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## The Irish *Céilí*: a Site for Constructing, Experiencing, and Negotiating a Sense of Community and Identity

Catherine E. Foley (University of Limerick, Ireland)

For over a hundred years the Irish *céilí*, as an ‘invented’ social dance event and mode of interaction, has played a significant and changing role. This paper examines the invention of this Irish dance event and how it has developed in Ireland throughout the twentieth century. From the Gaelic League’s cultural nationalist, ideological agenda of the late-nineteenth century, for a culturally unified Ireland, to the manifestation of a new cultural confidence in Ireland, from the 1970s, this paper explores how the *céilí* has provided an important site for the construction, experiencing and negotiation of different senses of community and identity.

“No man is an island entire of itself” (John Donne, 1572 – 1631)

The opening line above is often quoted by people in everyday life in Ireland. It is from Meditation XVII from the prose work, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (1624)*, by John Donne. This line speaks of the notion of connection, belonging, community, and the universal self. Notions of community fall along a continuum from small-scale, intimate, micro communities (real, virtual, or imagined) to the human race as a macro-community; John Donne’s lines above refer to the latter. Traditionally the notion of community defined a group of interacting people living in a common location with shared common values providing them with a social cohesion. Today, the word also refers to different kinds of communities.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of community in its diverse interpretations, applications and adaptations is a constantly recurring one in the social sciences. In the field of dance we find scholars such as Susan

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<sup>1</sup> These different kinds of communities include: local community, national community (also referred to as a ‘community of sentiment’ by Weber (1977); an ‘imagined community’ by Anderson (1983)), ‘organic community’ (Boyes 1993)), global community, virtual community, an affinity or interest group community (Slobin 1996, Cooley, 2009), a cultural cohort (Turino 2008), a sub-cultural community (Hebdige 1979), community as a symbolic construct (Cohen 1985), and community as a *communitas* (Turner 1969) which describes a society during a liminal period that is “unstructured or rudimentarily structured [with] a relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner 1969: 96).

Spalding and Joan Woodside (1995) who illustrate in their edited volume, *Communities in Motion: Dance, Community, and Tradition in America's Southeast and Beyond*, how vernacular dance reflects and shapes community. The concept of community is, however, never too far away from the concept of identity.

Identity has been an important theme within the social sciences since the nineteenth century. Notions of identity: self-identity, group identity, regional identity, cultural identity, social identity, national identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, global identity, subcultural identity, et al. have been examined by a number of scholars.<sup>2</sup> In her article, “Embodying difference: issues in dance and cultural studies”, Desmond (1993) has stressed the significance of dance and bodily movements as important social texts for the exploration of social identities, while Cowan (1990) in her richly ethnographic book, *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece*, has examined dance as a site for the exploration of gendered identities.

I understand community to be a cultural construct and identity to be a fluid concept. As Simon Frith says of identity and music, but which is equally applicable to dance:

... in talking about identity we are talking about a particular kind of experience, or a way of dealing with a particular kind of experience. Identity is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as music. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective... The experience of identity describes both a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process. (Frith 1996: 110)

This experience of identity relates to that found at *céilí* dance events. Although the event changed throughout the twentieth century offering different kinds of dance experiences it continued to be “a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process”. In order to provide a context to the changing meanings and dance experiences of this vernacular dance event, I will supply a brief history of the Irish *céilí* below.

### **The Irish *Céilí***

The Irish *céilí* is a participatory, vernacular dance event where people – male and female, go to dance socially to the accompaniment of live Irish traditional dance music played by an Irish *céilí*

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Gellner (1983), Castells (1989), Giddens (1991, 1992), Hebdige (1979), Stokes (1994), Hall and du Gay (1996), et al. Dance as a potent signifying agent of identity has been investigated by scholars including Royce (1977), Hanna (1979), Foley (1988; 2001), Meyer (1995), Daniel (1995), Albright (1997), Reed (1998), Mendoza (2000), Van Zile (2001), Giurchescu (2001), Buckland (2006), Shay (2006), Hall (2008), et al.

band<sup>3</sup>. As an Irish person, I have participated at numerous *céilís*<sup>4</sup> throughout my life and, therefore, this paper is informed by both my own embodied understanding of the *céilí* together with informal interviews with other participants and questionnaires.

During the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century in Ireland, Europe and elsewhere, traditions were invented to promote nationalist agendas of new emerging nation states where ‘national’ identities were promoted as culturally unified (see Hobsbawm 1983). It is within this cultural nationalist consciousness that the Irish *céilí*, as an invented tradition, emerged.

The Irish *céilí* dates back to the end of the nineteenth century when Ireland was endeavouring to assert itself cultural and politically as a separate nation state in the context of its colonised position for some 800 years. The Gaelic League, a cultural nationalist movement established in 1893 in Ireland, had as its primary objective the promotion of a cultural nationalism and the ‘de-anglicisation’ of Ireland. This involved the re-establishment of the Irish language as the primary spoken language of Ireland and ancillary to this was the promotion of Irish language literature and indigenous cultural practices such as Irish singing, Irish traditional music and dancing. In this endeavour it established numerous branches of the Gaelic League across Ireland and the diaspora where classes in the Irish language, Irish literature, singing, music, and dancing were taught; it also organised staged competitions in these areas at *feiseanna* (festivals with competitions in different indigenous performing arts) and *oireachtais* (assemblies) and published a weekly newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (The Sword of Light). Within this context of a cultural nationalism, the first Irish *céilí* was organised and was further developed and disseminated.

Up until this time, the word *céilí* had no association with dance in Ireland. In Ulster and Scotland, the word had existed and in Ulster its association was with people visiting a neighbour’s house to converse; no dancing was included. The concept of a social dancing *céilí* was appropriated at the end of the nineteenth century by the London branch of the Gaelic League. Members of this branch, in particular, Fionán Mac Coluim, secretary of the branch, attended a Scottish *céilí* on Easter Saturday, 1897. He observed the similarities between communal dances as practised by dancers at the Scottish *céilí* and those Irish dances that were then being taught to members of the London branch of the Gaelic League by P.D. Reidy, the dance teacher at the branch. The Scottish model of a *céilí* with Scottish dancing and traditional music was subsequently appropriated by the Gaelic League and thus the Irish *céilí* event was invented. The first Irish *céilí* was held in

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<sup>3</sup> A *céilí* band consisted of an ensemble of Irish traditional instrumentalists performing on instruments such as button accordions, fiddles, flutes, concertinas, drums, piano, etc.

<sup>4</sup> I am using the plural *céilís* for *céilí* here since most people in Ireland and abroad use this term; however in the Irish language the plural for *céilí* is *céilithe*.

Bloomsbury Hall, London, on 30th October, 1897, and was attended by invited, Irish, middle-class, immigrants who danced the then popular set dances - based on the French quadrilles, and waltzes. The success of this Irish *céili* and its subsequent dissemination throughout Ireland and the diasporic locations of England, Scotland, America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, produced a new meaning of the word: an Irish social dance event where Irish people, as members of a club, could interact socially and culturally, and through their dancing bodies assert and express a common cultural identity and demonstrate their cohesion as an Irish community.

In keeping with other new emerging nation-states, the ideological objective of the Gaelic League was to promote, both to the Irish themselves and to others, a positive and culturally unified image of Ireland. The *céili* event was an ideal site for the construction of this Irish unified community and the actual dances provided a site where this unity could be experienced and felt. As Frith states: “social groups “only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity” (Frith 1996: 111), and in this instance the cultural activity was Irish *céili* dancing.

### **Authenticating a Canon of Irish *Céili* Dances**

Irish *céili* events were organised and promoted by the Gaelic League. They were held in public dance halls, hotels, and community centres and functioned as an ideological tool for the promotion of a cultural nationalism. They thereby took on all the attributes of what Hobsbawm would consider to be an invented tradition:

... a process of formalisation and ritualisation, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. (Hobsbawm 1983:4)

The reference and link to the past was supplied by the use of the Irish language, the accompaniment of Irish traditional dance music, and communal dances which were collected from unspoilt, rural areas, predominantly in the west of Ireland.<sup>5</sup> These dances were group dances which had been choreographed by itinerant dancing masters who adapted them from English Country Dances and Sets of Quadrilles to fit the Irish traditional music accompaniment and dance abilities and desires of their agrarian clientele. Critically, the Gaelic League believed them to be old Irish dances. This authenticated for the League the legitimacy of these dances as true Irish dances and although they had been danced only in some regions of Ireland, their accepted authenticity

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<sup>5</sup> O’Keeffe and O’Brien, two members of the London branch of the Gaelic League travelled to Ireland to collect group dances from a number of Irish dancing masters; they also collected dances from P.D. Reidy in London. These group dances were published in their book, *A Handbook of Irish Dance* (1902).

prompted the Gaelic League in selecting, popularising, and institutionalising some of these dances through the Irish *céili* dance event.

An official canon of Gaelic League *céili* dances was thus constructed to promote the Gaelic League's cultural nationalism. This included communal dances such as *Ballaí Luimní* (Walls of Limerick), *Baint an Fhéir* (Haymaker's Jig), *Ionsaí na hÍnse* (The Siege of Ennis) and The High-Cauled Cap. These dances required dancers to form into couples and to then form the prescribed formation from which the dance would be danced. Some of the Gaelic League *céili* dances such as *Ballaí Luimní* (Walls of Limerick) and *Ionsaí na hÍnse* (The Siege of Ennis) were progressive in nature, in that dancers having completed the dance with the original set of dancers, progressed up and down the dance hall, dancing the same dance with different couples or groups as they progressed. Figures performed included dancers advancing and retiring, changing positions, linking and chaining movements, wheeling figures, and dancing under arches. These *céili* dances were performed to lively Reel and Jig tunes performed by a live *céili* band.

The names of the dances (see above) also conjured up images of places in Ireland together with events of an historical and cultural nature. This reiterated the importance of place and Irish culture not only for those attending *céilís* in Ireland but for Irish emigrants attending Irish *céilís* abroad in diasporic locations such as England, America, Canada, Australia, etc.

Set dancing (based on the French Quadrilles), which had formed the basis of a social evening's entertainment in rural districts of Ireland since the beginning of the nineteenth century was not part of the canon of dances permissible to be danced at Irish *céilís* because of its association with the French quadrilles, which branded it as foreign. These ideological strategies of selection, analogous with Weber's 'exclusionary strategies', were instigated in order to maintain and defend a sense of Irishness against perceived threats from outsiders and outside influences. But, what were the criteria for the above dance selection? I would suggest that the criteria was dependent upon the ideological agenda and cultural nationalist requirements of the Gaelic League at the time, fundamental to which was the construction and facilitation of an Irish unified community, "a community of sentiment" (Weber 1977), "an imagined community" (Anderson 1983). Thus, the Gaelic League sought communal dances according to specific criteria: dances which were believed to be Irish; dances which were easy enough to learn and to dance and, consequently, accessible to most participants; and dances which would allow for a co-ordination of movements. The latter facilitated the overseeing of the event and the behaviour of participants.

## ḃallaí luimní—THE WALLS OF LIMERICK

Ní tóca gur simplí don rince ḡaelac ná an ceann so. Is oimúnac go mór é leis don luét tosaithe agus do daoine nac bfuil bri na hóige iontu a cuilleadó óir nac bfuil ann ac an éois-céim agus an luascaó.

The Walls of Limerick is the simplest of all dances from the point of view of execution. At starting, the dancers line up in couples, lady on gentleman's right, each set of two couples facing each other. It is danced to reel-time, and consists of four movements, as follows.

### 1. AR AḡAIÖ IS AR ḡCÚL. **Advance and Retire.**

This is an essential feature in the majority of "long dances." Gentleman takes partner's left hand in his right, both advance to meet the opposite couple [2 bars], retire to place [2 bars]. Repeat the movement.

### 2. TREAḢHA LEAC-CAÖ. **Half Right and Left.**

Ladies exchange places by side-stepping across to the left, passing each other face to face, and finishing with two short threes [4 bars]; gentlemen now exchange places, but side-step to the right [4 bars].

### 3. FUR IS MHÁ ĆALL. **Dance with Opposite.**

Gentleman takes hand of opposite lady, both sidestep to gentleman's left, finishing with two short threes [4 bars]; sidestep back, finishing with two short threes [4 bars].

### 4. LUASCAÖ IS IOMPÚ SIAR. **Dance Round.**

Gentleman takes own partner's hands, both dance a complete circle around opposite couple [8 bars], finishing up to face in the opposite direction.

Repeat the movements with the next couple and with each succeeding couple until the music ceases. In this manner each couple progresses on the completion of the set of movements with the result that the couples dancing opposite each other are constantly varying.

Figure 1<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ár Rinncidhe Fóirne: Thirty Popular Figure Dances*, Leabhar 1, 1939, p.5.

## The Dissemination of the Irish *Céili* Dance Canon and the Construction, Experience, and Negotiation of Community

“any social practice that needs to be carried out repeatedly will tend, for convenience and efficiency, to develop a set of such conventions and routines, which may be ... formalized for the purpose of imparting the practice to new practitioners” (Hobsbawm 1983: 3).

The selected communal dances were relatively short and easy to learn and could be imparted easily to new practitioners. They were repeated throughout each and every Gaelic League *céili* event both in Ireland, the diaspora, and further afield. This allowed for successful dissemination of the *céili* dances together with the construction of a familiarity for participants to engage in *céili* dancing and the *céili* dance event. The familiarity of the dancers with this structure was conducive to the construction and experiencing of community and belonging. Generally, dancers came to the *céili* to dance, but also to experience, to reaffirm, and to renegotiate their sense of belonging to this Irish dance community.

A ‘process of formalisation’ gradually developed at the *céili* which was made manifest in a number of ways. There was payment for attendance at the *céili*; *céili* bands were employed to play at the *céili* and band members received payment; there was a formal adherence to particular *céili* dances; and a *fear an tí* (man of the house, or M.C. – Master of Ceremonies) oversaw and supervised proceedings. A ‘formalisation’ also occurred with the actual dancing. Movements were co-ordinated with the music using specific, basic motifs of step-dance movements, such as the basic characteristic foot motifs of the Reel, “the threes”, marked “1, 2, 3”. This motif was also danced in Jig time as “Hop Skip 2, 3”. Other motifs included the “sevens”, marked 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; and the *casadh* (a couple swinging motif), as it is commonly named. This formalisation process repeated over time at *céili* dance events allowed for the further dissemination of these *céili* dances together with the maintenance of a cultural embodiment within social and hegemonic structures.

The Gaelic League *céilís* became popular cultural and social events throughout Ireland and abroad from the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the selected *céili* dances were also taught in schools, in formal Irish step-dance classes, and at officially run Gaelic League *céilís* in Ireland and abroad. They were also published in a variety of publications including J.J. Sheehan’s (1902), *A Guide to Irish Dancing*, O’Keeffe and O’Brien’s (1902) *Handbook of Irish Dances*, and *An Coimisiún*<sup>7</sup> prescribed step-dance booklets, *Ár Rincidhe Fóirne* (Vol. 1, 1943; Vol.2, 1949; and Vol. 3, 1963). These publications inscribed particular dances as *Irish* dances.

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<sup>7</sup> *An Coimisiún* is the largest Irish step-dance organisation in the world. It was established in 1929 under the auspices of the cultural nationalist movement, the Gaelic League.

The institutionalisation and homogenisation of these *Irish céilí* dances allowed for dancers, dances, and *céilí* dance events to be easily supervised. Social interaction and inter-personal spacing between dancers on the dance floor was expected to be morally correct, in line with good Catholic teaching. Dancers danced predominantly at arms' length only coming closer together for a couple's *casadh* (swing movement) when the arm hold was such that dancers' arms came between the couples' bodies. These dance spaces were controlled environments and contributed to a controlled and sanitised configuration of *céilí* dances. However, a strong sense of decency and honest fun or *craic* was very characteristic of the Irish *céilí* where participants enjoyed the experience of dancing these *céilí* dances as part of a community. According to older *céilí* dancers, the Gaelic League *céilís* were great fun with energetic dancing to lively music. For many they were the only contexts where they regularly danced socially and where they had an opportunity to meet potential partners. According to one dancer however, they seemed “to express an unspoken political/cultural agenda, as if one could ‘free’ Ireland by dancing the High-Cauled Cap”.

Through these *céilí* dance events, place and a sense of cultural identity were constructed for both the Irish at home, and the Irish abroad. Through participation at *céilí* events, emigrants constructed and embodied a sense of belonging, community, and home. The *céilí* thus offered a social context where emigrants could re-imagine, re-live and re-experience through dancing, a sense of Ireland – of home, emotionally and corporeally. For those in Ireland, it generated, consolidated and reinforced a strong sense of community. Thus, wherever a Gaelic League *céilí* was held, in Ireland or abroad, it assisted individuals in feeling a sense of belonging to this *Irish* community. Within this context, *céilí* dancing was nurtured as Irish social dancing, and a particular configuration and interpretation of *Irishness* was experienced through the dance, and indeed, the whole dance event.

The Gaelic League *céilí* was a whole dance configuration – dance, music, the Irish language, constructed within a ritualised, cultural and social environment where people shared common cultural sentiments and values. The appropriation and selection of *céilí* dances and the construction of these *céilí* dance events by the Gaelic League were manifestations of the fact that dance was not only perceived to be a popular social leisure-time activity but also an important and powerful ideological tool for the shaping of an *Irish* cultural identity. As Simon Frith states, but which we might also apply to dance:

“Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith 1996: 124).

These Gaelic League *céilís* were popular cultural and social events throughout Ireland and abroad, particularly before and after the establishment of Irish Free State in 1922; they have

continued to the present day but waxing and waning at different times. For example, during the Irish Civil War years (1919-1921) no *céilís* were held in Ireland. Also, from the 1920s to the 1960s, Gaelic League *céilís* competed with rural and urban dance halls where the more modern couple dances such as foxtrots, quicksteps, and waltzes were the norm. From the 1970s, a different, less overtly nationalistic, identity was emerging as Ireland began to experience a stronger sense of cultural confidence which was assisted by the Irish traditional music boom of the 1960s and 1970s, the success of Irish rock bands such as U2, and Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1972. This was made manifest in transformations in Ireland as it endeavoured to take its place in Europe (See also Foley, 2001). Gaelic League *céilís* became less popular and came to be associated with a more culturally inward and nationalistic perspective of Ireland. Thus, in the 1970s another type of *céilí* event emerged which constructed a different sense of community. This community was analogous to Thomas Turino's cultural cohort (2008) where participants constructed their sense of community around a specific activity; in this instance the activity was set dancing. This type of *céilí* was not organised under the auspices of the Gaelic League; it was developed by enthusiasts of set dancing within the context of modernity and became known as 'the revival'. From the 1970s, therefore, different types of *céilís* existed in the cultural landscape of Ireland and the diaspora: (1) Gaelic League *céilís*, (these would become known as *fíor céilís* (true *céilís*); (2) *céilís* which were modelled on the Gaelic League *céilís* but which were organised by individuals and organisations outside the Gaelic League for cultural, social or fund raising purposes; the Irish language, the English language, or a combination of both was used at these *céilís* depending on the context and the clientele; and (3) *céilís* associated with the 1970s revival in set dancing. The next section looks at the latter type of *céilí*.

### **Set Dancing and the 1970s Revival<sup>8</sup>**

The 1970s revival of set dancing in Ireland aimed to revitalise set dancing as a vernacular dance form. These set dances or "Sets of Quadrilles" derived from the French Quadrilles and were first

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<sup>8</sup> Set dances were also revived earlier by the cultural nationalist organisation, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* (Organisation of Irish Musicians), established in 1951. This organisation aimed to preserve and promote Irish traditional music, song and dance. Classes were established in these indigenous performing arts at different branches of the organisation together with competitions at county, regional, and national levels (See Henry 1989).

danced in Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were taught by dancing masters and danced by all sectors of society throughout the nineteenth century. When they were no longer performed by the wealthier classes they continued to be danced in rural, agricultural communities at communal events, including house dances, weddings, crossroad dances, platform dances, etc.<sup>9</sup>

Certain characteristics identified these set dances or “sets”. They consisted of five, or six, set or prescribed figures. They were danced by four couples, generally in a square formation with each couple positioned on a side of the square and all facing inwards (sometimes, if there were not enough dancers to make up a full-set as above, a half-set, comprising of two couples facing opposite each other was danced). They were performed to Irish traditional dance music played on instruments such as melodeons, fiddles, flutes, concertinas, etc. Different figures of the dance were performed to particular dance tune types: Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes, Polkas, and Slides. Different localities had traditionally had particular configurations of figures and dance music types. For instance, Polka and Slide type tunes were strongly associated with Cork and Kerry; Reels with Clare, Galway, Roscommon etc; Jigs and Hornpipes were not specific to any particular region. These configurations came to be associated with the localities from which they had emerged and were named accordingly: “North Kerry Set”; “Sliabh Luachra Set”, “Fermanagh Set”, etc. Sets were performed with small breaks in between each of the five or six figures since to perform them without a break would leave dancers and musicians exhausted. The above is possibly the broadest parameter of identification of set dancing as a cultural practice in Ireland.

Banned at the Gaelic League *céilís* from the end of the nineteenth century, and in addition, having further declined due to the Public Dance Halls Act, passed in 1935,<sup>10</sup> set dancing continued in only some pockets of rural Ireland where it is still danced today. Some members of the 1970s revival took it upon themselves to collect set dances from these rural communities which they further transmitted at workshops and published for transmission and dissemination purposes (See Moylan 1984; O’Doherty 1995; Lynch 1989; Murphy 1995; Foley 2007;<sup>11</sup> et al.). Also, the dance

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<sup>9</sup> See Catherine Foley (2007), *The Sionna Set Dance*.

<sup>10</sup> The Public Dance Halls Act (1935) required that a licence be acquired for all public dances. Since many of the rural traditional gatherings for dancing were interpreted as public dances, these gatherings declined in some rural places.

<sup>11</sup> In 2005 I was commissioned by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, to choreograph a new set dance for the set dancing community. This new set dance I named *The Sionna Set Dance*, and it was published in 2007 by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance as a multi-media educational package. I provided a number of workshops of the *Sionna Set Dance* around Ireland and have performed it with others on national television. The published educational package has allowed other set dancers to teach it in different parts of the world.

club, *An Fáinne Rince Club* (The Ring Dance Club), produced a series of ‘learner’ video tapes for set dancers. These publications provided the basic standardised movements and figures for the development and expansion of set dancing repertoire. In addition, *Na Píobairí Uilleann* (The Uilleann Pipers’ Club) and others produced music cassette tapes and CDs for set-dance teaching and practice purposes. These publications assisted in the dissemination of set dances.

### **Constructing Community: “House” and “Home”**

The 1970s revival was centred in villages, towns and urban areas in Ireland and abroad (See O’Connor 1997, and Foley 2001b) and consisted of organized set-dancing workshops and *céilís*, which were not organised by the Gaelic League. It attracted male and female dancers (middle-aged upwards) from different economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds thus allowing for a different, more inclusive, type of community or cultural cohort to develop. The majority of the participants were women who danced for fitness, health, and social reasons (see also O’Connor 1997). Some of the adult dancers at these classes disseminated set dances further by teaching younger dancers in particular local regions. And, while the 1970s revival was promoting set dancing locally, nationally and internationally, individuals within rural regions continued to set dance and to teach their own local set dances and their local way of set dancing in their own rural regions.

Set dancing workshops within the revival were taught formally by established set-dance teachers who were recognised as having ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1973). These teachers were believed to have either grown up with set dancing or were recognised as being very good set dancers. These were invited to teach and were paid for their services. Popular instructors included Connie Ryan, Joe O’Donovan, Mick Mulkerin, Séamus Ó Méalóid and Pat Murphy. At workshops a formal method of transmission occurred and gradually a standardisation of set-dance repertoire developed. Particular set dances became popular and a formalisation and standardisation in the manner of dancing, irrespective of gender, was transmitted. This was different from what had been traditionally practised in rural regions where set dancing was transmitted informally at social events and where the one local set dance was the mainstay of the community. Also, the manner of transmission and practice within the revival was a ‘unisex’ one; no gendered aesthetic qualities were formally taught. Again, this was different to the gendered set-dance practices within rural contexts where male dancers led when dancing and percussive battering or shuffling, kicks, stamps, and improvisation were characteristic of their dancing. This facilitated the development of individual male, set dancing styles within local set-dance practices. Female dancers were led, kept a steady pace, and were expected to dance in a graceful and feminine manner. This meant no wild, rough

looking movements, and generally female set dancers did not improvise. Within the revival, males and females danced the prescribed movements to the accompaniment of music in a co-ordinated manner but the stylistic manner of gendered practices within them was not emphasised.

In addition, the music accompaniment within the 1970s revival differed from that played within the rural context in that it was played much faster. According to some rural dancers, it was only when the music was played slowly that one could assess the dancer. The speed of the accompanying music was therefore an important aesthetic factor and assisted in differentiating set dancing as practised in the 1970s revival and set dancing as practiced in some rural areas.

The 1970s revival therefore embodied its own aesthetic which was made manifest at the *céilís*. These events consisted of nearly all set dancing (at some *céilís*, *céilí* dances were also danced) and became more popular than the Gaelic-League style *céilís* popularly referred to as *fíor céilís* (true *céilís*). The latter continued to be organised predominantly at Irish language summer colleges for young people and at Irish language social events. From the 1970s, however, set dancing *céilís* became important vernacular events for adults who engaged in set dancing as a community or cultural cohort (Turino 2008) and who expressed, experienced, and negotiated their sense of community and identity.

Comparable to the Gaelic League *céilís*, a similar formalisation occurred within the 1970s 'revival' *céilí*. A familiar repertoire of sets was danced, one after the other, throughout the event; *céilí* bands were employed; and there was also an attendance fee. *Céilí* bands were much in demand and included the Four Courts, The Michael Sexton Céilí Band, Temple House, The Abbey Céilí Band, and The Kilfenora. These bands played all over Ireland approximately three times weekly and had a huge following. Contrary to the Gaelic League *céilís*, however, English was the spoken language at these revival *céilís* which contributed to the inclusiveness of these dance events. It also suggested that one could still be Irish without having to speak the Irish language.

Many of the dancers in the 1970s revival organised their social lives around the set-dancing community's calendar which allowed for a national and even an international set-dancing community to develop. Owen Hughes, from Mayo, had this to say concerning the May Bank Holiday set dancing weekend in Castletown, Co. Laois:

All the usuals were there (I mean the heavy gang, the ones who are at every céilí in Ireland) warming up for the weekend, with a set or two on Friday night in Sheehan's of Coolrain. Pat Murphy was the 'Fear 'n ti (man of the house) at the céilís and the workshops during the weekend. ....A big crowd had come from England, the USA, Europe, the four corners of Ireland, and I was even dancing with a girl who is a set dance teacher in Japan! The Saturday night céilí was lively, with the Abbey Céilí Band providing the strong energetic sound which kept everybody dancing swiftly and some people losing their grip at times...but there were no accidents at the céilí. Just as well, as there was no ambulance outside. The céilís I go to in some places have an ambulance outside. This is where they take their céilís a little bit too

seriously! The Ballyvourney Jig set is my favourite - when the Abbey are playing and they play it straight through without breaking between figures. Dancing the Ballyvourney Jig set to the Abbey Céilí Band is like being on a rollercoaster. It is great to dance it in a good set, a set where they can all dance well and not with some people who wouldn't dance to warm themselves, and who never get out of first gear. (The International Irish dancing Magazine: Vol. 3 Issue 7. July 2000; Bristol, England)



Set dancers performing the 'House Around' Figure of the West Kerry Set at a *Céilí* in Abbeyfeale, West Limerick, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2001. Photograph © Catherine Foley.

The above is indicative of the community spirit, passion, and some of the aesthetics inherent within the set dancing revival. The dancers came to these *céilís* to dance seriously and to dance fast to live traditional dance music; they came from far and near with their towels and their change of tee-shirts. This was a social event where participants did not fear not looking their best at the end of the event; they came to dance to good music, to get some exercise, and to socialise with others who had a similar interest and set of cultural values.

The interest in set dancing as part of the revival extended to set dancing cruises and package holidays abroad. The following advertisements on the World Wide Web are examples of these:

**The Craic on the Cruise, Trieste, Italy**

22-29 September 2008, €1482-2700, £990-1808

Sail the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas at this Irish festival on board a luxury cruise liner. The many musical performers on the journey include Danny Webster, the Copperplate Céilí band and the Annaly Céilí Band playing for nightly *céilís*. During the day you can visit Greek and Croatian ports including Athens and Dubrovnic, and if you prefer to stay on board, there are workshops and music sessions. Price

includes cruise, accommodation, meals, entertainment and flights from Ireland or Britain; mandatory insurance is extra.

**Fleadh Portugal, Hotel Montechoro, Albufiera, Algarve, Portugal**

2-16 October 2008, €1199, £799

Sunny Mediterranean seaside resorts have become a favourite destination for set dancing holidays. This one or two week package to Portugal is popular among set dancers in Britain and Ireland thanks to several participating céilí bands and workshop teachers. The setting is a ten-storey hotel on the Algarve coast; set dancing céilís are on the tenth floor, ballroom dancing is on the ground and the sea is within walking distance outside.

The dancing lasts all day, with morning and afternoon workshops and afternoon and night ceilis. Participating céilí bands include the Annaly Céilí Band, Copperbelt Céilí Band, Michael Sexton and Pat Walsh and Danny Webster. There are even more bands and entertainers catering for ballroom dancing.

The price shown is for two weeks' shared accommodation, breakfast, supper, entertainment and return flights from Ireland and Britain; insurance is additional. The one week package costs €889 and £579. Cheaper self-catering apartments are also available. (<http://www.setdancingnews.net/?mke>)

In addition, organisers of Irish themed music and dance holidays, such as *Enjoy Travel*, advertised events such as the following:

**Enjoy Travel runs the annual *Fleadh Espana*, which will be held in April, 2011, in Ibiza, Spain:**

Full line-up of the best of Irish Entertainment in Country Music, Céilí, Folk, Jazz etc. Teachers in Set Dancing, Ballroom and Social Dancing – plus tutors in various musical instruments.<sup>12</sup>

Competitions in set dancing were also characteristic of the 1970s set dancing revival. These competitions were for young and old and were organised by a number of organisations including *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* (the organisation for Irish traditional musicians), *Scór*,<sup>13</sup> *Slógadh*,<sup>14</sup> the Irish Countrywomen's Association, et al. Adjudicators officiated at these competitions and assessed the teams of set dancers according to their set dancing abilities, their co-ordination of movements in time with the music, their abilities at forming precise spatial patterns in the execution of figures, and their presentation; many of the set-dance teams wore formal dance costumes and brought their own musician or musicians with them. While these set-dancing competitions motivated set dancers to practice and assisted in popularising particular set dances, they also contributed in homogenising their practice and in marginalising some set dances and their styles of practice which did not prove to be successful in competition.

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<sup>12</sup> *Enjoy Travel* brochure, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> *Scór* is organised by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a cultural nationalist organisation established in Ireland in 1884. Together with the promotion of Irish sport, its remit includes the active support of the Irish language, traditional Irish dancing, music, song, and other aspects of Irish culture.

<sup>14</sup> *Slógadh* is a festival of competitions for young people in drama, music and dancing, organised by Gael Linn, an organisation which was founded in 1953 and endeavours to promote the Irish language through music, sport, song and other activities.



A set-dancing team performing the local Caledonian Set at a *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* set-dancing competition in Tulla, Co. Clare, 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2000. Photograph © Catherine Foley.

Set dancing *céilís* continue to be practised today not only in Ireland but also abroad, in Britain, Europe, North America and Australia. For example,

**Turning Wave Festival, Gundagai Services Club, Hume Highway, Gundagai, New South Wales, Australia**  
17-21 September 2008

A weekend of Irish and Australian culture with workshops and three *céilís* in an historic town 375km southwest of Sydney. Dancing is led by Margaret and Bill Winnett and music is by the Corner House Céilí Band and the Coast Céilí Band. The only place where you can dance sets in a genuine woolshed.

Workshops, *céilís*, and evenings of set dancing currently take place all year round in different parts of the world and in different contexts including public houses, community halls, hotels on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. They are also organised in particular locations over weekends, at summer schools (for example, the annual Willie Clancy Summer School at Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, or the *Blas* International Summer School of Irish Music and Dance at the University of Limerick), festivals, holiday resorts, summer cruises, and at commemorative events, including the annual Dan Furey and James Keane Festival of Irish Traditional Music and Dance in Labasheeda, Co. Clare.

With the popularity of set dancing we might ask the question: What is it about set dancing and set dancing *céilís* that make them so attractive? The sets were originally rural dance practices performed by the agricultural community at house dances, weddings, cross road dances, and

harvest. They were banned by the Gaelic League for ideological purposes and in the 1970s they were re-appropriated and revived by individuals in the cities and towns of Ireland. Was it traditional Irish dance music that made them attractive? Was it the enjoyment element of dancing sets? Was it the image of a rural, stable community in Ireland's past which was embodied in the dance which made set dancing attractive? Was it the rural values associated with the image of set dancing? Was it the social element which allowed individuals to meet potential partners and to escape the isolation of the self in modern urban Ireland? Or was it the health and fitness benefits gained from set dancing?<sup>15</sup> I suggest that reasons for set dancing may have been one or all of these, together with a need to generate a contemporary sense of an Irish community: a community that was inclusive and would facilitate a feeling of belonging through dancing and the whole dance event.

This was achieved through a number of devices: the structure of the *céilí* dance event; the use of the English language including common set-dancing terminology; the structure of the set dance itself; common repertoire of set dances; common set-dance masters;<sup>16</sup> common *céilí* bands (see above); and common publications – books and magazines.<sup>17</sup> All of these assisted in constructing a modern and inclusive sense of community and identity through set dancing in an Irish way.

Set dancers within the revival inhabited a social world of their own with weekly workshops, weekend workshops, *céilís*, and sometimes, pub sessions. The structure of the *céilí* event within the revival was generally the same everywhere. It was set dances for the evening with sometimes an occasional waltz (sometimes *céilí* dances might also be included). The familiarity of the dancers with this structure was conducive to the construction and maintenance of community. Most dancers present knew the repertoire of set dances since they had learned them at the numerous set-dance workshops. It was the *fear an tí* (tr. man of the house; similar to an MC, Master of Ceremonies) who decided and announced which set dance would be performed<sup>18</sup> and thereafter all dancers took to the floor and positioned themselves in their groups-of-eight or sets. The *céilí* band commenced with the usual 8-bar introduction and the set-dancing began.

The structure of the set dance itself was also conducive to community building. Each set was autonomous: an entity in itself, irrespective of how many set-dancing groups were simultaneously

<sup>15</sup> According to O'Connor, female set dancers enjoyed the safety of set dancing (see O'Connor 1997).

<sup>16</sup> These set dance masters included Connie Ryan, Joe O' Donovan, Séamus Ó Méalóid, Mick Mulkerin, Pat Murphy, etc.

<sup>17</sup> *The Set Dancer*, produced and edited by Bill Lynch, is a quarterly that supplies news and information on set dancing and traditional step dance workshops and *céilís*. See <http://www.setdancingnews.net/>

<sup>18</sup> On occasions when a *fear an tí* was not present, the *céilí* band decided on the selection of dances to be danced.

on the floor. Metaphorically speaking, the structure of the set dance was analogous to a micro-community; dancers were placed on the four sides of the square, facing into or conscious of the centre. All movements and figures built on this concept; set dancers moved in and out of positions within their own set dancing group, but at all times they were conscious of their set, their group. In some figures, couples danced ‘house at home’, or ‘house around’ (i.e. they danced around the circumference of their set-dance group); in other figures men and women danced on separately to different partners, but they always returned to ‘home’ position and to their own partner. Once a set dance was completed, however, set dancers had the opportunity to dance with other set dancers in other set dance groups. This facilitated meeting and dancing with numerous people throughout the event which assisted in constructing a sense of community.

The 1970s set dancing revival used common terminology such as ‘home’, ‘house at home’, ‘house around’, ‘show the lady’, etc. These terms traditionally used within rural contexts, provided set dancers and teachers with a common discourse, a scheme of knowledge, and a way of transmitting and understanding set-dance knowledge. It also developed a common set-dance repertoire from different regions of Ireland: repertoire such as, the Plain Set, the Caledonian, the Baile Mhúirne Jig Set, the Conamara Set, the Kerry Polka Set, the Cavan Set, and the Roscommon Lancers. This common repertoire of dances and the standardisation of movements, through a formal transmission process, enhanced the solidarity and sense of belonging within the group. Other contributory factors included a common stock of set-dance teachers, *céili* bands, and reference publications.

Criticisms have been levelled at the 1970s revival in set-dancing practice, particularly by set dancers from within rural traditions. Some of these criticisms were, “all figures and no individual dancing” and “music too fast for dancing”. Set dancers within the revival were reputed to dance quickly. When speaking with older set dancers in some rural regions they stated that a good set dancer was ‘slow music’. It was only when the music was played slowly enough that one could see the dance ability of the dancer. The revival movement in set dancing was also criticised for “too much standardisation” and “quantity over quality”. According to one dancer:

I would sooner dance one set, with good partners, to good music, than dance twenty sets in a *céili*.

However, whatever the differences and aesthetic preferences, set dancing was revitalised and given new meaning from the 1970s within the context of the *céili*. It was a representation and embodiment of a way of life, a modern *Irish* way of life.

**Conclusion:**

For over a hundred years in Ireland, the *céilí*, as an ‘invented’ social dance event and mode of interaction, played a significant and changing role. From the Gaelic League’s cultural nationalist, ideological agenda of the late-nineteenth century for a culturally unified Ireland, to the manifestation of a new cultural confidence in Ireland from the 1970s, the *céilí* illustrated the power of dancing to bring people together to construct, experience, and negotiate difference senses of community and identity.

The experience of dancing to live traditional dance music at these *céilís*, and the experience of relating to other participants through the act of dancing, provided individuals with the opportunity and means to socialise, connect, express, and negotiate their own sense of identity and being in the world.

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