The Hidden History of Highland Dance

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A recent controversy over the possibility that the Gaelic College in Cape Breton might reduce support for modern "Highland Dance" in preference to other types of tradition more strongly tied to Scottish Gaelic folk culture has exposed not only fundamental divisions between people's participation in and understanding of tradition(s), but also the degree to which the general public has been misled by romantic misrepresentations promulgated by Highland Games and other "heritage" events.

A similar and very fruitful debate has occurred in the world of Highland bagpiping in the last decade or so as the work of scholars such as Hugh Cheape, William Donaldson, John Gibson, Allan MacDonald and Barry Shears has revealed how the musical traditions of the Scottish Highlands were appropriated and reshaped by "improvers" – often anglophone élites based in the urban Lowlands – who imposed alien norms and aesthetics on Gaelic music played on the bagpipe. By the late nineteenth century, Highland communities effectively lost control of their bagpipe traditions to institutions who had distinctly different agendas and musical styles. By challenging the false monopoly of authenticity claimed by modern authorities, some bagpipers have recently been emboldened to reconnect to an older, vernacular style directly tied to Gaelic language rhythms and song tradition, a folkloric style that survived until relatively recently in some Canadian immigrant communities.

Thus far, the Highland Dance community has not gone through a similar process of challenging old orthodoxies, searching for roots, and re-establishing a vernacular style more closely tied to folk culture and communities. Some Highland Dancers may want to know more but are not presented with opportunities to learn about dance history in Gaelic culture; some dancers may be content with the ways things are, without any interest in origins and older style; some seem to positively revel in the romantic stereotypes of the nineteenth century and to avoid critical examination of the invention of these traditions for fear that the results would invalidate their authority and the nostalgic investment so many people have put into Highland Dancing.

With the general subordination of Gaelic culture to anglophone culture, there has been a lack of institutions to develop Highland tradition for its own community on its own terms, and to educate people about it. In 1955 the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing acknowledged its inability to provide an account of the origins of Highland Dancing, noting that the subject had failed to gain proper scholarly attention:

"Reliable evidence concerning origins and early development is scarce and scattered; in the general neglect of Scottish culture which has prevailed, until recently, in all four Scottish universities, Highland Dancing has been largely ignored by learned men, and as yet little or no serious research has been done. There is an opportunity here for academic investigation which, it is to be hoped, they will not fail much longer to exploit."

Although good work has been done since 1955, much remains to be done. Far too often, fanciful fictions have been repeated and recycled in popular books and articles about Highland Dance, not to mention Highland Games booklets, causing much confusion and misrepresentation in the popular imagination. Many of these myths surrounding Highland Dancing reflect nineteenth-century stereotypes of Highlanders as fierce, semi-savage warriors – a stereotype indeed encouraged by the war machine of the British Empire who were keen to employ Scottish Gaels in this role in the regiments, but one which distorts the complex history of the Highlands.

As I hope to demonstrate, particular attention needs to paid to the late nineteenth-century "improvers" and trend-setters of Highland Dance, their agendas and their influences. I hope to shed a little light on these issues in these short two articles and inspire some other scholar to develop this research further. In the meantime, perhaps this critical examination in dance history can help explain the difference between folk dance rooted in a Gaelic community – such as step-dance – and the formal, institutional forms of dance – such as Highland Dance – that have emerged as secondary phenomena.

Origins

Dance, in the broadest sense referring to bodily movement to music, is found in all human societies. Scottish Gaelic society had several forms of dance in early times including ring dances stepped to choral songs (which still survive in a few corners of Europe, such as the Faroe Islands) and ritual dances performed at special events (such as calendar celebrations and rites of passage). I have discussed the evidence about these earlier forms of dance in *Warriors of the Word*. They were, unfortunately, eventually squeezed out of existence by new forms of dance which emerged from French court society – dances renowned internationally because of their associations with the culture of the French nobility.

Scotland was well connected with the French court not only because of the alliance with the French from the late 13th century to the mid-16th century, but also later because of connections through the Catholic church (many Highland gentry were Catholic and were educated in France) and the Jacobite movement (which fostered these connections into the second half of the 18th century).

Probably the first of these French dance styles which impacted Scotland was the hay d'Alemaigne, which seems to have come into England and Scotland c.1500; it eventually came to be known as the "reel" in Scotland (*ruidhle* in Gaelic). The reel was the most popular form of social dance in many Scottish communities, in Scotland and in immigrant contexts, into the early 20th century.

By the early-18th century, dancing masters trained in France (or by French-trained teachers) were taking other new French dance fashions, as well as lessons in manners, etiquette, and the French language, to males and females who aspired to ascend the social ladder. The use of dance to display social status was an aspect of the "refinement of manners" which was affecting European society as a whole during this era as the fortunes of families and individuals waxed and waned at an unprecedented rate. Couples' dances were a means of demonstrating refinement and social rank, especially when it came to courtship. Along with the dances themselves came dance music, played on portable fiddles which came into the Highlands in the late-17th century, and often played by the dancing master himself.

By the mid-18th century dancing masters had established themselves in virtually all of the major towns of the British Isles and made at least passing visits to smaller villages, even in the Highlands. One of their new specialties was the solo dances, which were then referred to as "High dances," "Hornpipes," and "Pas Suel" interchangeably. Dancing masters created their own choreographies, taught their pupils, and held regular "dance balls" to display the results to other potential pupils.

It is likely that some dance masters produced choreographies which hybridized the new French footwork, leg positions and figures with some elements of pre-existing Highland dances – *Dannsa a' Chlaidheimh* "The Sword Dance" being the strongest candidate for some degree of continuity – but the lack of descriptive evidence and the continual changes imposed on dances throughout the course of the nineteenth century make it virtually impossible to identify and assess any such older elements. It must be appreciated that solo dancing was an international movement strongly tied to French fashions, even when the teachers were Scottish or teaching in the Highlands.

Some of the names of these dances suggest origins in the Highlands or amongst Highlanders, but these are misleading. A "fling," for example, was understood to be a particular dance movement, but the term "Highland Fling" does not appear until 1794 when it was used in the title of a tune composed by a Lowland dance teacher resident in London. It does not appear in association with an entire choreography until 1840.

The claim has been made that the Highland Fling is a "wild dance of triumph following victory in battle [...] inspired by the capers of the stag, the dancer's upraised arms representing the animal's antlers" (to quote one Games booklet). This little story reflects the warrior stereotype previously mentioned, but has no basis in reality. There is no name for the dance in Gaelic, and it is likely to be the product of a non-Highland choreographer exercising poetic license in creating a "pseudo-Highland" dance rather than anything rooted in older tradition. Dancers hold their arms up in many dance traditions in Europe, and in the folk style of dancing, Highlanders enjoyed snapping their fingers to the music and hooting to show their enthusiasm. The Lowland "improvers" of dance in the nineteenth century found this to be too crude for their tastes, so they insisted that dancers hold their fingers still and stopped making noise. Any resemblance to stag antlers is coincidental.

Highland Games

The Falkirk Tryst was first organized in 1781 by the Glasgow branch of the Highland Society of London, primarily for holding bagpipe competitions. The Tryst, which was held for several years, essentially laid the foundations for the later Highland Games. Dances were performed in the breaks between competitions by the pipers themselves in 1783; until close to the end of the eighteenth century these dances were exclusively reels. Competitions in dance were first held in about 1795 at the Edinburgh piping competitions.

The first Highland Games such as we know them now was held in 1819 in St Fillans. Although it is commonly assumed that the purpose of the Games was to celebrate and preserve aspects of Scottish Highland culture, these events were controlled, orchestrated, and supported by the landed gentry who had other purposes. The Games allowed these British élite to enhance their own image as the natural leaders of Highland society, to project a romantic image of themselves and their estates, and to underscore their commitment to the British Empire by promoting a narrow role for Highlander as loyal soldiers of the Empire. The actual functions and competitions at the Games were crafted to highlight Highlanders as brawny, macho, and militaristic rustics who were eager to win the approval of their superiors, to the exclusion of their other cultural achievements or traditions. Had the Games been run by Highlanders for the purposes of maintaining Highland culture, they would have featured the many aspects of Gaelic oral and literary tradition; commitment to the internal touchstones were instead compromised to provide entertainment for anglophones. In other words, Highland Games were part of a series of measures designed to transform selected elements of Highland tradition into palatable commodities agreeable to the tastes and fantasies of the "respectable" classes of British society, and to

orient Gaels towards meeting the demands made of them by the British State and away from their own development as a separate and independent culture.

Few of the British élite who judged the contests and awarded the prizes had any knowledge of the Gaelic language or culture by the time the Games were established, and increasingly less so as the nineteenth century progressed; they thus introduced an increasingly foreign influence on the "Highland tradition" practiced in them. This is one of the primary reasons why Highland bagpipe music became so far removed from its roots during this time period, as scholars have recently demonstrated: the judges simply did not understand the nature of the Gaelic music tradition of which bagpiping was an aspect, and instead imposed the alien aesthetic standards of the urban, anglophone world on the music.

Very similar dynamics were at play in Highland Dancing as well, especially as non-Gaels became involved as competitors, teachers, and judges and imposed the aesthetics of ballet and other modern dance forms. It wasn't long before Highlanders attending the Games began to complain about the differences between what was being performed and the dances that they knew from their own experience. For example, an attendee at the Games held by the New York Caledonian Club in 1865 remarked:

> "The dancing was very creditable, but it must be remarked that with regard to the Highland Fling, in some instances, steps were introduced entirely foreign to it, which detracts from the national character of that highly picturesque Terpsicorean display. John Goldie, the celebrated base ball player, of the Mutual Club, competed in most of the contests and succeeded in securing several prizes. The chief prize of $50 for the Highland Fling, goes to Boston, it having been awarded to Mr. William Calder of that city."

There are at least a couple of other reasons why changes would begin to be visible by this stage: first, as a professional athletic competition, dances would have been forced to become increasingly difficult; second, in order to have a standard form against which competitors from many different origins would be judged, variations that would occur naturally in any folkloric dance would have to be "ironed out" and normalized. A letter from Caroline MacDonnell, daughter of the infamous Alasdair "Fiadhaich" of Glengarry, in 1885 complains about these very influences on Highland Dancing and the Games as a whole:

> "Various efforts are being made to revive the old Highland Games, but it seems to be either unknown or overlooked that they were the pastime of the people – whereas now, several persons endeavour to gain a livelihood by them, which materially alters their character and has introduced a theatrical style of dancing, quite foreign to the real Scotch steps and mode of executing them. [...] The Highland Fling and Gillie Callum are seldom, if ever, danced to the end, only a few steps of the former, and the first and easiest half of the latter, being now sufficient to elicit great applause and win the highest prizes!! Other feats of strength and agility are wholly unrepresented."

The Maclennan brothers of Fairburn, Ross-shire, in the eastern Highlands were pivotal figures in the transformation of Highland Dancing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although they began their training amongst family and teachers in Scotland, their later training brought quite different influences to bear on their style and repertoire. The older brother William studied ballet in Paris and Rome, and besides reinterpreting older dances created a new one titled "Parrazatti" (an Italian name representing his European influences). William died in 1893 at the age of only 32 while touring the United States with Scottish fiddler James Scott Skinner. The younger brother Donald, who called himself the "Professor of Dancing," studied ballet in London and published the influential book Highland and Traditional Scottish Dances in 1950.

There can be no doubt that the brothers were skilled and agile dancers; their performances before European royalty (such as Queen Victoria and the King of Belgium) and the Pope brought them great recognition and prestige. These circumstances brought them into an unusual position as authorities in dance which provided them with the means of changing the nature of the art which few have questioned.

Step-Dance

What has come to be known as "step-dance" is derived from the same roots as Highland Dance: dancing masters trained in the French style who held dancing schools. Several such teachers migrated with their communities to British North America in the later 18th or early 19th century and brought their training and choreographies with them. Some of these dancing masters continued working into the middle of the 19th century. Over time, the immigrant communities in Atlantic Canada (and not just Cape Breton!) broke the formal choreography down into its basic footwork components, which became the basis of an improvisational art form.

Thus, step-dance became a vital aspect of Gaelic folk culture in these contexts by being adopted by local communities and by ensuring its connection to the type of music and social events that they practiced. It was performed by people of all ages to the songs and music played by and for their own Gaelic-speaking communities. This is the very essence of what "vernacular" and "folklore" mean: practices engaged in local communities and transmitted to members by observation and participation; traditions owned by the communities as a whole and maintained according to their own standards of taste and social needs (rather than outside institutions); variations of styles and forms which emerge in local communities, and thus allow for regional diversity. Thus, step-dance and Highland Dance were going in completely opposite directions during the nineteenth century.

This is not to say that step-dance is "pure" or unchanged from its roots: dancers created new steps, borrowed steps from their Francophone and First Nations neighbours, incorporated what they learned in mass dance movements like the Charleston, and were inspired by the professional dancers like Shirley Temple and Gene Kelly that they saw in Hollywood films. Still, these innovations happened within Gaelic communities according to what suited their own musical tradition – itself derived from the rhythms of the Gaelic language and style of the Gaelic song tradition – and social functions.

By the 1860s, Highland Games began to be imported into North America; most immigrant communities assumed that whatever was being done in Scotland as more authentic and authoritative than what they were doing (after all, wasn't the Queen herself a great fan of Highland Games?), so these events quickly took precedent over local practices in many immigrant communities, undermining confidence in the tradition brought by older generations.

Highland Dancing in the Twentieth-Century

Prominent self-appointed dance gurus, such as the Maclennan brothers, intervened in the transmission of Highland Dance tradition, silently creating new dances and movements without leaving much of a paper trail. Many people now repeat the common story that the first movement of the dance *Seann Triubhas* ("Old Trousers"), where the dancer kicks his legs forward, represents the dislike for trousers (which Highlanders had to wear after the Battle of Culloden) and their desire to kick them off. In fact, D. G. Maclennan admitted in his 1950 tract on Highland Dances that he himself had invented this movement and that it had no historical basis.

Other dance teachers also reformed styles and technique. One Gaelic folklorist noted in 1928 that whereas traditional sword dances, performed like other rituals for good luck before battle, would have only been done *deiseal* (clockwise) in the past, they were now being done *tuathal* (counter-clockwise), a movement that no traditionally minded Highlander would have considered a good idea before risking his life.

The incremental but relentless appropriation of Highland Dance tradition by non-Gaelic institutions was essentially completed in 1925 when the Scottish Pipers' Society met in Edinburgh to decide how to define and standardize dances. The dancers in attendance were James Gordon and D. G. MacLennan, who claimed their expertise via the lineage of the deceased William MacLennan. As they announced at the time:

> "It is hoped that the committees of all Highland gatherings throughout the country will agree to adopt these rules, which have been arrived at only after very full discussion by representatives from all parts of Scotland and the best known experts, based on the traditions handed down by the best dancers from the day of the late William Maclennan, who was the leading exponent of his time."

Not everyone did agree with such rules or was willing to defer to the guidelines of the committee, which is not surprising: the very essence of folklife and folklore is variation, and dances had been evolving and developing independently in different communities under different cultural conditions for generations. Judging by the comments of Matthew Hayes, president of the Scottish Dancers' Association, the Gaels of the western Highlands felt slighted by the monopoly exerted by the Lowlanders of the east and felt that Maclennan's approach was not representative of their tradition:

> "In view of the fact that different styles of dancing prevail in different parts of Scotland taught by teachers as efficient as Mr McLennan, it would be interesting to know upon what authority the Pipers' Society have determined which is correct. [...] As one who attends most of the Gatherings in Scotland, I affirm that McLennan's style is not the popular one and is not recognised anywhere except on the East Coast. [...] To lay down any fixed routine of steps is futile, as every teacher has his own style."

Further controversy ensued, demonstrating that the imposition of a single competition style was done to the detriment of the diversity and expressiveness of the wider tradition. In fact, one correspondent, A. MacPherson of Sutherland, bemoaned "Already we have an Association which I am afraid has, to some extent, killed individualism in bagpipe playing, and now we are threatened with a Dancing Association." The formation of the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing in 1950 – which has since claimed exclusive rights to define dance standards – carried forward an inherently flawed process which introduced non-Gaelic elements, compromised the Highland character of the dance style, and reduced regional and individual variations.

Besides creating a single, athletic competition format, the other major innovation of the twentieth century which has changed Highland Dance tradition has been the domination of female dancers. While I do not wish to enter into the question of whether it was right or morally justifiable to exclude females and children from dance traditions – as was the case with Highland Dance into the early 20th century – it is certainly the case that many proponents of the art resisted such changes. In a very short time, then, Highland Dance went from being an exclusively male art form to being a predominantly female one, with the majority of dancers now being young girls. This cannot but have also impacted dancing styles and repertoires.

Once females did begin competing in numbers, suitable dances had to be invented, borrowed or adapted for them. Some elements in some of these dances must have existed for some time, even if they have been transformed by new settings and styles. The "Irish Jig" was previously known as "The Irish Washerman" and is clearly derived to some degree from the French dance "Branle des Lavandieres" noted by Thoinot Arbeau (the pen-name of Jehan Tabourot) in his 1589 dancing manual *Orchésographie*. The Irish Jig probably also owes something to a medieval Gaelic dance known as *Cailleach an Dùdain* which was a dramatic dance, no longer performed, enacting the death and resurrection of a powerful female character (similar to ritualistic resurrection dramas associated with calendar customs in many parts of Europe).

It would be easy to assume that the dance "Flora MacDonald's Fancy" has some significant connection to the Highland heroine of the same name, but there is no evidence that the dance existed before the late nineteenth century. Flora Cruickshank of Peterhead (Aberdeenshire), the woman credited with remembering it and performing it for a modern choreographer, said that she learnt it from her grandfather, who had been a dancing master. She claims that it was originally danced to the tune "I Ha'e Laid a Herrin' in Salt," but this was replaced with tunes whose names play up the image of Jacobites and Prince Charles. This is indicative of the way in which "Highland Dance" has been modified to enhance the aura of romanticism around it and make it seem older than it actually is.

It is only after Gaelic tradition has weakened in communities that these "modern" forms of "Highland Dance" imported from urban Scotland, usually in association with Highland Games or similar organizations, have replaced vernacular Gaelic dances (reels, step-dancing, etc). The Antigonish Highland Society, for example, only called for the hiring of a Highland Dance instructor in 1921. In Cape Breton, it was the Gaelic College itself that taught and promoted modern Highland Dance after its foundation in 1938 – but not without provoking smothered resentment and resistance that has persisted to the present.

The Future

I'd like to make some remarks in this final installment about how the past history of dance traditions has relevance on our planning for the future, whether at the Gaelic College in Cape Breton, in our classrooms, or in our homes.

What do we mean by "Gaelic tradition" or "Highland tradition"? ("Gaelic" and "Highland" have essentially been synonymous since the medieval period.) This question has certainly been at the heart of some of the heated debates surrounding changes and claims about changes to tradition since well before the Gaelic College was founded – in fact, every documented music and dance innovation in the Scottish Highlands for the last three hundred years or more has been accompanied by controversy.

All tradition was invented, or introduced, by someone at sometime – the key questions, I think, are: How does the community respond to the innovation? How do they adapt and transform it to suit their own aesthetic parameters and cultural needs? How does the innovation interact with other aspects of tradition, weakening or reinforcing them? Does the innovation get embraced and integrated because it genuinely enriches the rest of tradition, or because the society is so compromised and desperate for external validation that it accepts whatever is expected of it?

The interesting thing is that most of the elements now considered "traditional" in the Gaelic music and dance tradition of the Atlantic Maritimes – the fiddle, step-dancing, and dance music (reels and jigs) – were fairly late introductions which were initially resisted by at least some Highlanders. The fiddle, for example, only entered Highland Scotland from continental Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century. Most all of the modern dance forms now associated with Scotland – the reel, country dances, "Highland Dance," step-dancing, Nova Scotian square sets, etc. – ultimately originate (to various degrees) in France. Many of these are dances introduced by French, or French-trained, dancing masters in the second half of the eighteenth century – so, in other words, these "essential" aspects of tradition were still fairly new when Highland immigrants came to Canada.

There can be little disputing the fact that Highland Dance has not been a folk art for many generations now: it does not exist in regional variation, you will not see it performed by community members as a normal part of a *céilidh*, etc. Step-dancing, by contrast, still is a folk art practiced by Gaelic communities. But I also want to emphasize that step-dance is not somehow inherently "more Gaelic" in its essence than Highland Dance: it simply went through a phase of being revised, embraced and performed by a Gaelic-

speaking community. There is no inherent reason why that did not or could not happen to "Highland Dance" as well, given the right conditions. In fact, we could say that about any other expressive art forms: hip-hop, tango, Bulgarian round dances, etc.

It is merely by their being adopted by and integrated within the wider body of Gaelic tradition that they become Gaelic art forms. Fiddle music was reshaped by the patterns, contours and rhythms of the Gaelic language, for example, and step-dancing followed accordingly. This is especially apparent when Gaelic *puirt-á-beul* (mouth music) is compared to the fiddle tunes and the step-dance footwork. Highland Dance could be re-Gaelicized, if there was sufficient interest and investment in the effort. The reality now is simply that it is almost exclusively an athletic activity done by non-Gaels in non-Gaelic performance contexts.

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