“Putting the dirt back in”
an investigation of step dancing in Scotland

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For

Emma, Solveig, Ingrid and Magnus
“... when you have the dirt in there - grace notes, connective tissue between notes, ways of entering and leaving notes, like emotional buttons - and play in a rhythmic way, it goes deeper ... a swingy thing going on and it is scary good ...”

Alasdair Fraser, 2005
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Mats Melin, Limerick, May 2005
Abstract

“Putting the dirt back in” – an investigation of step dancing in Scotland

Since about 1990 Cape Breton musicians and step dancers have been invited to Scotland to share, through workshops and concerts, their style of music and dance. A relatively small number of the traditional dancing and music community in Scotland has taken a great interest in this style. The historical links between Scotland and Cape Breton have been researched and a small ‘revival’ of step dancing has taken place.

This investigation looks at several issues in this process by placing it in a revival framework. I set the scene by identifying what Cape Breton and Scottish styles of traditional dancing included in 1990, comparing general aesthetics and how they exist contextually. The interest or ‘revival’ group in Scotland generally feel this style of music and dance is ‘Scottish’ and that is has a place on the traditional dance scene of Scotland. I examine the catalyst for this interest, and outline some examples of the historical references that back up this ‘claim’ of Scottishness. With the help of a case study of Cape Breton step dancer Harvey Beaton, I seek to illustrate; one, the Cape Breton dance context in this process; two, the relationship between and difference in context of step dancing in Cape Breton and Scotland; and three, that within the Scottish ‘revival’ certain aspects of the Cape Breton tradition are emphasised, while others are paid less attention. The Cape Breton music and dance is understood here as being inter-connected, so even if the study is primarily focused on the dance aspect, music is always taken into account.

Introduction

Percussive step dancing as it is danced in Scotland today is a relatively new style of dance on the Scottish traditional dance scene. This thesis investigates this phenomenon and focuses on the period of 1990 to 2005 in which Scottish dancers and musicians initially either discovered this style of dancing either when visiting (primarily) Cape Breton Island in Maritime east-coast Canada; or when attending workshops in Scotland where Cape Breton musicians and dancers had been invited to share their tradition. A relatively small number of individuals living in Scotland have taken a great interest in the Cape Breton style of step dancing and music during this period. The historical and cultural links between Cape Breton and Scotland have been explored and advocated from the very beginning of this process by those involved in reviving step dancing and popularising the Cape Breton style of playing music. In this investigation, the case study Cape Breton step dancer Harvey Beaton, is providing the platform from which I seek to illustrate; one, the Cape Breton dance context in this process; two, the relationship between and difference in context of step dancing in Cape Breton and Scotland; and three, that within the Scottish ‘revival’ certain aspects of the Cape Breton tradition are emphasised, while others are paid less attention. By applying Livingston’s (1999) suggested theoretical framework of a revival on the process, I seek to place step dancing on the Scottish cultural scene.

This investigation into step dancing in Scotland is as much a journey of finding and locating myself as a dancer and person, as it is a search for answers to various questions regarding the process of revival and in particular how this revival relates to step dancing in Scotland. Since 1992 I have been part, to some extent, of making people aware of step
dancing as a traditional style of dance in Scotland, as well as just enjoying and exploring the rhythmical and subtle percussive possibilities within this style of dance.

However, Scottish dance and music has been part of my life since I was ten years old. I did not grow up in a traditional music and dance environment of any kind. I was born and raised in suburban Stockholm, Sweden. It was a concrete jungle but still close to nature and lakes. My interest in Irish and Scottish music was awakened through the media and through an uncle who encouraged me to listen to this kind of music. Contact with Scottish dance happened by pure chance in 1978, and as I instantly enjoyed it, I never looked back. My first ten years of Scottish dancing was done in Stockholm within the framework of the wider control exerted by the Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance organisations. Having said that, most of my solo dancing skills I taught myself by studying textbooks\(^1\), as there was no teacher to hand with more than a basic knowledge of solo dancing. My first teacher, however, was Don Gilliam, an Australian Scot living in Sweden, who taught me more than anything else that dancing should be fun. I kept developing my dancing skills, by attending every class and course available and practising by myself, and I started teaching the local Scottish Country Dance club\(^2\) in Stockholm at the age of 15. I began to explore other types of Scottish dance too, that I had not been exposed to earlier. Travelling to Scotland regularly, attending classes and workshops with various teachers, allowed me to explore Ceilidh, Old Time, and the village hall type of Scottish dance and less formal styles of Country dancing.

Throughout the whole of this period there was one thing that always bothered me. All the steps I learned did not seem really to reflect the music that I had come to love. At this point I had seen only very little of Irish dancing, and no one was teaching it in Sweden, but it seemed, from the little exposure I had had, that the rhythm of the steps reflected the Irish

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\(^1\) Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (SOBHD) Textbook and other related manuals published by the various examination bodies affiliated to SOBHD.

\(^2\) The Stockholm Caledonian Dance Circle (taught both social and solo dancing), and later also taught the same for the Stockholm Branch of the
music. In the late 1980s I attended a course at the Gaelic College, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO) in the Isle of Skye on a group of dances known as ‘Hebridean’ dances from the Western Isles, which had more of a percussive nature. A northeast English dance team called The Newcastle Cloggies with whom I collaborated, performed some of these dances. It was then that I discovered step dancing as taught by Cape Bretoners, and particularly, by Harvey Beaton, who taught summer workshops at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The first time I saw it “it clicked”. Here was a man dancing to Scottish music, played in an even more rhythmic way than I was used to, and his footwork reflected the music down to the last beat. I had found what I was looking for, at last.

The question was, however, how Scottish was it? Some of those present advocated a strong Scottish connection historically and the Cape Bretoners themselves confirmed their Scottish heritage. I suppose you hear and see what you want to hear and see. The dancing and the music were exciting and there was a Scottish link. At that point I certainly never stopped to reflect on how much the dancing and the music could have changed and been influenced in Cape Breton since it arrived with Scottish settlers some 200 years ago. Or even considered how much that different environment might possibly have affected the tradition. Now some 13 years after I started step dancing in this particular style, I reflect on the process, and my own involvement in performing and promoting it, but also realise that I now think more about it from an ‘emic’ Cape Breton perspective rather than from a Scottish one, which is where I have been all these years.

I am Swedish and that will never change, I have come a long way from my first years of dance experience in Sweden. I have spent the last 10 years as a professional dancer, teacher, choreographer and performer in Scotland. I spend my professional life promoting all

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3 Interestingly enough, in reflecting on my first visit to Cape Breton, I remember that I felt more at home with the landscape and the climate there than I do with the equivalent in Scotland. Heavily forested, lakes and the majority of houses constructed out of wood Cape Breton was very similar to Sweden.
types of Scottish dance all round the country and beyond. I cannot help, however, wondering what the Scots actually make of me, as someone with a very different cultural background doing what I do?

With this investigation I am now trying to perform the difficult task of ‘othering’ myself from both the Scottish and Cape Breton points of view that I may have, and seeking to investigate step dancing in Scotland in an objective way.

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Chapter 1 – Revival – the transformation of a tradition

1.1 - “Putting the dirt back in!” – an investigation of step dancing in Scotland

This thesis is an investigation of step dancing in Scotland. Over the past 15 years or so step dancers and musicians from Cape Breton Island, in the province of Nova Scotia off the east coast of Canada, have received invitations to Scotland to share their style of dance and music. This process has led to debates on the origin of this vernacular dance form, its level of Scottishness, and whether to refer to it as ‘Scottish’, ‘Cape Breton’ or just ‘step dancing.’ Some argue for an Irish origin, while others hold on to completely ‘Scottish’ roots, claiming step dancing never died out in Scotland. One observer of this process states:

“What is interesting in this case is that a small but influential segment of the traditional Scottish music and dance community is in effect arguing that Cape Breton’s traditions are more authentically Scottish than their own. It is an argument for the counterflow of cultural authenticity from the diaspora to the source”

(Dembling 2005:1)

It is this ‘counterflow’ of music and step dance style from the diaspora to Scotland that makes this process both interesting and problematical. Several of those involved in the process have used the word ‘revival’, as have some of those writing about it (Moore 1994, Bennett 1994, MacEachen 2002).

In this thesis I ask, is this revival a ‘revival’ of an indigenous Scottish tradition? If this is a ‘revival’ there is no precedent in Scotland for it in recent times, because interestingly enough, the few indigenous memories of step dancing lingering in Scotland are not actively being ‘revived’. For example, all Scottish music and song revivals described in Ailie Munro’s The Democratic Muse (1996) deal with revival scenarios within Scotland, but none where the source material is in the diaspora. This seems to indicate that from a Scottish point
of view, revival concerns something indigenous. Of course, Scottish dance traditions have been modified by, and created out of, non-domestic influences over the centuries, but again those who have promoted them, for example the RSCDS\(^1\) and the Highland Dancing organisations, have not made an issue of the many non-Scottish aspects in their dance traditions.

Revivals are selective by nature, as will be explained later, but how selective has this particular ‘revival’ process been? What aspects of the Cape Breton culture has been embraced and which have not? Is it the case that aspects of the Cape Breton cultural context and identity, that are vital for its thriving nature, have seemed less relevant or been deemed difficult to implement in Scotland in the eyes of the revivalists? It is of course unrealistic to think that one could import a whole cultural environment. But how does this selectiveness affect the revival process and its impact on other Scottish dance and music traditions?

**Definitions**

1.2.1 - Step dancing

The term *step dance* is throughout this thesis read as meaning a form of percussive footwork. The basics of step dancing is the creation of percussive effects complementary to the music, by beating out the rhythm using toes and heels, brushing and low hopping movements. These are combined in motifs, some of which are common to most dancers, others are known and used only by individual dancers. These motifs are then combined into what is referred to as steps by the performers. This definition should not be confused with the term ‘step dance’ as used sometimes in Scotland referring to what is commonly labelled ‘Highland Dancing’ and which within Scottish Country Dance circles is referred to as ‘Ladies Step Dancing’. Both forms are performed in soft dancing pumps and draw heavily on aesthetics borrowed from

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\(^1\) Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. The English origins of Country Dancing are often not referred to. It is the ‘Scottish’ version of the dance form that is promoted.
ballet. Elevation and lightness are primary features in these two dance forms, and percussive elements, if they at all occur, are incidental.

1.2.2 - Vernacular

Step dancing is treated as a “dance form in vernacular use” (Buckland 1983:321-322), thus taking into account its use by both professionals and non-professionals and its use within both urban and rural contexts (Stearns 1968; Buckland 1983; Foley 2005 p.c.). Vernacular dance is taken as community based and “shaped and perpetuated by the traditional process; it can be either social or performance orientated in character” (Spalding and Woodside 1995:2).

1.2.3 - Tradition

As step dancing is referred to as a ‘traditional’ dance form in Scotland. I sought a definition of tradition that I felt comfortable with, and I found Spalding and Woodside’s definition of tradition as a work-in-progress useful – “because tradition tries to describe such a complex reality and is so commonly used by so many people in so many contexts, it may always be a work-in-progress” (Spalding and Woodside 1995:249). I refer to Spalding and Woodside for many diverse examples of definitions of tradition. Atkinson (2004) discusses issues of selectivity, creativity, continuity, and ongoing reconstruction within tradition. Along the same lines Feintuch argues, “that tradition is a social and academic construct standing for and resulting from an ongoing process of interpreting and reinterpreting the past” (Feintuch 1993:192). Atkinson (2004), Feintuch (1993), Rosenberg (1993), Handler and Linnekin (1984), and Nilsson (1997) all discuss the paradoxical concept of continuity and change in tradition. Atkinson, for example, speaks of this paradox:

“On the one hand, tradition comprises a canon of texts that provides a cultural identity for its practitioners largely as a consequence of its perceived continuity with the same texts and their practitioners in the past and/or in other places. On the other hand, tradition is inherently unstable across time, its constitution always changing to
meet the circumstances and ideological requirements of the present. The paradox can only be resolved in so far as these ideological requirements express themselves in terms of the need to establish a perceived continuity with a particular part of the past.” (Atkinson 2004:149).

Seeing tradition as an ever changing ‘work-in-progress’, I feel Hobsbawm and Ranger’s concept of ‘invented traditions’, and the artificial distinction between the changing character of ‘custom’ and the invariance of ‘tradition’ not suitable for this investigation.

1.2.4 - Revival

By definition ‘revival’ is the act of bringing back to life, restoring, renewing interest in a certain ‘system’, which in this case is a dance form closely linked with a certain ‘system’ of music. The revival is a social movement, which strives to restore this ‘system’ “believed to be disappearing or completely relegated to the past for the benefit of contemporary society” (Livingston, 1999:66). Livingston argues that

“Through the re-creation of past music ‘systems,’ defined by Rosenberg as ‘contextual aggregates of shared repertoire, instrumentation, and performance-style generally perceived as being historically and culturally bounded by such factors as class, ethnicity, race, religions, commerce, and art’ (Rosenberg 1993:177), revivalists position themselves in opposition to aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in reference to authenticity and historical fidelity” (Livingston, 1999:66).

1.2.5 - First and second existence

The nature of this investigation brings to mind Hoerburger’s two categories of vernacular dance (Hoerburger used the term ‘folk’ dance) as first and second existence. As Buckland points out, Hoerburger’s concept is constructed within an evolutionary framework and is ethnocentric and unrealistic. It does not take into account either that a person can be part of both the first and second existence (Foley 2005 p.c.). Hoerburger’s theory was “not intended to be conclusive but to stimulate further contemplation of the problems of definition”
In this case, Hoerburger’s theory, only works as a sign of division between a vernacular dance form endorsed and used by a community in one location (the source) and the conscious interest, in and, by a small community of interested individuals in another (destination). In this case, members of both communities take part in and feel part of each other’s activities.

1.2.6 – ‘Step dancing community’

The phrase ‘step dancing community’ refer, in this thesis, to those individuals who have a common interest, at whatever level, in this particular form step dancing, but they are not bound together in any other way.

1.3 - A Descriptive Framework for Revivals

To describe the ‘revival’ process of the past 15 years I have primarily based my theoretical framework on the suggested general theory for music revivals as presented by Tamara E. Livingston. Livingston’s article *Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory* (Ethnomusicology, 43:1, 1999) presents a model for a descriptive framework for music revivals. As the awareness of step dancing is closely inter-linked with what is argued as a revival of ‘Cape Breton’ (Cape Breton here equates to ‘older’) style fiddle and bagpipe playing for step dancing in Scotland, I feel the model is suitable for analysing this process. The processes described by Livingston for music revivals closely mirror, those I see happening in the dance field, while other aspects she presents seem not to apply to the step dance revival in question. In summary, Livingston’s general descriptive framework attempts to illustrate:

“a coming together, a convergence of various circumstances and personal motivations centring on the fascination and emulation of a music culturally and historically distanced from the present. Music revivals are a product of both specific
historical circumstances as well as general intellectual and social trends.”
(Livingston, 1999:81)

Livingston sees revivals as existing in a continuum, where some endure for long periods of time while others never come through the planning stage. Also, she discusses the causes of a revival’s breakdown and the fact that the revival often serves as a catalyst for other cultural expressions “stimulating new sounds, new textures, and new repertoires” (Livingston, 1999:81). Furthermore, Livingston discusses the tendency of revivals to react against modernity (where mass culture is considered a hallmark), while at the same time being a product of it – “they partake in the discourse of modernity even as they set themselves in opposition to certain manifestations of modernity” (Livingston, 1999:81).

1.4.1 - Livingston’s Model of Music [Dance] Revivals

A revival is a social movement with the aim of restoring, rekindling, reactivating, and preserving a tradition, which is believed by the revivalists to be disappearing or to have been completely relegated to the past. In the case of the particular style of step dancing examined in this thesis, it was almost eradicated from the public consciousness in Scotland. Livingston splits the purpose of a revival in two:

1. To serve as an alternative to and in opposition to mainstream or popular culture; and
2. “to improve existing culture through the values based on historical value and authenticity expressed by revivalists” (Livingston, 1999:68).

The occurrence of a revival does not happen at random. Social, economic and political circumstances motivate revivalists, as do practical considerations, such as source availability and the feasibility of restoration of the tradition in question. Where there is an element of ethnicity involved aspects of the revived tradition may be influenced “by the dialectics between the subgroup and the dominant group from which they desire to be distinguished” (Livingston, 1999:68). Also, in relation to this, the revival tradition, if seen as representing a
minority culture, can be closely associated with the dominant society’s culture. Thus, the revival expresses a difference without overtly challenging it. Furthermore, a period of the past can be seen as a ‘golden age’ of a certain tradition, and it can become one of the foundations of the revivalists. Livingston points out that an important part of a revivalist process is the construct and maintenance of the specific meaning and history of the revived cultural practice, and how these associations are represented and expressed (ibid.). The idea that revivalists tend to “collapse time and space in service to a ‘new authenticity’ defined by the belief in the practice’s timelessness, unbroken historical continuity, and purity of expression” (ibid.:69) is based on Bohlman (1988). Livingston expands those thoughts on folk song to include instruments and genres. Also relevant to this study is the notion of certain ‘acoustic’ instruments being favoured to accompany step dancing and ‘historically accurate’ styles for both the dancing and the accompanying music.

1.4.2 – Fundamental parts of a Revival

Livingston suggest that a number of fundamental parts are required for her model, but which does not prohibit each unique revival to add or take away aspects at their discretion; and which allows a flow between boundaries, is descriptive rather than prescriptive; and does not confine or predict particular dynamics of a revival. Livingston sums up these parts in six categories:

1. an individual or small group of “core revivalists”
2. revival informants and/or original sources
3. a revivalist ideology and discourse
4. a group of followers which form the basis of a revivalist community
5. revivalist activities [festivals, workshops, classes (my definitions)]
6. non-profit and/or commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market.

(Livingston, 1999:69)
Livingston discusses these categories in a universal context. I have chosen to highlight with bullet points those aspects, as well as discussing related topics, which are relevant to this study. This should illustrate the framework for this study.

1.4.3 - Core Revivalists and Sources

• The essential role played by a few “core revivalists” is central to the beginnings of a revival. They communicate by various means their vision, and consciously or unconsciously a small group of ‘converts’ is formed.

• The core revivalists can either be ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ to the tradition in question, but are distinguished by their strong need to ‘rescue’ or save the certain tradition and to pass it on to others.

• The creation of a new aesthetic code, musical style or ethos is what happens in reality during this process of ‘rescue’. This is done along personal preferences and the created revivalist ideology. Thus the tradition is transformed.

Bert Feintuch discusses the concept of the transformation of tradition in a music revival context by stating “rather than encourage continuity, musical revivals recast the music – and culture – they refer to. They are actually musical transformations, a kind of reinvention. And in reality, each revival achieves its own momentum with its own standard repertoire and styles and its own selective view of the past” (Feintuch 1993:184).

Returning to Livingston’s list of essential parts for building the revival, she states that:

• “Core revivalists almost always come from the ranks of the middle class as scholars, professional and amateur musicians …” (Livingston 1999:70). In this case one can equate musicians with musicians/dancers. Livingston elaborates on her claim that ‘music’ revivals are middle class phenomena

“which play an important role in the formulation and maintenance of a class-based identity of sub-groups of individuals disaffected with aspects of contemporary life.
Thus revivalist ideologies tend to be constructed on certain modes of thinking and structuring of experience that are shared by middle class people in consumer-capitalist and socialist societies. These include the categorisation of culture into ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ … an ideology of modernity, and the imagined community of the nation, among others. All of these belief structures and ways of thinking play an important role to a lesser or greater extent, in music revivalism” (Livingston, 1999:66).

- The revival repertoire, style and history characteristically rely on living sources and written historical references.

- Aesthetics and style of the revival is based on the believed ‘common denominator’ as given in written historical references and by living sources. This becomes the ‘essence’ of the style of the tradition and one that subsequent performances are compared with.

- The basic point of tension within a revival, and one, which often leads to its demise is, according to Livingston, the fine balance between adhering to the ‘stylistic norms’, and ‘essence’ of the tradition, and innovations by the individual practitioners.

In addition to this last point, Swedish ethnomusicologist, Ove Ronström (1996), locate the practice of a revival “as a fight in a Bourdieuvian field between orthodoxy (preaching authenticity) and heresy (promulgating development and change)” (Bakka 1999:80). Egil Bakka also points out that “extreme orthodoxy or extreme heresy (or indeed both simultaneously) have caused many a revival of traditional dances to flounder and sink; and all because, in our time of relativism, there are so few relevant new narratives of the past by which to navigate, regardless of our ultimate destination” (ibid.).

1.4.4 - Revivalist Communities and Activities

Focusing on those individuals who share a common interest in step dance, they could be said to form a social movement network and can as Livingston states be “distinguished from other groups commonly studied by anthropologists (e.g. kinship groups, village
communities) ‘by their fluidity of membership, their impermanence and their ideological focus’ (Winthrop 1991)” (Livingston 1999:72).

- Revivalist groups are non-territorial.
- The membership may span both local and national boundaries.
- They bring people together that may otherwise never have met.
- The group may distance itself from its own temporal and geographical location by referring to an idealised ‘homeland’
- Using newsletters, websites, emails, and magazines to stay in contact with one another can reinforce a sense of community.
- Festivals, workshops and seminars bring people physically together and are crucial to the revival mechanism’s survival. The social interaction reinforces the essence and discusses innovation within the revival group. These events supplement what people can learn by other means, for example, from books and videos.
- There is almost always, Livingston writes “a strong pedagogical component in order to pass on the tradition in a controlled manner. How well the revivalist community is educated about the tradition, however, varies according to the individual dispositions of participants” (ibid.:73).

There is no definitive way of categorising the range of motivations that bring individuals to revivals. Ethnicity, gender, generation, class, political and national sentiment issues are but a few of the many variables that determines, and to what level, there is participation in the revival. Even though there is a core ideology, some may choose to ignore it, some modify it to suit their needs and others search for “personal authenticity” in historical forms. Many are drawn to the revival form because it was simply unknown to them before.
1.4.5 - The Question of ‘Authenticity’

The most commonly contested issue in a revival is how ‘authentic’ the tradition is in relation to other disciplines of similar kind in a society. According to Livingston the word is used by revivalists to “draw attention to its [the revivals] supposed ‘time depth’” (ibid.:74). The term refers to a historical continuity where a tradition has been passed on through the generations without much outside influence or possibly in spite of mainstream markets. To make such an argument work, the historical research combined with “reactionary ideas against the cultural mainstream, must be carefully constructed and maintained” (ibid.:74). It is the ‘authenticity’ argument that forms one of the most important ideas behind the suggested aesthetic and ethical code of the revival. The actual term ‘authentic’ is not, to my knowledge, used within the step dancing movement in Scotland. The nearest reference is the use of the word ‘old-style’ in reference to a particular dancer’s performance style, which could possibly be linked to Livingston’s usage of the term ‘authentic’ with regards to performance styles among musicians preserved on field recordings (ibid.).

Terms such as ‘authentic’ are problematic. It is not the aim of this thesis to discuss the level of authenticity (i.e. Scottishness) of the step dancing of Cape Breton today compared to the step dancing, in whatever form it left Scotland with emigrants bound for North America. We may, however, be able to ascertain to what level step dancing is regarded as ‘Scottish’ by the Scots and others who are involved with step dancing in Scotland today. The Cape Breton view on this will also be examined in chapter 3.

To conclude this section it is worth reiterating Rosenberg’s notion of ‘transforming the tradition’. That is, that the making of a reviverist tradition based on an older tradition, and the construction of a revival history is never completely ‘invented.’ But rather, to use Livingston’s words, that ‘to some extent we all ‘invent’ our own histories; everything we see and experience is filtered by our own experience, our own internalised structures and our
own desires” (Livingston 1993:78). We are dealing with a particular process of historical interpretation and its transformation into practice.

1.4.6 – Application of model

By applying this model to the investigation of step dancing in Scotland it will inform us of how this particular ‘revival’ process is working, and what aspects of it are most important to those who take part in it. This thesis will compare the social contexts of this vernacular dance in both Cape Breton and Scotland.

Short historical overviews of the development of the Scottish and Cape Breton dance traditions will show where each tradition was placed when Scottish interest in the Cape Breton music and dance traditions began around 1990. With the help of a case study of Cape Breton step dancer Harvey Beaton, I seek to illustrate; one, the Cape Breton dance context in this process; two, the relationship between step dancing in Cape Breton and Scotland; and three, why within the Scottish ‘revival’ certain aspects of the Cape Breton tradition are emphasised, while others are paid less attention to.

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Chapter 2 – Reflection and ‘othering’ myself

2.1.1 Research focus

The investigation concerns only the revival of step dancing in Scotland between 1990 and 2005. It looks at the circumstances that served as the catalyst for this revival process. Music and dance are in this particular case interconnected. The Cape Breton context is illustrated, as is the connection between Scotland and Cape Breton. In the context theoretical framework of a revival I seek to investigate what parts of the Cape Breton tradition that are emphasised, and which ones are not, and how they are applied in a Scottish cultural context.

The investigation is aware of, but does not discuss, the changes in style and practices, in either historical or contemporary contexts of Scottish Country Dancing, or discuss the selective standardisation process of Highland and Solo dances since the formation of governing organisations for these particular dance forms. Nor is it studying the changes in practices in Old Time / Ceilidh dancing (label depending on context and style but encompass the same category of dances but with a slightly different repertoire). The investigation is not concerned with any other types of dance, old or modern, practiced in Scotland today.

While this investigation concentrates on the step dancing found in the communities of Cape Breton Island, which have predominantly Scottish heritage as influence on their traditions, it is also aware of that other styles of step dancing occur in other parts of North America. Margaret Bennett (1989, 1994, 1998), for example, discuss in detail step dancing in a Scots Gaelic community in Codroy Valley, Newfoundland, and mention step dancing in other parts of Canada. Dancer Hugh Bigney (2005 p.c.) mention step dancing traditions as part of his Scottish heritage on mainland Nova Scotia, and Johanne Trew mention that the
Scots in Ottawa Valley in Ontario had their own dance traditions, which were separate from the predominantly Irish influenced step dance tradition of the area (Trew 2000 and p.c. in 2005). And finally, Mylene Oullette and Brent Chiasson told me about both Scottish and French Acadian influenced step dance traditions in their native Prince Edward Island (2005 p.c.).

Finally, this investigation will not research the level of possible Irish or French dance influence on the step dance tradition of Cape Breton. For example, Colin Quigley (1985) describe step dancing of the Irish tradition found in Newfoundland that display similar aesthetics as that of Cape Breton, but this subject would be an interesting investigation in itself.

2.1.2 Reflecting and Othering

This investigation deals with a revival process of step dancing that I have been part of since its early days. During 1990-94 I took part in the revival process as a learner and a visitor to Scotland, and from 1995 as teacher and promoter of the dance form in Scotland. It therefore reflects on my own involvement and experience of the revival process, and I have had to step outside myself, “othering myself”, to look at my own interpretations, prejudices, and see the familiar with new eyes. I have had to confront the issues of being an ‘insider’ as well as an ‘outsider’ to the tradition. It is very much a journey out of a familiar place limited by the level of my objectivity.

The research process, reflexive and current, keep in mind the ethical responsibilities of the researcher to the sources and those involved as outlined by Finnegan (1992).
2.1.3 Research Methods

Due to my physical distance to my sources of information the majority of the information gathered was through Questionnaires. As time was an issue, the medium of email was used almost exclusively. Having access to a database consisting of people who have expressed an interesting in matters of Scottish music and dance, and who welcome information on such matters. Apart from using this list of names, the Questionnaires were sent to organisations, such as Feisean nan Gàidheal, with a request to pass them on to the step dance teachers on their list. So the main Questionnaire was sent out to a specific group of people consisting of as many of those that I know of that have taken up step dancing over the past 15 years. 34 questionnaires were returned out of a total of 96 that was sent out. 8 were returned due to ‘unknown address’ and having no postal address for these recipients, these had to be left.

The range of questions are shown in full in Appendix 1 and was concerned primarily on the individuals perception of step dancing; what was the attraction of the dance form that made the person start learning; how does step dancing fit in culturally in Scotland in their opinion; and questions relating specifically to the influence of Harvey Beaton on the emergence of step dancing in Scotland.

To balance the questionnaire sent to this selective group of people another set of questions (see Appendix 1) was sent to 105 people by email. This group consisted of musicians, singers, and dancers involved with other types of dance in Scotland, and some promoters of aspects of Scottish culture. The sources of addresses were the same as mentioned earlier. The choice was made entirely on what was available as email addresses at the time. This questionnaire received 11 replies, and some 15 never reached their destination. One reason for these returns is the use of spam filters by the receivers and depending on how you send your mail it may not get through. Most of the returns were due to the address list being out of date.
Modern technology was also used for interviews. One recorded interview using a Macintosh iPod with attached microphone was conducted. Another interview was done in the north of Scotland with a visiting Cape Breton source, whom I could not meet in person. With the help of friend, who asked the source the questions, the written answers were emailed to the source and me; and then the source corrected the statement and filled in any additional information and returned it to me.

Library sources, newspaper and other articles and web-based material are the sources for the background information and commentary on step dancing in Scotland and Cape Breton. My course elective on the development of dancing in the Scottish communities in Cape Breton consolidated information from various sources and helped me to clearer see the influences on and development of their dancing.

2.2 – Summary of the dance traditions of Cape Breton and Scotland in 1990

By 1990, traditional dancing in Scotland encompasses (in general terms) – Highland Dancing, governed by organisations and taught mainly through dancing schools and seen in public mainly at competitive events organised by the National Dance organisations. Country Dancing exists on several levels, but the main division is where it is performed is between being part of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Societies’ events, or else independently run. The main difference between the two is how much attention is paid to the ‘correct’ performance of steps and figures. Some of the main aesthetic criteria for these two dance forms are lightness, flow and elegance. Furthermore, the vernacular dance scene consists of ‘Old Time’ dancing, or ‘Ceilidh’ dancing as it is also called, depending on context, area and age range of the dancers. Stylistic and music preferences differ from one part of the country to another. In the periphery of this dance landscape, other styles exist, for example,

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1 For detailed studies on these matters I refer to Emmerson (1972, 1988, 1995); Flett and Rhodes (1964, 1996); Dunn (1991); Feintuch (2004a); MacGillivray (1988, 1997); Le Blanc and Sadowsky (1996); Campbell and MacLean (1974), and MacDougall (1922).
‘Hebridean’ dancing in the Western Isles, and dances particular to the Shetland Isles. In the main, the dance traditions are kept alive in village halls and other larger venues, such as Hotels, Town Halls and Community Centres.

In Cape Breton the vernacular dance tradition lives predominantly in the village halls. Square Sets are the only form of social dancing, often interspersed, with performances of solo step dancing. Many halls have an outdoor dancing area for summer time dancing. Solo step dancing, Scotch Fours (Reels) and Square Sets all feature at local indoor and outdoor festivals and concerts, where they often co-exist with displays of Highland and Country Dancing. The latter two dance forms now exist around the Island but are not the predominant forms of dancing, and their aesthetic appearance is the same as in Scotland. The vernacular Square Sets and step dancing are aesthetically more grounded and good dancers are said to be ‘close-to-the-floor’, ‘neat’, ‘light’ and ‘musical.’ Step dancing is taught both informally in the home as well as in public classes in the community. Square sets are learnt in village halls while they are danced. As in Scotland, Highland and Country dancing is learnt through dancing schools and dance clubs.
Plate 1

Map of Cape Breton Island

Map of Cape Breton Island reproduced with kind permission by the publishers Breton Books, Nova Scotia.
Chapter 3 – From a Cape Breton to a Scottish context

3.1 – Analysis of research material
Chapter 2 gave an overview of the dance traditions of Cape Breton and Scotland as they stood in 1990. This chapter will look in more detail at the context of dancing in, and the aesthetic values of Cape Breton through a case study of step dancer Harvey Beaton. Over the past 15 years Harvey Beaton has been the most frequently invited step dance teacher to visit Scotland from Cape Breton. Many, but by no means all, who are active in teaching and promoting step dancing in Scotland were taught by him and influenced by his style. Following that, this chapter looks at the factors that served as a catalyst for, and the resulting ‘revival’ of step dancing in Scotland

3.2.1 - Harvey Beaton – a case study
Music and step dance are, as part of the Cape Breton social fabric, are inseparable. This is illustrated in the following biography of Harvey Beaton, which describes his early influences in dance and music, and deals with questions regarding aesthetics. The reason why I picked Harvey Beaton is primarily because, in his own community of Cape Breton, he is admired for his style of dancing and piano playing, and because he was my first contact with this style of step dancing. The information was gathered from personal conversations, and correspondence with Harvey as well as literary sources.¹

¹ The full biography of Harvey Beaton is given in Appendix 2.
3.2.2 - Harvey Beaton – Step Dancer and Musician

Harvey Beaton is from Port Hastings, Inverness County on the west side of Cape Breton Island. His mother's family, MacDonalds from Troy, Inverness County, were considered dancers, but not performers, except for his mother, Marie Beaton, who did dance in a few concerts either alone or in an Eight-hand Reel.

Scottish music and dancing was part of his upbringing. Although no one in his family played the fiddle when he was young, he used to hear tunes on the local radio station. As a child he was witness to the music and Square sets being performed in his parents’ house. The family had a piano, which has resulted in Harvey being today not only known as a dancer, but also as a piano accompanist for fiddlers.

His mother Marie was probably the first step dancer he saw and, it was she who taught him his first few steps when he was about 13 years old. Harvey also remembers going to outdoor ‘Scottish Concerts’ in the summers in nearby Creignish and Glendale when he was growing up. The Catholic Parishes sponsored these events, and they essentially consisted of fiddling, step-dancing, and Gaelic singing.

At the time most people just picked up steps from other people in the home, perhaps at dances or in the house at parties. Classes close to Port Hastings were, however, set up in 1976 in Glendale and Creignish. The lessons were very popular and space was limited, but Harvey managed to enrol in the class at Creignish, which was being taught by Minnie (Beaton) MacMaster and Geraldine MacIsaac, who were both considered excellent dancers.

In the autumn of 1976 Harvey first danced in public at a Halloween Masquerade in Glendale. After that he was asked to dance at local concerts in community and church halls, and eventually at the big outdoor concerts in places like Glendale, Broad Cove, and Iona.

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2 The distinction between ‘dancer’ and ‘performer’ is discussed briefly on page ??

3 Minnie (Beaton) MacMaster is the mother of famed fiddler Natalie MacMaster, and Geraldine MacIsaac is the mother of equally renowned fiddler and dancer Wendy MacIsaac.
During a period of his teenage years Harvey danced every weekend in the summer at one concert or another.

Although he went to his first square dance at age 12 in Glendale, it was not until he was 15 that he started going to dances regularly during the summer. Every Thursday night there was a square dance at Glencoe Mills with music played by Buddy MacMaster, accompanied by his sister Betty Lou. At the dances it was common for a solo dancer to be asked to dance if the fiddler began playing Strathspeys between the Square Sets (which consist of Jigs and Reels). Harvey often danced solos at these functions.

Harvey began teaching step dancing and square dancing when he was 15 and has been doing so on and off ever since. He has taught dancing in several provinces in Canada and in many places in the United States. Harvey has also performed and taught in Cork, Ireland, and in several places in Scotland. He first came to Scotland in 1991 with fiddler Sandy MacIntyre. In 1992 Harvey came back to teach with Buddy MacMaster during Alasdair Fraser's week at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO) in the Isle of Skye.

When Harvey was growing up the dancing was never referred to as ‘Scottish’, although it was common knowledge that Harvey’s ancestors and those of the people around him were from Scotland, and that not just the dance, but also the music and all that went with it was their heritage. But the dancing was never referred to as ‘Cape Breton’ either, it was simply ‘step dancing’. The music though would often be referred to as Scottish as in the Outdoor Scottish Concert circuit. Many people referred to the music as ‘Scotch Music’ as well.

It becomes clear from Harvey’s story that step dancing is considered a social activity. In Cape Breton even when dancers perform it is in a social context. There is, according to Harvey, a vernacular distinction between people being considered dancers (many people are in Cape Breton, especially in Inverness County) and those who are considered performers. A
whole separate study could be done on this fine distinction, however when Cape Bretoners use certain phrases such as “… got the old-style”, “… has a close-to-floor style” or “… is a neat or tidy dancer” they often refer to somebody who is performing.

Harvey feels that the number of steps you have is relatively unimportant compared to what you do with them. One should not take the dancing too seriously. The dancing is about developing a unique style and becoming comfortable with the steps one knows.

Harvey no longer lives in Cape Breton but in Dartmouth (near Halifax) in Nova Scotia where he is the Principal at a Junior High School. Even though he visits Cape Breton regularly he does not like to comment on any recent changes to the step dancing over the last 10 years. He does not see any striking changes but people do continue to develop their own steps. Harvey, among many others, did the same some 25 years ago so nothing has changed in that respect. He points out that “as much as dancers develop and learn new steps, you can never replace the standard steps from generations ago. They are the foundation of the step dancing in Cape Breton. Those steps will never be replaced – simply complemented with other steps.” (Beaton 2005, p.c.). “I always say that the dancing is only as good as the music because the music determines how well you dance” (MacGillivray 1988:33).

It was only after he started dancing himself that he began paying attention to what other dancers were doing. He observed their differences and individual styles, even though they often danced the same steps. He does not recall asking too many dancers for steps, but observed more than anything else (ibid.). The dancers who had most influence on him in the early days were the aforementioned Minnie MacMaster, Geraldine MacIsaac and Margaret Dunn.
Plate 2

Cape Breton Dancers

Willie Fraser (aged c. 82) from Deepdale, Inverness County, Cape Breton
Step dancing in the Isle of Eriskay Community Hall during the Ceòlas Summer School 1997.

A Jig figure in a Square Set danced by students the Gaelic College,
St Ann’s, Cape Breton, July 1996.
There is no reference to other ethnic origins than Scottish in this case study. However, we will later look (3.4.2) at the research by Doherty (1999 and 2001), Feintuch (2004) and Dembling (2004), which all look at influences and change to Cape Breton music and dance traditions.

3.3.1 – Issues of Scottishness

The revival of step dancing in Scotland is closely linked to the ‘discovery’ of the Cape Breton style of fiddle playing and piping in the 1980’s when two respected Scots musicians, fiddler Alasdair Fraser and piper Hamish Moore, both independently fell in love with the music of Cape Breton and both are instrumental in this revival process. Both of them are important as facilitators of access in the early 1990s to Cape Breton music and step dance in Scotland. Alasdair invited Buddy MacMaster and Harvey Beaton to teach at his Summer School held at SMO, the Gaelic College in Skye. Hamish established his summer school, Ceòlas, which provides a place to learn and share music, song and dance in the Gaelic speaking environment of South Uist, but with a significant involvement of Cape Breton musicians and dancers.

It is worth pointing out that Liz Doherty’s research show that Cape Breton musicians have been coming to Scotland since World War II, and in the 1960s and 1970s several of them toured, performing their music round the country. The BBC also recorded and broadcast their music (Doherty 2001:3).

Fraser and Moore’s discovery of Cape Breton culture was not entirely accidental. The broader arena in which thoughts regarding Scottish identities are negotiated is summarised by Jonathan Dembling (2004). The key points are the failure of the 1979 referendum on home rule, and the following 18 years of Conservative rule from Westminster, which led to an increased nationalistic slant, 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 2004:6). Dembling continues his summary on Scottishness and identity issues:

“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.

The Lowland appropriation of Highland cultural symbols, … remains an unresolved issue in contemporary Scottish identity. While bearing little resemblance to Gaelic society past or present, Highlandism has a long enough history, and has been so widely adopted, that it is difficult to argue that it is not real. Debunkers of Highlandist myths do a historical service but cannot erase the fact that many of the nineteenth century inventions and romantic excesses have become firmly entrenched in the social fabric of the country. McCrone (2001: 135), attributes the rise of “tartanry” to the cultural insecurities of Lowland Scots at a time when they were questioning their ability to remain distinct from the English” (Dembling 2004:6-7).

Historically, this step dance (and music) revival has inherently strong connections with the Gaelic tradition of both Cape Breton and the Scottish Highlands4. An interesting observation is, therefore, that many of the individuals who are the driving forces behind the revival, are themselves neither from the Highlands nor Gaelic speakers. This would include people like Alasdair Fraser, Hamish Moore, and maybe I as a Swede would be the best example of all, proving the point that one’s heritage does not stand in the way of engaging in issues with which one feels a strong affinity. Dembling (2004) further discuss these issues of Scottishness and Gaelicness in Scotland.

4 See the source material for chapter 2.2 as references.
3.3.2 – Alasdair Fraser – case study

When I interviewed fiddler Alasdair Fraser in January 2005, asking what factors made him interested in the Cape Breton music and dance, it became clear that this was not only one person’s journey of discovery but it was set in the wider context of Scots seeking their identities. Carol Craig in *The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence* (2004) investigates these issues of Scottish identity and the lack of confidence in themselves.

Alasdair talks about growing up in a Scotland where his mother tongue, Scots, was discouraged, where the cultural self esteem – his own and the country’s – was low in his opinion. Playing his fiddle round Scotland in many different venues, he started questioning why the fiddle music was played in certain ways, and was it the right way? Alasdair felt disillusioned by what he saw as a lack of general interest in finding the ‘roots’ of Scottish music and dance. He tried to find his musical heroes in Scotland as he felt the only “way to learn a traditional art form is to identify your heroes and corner them, copy them and then develop your own style out of that” (Melin 2005). His frustration with the lack of fluidity in the traditional music scene in the late 1970s is apparent. In the Highlands, he says, the scene was not healthy at all and there were only a handful of indigenous fiddlers around, for example Angus Grant Snr. and Farquhar MacCreath.

Against this backdrop Alasdair Fraser travelled to Cape Breton in 1981 and “found the fluency in the culture of Cape Breton that I wanted in my own culture” (Melin 2005). He found people whom he felt expressed joy in their own traditions and had a depth of cultural awareness. Alasdair is often criticised for having an almost ‘missionary zeal’ in advocating the existence of the style, but he says that he simply got so excited that he wanted people to have a chance to share his experience. “When I see something beautiful I want to shine a light on it and ask questions about it” (ibid.). His enthusiasm often met with criticism in Scotland, where “people accused him of playing Canadian music even though the tunes were
from Lochaber, and they would say that the tunes had been away for too long, and why would you want to play the tunes like that?” (ibid.).

In 1987, Alasdair was teaching at a fiddle summer school at SMO in Skye. After years of posing questions on different ways of playing ‘dance’ music and exploring different possibilities; and constantly being met with a lack of interest in, or even denial of, a Scottish musical link with Cape Breton, he decided to bring Cape Bretoners to Scotland so that people could judge for themselves. Alasdair’s metaphor regarding the reluctance to discuss other ways of playing, was that the music and dance harboured a “wound that had healed over with scar tissue and I was opening it up” (ibid.). He argued that various forces had, in his mind, put restraints on the music and dance. He felt he was “swimming upstream against what the establishment dictated” when discussing these matters, and that it was time to inject life into a scene that was lacking in self-confidence.

For Cape Bretoners “there is an ongoing pride in their ancestry, in their Scottish roots, but now Cape Breton is their land” (Doherty, 2001:3). Alasdair said that the Cape Bretoners “were not making Scottish statements, nor representing Scotland in any way, they were representing the new world”. It was a duality he had found: they were “Canadian and yet Scottish, and Scottish and yet Canadian” (Melin 2005), and they were comfortable with their tradition.

As, seemingly, the cultures were related, Alasdair asked himself, what would be the harm in bringing the Cape Breton musical and dancing energy to Scotland? It would encourage people to allow themselves “to love another way of doing it” (ibid.). It would be like “bringing something back that could have been” (ibid.). But this last statement does not fit. The Cape Breton traditions have evolved according to the unique circumstances of the

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5 Alasdair mention in his interview the controversial topic of the ‘negative’ influence by the Presbyterian church on music and dance; and the aspirations by individuals and organisations of “cleaning up and sanitising” the music and dance to meet European ‘art’ ideals by adding new aesthetics (Melin 2005).
place. If it had remained as popular in Scotland as in Cape Breton, step dancing would also have developed uniquely due to its social and cultural circumstances. In reality it did not so develop, as the social and cultural circumstances in Scotland prioritised and favoured other aesthetics rather than percussive step dancing.

In 1992 Buddy MacMaster and Harvey Beaton, who are regarded as good ambassadors for Cape Breton culture in their home community, were invited to teach at the SMO summer school in Skye. Their humble manners and their confidence in their own traditions became a hallmark, as they shared their love for music and dance.

3.3.3 – Hamish Moore and Ceòlas

Hamish Moore’s discovery of Cape Breton music is similar in many ways to Alasdair Fraser’s story. Hamish shunned the competitive piping scene and experimented with jazz as he looked for something that would resonate in his heart and soul. Appendix 9 gives an account of how he discovered Cape Breton traditions.

Since that time Hamish has never hidden his passionate wish to see a revival in Scotland of the vibrant ‘Scottish’ culture he found in Cape Breton. To promote his ideas he created in 1996 a summer school, Ceòlas, which situated in the Gaelic speaking community of South Uist. Ceòlas is built on the “philosophy that music, song, and dance are all interconnected and interdependent and best preserved in Gaelic-speaking communities. (See Appendix 9).

It is worth noting that most of the Cape Breton tutors in the early years, for example Willie Fraser, had strong connections with the Gaelic language or were Gaelic speakers. This has changed over time as only a limited number of Cape Bretoners with music and dance-teaching skills have the Gaelic language.
Plate 3

Map of Scotland

Map of Scotland reproduced with kind permission by the publishers Breton Books, Nova Scotia.
3.3.4 - Seeking sources

In the early days of the step dancing ‘revival’ certain individuals took a more dedicated interest in the step dancing and began researching written references and searching for people in Scotland who could possibly remember it. Maggie Moore, Mairi Campbell, Dave Francis, Sandra Robertson, Karen Steven, and later Frank McConnell, and Mats Melin, to name but a few, pursued their own searches for connections between the music and dance culture in Scotland and Cape Breton, and how they fitted into it.

Written sources including references to step dancing are relatively scarce\(^6\), but the search for living memories in Scotland is perhaps of more importance in this context. Maggie Moore, who came from a Highland and Social dancing background, described one of her own discoveries:

“It can equally well be seen in Scotland where there are families, which have been famous for generations for their piping, or their singing or indeed their dancing. One such family is that of Anna Bain, from Leslie in Fife. She is the eighth generation of dance-teacher in her family and her mother, Sheila MacKay remembers being taught step dancing by her own mother in the 1920’s. … when Sheila saw me performing Cape Breton step dancing, her immediate reaction was:

*I can do that. That's the same as I learnt when I was young.*

and to my delight she proceeded to dance some of the steps that I had been doing myself” (Moore 1994:18).

The question Moore posed in 1994 was how many more examples like this would researchers be able to find round the country in “the last decade of the 20th century?” (Moore 1994:21). Similar recollections are described by folklorist Margaret Bennett, and Gaelic singer Maggie MacInnes and given in Appendix 10. One interesting aspect I find from my own experience and the example given by Bennett, is that some of the sources felt ‘embarrassed’ to admit, even to their own children, that they knew how to step dance, in case they might be ridiculed by those who “had been trained to dance properly” (Bennett 1994).

\(^6\) Some early Scottish sources, which directly or in-directly discuss the subject, are Topham (1776), Peacock (1804), Thornton (1804), MacTaggart (1824), and Allan (c. 1890). More contemporary sources include Bennett (1989), Emmerson (1972), Thurston (1984), Flett and Rhodes (1964, 1996) and MacGillivray (1988, 1997).
Fraser also speaks of this “denial” and that it was “OK to talk about it” when the dancing was becoming popular again (Melin 2005).

These recollections served as a confirmation to those involved with step dancing revival that step dancing was part of the Scottish dance tradition. But I question how closely the memories correspond to the current style of Cape Breton. To my knowledge no study has been carried out comparing these remembered steps and those of the Cape Breton tradition. Bennett (1994) does however speak of an exchange of similar steps between one of her sources and dancer James MacDonald Reid. Maybe, however, Moore’s statement: “…perhaps also there is a feeling deep in many of us that this dancing actually belongs here, and that we belong to it!” (Moore 1994:21), sums up the desire at the time to find similarity. There is room here for further studies within Scotland.

3.3.5 – 1985-1995: Initial contacts with step dancing
All of those who ‘discovered’ Cape Breton traditions in the late 1980s and early 1990s were musicians/dancers. According to those who responded to my questionnaires as part of this investigation, none of them were actively looking for step dancing and very few were aware of its existence.

Those who travelled to Cape Breton went for musical reasons, but all got excited about the dancing they found in people’s homes and in the halls. One was on a high school trip in 1986 and said: “My first steps were learned informally at a house ceilidh in Cape Breton. I taught the girl the Sailor’s Hornpipe and she taught me a couple of reel steps” (QMM03/05); another said: “…hearing the music, seeing the stepping and being amazed that I had not seen it before in Scotland since that is where my hosts … said it came from” (QMM04/05).

My questionnaire responses indicate that people first encountered step dancing in Scotland by seeing it either performed or taught by visiting Cape Bretoners first, and later by
Scots doing the same. They found out about the courses and events by word of mouth, recommendations, and through leaflets, which incidentally, are still the main means of communication, adding email and websites, between step dancers in Scotland. The interest group seems to consist mainly of people already involved with traditional forms of Scottish dance or music.

There were a few responses, however, that indicate both an awareness of step dancing and sub-conscious search for something like it. They suggest that they were aware of it from conversations with older people and TV programmes.\(^7\)

One source, coming from a professional dance artist and modern dance background, recalls questions being raised with regards to development of modern dance and issues of Scotland’s national identity. “A lot of interesting choreography emerged from young people then, using folk music, more than traditional music. Martha Graham … had written an essay stating that modern dance should use as foundation blocks the indigenous dance form of a culture” (QMM05/05). Subsequently the source and his colleagues questioned the validity of some ‘traditional’ dance forms. Years later, while improvising for a performance in modern dance the source was asked where he had got his Cape Breton and the Hebridean steps:

“This is my shame I had no idea what he was talking about, thinking instead that I was being very creative and inventive. It took maybe another 15 - 18 months until I heard of a workshop being taught by Mats Melin in Lochgelly in Fife, on Hebridean Dancing and/or the First of August. I remember being really stuck in the workshop because it felt like stuff I had been doing very naturally for years but now had to think about and be consistent on both feet, which was something I had never done. But it was the start of something big … It felt like this was old and authentic even if it was taught by a Swede! And I could make a connection between the early conversations … except this was me doing it and not talking about it. Maggie Moore who was at the workshop then told me about Mairi Campbell’s (and Dave Francis’) class at ALP in Edinburgh, which I attended for about six weeks before moving to the Highlands” (QMM05/05).

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\(^7\) Fiddler Aly Bain’s 1985 *Down Home* programme featuring Cape Breton step dancing is mentioned by the sources: QMM04/05, QMM05/05, QMM19/05, and QMM27/05
3.3.6 - The spreading of step dancing around Scotland

The initial courses at SMO resulted in classes being set in local communities. The classes were relatively few in numbers but their geographical spread over Scotland was, however, wide, as the course participants had come from all over the country and beyond.

At any time, since the late 1990s, there might only be around 15-20 people teaching step dance on a regular basis. Many of these teachers, for example, Frank McConnell and Sandra Robertson have since travelled to Cape Breton “to experience the totality” of that culture (Moore 1994:21). The number of people involved in the wider ‘step dancing community’ (see Chapter 1.2.6), fluctuates constantly and the core of enthusiasts has also changed over time. For example Maggie Moore is not taking an active part in the activities any longer. So the number of practitioners of step dancing in Scotland are relatively small compared to other dance forms, with both Scottish Country and Highland dancing counting practitioners in their thousands.

3.3.7 - Organisations promoting step dancing

Various organisations and institutions have directly or indirectly supported the spread and awareness of step dancing round Scotland over the years. Groups like ALP in Edinburgh, SCaT in Aberdeen and the now defunct Balnain House in Inverness set up regular workshops and hosted visiting Cape Breton artists.\(^8\) Local Councils have supported traditional dance projects, where step dancing often has reached communities and educational establishments (primary and secondary schools) as a result\(^9\), and has thus, often in combination with, for example, Ceilidh dancing, generated an interest in traditional

\(^8\) Adult Learning Project (ALP) [www.alpscotsmusic.org], The Scottish Culture and Traditions Association promote Scottish traditional culture and arts in Aberdeen and the Northeast (SCaT) [www.scat2000.co.uk].

\(^9\) The Highland Council (Inverness) initiative ‘Step 2000’ is one example, where the project culminated with a community performance at Eden Court Theatre in Inverness in 2001. Some of these Council initiatives have been in collaboration with The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust (STDT), which is an all-embracing organisation promoting all traditions of Scottish dance. [www.stdt.org].
dancing among the younger population. Several freelance teachers have taught step dancing at third level educational establishments, such as Colleges and Universities\textsuperscript{10}.

Fèisean nan Gàidheal is another organisation that has been hugely influential in spreading awareness, and the result is that youngsters growing up within the Fèisean environment see step dancing as part of their culture, and when older, will in turn teach it to the next generation (Appendix 11). Fèisean nan Gàidheal is a primarily Highland based organisation promoting music, song and dance with a strong emphasis on the Gaelic traditions. The perceived connection between the Gaelic language and step dancing is therefore emphasised in this context.

3.3.8 – Organisation within the ‘step dancing community’

There is no formal organisation for step dancing in Scotland. There has never been a call for one and I read it as a sign of a shared desire to keep the tradition informal. There are fairly strong opinions among step dancers on organisations\textsuperscript{11} trying to cash in on step dancing and formalising it. One source expressed “I think step dancing has the best chance of acceptance amongst Scottish youngsters, in particular, if not “taken over” by institutions who will inevitably want to codify and therefore limit natural expression” (MMQ10/05). However, a few sources expressed possible positive outcomes, as wider spread of awareness of the dance style if promoted by organisations - see Appendix 6.

\textsuperscript{10} For example: The University of Highlands and Islands incorporating, Inverness College and The North Highland College. These offer traditional music modules, which often incorporates a dance element. The Scottish School of Contemporary Dance at Dundee College incorporate modules of traditional dance, which include step dancing. The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) in Glasgow set up a dance module for their BA course in Traditional Music in 2001, covering all aspects of traditional dance, including step dance.

\textsuperscript{11} For example: United Kingdom Alliance of Professional Teachers of Dancing (UKAPTD) and British Association of Teachers of Dancing (BATD).
Informal get-togethers were organised for a period in the late 1990s primarily by Maggie Moore, and only a couple of formal seminars, supported by local councils, have been held.\textsuperscript{12} A couple of interesting issues raised at the time were:

- The participants did not feel Scotland was ready for a ‘Riverdance’ of its own, the general interest in and social context of step dancing had to become stronger.
- Scotland has a ‘clean slate’ and do not need to follow Cape Breton but can develop its own style.
- Canadian step dancer Jenny Dunbar said that “your steps are your footprint … there is no wrong way, some ways are more traditional, others are modern … work out what fits” (Melin 1997).

3.3.9 – Establishment of local dance groups and performance groups

To enable the running of step dance activities within the Scottish Arts Council and Local Council economic frameworks, some level of formal constitution must be arranged in order to access funding. So, even if there is no formal body on a national level, there has been no option for the local level. Groups like, for example, \textit{Hielan’ Toe} in Inverness and \textit{Inverkeithing Stepdancers} in Fife, have been formed. They can thus afford to bring in teachers and organise workshops to attract more interest in their activities.

Early on in the revival process, Hamish and Maggie Moore brought together various line-ups of step dancers and musicians for a number of stage performances\textsuperscript{13}, which drew attention to the dance form. TX Steppers, four young girls from Inverness, is another example of a performance group. Since then, the only formal groups established are \textit{The Scottish Step Dance Company} and \textit{Dannsa}\textsuperscript{14}. (Appendix 12).

\textsuperscript{12} Dingwall Seminar 1997 concentrated on historical contexts (the use of stepping in Reels for example), teaching techniques, musical awareness, and aesthetic points of view (comparing Scottish and Cape Breton views on aesthetics). Also social context issues, such as the role of step dancing as a performance and/or as a social dance were discussed, as were commercial interests in the style and the notion of it turning into a competitive dance form similar to Highland dancing. The 1998 Kingussie seminar was aimed primarily at teaching techniques and musical awareness. Both seminars were organised by Mats Melin.

\textsuperscript{13} For example, \textit{Ceilidh in the Kitchen} and \textit{Scottish Step-dancing Party}, the names alluding to the informal and social nature of the dance form.

\textsuperscript{14} For further information see www.scottishstepdance.com and www.dannsa.com
3.4.1 – Aesthetics and other issues

From early on in the step dancing revival there seems to have been a division in the level and type of interest in this vernacular style. On the one hand, there were individuals who were trying to understand the whole cultural and aesthetic concept of Cape Breton and trying to relate that to Scottish circumstances. On the other hand, there are individuals who are primarily interested in just learning the steps and exploring the rhythms. I have observed that some of the latter group came to be referred to as ‘step baggers’ by the first group, as it was felt that they prioritised quantity over quality.

In contrast many Cape Bretoners, like, Harvey Beaton, feel one should not take the dancing too seriously. This, however, reflects as I see it, the Cape Bretoners being comfortable with their tradition, while to the Scots, the scenario is something relatively new and different from what is in the culture already.

The aesthetics\textsuperscript{15} that are the reference point for many of the Scottish step dancers, were summed up by those 16 questionnaire sources, who had been taught by Harvey Beaton, when they commended his effortless and relaxed style and spoke of his lightness, accuracy of footwork, neatness, flow, timing, and musical interpretation. It was pointed out that he has wonderful steps but they do not look flashy or flamboyant. It is against the above aesthetics that the light and elevated nature of other forms of Scottish traditional dance are compared. The questionnaire sources say that step dancing allows individuality and personal expression, and is accessible by all ages, thus indicating that, in their opinion, the others do not, to the same extent. The close relationship between the music and the step dancing is seen as important, as well as the fact that it is not standardised, regulated or competitive.

\textsuperscript{15} Compare these statements with those given in Harvey Beaton’s case study.
It is worth reiterate what I mentioned in chapter 2.1.1 that the aesthetics described above could equally be applied to forms of Irish dancing and related forms of step dancing with links to Irish step dance found in, for example, Newfoundland and Ottawa Valley described by Quigley (1985) and Trew (2000) respectively. In 1994, Cape Bretoner Sheldon MacInnes, opened up a debate whether the dancing of Cape Breton had its origins “within Cape Breton itself or Scotland or Ireland or all three” (MacInnes, 1994) and that the issue was worth further study.

Another aesthetic issue that has raised discussions among step dancers in Scotland is what type of shoes are the best to use and whether to use taps or not. The debate has been on how the best sound can be achieved, and whether ‘taps’ are regarded as traditional or not. Again observing and comparing this with Cape Bretoners’ use of flip-flops, sandals, trainers and hard soled shoes with and without taps when dancing, seems to reflect a more relaxed attitude to this issue. As indicated in Harvey Beaton’s biography, there is a distinction in Cape Breton between ‘dancers’ and ‘performers’ and there are no doubt issues of the best type of shoes to ‘perform’ in, in Cape Breton as well.

3.4.2 – The choice of music for step dancing

The preferred instruments to step dance to come down to personal choice, but among many step dancers there is a strong preference for fiddle, pipes and Gaelic song. There is a general element of comparing Cape Breton musical aesthetics and instrumentation with Scottish ones. Cape Breton fiddle recordings are favoured by many for teaching and dancing to, and are compared with Scottish recordings in search of similar rhythmical playing by domestic artists. The use of accordion for the step dancing is less than that of fiddle and pipes. Ceòlas does not teach the accordion, but accordions feature, however, as part of local Uist bands

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16 Sean Nós and Old style Step dancing in particular.
playing for Ceilidh dances held during the course week. On the other hand, the fundamental style of piano accompaniment in Cape Breton music has not made a huge impact on the Scottish music scene. This piano style is, however, currently promoted through the Ceòlas summer school and step dancers are now aware of it, even if subconsciously, by listening and dancing to Cape Breton music recordings. The future will tell whether the Cape Breton style piano accompaniment will take root.

How Cape Bretoners found their own identity through their music and dance is something both Doherty (1996 and 2001) and Feintuch (2004a, 2004b) describe, pointing out how the Cape Bretoners embrace change in their music by, for example, pointing to the development of their distinctive piano accompaniment, the change of tune repertoire since World War II, the inclusion of many Jigs from the Irish tradition and the Cape Breton musicians’ own compositions. Doherty wrote:

“The younger Cape Breton players today recognise their Scottish heritage, yet they do not necessarily allow it to shape what they do. Their contexts are different and thus their musical language has adapted because of, and to rise to, the challenges of these new experiences. These younger players have embraced the music of their past; Scotland of the 18th century may inform much of their repertoire and aspects of their style; but now the older music of Cape Breton is also their heritage” (Doherty 2001:7).

Doherty continues by saying that “for the older people [of Cape Breton] all aspects of culture were entwined - the music, dance, song, stories - and the language was Gaelic” (ibid.). Both Fraser and Moore have at some point indicated that Cape Breton tradition is a ‘window’ on the Scottish music tradition of the past:

“Tempo, ornamentation, differing attitudes to correctness and the flavour, the loss of high bass, bowing styles, expanding technical prowess ... all of these are aspects of the fiddle tradition which have been subjected to change certainly since the 1920s if not before. When Alasdair Fraser, Hamish Moore, Mairi Campbell and others saw in Cape Breton something of Scotland past they were not wrong. When Hector MacAndrew told Winston “Scotty” Fitzgerald that his fiddle playing was “very close to the truth” neither was he wrong. However, the typical Cape Breton fiddler at the beginning of the 21st century cannot be held up as simply an uncontaminated replica of the 18th century Scottish fiddler. Rather the Cape Breton contribution to that tradition should be recognised and celebrated for what it is” (Doherty 2001:9).
Plate 4

Cape Breton Musicians and Dancers

Harvey Beaton at the piano with Buddy MacMaster on fiddle, Playing at a house party in Inverness, Scotland 2000.

Step dancers at the Broad Cove Scottish Concert, with characteristic fiddle and piano accompaniment. Inverness County, Cape Breton, July 28 1996
Dembling (2004) discusses the choice of instrumentation by the Cape Breton music revivalists in Scotland and the polarity among Scottish musicians between those who embrace the Cape Breton ‘driving’ or ‘dirty’ style, often hearing a close affinity with the Gaelic in it; and those who do not, preferring the indigenous ‘softer’, ‘smoother’ style and who argue that they cannot hear anything Gaelic in the Cape Breton music. (ibid.).

Doherty (1996 and 2001), Dembling (2004) and Feintuch (2004a) all describe the level of Gaelic language rhythm that is recognised as playing a central role in the playing of the older Cape Breton players

In the past five years the use of Gaelic song (puirt a beul) for step dancing has become more popular, this is no doubt due to promotion of its use at the Ceòlas Summer School, Féisean nan Gàidheal, the group Dannsa and by individual teachers and singers. Many Gaelic singers will encourage step dancing to their song if a dancer is present. However, not all Gaelic singers are used to singing for dancing (of any kind) which leads to problems for the dancers with regards to fluctuating tempos and stops between individual puirt-a-beul’s when a medley is sung. The process of interaction between voice and movement is regarded as both interesting and exciting by many step dancers.

The issue of the importance of the link between Gaelic language and step dancing is polarised. To those who are Gaelic speakers, feel an affinity with the culture, or are deeply interested in it, its importance to step dancing is referred to as fundamental, intrinsic or as very important. On the other side we have those not living in, nor identifying themselves with, the Gaelic culture, and to them it is often of little importance. Some find the link interesting and are interested in experiencing dancing to Gaelic song as mentioned earlier.

17 Other sources are Shaw (1993); Gibson (1998); Kennedy (2002), and Dunlay (1992).
Appendix 3 outlines the thoughts of some of the questionnaire sources on this issue. One source summed up the complexity of the issue:

“Having said that there are many fine dancers in Cape Breton who have no Gaelic but still I rate them very highly. On the other side there are some Gaelic speakers who step dance that I don't rate at all. I think it is a particular flavour which adds something when the understanding of the Gaelic language is there, but the understanding of dance has to be there first and foremost” (MMQ05/05).

It seems that Scottish traditional musical awareness has increased with many people through learning to step dance. This was confirmed by almost all the questionnaire sources, and some of them (who are musicians as well as dancers) feel their playing has improved or changed due to the influence of step dancing. Understanding the music enables the dancer to go ‘inside it’, exploring and finding the rhythm according to the same sources. A young musician and dancer describe her observations of this change in the music in Appendix 7.

3.4.3 – Is Scotland developing its own style of step dancing?

There is a feeling among over half of the questionnaire sources that a ‘Scottish’ style of some description is developing. What they see is, in my opinion, the concept of ‘transforming the tradition’ as described by, for example, Rosenberg (1993) and Feintuch (1993) in Chapter 1. The difference in context and surrounding tradition affect the style. Dancing to music, which has not got the Cape Breton style, and different teaching techniques that are not in use there, is seen as contributing to this change. Other influences mentioned are the issues of a perceived deeper musical understanding in Cape Breton, and that they as a community are secure in their identity as opposed to ‘Scottish insecurities’. “However, confident the dance musicians in Scotland [are] they are borne of an education system which belittles traditional music and dance and does little to develop and encourage the arts of any form in this country” (MMQ05/05). Integration with other forms of dance and Scots teaching
other Scots are more influential factors. On a more technical level, Scots explore Jig steps to a much greater extent than do Cape Bretoners. Quoted comments are given in Appendix 5.

When it comes to creativity, Dannsa, is a good example of a group that pushes the development and innovation of step dancing in Scotland forward. They have taken elements of step dancing and integrated them with old Reel and Quadrille figures, Scottish Country, Highland and Ceilidh dancing, but also modern dance, creating new choreographies. Dannsa draw heavily on their material from both Scottish and Cape Breton sources, but in the last few years more original work has appeared, as for example the creation of a dance to Gaelic working (Waulking) songs. In my opinion, as a member of Dannsa, it is the combined strength of the different cultural and social backgrounds of the Dannsa members that make for a very interesting creative tension and spark the groups choreographic ideas. Dannsa is currently the only professional traditional dance group in Scotland.

Recent years have seen a number of collaborations and fusion choreographies using step dancers performing with other traditional dancers as well as modern dancers\(^\text{18}\). Often the step dancers are the very people that create and choreograph these pieces exploring new ideas and dimensions.

### 3.4.4 – Merchandise market

There is no major commercial merchandise market involved with this revival. A few music CDs are available, such as recordings by Karen Steven, Hamish Moore and The Scottish Step Dance Company. There are no manuals or Scottish made instructional videos on the market. Some Cape Breton instructional step dance videos circulate among those involved.

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\(^{18}\) One example is the STDT commissioned piece ‘Generating Heat’ (2003), which fused step, Highland, Swedish traditional, and modern dance with Gaelic song, a Scots ballad, and fiddle music.
Chapter 4 – The process of transforming a dance tradition in Scotland

This chapter applies the categories that make up a revival as outlined by Livingston in Chapter 1 to the step dancing revival in Scotland. The events and data described in Chapter 3 are discussed and placed in Livingston’s model for a descriptive framework for revivals, starting with the circumstances that led to the step dancing revival in Scotland.

4.1 – Revival catalyst

Livingston (1999) states that revivals do not happen at random, and the Scottish step dance ‘revival’ is no exception. I interpret the revival as a reaction by certain individuals within Scotland, to a Scotland that at the time, in their opinion, lacked self-confidence in its own culture and identity. They felt that Scotland had lost contact with its roots through a refinement process of the culture’s aesthetics towards continental ‘art’ ideals. Alasdair Fraser talks about a Scotland that was ‘cleaning up’ the culture and making it ‘acceptable’ (Melin 2005). The social, economic and political circumstances within Scotland and the UK in general, all played a hand here in motivating these individuals to search for, what I would call, the ‘soul’ of the country. Traditional musicians, or dancers are marginalised within the ‘arts’ in Scotland, and the arts themselves are in turn marginalised compared to other social, economic and political considerations. Discovery of ‘Cape Breton’ culture and traditions, and the historical links between the two places, and most importantly, falling in love with the prevailing and vibrant ‘Scottish essence’ still alive in the Cape Breton culture, unquestionably led to it being embraced. ‘Finding’ sources that were very much alive and
accessible in Cape Breton provided an opportunity for sharing their cultural heritage with a wider ‘Scottish’ audience.

4.2 – “Restoring what could have been!”

In bringing Cape Breton traditions to Scotland, Alasdair Fraser described it as “restoring what could have been” (Melin 2005) and Hamish Moore wrote “I am grateful that Cape Breton exists and has preserved and held our music and dance culture in trust” (Moore 1994a). Moore’s statement in particular states a notion strongly held, by many, that Cape Breton and Scottish cultures are closely linked if not the same. These statements sum up the reasoning behind the revival. However, as I stated in chapter 3.3.2, the notion of ‘restoring what could have been’ does not work in reality.

Those individuals, for example Maggie Moore, who searched for step dancing in Scotland, found both memories and a few people who could do it. It seems, however, that these discoveries served at best as confirmation that the Cape Breton style was ‘Scottish’, but no learning of steps from these few sources seems to have occurred (3.3.4).

4.3 – A challenge to the establishment?

The Scottish revival in step dancing also sees elements that challenge the ‘established’ ways of dancing according to the rules and regulations of Scottish dance organisations, for example RSCDS and SOBHD¹, by bringing in a vernacular dance form that has, as its ‘essence’, an improvisational nature. This would correspond to Livingston’s (1999) second purpose for a revival, which states that the revival serves as an alternative to, and in opposition to, mainstream or popular culture. Step dancing requires a deeper musical understanding and demands that music be played in a particular rhythmical and driving way,

¹ The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society and The Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing.
which differs from domestic norms, which are characterised by smoother and lighter playing. At the same time, some of those involved with step dancing advertise it as rightfully part of the domestic traditions, thus claiming association with the dominant forms of dance (Moore 1994b).

There is also within the revival an element of polarisation, whereby the Gaelic aspects of Cape Breton culture have been emphasised, and by extension the connection with the Scottish Gaidhealtacht. Some individuals see the connection with Gaelic as an essential aspect of understanding the concept of step dancing and its Cape Breton cultural context. Of course, others do not place the same or any emphasis on the Gaelic content, and assert that it is an understanding of ‘dance’ that must be there first, pointing out that many excellent Cape Breton step dancers have no Gaelic (see 3.4.2 and Appendix 3). I see an element of constructed division between Gaelic and Scots aspects of Scottish culture at play here, and this would correspond to Livingston’s reference to the revival tradition being influenced ‘by the dialectics between the subgroup and the dominant group from which they desire to be distinguished” (Livingston, 1999:68).

Another aspect that could be seen as a reaction to the ‘established ways’ is the reluctance by many to dance to the accordion, the preferred instrument for social dancing in Scotland. It is the fiddle, pipes and to a growing extent Gaelic song that are the preferred step dance accompaniment. It may be argued that this could be due to the personal preference of dancers who claim that the accordion does not feel ‘right’ to dance to. But in contrast to this view, the Sean Nós dance tradition of Connemara, Ireland, is predominantly danced to accordion music. Two facts that no doubt play a part in the choice of instrument are that the accordion is almost never used in Cape Breton to accompany step dancing, and that it was not part of the tradition when it emigrated. Is it possible that the instrumentation issue ties in
Plate 5

Dancers in Scotland

Mats and Emma Melin, Sandra Robertson and Frank McConnell
Swinging in a Scotch Reel in the Isle of Eriskay Community Hall
during the Ceòlas Summer School 1996.

Dannsa : Mats Melin, Caroline Reagh, Sandra Robertson, Frank McConnell,
with Fin Moore on small pipes and Mairi Campbell (obscured) on fiddle.
Step dancing ‘in-a-line’ as the finish to a Scotch Reel, based on the Cape Breton Scotch Four.
Ullapool, Scotland 2003.
with revivalists’ notions of a ‘golden age’ as outlined by Livingston (1999)? This would link it with the notions discussed below about the connection with the past.

Liz Doherty comments on these tense feelings the revival process has aroused in Scotland from a musical point of view but it is still valid from a dance point of view:

“the more recent promotion of Cape Breton music in Scotland has aroused intense feelings, both positive and negative, throughout the music community. Perhaps it has been the active steps taken to promote Cape Breton music in Scotland over the last decade; perhaps it was the numbers of people embracing this; perhaps it was the very strong opinions voiced with regard to this tradition, but there has been a very palpable tension between the perceived dualisms of centre (Scotland) and periphery (Cape Breton) evident in Scotland over the last several years” (Doherty 2001:4)

4.4 – Connection with the past

Livingston (1999) suggests that the group may distance itself from its own temporal and geographical location by referring to an idealised ‘homeland’. In my own case, and I would also include some other teachers/performers, who have visited Cape Breton and experienced dancing in ‘context’, there, I would argue that there is a continual comparison between the two places. In Scotland Cape Breton stands for the ‘ideal’ community and social context with regards to step dancing. In Cape Breton the dancing and music ‘thrives’ naturally, while Scotland (as a culture) is still trying to come to grips with this ‘new’ concept. Of course I can only speak for myself, but many of the comments in the interviews and questionnaires mention this, and it emerges from my own discussions with other step dancers.

The use of, for example, Scotch Reels and dancing to puirt-a-beul, in teaching and performing contexts in Scotland, reinforces the historical connections between Scotland and Cape Breton as researched in Scottish literary sources\(^2\), since it connects with the use of Scotch Reels in Cape Breton as well as to the Gaelic dance song tradition in Scotland. It also connects with the current use of Scotch Reels in the Highland dancing tradition. This, in a sense, creates a connection with a period before the Reel dancing traditions in Scotland were

\(^2\) Primarily Flett and Rhodes 1964 and 1996.
changed and ‘cleaned up’ becoming used primarily for Highland dancing as indicated above. These historical connections are not of interest to everybody by any means, and some simply find the Reels exciting to dance when using stepping in them. The use of Reels in classes have, however, led to their occasional appearance in, for example, pubs and at house parties. However, Reels, as an old form of Scottish social dance is generally not known by the wider population of modern Scotland. This is another example of Rosenberg’s (1993) and Feintuch’s (1993) descriptions of ‘transformation of tradition’. It is interesting to note that, even though Cape Breton Square Sets are often taught in classes and at workshops, this ‘core’ dance of the Cape Breton community has not filtered through as a social dance to any great extent.

The revival has, nevertheless, rekindled a small interest in some indigenous set solo step dances from the Hebrides and the North-East, but these have also been transformed in the process (see chapter 5). For example, hard shoes are now worn whereas literary sources indicate that they were also danced in soft shoes or wearing socks.

4.5 – Revival motivation and aesthetic code

The reasoning behind the step dancing revival is that this vernacular dance form was part of the Scottish dance traditions, and as it has been ‘preserved’ in Cape Breton, it is therefore valid to ‘revive’ that form and integrate it into the current dance culture of Scotland. I see one of the main motivations behind the revival as the embodiment of the notion of ‘what could have been’ development of Scottish dancing and music in Cape Breton. Awareness among the teachers and promoters of step dancing constantly reinforces this idea. Once again I refer back to 4.2 and 3.3.2. Others, for example, Bennett (1994) and Reid (1994) argue that step dancing never quite died out (Appendix 10), but in reality few memories of step dancing

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3 Flett and Rhodes (1964 and 1996).
4 See Moore 199994b.
seem to have remained in Scotland. These few memories have, however, been used to reinforce the authenticity of step dancing as a Scottish dance form\(^5\).

There is an aesthetic code adhered to, which corresponds directly to the aesthetics of Cape Breton. The practitioners are constantly negotiating the fine balance between innovation and the ‘essence’ as found in Cape Breton. This aesthetic code was regarded by a majority of the questionnaire sources as ‘Scottish’ and I feel personally, that influences from other ethnic\(^6\) music and dance traditions of Cape Breton are not considered or acknowledged. Nor are the ideas of the ‘tradition’ as a ‘work-in-progress’ that constantly transforms, as outlined in chapter 1.2.3 and 1.4.5, discussed at any great length by step dancers in Scotland. (The transformation of tradition is discussed further in chapter 5.)

The reasons that motivate people to take up step dancing are as many as the number of dancers (as indicated by Livingston, 1999). For some people the reason is that step dancing is considered a part of their Gaelic community’s heritage, and they therefore explore and take an interest in the dance form. Others take up step dancing because they find the style and music that goes with it exciting, and some come to it out of curiosity. Others, again, are more interested in the technical aspects of percussive dance and are not particularly interested in historical aspects and cultural links.

### 4.6 – Core members and followers

The step dancing revival has its small group of core members, all of whom are dancers and/or musicians who would fit in with Livingston’s (1999) model as belonging to the middle class. The core constitutes those people who are most active in promoting the dance style, whether by teaching, performing or facilitating ‘events’ that feature step dancing\(^7\).

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\(^5\) See chapter 4.8.
\(^6\) Mi’kmaq, Irish, French Acadian, Polish to name but a few.
\(^7\) See Chapter 3.3.6-3.3.9
From a very limited number of maybe three to five people in the early 1990s I calculate there are about 15-20 people as a core in 2005. They are mainly ‘insiders’ of the Scottish tradition, but ‘outsiders’ are also involved. All are however, ‘outsiders’ to Cape Breton culture.

Conforming with Livingston’s (1999) model again, the step dancing community has no borders or boundaries. People who are interested in this form of step dancing come from all over the UK, and abroad, to attend the various activities that are available. As there is no formal organisation ‘governing’ step dancing in Scotland, anyone who is interested can take part at any time or place. A couple of constituted groups may have a membership policy to help fund their activities. The step dancing community’s size constantly fluctuates, as people come and go. Some core members are still very much involved and at the centre of many of the ‘events’ organised. Others, who were very active 10-15 years ago have moved on to other activities and may only occasionally take part in an ‘event’.

Livingston (1999) suggests that revivals bring people together who would probably otherwise not have met. The ‘step dancing community’ is drawn from many walks of life and, interestingly, the step dancing activities become ‘common ground’ where practitioners of, for example, Ceilidh, Scottish Country or Highland dancing meet. They would not necessarily have met otherwise, as some Scottish dance forms cross over less than others. On the basis of the comments in the questionnaires, I would argue that it is the unregulated nature of step dancing that mainly attracts people, as the other forms allow for only a limited or no freedom of interpretation.

The ‘step dancing community’ stays in touch mainly through emails, and word of mouth. A few websites feature information. Leaflets handed out at classes and among other dancing communities also assist in spreading the news. Many step dancers are involved in other dance and music activities so information crosses between various disciplines. This

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8 Ibid.
network is not organised by any one person, but relies on several people voluntarily passing on information. So again Livingston’s model applies to this revival.

4.7 - Activities

Festivals, workshops and seminars bring people physically together and are crucial to the revival mechanism’s survival as outlined in Livingston’s (1999) fifth category of the parts that make up a revival. Chapter 3 described Ceòlas and Strathspé Away as examples of festivals that centre round step dancing in Scotland. Many other festivals, Celtic Connections and the Hebridean Celtic Festival to name two, have featured step dancing in both a performance and workshop capacity. Many venues, such as theatres, community halls, schools and church halls generate income by providing their facilities for workshops, regular classes, and performances. In some, remoter, parts of the country these events can help the local economy, in that when a company, such as Dannsa, visits more revenue is generated for the community through providing subsistence and accommodation for the company. Institutions, such as STDT, SMO and RSAMD, also generate income from organising step dance workshops and courses. The individual step dancers, and groups in turn earn income. Many step dance teachers are professional dance teachers and performers, and can generate part of their income from these workshops and performances.

These workshops, classes, and other events are the main venues for social interaction between step dancers (and musicians), and particularly reinforce the tradition of, and discuss innovation, within the ‘revival’ group. This would conform with Livingston’s (1999) ‘pedagogical component’ of a revival, and as this ‘revival’ does not have any merchandise in the form of videos or handbooks to speak of, the interaction with other people at these ‘events’ is the essential way to learn more and confirm what you already know. The step dancing tradition in Scotland is currently transmitted orally. New ideas are tried out, both at
‘events’ like these, but very often in more intimate settings, as in the home, where in fact a fair amount of step dancing in Scotland takes place. Rather than hire a hall, people will, if numbers are small, meet at a suitable house (with a suitable floor) to exchange steps and ideas. Of course this also serves as a social event and often it is more of the latter than the former. This is, for example, the way the company Dannsa started out, and often carry on their activities (see 3.3.9 and Appendix 12).

4.8 – Authenticity

The most contested issue in this revival is how ‘Scottish’ step dancing really is. From researching the revival process, the following are examples of the different points of view held by people both involved in the revival and outside it:

1. Cape Breton and the Scottish tradition are the same;
2. there is a Scottish ‘essence’ to the step dancing tradition of Cape Breton which links the two traditions; and
3. ‘revival’ step dancing is not Scottish at all and is often dismissed as being Irish dancing.

Based on the information gathered in the questionnaires these points of view relate to the level of awareness of the historical links between Scotland and Cape Breton, awareness of memories of step dancing existing in Scotland and contextual matters of past and present Scotland and Cape Breton. People who are not directly involved in the step dancing revival usually offer the last point of view. Another aspect of the authenticity question is the significance of Gaelic in connection with step dancing, and this is one in which the points of view are quite strongly polarised (see 3.4.2). As Livingston (1999) suggests, authenticity is the aspect that draws attention to the historical past when step dancing was ‘common-place’ in many communities, particularly those in the Highlands and Islands where the emigrants
bound for Cape Breton lived. This history is reinforced by the literary sources\textsuperscript{9} referred to by the core revivalists in particular. The actual term ‘authentic’ is, however, seldom used, but the term ‘old style’ is often used in reference to the various Cape Breton dancers’ steps and individual dancing style, and also applied to Cape Breton style music.

4.9 – The difference of context

The main difference I see between the step dancing revival in Scotland and the use of step dancing, as a vernacular dance form in Cape Breton is its context. In Cape Breton it is very much a social activity where a performance aspect can occur as part of it, as I illustrated in the case study of Harvey Beaton. In Scotland, because of the small numbers involved, it is generally used as a performance activity, even though within the ‘step dancing community’ it is occasionally used as a social dance. I believe the most important factor for the survival of step dancing in Scotland is how (and if) step dancing can transfer itself on to the wider social dancing scene (see chapter 5). This would be another phase in the transformation of a dance tradition in Scotland along the concept as discussed in chapter 1.2.3.

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\textsuperscript{9} For example Flett (1964, 1996), Rhodes (1964, 1996) and MacGillivray (1988).
Plate 6

Dancers in Scotland

Young step dancers at Feis Arainn, Scotland in 2004 learning a Cape Breton Square set figure. Note that they are dancing in their socks as their trainers stuck to the floor making it difficult to dance.

Threesome Reels danced during Dannsa’s Festival – Strathspé Away held in Kingussie, Scotland, November 2004.
Chapter 5 – An ‘essence’ revived

This investigation shows that the main attraction of step dancing is its percussive nature and improvisational form, allowing for individuality and expression, which is very much contrary to the uniformity required in other traditional dance forms\(^1\). The wish to express oneself in an idiom seen as a part of an old Scottish tradition could be set against wider social issues of the Scots’ lack of confidence and national identity as discussed by, for example, Craig (2004). The relaxed style and non-competitive aspects are also highly favoured. Step dancing could be seen to be in opposition when compared to other forms of Scottish dance. For example, Dembling found that “among Cape Breton enthusiasts … were … reluctant to dismiss contemporary Scottish practises as inauthentic, even when their characterisation indicate otherwise” (Dembling 2004:7). However, my personal research and experience lead me to see, it rather as an addition to the other forms of Scottish traditional dance\(^2\). Most step dancers are actively involved with these other forms, and groups like Dannsa integrate step dancing with these other forms of traditional dance in their work.

The historical and contemporary links with the Gaelic language and the Highlands are strong and often emphasised. To some people these links are essential and to others they are not, and this division will no doubt remain as step dancers in Scotland are drawn from varied cultural backgrounds. The fact is that the increased interest in links between language and dance has led to more interaction between singers (particularly Gaelic singers) and dancers, than was common before the step

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\(^1\) In particular RSCDS style Country dancing and competitive Highland dancing.

\(^2\) As we are dealing with personal tastes here, there are always going to be individuals who think in extremes, from those who embrace all forms to those who favour only the one.
dance revival. Another positive outcome of the step dance revival is that the level of musical understanding has increased among both musicians and dancers (see 3.4.2).

None of the Scots involved\(^3\) with the step dancing revival grew up in cultural environment anything like that of Harvey Beaton in Cape Breton, where step dancing and Square sets were part of house ceilidhs and village hall dancing. Step dancing was simply no longer part of the social context in Scotland. Having said that, many were quite young at the time of taking up step dancing some 10-15 years ago, so for them it has been part of their traditional context for the better part of their lives\(^4\). Many of them are now also passing on step dancing to future generations of youngsters.

The vernacular form of step dancing I have investigated is, as a tradition, “a work-in-progress” as Spalding and Woodside (1995) defined it, and, for example Rosenberg (1993) and Feintuch (1993) describe traditions as ‘transforming’. The step dancing tradition has transformed in Cape Breton, which was my case study area. The culture of the Cape Breton Scots evolved and was/is influenced differently, thus underwent a different transformation from that of Scotland. The historical research for this investigation, the case study of Harvey Beaton, and comments from Scots enthusiasts all show this difference in transformation of the two traditions. In extension the transformation of step dancing has continued when it was revived in Scotland (see 3.4.3).

I see this revival as a Scottish ‘essence of a tradition’ that has been revived. By taking the transformed ‘Cape Breton’ style of step dancing, in which an ‘essence’ of Scottishness is recognised by those who are interested, and bringing it back to Scotland, this ‘essence’ of the transformed form has come to represent what scattered

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\(^3\) According to my research and personal experience.

\(^4\) Some of the step dancers active today, for example, Donal Brown and Alison MacLeod, were very young when starting to step dance. Also those who are part of the Feisean movement will experience the same familiarity with step dancing as they grow up.
memories recall as a dance tradition in Scotland. I base my argument on the fact that, to my knowledge, no step dancing of an extemporary nature found/remembered in Scotland has been revived into current use. It is the essence of a Scottish form of step dancing that has been revived with use of steps from Cape Breton. With the ‘Cape Breton’ steps, however, come all those influences of a Maritime Canadian culture that have transformed the step dance tradition there over the past 200 years. This fact, in reference to step dancing, and to music (Doherty 1999, 2001), should be recognised I feel.

In fairness, many of those step dancers, who have taken in the ‘totality’ of the Cape Breton culture, do refer constantly to the Cape Breton sources of their steps and the dance scene of that place. My concern is for how well the acknowledgement of Cape Breton’s part in the revival process transfers to other step dancers who have not visited or experienced the tradition in Cape Breton or been taught by Cape Bretoners. If Scotland and Cape Breton are equated in daily conversation, this fact may be forgotten. By contrast, the Cape Bretoners are not forgetting their Scottish heritage as being a significant part of their current ‘Cape Breton’ tradition (Feintuch 2004a, 2004b). It is not only questionnaire sources level of awareness of the revival process and the historical context of the step dancing tradition as they see it, but also the way they have acquired this information, that informed their opinions as to whether they see step dancing as a Scottish and/or Cape Breton tradition. Some of their answers to these questions are given in Appendix 4.

5 Nobody is referring to steps as having been danced by Sheila Mackay from Fife (see 3.3.4), but origins of steps are always referred to Cape Breton sources, for example: ‘Donald Angus Beaton’s step’, ‘a Jean MacNeil step’ and so forth. Some of these same steps when being passed on by Scottish teachers are becoming known by the Scottish teachers’ names. The original link with the source can thus be forgotten.

6 I would here grant Cape Breton the same right as any other part of the diaspora to be acknowledged if their traditions, as part of a counter flow, influence the current traditions of Scotland.

7 Some of the questionnaire answers indicated that ‘Scottish’ and ‘Cape Breton’ is thought of as being the same thing.
It could be argued, that some of the set solo dances currently being danced again, for example ‘First of August’ and ‘Flowers of Edinburgh’, are indigenous step dances that have been revived. However, I did not look into these dances as I feel they come from a different era of the transformation of dance tradition in Scotland, and these dances display a blend of, what I would refer to as old and new aesthetics combined\(^8\). These particular set solo dances are performed, by some individuals in a decidedly percussive manner, as part of the step dancing revival, which shows another ‘transformation of tradition’. I feel this is a case of “popular interest in preserving traditional moments often impels people to reconstruct realities in the name of authenticity, purity, honour, and culture” (Washabaugh, 1997:52). These set solo dances are worthy of a separate study in my opinion.

One fact is clear: step dancing is back in use in Scotland, and as a process the revival is still going on. Albeit the numbers of practitioners are small, its presence is, nevertheless, being made known to the wider public in various ways, particularly through performance and choreographic collaborations, as I pointed out in chapter 3. Even as I write, a couple of step dancers are touring the UK performing with one of Scotland’s leading traditional bands - ‘The Battlefield Band’\(^9\).

Having personally experienced step dancing as a social dance form in Cape Breton, that is how I and many other step dancers see it. Step dancing is, however, perceived by the wider public in Scotland as difficult and as a performance form of dance. When Alasdair Fraser talks about ‘putting the dirt back in’ the music he no doubt also sums up what a lot of step dancers feel when they are dancing:

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\(^8\) Many of these dances could be classified as hybrids of percussive stepping and modern Highland dancing aesthetics.

\(^9\) It is not common for Scottish traditional bands, such as Battlefield Band, to include dancers in their shows and performances.
“… when you have the dirt in there - grace notes, connective tissue between notes, ways of entering and leaving notes, like emotional buttons - and play in a rhythmic way, it goes deeper … a swingy thing going on and it is scary good …” (Melin 2005).

The challenge for the future of step dancing in Scotland is, in my opinion, how to make ‘the dirt’ enter and become accepted on the Scottish social dance scene.

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(16980 words)
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Appendix 1

Questionnaire on the revival of step dancing in Scotland

This questionnaire forms part of the research for my MA in Ethnochoreology thesis. The thesis looks at the process of revival of step dancing in Scotland over the past 15 years or so. Questions, such as, “can it be called a revival or whether it is a (re-)introduction?” are investigated, as are: Is step dancing seen as a Scottish or a Cape Breton dance tradition? How important is the relation between step dancing and language to the practitioners? The thesis concentrates, in particular, on the influence of Cape Breton step dancer Harvey Beaton; his influence on those attending his workshops; and the subsequent spread and development of dancers, dance classes, workshops, festivals and dance groups around Scotland.

Many thanks for your co-operation. Mats Melin, Limerick, 2005.

Name (optional) and current geographical area of dance activity:

[ ] Male       [ ] Female

Section 1

1. What attracted you to step dancing in the first place?

2. When and where did you start step dancing?

3. How did you find out about this style of dance?

4. Did you know anything about it before you started?

5. At the time you commenced step dancing, were you consciously looking for a particular style of dance to explore and learn?

6. Who (if anyone) is currently teaching you or are you a teacher yourself?

7. Is there any one step dance teacher/dancers that has had more influence on you and your own style of dancing? Or are there several teachers/dancers that has influenced you?

8. Are you exploring making up new steps yourself?

9. Do you feel most comfortable making up routines of steps or do you feel able to respond to the music and make up the dance as you go along, i.e. improvise?

10. Are you a practitioner of Scottish dancing, e.g. Scottish Country, Highland or Ceilidh / Old Time?

11. Are you a practitioner of other kinds of dancing as well (specify)?

12. What is, in your opinion, the main difference between step dancing and other Scottish forms of traditional dance?

13. Do you see step dancing as (mark any that apply):

   [ ] Recreational?
   [ ] A form of exercise and a way to keep fit?
   [ ] A dance tradition to be nurtured and preserved?
   [ ] As a fun form of dance along side many others?
As a social form of dance?

As a performance form of dance?

As part of the Scottish traditional dance scene?

14. In taking up step dancing has your musical awareness altered in any way?

15. Often in step dancing circles the relationship between the language (Gaelic in particular) and the rhythm of the feet is emphasised and explored. How important is that aspect to you, i.e. is it relevant at all in your own relationship to step dancing?

Section 2

16. How aware are you of the historical background of step dancing?

17. Do you see the current interest in step dancing as a revival of an older form of Scottish dance or as a (re-)introduction of a form of dance, where much of the essence may be Scottish but which has developed in Canada (primarily in Cape Breton but also in other parts of Canada)?

18. Do you see step dancing today in Scotland as a Scottish or a Canadian form of dancing, for example, Cape Breton form of dancing?

19. Where you ever taught by Cape Breton step dancer Harvey Beaton? If so when and where?

20. How did you find out about Harvey’s workshop / short course?

21. Was it Harvey Beaton’s particular style or a general interest in step dance that made you attend his workshop/s?

22. What is it (if anything) in Harvey Beaton’s dancing that you find exciting or interesting?

23. Does Harvey Beaton’s style of dancing feel or seem Scottish to you?

24. Are you aware of how long the revival/(re-)introduction of step dance in Scotland has been going on for?

25. Has, in your opinion, step dancing started to develop and find its own style in Scotland as compared to how it is taught by, primarily, visiting Cape Bretoners? If so can you give any examples?

26. Do you see step dancing as part of the Scottish social dance scene (currently or in the future)?

27. What is your attitude towards writing steps down as an aide to remembering?

28. If so, do you use some form of notation to help remember steps?

29. What is your attitude towards formal dance associations trying to incorporate step dancing into their institutional ways of teaching dance, where medal tests and examinations are important parts of their dance activities?

30. Are you aware of what goes on with regards to step dancing activities round Scotland and the UK? If so, how do you find out (web, newsletters, word of mouth etc)?

31. Have you any other thoughts on the practise of step dancing in Scotland or have you any particular ideas of what you see happening to the development and spread of step dancing in Scotland?
Questionnaire answers

Most sources did not give their name so I decided to keep them all anonymous but I indicate gender against each questionnaire number:

QMM01/05  Female
QMM02/05  Female
QMM03/05  Female
QMM04/05  Female
QMM05/05  Male
QMM06/05  Female
QMM07/05  Male
QMM08/05  Male
QMM09/05  Female
QMM10/05  Male
QMM11/05  Female
QMM12/05  Female
QMM13/05  Female
QMM14/05  Female
QMM15/05  Female
QMM16/05  Female
QMM17/05  Male
QMM18/05  Female
QMM19/05  Female
QMM20/05  Male
QMM21/05  Female
QMM22/05  Female
QMM23/05  Female
QMM24/05  Female
QMM25/05  Female
QMM26/05  Female
QMM27/05  Female
QMM28/05  Female
QMM29/05  Female
QMM30/05  Female
QMM31/05  Female
QMM32/05  Female
QMM33/05  Male
QMM34/05  Male

Total of 26 females and 8 males.
Appendices

Contents of email to those who are not actively involved with step dancing in Scotland:

I am emailing you with regards to the thesis project I am conducting as part of my MA degree course in Ethnochoreology at the University of Limerick.

I am looking at the “revival” process of Step dancing in Scotland over the past 10-15 years. I am particularly looking at what factors made it happen; what attracted people to take it up etc.; the debate whether it is a Scottish or Cape Breton (Canadian) form of dance forms part of it too; its promoted links to the Gaelic language and so forth. I am also, in particular, looking at one frequently invited step dance teacher from Cape Breton and his influence on the dancers attending the workshops.

I have sent out a questionnaire to as many people involved in the step dancing that I could locate, to find out their views on this matter.

However, I would also appreciate some comments (short/long) from people who are not involved actively with step dancing in Scotland today. Those of you who are involved with other forms of Scottish dance and with Scottish music, but also those of you who are not, but may have a more general interest in Scottish culture.

So the main question is: How do you see the fairly recent interest in step dancing and its related style of mainly fiddle music interacting with the dance and music culture in today’s Scotland? Is it relevant? Does it influence the domestic styles at all? Do you see it as Scottish in “essence” at all?

Do you perhaps even see it as just another dance form, like Salsa, Belly dance, Capoeira, Tango etc that become popular in modern society. Or, is step dance different because of a historical Scottish (West Highland & Islands / Gaelic) connection with the place - Maritime Canada (Cape Breton and so forth) from where it has been introduced?

Yours sincerely etc.

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Appendix 2

Harvey Beaton - Step Dancer and Musician – a biography

Harvey Beaton is from Port Hastings, Inverness County on the west side of Cape Breton Island. His mother's family, MacDonal ds from Troy, Inverness County, were considered dancers, but not performers¹, except for his mother, Marie Beaton, who did dance in a few concerts either alone or in an Eight-hand Reel. This would have been when she was a young woman, and Harvey never saw her perform in a concert. His mother did have brothers and one sister and uncles who could dance as well. His maternal grandfather, Duncan Francis MacDonald, used to play the fiddle for dances prior to the 1930s.

Harvey cannot recall the first time he ever heard a fiddle tune or saw a step-dancer. Scottish music and dancing was simply part of his upbringing. Although no one in his family played the fiddle when he was young, he used to hear tunes on the local radio station. As a child he was witness to the music and Sets being performed in his parents’ house. Even though the ‘parlour’ was small, they would make room for a Square Set during some of the house parties they’d host. Harvey says that the first fiddler he heard was probably Donnie ‘Dougald’ MacDonald of Queensville. He was a friend of the family’s and a regular at these parties. Also, for example, his cousin Howie MacDonald and his family would be at these parties and they were a big influence on his life in music. The family had a piano, which has resulted in Harvey being today not only known as a dancer, but also as a piano accompanist for fiddlers. Being naturally exposed like this is what first awakened his interest in music and dance.

His mother Marie was probably the first step dancer he saw and, it was she who taught him his first few steps when he was about 13 years old. Harvey also remembers going to outdoor ‘Scottish Concerts’ in the summers in nearby Creignish and Glendale when he was growing up. His first recollection would have been a concert in Creignish when he was about nine years old. The Catholic Parishes sponsored these events, and they essentially consisted of fiddling, step-dancing, and Gaelic singing.

Harvey remembers being at a closing party of a step-dancing class that was held in Sydney. After watching the students dance that evening he wished that he had the opportunity to take classes. But at the time the nearest class held to Port Hastings was two

¹ The distinction between ‘dancer’ and ‘performer’ is discussed briefly on page ??
hours away in Sydney, where his cousin Evelyn MacDonald was learning to dance from Father Eugene Morris. Harvey said “this was a great irony considering the number of step dancers who lived in Inverness County!” (Beaton, 1994, p.c.). There were also classes in Antigonish, on mainland Nova Scotia, where Margaret Dunn, (originally from Queensville, Inverness County), was teaching. At the time most people just picked up steps from other people in the home, perhaps at dances or in the house at parties. Classes closer to Port Hastings were, however, set up in 1976 in Glendale and Creignish. The lessons were very popular and space was limited, but Harvey managed to enrol in the class at Creignish, which was being taught by Minnie (Beaton) MacMaster and Geraldine MacIsaac. For eight weeks at $1 per lesson, Harvey took the one-hour class held at the community recreation centre. He had just turned 14 and was thrilled to have those two for teachers because they were both considered excellent dancers. Another early influence was Margaret Dunn who taught him informally on occasion but never in a class.

In the autumn of 1976 Harvey first danced in public at a Halloween Masquerade in Glendale. He recalls:

“I believe Carl MacKenzie was playing that evening and when the dance was almost over he started playing some really great Strathspeys. I was in the car ready to leave when I heard the lively music and decided to run back inside to see who was showing their steps. After I was inside, someone pushed me out onto the floor and I step-danced in front of the crowd for the first time” (Beaton, 1994 p.c.).

His first concert performance would have been at an indoor concert in Glendale hall around 1977-78. After that he was asked to dance at local concerts in community and church halls, and eventually at the big outdoor concerts in places like Glendale, Broad Cove, and Iona. During a period of his teenage years Harvey danced every weekend in the summer at one concert or another. To this day he still enjoys performing at such events when he visits Cape Breton.

Although he went to his first square dance at age 12 in Glendale, it was not until he was 15 that he started going to dances regularly during the summer. Every Thursday night there was a square dance at Glencoe Mills with music played by Buddy MacMaster, accompanied by his sister Betty Lou. Dances were also held on Monday nights at Brook Village where fiddler Cameron Chisholm and pianist Maybelle Chisholm played. At the

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2 Minnie (Beaton) MacMaster is the mother of famed fiddler Natalie MacMaster, and Geraldine MacIsaac is the mother of equally renowned fiddler and dancer Wendy MacIsaac.

3 Margaret Dunn is the mother of fiddler and step dancer Jackie Dunn.
dances it was common for a solo dancer to be asked to dance if the fiddler began playing Strathspeys between the Square Sets (which consist of Jigs and Reels). Harvey often danced solo at these functions, especially in Brook Village where the pianist Maybelle Chisholm insisted he get on the floor.

In 1994 Harvey commented on the state and growing interest in step dancing since he started in mid 1970s:

“When I was a teenager in the 1970s there weren’t many others my age dancing. This has changed a great deal over the past ten to fifteen years as more and more young people began playing Cape Breton Scottish music and appreciating it. These days there are step-dancing lessons in virtually every community in Inverness County and in many other parts of the island and on mainland. At my home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, I get calls very regularly from people wanting dancing lessons. Presently I teach two classes of over thirty people” (Beaton 1994, p.c.).

Harvey began teaching step dancing and square dancing when he was 15 and has been doing so on and off ever since. In 1977, one year after he started dancing, he set up a class in Port Hastings and had at one point 70 students in the class (MacGillivray 1988). He has taught dancing in several provinces in Canada and in many places in the United States, including Boston, Washington DC, Washington state, California, and New York. Harvey has also performed and taught in Cork, Ireland, and in several places in Scotland. He first came to Scotland in 1991 with fiddler Sandy MacIntyre. They did workshops (fiddle and dance) in places like Inverness, Dingwall, Thurso and Portree. In July 1992 Harvey came back to teach with Buddy MacMaster during Alasdair Fraser's week at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in the Isle of Skye. In a letter from 1994 Harvey wrote that “[it] is a real treat – to teach my style of step dancing in the very place from which it originated” (Beaton 1994, p.c.)

When Harvey was growing up the dancing was never referred to as ‘Scottish’, although it was common knowledge that Harvey's ancestors and those of the people around him were from Scotland, and there was a heritage, the music and all, not just the dance. But the dancing was never referred to as ‘Cape Breton’ either. It was simply ‘step dancing’. The music though would often be referred to as Scottish as in the Outdoor Scottish Concert circuit. Many people referred to the music as ‘Scotch Music’ as well.

It becomes clear from Harvey’s story that step dancing is considered a social activity. In Cape Breton even when dancers perform it is in a social context. This is reflected in Harvey’s comments on an event in the Isle of Skye a few years after he began coming to Scotland:

“there was a night at a bar in Armadale and a young girl got up to do a few steps. I couldn't remember who the girl was, but it suddenly struck me that the dancing might
start to become part of the social fabric [in Scotland]. This is a social dance and belongs in a social setting. I couldn't see the point in learning steps unless you were going to use them in a social context” (Beaton 2005 p.c.).

There is, according to Harvey, a vernacular distinction between people being considered dancers (many people are in Cape Breton, especially in Inverness County) and those who are considered performers. A whole separate study could be done on this fine distinction, however when Cape Bretoners use certain phrases such as “… got the old-style”, “… has a close-to-floor style” or “… is a neat or tidy dancer” they often refer to somebody who is performing.

Harvey feels that the number of steps you have is relatively unimportant compared to what you do with them. One should not take the dancing too seriously. The dancing is about developing a unique style and becoming comfortable with the steps one knows. He also talks about the concept of “owning a step”

“That occurs when you have practised a step so much that it becomes a part of your repertoire. It occurs when you no longer think about how the step goes, who taught it to you, or under what circumstances you learned it. After awhile that step becomes “yours” so to speak. Again the number of steps a dancer has does not determine how good he or she is ... it is all to do with the execution of the steps, with the timing to the music, which is so important. The dancing has to look natural, not mechanical” (Beaton 2005, p.c.)

Harvey is aware that the style has been embraced in Scotland and is impressed with the standard of many of the dancers he sees there, but he has no on whether a distinctive style is forming in Scotland as opposed to Cape Breton. He notes, however, that quite a few new steps are being created in Scotland.

Harvey no longer lives in Cape Breton but in Dartmouth (near Halifax) in Nova Scotia where he is the Principal at a Junior High School. Even though he visits Cape Breton regularly he does not like to comment on any recent changes to the step dancing over the last 10 years. He does not see any striking changes but people do continue to develop their own steps. Harvey, among many others did the same some 25 years ago so nothing has changed in that respect. He points out that “as much as dancers develop and learn new steps, you can never replace the standard steps from generations ago. They are the foundation of the step dancing in Cape Breton. Those steps will never be replaced – simply complemented with other steps.” (Beaton 2005, p.c.) In a letter Harvey wrote in 1994 that

“there are still enough original steps to make everyone a unique performer. Some people, however, fear that Cape Breton may lose its unique style of dancing as young people in particular begin to experiment with other styles of step dancing, Irish, for
example, and integrate it into the Cape Breton style. I am not yet too concerned about this as I feel experimentation is a natural curiosity and that there are plenty of dancers carrying on the "pure" Cape Breton dance form" (Beaton 1994, p.c.).

When Allister MacGillivray interviewed Harvey in 1986, he commented on the importance of teamwork between dancer and the fiddler. “I always say that the dancing is only as good as the music because the music determines how well you dance” (MacGillivray 1988:33). He also pointed out that that you have to listen to the music all the time. “… you have to be really familiar with the music before you can do the dancing well because the timing is crucial” (ibid.:34).

It was only after he started dancing himself that he began paying attention to what other dancers were doing. He observed their differences and individual styles, even though they often danced the same steps. He does not recall asking too many dancers for steps, but observed more than anything else (ibid.). The dancers who had most influence on him in the early days were the aforementioned Minnie MacMaster, Geraldine Maclsaac and Margaret Dunn. Others like the ‘close to the floor’ and very ‘neat in style’ step dancer Willie Fraser from Deepdale, Inverness County, taught Harvey to dance the Scotch Four (ibid.). No doubt the influences are many more but observed and learnt subconsciously.

Step dancer and teacher Margaret MacLellan Gillis from North Sydney summed up Harvey Beaton’s dancing rather aptly in 1986 –

“My favourite dancer in Cape Breton is Harvey Beaton. He can execute the steps with very little effort. He can get around the steps very neatly and get a lot of taps in … that’s what I admire: his poise and his deliverance of steps. But there are a lot of good dancers” (MacGillivray 1988:63).

The last sentence could possibly sum up parts of Cape Breton.

By looking at the dancers that Harvey mentions as very influential on his own dancing, we can learn through MacGillivray’s interviews that Minnie MacMaster learned to dance initially from her mother Margaret Ann Beaton from South West Mabou, and her maternal grandfather was step dancer “Big’ Donald Cameron or Domhnall Mór (d. 1923). Domhnall Mór was “240 pounds and light as a feather” (MacGillivray 1988:36), and he went to a dancing school in Mabou. Minnie got her initial strathspey and reel steps from her mother, whose style was ‘close-to-the-floor.’ At the age of eight Minnie was making up her own steps and together with her siblings they used to dance to their mother’s jigging (Ibid.).
Margaret MacEachern Dunn was brought up in Queensville, Inverness County, but at the time of her interview (MacGillivray) in 1986 lived in Antigonish County, Nova Scotia. She had no step dancing in the family directly, but some aunts, whom she rarely saw as they lived in the US, danced. She mentions quite a few people she saw dance, and concerts and in houses when she grew up. Interestingly enough, she names Harvey Beaton’s mother Marie as the only one who taught her steps. Marie Beaton was a teacher and boarded with the Dunn family and taught Margaret some steps during her stay (MacGillivray, 1988).

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Appendix 3

The Gaelic language and step dancing

The question regarding the relevance of the Gaelic language in relation to step dancing gave some very interesting responses. To show the polarity in opinion, ten of them are quoted. They are not given in any particular order.

1. “I live in a non Gaelic speaking area, and it just doesn’t feature in my dance. It’s just me, and the music. Whether the Gaelic language is significant to step dance is something I would question. It may have a bearing on step dance as interpreted by Gaelic speakers i.e. they maybe interpret differently than an English/Welsh speaker. Percussive dance is world wide, and not specific to Gaelic speakers. I think that the musical rhythms that we grow up with have at least as much bearing” (MMQ09/05).

2. “I admire step dancing which is closest to the form which is performed to accompanying Gaelic mouth music. Maybe, partly because in this format there are 2 natural physical limitations (and therefore objective standards) to the tempo, namely the dancers capacity to dance at a particular tempo and the singers ability to sing the words in a comprehensible way” (MMQ10/05).

3. “… I don’t think I am a lesser dancer by my inability to understand Gaelic language. An overemphasis on this link (in some dance schools/camps) can exclude some people and create a sense of “this is OUR dance, and if you’re not one of us you can’t have it”. That’s exaggerated, but there is an element of this. Everyone can dance; not everyone can speak a particular language” (MMQ08/05).

4. “It is very important, I firmly believe you cannot truly step dance without the Gaelic background” (MMQ11/05).

5. “It is not really relevant to me. I am not a Gaelic speaker. I love dancing to someone singing (without accompaniment) It is a real treat and is something special” (MMQ12/05).

6. “I think this is one of the most important aspects of the dance and as a teacher I find it difficult to understand why some people don’t see that relationship. Someone can have hundreds of steps and be technically, very accurate but if they have no awareness of the language and the music and the relationships there is always going to be something missing” (MMQ13/05).
7. “Not in the language but in the music that has been passed down and the changes in rhythm from the same music being played in different traditional styles by numerous musicians” (MMQ14/05).

8. “Having said that there are many fine dancers in Cape Breton who have no Gaelic but still I rate them very highly. On the other side there are some Gaelic speakers who step dance that I don't rate at all. I think it is a particular flavour which adds something when the understanding of the Gaelic language is there, but the understanding of dance has to be there first and foremost” (MMQ05/05).

9. “I admire the dancers and singers who explore and pursue this relationship and incorporate it into their repertoire, in the same way that I admire musicians who are true to one style of music. However, personally I feel an intuitive connection with the dance and am confident about my interpretation of the music and dance. Just as my fiddle style is a blend of influences from the North East, the West Coast, the Highlands, Shetland, Scandinavia, Donegal and Cape Breton, I enjoy this eclectic mix” (QMM03/05).

10. “Very much so, puirt a beul adds another line of complexity to the dance as you are wanting to put the rhythm of the words on the floor. It can add another slice of subtlety to the way you dance a step as the word will influence the way you dance the step, so that it matches the internal rhythm of the word or phrase. When I started practising steps it would be to the accompaniment of my mother, …, singing puirt a beul. It was as if it was the most natural thing in the world to put the two things together. As my knowledge of steps increase, we could hear what ones suited best to certain puirt. You would try and find ways of putting 'the words on the floor’” (MMQ15/05).

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Appendix 4

Answers regarding questions 17: Do you see the current interest in step dancing as a revival of an older form of Scottish dance or as a (re-)introduction of a form of dance, where much of the essence may be Scottish but which has developed in Canada (primarily in Cape Breton but also in other parts of Canada)?

And question 18: Do you see step dancing today in Scotland as a Scottish or a Canadian form of dancing, for example, Cape Breton form of dancing?

Only one of the sources did not feel aware at all about the historical background while the majority has been made aware of aspects when learning or conducted their own research. Almost all are also aware of the ‘revival’ span of 15+ years.

The sources opinions on whether we are dealing with a revival or re-introduction depended on their views of whether they see it as Scottish or Cape Breton tradition. Only 4 see it as a Cape Breton style (and thus a introduction), while all others see it as Scottish style (revival).

16 out of the total see it as Scottish style of dance, but which has been nurtured and developed in Cape Breton. [A revival of the Scottish ‘essence’ of step dancing along my personal argument.]

About two thirds of the sources indicate they feel it is a Scottish style because they have either been told so by those who taught them, and/or that the referred to Scottish connection with Cape Breton serves as validation for their statement.

Four comments illustrate some of the current reasoning:

- “… a bit of both! It’s a revival of an older form of Scottish dance with much historical evidence of this fact. But it cannot have been danced in Canada for so long without other influences acting upon it …” (MMQ08/05).

- “I think it is hard to speculate as to the Scottish authenticity of the step dance we know today which essentially came from Cape Breton at the beginning of 1990s. I feel that there is a lack of hard evidence for us to be sure that the steps and style we see today are Scottish. What I do know though, is that I feel totally at home playing and dancing in this way and I think that says something. It feels as though the music and dance belongs … I feel that it is Scottish and Cape Breton. I see Cape Breton as being Scottish and therefore the two as one” (MMQ03/05).

- “I see it as a combination of the two. As people explored the Cape Breton style, it awakened some knowledge in older members of certain communities and people then recognised that there was a Scottish root the this style of dance. This is probably why we have such an affinity with it. It may have come back from Canada but I feel people are putting a Scottish slant on it again” (MMQ15/05).
Appendices

- "I think the interest is in just doing a form of dancing initially. I don't think people are coming to classes because they have background knowledge in their history and culture but the classes may lead them there" (MMQ05/05).

Finally, from a respected musician, who answered my second questionnaire with the following thoughts step dancing in Scotland:

“I've always regarded step dancing as very much part of the Scottish scene and to see folk in Scotland taking it up is very refreshing though relative to the size of the population it must still be a miniscule number of people who actually do it. … But there are more now than there were 25 years ago so that must be a good thing. Though it is of historical interest to debate its antecedents, in general terms it probably doesn't matter very much given that what people do now or in the future is the important thing. Because it is in itself essentially a solo affair it seems to me that in the modern world it lends itself more towards performance (and the specialist groups that tend to go with that) than to being nowadays a general social activity. But I don't see anything negative in that and I applaud the efforts of those who are trying to spread the word. I suspect it will always now be associated with Gaelic culture because of its current roots in Cape Breton but I don't think it will be any more difficult to persuade other parts of Scotland to become interested than it is for any other forms of our culture. Because step dancing has been absent from these shores for such a long time (testament to the success of the English/Scottish efforts to destroy Highland culture after the Jacobite rebellions), I think it will be a long time before it is again regarded as native rather than a connected import, as it is currently viewed by the uninvolved who have heard of it.

I don't know enough about the dancing to know if the Canadian version shows influences from elsewhere but I think in some ways the music does. Scottish fiddle music clearly became more refined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and it seems to me that the Cape Breton version has gone in rather the opposite direction, and there's no doubt in my mind that the piano accompaniment style owes as much if not more to the syncopations of ragtime (and the influence of early recording from the U.S.A.) than it does to anything Scottish. Nobody had pianos after all when the music crossed the Atlantic in the first place. But the fire and excitement in the bowing style does, I am sure owe a good deal to older forms of Scottish music, both highland and lowland.

In conclusion I have a hunch that both dance and music are probably a bit of a mixture but, outside of the Scottish communities in Canada, they have more right to be carried out here in Scotland than elsewhere, so why not!”

(Personal correspondence).
Appendices

Appendix 5

Has Scotland developed its own style of step dancing?
The following are some thoughts on this question. The are mainly contextual differences, for example, the choice of tunes, teaching techniques, and influences on the style depending on the background and experience of the teachers.

• “I can't say I have noticed. The only movement is from the waste down so the only style differences would be in particular rhythms/steps people might use. This would then relate to certain tunes that are common in Scotland as apposed to tunes that are common in Cape Breton. I would think that a lot of the Cape Breton tunes are simple but effective and in Scotland we tend to go for more complicated technical tunes and probably more complicated technical steps. I think it is in our nature to do that in this country, therefore the style is probably more laidback/natural in Cape Breton. Perhaps it is not so natural in Scotland with a lot of over emphasis instead of subtlety and style” (MMQ07/05).

• “Yes, I feel that step dance today in Scotland is taking on its style in terms of teaching. I see Scottish teachers using innovative teaching techniques and being creative with the steps and teaching, whereas my experience of the Cape Bretoners is more of a left brained, step by step, methodical building up of the steps, using a 'copy me' approach. At times it seems that the Cape Bretoners still see Scotland as only beginning to get into step dance and while their workshops can sometimes seem geared towards beginners I think there is room for them to research where Scotland is at in terms of its awareness of the dance” (MMQ03/05).

• “Even the very good musicians playing for dancing in Scotland, will never be a Cape Breton musician. There is natural joy and a very specific understanding of musical tempi in Cape Breton (although the recent fashion for an increased tempo for playing Strathspeys might dispute this last claim), which is borne from an understanding that this is a free people who are secure in their own identity. However, confident the dance musicians in Scotland they are borne of an education system which belittles traditional music and dance and does little to develop and encourage the arts of any
form in this country. Consequently I think the dancing in Scotland has much less 'bounce' in its style, is a bit 'flatter' and is generally less 'flamboyant'. That is not to say that it is has any less value - it is just different because musically and culturally the differences are marked” (MMQ05/05).

• “I think it has started to develop very positively with Dannsa. I think there is an interesting question as to how it develops or what it develops into in terms of the connection with music, language etc and also as to how people see it in terms of Scottish/Canadian form of dance” (MMQ13/05).

• “It is developing in its own right in Scotland. Individuals are using historical links to develop new pieces and also it is now being used in conjunction with many other Scottish dance styles – giving step a new but distinctly Scottish look” (MMQ20/05).

• “Yes. The Scottish Step Dance Co. have taken this form of dance and develop their own style with it. I’m not sure if I am particularly keen on their style. Whereas, Dannsa have taken on board what it is all about and although are trying out new things I find they have stayed truer to the style” (MMQ11/05).

• “Because many young Scots are now learning from other Scots (who may or may not have been taught by Cape Bretoners) the style is to my eyes somewhat watered down compared with Cape Breton. Most Scots do not have the Cape Bretoners sense of timing developed from toddler age onwards and this lack of timing is an impediment to dancers and the musicians who play for them” (MMQ10/05).

• “Yes. In my view, Dannsa have developed a particularly Scottish form and it seems to me that much of the dancing here is done to music which is not played in the Cape Breton style – so logically it must be developing as a ‘Scottish’ style” (MMQ31/05).

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Appendix 6

Opinions on regulating organisations

Answers concerning Q29: “What is your attitude towards formal dance associations trying to incorporate step dancing into their institutional ways of teaching dance, where medal tests and examinations are important parts of their dance activities?”

Only 5 sources felt there might be something positive with organisations, such as UKAPTD and BATD, making it more institutionalised along the lines of Highland Dancing, for example. The majority feel ‘strongly’ that it would take away the spontaneity and unregulated way of the dance form, and make it ‘stressful’ rather than a relaxing form of dance. An observation is that it is this freedom of expression that is one of the main attractions of the dance style (see 3.5.2).

Those who felt there might be some merit to this idea expressed thoughts that it would give and maintain its high profile, “but at the expense of losing some of its vitality and popular foundation (MMQ08/05). It could be a way to encourage more people to take it up, however, another said that, in the end, it is down to individual choice in what way they want to pursue it.

Some further comments were:

• “I do applaud this as it provides the dancing with a status, however I think that the informal style should be keep alive also” (MMQ23/05).

• “I think it’s a good way of getting more people interested and developing the dance style. I think for any art form, e.g. step dancing, to grow strong in a culture it has to be present in many different forms, even forms that some people might think are wrong and unsuitable” (MMQ21.05).

• “I believe that this may be a useful way of introducing new dancers to step. Dancers within the dance associations will often participate in more than one dance form and will regularly be encouraged to add more to their repertoire. Its use, however, will be limited because of the format of standardised syllabi and examinations, but if taken as an introduction to step then I believe that it could be a valuable resource” (MMQ20/05).
• “I find it interesting and if it happens, fine. I feel that if people are not interested in accreditation and grading that is their choice. There is a debate about music competitions versus music concerts and you often find people against competition. Again my feeling would be there is room for everything and it's up to the individual to choose” (MMQ03/05).

• “They should not try to standardise it...is this not the first step in ironing out the individuality. It's like putting down a traditional melody on the stave, it is then seen as the only way to sing that melody. If its written down...then that MUST be the correct way and everyone else hasn't got it right! There might be a danger in folk being put of by rules and regulations. Authorities seem to have a problem with the organic nature of traditional music so I can see them thinking the same way for dance. If they can't assess it the way they do other styles then it doesn't conform to their sensibilities, and so they look down on it as an unstructured form of dance” (MMQ15/05).

• “I think that they see it is as a way of making money mostly. I don't think it should be a tested thing, people want certificates for everything now but it doesn't necessarily do any good for anyone” (MMQ07/05).
Appendix 7

First impressions of step dancing and transformation of music in the north of Scotland

For most young musicians and dancers growing up around the late 1980s and early 1990s step dancing was not part of the cultural scene and they were certainly not aware of its existence. A good illustration of this fact, which no doubt mirror many others, come from a young piper, accordion player and Highland dancer from the north of Scotland:

“… the first time I was to experience step dancing. I had actually never heard of it before. I went to lots of Ceilidhs all along the North Coast of Sutherland and Caithness too while growing up. I never saw or heard of step dancing at any of these. Laterally though, there was one lady from Caithness (via England) who came along to some Ceilidhs and did step dancing. Her husband played [the fiddle] for her. … We didn't really know what type of dancing it was either, as we weren't told” (MMQ02/05).

She next experienced step dancing at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in the Isle of Skye where she was attending a piping course. Harvey Beaton was teaching step dancing in a marquee in the courtyard and the pipers were encouraged to take part. She comments:

“It was a new thing to me although it didn't seem unnatural. I had always done Highland Dancing while growing up, as I suppose it was available. Step dancing seemed much more fun - I think the music appealed more to me! … Although I did not grow up with any knowledge of step dancing, I can see it as Scottish, as it seems so natural and fits in with the culture and music so well and with the language and song.” (ibid.).

Her comments are interesting and important as she belongs to the generation of young tradition bearers who are shaping and carrying parts of the traditional culture forward. She works as a professional musician and music teacher, and is based in the northwest Highlands, where the Feisean and local interest groups have promoted traditional music and dance through workshops and regular classes over the past ten years or so. Her final comment regards the influence of local musicians playing for step dancing has had on the local music scene:

“I think the step dance and the fiddle music is a big part of our culture now. Most Ceilidhs we have here in Ullapool anyway, have step dancers taking part and the
music played for the dancing is provided on a variety of instruments including bagpipes and accordion as well as by fiddlers and singers. The style of playing [for step dancing] has influenced musicians on most instruments and sessions tend to be a bit faster and the tunes are less 'pointed' as they might have been if no step dancing had been present. We might have been playing more slowly and measured as in Bagpipe competition style and army piping style. These two forms of music certainly had an influence on my playing, probably due to my tutors and lots of pipers locally having been in the army etc.” (ibid.).

So in the view of one musician-dancer, the step dancing is impacting on the local music styles and more importantly she mention step dancing as part of vernacular activities at local Ceilidhs. Another source says that step dancing now feature in some local pubs and informally at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is the Isle of Skye (MMQ02/05).

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Appendix 8

Cape Breton Step Dancers

Cape Breton step dancers (and musicians) who have been invited to teach and perform in Scotland since 1985. They are, in no particular order:

Harvey Beaton
Mary Janet MacDonald
Jean MacNeil
Willie Fraser
Maureen Fraser Doyle
Clare MacQuarrie
Heather MacQuarrie
Mairi Rankin
Alexander MacDonnell
Mac Morin
Lisa Gallant
Rodney MacDonald
Wendy MacIsaac
Krista and Kelly MacDonald
Margie MacDonald
Jackie Dunn
Sine Mackenzie
Hilda Chiasson
Tracey Dares
Andrea Beaton
Katie Shaw
Frances MacEachen
Jenny Dunbar
Mary MacGillivray

Four on the Floor: Pamela Campbell, Dawn MacDonald, Meghan MacDonald, and Christine Morrison

There are probably several more. My apologies to those I may have unintentionally omitted.

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Appendix 9 – Hamish Moore and Ceòlas

Hamish Moore

Hamish Moore’s discovery of Cape Breton music and dance is summed up in an article from the Cape Breton publication *Am Braighe*:

“His [Hamish Moore’s] musical epiphany occurred after hearing for the first time Buddy MacMaster and Maybelle Chisholm playing Cape Breton fiddle tunes in Philadelphia in 1987 – many of which were old Highland pipe tunes, but unrecognisable. He began collecting fiddle tapes and eventually visited Cape Breton in the early 1990s. There he met old-time piper Alec Currie, who played tunes on the pipes with the same *step-dance rhythm* [my italics] that fiddlers like Buddy played on the fiddle. Hamish immediately saw the importance of Cape Breton as a link to the old Highland music that he felt had been changed beyond recognition in Scotland due to political circumstances and external (European) influences, something he said Cape Breton was spared. He became a passionate promoter of this new ‘old’ style of music, both in Scotland and in Cape Breton, where he was hired during the summer to teach at St Ann’s Gaelic College” (MacEachen 2002:10).

Ceòlas

Initially set up with help from the National Gaelic Arts Project and the local community, with Hamish as artistic director, it is now under the control of a local committee and the artistic director is piper Iain MacDonald of Glenuig.

The early promotional material, emphasise ‘Scottish’ traditions in a Gaelic-speaking environment, and there is very little mention of Cape Breton, apart from that some of the tutors originates there. The Scottish / Cape Breton connection is highlighted more in 2001. This change coincided with the local South Uist committee taking full control of the summer school.

It is also noteworthy that the Cape Bretoners, for example Willie Fraser, Joe Peter MacLean, and Mairi Rankin, which were brought over in the first few years of Ceòlas existence had strong connections with the Gaelic language or were Gaelic speakers. This has changed over time as only a limited amount of Cape Bretoners with music and dance-teaching skills have the Gaelic language. The course as whole has evolved over the past ten years, where further aspects of Gaelic culture, for example working, i.e. waulking songs are taught. Cape Breton style piano accompaniment is another addition.

The following information can be found on Ceòlas website [www.ceolas.co.uk](http://www.ceolas.co.uk) and was accessed on the 14 May 2005

“Ceòlas is a music and dance summer school featuring expert tuition in piping, fiddling, singing, Scotch reels and Quadrilles, step dancing and the Gaelic language. It is set within the Gaelic-speaking community of South Uist. Ceòlas explores the vital connections between Scottish traditional music, Gaelic song and dance while allowing ample opportunity..."
for participants to enjoy all these art forms in cèilidhs and in homes, the places which fostered them.”

“Though focusing on Hebridean tradition, Ceòlas also has a strong Cape Breton dimension. Gaelic culture taken to Cape Breton (Nova Scotia, Canada) by emigrants from the Gaidhealtachd nearly 200 years ago survived there in relative isolation. Now, Ceòlas provides a unique opportunity to bring it all ‘back home’. Celebration of cultural links between music, song and dance, and across the Atlantic, is the School's hallmark.”

“The renowned piper Iain MacDonald of Glenuig, who now resides in Benbecula, will this year lead the following Ceòlas tutors as Artistic Co-ordinator:”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alba - Scotland</th>
<th>Ceap Breatainn - Cape Breton</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Cathy Ann MacPhee &amp; Mairi Smith - Hebridean Songs</td>
<td>• Angus MacKenzie - Piping for Dancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Kenna Campbell - Puirt a Beul</td>
<td>• Carl MacKenzie - Cape Breton Fiddle</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Rona Lightfoot - Working Songs (inc. Waulking Songs)</td>
<td>• Mary Janet MacDonald - Step Dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Iain MacFarlane - West Highland Fiddle</td>
<td>• Sine MacKenzie - Beginner Step Dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Alasdair White - Fiddle</td>
<td>• Marion MacLeod - Piano Accompaniment</td>
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<td>• Fin Moore - Piping for Dancing</td>
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<td>• Liam Brown - Ceòl Mòr</td>
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<td>• Frank McConnell - Step Dance</td>
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<td>• Fearchar MacLennan &amp; Mary Ellen Stewart - Gaelic Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Gabe McVarish, Donal Brown &amp; Angus MacDonald - Music for Dancing</td>
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On the following page is an example of a page out of Ceòlas advertising leaflet from 2000.
A unique music and dance summer school that explores the interconnections between Scottish traditional music, song and dance within the Gaelic speaking community of South Uist in Scotland’s beautiful Outer Hebrides.

Classes in piping, fiddling, step dancing, Scotch Reels and Quadrilles, Gaelic language and song plus House ceilidhs, community concerts and dances.

Cèolas takes a holistic approach to tuition and no single element is complete without the others. All Cèolas participants follow more than one discipline. Pipers also learn to beat out the rhythms of their Strathspeys in a step dancing class; fiddlers learn the words of their tunes in puirt a’ beul and Gaelic song classes and dancers study the puirt a’ beul in order to understand how the steps are linked to traditional Gaelic songs.

Cèolas rekindles the links between Gaelic music, song and dance and re-establishes the music’s social and environmental context. It is this particular element that sets Cèolas apart from other summer schools. Cèolas is based within the Gaelic-speaking community of South Uist where classes are held in the local school. The social gatherings of house ceilidhs, community concerts and music sessions are integral parts of the school and participants are accommodated in the homes of the local community who organise and run Cèolas with Pòiseact nan Ealan.

The island of South Uist is an environmental jewel set on the Atlantic fringe of Europe. Its seas are a rich marine environment. Its long empty beaches and colourful machair land and its network of lochans and croft land support huge numbers of local and migratory birds. This natural environment has shaped the history and music of the Gaelic community and the Cèolas schedule builds in specific time to visit the neighbouring island of Eriskay.

Since the inception of the CEOLAS Summer School in 1996 many students from Ireland have participated in the CEOLAS programme of classes and events. CEOLAS provides a rich and fascinating insight into the Scottish and Canadian tradition of Gaelic song, music and dance. You can be assured of a very warm island welcome by a truly vibrant Gaelic speaking community.
Appendix 10 – Memories of step dancing in Scotland

Maggie Moore (1994) describe some of her own discoveries:

“It can equally well be seen in Scotland where there are families, which have been famous for generations for their piping, or their singing or indeed their dancing. One such family is that of Anna Bain, from Leslie in Fife. She is the eighth generation of dance-teacher in her family and her mother, Sheila MacKay remembers being taught step-dancing by her own mother in the 1920’s. … when Sheila saw me performing Cape Breton step-dancing, her immediate reaction was:

*I can do that. That's the same as I learnt when I was young.*

and to my delight she proceeded to dance some of the steps that I had been doing myself” (Moore 1994:18). … A friend's granny in Lewis described how, when she was young, they used to meet and step-dance on a particular bridge near Callanish. Gillin Anderson from Larbert describes how her mother, Mary McHarg, leapt out of her chair on seeing Cape Breton step-dancing on television, and proceeded to step away beautifully in exactly [my italics] the same manner” (Moore 1994:21).

In the same year folklorist Margaret Bennett mention another couple of people who could step dance, which she had found in the course of her own research.

“a former Highland dance champion … she discovered that her own mother, brought up in the Stirling area, and by then in her seventies, had a repertoire of step-dances which she had never demonstrated until she saw a film of step-dancing in Canada. Till then, the older lady had thought her daughter who 'had been trained to dance properly' might ridicule her. … a step-dancer in the Spey Valley who can still dance step-dances that had been taught to her by her parents who were from Laggan and Barra respectively. Like the Stirling woman, she did not simply display a glimmer of recognition at the sight of "Cape Breton step-dancing", but she could (and can) get out on the floor and dance the steps” (Bennett 1994).

In course of the research for this thesis, Gaelic singer and musician, Maggie MacInnes from the Isle of Barra, recall her mother Flora MacNeil’s visit to Cape Breton in the 1970s:

“she [Flora MacNeil ] was told by all the step dancers that their dancing had come over from Scotland. When she came back here and mentioned this to a few people who she thought might know about it, she received a generally dismissive attitude which made reference to it being more likely to have come from Ireland. It was not until she spoke to her mother, Annie Gillies who was born in Barra in 1889 that she was told otherwise. My Granny, speaking in Gaelic, apparently said something along the lines of “Of course I remember the step dancing. My mother was good at it but her sister, my Aunt Fionnghuala was better.” Granny had not step-danced herself but the earlier generation clearly did. She went on to describe the dancing as close to the floor dancing and the more sound you made the better. (MacInnes 2005, p.c.).
Another example is taken from Liz Doherty’s research (2001):

“It does seem that step dancing did exist in the Highlands and Islands until well into this century. The late Farquhar MacCraith used to speak of two brothers by the name of Gillis who would be invited up to step dance during the intervals at dances. This continued until the 1960s when the brothers would have been over 70 years of age. Yet any of the younger players from the area that I’ve spoken too admitted to never having seen this type of dancing until they came in contact with Cape Bretoners” (Doherty 2001:6).

I have personally collected memories of step dancing in the Shetland Isles, North Sutherland, Aberdeenshire, Angus, South Uist and Isle of Barra. (Melin personal archives). When I was in Barra I met Fearchar (Farquhar) Mac Neil. In doing the research for this dissertation Mary Janet MacDonald from Port Hood, Cape Breton told me about her meeting with Fearchar:

“This is what I remember. I went to the Barra Feis in July of 1983. I was like a fish out of water and had hardly even flown before so I was really out of my element when I got there. I was given the schedule for my classes and then went ahead and began teaching. I would meet up with fellow tutors at breaks and lunch and conversations took place just to familiarize myself with what everyone was doing - it was my introduction to clarsach, shinty, and Hebridean dancing. So, Farquhar was there and was asking me questions and that was about it. He could be found in the kitchen with the two local highland dance teachers … holding the back of the chairs and showing them the steps and telling them how to teach the next class. He must have went with them for a while and then he'd come to my class, sit in the back, and watch . . . silently. I was a little worried, didn't know how to take that. Then BBC were there – questioning me about this ‘step dancing’ and for the first time in my life I felt I had to defend its roots - knowing that it came from Scotland - but not really equipped with stats that they wanted to hear. I was quite sad about the feelings I was having, but then later in the week, dear Farquhar took me aside and said “I've no doubt in my mind but that this is a dance that we had here in Scotland, and it is bringing back memories of me as a young lad watching my grandmother on the pier, and lifting her skirts a bit and doing this dancing with her feet.” (I can't say those were his exact words but that was the message)” (Melin 2005 p.c.).

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Appendix 11 - Fèisean nan Gàidheal

The **Fèisean nan Gàidheal**’s informal work, predominantly with young people, encourages the connection between music, song and dance and the link with the Gaelic language in a Gaelic cultural context. The link between Gaelic language, and, for example, the use of puirt-a-beul (mouth music) for step dancing has been part of the ‘revival’ since the very start. Highland Dancing and Ceilidh dancing also feature at local Fèisean, but step dancing is very popular and it has developed in proportion with the music and the language. Step dancing was part of the Fèis Bharraigh some 20 years ago, when Cape Breton step dance teachers Mary Janet MacDonald and Frances MacEachen attended. The extension of this is that youngsters growing up within the Fèisean environment see step dancing as part of their culture. These youngsters, are now, when they are older, in turn teaching it to the next generation. Many of these youngsters are fluent Gaelic speakers and to some extent teach through the idiom. From personal experience another factor is that a number of youngsters who would probably not voluntarily tried any other form of dancing often find this style interesting and give it a try.

**Background of Fèisean nan Gàidheal**

“Fèisean nan Gàidheal was established in 1988 as the independent umbrella association of the Fèis movement. The organisation offers grant-aid, training programmes, insurance, instrument-bank administration, published resources and many other services to its member Fèisean. This includes a regular newsletter entitled Faileas.”

(http://www.feisean.org/adult/english/whoarewe.htm)

“Fèis (plural Fèisean) is the Gaelic word for a festival or feast. However over the past few years the word has become synonymous with the Fèis movement; a group of Gaelic arts tuition festivals, mainly for young people, which now take place throughout Scotland.

A Fèis is an opportunity for individuals to come together to develop skills in the Gaelic arts - song, dance, drama, and traditional music on a wide range of instruments. Tuition is accessible and fun, but professional and effective. The focus of activity for most Fèisean is an annual, week-long festival, but increasingly Fèisean offer a full programme of year-round follow-on classes to ensure sustained provision.
The Fèis movement came about when a group of parents and other individuals on the Isle of Barra became concerned that local traditions were dying out and that island children were not being taught traditional music in the context of formal education. To address this issue the first Fèis Bharraigh was held on the island in 1981.

Inspired by the success of this first Fèis, many other communities throughout Scotland established similar events. Fèis Bharraigh celebrated its 21st birthday in 2002, and 22 years on, there are now over 35 Fèisean, each one community-led and tailored to local needs. Volunteers still form the core of most local Fèisean.

The skills taught at Fèisean are a highly-valued aspect of the informal education of young people, as demonstrated by the level of volunteer commitment and parental support in local areas. Most importantly, the Fèis experience is valued by the young participants themselves. At national level, the Fèisean are seen by many as one of the most successful arts initiatives in Scotland.” (http://www.feisean.org/adult/english/whatisafeis.htm).

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Appendix 12

The Scottish Stepdance Company

Musician and percussive dancer John Sikorski set up the Scottish Stepdance Company in 1998. John says that “many people had been recommending that he get some sort of group together to ‘show off’ Scottish step dance” (Sikorski 2005 p.c.). Together with fiddler Amy Geddes, he invited various others to perform a show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.¹ A number of tours of UK festivals, as well as international events in Norway and Russia followed. Due to the spread of all the members, it proved difficult to arrange rehearsals. The company is no longer actively promoted, as the members have gone on to other projects.

Dannsa

The four members² of what has become the group Dannsa, came together with three musicians in 1999 for a one off charity concert performance with a remit to combine traditional and modern dance. The four dancers continued to meet informally and eventually their ideas turned into choreographic pieces drawing on their combined knowledge of various traditional and modern dance forms. The group integrate dance, music and song and has worked with many different musicians and singers. Much of their material is based on the Gaelic traditions, but many other forms of dance influence as well. Since the groups’ formal establishment in 2000, Dannsa have toured Scotland annually and also visited Sweden. Their performance format is a combination of performance and audience participation - consisting of their own choreographed performance pieces blending step dancing and other forms of traditional dancing, which is interspersed with inviting the audience up to join them for Ceilidh dancing. Most performances are in village halls round the country, but stage performances occur as well. For the past two years they have organised a festival, ‘Strathspé Away’, that celebrates all forms of Scottish dance. Dannsa has grown enough to afford employing a development manager in 2005. Dannsa is the only professional traditional dance group in Scotland.

For further information see www.scottishstepdance.com and www.dannsa.com

¹ Adam Sutherland, Alison MacLeod, Pete MacCallum, Sandra MacKay and Keri.
² Caroline Reagh, Sandra Robertson, Frank McConnell and Mats Melin. Dannsa now also includes piper Fin Moore as a full time member.
These are some examples of points of view expressed in the newspapers regarding step dancing in Scotland. It is worth noting that the contributors’ were not part of the step dancing revival. The three articles were published in the West Highland Free Press during the month of July (no exact date), 12 August, and 19 August 1994.

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Appendix 13

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The Victorian “tartaning” of Scotland had a profound effect on music and dance, but now part of the culture that was lost as a result is making its return. LINDA MURRAY explains . . .

“Stepdancing returns to Scotland!”, you’re saying to yourself. “But when did it leave!”

Well, stepdancing left with the people of the Highlands and Islands during the clearances, and its ejection from Scotland’s culture has been so efficient that you couldn’t be blamed for being unaware of its existence. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries many people set sail for Nova Scotia on the east coast of Canada where, along with their macgregor belongings, they took their language, music and dance.

Back in the homeland Queen Victoria and her infatuation with the Highlands brought a cultural movement to Scotland which did not reach across to Nova Scotia in a musical sense. This tartan time had a marked and lasting effect upon the style of music and dance in Scotland. Introduced formalities in dancing caused the speed at which tunes were played to alter and also removed and changed many of the settings of tunes which once served a different set of feet. Old country dances had to compete with the Quadrille, Polkas, Schottisches and other “refined” forms from Europe. These survived to remould Scottish dancing styles.

Cape Breton has never lost its stepdancing. It took the simple and vigorous stepping which was an essential part of the indigenous roots of Scotland and developed it into sequences, often improvised, of steps for Strathspeys, Reels and Jigs. The dancer marks the rhythm of the music with percussive toe and heel taps along with brushing movements. The feet are kept close to the ground in a compact style still suited to the kitchens of croft houses from which stepdancing came. The upper body and arms remain passive.

This July, for the third year running, the indefatigable Harvey Beaton from Nova Scotia is teaching a course in Cape Breton stepdancing at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye. The course runs alongside the renowned Highland fiddle course taught by Scotland’s Alasdair Fraser and Cape Breton’s Buddy MacMaster.

These two courses constantly intermingling throughout the week producing an exciting and enriching natural compatibility between the fiddle and stepdancing. The fact that both courses were fully booked months ago, as well as a dramatic increase this year in the numbers for stepdancing, is clear evidence of the growing enthusiasm in Scotland to bring the dance back to the music it belongs to.

Over the last two years workshops and regular classes in stepdancing have sprung up in Inverness, Dunkeld, Skye, Edinburgh and Arran. Hopefully there are others that I have not yet heard about.

I have always found it very strange that we do not know how to dance to so much of our own music (can you imagine Flamenco music without its dance?). All we lack are the steps, and Cape Breton in Nova Scotia now offers them back to us well nurtured by their own creativity and enthusiasm.

Stepdancing is for the young and not-so-young to enjoy. You don’t have to be a graceful mover, but a sense of rhythm is important as the emphasis is on the beat. Smooth-soled shoes will make it easier for you. So try a beginners’ workshop and learn a few steps. And when next the music catches you — don’t just sit there clapping, get up out of your seat and dance!

Thanks are due to Frances MacEachen of ‘Am Brughe’ for information sources.

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Dear Sir,

The article on stepdancing (“Stepdancing makes it return journey across the Atlantic”) in last week’s WEFP suggests that this traditional Gaelic artform had died out entirely and is just beginning to be re-introduced by teachers from Cape Breton. Although this is the widespread public image, it is thankfully not entirely true.

Over 20 years ago I returned to Scotland as a young boy from a small community in Canada (not Cape Breton) with Gaelic as my first language and a broad vocabulary of traditional dances, including step-dance. During the 1960s, I performed step dances in many ceilidhs and concerts throughout Scotland.

Although the general public opinion held that this style of dance was entirely Canadian or “Irish Dancing”, many old people told me that they remembered seeing dancing just as I did as being customary in small, private occasions, and quite a few people could actually perform stepdances themselves.

I made it my life’s work to learn as much as I could of the folkdance tradition and ensure its survival. Over the past three decades I have continuously collected, performed and taught the Gaelic stepdance tradition within Scotland and abroad and have learned from living sources in Scotland as well as a variety of communities in North America. In order to understand the origins and the cultural context and find effective ways of teaching and reviving folkdance in Scotland, I have studied European Ethnography, Ethnomusicology, Folkdance, and been trained as a professional dancer and dance teacher.

Indeed, stepdance is not the only indigenous artform which has barely survived within living memory without the awareness of the general public. It is too simplistic and rather unfair to attribute the general lack of awareness of step dancing to “the Victorian ‘tartaning’ of Scotland” (although that trite phrase is so trendy among journalists as to make its ubiquitous appearance in virtually every article on Scottish folk culture). The formal codification of “tartans” occurred before the birth of Queen Victoria and the original dance style was still intact at the time of her death.

In my lifetime, I have seen far more damage inflicted upon the holistic culture of the Gael by arts administrators and “folk” festival directors than could be attributed to the entire reign of Queen Vicky.

Stepdancing did not die out in Scotland; it simply didn’t make it into the spotlight because of its relatively private and untheatrical nature.

Carpeted floors, trainers and Scotland’s insatiable appetite for outdated Americans have made it difficult to keep stepdance popular; but it never quite expired. There is ample evidence of this available in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University and in the memories of many people of my own acquaintance.

Yours faithfully

James MacDonald Reid

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Appendices

Step Dancing
In Scotland

School of Scottish Studies
Edinburgh

Dear Sir,

In a recent issue of the WHFP, James MacDonald Reid claims that step-dancing has not died out in Scotland. There are, however, problems with his evidence.

As much as we would like it to be otherwise, the material in the School of Scottish Studies archives does not provide "ample evidence" of a living step dance tradition in Scotland. The fact that there has been so much decline and cultural interference in the Highlands makes it difficult to determine with any confidence whether what has been observed represents the vestigial elements of a highly-attenuated tradition or remnants of dance forms imposed from outside the Gaeltacht.

What Cape Breton dancing represents is a healthy community tradition — what has been found in the Highlands are memories of something which are not altogether clear.

The danger of over-enthusiasm in this area is evident in James MacDonald Reid’s description of the way in which some older people in the Highlands recognised the dances he brought with him from Canada as being just like ones they had formerly done. Ethnologists would no doubt be very excited to have a more precise name than “not Cape Breton” for the Canadian community in which he grew up with Gaelic as his first language and learned a "wide vocabulary of traditional dances" which were recognisably "Scottish".

Step dancing in Canada is widespread and after 200 years of evolution and cross-cultural contact it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove that any of the styles are peculiarly Scottish, particularly since there is no living tradition in Scotland with which to compare.

Researchers who are too quick to demonstrate their own traditions and provide their own opinions as to the origins of their dances run the serious risk of influencing the information they ultimately receive. They will probably get the answers they want — they just might not be the right answers.

While James MacDonald Reid is right to claim that "arts administrators and ‘folk’ festival directors" have inflicted much damage on "the holistic culture of the Gaels", we should remember that so too have "professional dancers and dance teachers". Let’s not make the same mistakes again.

Yours faithfully

Mike Kennedy

Published in the West Highland Free Press 19 August 1994. In addition to these three articles it is worth reading Margaret Bennett’s article *Step-dancing: Why we must learn from past mistakes* [http://www.siliconglen.com/Scotland/10_3.html], which was published in the West Highland Free Press on the 14 October 1994.