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## **Irish Traditional Dance in the Greater Metropolitan Area: Ceili, Set and Step Dancing**

Marta Mestrovic Deyrup

Irish traditional dance in the New York metropolitan region is really the story of an artistic collaboration, or perhaps a better word is cross-pollination, between the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in America. It also is a relatively recent, mid-twentieth century phenomenon that only began with the rise of cheap and frequent air transportation that enabled the Irish to easily travel to and from this country and the simultaneous commercialization and popularization of folk music in both Ireland and the U.S.

There has always been an Irish presence in our American popular culture at large—one only has to look at the influence of the Scotch Irish on the development of folk music and dance in this country. Country music, for example, is an offshoot of traditional Scotch Irish ballads and tunes and clogging is really a form of step dancing that was done in Appalachia. It is also true that in our region, Irish-American singers and musicians have had an enormous impact on popular culture. They performed to great success in the music and dance halls in New York from the late nineteenth century until the early 1930s. But the music they were performing was a pastiche of different musical genres, just as the dancing was—waltzes, jigs and popular tunes. As Linda Dowling Almeida observed in an earlier chapter over 70,000 Irish immigrated to the United States between 1945 and 1961, many of them settling in our region.<sup>1</sup> It was only after their arrival that the three forms of Irish traditional dance now performed in our region, ceili, set and step dancing, really began to take on their current shape.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Dowling Almeida, “Irish Immigration to the United States in the Twentieth Century,” *The Irish-American Experience in New Jersey and Metropolitan New York: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Commemoration*, ed. Marta Mestrovic Deyrup and Maura Grace Harrington (NY: Lexington Books, 2013), 83-85.

The sheer number of these immigrants in our area led to a demand for places for young people to meet. Naturally this involved entertainment. They attended organized socials and visited dance halls. They also met at local taverns in the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan. As Gerry Kennedy, a local dance teacher and traditional musician, remembers, “When I first came here in 1955, the O’Neills owned a pub out in Woodside, Queens. Every Sunday night there would be musicians and people were dancing the sets, generally, one set, the Caledonian, since most of the people dancing there were from Clare. I remember Paddy O’Brien and Joe Cooley being there. I had danced house dances in Ireland and maybe once a year there would be a dance in the parish hall. We danced the Caledonian, the waltz, what they called the barn dance, which was something like the polka family, but there was no system to it.” Although there was already a distinct “New York style” of traditional music developing here, this was not true for set dancing—if anything, the dances were reconstructed from memories people had from their youth in Ireland.

The 1950s was also the beginning of broadcast media. As Felix Dolan, a well-known Irish traditional musician in New York State notes, “Prior to 1950 Ireland was not electrified. If you had a radio it was a battery radio. Transportation was terrible—if you owned a bike you were doing very well. People stayed inside their communities. Even as late as 1960s people in County Clare would dance one dance, perhaps the Connemara or the Clare Lancers. Then they would do a waltz, then the same set again. This would happen three or four times a night. They didn’t have the breadth of dances we have today. The local styles of playing music also changed when people started to get Victrolas, and brought back records and to travel back and forth between Ireland and the U.S.”

The folk revival in the US during the sixties and seventies led to a renewed interest in traditional Irish music both in the U.S. and abroad. Later, as media evolved from radio and phonographic records to tape cassettes, CDs, and MP3s the music became even more portable. This, in turn, led to musicians listening to tunes from all the counties in Ireland. As the once regional music became more commonly heard and performed throughout all of Ireland, the dancing that accompanied this music also began to change. Originally, each region in Ireland had its own particular dance—Kerry and Sliabh Luchra are known for their exuberant polka sets—and common dance rhythms—for example, Clare is famous for its reels and soft, low-to-the floor way of dancing. By the 1980s and 1990s ceilis, or country dance parties, had expanded to include dances from all the regions of Ireland. So, people were dancing not only the Caledonian and the Plain Sets from Clare, but also the Cashel from Tipperary and the Skibbereen from West Cork.

Today, set dancing, one of the three types of Irish dance forms, has become an international phenomenon. A look at *Set Dancing News*, a magazine that serves as a community bulletin, showed that there were approximately 40 set dancing world events for the month of February 2012 alone. Just as the music has spread and become popular throughout the world, so has the dance. You can find traditional Irish dancing in Croatia, Germany, Canada, Portugal, Australia, and elsewhere throughout the world.

Although set, ceili and step dancing are manifestations of Irish traditional culture, their historical development is quite different. Set dancing is descended from continental European court dances; ceili dancing was codified (some might say created) in the nineteenth century by the Gaelic League in Ireland, as a way of promoting a native Irish culture; and step dancing,

referred to as Irish dancing, is a competitive dance form, done both as a solo and team performance, which dates from the mid-twentieth century.

They also are also very different in how they are performed. Set dancing is essentially a form of social dancing that requires 4 couples (8 people), who are arranged in a square. They progress through a series of three to six figures, each of which have a different time signature, the most common being the reel (4/4), the polka (2/4), the jig (6/8) and the hornpipe (4/4). There are different regional styles of set dancing, but in our area of the northeast, we dance as they do in Clare with our feet very close to the floor.

Ceili dancing, which is also a form of social dancing, has no fixed number of dancers and may be danced in a line or a circle—an example might be the 16-hand reel (8 couples) or the High-cauled Cap (4 couples). Unlike set dancing, ceili dancing has a very specific pattern of footwork, known as sevens and threes. At some point in a dance a couple will move sideways, women to the left of their partners and men to the right for seven steps, dance in place for three steps and then reverse their direction and slide seven steps back. The general posture of the couples is more erect and their movements are more formalized than in set dancing. As a side note, the term “ceili” is somewhat misleading, because it refers to both a kind of dance—ceili dancing—and also to any social gathering that includes music and dancing. A ceili or ceildh is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a social event with Scottish or Irish folk music and singing, traditional dancing, and storytelling” and is originally derived from the Gaelic word for “an evening visit, a friendly social call<sup>2</sup>.” Both set dancers and ceili dancers hold their ceilis at local “house parties,” VFW or church halls, and community centers. Attendance can range anywhere

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<sup>2</sup> "ceilidh, n.". OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 6 June 2012  
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29391?rskey=tbdgUW&result=6&isAdvanced=false>>.

from 32 (the equivalent of four sets) to over 100 people. These dances usually last three or four hours and are divided by a break, during which a table with Irish soda bread, trifle, and other food is set up so that the dancers can eat, rest, and catch up with their friends.

Step dancing, the last kind of dancing to be covered, bears some similarity to tap dancing. In this style of dance, the upper body is kept very still, with the focus being on the movement of the performers' feet and legs. Ceili dancing which, largely fell out of fashion in our area in the 1990s as a form of adult social dancing, is now is learned and performed primarily by students in schools of Irish dance as a complement to step dancing. These are the only Irish dance forms that are adjudicated by competition.

Although set dancing is a relatively recent phenomenon in our region, dating from the mid-1980s, it has a long history in Ireland. As Pat Murphy has noted, set dancing is closely related to the cotillions and quadrilles that were danced in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Both the cotillion and the quadrille are based on a “four couples in square formation.”<sup>4</sup> The “four couples in square” formation became the basis for set dancing and later for American square dancing. As Ann Esmay, a dancer who helped lead the set dancing revival in New York State in the 1980s and 1990s, remarks, “The sets came primarily from the continent with soldiers and travelers going to and from Ireland. The sets they brought back—the lancers, the mazurkas, the quadrilles—were primarily sets of four couples that were then danced to tunes by local Irish musicians. The dance masters were teaching these sets as they were danced on the continent but then making them Irish, so every town and region would have its own set. For

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<sup>3</sup> Pat Murphy, *Apples in Winter: Irish Set and Social Dancing* (Self-published, 2009), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Murphy, p. 19.

reels and jigs they used Irish music and over time they made the sets their own. In most places the (one) dance was referred to as the set. It didn't even have a name."

Set dancing is also known as country dancing. Two of the most frequently used expressions in set dancing are "round the house and mind the dresser" and "keep the set tidy," which refer to a time when dances in Ireland were held primarily in people's homes. Gerry Kennedy remembers, "If you were out in the country that's all you had—it didn't take much to get a set together. If a lady relative was visiting, there'd be a big dance at the house. There was no telephone. The news spread through word of mouth and soon the whole house would be full. You had people dancing the Caledonian with couples waiting on the side to jump in for the next dance."

From the eighteenth century onwards dance masters came regularly from the continent to Ireland.<sup>5</sup> As Felix Dolan comments, "They would teach a particular dance to a particular community. The dancing master would go village to village, perhaps teaching each one a different set. He had special things he would teach to a community that he would teach no one else. This is one way a particular dance become associated with a particular place in Ireland."

The fact that set dancing was social dancing; that it was taught by dance masters; and that it was danced to Irish, not continental tunes, shaped the path this folk art form would take when it was revived in Ireland and introduced to the United States in the late twentieth century.

Although set dancing took root in the New York metropolitan area in the 1980s and 1990s it was not without a great deal of opposition from supporters of Irish traditional culture, in particular the Gaelic League, which actively discouraged the dancing of sets at ceilis. The

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<sup>5</sup> Murphy, p. 16.

Gaelic League had been founded in 1893 in Dublin, with the objective of “recreating a separate cultural Irish nation.”<sup>6</sup> Ireland at that time had been under English rule for two hundred years and would be until 1920. The Gaelic League devoted its efforts to preserving and promoting what was specifically native to Ireland. That included the Irish language, Irish music and dance, and Irish literature.

One decision the Gaelic League made was to codify Irish culture. Because set dancing had its roots in France, it was rejected as too European. The Gaelic League looked to another folk tradition, ceili dancing, as being the true expression of native Irish dance. Felix Dolan notes, referencing the work the late John Cullinane did on set dancing in North America, “When the Gaelic League started, it got dancing masters to go around Ireland, to listen and watch and write down what people were doing. They came up with an official list of thirty dances which they wrote down and collected in a book, appropriately called the *Thirty Popular Ceili Dances*. These were the dances that would officially be danced at Gaelic league events.” As Pat Murphy notes, “The local halls in the 1930s and 1940s catered mostly for ceili dancing, but sets indigenous to the area sometimes survived. In the 1940s, 1950s and even the 1960s house and crossroad dances continued to be held too, usually on special, family, religious or other festive occasions...In this way, the Caledonian Set in Clare, the Castle or Cashel Set in Tipperary and many sets in Kerry and Cork continued to be danced.”<sup>7</sup>

In the United States, ceili dancing also was sponsored through the auspices of the local Gaelic League, which had “four or five local branches in the New York area,” according to Dolan. Prior to the introduction of set dancing in the eighties, traditional social dancing in our

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<sup>6</sup> Murphy, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, p. 21.

metropolitan region meant ceili dancing. Although still danced in other parts of the Northeast, such as central Pennsylvania and the Washington, D.C., area, ceili dancing in our metropolitan region has largely been relegated to classes taught in traditional Irish dance schools for children and young adults.

There were many reasons for the decline of ceili dancing, one of the most prominent being that ceili dancing is restricted to the official dances found in *Thirty Popular Ceili Dances*. This is not the case with set dancing. For example, sets like the mazurka and the North Kerry, which were popular in the nineties, have been replaced by newer dances such as the Claddagh and the Antrim Square, which comes from Australia. This is similar to the situation of Irish traditional music in this country which also substantially changed over time and for which new tunes are still being created. Set dancing figures can be more complicated and more challenging than ceili figures, which makes the dances more interesting to learn. Lastly, set dancing does not require any particular athletic ability—there are people comfortably dancing throughout their seventies and eighties—whereas ceili dancing requires mastering and performing intricate footwork.

The reintroduction of set dancing in Ireland and its establishment in the United States is directly related to the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s. The U.S. saw the emergence of performers such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, who took traditional folk music, much of it drawn from our English and Scotch Irish heritage, and made it their own. In Ireland, there emerged popular folk groups such as the Chieftains and the Clancy Brothers who both sang and played traditional Irish music. These Irish musicians often performed in our New York Metropolitan area; their records sold in local music stores that catered to a local Irish-American public.

Musicians have often commented on the close relationship between traditional music and dance. Although tunes commonly are played in sessions without any dancing taking place, Irish dance could not exist without Irish music. The reels, slides, jigs and polkas form the basis of all Irish dance steps. A reel is done very close to the ground—almost as a walking step—whereas a polka is danced by shifting the weight of one's body from one foot to the other and emphasizing a down step. Musicians at a ceili might go through a hundred or more tunes in one night. Although a musician does not know in advance which tunes he will play at a ceili, he most likely will have a list of sets, with the number of bars and time signature for each figure penciled in. For example, the Claddagh consists of reels and jigs and the Clare Lancers of all reels. Felix Dolan comments that knowing the number of bars is critical, so that the musicians know how many tunes to play for each figure and when to stop with the dancers. Musicians also adjust the pace and timing of their playing to the ability of the audience.

Just as the Gaelic League had been founded in the nineteenth century to preserve Irish culture, a new organization, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, was started in Dublin in 1951 to promote Irish music. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann proved to be hugely successful and today many of our local Irish clubs and organization are members of the Comhaltas. It is the Comhaltas that is largely responsible for the vibrant traditional Irish music scene found today in metropolitan New York and the live music that is performed at area dances. Of the sixty branches in the United States, six are in our region.

As people in Ireland and the United States began to appreciate and listen to folk music, there began to be an interest in re-examining some of the older forms of dance. Joan Dolan, who was instrumental in the introduction of Irish set dancing in our area, comments, "We were doing ceili dancing in Bedford, New York. At the same time good dancers from here started going

over to Miltown Malbay, for Willie Week (a summer traditional Irish music and school in Ireland started by Willie Clancy in 1973). It was a focal point for set dancers. Even though we were all ceili dancers, people over there received us dancers very well. Once we saw how seriously people were taking set dancing, we gradually started to learn some of the dances. In 1984 there began to be interest in trying to do some set dancing as part of ceili. We then asked various dancing masters visiting the U.S., Jack Slattery, Connie Ryan, Timmy “the Brit” McCarthy, and Joe O’Donovan and his wife Siobhan, to help us get started. Whenever we went over there we would look them up. We did a lot of workshops in Ireland.”

In many ways this replicated what had occurred a hundred years earlier in Ireland, when set dancing teachers would come to the villages and towns of Ireland to teach the new dances of Continental Europe. While all these teachers contributed to the development of set dancing in the New York-New Jersey area, Connie Ryan from Tipperary, Ireland, is largely regarded as the person who had the greatest impact. He offered set dancing workshops throughout the East Coast in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup>” Particularly popular were the weekend workshops he offered in Cape May, New Jersey. Connie Ryan was a charismatic, talented individual who had a great passion for set dancing. Another individual who gave numerous people their start as dancers was Kathleen Collins, who is both a musician and a dance teacher; in 1966 she had won the All-Ireland Fiddle Championship as a teenager. Gerry Kennedy comments, “The Gaelic League is responsible for keeping the tradition alive all these years and they kept it going until set dancing was revived. Connie Ryan was very instrumental in getting the dancing going again. But to me Kathleen Collins was a fantastic teacher. She was teaching in Pearl River at that time. Kathleen had 15-16 sets, she was teaching three or four nights a week. She’d have six sets on the floor for

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy, p. 22.

the first class, with two on the carpet. She also taught in Woodside and the Bronx.” Other important local teachers included Frank, Mary and Denise Holt.

These aspiring dancers either took classes or taught themselves set dances from a book, such as Pat Murphy’s *Toss the Feathers*. The Dolans, Clancys and Killeens ran a monthly ceili in a hall in Bedford Hills for 17 years, before they were driven out by rent increases, and this venue served as the meeting place for dancers and musicians throughout the tri-state area. John Sindt remarks, “There were only two ceilis around in the eighties, one in Dumont and one in Bedford. Eventually there were three. Once the Comhaltas got involved the sets took off like crazy.” The current Dumont ceili, in fact, developed from a session of Comhaltas musicians that gradually began to attract dancers.

This “set dancing revival” was not without controversy. Some ceili organizers could not understand the inclusion of new dances that were not “Irish” at their local events and initially only allowed one or two to be performed a night. They relented when it became apparent that set dancing was far overshadowing ceili dancing in popularity. There is still, however, somewhat of a tension among the audience at events that include “too few” or “too many” ceili dances.

As Bill Harrison notes that by the late 1990s, set dancing had taken so much of a hold that the “New York City area had at least six teachers, a dozen ceili the a month and two or three weekend set dancing festivals a year.”<sup>9</sup> Today there is at least one ceili and often two held in the tristate area every week, as well as numerous sessions and set dancing classes.

All three forms of Irish traditional dance, set dancing, ceili dancing, and step dancing, received a great boost with the stage debut of Michael Flatley’s *Riverdance*, in 1993. *Riverdance*

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<sup>9</sup> Murphy, p. 28.

celebrated Irish music and dance, while at the same time placing it in the context of other international dance forms. The performance caught the imagination of the public and it has continued to be performed on tour for the past nine years. While it is unclear whether ceili dancing and set dancing will die out as forms of traditional culture in our New York metropolitan region, step dancing, which received greatest surge of interest because of Riverdance, has no such problems. Over the past fifty years it has turned into a competitive sport that has thousands of participants, most of whom started as young children as part of their Irish heritage.

Step dancing or Irish dancing has been performed in Ireland since at least the late nineteenth century and, like ceili dancing, was a “native” form of dance that was encouraged and supported by the Gaelic League. Unlike set dancing, whose teachers for the most part have no professional training, step dancing teachers must pass a series of exams and receive certification. All step dancing teachers, whether in Ireland or abroad, are members of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (the commission on Irish dance). This commission is part of the Gaelic League and is responsible for supervising teacher education and dance competitions. The commission also organizes the worldwide Oireachtas and Feisanna (festivals and competitions) that take place every year.<sup>10</sup>

There was step dancing being done in our area in the nineteenth century. The dance teachers in our area came primarily from Munster, Cork and Kerry and taught in boroughs of New York and Newark. <sup>11</sup> This, however, was a rough and ready affair. There was no systemized form of dance instruction. Everything changed when the McNiff family arrived in New York in 1948 from Belfast, where they ran a dance studio. As Joan McNiff-Cass describes,

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<sup>10</sup> See the information available on the An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha Website of <http://www.clrg.ie/>.

<sup>11</sup> John P. Cullinane, *Aspects of the History of Irish Dance in North America* (Cork City, Ireland: J.P. Cullinane, 1997), 46-47.

“My family, which consisted of my mother, brothers, and myself, came here on the last voyage of the S.S. Washington. My brothers were fourteen and twelve and I was eight or nine. Both my brothers had done a lot of Irish dancing in Belfast and that at the age of sixteen Peter started teaching at the American Legion hall on 88th Street, just off Third Avenue.. He would teach there every Sunday. All of us did a lot of shows—Carmel Quinn, Ed Sullivan, and Arthur Godfrey.” As with set and ceili dancing, Irish dance classes provided a way for young immigrants to socialize.

In the beginning there was a great deal of resistance to the McNiff style of dancing. The first involved a question of dress—the women dancers wore simple green dresses with black tights as they did in Ireland, which was not the fashion in the New York area. In addition, the music was too fast for the dancers to perform to. Says McNiff-Cass, “We were lucky to have great musicians, but they were more for listening than for dancing. For Irish dancing, you have to be consistent, you have to start slowly and stay slow—today they use the metronome for this.” Lastly, there were no professional judges or adjudicators at student competitions. Oftentimes, the judges were stewardesses from Aer Lingus, who knew very little about traditional Irish dance. The current structure of local competitions (oireachtas), leading to national and then world competitions, was introduced in 1964, but as McNiff-Cass remarks, “It took a long time to get everything in place. Eventually, the parents finally agreed that there should be knowledgeable teachers who would have to take an exam in order to adjudicate.”

Although the McNiff Dance School benefited from the Riverdance phenomenon—McNiff-Cass remembers students coming to the studio saying that they wanted to “learn Riverdance”—the school and its Belfast style of Irish dancing partly were responsible for the show’s huge success. One of the school’s early students, Brooklyn-born Donny Golden, who

trained at the studio, and who is widely considered to be one of the best living Irish step dancers, was the teacher of Jean Butler, the star of Riverdance.

The future of Irish social dancing is unclear. Many of the people who introduced or perhaps a better word is “invented” set dancing in the nineteen eighties and nineties in our metropolitan region—are now in their sixties, seventies and eighties. They have not been replaced by younger people and there is a general belief that when this generation passes that set dancing will die out with it. Some of the dance teachers, such as Jack Regan, believe that the future of set dancing lies in Ireland, where set dancing is part of some elementary school curricula, or perhaps here if it could be taught in some of the parochial schools. If this is the case, a new set dancing revival might follow the path that it has for the last three hundred years, with new dances being introduced by itinerant dance masters who could inspire a new generation of traditional dancers and the musicians who accompany them. This pessimism applies as well to ceili dancing, which is danced primarily by older people. This is not the case of step dancing, which has thousands of students throughout the country and which is a robust and living traditional art form.

*Much of the information for this article was obtained through interviews of individuals who spearheaded and organized these cultural activities in our area over the last thirty years—musicians, dancers and dance teachers, many of whom are affiliated with local Irish organizations such as the New York Irish Center of Long Island City, Queens, the Irish Arts Center of New York City, branches of the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Mid-Atlantic Region, and the Bergen Irish Association in New Jersey. Information was also drawn from the series of books on Irish dance prepared by Dr. John P. Cullinane and dancemaster, Pat Murphy.*

*Further readings*

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