Diana Jordan who appeared better able to put them across. What brought him most often to Yorkshire was to teach a group of men who were members of the West Riding Movement Study Group. This perhaps indicates that there were no close male disciples to whom he could delegate. It was Arthur Stone, another education advisor who Alec Clegg had brought with him from Birmingham, who set up the men's group. Stone recalled that Modern Educational Dance was more established among women teachers than among male Physical Training (or PT) teachers because the women had taken courses with Laban and his associates during the war while the men had been in the army. Two of the male teachers in Yorkshire who took an interest in dance, Dick Eastoe and Jack Stachan, had both been Captains in the army who on demobilisation had returned to teaching in Yorkshire. They were among the original members of the West Riding Movement Study Group. Another original member that Jean Williams and I interviewed at Woolley Hall was Edward Tattersall. He recalled going in 1947 on an in-service teachers course at Dartington College in the South of England where he and William Elmhirst were the only men among over a hundred women, and the two of them therefore received exclusive dance tuition with Laban himself. Elmhirst was not a teacher but one of the family who owned the Dartington Estate. In 1953 he donated premises at Woburn Place in Addlestone, Surrey as a permanent home for the Laban Art of Movement Studio.

In Edward Tattersall's case movement work with Laban was clearly a decisive and extremely useful experience. He himself had felt dissatisfied with the way the teaching curriculum of the 1930s specified formal drill for PT classes. In movement and dance he found ways of developing what he described as 'brain and physical co-ordination'. He went on to be a headteacher, first of a small school at Netherton outside Wakefield and then at a large comprehensive in the mining village of Rossington outside Doncaster. He told us with some pride that every child in his school did some creative work, with clay, paint and dance, during every school day. All 22 of his teachers taught movement, because he taught them how to do it.

Jean Williams then played devil's advocate and asked him about reading, writing and maths. How for instance does dance help children with spelling? His reply gives an insight into the philosophy behind Sir Alec Clegg's work in the West Riding. Well, he said, dance and art help develop the child's attention and sensitivity, and make them notice things. They won't learn to spell unless they notice the difference between letters. Henry Scott, who was a senior advisor in the West Riding Education Authority during the 1950s said that it was generally recognised at the time that the best schools, in terms of high levels of learning experience, were the ones in which movement was taught. This belief was corroborated by his colleagues. Unfortunately I have not been able to discover their criteria for assessing 'learning experience'.

In Britain during the 1970s, as Janet Adshead-Lansdale has discussed in her book The Study of Dance (2), dance education moved away from physical education towards the study of dance as art. The presence in Britain of Graham-derived modern dance companies contributed to a shift among dance teachers away from Laban-derived dance towards American modern dance (1981: 22-9). This is the context in which Margaret Dunn invited Robert Cohan to bring his company to Yorkshire for a five week residency in 1976 for what was the first educational residency in Britain by a dance company. They were primarily based at Bretton Hall College where Dunn was Vice Principal. They also stayed at Bingley College. It was primarily dance teachers and lecturers in the West Riding who

were members of the Movement Study Group who brought their pupils and students to observe or take workshops with the company. During this five week period Cohan choreographed the piece *Khamsin* in public sessions that many in Yorkshire still remember (see Mansfield 1985: 130-3).

The sight of highly trained professional modern dancers was at this time a new and overwhelming experience for both teachers and pupils, but it is too often forgotten that modern dance itself was already familiar to these Yorkshire folk. What had been missing was the example of trained professional dancers who could convey to pupils and teachers an idea of what it was possible to achieve. Laban, Bodmer, Ullman and their peers had themselves performed professionally, or had the experience of training professional dancers and watching performances. Most of the teachers of Modern Educational Dance had never had access to this experience, nor had their pupils. It seems in retrospect that almost overnight Modern Educational Dance was dropped and American modern dance adopted by Yorkshire's dance teachers. Many, though not all, of those who were introducing American modern dance were not even aware of the existence of a European modern dance tradition and were under the misapprehension that up until then in Britain there had only been ballet.

Jane Dudley, who had been a member of Martha Graham's dance company in the 1930s and 40s, moved to London in the early 1970s to teach at the London School of Contemporary Dance at The Place. Giving an address at the Yorkshire Dance Centre in Leeds a few years ago she said that she regretted the way Graham's work filtered into English schools where this was to the detriment of the existing Laban-based modern dance teaching. It should not, however be surprisingly that Dudley admired Modern Educational Dance (3), as she herself had trained in New York in the early 1930s with Hanya Holm who was a pupil of Wigman's, and she remembers Wigman herself teaching in New York in the 1930s. Dudley also observed that she didn't think the dance technique based on Graham's work 'suits the English soul': 'As soon as anybody left the School, like Richard Alston and Siobhan Davies, they went straight to New York and trained at the Merce Cunningham Studio' (1994: 23). The 1980s and 90s has not however seen a switch in Yorkshire from Laban to Graham-based modern dance. For many of the older members of YMD recent developments appears as fragmentation, while younger members recognise a pluralist blossoming of interest in the many different dance styles that are currently studied and practised today in Yorkshire, just as they are in the metropolitan centres of London and New York.

Dance history looks different from a Yorkshire perspective. The general consensus is that the sudden explosion of interest in modern dance during the 1960s and 70s was a result of the arrival of American modern dance artists (see for example Murray 1979: 68-88). In Yorkshire's West Riding, as I have shown, modern dance itself was by no means a new concept and Yorkshire folk therefore responded enthusiastically to the work of London Contemporary Dance Theatre because of the long tradition of dance teaching in the county. To set the Yorkshire experience into a broader, international context I therefore focused on the presence of two individuals, Laban and Cohan. But to do this is to turn the focus away from Yorkshire towards the canon of dance history that in effect marginalises and excludes individuals like Dunn, Jordan and Tattersall from serious consideration. The West Riding Movement Study Group was, by British standards, based a very long way away from London, and cultural events away from metropolitan centres are often unfairly ignored and dismissed. Also ignored and dismissed are dance activities like teaching which are not directly connected with professional performance. The West Riding Movement Study Group didn't even initiate and promote a new method of teaching dance, but merely applied and contributed to the development of an existing one (albeit with considerable success). Furthermore people from Yorkshire are, in popular parlance, Northerners. Supposedly quaint, 'provincial', dour, speaking with a comical accent, and culturally deprived, they are frequently objects of stereotypical humour. There is no room for the West Riding Movement Study Group in a dance history that narrates a canonical succession of avant-garde performances produced by and for a sophisticated metropolitan elite (although Laban himself had contributed to this history). It is therefore necessary to interrogate the relationship between the function of the canon in dance studies, and the transmission of traditions between different groups and generations of dance practitioners. To do this I am applying theoretical structures from critical theory and post-structuralism.

The process of the legitimation of tradition is one of the areas of contention between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard. For Habermas, legitimation involves 'the dynamic interaction of social classes, class fractions, prophetic and messianic movements, and state agencies. The values and norms espoused by these various actors must be seen in conjunction with the institutions that articulate them and translate them into collective behaviour' (Wuthnow 1984: 205). Lyotard, while broadly following this view of legitimation, criticises Habermas for using consensus as a criterion for its validation. He argues that Habermas' notion of consensus as 'an agreement between men (sic.), defined as knowing intellects and free wills, and (...) based through dialogue' (Lyotard 1984: 60) is founded on notions of universal common sense that were part of the project of the Enlightenment. Both Habermas and Lyotard agree that modernity undermines and progressively delegitimises the individual's freedom to exercise judgement. The difference between their two positions is that whereas for Habermas the modernist project of the Enlightenment is still incomplete and the 'narrative of emancipation' (ibid.), as Lyotard characterises it, is still valid; Lyotard however argues that such grand narratives have failed.

Two examples of grand narratives in dance history demonstrate the progressive fragmentation of the process of legitimation. The first concerns the way traditions are handed down within a modern dance company. The modern dance company that has the longest continuous tradition is the Martha Graham Dance Company in which Cohan and Dudley both danced. Whereas long established ballet companies keep their repertoire alive by providing roles for dancers at all stages of their career, modern dance companies lose their dancers altogether at regular intervals. Nevertheless some Graham works, like the 1940s 'Greek pieces' have been kept in repertory although others have been lost. In the 70s and 80s the Graham company has, with varying degrees of success, revived pieces from the 1920s and 30s by bringing together older dancers including Dudley to try to reconstruct them. A diagrammatic representation of this process would, nevertheless, be a straight line passing from the past, through the present and pointing towards the future.

Most dance companies today lack this kind of continuity, and historically there has always been interaction between dancers and choreographers from different companies and countries. A formative experience for Graham was of course her years dancing with the Denishawn company. My second example of a grand narrative is the diagrammatic 'Family Trees of Modern Dance Choreographers' at the back of Cobbett Steinberg's 1980 book The Dance Anthology (Steinberg 1980: 443-4). As one looks at such linear presentations the temptation is to argue about the criteria for inclusion. Why, for example, is Trisha Brown under Humphrey/Weidman while Rainer and Paxton are under Graham? Why, except for the token inclusion of Wigman, has European modern dance been left out? There is also a temptation to elaborate them. Why, for example, has no attempt been made to connect the Wigman/Holm line with the Graham line through those like Jane Dudley who trained with one and then danced with the other. To argue about them on this level is to argue about the dance historical canon, and to take for granted its necessity.

The progressive complication of the 'family trees' as they approach the present is a sign of increasing fragmentation and diversification. This can be seen as a consequence of the deleterious effects of modernity. Lyotard accuses Habermas of not recognising the way grand narratives obscure this process of fragmentation and delegitimation. Such narratives are structures that enable certain kinds of discourse while closing off others. In the field of art history, the most famous example of this type of diagram is Alfred H Barr's chart of the Development of Abstract Art, from the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art's seminal exhibition Cubism and Abstract Art in 1936 in New York. Recently, art historians have criticised this for presenting a distorted view of the progressive development of modern art that posits abstraction as the only logical conclusion of a process started by French Nineteenth-century impressionist painters. It has also been criticised for presenting a view of visual art as an autonomous discipline, whose hermetic development is entirely distinct from and uncontaminated by social and political events (see for example Frascina 1985).

Such criticisms are relevant to grand narratives of the dance historical canon. 'Family Trees' suggest that each generation of dance artists is influenced by their immediate predecessor. Many students unfortunately write in their dance history essays that Merce Cunningham was influenced by Martha Graham while in her company but later reacted against her work under the influence of the composer John Cage. This ignores the very different historical

moments in which Cunningham and Graham first discovered dance, and the differing social and political contexts of their choreography. It makes equally little sense to see members of the West Riding Movement Study Group as disempowered subjects working under the influence of Laban and Cohan.

Grand narratives not only occur in the discourse of dance history, but can also have specific effects within the way events develop. Laban and Cohan came to Yorkshire as a result of a chain of political and institutional events, within the British Ministry of Education and within the regional government of the West Riding. The fact that Laban and Cohan had played a significant role in the development of modern dance allowed them to be used to give legitimacy to institutionally sponsored teaching of dance. This has to be taken into account when writing the history of dance in Yorkshire. As Janet Adshead-Lansdale points out in a recent article:

Research, to be of value, should demonstrate sensitivity to the workings of power in the institutionalisation of knowledge and to how the desire to control knowledge is embedded in the discourse of the subject. This is not a conspiracy theory of knowledge in dance, simply a 'fact' of postmodern life. (1997: 69)

The grand narratives of an institutionalised, academic history constitute a transformation of the discourse of the subject. Personal narratives about 'I', 'you' and 'we' are recast into impersonal, objective narratives about 'she', 'he', 'it', and 'they'.

'So do you actually remember Laban in Yorkshire?'

'Yes, he used to come along and sit in the corner with Arthur Stone and criticise the men's teaching. They were all learning and Laban was doing the criticism.'

can all too easily become

'Laban used to come to meetings of the men's group of the West Riding Movement Study Group that met regularly at Scawsby College where he gave critical feedback on members' teaching. This is confirmed by surviving members of the group including Edward Tattersall and Arthur Stone each interviewed in 1991.'

The impersonality of this transformation can sometimes be alarming, leading to the fear that something becomes lost in the process. I myself became aware of this when I told a few members of YMD that I would be giving a paper about Laban in Yorkshire at this conference. I interpret their unfavourable reaction as fear of their experience being transformed and defamiliarised through insertion into discourse.

This is something which Marcia Siegel has touched upon recently. At the 1993 conference on Black Mountain College and Merce Cunningham in the Fifties Siegel had observed:

It's funny to hear other people take (...) work and think about it in different ways from how you originally thought about it. I would say that's very disconcerting for anyone who has ever put out any [written] work and I'm sure its even more disconcerting for performing artists, who don't intend the work to be fixed in the first place. (Siegel 1996: 39)

In a subsequent interview with Viola Farber, Siegel commented on the necessarily partial process of constructing narratives out of available facts. While writing her book Days on Earth (1993) about Doris Humphrey, Siegel recalls

that she felt she was inventing Humphrey's life out of everything she could find out about her, so that writing it was like writing fiction, or writing a novel (ibid.: 41).

One might adapt her simile and say that dance history writes a discourse that imitates its sources. However we call it, the point is that the process changes the original and adds a supplement to it. It thus enables people to think through the discourse along the lines which the discourse itself dictates, while closing off possibilities of thinking about it in other ways. It is necessary to recognise that this happens on both conscious and unconscious levels. As Jacques Lacan observed in 'The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis' (1975):

Whenever we are dealing with imitation, we should be very careful not to think too quickly of the other who is being imitated. To imitate is no doubt to reproduce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it. (quoted Owens 1992: 201)

The discourse of dance history, in imitating its source, makes its subjects (both its readers and writers, and the dancers whose work is being written about) the subject of the power of the institutionalisation of knowledge. The lesson to learn from this is not only the extent of a researcher's responsibility to guard rigorously against misrepresentation; it is also necessary to recognise the need to make visible the workings of power.

I began this paper by saying that my title 'Laban in Yorkshire' is meant to be slightly tongue in cheek. I can now end it by pointing out that I have used the prestige associated with Laban's name to permit me to make some space within academic discourse for Yorkshire experiences of dancing. In doing so I have engaged in a more wide ranging discussion than my parochial subject might have suggested. My hope is that by doing so I am not merely giving recognition to my Yorkshire but making space for other geographically and theoretically diverse 'Yorkshires' which have been or may yet become marginalised by the grand narratives of dance history.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. My initial interest in dance, and awareness of the history of dance in Yorkshire was inspired by my two colleagues and friends Michael Huxley and Valerie Briginshaw, both of whom I first met when they were living in Yorkshire in the 1970s and postgraduate students at the University of Leeds. Michael Huxley was then researching 'Central European Dance' and he has given me valuable advice and information while writing this paper. Valerie Briginshaw was researching the work of dance artists in education, and discussions with her helped me to write about the Yorkshire residency of London Contemporary Dance Theatre.
2. The Study of Dance was written while Janet Adshead-Lansdale was at the University of Leeds and she was therefore an on the spot observer developments in Yorkshire.
3. Jane Dudley taught a weekend course for YMD at Woolley Hall in the 1970s.

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