

Step Dancing in Cape Breton and Scotland: Contrasting Contexts and Creative Processes

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Abstract: This article briefly outlines the migration of percussive step dancing to Cape Breton Island from the Scottish Highlands in the 19th century and the introduction of this dance genre to Scotland from Cape Breton in the 1990s. I reflect on the changes to the dance genre in Cape Breton and to the understanding of step dancing in Scotland, particularly on a visual and kinaesthetic level, as the reference points and the guiding support of a step dance community do not exist in Scotland as they do in Cape Breton.

Résumé : Cet article décrit brièvement la migration de la danse à claquettes faisant percussion depuis les Highlands d'Écosse à l'Île du Cap-Breton au 19e siècle, puis le retour de ce genre de danse en Écosse depuis le Cap-Breton dans les années 1990. Je réfléchis aux changements qu'a connus cette danse au Cap-Breton et à la manière dont on conçoit la danse à claquettes en Écosse, plus particulièrement aux niveaux visuel et kinesthésique, car il n'existe pas en Écosse, contrairement à l'Île du Cap-Breton, de points de référence et de lignes directrices pouvant soutenir une communauté de danse à claquettes.

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“They Don’t Make Up Steps the Way We Do”

In October 2012, when Cape Breton pianist and step dancer Mac Morin visited the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick in Ireland, he casually commented, while working with the group Dannsa, something to the effect of “They don’t make up steps the way we do.” Mac Morin was, at the time, having a few days’ break during

a performance tour of Scotland with the Scottish traditional step dance company Dannsa.¹ The sentiment of the statement aptly sums up one dancer's reaction to a movement repertoire with which he is intimately familiar but which was, through Dannsa, experienced in a different social and performance context. This article focuses on how the particular movement repertoire today commonly known as "Cape Breton step dancing" is currently realised variably on either side of the Atlantic. This article aims to highlight how dance praxes in two geo-cultural contexts have created a difference in movement combination, a distinction which may not necessarily be detected visually but one that is felt kinaesthetically when performed (Hahn 2007; Sklar 2008). I have elsewhere discussed the visual, aural and kinaesthetic transmission processes at work in the Cape Breton context (Melin 2012). The emphasis in this article is therefore on how these two contexts influence the performance of Cape Breton step dancing, and in particular how transatlantic transmission, or rather perhaps how the learning in Scotland of Cape Breton step dancing has been interpreted differently in relation to local aesthetic reference points and modes of evaluation. This is an area of experience with which I am personally familiar, as a practitioner of step dancing in both Cape Breton and Scotland. Being Swedish, however, I negotiate the embodiment of movement in both of these places as an outsider.

To help explain one of the contexts discussed in this paper, I start with a brief outline of the 18th- and 19th-century migration and settlement of Scottish Highlanders, who transported a vernacular form of percussive step dancing to Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.² It was only in the 1990s that Cape Breton step dancing was introduced in Scotland, creating the other context discussed in this paper.³ The dance traditions in each cultural context—Scotland and Cape Breton Island—have evolved quite differently from each other (Quigley 2008; Melin 2012). Historically, percussive step dancing has been maintained in Canada while it virtually disappeared in Scotland. This article highlights some aspects of why presently Cape Breton step dancing is realised differently in Scotland and in Cape Breton.

The Migration of Scottish Highlanders to Cape Breton

A significant number of Scottish immigrants to Cape Breton formed part of the approximately one million emigrants who left the British Isles bound for North America during the 18th and 19th centuries. Changing social and economic circumstances associated with the agricultural and industrial revolutions of those centuries and the post-Napoleonic war depression

were the main contributing factors to this large-scale emigration.⁴

The impact of this immigration and the settlement patterns of the different social strata of the Highlanders on Cape Breton Island have been considerable. The Scottish Highland emigration can be understood to have occurred in stages. The Highland emigration began with what Gibson refers to as the “Gaelic upper middle class”-led emigration to North America during the period 1770-1815 (1998: 187-90). Unlike the popular myth of forced emigration, this was a voluntary movement by tenants against the wishes of their landlords in order to preserve their lifestyle, culture and traditions in a new setting (Bumstead 1982). According to Marianne McLean, “the tenants’ fervent belief in their right to clan lands, and their desire to live with Gaelic-speaking kin” (1984: 289) were core values of the Highland society. Economic changes, such as the spread of sheep farming across the Highlands and increased financial pressures on tenants by landlords, threatened these essential values. Most of these early emigrants had the means to pay their own fares across the Atlantic. For the same economic reasons, the exodus of the less well-heeled middle class took place in the first half of the 19th century, and they were in turn followed by the poorest of the population (Gibson 1998; Bumsted 1982; McLean 1984, 1991; Somers 1985; Hornsby 1989, 1992; Richards 2008; Devine 2011).

Some 20,000 mainly Gaelic-speaking Scots settled on Cape Breton Island between 1802 and 1840. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, more Highland Scots immigrated to Cape Breton than to any other destination in British North America. This was to have a dramatic effect on the population of the island, which increased from about 2,500 in 1801 to almost 55,000 in 1851. From the middle of the 19th century, however, this trend changed. The potato blight and the famine years of 1845 to 1851, which were most dramatically evident in Ireland but which affected Scotland and Canada as well, effectively ended emigration to Cape Breton. During this period, as Hornsby points out, the ethnic composition of the island population changed significantly:

By the early 1820s, Scots made up a majority of the population; by 1871, 50,000 of the 75,000 Islanders were of Scottish origin, outnumbering by two to one the descendants of Acadian, Irish, and Loyalist families who had settled in Cape Breton before 1800. In large part, Cape Breton had become a Scottish island. (Hornsby 1992: 31)

The people who step dance today, and those who began sharing step dancing with dancers in Scotland from the early 1990s, are generally descendants of these earlier Scottish immigrants, as described below.

It is important to note that whole families and extended kin groups emigrated together from Scotland, and to note the settlement patterns of the same upon arrival in Cape Breton (Hornsby 1992). Either landlords cleared whole villages, paying the overseas fare for most or all inhabitants, or family groups opted independently to leave together. A pattern of chain migration developed, where those who left first would encourage other kin and friends to follow (Hornsby 1992: 46). This settlement pattern helped to ensure the transmission and maintenance of a variety of Highland traditions, including step dancing.

In describing Nova Scotian Gaelic culture in the report *Gaelic Nova Scotia: An Economic, Cultural and Social Impact Study* (2002), Michael Kennedy describes 18th- and 19th-century Gaelic society on both sides of the Atlantic as a social order in transition. Kennedy describes the old Gaelic society as being both intimate and compact as well as aristocratic and stratified; all levels of Gaelic society commonly interacted physically and intellectually and shared major cultural reference points. During the 19th century, this system came under considerable pressure to change, a pressure deriving from external authorities on both sides of the Atlantic to anglicize, resulting in Gaelic culture's existing "almost exclusively as an informally transmitted folk culture in rural communities" (Kennedy 2002: 117-20).

Initially, the Scottish Gaels' rural Cape Breton society was much less stratified than the polarized society they had left in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Gaelic language and culture were quite successfully maintained in an environment of transferred kin groups. The lack of emigration of other ethnic groups to the same areas settled by Scottish immigrants, as well as the relative isolation of these rural areas contributed to this maintenance of Gaelic language and culture (Hornsby 1992: 76). Music, song, dance, stories and language are only some of the prominent Scots Gaelic cultural expressions that were maintained and developed in Cape Breton, and step dancing should never be considered in isolation from other aspects of culture with which it did and does continually interact (Melin 2012).

Twentieth-century Cape Breton underwent significant changes due to modernization and industrialization from which, as Cape Breton historian Robert Morgan puts it, the contemporary Cape Bretonian has emerged (2009: 185-220). The 20th century saw fishing and farming industries decline while mining, steel manufacturing and forestry peaked and then dwindle. The impact, for example, of tourism and outward migration to mainland Canada and the U.S., as well as urban migration, have not only had a huge impact on island life in general but on cultural life in particular. These changes have, to a certain degree, eroded the intimate passing down of traditions, particularly

in the home by family and friends (Melin 2012: 210). They have not, however, erased the deep visual, aural and kinaesthetic transmission processes that occur in the Cape Breton step dance community, which I examine more closely later in this paper (Melin 2012: 203-210). But first I will compare Scottish and Cape Breton vernacular dance traditions.

Scottish and Cape Breton Dance Traditions

Rural and urban Scottish dance traditions have, generally speaking, developed from house ceilidhs⁵ and village and crossroads dancing traditions, comprising a limited number of dances and predominantly represented by various forms of Scotch Reels (Flett 1985; Emmerson 1972).⁶ Eighteenth- and 19th-century dance (and music) traditions were shaped by dancing masters, each of whom travelled through a particular region to offer dancing lessons. The dancing masters' repertoire was highly influenced by European and English dancing trends and aesthetic preferences. Recent research also suggests mid-17th- and late 18th-century European influence on dancing—in particular, on that of the Highland clan elite (Newton, forthcoming) Later, the 20th-century Scottish dancing landscape became largely governed and structured by organizations with global membership and multiple local and national chapters. Today, the two main forms of organization-based dancing are Highland dancing (athletic solo and group dances predominantly performed at competitions)⁷ and Scottish country dancing (social figure dances of English origin), which can be danced informally or formally as part of the worldwide Royal Scottish Country Dance Society's⁸ organized and technically and aesthetically regulated activities. Highland dancing is generally associated with the great Highland bagpipe, while accordion-, fiddle- and piano-based music commonly accompanies Scottish country dancing. The current Scottish vernacular dance scene also includes "old time" or "ceilidh" dancing, the name depending on the context, area and age range of the dancers taking part. Stylistic and music preferences differ from one part of the country to another for these mainly couple and group dances derived from earlier dancing master repertoire and European social dance genres. In the main, dance traditions are kept alive in community contexts such as village halls and other larger, public venues, such as hotels, town halls and community centres. A few historical sources indicate that percussive step dancing once existed in Scotland, but there are no detailed descriptions of its form. By the beginning of the 20th century it had virtually disappeared from the scene altogether (Emmerson 1972; Flett 1985; Melin 2012). Some recent observations and interesting discussions on these dance genres can be

found in, for example, Morrison (2003, 2004) and Newton (2009, 2012). A selection of refined solo dances, maintained by dancing masters and latterly by the Highland and Scottish country dance associations, suggests that the percussive dance tradition has now morphed into a predominantly soft shoe dance genre (Flett 1996; Cramb 1953; UKAPTD 1995).

In Cape Breton, by contrast, a vernacular form of percussive step dancing has continued to exist since the arrival of the earliest Scottish immigrants due to the unique community configurations on the island. As mentioned, the character of Cape Breton step dancing as a whole is a product of the ethnic mix and influences on the community since the first step dancers arrived from overseas (Melin 2012; Voyer 2003; Le Blanc and Sadowsky 1986; MacInnes 1996). This brief article does not, however, allow for exploration of this particular area of research, but the range of possible influences on the dance genre must be kept in mind when the Scottish connection is discussed. Cape Breton step dancing has managed to thrive alongside the introduction of new dance forms, such as quadrilles (commonly known in Cape Breton today as square dances or square sets and initially introduced from mainland Canada and the U.S. in the early 20th century), and the decline of some early dance forms, such as Scotch Reels (Rhodes 1985; Melin 2012). Currently, the vernacular dance tradition lives predominantly in the many parish halls, where square sets are the main form of social dancing and regularly incorporate percussive footwork. These square set dances are often interspersed with performances of solo step dancing at various points during the evening. Solo step dancing, Scotch Fours (Reels) and square sets all feature at local indoor and outdoor festivals and variety concerts where they often co-exist with displays of Highland and Scottish country dancing. The latter two dance forms now exist around the island but are not the predominant forms of dancing, having been introduced in the mid- and late 20th century respectively, and their aesthetic appearance is the same as in Scotland.

By contrast, vernacular square sets and step dancing are aesthetically more grounded (i.e., danced with little elevation); good percussive dancers are said to be “close to the floor,” “neat,” “light” and “musical.” Step dancing is still passed on informally in some homes, as well as taught in public classes in the community. Step dancing, however, has never been regulated by associations or by standardized instruction manuals, as most Scottish dance forms currently are, particularly Highland and Scottish country dancing. Step dancing in Cape Breton has evolved from set solo step dances taught by dancing masters, such as the Flowers of Edinburgh, and early forms of extemporized step dancing, to the form currently in practice (Rhodes 1996; Melin 2012). The Cape Breton tradition is predominantly oral whereas Scottish dance

traditions rely heavily on written instructions for their continued survival. Cape Breton square sets are commonly learned in village halls while they are danced. Some dance forms, such as the many different Scotch Reels and Gaelic dance games described by Frank Rhodes (1985, 1996), in articles based on his 1957 interviews with descendants of Scottish settlers, are no longer practised. The Cape Breton dance tradition today is predominantly danced to fiddle music with piano accompaniment, which has succeeded an earlier, more dominant dance piping tradition.⁹ This comparison between vernacular dance in Scotland and Cape Breton illustrates well aspects of continuity and change in tradition, in relation to different contexts, as discussed by many scholars, including Glassie (1995), Feintuch (1993), Rosenberg (1993), and Spalding and Woodside (1995).

Step Dancing from Cape Breton to Scotland

In the early 1990s, a relatively small number of Scottish dancers and musicians “discovered” Cape Breton step dancing. Based on my research and on my own participation in, and observation of, the Scottish vernacular dance community of the time, I would say that approximately 20-30 Scots became interested in Cape Breton step dance. These individuals either visited Cape Breton (or other North American venues where Cape Breton step dancing was featured), or attended summer school workshops in Scotland where Cape Breton step dancing came to be taught. They explored and advocated selected historical and cultural links between Cape Breton and the Scottish Highlands. They subsequently brought this step dance genre to the attention of others by representing it as an older form of Scottish dancing (Moore 1995; Sparling 2011). Similarly, some individuals advocated the Cape Breton style of playing (fiddle) music as being an older form of Scottish music (Dembling 2005; Sparling 2011). Some Cape Bretoners were also invested in the belief that they had maintained a “pure” form of traditional Scottish music and dance (Sparling 2011). Although scholarship has demonstrated the unsurprising fact that Cape Breton fiddling and step dancing have evolved and developed in their own distinctive ways since first coming to the island with Scottish settlers, this reality was often largely ignored or de-emphasized by the Scottish interest group (Dembling 2005; Sparling 2011; Doherty 1996, 2006; Melin 2012).

Many of those involved in the early and mid-1990s often incongruously referred to the “discovery” of Cape Breton’s percussive step dancing as a *revival* of a “lost” Scottish dance form. It is important to note, however, that at this time the little research that there was on percussive step dancing in Scotland was

based on fragmented and scattered memories. Thus the current Cape Breton genre of step dance was assumed to be the dance form identified in these memories. Those who engaged with this form of percussive step dancing came to identify an “essence” of Scottishness in the Cape Breton genre and came to see it as a “Scottish” dance form. To my knowledge, no step dancing of an extemporary nature as remembered in Scotland has actually been revived. Rather, it is clear that the core material of step dancing currently practised in Scotland is drawn from current Cape Breton dance practice, as can be seen in the common Cape Breton practice of attributing steps to the person from whom one learned them. Initially nobody in Scotland referred to Scots as step sources. Instead, steps were, in the 1990s, at least, always attributed to Cape Breton sources, as in “Donald Beaton’s step,” “a Jean MacNeil step” and so forth. In recent years, some of these same steps are now attributed to Scottish teachers’ names, and the original Cape Breton link with the source is thus forgotten. One must, nonetheless, remember that with certain Cape Breton steps—for example “Donald Beaton’s step”—there is an inherent link to Scotland simply through the association of that particular step with the performance of it by an early Cape Breton settler from the Highlands. Furthermore, through that step and other movements, his descendants have maintained aspects of “Donald Beaton’s ‘Scottish’” repertoire of steps, but have also added to and modified them. It is equally important to note that new steps are currently created in Scotland that are not in use in Cape Breton, and so perhaps these should be regarded as Scottish, if place of origin is regarded as of high importance. My interpretation of the Cape Breton way of naming steps after particular people is that such a practice is like an intricate web of traditional sourcing that acknowledges origin but allows for change along the way.

The *essence* that many involved with the percussive step dancing from Cape Breton recognized when it was introduced to Scotland in the early 1990s was a level of “dirt” and a fluidity referred to as “swing” or “drive” (also in relation to the music) that many felt the then current Scottish dancing lacked as a result of having become refined and restrained by outside forces like associations and governing bodies (Melin 2005). This quality of “dirt” was a rawer, less standardized and institutionalized sound and movement practice, often also thought of as more “authentic.”

In the early 1990s, the influential Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser and piper Hamish Moore “discovered” Cape Breton music and dance, and they became important points of access to Cape Breton–style music and step dancing in Scotland. They both arranged to bring Cape Breton musicians and dancers to teach at traditional music and dance summer programs in

Scotland. The timing of Fraser and Moore's interest is significant, but while exploring this recent attention, we must keep in mind that traditional Cape Breton musicians and dancers had been visiting Scotland since at least World War II, some toured Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s, and the BBC broadcast their music in the U.K. (Doherty 2006). Dembling (2005) suggests that the failure of the 1979 referendum on home rule and the following 18 years of Conservative rule from Westminster led to an increased nationalistic attitude toward cultural expression, or at least a more self-conscious shaping of the arts and culture, in Scotland. In the period leading up to devolution and the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, "a great deal of thinking and discussion about what it means to be Scottish in the twenty-first century" ensued (Dembling 2005: 183).

When I interviewed fiddler Alasdair Fraser in January 2005, asking what factors drew him to Cape Breton music and dance, it became clear that his personal journey of discovery was set in the wider context of Scots seeking their identities (see, for example, Craig 2004). Alasdair talked about growing up in a Scotland where his mother tongue, Scots, was discouraged, and where, in his opinion, cultural self-esteem—his own and the country's—was low. Alasdair felt disillusioned by what he saw as a lack of interest in the "roots" of Scottish music and dance. In the Highlands, he said, the 1970s traditional music scene was unhealthy and there were only a handful of indigenous fiddlers around, such as Angus Grant Snr. and Farquhar MacRae. Against this backdrop, Alasdair Fraser travelled to Cape Breton in 1981 and "found the fluency in the culture of Cape Breton that [he] wanted in [his] own culture" (Melin 2005: 30).

Discussions of Step Dancing in Scotland

By the late 1990s, interest in, and awareness of, this "new" step dancing genre had spread around Scotland at a grass roots level. At this time, many dancers in Scotland engaged in often rather heated discussions of what style of dance best represented "Scottishness." The positioning of each individual in these discussions depended heavily on that individual's background and experience with Scottish dance. Some asked which of Highland dancing, Scottish country dancing or step dancing best represented this "Scottishness" and, in the case of the latter, what was the "correct" way of step dancing? Little consensus emerged, but it is important to note that the debate and arguments took place for they indicate that step dancing had come to be seen as something that contrasted other forms of dance already practised in Scotland. In 1994, I

attended and presented papers at the Scottish Arts Council's Conference on the Diversity of the Scottish Traditions of Dance, which was one of those rare occasions when representatives from most Scottish dance genres debated both formally and informally many of the issues presented above. I clearly recall the discussions about the place of step dancing in relation to other forms of Scottish dance being one of the main topics. Dembling articulates the two views of Scottish history that animated these debates:

There are, broadly speaking, two views of Scottish history. One sees Scotland as a broken, colonized country, culturally deformed from centuries of forced assimilation into a Greater Britain. The other presents Scotland as a willing participant in Union and Empire, industrious and plucky, maintaining its distinctive institutions while freely adopting new ideas and fashions. These views, though seemingly oppositional, are often both held in varying degrees by the same person—a manifestation, perhaps, of the “Scottish Antisyzygy”—complicating any attempt to neatly analyze Scottish identity politics. (Dembling 2005: 184)

These debates continue today, evident in online and social media responses to the upcoming 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Within the 1990s step dancing community, there were some who felt that embracing all forms of dance in Scotland was absolutely fine, while others felt step dancing had a premier, and perhaps “older,” claim to the “Scottishness” of dance traditions. People from outside the step dancing community in Scotland often disregarded the step dancing genre altogether, sometimes dismissing it as Irish rather than Scottish, and kept advocating the Scottishness of their personal favourite dance genres. On occasion, the same person, as in Dembling's argument above, could hold all these different positions simultaneously.

From the outset, many of the budding step dancers in Scotland aligned themselves and their dancing with Gaelic tradition in both Cape Breton and the Scottish Highlands. The fact that the two main summer schools where (Cape Breton) step dancing was taught are situated in the Highlands (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye and Ceòlas in South Uist) and that both summer schools had prominent direct or indirect Gaelic content as part of their program (Gaelic language and song classes for example) strengthened this connection. Furthermore, the Gaelic youth music movement, *Feisean nan Gaidheal*,¹⁰ adopted step dancing as one of their class options from the early 1990s. Of course, not all Scottish step dancers recognized a Gaelic connection to their dancing. An historical Gaelic framework was of lesser interest for

those who were more interested in step dancing for its percussive nature, or simply for its being a fun hobby and good form of exercise.

Embodying Movement Material Over Short Time Periods

The initial contact with Cape Breton step dancing was, for most learners in Scotland, including myself, of short duration: one-day workshops to weeklong summer schools being the regular extent of the annual learning environment with visiting Cape Breton step dance teachers. Thus the nature of the learning process was intense, as a lot of information had to be absorbed within a short time frame. So, when I and some of the other earlier students took it upon ourselves to pass on our newly acquired skills to others around Scotland and beyond, many questions arose on how best to teach this dance form and what might be the “correct” way of performing/teaching it.

As most learners came from a Scottish dancing world that is association-based and employs written dance manuals as guides, the notion of freely expressing oneself through improvised step dancing was exhilarating. This freedom was also rather confusing to many, as there was so little in our own past experience that was similar and on which we could draw to make sense of Cape Breton step dancing. Across the Atlantic, unspoken guidelines govern the stylistic criteria of Cape Breton step dancing. In Scotland, we lack a wider knowledgeable community that informally supports and maintains step dance aesthetics. Moreover, the contexts in which step dancing was performed were different. Consequently, efforts were made in Scotland to construct step dancing contexts and seek audiences that, in some way, correlated to those in the Cape Breton community.

The step dance community that sprang up around Scotland in the mid- and late 1990s was initially found in the small groups of those who attended regular classes and workshops—classes taught by the earliest Scottish students rather than by Cape Bretoners. With the formation of performance groups such as the Scottish Step Dance Company and Dannsa, and with Traditional Dance Artist-in-Residence posts created by local council authorities and the Scottish Arts Council, awareness of step dancing spread into the primary and secondary school systems as well as into some regions of Scotland. However, broad community awareness of step dancing did not emerge as it had in Cape Breton.

Scottish dancers found it difficult to identify Scottish role models and local sources of best practice. Even though some dancers started video-recording the classes given by visiting Cape Breton step dancers, the recordings

were no substitute for a continuous live experience in context. In the late 1990s, several gatherings were held in places such as Dingwall, Kingussie (both in the Highlands and organized by myself) and in the small rural and centrally placed village of Dalguise in Highland Perthshire. Some meetings were formal while others were more spontaneous, but they all provided opportunities for Scottish step dancers to dance together and to share what they had learned from workshops and visits to Cape Breton. I attended most of these meetings and I recall that they had a strong focus on the execution of steps and the relationship between music and movement. There was never one leader at any of these events; rather, different people facilitated the meetings and many different dancers took turns leading a section of a meeting. I would suggest that these meetings could best be described as open-ended, and the discussions often raised more questions than they answered.

Some of the issues that I recall being debated were, for example, what type of shoes would be best to wear to create the best sound for step dancing? Were leather soles better than man-made ones? Where could you buy them? Should one wear taps (sometimes known as “clickers”) on one’s shoes? Was it appropriate to wear taps in class, or should one only wear them for performance? Was it even “traditional” to wear taps? The reasons for one preference over another were as many as the questions raised, and the discussions continued. While these discussions took place in Scotland, the dancing community in Cape Breton danced barefoot, in sandals, in sneakers or in leather-soled shoes. Some wore taps on their shoes for performance and others did not. All options were apparently accepted by the community, but no doubt personal preferences influenced individual choices. There seemed to be no single “correct” type of footwear.

Another key topic in the Scottish workshops and meetings was the “correct” execution of the actual motifs, commonly referred to as “steps.” Each visiting Cape Bretoner came with different individual preferences, and so the pool of source material the Scottish learners accessed included many variations. My own recollection is that never did any Cape Breton step dancer teaching in Scotland use the phrase “correct way of dancing,” but, rather, presented a preferred way of executing his or her own “steps.” Some Cape Breton step dance teachers even pointed out in class how different dancers “from back home” did a common “step” in subtly different ways, emphasizing that this was acceptable in the eyes of the local dance community. However, this was, as I recollect, lost on some of the Scottish learners who came from an association-regulated dance background. Many felt strongly there must be a “correct” way of dancing a particular step. On some occasions, rather heated discussions would take place as to whether a step should end with a “toe-toe”

shuffle or with a “heel-toe” shuffle. Personal experiences were discussed and demonstrated at our meetings and classes, but consensus was seldom reached.

I recall one particular occasion from the late 1990s when the issue of “correctness” was strongly debated. This was at a seminar where the execution of a common reel step known as the “hop step” was discussed. It had been taught in one particular way by a number of visiting Cape Breton step dancers, and it also appeared the same on, at the time, the only existing Cape Breton teaching video (MacDonald 1992). But on one occasion, a visiting dancer who had lived in Cape Breton said, “that is not how I dance it.” The step was duly demonstrated with one small alteration, an added hop (thus subtly altering the rhythm), causing a mixed reaction from those present. Interestingly, some of the dancers present expressed the view that this was an “incorrect” way of dancing the step. The matter was not resolved and those present agreed to differ. The incident, however, left me reflecting on the differences between how a step is formally taught on the one hand and how it is actually danced on the other. In recent years I have come to realize that these two versions of the “hop step” are often used interchangeably in Cape Breton and perhaps not thought of as significantly different. While we debated, our Cape Breton role models kept dancing “back home,” ending their steps with either “toe-toe” or “heel-toe” shuffles, adding or leaving out an intermediary “hop,” as dictated by their preferences at a particular moment in a particular performance, or by their general personal preferences.

The “hop step” can be described in a mnemonic fashion as:¹²

Version 1: “step L, shuffle R, hop L, tap R, tap R” (counting: 1 & 2 & 3 4)

Version 2: “step L, shuffle R, hop L, tap R, **hop L**, tap R” (counting: 1 & 2 3 & 4)

The small difference lies in the “hop” between the taps of the right foot between counts 3 and 4 (bolded in Version 2). In Cape Breton both are often used interchangeably.

Another particularly significant aspect of the Scottish step dance community’s interaction, or lack of interaction, with Cape Breton step dancing, was that, as far as I can recall, nobody acknowledged the multitude of ethnic influences that have had some effect on step dancing as a whole in Cape Breton. Simonne Voyer (2003), Le Blanc and Sadowsky (1986), Doherty (1994) and MacDonald (1999) all point to aspects of French Acadian and Irish influence on both music and dance in Cape Breton. Since all the step dance

role models who came over to teach in Scotland were descendants of Scottish emigrants, it is perhaps understandable that the focus in Scotland centred on their Scottish backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, any non-Scottish elements or influences could threaten efforts to reclaim the Cape Breton step dancing tradition as authentically and purely Scottish (Dembling 2005). It is therefore perhaps ironic that, commonly, when Scots began performing step dancing in public around Scotland from the mid-1990s, audiences thought that it was a form of Irish dance.

The Linking of Motifs and Cells

For all the discussions and deliberations the step dancers in Scotland engaged in during the 1990s and early 2000s, a deeper discussion concerning how to combine elements, cells and motifs into longer sequences or steps seldom took place. Some of the steps we learned from Cape Breton dancers were quite long (eight-bar sequences) and involved many smaller but familiar segments put together in a particular order, but most steps were one or two bars long. In workshops, the visiting Cape Breton teachers would sometimes say that particular steps go well together, but most of the time we were left to improvise or make up our own routines with the movement material we were learning. Even though we observed these Cape Breton step dancers perform on numerous occasions, these examples still only provided snapshots of a living tradition. Personally, when I first became interested in Cape Breton step dancing, I found myself focusing on the execution of individual steps, not necessarily how they were linked. In my dissertation, I draw on Hahn (2007) and Sklar (2008) to analyze the fieldwork I conducted in Cape Breton from 2006 to 2012, arguing that

the emerging picture, based on the particular sources of the study, is one of a holistic transmission environment, where the processes of sights, sounds, and kinaesthetic awareness, all often subconsciously work harmoniously together to inform each actor in this cultural context. These transmission processes take place over an extended period, and in one sense they never stop, but develop into an on-going process that forms an integral part of daily life. The transmission of movement and awareness of rhythm (in the local music tradition) from a parent or family member, most commonly the mother, becomes a natural part of this process. The learning at home is further reinforced by social

dancing and performance. Initially, there would have been Scotch Fours (or Reels) danced at home, but when square dancing became popular, the dancing in the local schoolhouses, and later in the halls, became the prominent “third places” gathering contexts. Solo dance performances at both social dance events and at community concerts further added to the opportunities [for] knowledge transmission. (Melin 2012: 203)

Reflecting on how I have learned to absorb Cape Breton dancing holistically over the last six years, and also reflecting on my observations from the early 1990s onwards, I realize that the main difference between step dance learning in Scotland and Cape Breton is encapsulated in the difference in transmission processes. In Scotland, almost none of the elements articulated in the quotation above occurred. Perhaps they never could or can since the Scottish contexts and conditions are so different from those in Cape Breton. However, I feel that the main reason why step dancers in Scotland make up rather different types of steps than in Cape Breton results from differences in access to regular opportunities and contexts in which to dance, as well as in which to observe and interact with other dancers.

To illustrate how step dancing was adopted and used in Scotland, I will provide a brief description of the group *Dannsa*'s engagement with the dance genre. *Dannsa* was established in 1999 by dancers Frank McConnell, Caroline Reagh, Sandra Robertson, myself and piper Fin Moore, complemented by various fiddlers and Gaelic singers. The group is worthy of a separate study since *Dannsa* is a good example of a group that continually pushes the development and innovation of step dancing in Scotland. They have taken elements of step dancing and integrated them with old reel and quadrille figures, as well as with Scottish country, Highland and ceilidh dancing, but also with modern dance, creating new choreographies for stage and community hall performances. *Dannsa* draws heavily from both Scottish and Cape Breton sources, but since the early to mid-2000s, they have produced more original work, such as, for example, the creation of a dance to Gaelic working (waulking) songs, songs that did not originally accompany dance.¹³ In my opinion, as a former member of *Dannsa*, it is the combined strength of the different cultural and social backgrounds of the *Dannsa* members that makes for a very interesting creative tension that fuels the group's choreographic ideas.¹⁴

When the members of *Dannsa* work on creating step routines, they draw on their individual learning experiences from various Cape Breton step dancers in Scotland and in Cape Breton itself. Steps used are often labelled by naming the source, such as “Mary Janet's” or “Jean MacNeil's” step, and these

were combined to suit the music or song to be danced to. However, quite early on in their learning of Cape Breton step dancing, all members of Dannsa started to make up their own “steps” based on their own reference points and understanding of the music-movement relationship. These reference points would naturally have been quite different from those of a Cape Breton step dancer. As Dannsa’s work developed, they placed more emphasis on dancing to Gaelic song, particularly *puirt-a-beul* (mouth music), so that the close relationship between movement, language and song rhythm was explored,¹⁵ and Dannsa started to combine cells and motifs in a slightly different way from that which is customary in Cape Breton.

While dancing to *puirt-a-beul* does occur in Cape Breton (Sparling 2000, 2003; Melin 2012), the reference points—the shared aesthetic understandings and the music-movement relationship—differ in the two places, and so the resulting realization of dancing to *puirt-a-beul* is quite different. These differences relate to the way singers deliver the songs as well. The tempo, phrasing, places where a breath is taken and so forth differ in each place because of the difference in the singers’ awareness of the respective required dance rhythms. The dancers also, I observe, hear the songs and apply movements to the singing differently, as their cultural, or social, conditioning to the different soundscapes is different. I personally found that dancing to *puirt-a-beul* in Scotland, where it is presently seldom sung for dancing, was difficult until the singers were made to understand the rhythm and tempo requirements of the dancer. The difference would not necessarily be immediately apparent on a visual level, but would certainly be at an aural and a kinaesthetic or embodied level (Hahn 2007; Sklar 2008; Melin 2012). In short, the embodied flow of movement (the linking of different movements) to which dancers in one context are accustomed would be different from that to which they are accustomed in another context, even when dealing with the same step dance genre. There are differing levels of comfort and resulting “flow” in an individual dancer’s movement depending on that individual’s points of contextual reference in the tradition. In short, we learn to “know with our body” in our home context (Hahn 2007). I discuss the embodying of movement material along visual, aural and kinaesthetic modes of transmission in the Cape Breton context in detail in my doctoral thesis (Melin 2012). Leaving the details of exactly what these differences are for another time, this article illustrates that the Scottish dancers’ approach to the movement material can be distinguishably different from that of a Cape Breton dancer, particularly on deeply embodied levels, due to context, relationship to the music, tune/song repertoire knowledge, local aesthetic preferences and differing modes of evaluation of the movement material.

When I asked Mac Morin what he meant by his statement that “they don’t make up steps the way we do,” he explained that back home in Cape Breton, he would simply not combine movements, or experience the same “flow” the way the members of Dannsa do. Mac Morin felt that it took longer for him to embody some of the Dannsa material than he might have expected, as it did not “come naturally” to him.

I have personally had this experience in reverse: as I heard the music and observed a Cape Bretoner dance, my mind and body danced too, making up steps in my mind as I watched. However, what I saw performed was a combination of cells and movements that I would not readily have come up with myself. In other words: They don’t make up steps the same way I do! 🍁

Notes

1. “Dannsa” is the Scottish Gaelic word for “dance.” See www.dannsa.com.
2. I am fully aware of the mixed ethnicities that constitute the Cape Breton community (Scottish, Irish, Acadian, French, English, German, etc.), but the focus of this article is deliberately narrow to address the interests of Scottish step dancers in, and their relationship to, the Cape Breton step dancing community they have encountered.
3. I have previously studied and written about this in more detail in my MA thesis (Melin 2005).
4. Good studies of Scottish Gaelic society’s intricate kinship-based system and the causes for emigration include Bumsted (1982); Devine (2011); Gibson (1998, 2005); Hunter (1994, 2010); Johnson and Boswell (1985 [1775 and 1786]); MacKenzie (1991 [1883]); McLean (1991); Pennant (1774-1776); Richards (2008) and Smout (1987).
5. “Ceilidh” is a Gaelic word meaning “visit.” Traditionally, a ceilidh was an informal social visit, typically occurring in the evenings, that could involve any number of people. Hosts and visitors alike would share news, stories, songs, music, dance, food and so on.
6. A number of Scotch Reels are described in Flett and Flett (1985). Reels are for the most part two-part dances comprising a travelling figure, commonly a circle or a figure of eight, danced by, in this case, four dancers, alternated by steps danced on the spot.
7. The main organizations are The Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing and Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association. There are several national dance teachers’ organizations responsible for teacher accreditation and medal tests for dance students, including the United Kingdom Alliance of Professional Teachers of Dance (UKAPTD), British Association of Teachers of Dance and Scottish Dance Teachers Alliance.

8. See <http://www.rscds.org/help/history.html> for a history of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society.

9. Doherty (1996, 2006); Dunlay and Greenberg (1996); Feintuch (2004); Gibson (1998, 2005); and Graham (2006) describe and analyze the Cape Breton music tradition.

10. Fèisean nan Gàidheal was established in 1991 as the independent umbrella association of the fèis movement. *Fèis* is “festival” in Gaelic (the plural is *fèisean*), and the fèis movement was designed to provide an alternative to competition in which children could learn traditional Gaelic-centred expressive forms (including music, dance and song). According to the Fèisean nan Gàidheal website, approximately 13,000 young people participate in Fèisean nan Gàidheal–supported activities (Fèisean nan Gàidheal 2013).

11. Although labanotation requires training to use (both for transcription and interpretation), I provide it here because it offers the most widely accepted form of dance transcription among dance scholars.

12. See the *MUSICultures* 40-1 playlist on YouTube for examples of these. Version 1 can be seen danced by a young boy at 11 minutes and 50 seconds in “Chestico Days 2009” and Version 2 can be seen danced by Harvey Beaton four times beginning exactly 60 seconds into “Harvey Beaton.”

13. For information on the waulking tradition, see, for example, Campbell and Collinson (1981).

14. Danna is currently the only professional traditional dance group in Scotland, and was in 2012 shortlisted for a Creative Scotland award under the category Scotland’s Traditional Arts, Scots and Gaelic Award.

15. For information about puirt-a-beul, see, for example, Sparling (2000, 2003, 2005, 2011) or Lamb (2012).

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