Dance at the Crossroads in Scotland 2006
Scottish Dance at the Crossroads 2006
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This paper on Scottish traditional dance is based on my own observations made between 1995 and 2005. As a professional dance teacher, researcher and dance project leader, I observed during this period a number of issues that are facing traditional dance in modern Scotland. The issues selected for this paper are inter-related and concern resistance to change in certain areas of the dance tradition. These include the notion of a supposedly ‘one’ correct way of performing a dance; how traditional dance is frequently made exclusive to a certain group of people rather than inclusive to anyone; and finally, the new scenarios of collaboration between modern/contemporary dance styles and traditional dance, and the impact of traditional dance forms on the established forms.

This paper is by no means comprehensive or based on any thorough studies undertaken of the areas mentioned above. It could, however, serve as a starting point for further discussion, and possibly comparison, with similar occurrences in other dance traditions.

The following notes are a view of what I see emerging in Scotland. These notes are based upon my observations made in many different locations around Scotland, covering almost two-thirds of the country. The places where I have worked extensively during this ten-year period include Shetland, Orkney, the Hebridean Isles, North and West Highlands, Aberdeenshire, Angus, and Perthshire; I have also worked in the urban centres of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth, Aberdeen and Dundee. My observations made in the Borders, the Central Belt and the South West were less frequent. The context and places of these observations were also varied. These places ranged from dance classes and workshops held in schools, community centres, village and town halls and dedicated dance centres. These places were, to a greater extent rural; only a quarter of these venues were in an urban or town environment.

The context was equally varied. They included dedicated dance class environments such as dance schools; first, second, and third level educational contexts; dance sessions/classes/workshops in community dance classes and adult learning programmes; and children’s initiatives. Informal and formal dance occasions ranged from village ceilidhs to formal balls and weddings featuring dance. A complete list of contexts relevant to this paper would be very extensive, but samples range from formal to less formal contexts. Formal contexts include weddings and balls, the latter organised by dance associations or other organised bodies such as farming organisations. Formal dance classes held by established and constituted Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance organisations’, and formal classes in Old Time Dancing by registered dance teachers. Less formal contexts include classes by community groups in Highland, Scottish Country, Ceilidh, Old Time dance and latterly Step dance. In addition to these contexts are the educational contexts mentioned earlier and the many informal, impromptu, occasions that simply happen in village halls, pubs, kitchens and homes without premeditation.

Tradition

Dealing with the realm of traditional dance I looked for a definition of the word ‘tradition’ that I was comfortable with in this particular context. Spalding and Woodside offer a useful definition of tradition as a work-in-progress – “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, p.249). 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, p.192). 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”


The passing on of the dance traditions in Scotland has, in general terms, gone from informal learning in the home environment, to more formal teaching contexts of the Dancing Masters in village and town halls. These contexts allowed a great deal of individual interpretation of the dance traditions. From the 1920s onwards, the organisations for Scottish Country Dancing and Highland Dancing were set up, thus codifying and standardising these dance traditions to a great extent. Today, the teaching of traditional dance is done by enthusiasts who are either formally trained and registered with an organisation of their particular dance style, or who have acquired their teaching positions by other means, such as simply being tradition bearers due to their actual or perceived knowledge. This paper will, however, not discuss the teaching ability of these teachers, in their different contexts.

If we accept the definition given above, that the tradition is a ‘work-in-progress’ that is undergoing constant change, this will lead us to the first couple of observations. The first deals with the resistance to change by organisations and individuals alike, and the second deals with the increasing speed at which the tradition is changing in our modern world.

Organisations, Individuals, and the Issue of ‘Correctness’

The Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance organisations’ were set up with a number of separate aims and objectives (the reasoning that informed their choices for these aims and objectives is a separate study). What these organisations have achieved, and this is common to them all, is written, standardised manuals for their forms of dancing. The rules for the execution of their dance forms has, over the years, not only reached national levels but has also been recognised internationally. For example, where once the many Dancing Masters dictated their own interpretation of the style of steps, movements and figures for the individual dances, these organisations have laid down, what in the field is often referred to as ‘the correct way’ of executing these dance forms.

At this point I would like to make it clear that I am in no way criticizing the aims and standards of these organisations. I am, however, pointing out scenarios where these standards and aims have impacted on the dance tradition, as a whole, particularly outside the structured world of these organisations.

Martin Stokes points out that ‘the definition and construction of national styles is seldom unproblematic’ (Stokes 1997, p.11), and as Stokes also points out, one may ask who is doing the defining? Who is entrusted in modifying the repertoire of the tradition in question? Are there entrenched interests in the existing tradition that these modifications will affect? To what extent will they be accepted or rejected? What circumstances create an environment that projects a view (directly or indirectly) that a standardised national form is supposedly more ‘authentic’ (read ‘more correct’) than a locally developed form of the same tradition? One may ask whether this view is tied to the processes of standardisation alone, or do they appear as part of the wider social context of Scots seeking their identities? Carol Craig in The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence (2004) investigates the issues of Scottish identity and the lack of confidence in themselves.

In the case of Scottish Country Dancing, the standardised ways of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society were spread nationally by the encouragement of their style through the
Scottish education system. This was achieved by teaching Physical Education teachers the society form of dancing. The establishment of a network of national and international branches and affiliated groups has also been essential in spreading this form of dance.

For Highland Dancing the story is similar, but rather than being a recreational activity, the aim has been focused on the competitions and the development of technical excellence of the dance form. Similarly to Scottish Country dancing the standardised form has largely become the benchmark for competition and medal test standards worldwide (exceptions exist in New Zealand and Australia). For a deeper study into this field I refer to Gareth Mitchelson’s paper asking whether Highland Dancing today is an art or a sport?

With some 80 years of standardisation and formalisation for Scottish Country Dancing and some 50 years of the same for Highland Dancing the memories of the teachings of Dancing Masters are only just lingering with the quickly fading generation of senior dancers. Equally, many of the memories of local variations of dances are often kept by the same group of dancers, unless the community in question is vibrant enough to cross the generations in their dancing activities.

To illustrate how the issue of ‘the correct way’ is brought to your attention in the field, the following example I experienced in 1998 is a typical one:

The scene is an evening of social dancing in a small village hall in rural east Scotland. Those present are mainly retired senior citizens and most have danced socially for the better part of their lives. Dancing Masters taught a good number of these dancers and others learnt either in school or at local dance classes. Some would have been involved with association based dancing at some point. A four-piece band (fiddles and accordions) by players of the same age range provide the music for this weekly evening of social dancing. The particular repertoire for this evening would be referred to as an ‘Old Time’ dance evening. This is a mix of round the room couple dances (two steps, foxtrots, marches and waltzes) and formation dances in sets of the Scottish Country Dance variety and Lancers Quadrilles. What is significant is that all the dances are done with local variations from wherever the dancers come from. It is not unusual to see 5 or 6 variations of the same dance being performed simultaneously. It is not these observations that stand out. It is the comment from members of this group, that they, as a group (and as individuals), do not dance the ‘correct way’ but that they, nonetheless, enjoy their ‘local’ way of dancing. The comments are given both as some sort of an apology for not dancing ‘in the correct way’ but at the same time making a statement that they enjoy their ‘local’ way.

This notion of apologising for not dancing the ‘correct’ way is by no means a localised occurrence, but one that I have encountered in a similar manner in most of the places I have visited. When the established way is not referred to, another common way of expressing similar notions, is discussing one’s own ways or a neighbouring community’s ways as not ‘being quite right’.

There is also a definite distinction of what is acceptable depending on the context of a dance. I have seen the same people dance the same dance at a local village dance and at an association dance event. In the latter context the local variations are frowned upon and not accepted. Again the local variations are seen as not ‘correct’. This second scenario is easier to understand as the context dictates the association style, and those partaking accept those rules by attending. However, one can also observe that those dancing the association style often refer to other ‘styles’ as incorrect or words to that effect.

There is a definite tension here between the different contexts of the same dance form and the notions of what is ‘correct’. It involves, dress code, ways of executing steps and movements and whether innovation and ‘local’ interpretation is accepted.

In these scenarios one can detect elements of the processes described by Malcolm Chapman in ‘Thoughts on Celtic Music’ (1997) at play here. Chapman outlines a first process of opposition: ‘self versus other’ or in some of these cases it would be ‘organisation versus local’, one being dominant, and the other being peripheral ii. The second process describes the
progression of fashions from the centre to the periphery and the constant renewal of these fashions that appeal to the centre and the progress to the periphery. Chapman’s third process describes ‘a systematic function of the meeting of incongruent category systems, causing the perceiving culture to construct the perceived as inconstant …’ (Chapman 1997, p.36). These different and inconsistent systems may (partly) be applied to standardised versus local variations of dances. Elements of this third process together with elements of Chapman’s fourth process – romanticism – hint at an explanation of these notions of correctness. The standardised and refined ways generated in the centre by organisations are based, in my view, on the traditions of the periphery and romanticised or glamorised notions of what the peripheral ways should be. When the centrally constructed ways are referred to as ‘benchmarks’ or ‘optimal standards’ and when those views begin taking precedence over the evolved ways of the periphery, (even in the minds of those in the periphery) I see these scenarios occurring.

**Resistance to Change and Innovation**

Another observation is that the Scottish Country Dance organisation, for example, by laying down rules and stating that only certain dances and movements are recognised by them, has spurned within (and outside) their own membership, an almost frenetic level of new ideas and number of new dances being devised by modern day dancers. There are today well over 8,000 Scottish Country Dances in circulation around the world, with maybe only 10% being accepted by the main organisation. However, many of these new dances have become very popular worldwide and are often more frequently danced than those approved by the organisation.

This explosion of new dances and new innovative figures in the Scottish Country Dancing world could be seen as a reaction to the boundaries set by the organisation as to what is regarded as ‘correct’ and what is seen as traditional. Newly composed dances have, until the present day, been encouraged to a limited extent by the organisation. Only about 10 of these dances are ‘accepted’ annually. Many of the new dances push the boundaries for what the organisation sees as their view of what constitutes a traditional Scottish Country Dance. Seldom is it highlighted that to conform to their own aims, the organisation (RSCDS) has had from the outset to modify (to a greater or lesser extent) existing Country Dances that were in use or found written down in various manuscripts and old dance manuals.

This scenario has caused tension among dancers as to whether or not one likes the new ideas or would prefer to remain faithful ‘to the tradition’ as presented by the organisation. Dance clubs have been known to split on the basis of this issue alone.

When it comes to innovation within Highland dancing it is very limited. When choreographic competitions were introduced to break this limitation, one of the main organisations ruled that only sanctioned movements and steps were to be used for this type of competition. Innovation now really only exists within the realm of display dancing by for example, Highland dancing schools.

So, as observed, on one hand we have organisations that resist innovation and new creative ideas as it is at odds with their stipulated aims. This almost ‘fear’ of change has filtered down to many individuals who often excuse their own ways of dancing by hiding behind a perceived ‘correct’ way. On the other hand we find individuals who push the boundaries of the traditions with their innovative ideas, and others who simply dance the way they have always danced regardless of rules and regulations by national organisations. That people are innovative and that change occurs in a tradition is not in question here, but maybe the speed at which this change occurs in modern society, adds to the polarisation between ‘purists’ or ‘traditionalists’ and those pushing the boundaries?
The Increasing Rate of Speed of Change in the Tradition

One can speculate that one reason for this widespread notion of fear against change on both an organisational and individual level is due to the accelerating speed of change itself. In days gone by change came gradually. New ideas were tested by a community before being absorbed and often modified to fit their individual needs in their particular dance tradition. The speed increased somewhat with the Dancing Masters who actively introduced new styles of dancing in their repertoire to keep interest up and to be able to compete for customers with other Dancing Masters. The many newspapers advertising dance classes during the 1800s often did so by highlighting the ‘new continental’ styles of dances. These included polkas, mazurkas, waltzes, and country-dances and in particular the Quadrilles offered to the public by the Dancing Masters, alongside the standard reels and solo dances. However this is nothing, compared with the speed of communication and ease of travel that is on offer at present. With use of the Internet there are no limits to the amount of people who can immediately access a newly composed dance from anywhere on the globe. Dancers can also travel worldwide to share their experiences. I feel it is not strange to find a certain amount of resistance within this high-speed exchange and expansion of tradition.

By nature, the Scottish dance traditions have from early on been an easy target for this type of rapid expansion. I am here referring to written dance notations of Scottish dance forms.

Oral vs. Written Transmission of Dance Traditions

Very little, if any, of the Scottish dance tradition relies on oral tradition alone for its survival. There are manuals stipulating how all steps, movements and dances should be danced according to the aforementioned organisations. Other dance traditions such as Ceilidh / Old Time dancing are also dependent on the written word for its assimilation. Even though the dance styles are not governed by any national organisation, the grammar used in describing these dances is very closely linked to how both Scottish Country and Highland dancing is described in text. This is in stark contrast to, for example, the Irish solo step-dance tradition, which is almost completely based on oral transmission.

The only aspect of the current Scottish dance tradition that relies almost exclusively on oral transmission is the fairly new scene of step dancing. Percussive step dancing has primarily been introduced from ‘Scottish’ communities in Cape Breton Island, Canada, since the early 1990s. According to many of its practitioners in Scotland it is currently claimed to represent an almost forgotten style of Scottish dance. Some memories linger of a percussive dance style in Scotland but few, if any, steps have actually been revived within Scotland (Melin 2005). So different is this style of dance to those commonly found in Scotland that it is often dismissed as Irish dancing. Without trying to analyse how much of the Cape Breton dance tradition has a Scottish essence, it can safely be said that this style of dance has now become part of the Scottish dance tradition.

This recent introduction of Cape Breton step dance to the traditional dance scene has not occurred without friction. It has received a mixed greeting by the practitioners of existing dance forms. The reaction has ranged from mistrust and dismissal to total acceptance by Scottish dancers. It is very much at odds with the rest of the dance tradition as the core of the current Cape Breton step-dance tradition is based on improvisation and the individuals’ interpretations of music and steps. Innovation, to a certain degree, is naturally inherent in this dance form. Nothing could be further from the prescribed ways of the other dance traditions. It is also aesthetically different, being a ‘close to the floor’ percussive dance style as opposed to the light, elevated, and technically refined and ballet-influenced styles of, for example, Scottish Country and Highland dancing.
Inclusive and Exclusive Dancing

Texts describing most Scottish dance traditions are readily available and the dance scene outside the control of organisations has become quite diverse. In some places people are quite happy to keep their existing dance traditions, while in other places there seems to be a ‘hunger’ to add something new to the repertoire. In some cases it borders on an almost competitive streak as to which dance group has the most dances (old and new) and who introduces a new favourite to the area first. In one area in particular I observed the quality of dances/dancing almost being exchanged for a quantity of new dances. This particular case refers to a certain older age group of dancers of a certain area in the east of Scotland. Here local Old Time and Scottish Country Dance groups (generally not organisation regulated) seemingly indulge in an unwritten and unsaid competition on how many new Country Dances, and Old Time couple dances they could put on their respective repertoires. I noted that to the majority of those involved with these particular dance groups, this was a cause of great excitement and encouraged frequent participation. However, for those people who are content with a limited number of well-known and well-liked dances and for those who are beginners to the dance form, it often formed a barrier to participation. The social dancing had become exclusive rather than inclusive by nature in these particular cases. This is by no means an unusual occurrence since I have encountered similar scenarios in other places round Scotland.

Modern Initiatives of Collaboration – Modern and Traditional Dance

In recent years, Scotland has seen a number of initiatives of collaboration between different dance forms. Choreographic pieces have been commissioned by the prestigious St Magnus Festival (Orkney), the Umbrella organisation, and the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust (STDT), allowing professional and amateur dancers to share their knowledge in modern, contemporary and traditional dance.

One such collaboration was requested for a one-off charity performance combining modern and traditional dance. The success of this choreography resulted in the formation of Scotland’s currently only professional traditional dance group ‘Dannsa’. Highland dance choreographies have explored combinations of ballet, modern, hip-hop, street, jazz, and step dance to great effect. These are only a few examples of the modern scene of traditional dance where the boundaries are pushed even further.

These collaborations are, however, marginal in the greater scheme of modern Scottish arts policy. They are highly dependent on, and really only occur, if serious arts funding is available from central sources such as the Scottish Arts Council.

At the Crossroads – Thoughts on Future Challenges

Scotland is at a crossroads with regards to its traditions of dance heritage. As dance forms become specialised, they also become exclusive rather than inclusive. It is no longer the case that a majority of people know their traditional dancing. This becomes quite clear when one attends a wedding where dance features, as a rule. It is often the case, that younger and middle-aged participants have no idea how to dance the basic repertoire of ceilidh dances. The use of a caller with dance bands has become quite common. However the traditional dance band is currently losing out to DJs with recorded music providing the wedding entertainment.

Dancing has largely disappeared from the Scottish schools curriculum. It is treated as part of Physical Education, and only then features if the PE staff are interested in teaching the dance form. If any school staff member is a Country dancer it is often the case that voluntary clubs exist within the school but this seems to be a declining feature in modern Scotland.
Organisations such as STDT and some local Councils have encouraged traditional dance projects where traditional dance is offered to local schools. These are often very successful, but only in the short term. As funding dries up, so does the availability of sustained traditional dance featuring in the Scottish school system.

To my mind some of the biggest challenges facing the traditional dance scene in modern Scotland are:

- How to introduce traditional dance to young people in an attractive contemporary way so that they take note.
- There are a number of voices who claim the organisations are too set in their ways of promoting their particular dance styles that they fail to understand the changing requirements for attracting new participants (young and old) to their dance forms.
- Scottish Country Dancing is on the whole greying, with mainly youth initiatives through the school system. I do not know of any statistics showing how many young people they retain outside of dancing promoted in the schools.
- Highland dancing is primarily the domain of young females among the dancers and the majority of teachers and adjudicators are also female. This dance tradition was once seen as a male form of dancing only. How does it (and does it have the criteria to) become attractive to males again?
- Make funding bodies understand that the traditions of the nation (not only dance) do not survive to the same extent without proper funding. Some would however, argue that if a tradition is worth keeping it would be upheld regardless of funding.

One final thought I would add would be that to properly understand what the modern day challenges to traditional dance are, a thorough understanding of its past must be obtained. As part of the original objectives of STDT research was a priority. With the lack of funding to set research projects in motion, this is not happening on any greater scale, if at all, today. Proper academic research would shed light on the real dance traditions and their histories and, I hope, place the many romantic notions commonly associated with the various dances and dance forms in their rightful place; as accompanying stories rather than being viewed as supposedly concrete facts. This might assist in overcoming some of the lack of confidence in the tradition and might ease the general relationship between the Scots and their dance tradition.
Endnote

i. The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) was set up in 1923; The Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association (SOHDA) c. 1947 and The Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (SOBHD) in 1950.

ii. I here equate the dominant with the organisations who has over the years set up a national and global network of affiliated organisation (clubs, associations etc) that further their aims and objectives against the small local peripheral groups of people with their locally evolved ways of executing the same dance traditions.

iii. For example the past and current spread of new fashionable dances and dance types from the centre to the periphery, but also the counter flow of dance types from the periphery to the centre and back out again.

iv. Local variations of dances and dance styles in comparison with codified, refined and standardised organisation versions of the same.

v. Much of the standardised organisation ways of dancing are based on romanticised views of what their styles of dance once was and should be today.

vi. This was one of the reasons why, for example, the Stockholm Branch of the RSCDS (Sweden) split in the early 1980s into two clubs, one which danced exclusively association dances and the other which mixed association dances with newly composed and innovative dances on their respective repertoires.

vii. Apart from percussive step dancing.

Bibliography


Cape Breton step dancer, Willie Fraser.