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Reverence for Éire: Expanding the Tradition

Briana B. Kelly

The College at Brockport, brianablairkelly3@gmail.com

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Reverence for Éire:
Expanding the Tradition

by
Briana Blair Kelly

A thesis submitted to the Department of Dance of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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Reverence for Éire:

Expanding the Tradition

by Briana Blair Kelly

APPROVED BY:

Advisor

Reader

Reader

Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

Date

Date

Date
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ABSTRACT

Many aspects of Irish movement have been lost or forgotten due to the emphasis on oral tradition. Other features of Irish culture, literature for example, were well-documented, while Irish dance was neglected. This thesis recognizes the Irish body as an important historical site to research as well as a vessel for immense creative potential. It is an example of the exploration and documentation necessary for such a vast and varied subject. For centuries prior to the 1990’s Irish dance revival, Irish dance was known by those who participated in the dance form and was otherwise unknown to the global population. But, after the debut of Riverdance Irish dance became a global phenomenon. Now what? How can Irish dance be presented on stage in alternative ways? What impact can it have now? My research is focused on how Irish dance can not only exist but thrive within a contemporary context. Irish dance is still at such a beginning and I aim to uncover its creative potential through physical exploration and choreographic innovation. My aim is to establish a new set of relations through which Irish dance can be seen and recognized by challenging some defining limitations of the form.

Keywords: Irish, Irish dance, Riverdance, Fusion, Contemporary, Posture, Head-Tail Connectivity, folk dance, cultural dance, social dance, tradition, Ireland.
INTRODUCTION

WHILST DOING A LONG O V E R DUE CLEAROUT AT THE OFFICES OF IRELAND’S OLDEST AND MOST RESPECTED SCHOOL OF DANCE, MRS O’HARA MADE A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY........

(Ed McLachlan Irish Dance Cartoon)\(^1\)

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By documenting something we validate it and assign value; we “document things into existence.” ² “The absence of documentation on dance and movement speaks volumes” ³ and highlights the need for exploring, mapping and debating the most neglected area of Irish social, cultural and historical life – the body. Perhaps the Irish did not “realise how important the body, and our attitude to it, is in terms of social history.” ⁴

Through the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even eighteenth century, it was not considered important to record the social trends, exchanges and innovations that were shaping Irish movement. The lack of documentation could be attributed to the simple fact that it was not deemed a priority. Another possible explanation is that the dances were so familiar that documenting them seemed superfluous. Perhaps, because Irish movement was still developing and continually evolving through these times, documenting was not stressed due to form’s ephemeral nature. The oral tradition of teaching and passing on Irish movement, and the lack of an established notation system are more possibilities to explain the lack of documentation.

Many aspects of Irish movement through history have been lost and forgotten due to this emphasis on Irish oral tradition. “Conscious choices were made to ensure the orality of the dances. In 1930 and again in the 1960s, appeals were made to record and preserve older dances. Both times the answer was the same - a complete refusal to notate or record any dance…To this day, literally hundreds of dance steps are lost every year to the passage of time. The loss is felt a necessary sacrifice to maintain the last bastion of Gaelic orality.” ⁵

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4. Ibid., 8.
For whatever reason, it is curious as to why documenting dance was neglected, when other aspects of Irish Culture were well-documented. This thesis is my way of recognizing the Irish body as an important historical site to research as well as a vessel capable of immense creative potential. This thesis is an example of the exploration and documentation necessary for such a vast and varied subject.

As a member of the Irish dance world, first as a competitive Irish dancer for ten years and now as a non-competitive Irish dance teacher, my hope is for the dance form to one day receive the recognition it deserves and becomes a staple within dance education and academia. As a modern dancer, I work toward achieving this recognition through unearthing the choreographic potential of Irish dance by expanding the Irish “tradition”.6

Dance is an area, however, where different kinds of Irish people can meet and manage the past together – even if their experiences and memories are diverse and fragmented. Because of the multivocality – the many possible interpretations – of a dance performance, dance provides a versatile forum for investigation of the past. – Helena Wulff7

Chapter one explores the earliest documented years of Irish movement from the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, just before the establishment of The Gaelic League. While focusing primarily on Irish dance posture, this chapter covers some historically significant occurrences in Ireland’s past which contributed to the shaping and molding of contemporary Irish dance practices.

Chapter two begins in the nineteenth century; a time when the Irish people needed an identity different from the English who oppressed and controlled their country for

6. Tradition is in quotation marks due to the numerous differentiating opinions, perspectives, and definitions as to what tradition “is” and means.

centuries. The establishment of The Gaelic League and The Irish Dancing Commission were pivotal turning points in Irish dances’ timeline. The influence and control of these governing entities was vast and varied, spreading into all aspects of Irish culture, causing both positive and negative alterations to Irish dance and the national identity attached to it; some of which are still existing in contemporary culture.

Chapter three discusses Riverdance\(^8\), its influence on the Irish identity, and the globalization of Irish dance. Irish dance was created through cultural exchange; thriving and expanding because of foreign influences. The Gaelic League and Irish Dancing Commission’s nationalistic quest to establish and promote the Irish identity stuck Irish dance in a *cul de sac*. The dance form remained in this *cul de sac* until the debut of Riverdance, which reintroduced foreign influences and marked a crucial creative shift. But, while Riverdance’s debut was timely and necessary, it only scratched the surface as to what Irish dance has to offer choreographically.

In a society in which postcolonial formations of an ‘Irish’ body have led to the oppression of corporealties that do not fit hegemonic norms, instances of performative bodily expression that reflect, resist or deviate from these norms present important sites for investigation. – Aoife McGrath \(^9\)

Chapter four begins in post-Riverdance times, when select Irish dancers and choreographers began to question the dance form’s function and voiced a concern for its future. Irish dance had once again become stagnant so Irish dance choreographers, such as Jean Butler and Colin Dunne, began to investigate and uncover different ways in which Irish dance can exist

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8. Riverdance is a theatrical show consisting mainly of traditional Irish music and dance. It originated as an interval performance act during the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and is composed by Bill Whelan. Production team, John McColgan and Moya Doherty, expanded it into a full-length stage show, which opened in Dublin on February 9, 1995. Riverdance is one of the most successful dance productions in the world.

within the global arena. The remainder of the chapter is a glimpse into my own investigation of how Irish dance can thrive within a contemporary context. It discusses my creative process, the reasoning behind my sound score selections, the performance of my choreographic investigation, and ends with final reflections and conclusions about the entire process.
CHAPTER 1

The Development of Irish Dance

The first written documentation of Irish dance, the small amount that exists, appeared in the sixteenth century with the mention of the Irish Hey\(^1\), the Trenchmore\(^2\) and the Rince Fada.\(^3\) Country Dance\(^4\) was a large part of daily life and social gatherings in rural Ireland and was not limited to the lower culture or peasantry. In 1681 Thomas Dineley\(^5\) wrote, “they (the Irish) are at this day much addicted…to danse after their countrey fashion [that is] the long dance\(^6\) one after another of all conditions, Master, Mrs., servants.”\(^7\)

At this point in time the main source of information on Irish dance customs was provided by English visitors. One of the first references to Irish dance customs was in a letter

1. The Irish Hey was mentioned often: as a dance, being included in dances, in poetry, in plays. There was mention of a dance leading off in a Hey, a circle. Another referred to the men standing still and the women were going to Hey between them; winding in and out. It is reasonable to infer that the Irish Hey was the earliest and simplest form of our modern Round dances.

2. The Trenchmore is a popular and long-lived long dance. It seems to have Irish roots, and is possibly more than just a dance; it is a style/type of dance as well. It was documented as a boisterous and energetic dance. With language changing over time, and multiple words having the same meaning, Trenchmore could actually be Rince Mor, a term, which to this day, refers to certain Irish Country Dances.

3. The Rince (Rinnce) Fada originated in southern Scotland. It then penetrated to Ireland and England. This dance is still performed today in contemporary times. The men stand in one line and their partners facing them in another line. The dance begins at one end of the line and works along through the whole line until everyone is dancing. It was documented that a white handkerchief was held in between partners.

4. A Country Dance a traditional type of social English dance performed by couples facing each other in long lines. These couples dance together in a figure or “set”. Often dances would follow a “caller” who names each change in the figures.

5. Thomas Dineley (died 1695) was an English antiquary. He traveled to Ireland in 1680. While he was there he documented what he saw and the history of the country. These observations were published in 1870 as a reprint from the pages of the journal of the Kilkenny and South East of Ireland Archaeological Society.

6. Long dances were performed by couples and had many different formations: one line, two lines, circles and squares. A couple examples of these long dances are the Trenchmore, an adaption of an old Irish peasant dance, and the Hey, which was a forerunner of the present-day reel. Several versions of the same dance were to be found in different parts of Ireland.

written by Sir Henry Sidney\textsuperscript{8} to Queen Elizabeth I in 1569; "They are very beautiful, magnificently dressed and first-class dancers."\textsuperscript{9} These first-hand accounts of Irish dance customs, while providing impressions and opinions, were broad and vague. There were no detailed descriptions, explanations, documentation or notation of footwork, formations or posture.

Many problems can arise when tracing genres or styles of dance backward in time; partially from the lack of documentation, but also because of language and its many changes through time. It is “unusual that there is no written record of dancing or movement until the sixteenth century, but what is remarkable is that there is no indigenous Irish word for dance.”\textsuperscript{10} The words \textit{Damhsa} and \textit{Rince}, both translating to dance, are loan words from other cultures: \textit{Damhsa} comes from the French ‘danse’ and \textit{Rince} comes from the English ‘rink’. Further down the timeline the name of the Irish reel originated from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘rulla’ meaning ‘to whirl’ and the Irish jig was inspired by the Italian word ‘giga’.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, older Irish dances were displaced by English varieties. Through Norman and English influence, dancing as a courtship activity was enhanced by the introduction of the new figure-formations. But, older Irish dances left their mark on new ones.

Dances that have become staples in the Irish cultural repertoire: hornpipes\textsuperscript{11},

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\textsuperscript{8} Sir Henry Sidney (1529-1586), Lord Deputy of Ireland, was a prominent politician and courtier during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. He continued to serve un Mary I of England and Queen Elizabeth I. He was instrumental in the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland, serving as Lord Deputy three times. His career was controversial in both England and Ireland.


\textsuperscript{11} The hornpipe is an English, Irish and Scottish dance that is suggested to have originated around the 16\textsuperscript{th} century aboard English sailing vessels. This dance is performed in hard shoes and has both slow and fast versions. Hornpipe not only refers to a type of Irish dance but also to the music that accompanies the movement. A hornpipe standard time signature is 4/4 or 2/2. The rhythm is very even and the dance is performed in a similar manner.
reels\textsuperscript{12} and jigs\textsuperscript{13}, do not only exist in Irish culture; they also exist in the United Kingdom and North America. These dances have become a beloved commonality between cultures. The one exception to this cultural and social exchange was the slip jig\textsuperscript{14}, which emerged with the creation of Irish step dancing and is strictly Irish. Even though the dance form, as we know it, has bits and pieces from many different cultures, it must owe something to the “native” movement.

The curiosity surrounding Irish dance posture has escalated through centuries of constant change and poor documentation. It would be ill-advised to say that Irish dance posture has remained unchanged over centuries of existence. It is hard to believe Irish dance posture has always been so “rigid” with the existence of sean-nós dancing\textsuperscript{15} and centuries of outside influences. This is not to say that sean-nós is a pure form, because in fact there are no strict native or pure Irish traditions. Irish traditions are rich and varied, and the aesthetic expressions and preferences are diverse and ever-changing.

The most discussed and speculated aspect of Irish dance is the “rigid” posture. What is the “reason” for this particularly inhibited posture? The “reasons” and explanations are many and

\textsuperscript{12} The reel is indigenous to Scotland but their term ‘reill’ has possible Old Norse origins; the term ‘rulla’ which means ‘to whirl’. In Irish dance, the reel is danced in soft shoes and is one of the first dances taught to students. Reel music is played in either 2/2 or 4/4, like the hornpipe, but consists mainly of eighth note movement with an accent on the first and third beats of the bar. There is a hard shoes variation called a treble reel.

\textsuperscript{13} The jig is a lively folk dance performed in compound meter. It developed in 16\textsuperscript{th} century England and is closely related to the French ‘gigue’ and Italian ‘giga’. Today it is most associated with Ireland, Scotland and Canada. The jig is normally written and performed in 6/8, but has been adapted in a variety of time signatures which have been classified into the following groupings: light jig, slip jig, single jig, double jig, treble jig.

\textsuperscript{14} The slip jig is often considered “the ballet of Irish dance” because of its graceful movements and that seem to glide the dancer across the stage. A slip jig is written in 9/8, relating it to a waltz, and providing a certain circulatory to the music and movement.

\textsuperscript{15} Sean-nós dancing: sean meaning the ‘old’, nós meaning ‘form’ or ‘way’ (knowledge, a way of doing something). A seemingly more wild and unstructured style of solo dancing in which the impulses, from the feet, continue unhindered through the upper body. Sean-nós combines stylized movement, individual performative improvisation, the body is relaxed, and the arms are waved about freely. Sean-nós is a living tradition in areas such as Connemara, Ireland.
unclear; they are not solidified or concrete. Some argue that the focus of Irish dancing is meant to be on the feet, so the upper body is kept still to minimize distraction; this explanation sidesteps social and historical significance. This sidestepping only brings forth more questions: If the purpose of the posture was to minimize distraction from the feet, why are there so many questions, speculation and conversations surrounding the posture? Other countries have dance forms that focus on the feet, why don’t they have the same posture? Is there one explanation as to why Irish dance posture is the way it is? If not, what contributed to the formation of modern Irish dance posture?

**Oppression: Creator of Modern Irish Dance Posture?**

Once upon a time, the Irish used to dance with their hands in the air and the smiles on their faces. But the English kidnapped some dancers and took them to dance for the Queen. In protest they danced with deadpan faces and their hands at their sides. – Helena Wulff via Thomas Taafe

The origins of this “rigid” and codified posture have been discussed, evaluated and speculated. Tales and myths have been formed to offer an explanation as to how this unique posture came to be. The truth: there is no one reason. Although, these folktales appear to be variations on a theme, so it is possible to identify a shared central narrative within them; oppression.

1. The Catholic Church disapproved of dancing in earlier times so the Irish people developed the style of dance that kept the upper body still. This way a priest passing by and glancing in the window could not tell if people were dancing.

2. British soldiers, who were also disapproving authorities, were fooled by the inactive posture. To continue dancing, but also to camouflage the activity, the arms were pinned to the sides of the body.\textsuperscript{17}

What these stories have in common is the belief that the lack of upper-body movement was a response to oppression; whether by the English or the Catholic Church. These tales make one believe there was a need to invent a dance form that purposefully masked itself as \textit{not} dance. While these tales are not fact, they do imply an understanding that arm movements must have existed at some time in the past.

Photographs of Irish dancers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries show dancers with their hands on their hips. It is said the Irish previously danced with their hands on their hips but this posture and carriage was viewed as suggestive and haughty. The Catholic Church is believed to be the driving force behind ‘civilizing’ the Irish farmer; “because (the Catholic Church) gained a monopoly of control over their bodies, secular civility became almost synonymous with Catholic morality”\textsuperscript{18}

It would have been difficult to maintain a ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ shape of an Irish body with the changing times, outside influences, and the regular effects of oppression. Maintaining this ‘rigid’ posture, while the lower-half of the body is moving wildly, is challenging and requires mastery to convey a sense of ease. “…the verticality of the body and the control with which it is held represent not only the individual’s mastery of his or her own body, but a set of social, cultural, and historical values associated with civility, morality, and status.”\textsuperscript{19} Control is a

\textsuperscript{17} These two folktales were provided by: Frank Hall, \textit{Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty} (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2008), 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Frank Hall, \textit{Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty}, 19. Hall is quoting Tom Inglis.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 20.
matter of high to low, top to bottom.

These folktales clearly demonstrate that Irish dance posture can be viewed as an effect of cultural subordination. Yes, oppression was a contributing factor as to why Irish dance posture is the way it is, but it did not solely shape modern Irish dance posture. This stiff and formal practice of dancing, with such a ‘rigid’ posture, is one of relatively recent origin and a modern invented tradition.

Creation of Irish Step Dancing and Emphasis on Competition

…Irish national identity is both cherished and contested, diverse and distinct, and all this is expressed in Irish dance, often through the memory of the past. – Helena Wulff

Those alive during the eighteenth century witnessed a tremendous change in Irish dance. At this point in time a divide was created; some Irish dancers were interested in competition but, still so many who were neither interested nor skilled enough to compete, learned Irish dance for fun. This riff was a result of the creation of Irish step dancing. Irish step dance owes its survival to the dance masters who continued teaching the “fashionable” group dances but also developed the individual dance skills in terms of step dancing. Group dances were taught by dance masters to hold the interest of their less gifted pupils and to give them the chance to enjoy dancing. Early dance masters, who were most likely French, invented the intricate steps of step dancing and led Irish dance in a new direction.

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21. Irish step dancing was the result of standardization, codification, and The Gaelic League’s nationalistic dream. This will be discussed more in Chapter 2.

22. This fact was stated in Deirdre Mulrooney’s *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006), 19. Also supported by Frank Hall, *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty* (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2008), 22.
This new direction seemed inevitable: Joan Flett stated, “It is probable that the country dances would have lost a great deal of their simplicity and some of their vigor in the transition from a rural to a more sophisticated situation. They would have been affected by the dress and manners of the times, would have been polished and may well have been influenced by dances introduced from abroad.”

“The modern civilizing process was a transformation of lifestyle, customs and manners.” Looking at the Irish body specifically, it was a transformation in terms of the “mechanisms by which it was controlled.” Irish bodies transformed “from open, passionate bodies to closed, moral bodies.” Irish dance posture, with its shape and control, now needed to align with a particular vision of an ideal Irish dancing body.

It appears there was a constant battle between control and relaxation in Irish culture and the body became a physical site for showcasing this dilemma. This controlled and ‘rigid’ posture is a social, cultural and historical construct which has been appropriated by Irish dancers as an expression of “Irishness.” The concept of embodying “Irishness” only became more exaggerated with the establishment of the Gaelic league and their nationalistic endeavor.

The carriage in Irish dancing, regardless of its origins, is unique to Irish dancing. The contrast in the upper and lower halves of the body – upper still while lower leaps, twists, turns and beats out rhythms on the floor – creates a powerful aesthetic which instantiates and Irish historical concern with control, authority and playful expression. – Frank Hall

23. Joan Flett was an expert in English and Scottish social dance.
25. Frank Hall, Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty, 19.
26. Ibid., 19.
27. Ibid., 19. Hall is quoting Tom Inglis.
28. “Irishness”: the fact or quality of being Irish.
Is Irish dance even Irish? Yes. Irish dance is a unique dance form that was created through cultural exchange. Through cultural interaction the Irish people were introduced to different ideas and could blend their native culture with aspects from others’. Cultural exchange kept Irish dance changing, progressing and flourishing. Perhaps the foundations of Irish dance are not strictly Irish, but they have long been a part of Irish social culture so surely there is claim for these dances to be called Irish.
CHAPTER 2

Inventing Irish Bodies: The Gaelic League and Irish Dancing Commission

The first thing that strikes any observer is that ease and grace and beauty of movement are almost invariably sacrificed to complexity of steps. When will Irish dancers understand that the simplest steps beautifully danced give more pleasure than the most difficult steps danced with an awkward carriage of the body and with obvious physical distress? - J.G. O’Keeffe and Art O’Brien, 1912 ¹

By the nineteenth century England had already occupied Ireland for centuries. The Irish people were desperate for an identity that was unique to their culture after being bullied by other nations for so long. Catherine Foley² discusses how Irish dance became invaluable when the Irish needed a national identity that was uniquely their own in her article “Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local:” “The construction of an Irish cultural identity emerged at the end of the nineteenth century within the context of colonialism. For the nationalist movement in Ireland a cultural representation was needed to establish an “Irishness” that was positive and different from “Englishness.”

The slow disappearance of the mother tongue, Gaelic, and the oral culture that went with it, was keeping the people of Ireland from achieving nationhood. The nationalist approach to

². Catherine E. Foley is the Founding Course Director of both the MA in Ethnochoreology and the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Ireland. She is the Founding Director of the international dance festival, Tráth nag Cos. She is the Founding Chair Emerita of the international society, Dance Research Forum Ireland, and is Founding Director of the National Dance Archive of Ireland. She is currently Chair of the International Council for Traditional Music Study Group on Ethnochoreology.
dealing with this dilemma was creating The Gaelic League. The formation of the Gaelic League, in 1893, was the first attempt to construct an Irish nation with the mission to create a popular culture drastically distinct from England. Originally, The Gaelic League aimed to promote all aspects of Irish Culture, but focused mainly on Irish language and literature. The League was a radical humanist utopian organization advocating “…the regeneration of the contemporary nation...by a return to its creative source in the evolving Gaelic civilization of its recent past.”

The establishment of the Gaelic League was a strategic move to solidify what it meant to be Irish. Extreme decisions were made, which at the time were necessary and made sense, but in the long run were detrimental to the development of Irish dance. But, The Gaelic League was the first successful, large-scale cultural and political reform in a country who has a long history of failed resistance movements and revolts.

The Gaelic League’s mission eventually moved far beyond exclusively a language restoration to embrace a general revitalization of the creative culture attached to it. It turns out that “…dancing brought in more people than did the intellectual debates and political rhetoric.” The dance form’s popularity, combined with the need to establish an Irish cultural identity, created a new function for Irish dance; it was now a focal point for Irish cultural representation, as well as a social pass-time.

3. The Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge) is a social and cultural organization that promotes Irish culture worldwide. Originally the organization was intended to be apolitical, but many of its participants became involved in Irish nationalism.


Until the formation of The Gaelic League, Irish dance had been a social and recreational activity vital to the life of the people. With the disappearance of that way of life, the new structured and regulated Irish dance overshadowed the social function that had long been the favored performance outlet for Irish dance.

In other words, Irish dance became institutionalized through the efforts of the Gaelic League to unify Ireland as a nation-state through Irish cultural practices. In constructing this canon, however, different regional dance styles and repertoires became gradually marginalized at the expense of promoting and disseminating the institutionalized “national” canon. – Catherine E. Foley

Regulations and Restrictions: Dominance of the Gaelic League

The Gaelic League, comparatively to previous resistance movements and revolts, was successful for two reasons. First, the timing was right; it was only fifty years after forty percent of the population’s forced emigration due to famine. Second, The Gaelic League was led by Irish educated elites, who participated in the international intellectual debates of the time.

The Gaelic League, now faced with the harsh economic realities of their country, began to draw rigid parameters and started dictating which kinds of expression were suitable and helpful to their nationalist agenda. By combining the popularity of Irish dance with a union of art and politics, The Gaelic League found a way to promote and preserve the Irish identity.

During the early 1900s there was a debate as to which dances were acceptable and promoted “Irishness”. In 1927 The Gaelic League set up a sub-committee to assist in sifting “foreign” from “native” and, “acceptable” from “unacceptable” dances. In June 1930 An

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Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha⁷, The Irish Dancing Commission, met for the first time as an authority charged with regulating Irish dancing affairs.

The formation of The Irish Dancing Commission immediately changed the social relation to Irish dance. It was with the assistance of the Irish Dancing Commission that Irish dance officially transitioned into Irish step dancing and a new “standard dialect” of Irish dancing body language emerged. The Irish Dancing Commission became a vital tool in preserving vital aspects of Irish culture and simultaneously hindered further developments in Irish dance.

1. “Do everything necessary to promote Irish dancing, both ceili⁸ and stepdancing.⁹
2. Exercise central control on Irish dancing and those connected with it, teachers, adjudicators, pupils and organisers of competitions.
3. Draw up all rules necessary for those purposes and enforce the implementation of those rules.”¹⁰

While remaining under The Gaelic League’s patronage The Irish Dancing Commission oversees all aspects of competitive Irish step dancing, in Ireland and abroad. Since creation, The Irish Dancing Commission has “gradually established official regulations concerning dances, dancers, teachers, adjudicators, dance events, feiseanna¹¹, clothing, and music.”¹²

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7. An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, The Irish Dancing Commission, is the oldest and largest governing body for competitive Irish step dancing globally. The Irish Dancing Commission, founded in 1927, created a standardized system of Irish dance, music and competition for its member organizations in 26 countries.
8. Ceili dances (fior céili): a popular form of folk dancing in Ireland. They are based on heys, round dances, long dance, and quadrilles. A céilí (Irish) or cèilidh (Scottish) is a traditional social gathering involving music and dance either at a house or a larger social hall or community gathering place.
9. Stepdancing refers to Irish step dancing.
10. Goals of The Irish Dancing Commission were found in Frank Hall’s, Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2008), 38.
11. Feiseanna in the plural of Feis. A Feis is an Irish step dance competition. It mainly refers to smaller local competitions but also encompasses regionals (Oireachtas), nationals (National Oireachtas), and The World Championship (Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne). The term Oireachtas applies to larger and more prestigious competitions.
For the past 90 years The Irish Dancing Commission has had final say as to what is vital in preserving Irish step dance. The Irish cultural identity and the dance form attached to it, which was so important to establish and promote, was now being standardized, centralized and institutionalized by The Irish Dancing Commission in hopes of preserving the “tradition.”

In doing so, the Commission, whether consciously or unconsciously, began the gradual demise of both the transmission and performance of Irish step dance practices. A dance form, which was created through cultural exchange, was now being narrowed and restricted. The Irish Dancing Commission oversaw the evolution of Irish step dance through controlling its rate of change and stability through a system of monitored and exclusive competitions.

To what extent does An Coimisiún (the Commission) — or any institution or organization in Ireland—actually speak for Irish dance or Irish dancing?...Is Ireland a small, bounded, territorial entity that looks inward on itself for notions of its identity, or does it look elsewhere, to the diaspora and to other places outside itself to gain an understanding of what and who it is? – Catherine E. Foley

The label “Irish dance” is used loosely; its meaning dependent on an individual’s background. There are multiple notions and understandings, even within Ireland itself, of what “Irish dance” is or is not. The general perspective, still, is widely associated with The Irish Dancing Commission; that is until the debut of Riverdance in the 1990s.

Political Maneuvers of the Gaelic League and Irish Dancing Commission

After their language programs were transferred to the State in 1922, the League focused their attention on their dance program; one of the last intact programs of the organization.

Historical significance, originally placed on the spoken language, was now transferred to dance. The Gaelic League’s mission was to establish and promote what it meant to be Irish. Intensification of the project to invent Irish bodies led to the League creating and passing laws and bans that had a direct impact on Irish dance and culture.

The Gaelic League’s political maneuvers began with the 1930’s ban (known as “The Ban”), which prohibited any dancing other than Irish dance. “The Ban” supported the social dances that were so integral to the Irish identity while simultaneously accomplished a nationalist cleansing of the art of dance. “…the Ban” propelled Irish dancing down a cul de sac that went against the grain of Irish tradition’s tendency to amalgamate foreign influences, which had made it flourish and grow.”\textsuperscript{14} Irish dance was created through centuries of cultural exchange but, thanks to “The Ban”, the Irish were now restricted as to what they were allowed to dance. The Irish people were now isolated and unable to participate in the cultural exchange that previously made their culture thrive.

The 1935 Public Dance Hall Act\textsuperscript{15} was a knee-jerk reaction to the national identity crisis. This Act controlled where, when and under whose supervision dancing could take place, and erased dance as an informal and leisure activity. “This law had the effect, whether intentionally or not, of effectively killing the house dances which had formally been an indispensable part of life in rural Ireland.”\textsuperscript{16}

The Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 promoted a much more restricted version of Irish dancing than ever before. “…20\textsuperscript{th} century Irish dance came to be characterized for the most part

\textsuperscript{15.} The 1935 Public Dance Hall Act required all those who wished to organize a dance event to apply for a license. This had the side effect of making traditional Irish dances (céilí) in rural homes illegal.
\textsuperscript{16.} Helen Brennan, \textit{The Story of Irish Dance} (Maryland: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2001), 103.
by rigid bodily posture and sobriety of movement, mockingly described as ‘strictly from the ankles down’…it promoted a rigid group identity at the expense of any assertions of individual style.”17

These rules and restrictions not only took away individual style but also took away the foreign influences that fueled Irish dance. A dance form, created through cultural exchange, was now placed in a locked box labeled ‘Irish nationalism.’ Éinrí Ó Muireaghasa18, one of the league’s most respected members, stated: “…in many localities the boycotting of foreign dances would at the present time put an end to all dancing, and even where Irish dances are still in vogue, they are rarely in sufficient variety to fill an evening’s entertainment with them alone. We cannot afford to be very drastic in our reform lest we kill the movement by starvation.”19

**Increased Emphasis on Competition**

With the establishment of The Irish Dancing Commission, Irish dance transitioned into Irish step dancing. Irish dance “reached the height of its perfection in the solo or step dances”20 and an increased emphasis and interest in competition emerged alongside this new form of Irish dance. Irish step dance created a way to compete in “Irishness” and strengthen the cultural importance of Irish dance. Irish dance had become such an important part of the Irish cultural identity, and now there was a way to demonstrate one’s “Irishness.”

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18. Éinrí Ó Muirgheasa (aka Henry Morris) was a teacher, Irish civil servant, folklore collector and writer. He is best known for recording oral tradition and folklore in Irish in the Monaghan, Louth and south Armagh area.
Competition had been an important aspect of Irish dance for a long time before the formation of The Gaelic League and The Irish Dancing Commission, but with the extra emphasis placed on Irish Dance’s ability to validate one’s “Irishness”, an increase in participants soon followed. This increase in participants, showing a stronger interest in competition, created a need for more dance masters. Dance masters, determined to prove themselves as creative and innovative, choreographed a variety of new dances to add alongside the established “traditional” dances. With the sudden growth in popularity and explosion of creativity the importance of preserving Irish step dance, and the cultural identity now attached to it, became even more of a dilemma.

The Gaelic League argued that the new dances were not traditional, while the dance masters stated they were continuing the same tradition which had always been: a choreographer’s art. All Irish dancing is creative; creative change through cultural relations and exchange is a constant feature of the form, and its teachers are both artists and choreographers. But, while there were complaints about the “purity” of the dance masters’ creations, it can’t be argued they were some of the only traditionalists whose teaching method upheld the old oral culture. “This reliance on memory is perceived as necessary for preserving the cultural integrity of their art...”

“Fair competition, in the context of producing a national symbol in dance, requires a national-level codification of rules and authentication of competitions, adjudicators, and dancers.” The Irish Dancing Commission chose select dances from across the country that were

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deemed vital to preserving and promoting Irish step dance. These dances, which were seen as vital, are still performed by Irish dance schools around the globe in organized competitions and step-dancing exhibitions. The Irish Dancing Commission’s aim was to promote and preserve their “native” dance form but in reality, they took a rich, vast cultural dance form and weeded through it until it all fit into a small standardized box.

“The logic goes like this: if the nation is one distinct community conceived according to the model of one individual, one body, then isn’t there also one Irish dancing, one unified movement symbol? By implication, shouldn’t there be one set of rules by which Irish dancing is to be adjudicated?”23 It was this mindset that hindered further developments in Irish dance for many years and led to a stagnant period with little exposure to the global arena. “Even with growing numbers and geographical diffusion, it was not a well-known art form. The increasingly specialized costume, not to mention the developing technique, made it more and more the activity of a specialized group of people, unlike Irish music or song that was shared much more widely and informally.”24

It was, in part, the emphasis placed on competition and the standardization necessary for easy adjudication that caused the posture to stiffen. It is easier to judge no movement rather than “natural” movement. Under The Irish Dancing Commission, the posture in Irish step dance became more restricted, rigid and codified. The posture in Irish dancing now consisted of these elements: 1. The torso is held in an upright position, 2. The shoulders are held back, and 3. The arms are held in a relaxed manner, down at the sides. Up to 1920’s it had been completely

24. Frank Hall *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty*, 118.
acceptable to have “natural” relaxed arms or even hands on the hips; Now the posture was held, controlled, and confined.

Dancing for fun was now considered ‘amateur’ and the focus was now placed on the ‘champion’ dancers who achieved that status through “systematic and hierarchical competitions.” This increased emphasis on competition created a decrease in improvisation within the dance form. The dancers were more virtuosic and faster but there was less risk-taking. “The dance form was getting more and more refined, because of elements of the rigidity of its codification, and the necessity to be able to deliver.” With the regulation of competition by the Irish Dancing Commission Irish step dance lost its full body inclusion and all physical activity concentrated to the feet.

Irish dance entered the global arena in 1969 with the establishment of The Irish Dancing World Championship. The Irish Dancing World Championship allowed Irish dancers from Ireland, America, Canada, England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand to compete against each other for the first time. Emigration of the Irish people had already spread Irish dance globally, but The Irish Dancing World Championship allowed competition and performance value to become the focus of Irish dance; technical ability and emphasis on appearance and performance began to overshadow the cultural significance of Irish dance.

Many “traditional” Irish dances have been preserved, but truthfully most of the thousands of regional Irish dances were passed over. These chosen dances have also been altered by

27. The Irish Dancing World Championship (Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne). The term Oireachtas applies to larger and more prestigious competitions.
competition and performance, but do retain some “traditional” characteristics. The names of dances (ex: reel, jig, hornpipe), standard steps (ex: the lead around, the skip step, the seven step, the rising step), “traditional” set dances (ex: The Blackbird, St. Patrick’s Day, Rince Fada, The High Caul Cap), formations (ex: the square formation of both a 4-hand and 8-hand), select “traditional” songs (ex: The Blackbird, St. Patrick’s Day, The Walls of Limerick), and musical structure (ex: the reel is played in 4/4, the slip jig is played in 9/8) have been preserved through competition and standardization. Some of the footwork is probably “traditional” but no one can say for sure, due to poor documentation for centuries.

Modern Irish dance posture, we know is not “traditional.”

Well-known physical, visual and musical aspects are attached to competitive Irish step dance and have become the ‘new standard’ throughout the Irish dance world. The dancer’s torso

28. The lead around always begins 4-hands and 8-hands. The couples create what look like the spoked on a wheel as they travel around in a circular pattern. The lead around makes a full rotation counter-clockwise first in eight counts, then a full rotation clockwise in eight counts.

29. The skip step (skip 23s) is a travelling step consisting of three steps. When teaching this step, I compare it to a chasse. Right side is notated:

   Step R foot forward, bring L foot into front foot, step R foot forward and simultaneously kick L foot up to the glutes.

30. The seven step travels sideways and is half of a grapevine step; the following foot only crosses behind. If travelling to the right, the right foot stays in front; same rule applies for the left side. Front foot is the leading foot, back foot in the following foot. Right side is notated:

   Jump in 5th, step R side, cross L back, step R side, cross L back, step R side, cross L back

31. Rising step is a common step used in the light jig. Up, lift back, lift back 234. This step can be done on both sides. Right side is notated:

   Hop on L and bring R foot up to L knee, hop on L and close R behind, hop on R and close L

   back, shift weight onto R foot in front, shift weight on L foot in back, shift weight forward again.

32. The Blackbird, also known as An Londubh, is a traditional hornpipe solo set dance.

33. St. Patrick’s Day is a traditional treble jig solo set dance.

34. High Caul Cap is a traditional 8-hand reel.

35. A 4-hand and 8-hand refer to how many dancers there are. 4-hand = 4 dancers, 8-hand = 8 dancers. There are also 16-hand figures which involve 16 dancers. In a 4-hand, couples begin two opposite two. In an 8-hand, the four couples create a square; it is easy to see the relationship to American square dancing. In a 16-hand, varying formations occur throughout the dance; the focus is more on artistry and spatial design.

36. Walls of Limerick is a traditional group dance. Couples line up two opposite two repeating down the hall.

37. This list of examples is supplied from previous knowledge of Irish dance and Irish music.
is held upright and their arms are still at their sides while their legs are kicking, twisting, cutting and continually in motion. The dancers perform up on the balls of their feet and rarely come down from that position. Intricate rhythms are created with the legs and feet, both audibly and visually, as Irish dancers fly around a stage. The girls have a head full of curls that bounce as they dance. Their intricate costumes, poodle socks38 and shoes, either ghillies39 or hard-shoes40, complete the visual picture of what a female Irish step dancer “should” look like. Boys wear pants or kilt, a bright colored shirt and sometimes a vest that is adorned with intricate designs.

“Traditional” set dances and group dances are still used in competition but most of the dances are unique steps, choreographed by a certified Irish dance teacher, that are created within the parameters dictated by the Irish Dancing Commission. “Steps are continuously being created, developed, altered or adapted depending on dancers’ skills and actual dance performance contexts, but what does not change within the competitive context is the 8-bar structure of the step (excluding solo set dances).”41 Irish music has driving rhythms and specified time signatures for specific dances. Timing is paramount; that is being on time to the accompanying, metrical, Irish traditional dance music.

38. Poodle socks are tall white socks that have small bumps from the ankle to the top. These bumps were originally there to help hold up the laces of the ghillies. Shoes are no longer tied this way but poodle socks are still used.
39. Ghillies, also known as pumps, are female soft shoes. They are similar to ballet slippers but made of black leather and lace up the instep of the foot. The laces crisscross as they lace up creating a very unique look. The laces used to twist around the ankle and tie up further on the shin/calf, but are now tied by wrapping the laces around the ankle and arch of the foot.
40. Hard-shoes are dance shoes, made of leather, that cover most of the foot. The heel and toe of the shoe are made of fiberglass while the sole is made of flexible leather. Hard shoes are now made with a bulge on the inside of the heel for heel clicking and the toes are flat on the tip, similar to point shoes, to make toe stands easier.
The New ‘Standard Dialect’ of the Irish Dancing Body

Modern ‘traditional’ Irish dance was politically and ideologically legitimated in terms of modern nation-building, whereby the ‘tradition’ of Irish dance was ‘invented’, that is, it became codified, categorized, ‘fixed’, as part of the official modern Irish state project...Modern ‘traditional’ Irish dance, the dance that is popularly taken to be ‘traditional’ Irish dance, is, ironically, an ideological misrecognition. Far from representing the holistic integrity of community underpinning and providing moral anchorage to modern Irish society, ‘traditional’ Irish dance is in fact the aesthetic representation of that particular experience of alienation associated specifically with modern organization. - Donnacha Kavanagh, Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane

After 1922, the State was concerned with building a “pure” and “authentically Irish” national culture. Viewing the body as a metaphor for nation causes one to see Irish society from a fresh perspective; often illuminating and celebratory but also disconcerting. Irish bodies were troubled bodies who were the “unofficial battleground for identity politics” during the “hammering out of a burgeoning nation state,” as seen clearly in the posture.

Honestly, there is no single reason for this posture and carriage, which eliminates the movement in the upper body. But, three major factors impacted the development of Irish dance, its posture, and eventually led to the creation of a new ‘standard dialect’ for the Irish dancing body.

1. The practice of the dancing as physical education – Dancing lessons educate in physical control and the focus is on technique: steps, rhythm, carriage (posture.)

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43. State refers to the Republic of Ireland; a sovereign state in north-western Europe occupying 26 of 32 countries of the island of Ireland.

2. **The processes and requirements of formalized competition** – Adjudicators needed to have clear reasons to choose one dancer over another. Standardization, rules and regulations were created by The Irish Dancing Commission to allow there to be a clear “winner.” It is easier to judge a “straight and still” posture rather than a “loose” posture; “loose” left too much room for interpretation. Imitating a winning dancer contributed to this popular physical trends and regulations. At some point crossed feet became a winning characteristic, same with the rigid torso.

3. **The agenda of nationalism** – assumption that Irish dancing in an *Irish* activity and that “Irishness” is a singular identity. It changed from being an activity done by some Irish people to a symbol of “Irishness” itself. It was mainly because of nationalism, not centuries of oppression, that Irish dance posture became restricted and rigid in the 20th century.

Thanks to the folktales circulating, most of which were created to assist in explaining the origin of Irish dance posture, many have come to believe the restricted and rigid posture Irish dance was a physical reaction to the centuries of oppression from foreign cultures. But, in actuality, the “complete lack of upper-body movement in Irish dance was introduced (or at least made compulsory) only 80 years ago and not two or three centuries ago as the stories would have us believe.”

The practice of pinning the arms to the side of the body and the emergence of stories seeking to explain the unusual carriage both originated in the 1920s. Before the 1920s photographs of Irish dancers show that the arms are not pinned to the sides of the body.

Photographs of dancers in the 1920s show the emergence and spread of this as a usual practice and, after the formation of The Irish Dancing Commission in 1929, all Irish dancing took on the style which has been maintained to this day.

The politics of the Irish dancing body are established in the starting position; a tall, rigid, gathered, and controlled stature with over-crossed legs and feet. “The maintenance of this position and posture underlies all choreographic logic.”46 The frontal view of an Irish dancer is represented by a straight line and possesses no kinesphere.47 This lack of kinesphere and expression can represent the “political agenda of the Gaelic League/Sinn Fein48/IRA49 whose united goal (was) to harness Irish dance to the cause of national reunification.”50

Interestingly, from the front, Irish dance seems to mask itself as not-dance. But, if looking from the side another interesting revelation arises. Extension of the leg front and back create a Pac-Man shape51 which can represent the separation of Ireland when placed over a map of the country, leaving Northern Ireland (County Ulster) from the inclusion of the nationalist movement and the Gaelic league. The frontal and lateral views of the lower body contradict while the posture remains the same all around.

47. Kinesphere – a notion created by Rudolph Laban. A mover’s kinesphere is the spherical space around the body that can be reached, with extended limbs, without shifting weight away from the supporting foot. Rudolph Laban was a dance artist, theorist, and one of the pioneers of modern dance in Europe.
48. Sinn Fein is a left-wing Irish republican political party active in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.
49. IRA (Irish Republican Army) was dedicated to Irish republicanism; the belief that all of Ireland should be an independent republic. The IRA was characterized by the belief that political violence was necessary to achieve that goal.
I cannot bear this regimented [look]. I’m always preaching about being natural and standing to dance as you walk, no strain and no stiffness, you know. And I don’t know where this awful sticking out of the chest and keeping [arms] back – I don’t know where that all came from. I just don’t know. But I’m sorry to say that is the trend as well. That is winning as well. I would go, now, for a good steady dancer with a nice carriage. – dance teacher, Galway

Irish dance posture is a contradiction. The lack of movement in the upper body is attached to a vigorously and aggressively moving lower half. Irish dancers’ posture tends to be referred to as “restricted”, “rigid” or “stiff” while the lower body is the sight of expression, dynamics, rhythm, change, and exuberance. The top half of the Irish dancing body displays a discipline developed through competitions, though it is linked conceptually and historically with the oppression of the Church and the British Army. Meanwhile, the lower half of the body focuses on individual creativity and expression. This physical trend, which developed through pursuing the nationalistic dreams of the State, Gaelic League and Irish Dancing Commission, continued through the 20th century until the premiere of Riverdance in the 1990s. Irish dancing

bodies were stagnant and hindered until a small group of people chose to create a show, based in Irish dance, without ‘permission’ from the ‘governing authorities.’
CHAPTER 3

Reintroducing Foreign Influences: Riverdance and the Globalization of Irish Step Dance

…despite the common public perception that the significance of tradition is an effort toward "preservation," constructivists argue that the reproduction/reenactment of cultural traditions primarily represents the efforts of contemporary cultural actors seeking to establish the fit between the memory of past practices and current practices to gain support for the goals of contemporary interest groups. – Samuel Gilmore¹

Before Riverdance, Irish step dance was known only by those who participated in the dance form and it was otherwise unknown to the global population. After Riverdance’s performance on Eurovision² in 1994 and its New York City premiere in 1996, Irish dance became a global phenomenon. Riverdance was a full-length Irish dance stage piece based on Irish step dancing, with real Irish dancers, traditional musicians, and singers that incorporated creative crossover with foreign cultures. “Beginning by recalling the origin of humanity, the show proceeds by praising Ireland, its land and legends, moves on to depict the distress of emigration and the excitement of urban life in the New World. This is mixed with a crossover journey around the globe. The show ends with a happy homecoming to Ireland.”³

Its aim, as an historical narrative, was to highlight the struggle to create and retain a

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2. Eurovision Song Contest is the longest-running annual international TV song competition.
national identity while also rejecting the governing authorities who established and “control” the “Irish body:”

... *Riverdance* was a symbolic and exuberant rejection of Parochial Ireland: ‘we went back before competitive dancing; we took our cue from when dance was much more celebratory than when it had developed in the 20s and 30s’. Part of the symbolism of *Riverdance*... ‘[was] stripping away the embroidery of the competitive style of dance—both the embroidery of how the dance was approached and the embroidery of how they were dressed—and actually it was stripped way, way down to black, simple. But in another way it was built up in a sort of a much more elaborate theatrical fashion; it was almost like an S-shaped development; we went back to go forward to almost go back again.’ - Moya Doherty – Producer of *Riverdance*[^4]

*Riverdance* utilized many “traditional” aspects of Irish step dance but the creators and participants of *Riverdance* did not have the “permission” of The Irish Dancing Commission. This is interesting because shortly after its premiere, *Riverdance* became the new poster-child for Irish dance around the globe and became the contemporary “Irish identity”. To most of the globe, *Riverdance* is “traditional” Irish step dance and has frequently been mistakenly referred to as “Riverdancing.”

Little did the world’s population know that *Riverdance* was altered from its original “Irish version” to appeal to a larger audience. First physical, visual and rhythmic changes were made to “traditional” Irish step dance. Next, most of the Gaelic was removed from the show. Lastly, many dances from other cultures were added to the show. The concept moved beyond using strictly Irish dance and culture within the show. *Riverdance* was altered so the show would appeal and relate to a wider audience. *Riverdance* commercialized Irish step dance and turned it into a profitable commodity. These physical, visual and musical changes applied to

Riverdance made Irish step dance a recognizable brand and created a new image of what it meant to be Irish.

This new theatrical Irish step dance, displayed in Riverdance, allowed Irish dance to relate to a larger social context within the global perspective. “The Ban” had taken Irish step dance “down a cul de sac that went against the grain of Irish tradition’s tendency to amalgamate foreign influences, which had in turn made it flourish and grow. We had to wait for Riverdance to reverse it out of that blind alleyway in the 1990s, loosening up the stultified form by re-introducing some arm movements, and juxtaposing it with flamenco, American tap and Russian folk dance.”5 Because of Riverdance, Irish step dance expanded beyond the control of institutionalized competitions and found a place in the world of commercial theater. It still represented “Irishness” but the value shifted due to the new context.

The success of Riverdance was determined by economic, temporal, and dance and music structures already in place. However, it was the particular combination of dance, music, lighting, costume, and technology on a "big stage," presented in a Western theatrical manner, that enabled Irish dance to become acceptable to popular audiences. All of these aspects of Irish dance stage shows contributed to what is currently a global homogenization of the representation of Irish step dance. – Catherine E. Foley6

Riverdance put a contemporary twist on a previously strictly “traditional” cultural dance form by utilizing traditional behaviors and adding new components to the performance. The most noticeable added component was the addition of arm movements which created a “modernized” technical version of Irish step dance. This in turn gave Irish step dance a more relaxed appearance when compared to the standard “stiff” upper body in the competitive form. The

addition of arm movements also provided Irish dance with similarities to well established concert
dance, something the global dance viewing audience could relate to and understand.

Changing times and contexts in which Irish dance must function has required the dance
form to keep a constant interaction between the past and present. The incorporation of arm
movements allowed the global population to view Irish dance through a new lens. “It certainly
conjures up the image of Irish bodies on the move, conquering the world. Together with Irish
competitive dancers and dance theatre dancers, they all seem to be moving away even from the
problematic state of postcolonialism.”

With the amount of change and outside influence that occurred since the creation of Irish
dance, it would be nearly impossible for a dance form to stay true to its “cultural” or “traditional”
form. With the sudden increase in popularity, the emergence of new dances and trends, and the
globalization of the dance form, it was practically impossible for Irish dance to stay completely
true to its “traditional” form. Following globalization, Irish dance was mainly considered a
competition and performative dance form attached to the traditional behaviors of its social and
cultural predecessors. The classic Irish inferiority complex exited as the nation reconfigured
itself in movement; the Irish “tradition” was changing again.

The Irish Dancing Commission has continually worked to preserve “traditional” Irish
step dance while, maybe, Riverdance was striving for a similar outcome by re-imagining, re-
inventing and broadening the dance form. Perhaps neither method is “correct” on its own; it’s the
combination of the two approaches that have assisted Irish dance, in all its forms and functions,
to expand its “tradition.” Riverdance is far from a cultural renaissance organization

7. Helena Wulff, “Memories in Motion: The Irish Dancing Body,” Body & Society 11, no. 4
but “may in fact be an Irish wake—exuberant, but as a defense against death.”

“Tradition” is not fixed or unchanged, it is re-imagined, re-invented and expands through the years. “…living tradition is a negotiated order, involving an interrupted conception of the past and the negotiated social reenactment of the present.” There is a sense of historical importance in knowing where the dance form originated, but the large amount of alterations and foreign influences woven into the contemporary version should also be recognized; especially in Irish step dance. “They are not constants; they are not pure and homogenous forms. They have gradually assimilated related forms and styles that satisfy the needs of individual performers or meet socio-cultural and political aims.”

Riverdance = Hybridity

Identity is rarely straightforward and given, but rather a matter of negotiation and exchange. – Declan Kiberd

Very specific decisions and changes were made which allowed the Riverdance to be seen as valid, on its own, on an artistic level. Riverdance, which utilized vital aspects of “traditional” Irish step dance as its foundation, altered the dance form by adding new elements from a variety of sources.

Michael Flatley\textsuperscript{12}, Jean Butler\textsuperscript{13}, Colin Dunne\textsuperscript{14} and other members of the production team were “…instrumental in the media’s recognition of Irish dancing, the dance itself has made the world-wide impression.”\textsuperscript{15} The highly developed technique that has been established in competitive Irish step dance over a century burst onto the scene in \textit{Riverdance}. The corps\textsuperscript{16} movement vocabulary had very few differences from competitive Irish step dance and therefore were a symbol of the older national social dance form. The solo performers on the other hand had a different aesthetic to their movement and were the theatrical link to the larger transnational context.\textsuperscript{17}

Michael Flatley’s choreographed arms are well known to a majority of the global population: they have been copied, imitated and spoofed countless times since the premiere of \textit{Riverdance} in 1996. There may be some who have trouble taking him seriously but Flatley should be given credit where credit is deserved. Michael Flatley not only made Irish dance relatable to the general population but now, thanks to him, Irish dance in unforgettable. \textit{Riverdance} altered Irish step dance for increased entertainment value and popularity and now Irish dance is more popular than ever.

The solo performers’ steps were very similar to the corps but their style and look were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Michael Flatley is an American dancer, choreographer, and musician. He became internationally known for Irish dance shows \textit{Riverdance}, \textit{Lord of the Dance}, \textit{Feet of Flames}, and \textit{Celtic Tiger}.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Jean Butler originated the female leading role in \textit{Riverdance}.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Colin Dunne replaced Michael Flatley as the male leading role in \textit{Riverdance}.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Frank Hall, \textit{Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty} (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2008), 122.
\item \textsuperscript{16} The corps is a group of dancers who are not soloists. They are a permanent part of the company but often work as a backdrop for the principal dancers.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Frank Hall, \textit{Competitive Irish Dance}, 126. Frank Hall used the term ‘transnational’ “to approach the developing relations of significance when a “national symbol” is used to make claims to supranational or extranational identities. It is nothing new. In some ways, the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day by many ethnicities and nationalities in America is a good example. \textit{Riverdance} is the example \textit{par excellence} of this phenomenon. Especially because the dancing which it featured came from a narrow and exclusionary setting.
\end{itemize}
transformed. *Riverdance* incorporated dramatic horizontal movement (associated with non-Irish dance) with the classical vertical movements of Irish dance.\(^{18}\) This fusion of dance forms and styles created the unique ‘look’ of *Riverdance* and assisted in strengthening the theatrical link to the larger transnational context.

*Riverdance* introduced star performers, with the chorus line masked in the background, reminiscent of MGM musicals. (The dancers)...performed Irish step-dance motifs from, or influenced by, competition culture, they also employed movements from other vocabularies, such as stylized Western balletic or theatrical walks, hands on hips movements, and eye and hand contact made in a theatrical way. The Irish step dancers were suddenly required to move in a theatrical manner previously not expected of them. – Catherine E. Foley\(^{19}\)

The creators of *Riverdance* relied on the established “tradition” to provide the foundation for their show. *Riverdance* was greatly influenced by competitive Irish step dance while competitive Irish dance remained mostly unaltered or effected. *Riverdance*, and the other Irish step-dance stage shows, relied on The Gaelic League and Irish Dancing Commission to supply well-trained dancers, while in turn these organizations benefited from the global promotion of Irish step dance.

The production team relied “absolutely on a disciplined corps of uniformly precise specialized dancers, trained in the modern Irish tradition, by schools and dancing masters, whether in Ireland or in Irish diaspora\(^{20}\) communities in English and American cities; *Riverdance* consists of professional dancers put through their paces since childhood in hierarchically organized and officially adjudicated competitions; Riverdancers’ bodies appear liberated,


\(^{20}\) Irish diaspora refers to Irish people and their descendants who live outside Ireland.
eroticized, but these are disciplined bodies, subjectified, transformed, improved and put to work as surely as the bodies of the patient, the prisoner or the proletariat forensically described by Foucault. Riverdancers are workdancers, cut from a pattern, rigorously quality controlled.”  

Part of the symbolism of Riverdance was stripping away certain established regulations of the competitive style of the dance form to offer a new arena in which the dancing could be seen, recognized, and evaluated. Riverdance’s growth in popularity and recognition resulted in the creation of a new global perspective for Irish step dance and in turn also created another function for Irish dance; it was now a cultural, social, competitive, performative and theatrical dance form.

Riverdance altered more than just the physical aspects of Irish step dance; it also introduced an alternative dress-code for Irish dancers. The competitive dance dress code fought to hide and de-sexualize “the body in a way that was consistent with the repressive, puritanical and patriarchal Catholic ethos of the time.”  

Riverdance seemed to have a more liberated approach to the body. The production team chose body-hugging materials, short skirts, bright colors, tight shirts and shimmering fabrics to subtly sexualize the performers’ bodies and attract the audiences’ gaze.

Riverdance altered more than just the physical and visual aspects of Irish step dance; it produced Irish music like no one had ever heard before. Irish dance, like Jazz dance, would not exist without its incredibly close relationship to music. Irish music and dance, along with song, are the trinity of indigenous art forms of Ireland. The relationship between Irish music and dance

is part of Ireland’s national identity. So, how did *Riverdance* honor this established relationship?

Bill Whelan’s compositions were a major factor in the success of Irish step dance’s new theatrical function within the global perspective. The hybrid nature of the dancing in *Riverdance*, which had never been attempted publicly before, is equally apparent in the music. “It is more accurate to acknowledge that Whelan, in his compositions, constructs a music that reflects the fluidity, diversity, and hybridity of the modern tradition…In its centering of hybridity, *Riverdance* both constructs and reflects an image of Irish culture that is postmodern in texture, embracing the ancient and the modern, the local and the global.”

Bill Whelan successfully encompassed both the familiar and exotic in such a way that “tradition” was embraced, broken apart and reconstructed in new ways. His compositions for *Riverdance* were strongly influenced by Balkan time signatures and rhythms, particularly Bulgarian, and applied the use of unfamiliar instruments, such as electric guitar, banjo and castanets, to “traditional” Irish music. Bill Whelan “broke from the usual eight-bar, regular structure of Irish traditional dance music and choreographed foot motifs to adapt to the new musical phrasing.”

Rock music also influenced Bill Whelan’s compositions. “For example, the *Riverdance* orchestra appeared onstage at all times, so that the audience could see the inter-play between the musicians and dancers. Often individual musicians took center stage and performed

23. Bill Whelan composed *Riverdance*.
25. “Balkan music uses a variety of rhythms and time-signatures. Many of them are already part of the global music treasury, some of them may be considered unique (the Tsamiko rhythm, the 11/8 time-signature, etc). The uneven time-signatures are ingrained into the soul of Balkan musicians so deeply, so that a 7/8 based rhythm in Macedonia is called the 'straight' rhythm (напор).” http://balkan.musicvm.com/rhythms-and-time-signatures
with rocklike gyrations, not typical of the traditional Irish musician. Also, in "Trading Taps"…Whelan blended American swing for the tapping with Irish music for the step-dance routine."  

With its hybridity, originality and popularity it’s no wonder that “…Riverdance has stimulated more commentary…than any other Irish musical artwork to date.” It would be more accurate to label Riverdance as world music and not just Irish music; not only because of its hybridity but also because of Whelan’s ability to pull bits out of the Irish tradition and apply them in such a way that when you listen to it, it seems to be anything more than a nod towards it. Whelan consciously composed this way rather than letting the Irish tradition lead and then trying to tuck the rest in behind it.

Hybridity was a theme of Riverdance; residing in every aspect of the show. This stage show’s appeal is its hybridity; “…the way it includes representations of disparate cultural dance forms, such as tap dance, flamenco dance, and Russian folk ballet, along with Irish step dance.”

In ‘Firedance’ Spanish guitar provides the accompaniment for a solo flamenco dancer. Here, castanets take the place of the traditional bodhrán drum in providing percussive rhythm for the dancer. Irish reels merge with more traditional flamenco music to create a hybrid of the two cultures. ‘Morning in Macedonia’ presents Eastern European folk dance and incorporates aspects of Russian ballet. In one of the most famous scenes, ‘Trading Taps’, Irish step dancers battle against African-American tap dancers as both attempt to prove the supremacy of one form over the other.

The Big Question…

With all of these alterations that were made to Irish art forms in *Riverdance*, should the show, as a whole, be viewed separately from Ireland or as a national symbol of Ireland? Should the global population use *Riverdance* as a gauge as to what “authentic” Irish step dance is, rather than labeling it as a contemporary spin on “traditional” art form? “…*Riverdance* contains moments that are potentially transgressive and creative, generative of potentials for further cultural and economic development. Like dance forms before it, *Riverdance* challenges dominant accounts of ‘Irishness’…but it also opens up for debate our understandings of work and organization and the relationship between economy and culture.”^{32}

*Riverdance* has come to be the aesthetic representation of Ireland’s globalization due to the show’s global success paralleling Ireland’s successful globalization. *Riverdance* challenged “dominant accounts of “Irishness””^{33} by utilizing elements of the established Irish tradition and consciously pushed the modernization of the dance form. Is it right for a show, which challenges so many established aspects of “Irishness,” to be labeled as a cultural signifier? Is *Riverdance* an actual representation of “Irishness” or just considered to be through globalization and product promotion?

Even though *Riverdance* displayed a “false” image of Irish step dance, it was still a way to have Irish dance recognized in a larger social context. *Riverdance* altered “traditional” Irish step dance for increased entertainment value and popularity but, thanks to *Riverdance*, Irish

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dance is more popular than ever. The dance form has changed and has not only survived, it has thrived. Riverdance, through supplying a “false” image, was able to gain global recognition of Irish step dance while honoring the “tradition” attached to it. “Riverdance started the unravelling of this tightly wound form, began reversing it out of the cul de sac it had driven itself into, and celebrated the result on a world platform.”34 Perhaps it is time to view Irish dance as a multi-faceted dance form that can function in many ways.

A Troubled Relationship: Tradition and Innovation, Spectacle and Commodity

Postmodernism, as a belief in the creative potential of cultural hybridity accompanying economic globalization, seems to promise rejuvenation. The critical and commercial success of Riverdance is that it seemed to promise and to herald precisely such rejuvenation. But how post-modern is Riverdance? – Donnacha Kavanagh, Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane35

The Riverdance creative team pushed the boundaries of tradition and postmodernity, which in turn caused people to ponder and debate deeper questions of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. But, while it has the appearance of postmodern hybridity and inter-cultural improvisation, it continues to rest on restricted cultural foundations.

Riverdance is arguably the greatest influence on Irish dance after the 1990s. Some would argue it has led to extreme and misplaced alterations and changes within the competition dance form; “…many in the audience and among the adjudicators remarked that the costumes were

moving too far away from “tradition” and too close to “Broadway” or “spectacle.” The commercial spectacle and success of Riverdance was instrumental in redefining the parameters of physical performance and personal presentation.

Redefining Irish dance was necessary at the time of Riverdance’s creation and debut, but now Irish dance has moved beyond the established “tradition” of Riverdance and is focusing on questionable aspects of the dance form. When a judge makes a final decision on scoring based on costuming and presentation, and every “fusion” Irish dance troupe looks strangely similar to each other, perhaps it’s time to rethink and reimagine the direction of Irish dance. “Like many nations with a colonial past, the Irish still feel the weight of this history and regularly question their identity in a globalized and homogenizing world.” Ireland has been consumed with being “Irish” for so long, but what is “Irish?” Luckily there are imaginative and dedicated Irish dancers willing to investigate and explore the varied entirety of the “Irish tradition.”

Riverdance was exactly what Irish dance needed by the end of the 20th century. It globalized Irish dance, increased its popularity, and most importantly showed that the dance form could evolve. Riverdance led the world into the 90’s Irish dance revolution when it took Irish dance out of the nationalistic cul de sac it had been stuck in for nearly a century. Riverdance “changed the symbolic nature of Irish dancing by changing the context in which it is seen, viewed, recognized, and evaluated.”

38. Frank Hall, Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2008), 127.
Thanks to *Riverdance*, Irish dancers now had the opportunity to perform longer. They were no longer labeled as strictly Irish step dancers but also professional dancers who worked within a theatrical context. “…the opportunities for Irish dancers after and beyond competition have mushroomed.”  

*Riverdance* created a demand for Irish dancers; while other dance companies were having trouble funding a single tour, *Riverdance* had multiple troupes touring the globe with ease. “*Riverdance*…had a tremendous effect on the place of Irish dancing in the larger social context” and opened a vast world of performance, creation and experimentation for the trained dancer.  

*Riverdance* pushed the boundaries of Irish dance but is certainly not the be all, end all. Many people associate the image of *Riverdance* with Irish dance; in fact, many call Irish dance, “Riverdancing.” But, while *Riverdance* achieved what was intended, that is a very small aspect of Irish dances’ creative potential. Groups and individuals have been experimenting with blending Irish dancing with other genres ever since *Riverdance* developed an audience for them. This new theatrical form of Irish dance, presented in *Riverdance*, became the new national representation and allowed Irish dance to obtain universal significance. The popularity of *Riverdance*, in Ireland and abroad, “…prompted critical reflection on notions of cultural authenticity, ethnicity, and identity.”

40. Ibid., 119.
CHAPTER 4

Re-imagining “Irishness”

Creativity is an act of defiance. You’re challenging the status quo. You’re questioning accepted truths and principles. You’re asking three universal questions that mock conventional wisdom: “Why do I have to obey the rules?” “Why can’t I be different?” “Why can’t I do it my way?” – Twyla Tharp

In post-*Riverdance* times, the big questions became: Now what? How can Irish dance be presented on stage in alternative ways? What impact can it have now? *Riverdance* was invaluable to the development of Irish dance, but the dance form quickly became stagnant again. *Riverdance* exhibited virtuosity and form, loosened the carriage up a little bit, and even added a bit of personality, but these changes were not reactionary impulses and cravings; they were decorative and choreographed movements. What would Irish dance look like if the entire body were engaged in the movement?

The popular contemporary competition aesthetic is very displaced from art and culture. Maybe it’s time to turn Irish dance upside down in hopes of revealing something new about the dance form. By embracing contemporary dances’ inherent tradition of asking questions, dissecting, discussing, exploring, and re-inventing, Irish dance could find its own voice again and find a healthy path for the dance form to continue.

Those who are used to seeing dance forms such as ballet and ballroom, and television

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2. Popular contemporary competitive aesthetic refers to the codified and rigid carriage enforced in present times.
shows such as So You Think You Can Dance\textsuperscript{3}, may view Irish dance as strange and unappealing. But, those who are used to viewing dance theoretically have a different reaction to the Irish dance; they are intrigued and crave to know the reasoning behind this unique dance form.

**Irish-Contemporary**

**Jean Butler**

Jean Butler is best known for originating the principle female role in *Riverdance*. She is a striking figure on stage: nearing six feet tall with lengthy limbs, red hair, gliding effortlessly around the stage. In her early dance career Butler was a champion Irish dancer and toured internationally with The Chieftans.\textsuperscript{4} After *Riverdance* she seemed to cling to her previous life, not quite knowing what to do next. Following completion of her Masters in Contemporary Dance Performance, from the University of Limerick, Butler’s choreographic and creative interests became well-defined.

She wanted to “remind (herself) what Irish dancing was before (her) experience with *Riverdance*…(She) wanted to have a look at “the dance” itself.”\textsuperscript{5} She had no interest in cross-fertilizing Irish dance and contemporary dance but rather what happened to Irish dance when you take away two crucial compositional structures: “step-arrangement and its musical counterpart.”\textsuperscript{6} Butler was curious what happens when you explore a concept and create a piece that is not meant to “entertain.” In Butler’s opinion approaching Irish dance kinesthetically will open endless

\begin{itemize}
\item[3.] So You Think You Can Dance is an American televised dance competition show that airs on Fox in the United States.
\item[4.] The Chieftans are a traditional Irish band from Dublin. They are accredited with assisting in popularizing Irish music around the world.
\end{itemize}
possibilities.

Butler’s recent choreography seems to be haunted by the question: What does it mean to be an Irish dancer? While investigating this question she tries “…hard not to be pigeonholed, without being unrooted.”7 Butler’s creations initiate from her Irish dancing foundation but are presented in a contemporary context; she is working between different worlds and searching for a way they can coexist in the creative process.

In her recent piece, “This Is an Irish Dance,” Butler reached a new stage in her self-discovery. While creating this piece she was driven by two questions: “what constitutes Irish dancing in a global context? Why isn’t this an Irish dance?”8 Butler is determined and passionate about reminding people that Irish dance can be something else; it does not need to be so narrowly defined.

Colin Dunne

Colin Dunne became Jean Butler’s male counterpart in Riverdance. He, like Butler, was a champion Irish dancer while growing up and toured with The Chieftans. Dunne was originally invited to choreograph and perform in the Riverdance number “Trading Taps”9, but took over as male lead after Michael Flatley’s departure from the show. He continued to work in the field of

9. “Trading Taps” is a dance number in Riverdance that combines Irish dance and tap, Irish music and Jazz. Original Choreography: Colin Dunne, Tarik Winston “The wealth of the poor is in song, dance and story. Under the street-lamps in the new cities the dancers perform with pride in their heritage, curious to see what other traditions bring, struggling to bridge the gap between old dreams and new realities.” http://riverdance.com/the-show/scenes/trading-taps/
Irish dance, following his own departure from *Riverdance* but continued to question the past, present, and future of the dance form. Dunne’s interest to explore, create, and push the boundaries of Irish dance lead him to pursue in MA in Contemporary Dance Performance at the University of Limerick.

While reflecting on his earlier dance days in *Riverdance*, Dunne voiced some concerns about growing up and training as an Irish dancer. He felt that as an Irish dancer he had “little notion of proper training, injury prevention, body awareness” and other “aspects taken-for-granted by other Western theatrical dancers.”

It was this awareness that motivated Colin Dunne, and other step dancers, to develop Irish step dance further as a theatrical dance form and to acknowledge the whole dancing body, as opposed to what Dunne considered Irish step dance to be at the time: “a dance form from the waist down” - Colin Dunne

Colin Dunne wanted to explore ways of expanding his abilities as a dancer “…by acquiring different knowledge, dance vocabulary and tools through other types of movement classes.” He wanted to construct his own way of moving that would allow him to express something, through his body, about himself. By negotiating the aesthetic boundaries within Irish competitive step dance, Dunne’s process of creating, in terms of space, music, body, and rhythm, changed a great deal.

12. Ibid., 60.
Introduction to Academia

“Dance, along with music and song, is one of the trinity of the indigenous performing arts in Ireland…yet it was conspicuously under-represented…”\(^1\) Up until the 1980s, dance in Ireland existed as an important activity which already acquired multiple functions over time: socialization, entertainment, competition, performance, tourism, ceremonial occasions, and more. “It was not, however, researched and examined on a par with other fields of study within the social sciences.”\(^2\) Even with its more recent inclusion into academia, Irish dance is still rarely addressed in the literature on Irish studies. It is important to recognize that dance, as an art form, has been neglected.

Thanks to the creative endeavors of movers, like Colin Dunne and Jean Butler, Irish dancers can be taken seriously in the theatrical performance world. They have stressed that Irish dance is developing, growing, and has a great deal of creative potential. Irish dance has become “a living work-in-progress, with a world-wide audience.”\(^3\) The need to improve, promote, and develop the dance form is still extremely prevalent in contemporary times; one wise way is by situating it into an academic context.

Traditional\(^4\) dancers are unaware what contemporary\(^5\) dancers are up to, and it’s the same the other way. With the establishment of Ireland’s first ever MA in Dance Performance, at the University of Limerick, Irish dance is now being endorsed in academia. Contemporary and traditional dancers are now able meet and share their methods, processes, and theories in the

\(^2\) Catherine E. Foley, “Ethnochoreology as a Mediating Perspective in Irish Dance Studies,” 143.
\(^4\) Traditional referring to traditional Irish dancers.
\(^5\) Contemporary referring to contemporary/modern dancers.
laboratory atmosphere being upheld at the University of Limerick. This recent exchange between contemporary and traditional movers is timely and extremely important for the expansion and advancement of Irish dance. It will take many invested movers, blurring the line between dance forms, to uncover the full choreographic potential and uphold the global importance of Irish dance.

Master of Fine Arts Thesis: Creative Portion

There is also an immediate reaction to someone whose spine is overly rigid and locked into the vertical. Such a person may be perceived as ‘uptight’ or ‘inflexible’. – Peggy Hackney

My research focused on how Irish dance can not only exist but thrive within a contemporary context. Irish dance is still at such a beginning and I aim to uncover its creative potential through physical exploration and choreographic innovation. Personal interest and extensive experience within the traditional and competitive worlds of Irish dance sparked a curiosity as to what else the dance form has to offer creatively. My aim is to create a new set of relations through which Irish dancing can be seen and recognized by challenging some defining limitations of the form.

Through physical research my dancers and I worked towards unearthing the unique choreographic potential of Irish dance. We investigated traditional Irish dance roots while simultaneously working to expand the Irish “tradition” through fusion and collaboration. While retaining specific characteristics that seem vital to the preservation of the “traditional” dance

18. Performed at DANCE/Hartwell, The College at Brockport (SUNY), March 31 & April 1 & 2.
form we also manipulated and erased other aspects to expose the vast choreographic possibilities of Irish dance.

**The Process**

The thesis process began with me teaching my dancers “traditional” Irish dance. To make the choreographic process a collaborative experience my dancers needed to know Irish dance before they could alter it. They had to embody it, learn the historical background and significance, and also the terminology attached to the dance form. My dancer’s extensive body knowledge and understanding of multiple dance forms, specifically modern, and perceptual abilities assisted in their success in comprehending and performing advanced Irish dance steps and movements. Because my thesis dancers were experienced movers they processed information much faster to execute the correct outcome.

Through conversation my dancers and I solidified what elements of Irish dance seem vital to the dance form: the posture, complex footwork, the unbreakable relationship to the music, the undeniable driving energy, jumping, remaining on the balls of the feet, the emphasis placed on community, the visual rhythms, and the intricate spatial designs. These elements continued to be considered through the creative process but, while all of these crucial elements remained in the choreography, not all remained un-altered.

It then came time for me to decide what *I* was interested in changing. After receiving some feedback early in the process, I decided my choreographic research would focus on the posture of Irish dancing. Irish dance posture is unique; so, what happens when it is manipulated? I was positive that by altering the posture by changing the function of the spine, utilizing the
entire length of the head-tail connection\(^{20}\), and exploring all variations possible, I could produce a multitude of possibilities.

My choreographic endeavor was to alter the relationship of head-tail to create new functions for the spine within Irish dance. This required a weaving of dance forms, Irish and modern, which raised many questions on how this fusion could be accomplished:

Why is Irish dance posture the way it is? Does the posture in Irish dance embody “Irishness”? How can head-tail movement be incorporated into Irish dance? Does the incorporation of head-tail alter the alignment and footwork? How so? Does this new variation of Irish dance still embody “Irishness”? What other choreographic tools can assist in showcasing the alterations to “traditional” Irish dance? Does Irish dance have to stay “traditional” to stay connected to the Irish culture or can it progress with the changing times to stay relevant in contemporary culture? How much is too much?

To assist in answering some of those questions we had to start exploring the possibilities. Each dancer investigated how to incorporate head-tail movement into Irish dance. We expanded and diversified their investigations through observations and discussion. We were in our own little world experimenting with different ways of approaching Irish dance. Each dancer’s head-tail investigations were wonderfully unique and have been incorporated into the final creative work.

\[^{20}\text{Head-Tail Connectivity (Spinal); one of seven Bartenieff Patterns of Total Body Connectivity. Head-Tail Connectivity energizes our spinal connections, helps bring a sense of playfulness, liveliness, and integrity, and assists in defining an individual and their relationship to gravity. Spinal movement allows an exploration of new possibilities. Irmgard Bartenieff was a theorist, dancer, choreographer, physical therapist, and a leading pioneer of dance therapy.}\]

The Music

…the link between cultural traditions and personal identity was often naturalized in the language that people used. A number of people expressed their connection with traditional music and dance using metaphors related to the body. This finds accord with popular descriptions of Irish music as the ‘heartbeat’ or ‘pulse’ of Ireland. – Marion Leonard21

Choosing the sound score for my thesis took over a year. If this music was to support only Irish dance, it would have been easier; but I was mixing dance genres. My sound score choice would be crucial to the success of my fusion endeavor. The music and dance needed to uphold my support of the established Irish identity and work cohesively towards my expansion of the Irish “tradition.” Collectively, the movement and sound score articulate a connection to the Irish heritage, and imagined ‘home’, while simultaneously working towards expanding the dance form’s future.

I listened to anything and everything until I decided on four songs: "Urchill A'chreagain”22, "The Green Hills of Tyrol”23, "La Turlutte du Rotoculteur”24, and "Rocky Road to Dublin”25. Each song was chosen for very specific reasons and worked cohesively with the movement to portray the unraveling from “traditional” to “untraditional”.

23. "The Green Hills of Tyrol” – one of the best known, and oldest tunes played by pipe bands today. It was originally from the opera “Willem Tell” by Rossini. It was transcribed to the pipes by John MacLeod in 1854. It is a tradition al Irish tune. This recording was arranged and performed by Eileen Ivers. It appeared in the PBS show Absolutely Irish.
24. "La Turlutte du Rotoculteur” – composed and performed by De Temps Antan. It appeared on their 2010 album, Les habits de papier, produced by L-Abe.
I chose "Urchill A'chreagain", composed and performed by Cillian Vallely\textsuperscript{26} and Kevin Crawford\textsuperscript{27}, as my opening song for a few reasons. First, the instrument highlighted in this song is the uilleann pipes\textsuperscript{28}, a strictly Irish instrument. The uilleann pipes produce a very unique sound which makes me think of nothing but Ireland. Next, I chose this song because of how it began; slowly. Not only did the slow and sustained notes create an instant visual of how the piece would begin but they also lent towards slow and controlled movements, which is unheard of in Irish dance. Lastly, "Urchill A'chreagain" increases in tempo, approximately half way through the song, which allowed the opening section of my piece to showcase fast-paced “traditional” Irish movement.

The next section was a solo, performed by me. This section introduced the concept of Head-Tail Connectivity into Irish dance. For my solo, I chose "The Green Hills of Tyrol"; a traditional tune, arranged and performed by Eileen Ivers\textsuperscript{29}. This song is hauntingly beautiful with the melody rising and falling, creating an image of Ireland’s green landscape in one’s mind. Eileen Ivers’ arrangement did not, however, have a steady meter\textsuperscript{30}, which is unusual for a Celtic tune. This traditional tune, with a single alteration, mirrored my solo; traditional, with a simple alteration.

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\textsuperscript{26} Cillian Vallely is the uilleann pipes and low whistle player with the renowned Irish band Lunasa.
\textsuperscript{27} Kevin Crawford is an English flute, tin whistle, Low whistle and bodhrán player in the renowned Irish band Lunasa.
\textsuperscript{28} Uilleann pipes are the national bagpipe of Ireland.
\textsuperscript{29} Eileen Ivers is an American fiddler who has respectfully explored the traditions and progression of the Celtic fiddle.
\textsuperscript{30} “Meter is a recurring pattern of stresses or accents that provide the pulse or beat of music. Meter is notated at the beginning of a composition with a time signature. Time signatures are always notated with two numbers, one on top of the other, much like a fraction in math. The top number denotes the number of beats in each measure. The bottom number denotes the note value that receives the beat. The note values that can receive beats include double whole note, whole note (1), half note (2), quarter note (4), eighth note (8), sixteenth note (16), thirty-second note (32), sixty-fourth note (64), and one hundred and twenty-eighth note (128).” https://dictionary.onmusic.org/appendix/topics/meters.
Now that the concept of Head-Tail Connectivity had been introduced we could move on to showcasing our head-tail investigations; the third section of my thesis did just that. This section was the farthest from “traditional” as it demonstrated the boundaries we pushed to the limits during the choreographic process. I needed a song that had a strong Celtic influence but also worked well with the unique and “untraditional” movements my dancers had created.

“La Turlutte du Rotoculteur”, Composed and performed by De Temps Antan, was the perfect choice. De Temps Antan is a French-Canadian band.

This may seem strange, considering my thesis is based in Irish dance, but this song choice was quite perfect. Millions of Irish people immigrated to North America, many of whom, settled in Canada. Over centuries of cultural exchange, Irish culture influenced many aspects of the French-Canadian culture; especially the music. "La Turlutte du Rotoculteur” demonstrated a fusion of musical genres while my thesis showcased a blending of dance genres. The quick tempo and high energy of the song energized my dancers and the audience; preparing both for the big finale.

The final song of my thesis was a well-known traditional Irish song, “Rocky Road to Dublin”: a traditional Celtic tune, lyrics by D.K. Gavin, arranged by David Downes, and performed by The High Kings. I wanted to end my thesis with a very well-known traditional song, that would pull the audience in. The last section of my thesis unveiled what we wanted to present as our new “style” of Irish dance; our expansion of the Irish “tradition”. “Rocky Road to

31. Since 2003, De Temps Antan, has been exploring and performing sim honord melodies from the stomping grounds of Quebec’s musical past. Using fiddle, accordion, harmonica, guitar, bouzouki and a number of other instruments. http://detempsantan.qc.ca/en/biographie/.
32. I was unable to find historical information on D.K. Gavin.
33. David Downes is a composer, pianist, producer, and musical director. He is best known for being the co-founder and musical director of the all-female Irish group Celtic Woman.
34. The High Kings is an Irish folk group formed in Dublin in 2008. Band members: Finbarr Clancy, Brian Dunphy, Martin Furey and Darren Holden.
Dublin” is written in 9/8\textsuperscript{35}, which is the normal time signature of a slip jig. The slip jig, known as the ballet of Irish dance, is a graceful and slow dance performed by women. “Rocky Road to Dublin” increases the tempo, offering a variation on the well-known slip jig, and builds towards an ending that holds the listener in suspense. The ending of the song, combined with choreographed organized chaos\textsuperscript{36}, offered an explosive and gratifying end to my thesis.

**The Performance**

Overall, I loved the performance! It captivated my attention throughout the whole piece… the subtle addition of contemporary, I found, to be delightful, creative, and innovative. I felt the performance to be exciting and new and I just loved it! - Debbie Rose-Walter\textsuperscript{37}

The final creative work was a fusion of Irish dance and modern dance, with a focus on the Head-Tail Connectivity. Fusion in dance, to me, is an exploration of how multiple dance forms can be combined to create new ways of moving. Not every moment in a fusion piece must be a complete fusion; an equal percentage of each is not needed in every movement. I think it is important for both dance forms to stand alone as well as part of the fusion. I am not trying to create a new dance form but rather investigating and expanding the creative possibilities of the “original forms.”

Fusion will create an abundance of choreographic possibilities but, in the larger social context, it will also establish artistic ties between the Irish and other cultures. Irish dance has seen developments, explorations and investigations over recent years by Jean Butler and Colin.

\textsuperscript{35} 9/8 time signature – compound triple. Time signature of a slip jig in Irish dance.

\textsuperscript{36} Organized chaos is the term I use to describe a choreographic moment when it seems, from the audience’s perspective, somewhat chaotic and possibly improvised but it reality has been rehearsed and consists of set material.

\textsuperscript{37} Debbie Rose-Walter is the mother of one of my thesis dancers. This was her response to my thesis work. The quotation was taken from an email sent to me following the performance of my thesis.
My choreographic design was to show a gradual unraveling of “traditional” Irish dance; from its more “stiff” and “strict” form to the new form that utilizes Head-Tail Connectivity. This unraveling reflects the learning process my thesis dancers went through. I aim to provide a similar understanding of this unraveling, from “traditional” to “untraditional”, for the audience. The audience needs to know what Irish dance looks like before they can comprehend how it has been altered.

To those who grew up surrounded by Irish culture, it seems “unnatural” to listen to Irish music without wanting to get up and move. There is a “natural” response to the music; a craving to react physically. Yet, in Western concert dance, the only expected audience response is polite applause following the conclusion of a piece. This presented a challenge for me as a choreographer: How do I present Irish dance, in a concert dance setting, and still receive the “natural”, and expected, reaction to the dance form and its music?

My first step to achieving this was to have the dancers clearly show their enjoyment while performing the piece. Passionate Irish dancers tend to have an infectious unique spirit. If the dancers were having fun while performing then the audience would be encouraged to enjoy it as well; and possibly demonstrate their enjoyment in an audible or physical way. Second, I stimulated a level of inclusion by diminishing the fourth wall. I wanted to dissolve the barrier between performers and audience members. I encouraged eye contact between dancers and also between dancers and audience members. Of course, this was a first attempt at how to receive the “natural”, and expected, reaction to the Irish dance and its music. Like any first attempts, and many attempts after that, there are varying degrees of “success.”

My dancers and I were able to get some audience members to clap along with music during the performance, and I could see a lot of smiling faces, but that was the extent of our
success with this aspect of the performance. We did, however, receive incredible applause and cheering after the piece finished!

We both thoroughly enjoyed your Irish dancing thesis work! For both of us it was a highlight of the evening performance. The music was bright, energetic and melodic which made it very enjoyable to listen to. The dancing was also fun to watch as it combined traditional Irish dancing with other movements. It looked like the dancers were having fun, which made it impossible not to smile and really enjoy watching the dance. - Gregg and Jean Norris

**Final Reflection and Conclusions**

It was so good! It was classic & interesting, it was energetic & mesmerizing, it was past, present, & future. It was delicately feminine & strong as a lioness!!!!

- *Rosanne Chesbro*  

The choreographic portion of my thesis successfully combined the footwork and other aspects of Irish dance with contemporary arm and body movements. “Traditional” Irish dance was effectively united with ‘foreign dance.’ We tested and stretched the limits and possibilities of Irish dance by adding the complex concept of Head-Tail Connectivity into the mix. This is just a start; Irish dance has a tremendous scope as an art form that has yet to be explored properly.

Every contemporary movement was inspired by Irish dance. My work was rooted in Irish dance, but used contemporary dance to enhance and develop the movement; develop, not erase. I did not shy away from cravings; if something peeked my interest, I investigated it further. Not everything was showcased in the final piece, but everything that came up in rehearsals was explored.

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38. Greg and Jean Norris are the parents of one of my thesis dancers. This was their response to my thesis work. The quotation was taken from an email sent to me following the performance of my thesis.

39. Rosanne Chesbro is a previous employer as well as a College at Brockport, Dance Department alumni. This was her response to my thesis work. This quotation was taken from my Facebook page.
By integrating knowledge from a variety of sources I am constructing new arenas in which Irish dance can flourish. My thesis, as a whole, supports the progression of Irish dance and its infiltration into concert dance and academia. My thesis is progressive with a “traditional” foundation, and breaking down barriers between dance forms. Further innovations and explorations of Irish dance could push the dance form beyond the boundaries of the established global perspective and lead the dance form into a new era where it can be a major player in the choreographic world.

I want to encourage further conversations on the definition of cultural dance and its role within academia. Cultural dances’ interdisciplinary nature allows it to permeate multiple areas of study; Irish dance is no exception. Its direct influence on American dance forms, local, national and global historical significance, and ties to political and economic trends makes Irish dance a fascinating and beneficial subject to incorporate into academic curriculum.

I was so delighted to have witnessed this amazingness live!!! Your composition was electricity in the room; your presence was the source! – Rosanne Chesbro

Rosanne Chesbro is a previous employer as well as a College at Brockport, Dance Department alumni. This was her response to my thesis work. This quotation was taken from my Facebook page.
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