Something to Dance About

JOE MCGOWAN

EVERYONE'S AT IT these days! Dancing that is. Maybe it's all this money that's coming from Europe that has given us so much to dance about lately, but whatever it is, there's no doubt that the country has taken to dancing with a passion. While ballroom dancing has always had a following, there has been a great revival of Ceilidhe and set dancing in recent years, and now line dancing is the latest craze to hit the country.

In the intervals spent mopping fevered brows and regaining wind lost during the rigours of dancing a High Caul Cap or a Cashel or Corofin Set, the conversation sometimes turns to the 'chicken and egg' question of which came first–the Ceilidhe dance, or the Set. Advocates of set dancing are heard to claim that Ceilidhe dancing is the new boy on the block, having come into being as recently as the closing years of the last century, with the advent of the Gaelic League. Defenders of Ceilidhe dancing decry set dancing, claiming that it is not Irish at all but a variation of the French quadrille introduced to England and Ireland by Wellingtons troops in the last century.

The truth seems to be that the Irish didn't have to wait for either, the French or the Gaelic League to take the floor. It seems reasonable and likely that the roots of Irish dance originated in the well documented pre-battle and religious dances of our Celtic ancestors, which they brought to Ireland with them.

It is well known that the Celtic peoples of the European continent included many forms of dancing in their pastimes and practises. It would be surprising if our Irish forebears, members of this great family of Celts, did not include dancing as part of their culture. The early dances were, more than likely, associated with sun and tree worship, as both of these were an integral part of the Celtic Druid culture. According to Tacitus, the roman historian, the druids at Stonehenge danced within a circle of stones when the first rays of the morning sun at midsummer lit the main altar. The similarity of the rays of the winter solstice sun striking through the passage at Newgrange is striking. Again, much is recorded about these ceremonies and of the circular dances around the object of worship that took place at them.

The lovely triskeles and circles that feature in Celtic art are thought to represent artistic impressions of the dance patterns of that period, again, possibly having religious significance. The Celts are also said to have danced clockwise in circles on happy occasions and anti-clockwise in circles when mourning.

So much for the claims that Irish dancing started either with the Gaelic League or the French quadrilles! The plea put forward by some, that there was no word for dancing in early Irish language might indicate the absence of the activity itself as words such as *leimneach* could easily have been used to describe the activity. How closely the steps danced today resemble the steps danced in the legendary courts of the Celtic warlords, we cannot be sure. What we can safely claim is that much of the Ceilidhe and set dancing of today has evolved from these early movements and has been influenced by many of the fashions of history.

'Carolling', meaning a lovesong dance, is said to have taken place during a visit by the Mayor of Waterford to Baltimore and this may be the first recorded mention of dancing in Ireland in the late Middle Ages. This was a combination of singing and dancing in procession which probably came to Ireland with the Normans in the twelfth century, as it was popular in Normandy at that time. This eventually became known as 'the hey', a round dance in which the women wound in about their partners in a manner similar to the dancing of the High Caul Cap and many of the traditional dances of today.

Spencer in his' View of Ireland' (1596) referred to the old manner of dancing among the Irish as owing its origin to the original inhabitants, then thought to have come from Scythia on the Black Sea. Fynes Morrison, secretary to Lord Mountjoy wrote in 1600 that the Irish, 'delight much in dancing, using no arts of slow measures or lofty galliards, but only country dances, whereof they have some pleasant to behold, as Balrudery and the Whip of Dunboyne. They dance about a fire, commonly in the midst of a room, holding withes (?) in their hands ——.' This 'hey' seems to represent an intermediate stage in the evolution of most of our present day traditional dances. A 'long dance' mentioned by an English traveller, Dinsley, in 1681, is the *rince fada*, very much like our present-day 'Bridge of Athlone'.

Pat Murphy notes in his book,

'Toss the Feathers' that, 'It is important to remember that from the twelfth to the early part of the twentieth century Ireland, was under English rule. Accordingly, it's own Gaelic cultural identity was largely suppressed and prevented from developing. This suppression, which affected music, dancing, poetry and language was strongly enforced by the Tudor rulers, and it is ironic that though Elizabeth Ist declared a preference for the Irish jig, her deputies attempted to outlaw Irish bards and musicians.'

In 1603, Irish music and dance was outlawed because of the part supposed to have been taken by harpers, pipers and poets in this great uprising of Gaelic Ireland against the invader. The Gaelic aristocratic order which had encouraged and fostered music was destroyed. Queen Elizabeth herself ordering the extermination by martial law of, 'all manner of bards, harpers, etc.', later ordered her lieutenants to, 'hang all the harpers wherever found'. From the time of the Statutes of Kilkenny (1367), they were forbidden to enter the Pale, and it was an offence for anybody to give them shelter or entertainment.

However, music and dancing survived and became so popular in the Ireland of the 1700's that the dancing master became an important figure in the social life of the countryside in the last half of the century. Arthur Young in his account of his travels in Ireland during the years 1776 to '79 told that dancing was so common among the poor people, that dancing masters travelled throughout the country from cabin to cabin, with a piper or blind fiddler. They were paid by the cottiers at the rate of six pence a quarter for teaching their children dancing.

In fact, these dancing masters plied their trade until relatively recent times; the great Sligo fiddle player James Morrison taught dancing up to the time he left Ireland in 1915. He travelled regularly to Manorhamilton and other towns to impart his knowledge and spread a love of dancing. A Mayo man, Peter Tuohy, who taught at Aughagower near Castlebar early in his career, became a roving dance master who travelled from house to house in the Sligo area as late as the early 30's. He taught step-dancing in Carrowkeel Hall among other places and held competitions there at the end of a series of lessons. Some of his past pupils can still recall how he danced the hornpipe while playing the fiddle behind his back. His nephew, Michael Tuohy, taught in the Dromahair/Manorhamilton area as recently as 1948 before drifting north to Fermanagh.

About the same time, Sean Donohue, who taught dancing for a time in South Donegal, sometimes walked as far as Manorhamilton where he taught dance at McGloins Hall. He charged six pence for two hours, teaching dances such as the Harvest-time Jig, etc. Among his more famous pupils were Sylvia O'Reilly of Ballyshannon and Mae Gillespie of the Gillespie School of Dance. A legendary figure and prolific dancer and musician, he had his early training with the British army, where he served as a drummer in a regimental band during the Boer War. During his time in Ballyshannon and Leitrim he trained among others, the Garrison Pipe Band and the Castle St (Manorhamilton) Fife and Drum Band. He also trained the Drumcong Pipe band of Ballinamore–where he spent some time teaching dance and music before his arrival in Manorhamiton.

In the early years of the last century, the group dances were made up of figure dances based on the solo reel and jig. While some of the old dances were fading in popularity, the *rince fada* was still being danced. Breandan Breathnac in his book on folk music and dances of Ireland, believes that 'the reel of three and the reel of four or the common reel, appear to have been the first of what nowadays would be described as the '*ceilidhe dances*.'

An English traveller, John Carr, observed in 1805 that, 'A Sunday with the peasantry in Ireland is not unlike the same day in France. After the hours of devotion, a spirit of gaiety shines upon every hour, the bagpipe is heard and every foot is in motion.'

Intervening between these early Ceilidhe dances and the later popularisation of Ceilidhe dancing at the turn of the century, by Connradh na Gaeilge, came the sets and half-sets which became very popular in the last century, and are enjoying a great resurgence in popularity at the present time. These are all derived from the quadrilles, which were very popular in the Paris of Napoleon. Wellingtons armies on their victorious return from their wars with the French, introduced the French 'sets of quadrilles' to England and Ireland at that time.

The Irish dancing masters naturalised these dances by substituting native steps for the ballroom steps, and by speeding up the time to that of the common jig and reel. The term 'sets of quadrilles' was shortened to 'sets' when four couples danced and to 'half sets' when two couples danced. Thus adapted to the Irish temperament, the popularity of these dances spread throughout the country.

They were performed in country houses and at cross-roads ceilidhe's and apart from the enjoyment derived, they did much good. From time to time, small sums of money were raised for poor families in the neighbourhood. In the middle of this century the advent of the Bid Bands, Parish Halls and Ballrooms, caused a rapid decline in the popularity of the country house dances. In most areas set and half-sets disappeared altogether and Ceilidhe dances were few and far between.

The country house dance survived

the disapproval of and the condemnation by the clergy, who looked on these gatherings, as 'occasions of sin' and were known to preach on occasion that the 'devil is in the house there is a dance in'. The Catholic clergy were not alone in this, as many Protestant countries treated dancing in exactly the same way. Calvinists went so far as to denounce all dancing as evil and declared that it was 'detrimental to the soul's future potential.'

Traditional dance music has two parts, the first part of which is the 'tune' and the second part the 'turn'. The story is told of a local priest who, having scattered the dancers at a crossroads ceilidhe with threats of the wrath of God and anything else he could think of, inquired of the blind musician, with heavy sarcasm, if he could play the *Our Father*. The quick-witted musician is said to have replied, quick as a flash, that if his reverence could whistle the first part of it for him he was sure he would be able to play the 'turn'.

The older generation can still tell of great night's dancing in the country houses in those long lost innocent times and many were the songs written about great dances.

The above shows a part of one of these.

Our dances in such a long history, have survived prohibition, war, and pestilence, famine and Penal Laws and, in later times competition from television, video and hi-fi.

People of all ages from all over the country flock to ceilidhe, sets, classes and workshops, thus ensuring that this uniquely Irish and ancient form of recreation will continue long into the future.

Credit, too, must be given to the modern incarnation of the dance master–the dance teacher. In this modern world they don't have the status of the master of long ago, but there's no doubt but that their role in the survival and enhancement of our native art form, is just as great.

There was dances in the houses and
dances in the halls
But the dance in Mick the Newmans
was the dandy of them all.
There's fair-haired Ned Gillespie and
also Lukie Wymb's
Here comes Michael Higgins, sure we
know he'll do great things.
Pat Murphy comes from Cartron, he
has a wealthy stock;
His father's a big farmer and they keep
a turkey cock.
The music it was powerful 'tween the
'Rabbit' and the 'Boar,
Up shouts Pat there in the corner,
By Gobs, don't spare the floor.

SUMMER SCHOOL *EXTRA!*



Above: 1798 Bi-Centenary Celebrations at the Joe Mooney Summer School 1998. Set Dancers (Back Row): Padraig McManus, Kitty Daly, Rose McGuckin, Catherine Curran, Jim Flynn & James Gilchrist. (Front Row): Gerry McGuckin & Sheila Gilchrist



Right: Louise Hamilton age 9 from Dromahaire came 1st in the tin whistle U12, at the Co. Leitrim Fleadh Ceoil. She was awarded a scholarship by the Board of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann to attend the 10th annual Joe Mooney Summer School in Drumshanbo.