REVIEW ESSAY

STEP DANCE IN CAPE BRETON AND OTHER COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIPS: A REVIEW ESSAY

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*Canadian Folk Music*, the journal of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, devoted an entire issue in 2015 to the subject of vernacular percussive dance (commonly known as “step dance”) in Canada.\(^1\) The introduction to the volume, co-written by the three editors, notes that insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to this form of cultural expression despite its popularity amongst numerous Canadian ethnic groups.

Each of us was frustrated by particular gaps in the scholarship on percussive dance in Canada, including our individual styles from Cape Breton, Newfoundland, and the Ottawa Valley, their antecedent forms in Scotland, Ireland, and England, and particularly work that looked across all of these styles.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) I’d like to thank Greg Adams, Robert Dunbar, and Mats Melin for comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay. Any remaining shortcomings are my own.

Commonalities between regional styles in Canada, and in fact in North America more widely, despite local variations, point to a significant set of shared lineages or influences, yet the social histories and cultural dynamics which explain the origins and trajectories of many local branches of choreographic tradition have yet to be untangled.

Some excellent work has been published in the last few years which subjects a body of evidence – the observations of outsiders, commentary from community insiders, social history, musical remains, dance manuals, and formal ethnography – to the modern methodologies of anthropology, folkloristics, ethnomusicology, and ethnochoreology. The results not only illuminate the personalities and processes that have contributed to the dances of particular groups but can provide insights that can be applied to others. There are two volumes in particular that were too new to be used by the authors of the Canadian Folk Music but which warrant special mention, especially as they pertain directly to the history of step dance in North America.

Catherine Foley’s Step Dancing in Ireland is an historical and ethnographic history of the tradition in Ireland, tracing its roots from eighteenth-century dancing masters to her own experiences in the twentieth century. She pays particular attention to the social meaning and context of dance, making it a living thing that is negotiated and contested. Although introduced as a feature of colonisation and an embodiment of social class, the Irish dancing master acted as a cultural mediator between diverse social groups and reshaped step dance as a choreographic rejoinder to the “civilising process,” a form of cultural expression allowing the assimilation of external innovations to became distinctively Irish.

3 Ibid, 2.
Phil Jamison’s *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics*\(^5\) treats the history of the various forms of dance in Appalachia as a complex weave of many ethnic influences. His first task is to demolish the myth of Appalachian isolation, tracing the migrations, settlements, trade patterns and travel routes that have continually brought influences into the region, even if they sometimes lingered longer than elsewhere. By dissecting the components of social and solo dances, Jamison is able to identify the contributions of various ethnic groups to Appalachian dance tradition. Not only has the crucial influence of dancing masters in the formation of step dance (variously referred to as “flatfooting,” “clogging,” and “buckdancing”) been largely forgotten, but the tradition has ricocheted so many times between “high” and “low” culture, European, African and Native performers and contexts, that no single social category can claim ownership of or authority over it.

There is a vibrant percussive dance tradition of Scottish Gaelic origin in Cape Breton, with related branches in mainland Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and the Codroy Valley of Newfoundland. While some have doubted the Highland pedigree of this dance form and have posited Irish influence, advocates over the last two decades have insisted that it represents a relic of eighteenth-century Gaeldom, lost in Scotland but maintained in its purity in Canadian exile. The cohesion of linguistic, musical, choreographic and familial networks in the Maritimes have enabled it to survive and thrive, according to its advocates. A careful study might help clarify its origins in Scotland, its transmission to Canada, and the various forces on and contributions to its evolution in Gaeldom, including its virtual absence in Scotland.

John Gibson’s *Gaelic Cape Breton Step-Dancing* is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of the history of the tradition both in Scotland and the Canadian Maritimes. This book presents the largest collection of materials about dance in Gaelic contexts available to date, gathered from the records of local cultural organizations, the descriptions of anglophone outsiders (mostly travelers and sojourners), and texts internal to the native Gaelic community itself (mostly song-poetry and expository prose). He also provides summaries of his notes of fieldwork interviews of Cape Breton Gaels he conducted from the 1970s to the present day and correspondence with some notable authorities. Copious genealogical information places dancers into a kinship and geographical context.

Although accomplished scholars such as those noted above have provided appropriate precedents for the research of ethnic dance traditions in North America, Gibson’s volume has a narrow agenda: to prove that modern Cape Breton step dance is the only genuine, authentic form of Scottish Gaelic choreographic practice that survives to the present, that it provides the singular missing link for understanding the history of dance in the Highlands, and that its demise in Scotland, along with documentation about it, is due to the hostile prejudices of evangelical Protestantism and Anglocentric “Improvement.”

There are many valid reasons for the resentment that lingers about the persecution of the Gaelic language and culture, but chips on the shoulder can have the effect of creating blind spots that compromise scholarship. Gibson’s adherence to a tightly circumscribed definition of dance causes

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him to suppress materials and lines of inquiry that would call his assumptions into question and expose the complicated relationships of historical reality where dance and Gaeldom are concerned.

One fundamental flaw in the work is an essentialised vision of culture and tradition that anthropologists abandoned generations ago: authentic Gaelic dance, it is implied, was inseparably tied to Catholic, Jacobite, and isolated rural communities. From this static starting point, it can only decline through malicious influences of external origin (pp. 4, 14, 16, and 26). This master narrative of Gaeldom’s collapse is not a wholly invalid one, given that its transformation into modernity was driven by anglocentric institutions with little respect or accommodation for the specific ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social characteristics and needs of Gaels. The irony, however, is that the form of dance for which Gibson is an advocate is a syncretic one, the result of Gaeldom’s acculturation of élite European choreographic fashions, not an ancient relic predating or contrasting with such innovations.

Gibson himself provides the data to support this idea but is not open to it and lacks the methodology to analyse the dynamic processes adeptly explored by Foley, Jamison, and others. “Improvement” is a recurring centripetal paradigm in the cultural history of eighteenth-century Scotland and education is improvement applied to the human. Numerous sources quoted in the book reiterate the role of dance as the physical correlative of formal instruction and discipline to enable pupils to become members of the refined, genteel, upwardly-mobile social class (pp. 79, 156, 178, 189, and 377).

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Against this evidence and the inexorable forces of social change, Gibson claims that formal methods and institutions of dance made no significant, lasting impact on tradition, especially in Nova Scotia (pp. 6, 12, 38, 45, 52, 63, 89, 134, 198, and 266). This is naive and detracts from giving credit to Gaelic communities for their creativity and resiliency in evolving their cultural expressions according to contemporary conditions. Amongst those formal institutions and methods were dancing masters, dance schools, and balls/assemblies which exposed Gaels, even in the eighteenth-century Outer Hebrides (e.g., p. 155), to new forms of and ideas about dance.

Indeed, another of the fatal flaws of the book is that there is no attempt to discuss dance in general terms, to define step dance explicitly, to break it down into its constituent elements, to attempt to explain why Gaels danced and the contexts for doing so, or its role in traditional culture. This would have enabled a more nuanced and fine-grained analysis of its historical development, relationships to other Gaelic dance genres, influences on and from the choreographic practices of other ethnic groups, and the significance of dance in Gaelic society in the past and present.

For Gibson, “Nova Scotia Scotch step-dancing is the one and only key to the old puzzle … There is no plausible alternative” (pp. 12 and 260). Ethnochoreologists will beg to differ with such a blinkered view. It is impossible to believe that someone who has rummaged through so many obscure texts would miss references to dance forms and practices in the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography, so his pattern of excluding material that might contradict his predetermined conclusion cannot be accidental. He represses,

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8 Fortunately, such issues are skillfully examined in Mats Melin, One With The Music: Cape Breton Step Dancing Tradition and Transmission (Sydney, Cape Breton: Cape Breton University Press, 2015).
for example, evidence for ritual/dramatic dances, even when sources are available from authorities he quotes, such as Alexander Campbell, Fr. Allan MacDonald, and Alexander Carmichael, and denies the importance of such genres in Gaelic society (pp. 109, 186, 219 and 250). This suggests a lack of expertise in the categories, functions, and contexts of pre-modern dance and trivializes the differences between archaic Gaelic dance traditions and moderns forms of social dance, such as step dance, that are rooted in élite continental precedents. He similarly ignores evidence for the ring dance, a choral form of song movement performed at ritual events, which predates any form of step dance by centuries in Gaeldom.

Perhaps the most glaring omission is a lack of discussion on the relationship between step dance and (so-called) Highland dancing, both of which are clearly derived from the same eighteenth-century dance practices but have evolved separately. While the former became a vernacular genre in Canada, detached from formal settings, the latter became fixed and ossified as an institutional practice with

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increasingly non-Gaelic influences, performed competitively. Although there is evidence of the existence of dancing masters and fixed, choreographed dances of a formal nature in Cape Breton, Gibson gives them little weight and even implies a dismissive attitude towards dance genres of this sort (as on p. 99).

Cape Breton itself has never been entirely cut off from external influences and as a living, vernacular tradition, Canadian Gaels have continuously responded to the creative musical and choreographic possibilities available to them, adding musical instruments (such as the piano), musical styles (such as the stride piano style\(^\text{11}\)), and dance motifs (such from the Charleston and tap dancing in Hollywood films). Indeed, many sources remark on the performance of incoming dance fashions in the same spaces as the traditional ones in Cape Breton.

This volume is at its best when Gibson shows how different kinds of sources can shed on one another, such as when he finds Gaelic song-poetry, fieldwork interviews, and documentary remains that flesh out the biography of a nineteenth-century tradition bearer whose reminiscences about dancing in her youth has been much quoted from *Carmina Gadelica* (pp. 162-69).

Although Gibson has identified an important collection of references to dance in primary Gaelic texts, presenting them in geographical and chronological groups, there are problems with some of the sources and the way that he interprets them. The most significant issue is confirmation bias: Gibson is too eager to read too much into brief and ambiguous comments. Step dance is not just people moving their limbs and kicking their feet, keenly and vigorously, in time to the music, but few

sources are more precise than this (pp. 77, 80, 90, 152, 166, 203, and 211).

There are challenges with the Gaelic terminology and the semantics of particular words used for dance in general, for specific dances, and for particular movements, and the volume does not address them in sufficient detail. Amongst these is the ambiguous *dannsa Gàidhealach*, which, as Gibson shows, does indeed refer in some sources to Cape Breton step dance (p. 102), but in some of his other texts it could equally connote the performance of modern Highland dancing.

Gibson has not utilised secondary sources that would elucidate the meaning and context of some of the primary texts he uses, as when he trusts a spurious nineteenth-century interpolation (“Bhidh fleasgaichean donn’ air bonaibh rì ceòl”) into an eighteenth-century song-poem\(^\text{12}\) (pp. 50 and 166). He also commonly relies on implications of Gaelic isolation or cultural continuity in texts without considering the agenda or rhetorical aims of the author (i.e., pp. 80, 130, and 152).

Step dance is a physical activity which is dependent upon specific material conditions – especially wooden floors and hard shoes – which were much more readily available to Canadian Gaels than Scottish ones. Gibson does not discuss this issue and very few of his printed excerpts mention it (pp. 46, 228, 232 and 239) but I believe that it contributed to the divergent evolution and popularity of this percussive dance form in *Dìthaich nan Craobh* (“the Land of Trees”, as Gaels called North America), in contrast to Scotland.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) See discussion in Newton, “ ‘Dannsair air ùrlar-déile’,” 57-58.
Gibson’s lack of familiarity with the aesthetics of European dance fashions14 cause him to misinterpret remarks about the perceived grace of Highlanders (or lack thereof), according to outside observers (pp. 132, 137-39, 142, 178, and 216). He erroneously claims, for example, that “The Victorian phenomenon of Highland dancing strives to find use for the arms, hands, and fingers in some of its repertoire.” (p. 265). By comparing textual descriptions with visual representations of dancing in eighteenth-century Scotland (such as those included in the works of George Emmerson and Tom and Joan Flett), there is copious evidence that rural Scots danced with their whole body, typically elevating their arms and legs, and snapping their fingers. The focus on the neat, minimalist movement of the feet in percussive dance, particularly under the formal discipline of dancing masters, shifted the emphasis to the feet and eliminated the gestures of other limbs. Cape Breton step dancing has thus narrowed the choreographic repertoire that existed in the eighteenth-century Highlands, whereas (so-called) Highland dancing has, in this case, preserved an anachronism, even if it has since been codified and rigidified through ballet aesthetics.

Gibson ends on a sour note, objecting that three of the foremost folklorists of the twentieth century – John Lorne Campbell, Margaret Fay Shaw, and Calum Maclleathain – did not seek out the data from informants that would have vindicated his conviction that step dancing was a principal form of Gaelic cultural expression. Nor did their informants offer such information on their own accord, despite some of them being opinionated personalities indeed.

Most Gaelic folklorists of the twentieth century were primarily concerned with gathering oral tradition relating to Highland folk life in the past, particularly the sophisticated song-poetry and oral narratives that evince continuity with the medieval past. That Gibson should be surprised that his own personal shibboleth for authentic Gaelicness was not prioritized by earlier folklorists suggests either a lack of self-awareness of his motives or an insufficient grasp of the history of folkloristics. Cape Breton step dance commonly serves as emblematic certification of the purity of Gaelic culture in exile and the corrupted state of tradition in the Highlands, but this is an oversimplification of the diverging paths of branches of Gaeldom at best.

This review essay may seem to be a prolonged treatment of a niche topic, but step dance is a widely-celebrated “product” of Cape Breton Gaeldom with a large public following, commonly extolled as a fossil from the eighteenth-century Highlands. It is thus invested with considerable symbolic significance. Despite claims of it being an archaic isolate of pure Gaelic pedigree, Cape Breton step dance should be studied as one member of a family of related modern dance forms that evolved in dialogue between disparate communities. Scottish Highland immigrants – as individuals, families, and communities – were widely dispersed in Canada and the United States and had many points of contact with other ethnic groups. Creating a more complete and accurate understanding of North America will necessarily require ending the long exclusion of Scottish Gaelic Studies from the academy. Scholars attempting to research the history, and literary and

cultural expressions, of Gaeldom need rigorous intellectual tools and a wider context to interpret and represent them accurately. Likewise, scholars in broad disciplines (such as dance) need to be able to draw upon research about Gaeldom that meets modern academic standards of being scrupulous, objective, and balanced.

The narrow approach of this volume does not directly provide us with any useful resources to answer such basic questions as whether the dance practices of Scottish Gaels did or could have had any influence on the Red River Jig of Manitoba or step dance in the Ottawa Valley, to name just two obvious examples from the volume of *Canadian Folk Music* mentioned at the start of this article. Nor does it acknowledge or attempt to explore how continental dance practices (such as the antecedents of step dance) interacted with and largely displaced older choreographic genres in the Highlands. Scottish Gaelic Studies can and should be in dialogue with research about all ethnic groups and vernacular cultures in North America, and we are the poorer for the continued lack of attention to it in scholarly activity on this continent.