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Modalities of Revival

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Taking the Floor:

Dance, Nation and gender in the Irish Revival

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Dance has been relatively neglected in scholarship of the Irish Revival. In fact dance has only recently been accepted as a scholarly pursuit with something valuable to offer to Irish social, cultural, and historical studies. As an expressive cultural form dance can tell us a lot about the society in which it is performed as it both reflects and produces culture. It reflects it in the sense that it reveals the nature of the institutions and ideologies that produce and regulate it. It produces culture through the formation of cultural identities, invoking through its performance a set of social, political, and moral values. So it is to dance that I now turn to see what it can tell us about the Revival.

I'm sure most people listening to this podcast have heard of *Riverdance*, a term that has itself become synonymous with Irish dance. It is generally acknowledged that the performance of *Riverdance as a 7 minute interval act* during the Eurovision song contest of 1994 marked a watershed in the transformation of Irish dance from a national to a global level. Less well known is the fact that one hundred years earlier dance was also undergoing a major transformation. It was during the Irish Revival that dance began its journey on the symbolic road to Irish nationhood. The question I want to pose here is how did this journey begin and what routes did it take?

Cultural Nationalism and the Gaelic Revival.

It may be useful to contextualise the role of dance in The Revival in terms of the emergence of culturally nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It may be seen as part of a wider European movement of that period the objective of which was the discovery and promotion of what was regarded as the unique cultural heritage of the newly emerging European nation/states. The promotion of 'unique' national cultural heritage was frequently used as a rationale for the creation of autonomous political entities or as Ernest Gellner (1983) would have it to make culture and polity congruent. The objective of those involved in the Gaelic Revival Movement was to revive the language, customs, folkways, of 'traditional' Ireland - an Ireland that was in decline and whose culture was perceived to have been obliterated by British colonial rule. The main cultural organisation taking on responsibility for the promotion of dance heritage was the Gaelic League founded in 1893 as a non-political, non-sectarian organisation. League leaders were strongly influenced by European thinkers of the time on the connection between culture and politics and in particular on the role of culture in the struggle for political independence. According to dance scholar Mo Meyer (1995: 29) the 'educated Irish elite - poets, writers, artists, historians, philosophers and folklorists' who founded the League knew of and participated in the international debates of the day. The philosophy and policies of the League were strongly influenced by German writers particularly Johann Herder who believed each nation had a unique spirit and cultural heritage that was expressed through modes of communication such as language, music as well as techniques of the body such as gesture, movement and dance. This spirit was captured in its purest form in the 'folk' culture of rural peasants and the

task for revivalists was to transform this culture into a national culture. How was this dissemination to occur? National cultures could be developed through the creation of what historian Benedict Anderson has termed a 'national imagined community'. The community is imagined in the sense that members don't know each other and for the most part will never meet. However bonds are established between them through the use of distinctive cultural symbols and practices such as language use, religious practice, national newspapers, dance and sport¹.

While the League became the pre-eminent organisation in the promotion of Irish dance, it was not part of its initial primary objective which was to restore the Irish language. Over time, however, leaders within the organisation, most notably Padraig Pearse, realised that it was necessary to provide what he referred to as 'healthy native entertainments' (An Claidheamh Solais, 22nd. May, 1909) as well as language instruction if they were to succeed in getting widespread popular support for the creation of an Irish 'national imagined community'. And dance was considered to be one of these 'healthy native entertainments'.

The dancing body and the body politic

In line with the prevailing philosophy of culture, revivalists wished to create a dance canon that was distinctively Irish. In order to do so they set about constructing an idealised Irish dancing body. This body was to reject all foreign influences. It was to be a 'civilised' upright and disciplined body. And over time it was to be a young, female body. I would like to consider each of these characteristics of the dancing body in turn.

One of the major influences on the creation of the Irish dancing body was a reaction to the portrayal of the Irish ethnic body under British colonial rule in Ireland. For centuries the Irish body had been defined in opposition to the British, the latter being represented as upright (physically and morally), hardworking, adult, reasonable: the Irish, in contrast, were commonly portrayed as feckless, childlike, lazy. Indeed, one of the negative stereotypes of the Irish was the excessive time they devoted to drinking, music and dancing. The abiding colonial image of the Irishman from the 1860s was the ape-like cartoon figure of *Punch* magazine. Liz Curtis's (1984) insightful historical account traces his simian physiognomy, posture and demeanour to the combined effects of two events occurring in Britain at this time. One was the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution, specifically that aspect of the theory which proposed a 'missing link' between the ape and the Englishman, the latter being considered as the pinnacle of the evolutionary process. The Irishman, placed much lower down the evolutionary scale, was believed to be that 'missing link'. The second significant event was the Fenian uprising of 1867 in which the rebels were represented as less than human, belligerent, irrational, and violent.

When the London Branch of the Gaelic League was founded it was anxious to counteract the rowdy, drunken image of the Irish which had been historically embedded but which was also associated with Irish social events in the city such as the annual St. Patrick's Day celebrations held at Holburn Town Hall. Fionán MacColuim, the organizer of the first League céilí held in the Bloomsbury Hall in October, 1897, wished to project a different image. MacColuim, who worked as a

clerk in the India Office and was Honorary Secretary of the League in London was acutely aware of the negative image of the Irish. In fact according to dance scholar John Cullinane, (p. 26) MacColuim's desire to create a good image was 'bordering on obsession' and was constantly reflected in his report of the Céilí. He even remarked that the Scots, at their Céilí in Bloomsbury always had a very respectable well-behaved crowdⁱⁱ. MacColuim writes "This was the type of people I have in mind for our first Ceili, that is, people associated with the League or who had received an invitation from us". According to Cullinane, O'Keefe and O'Fathaigh, two members of the Branch stood at the door and welcomed people, but also vetted those seeking admission and refused admission to some. O'Fathaigh who was 'fear an tí' on the night prevented one artist from singing 'Phil the Fluter's Ball' as he considered it to be 'stage Irish'.

In addition to gate-keeping and image management League members set about determining which dances were appropriate for their social programmes and began making a distinction between dances that were seen as uniquely Irish and those that were not. This was a gradual selection process involving much debate and controversy revolving around the desire for tradition on the one hand and the need for innovation on the other. These tensions were clearly present in the first major dance event held by the League. We learn from Breathnach's (1983:49-50) detailed account that the Céilí was an eclectic affair, including as it did, step dance, music and song, but also sets and waltzes to Irish airs. Though successful, it created quite a bit of controversy about the provenance and authenticity of the dances themselves. Solo step dances such as some jigs, reels and hornpipes because of their intricate footwork and demands on the performers energy, were beyond the capacity of the ordinary

dancer. MacColuim was dissatisfied with the limited repertoire at the first céilí, which contrasted sharply, in his view, with the variety displayed at a Scot's céilí. However, he was able to add to the dance repertoire following his introduction to one “Professor Patrick D. Reidy who had been a dancing master in west Limerick and Kerry in the late 1880's but by then resident in Hackney. Reidy began to hold classes for League members teaching them group dances such as the *Four* and *Eight Hand Reels*, the *Humours of Bandon*, and the *High Caul Cap* (see Brennan: 1999:30). These new group or figure dances were included in the céilí programmes. According to Breathnach they were an immediate hit because they were less taxing on the performers' energy. However, it did not prevent many League members from raising objections to their introduction as their provenance was seen to be in the French quadrilles and as such inferior to the native step dances.

The controversy that arose between the ‘old and ‘new’ steps that was a prominent feature of the first League céilí continued to rage and grew increasingly heated and bitter. Cormac Ó’Caoimh, the first dance master of the League’s first Scoil Rince (dancing school) confirms the fact that there was an outcry of opposition to these newly-composed dances (see Mac Fhionnlaoich, 1973, p. 7). For instance one clerical adjudicator at the Oireachtas denounced the figure dances as a danger to the modesty of Irish maidens and demanded that the Church impose the most extreme penalties on those who practiced them. In Meyer’s (2001, p.70) opinion the debates ‘were so heated that for a time, the lack of consensus on the issue of national purity in dance almost destroyed the League’.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1912, however a compromise had been reached and the figure dances finally became accepted. (Breathnach,1983, p, 50).

Selecting appropriate dances for the new canon was an ongoing process too and MacColuim's party traveled to Ireland to discover and collect more dances. These trips were confined largely to County Kerry though they did visit some other places. Their choice of location was influenced both by the romance associated with the 'Celtic West' and the presumption that Munster was superior in dance terms because of the influence of the dancing masters. The renowned "Professor" Reidy himself was originally from Castelisland, Co. Kerry^{iv}. And so it was that the Munster style became the national style for Irish dance (Brennan, 1999).

The travelling dance collectors were selective not only in their choice of location but also in their choice of dances. Even though sets were danced at the first céilí in Bloomsbury Hall, and were, in fact, the most common folk dances in rural Ireland of the early twentieth century, they were rejected because of their foreign provenance, having been derived from the French Quadrilles and introduced into Ireland by the British military. Even the names of the dances themselves - 'The Lancer', 'The Victoria', 'The Caledonian' - would have aroused suspicion among cultural nationalists in Michael Tubridy's (1994, p. 27) view. Dance scholar Helen Brennan confirms that social dances such as the highland Schottische, the barn dance and the waltz were also excluded from the canon at this time, despite the fact that they were part and parcel of the repertoire of the ordinary people of rural Ireland among whom traditional dance was strongest (Brennan 1994:23).

Apart from their foreign provenance there were other, though less frequently acknowledged, reasons for rejecting set dances. Revivalists, while ostensibly embracing 'folk' culture, had, in fact, an ingrained dislike of it. Both Hall, (1994) and

McMahon (2008) identify urban, bourgeois values as pre-dominant in Gaelic Revivalism. Leading members of the League would have had an affinity with ‘high culture’ and on this basis alone set dancing would have been rejected because of its association with the ‘low culture’ of the rural poor. League members were equally dismissive of urban working–class culture according to Hall:

popular urban music-making and dancing as they existed in the variety theatres (and much later in the dance halls) were despised in revivalist circles, partly as they represented cultural impurity, but, more significantly, as they were expressions of low class vulgarity...(p.87).

This is a good example of what Natasha Casey (2002, p. 19): has identified as an ‘intrinsic dilemma’ for Revivalists and discernible in Johann Herder’s writings on ‘folk culture’. She observes that:

... the folk are enchanting to those already corrupted by society’s modernizing forces as they represent a connection to idealizations of the past when life was less “complicated”. However, the folk are also patently uncivilized, compared to those living in the modern, though corrupt, world.

Despite their ambivalence towards ‘folk’ culture, League members made strenuous efforts to develop appropriate dance styles and over time dance was becoming increasingly important to the organisation. By 1912 it had become in Breandan Breathnach’s words ‘an inseparable adjunct of the language movement.... and the

Gaelic League had saddled itself with an added burden to that of promoting the language' (p.50).

It is also apparent that the developing dance canon cannot be regarded as merely a static reflection of an organic folk culture but was marked by a continuous negotiation of its form and function. This was evidenced by internal tensions in the League around definitions of 'traditional' dance, as well as social class biases and the cultural tastes of its members. In this regard Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have noted that not only were traditional/folk practices harnessed to projects of cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth century but were often invented as 'traditional' practices. They coined the term 'invention of tradition' that refers, as the name implies, to a process whereby newly-invented practices are presented as having a long history within a culture. In this sense, dance was an 'invented tradition'.

The project of developing the dance canon in line with a nationalist cultural project is also evident in the dance manuals that began to appear in the early 1900s. The manuals give unique insights into the ideal Irish dancing body because, in addition to details of dance steps and formations, they specify correct bodily techniques such as hold, posture, and tempo. John Sheehan, the author of one such popular manual and a leading member of the Gaelic League in London calls on dancers to reject English fashions. In his *Guide to Irish Dancing* (1902, p.48) he exhorts his reader thus:

Don't hug your partner round the waist English fashion. When swinging hold her hands only. A bow to your partner at the end of the dance would not be

amiss, but be careful to avoid any straining after "deportment". Leave that to the Seoníní.^v In short be natural, unaffected, easy - be Irish, and you'll be all right.

As well as frowning upon physical proximity between the sexes Sheehan calls on dancers to distinguish themselves from the English by being natural and unaffected rather than straining after deportment. He signals distaste for what he considers to be the mannered, unnatural, and affected nature of English deportment. Sheehan was writing at a time when the idealised British male body ('the White Man's body) was the apotheosis of civilised masculinity. It had initially been promoted by notables such as Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scout Movement. Powell's writings on the 'white man's body' reveal his fears that venereal disease, intermarriage of the races and declining birthrates were endangering Britain's imperial power. His intention in founding the Scouts, therefore, was to restore imperial success by developing athleticism, self-sufficiency and chivalry in Britain's boys and young men. Amongst other things this entailed cultivating the stance of the 'white man' who was imagined as tall, muscular, with eyes straight ahead and body at attention and who could be clearly distinguished from 'the man', the imperial subject who, according to Powell, wished to emulate the white/British man (see Enloe, 1989, p. 50). Sheehan's advice on dance posture seems to be attempting to counter the negative Irish stereotype as uncivilized and uncouth on the one hand, but avoiding the stiff and formal manner of the British imperial body on the other. The final piece of advice in the passage- not straining after "deportment"- has clear political overtones with its reference to 'seoníní', a derogatory term for someone who apes English manners and customs.

A passage from O'Keefe and O'Brien's *A Handbook of Irish Dances*, another popular manual also advises on dance posture and movement. The authors observe that:

There are some features in connection with Irish dancing as it is seen today in Irish towns and cities that call for passing comment. The first thing that strikes any observer is that ease and grace and beauty of movement are almost invariably sacrificed to complexity of steps. When will Irish dancers understand that the simplest steps beautifully danced give more pleasure than the most difficult steps danced with an awkward carriage of the body and with obvious physical distress? It must be patent to anybody who has given the subject a moment's consideration that jigs, reels and hornpipes, danced without grace and ease, become athletic exercises pure and simple, and very often, ugly ones at that.

Here we might note the emphasis they place on carriage, on ease and grace as key components in aesthetically pleasing dance. Although I am unsure how best to interpret the distinction they make between dance and athletics it may be that they wish to differentiate between dance as representational/ or meaningful and as such capable of symbolising the nation, and dance as empty of meaning and purely technical. The passage continues with further advice for the 'perfect step-dancer' who:

...is not always beating the floor violently, neither is he flying about from one end of a platform to another: his movements are all easy and are performed with a certain stateliness, and the time is clearly but not violently marked (p.27).

Could there be a political significance here? Though ostensibly non-political, factions within the League were becoming increasingly political in their nationalist aspirations. For these factions the promotion of Gaelic culture was seen as a prerequisite for the overturning of colonial rule and the formation of an Independent Irish state. In other words Gaelic culture under Home rule was not acceptable. Mo Meyer argues that 'For the die-hard revolutionary nationalists Irish dance took on the rallying role, that had, until then, been played by the Gaelic Language'. 'One might', in fact, he claims (p.69) 'view dance as the gunpowder of the Irish Revolution'. This was because of the triad that he believes existed between the cultural as represented by the Gaelic League, the political by Sinn Fein, and the military in the form of the IRA. So without wishing to over-interpret O'Keefe and O'Brien, the avoidance of violent moves mentioned twice in the one sentence may imply a rejection of militant nationalism.

And how do we best interpret the authors' concern with dignity, grace, comportment and the balance required between uprightness and ease? The upright body in dance does have wider political significance. Paul Connerton in his book (1989, p.90) *How Societies Remember* observes that 'much of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body'. There is an identifiable range of repertoires through which many postural performances become meaningful by registering meaningful inflections of the upright posture. Dance anthropologist Frank Hall (1996) concurs that the 'civilising process' emanating from European courtly manners, is frequently expressed in bodily and spatial metaphors such as 'upstanding citizen', bearing up under pressure and so on. The upright body (indeed what is generally regarded as a stiffness of the upper body) characteristic of Irish dance might also been seen as

‘good bearing’. It may well be that the dance instructions that I have considered express a concern with an authority of the dancing body that reflects the political body. Though referring to a somewhat later period Hall believes that the selection of a straight still posture in dance is not surprising ’ because it agrees with values that enhance its status as a symbol of the Irish nation’. O’Keefe and O’Brien’s use of the term ‘ stateliness’ is equally telling in its double meaning - ‘an impressively weighty and dignified but graceful manner’ when applied to the dancing body. It also has an obvious political meaning in terms of its reference to a country or nation-state. The authors’ choice of language here provides a clear, albeit unconscious, illustration of the linking of the individual dancing body and the body politic.

The authors’ concern with ‘ease’ is no less intriguing. They lament its absence in dance because of the common practice of ‘beating the floor violently’ (a mark of wildness) and the faster than required tempo (connoting haste and lack of ease). It seems to mark a desire to be seen as ‘civilised’ but not affected nor stiffly formal like the English. The term also connotes a sense of authenticity. Connerton (p.90) again draws our attention to the meaning of the term ‘ease’ and distinguishes between two types - a natural postural ease and a forced ease. Natural postural ease indicates most accurately the habitual nature of the person and a sense of authenticity.^{vi}

A consideration of the ideal posture and movement that the dance manuals of the early 1900s called for, makes it clear that they were authentically Irish in at least two ways; they were to be distinguished from the British, and they were to represent the values to be embodied in the nation-state. These values included those of

dignity/stateliness, uprightness/honesty, restraint, modesty, ease, grace, and authenticity (Hall,1996: 88).

The Revival era was also marked by an increasing discipline in dance performance and teaching which led, in turn, to the emergence of a national standard. The new approach to céilí was more strict and disciplined than it had been. Competitive dancing now included the use of the promenade, rising and side steps. This was generated partly by the desire for creating a positive image of the Irish in London but it was due to the fact that competitive dancing had become an important feature of the League's activities. Prior to this standardization process it was more difficult for judges at national level as the same dance could be performed differently in different parts of the country or, indeed even in Gaelic League circles in Dublin (Cullinane, 1997 p54). The creation of a national standard made it easier to evaluate competitors. Hall also makes the point that when dance became formally competitive (with increasing regulation and evaluation) it led to a narrowing of style and imitation of the winning form.

That dance was turning into a more serious and disciplined activity is captured in a report published in *Sinn Féin* on 19 March 1910 of a lecture addressed to a Dublin meeting of the women's organisation, Inghinidhe na hEireann. The report states that the lecturer 'John Brennan' (aka Sydney Gifford one of the Gifford sisters active in Inghinidhe na hEireann) had called for 'more frivolity' in Irish-Ireland entertainments including dance as she considered that they were too 'monotonous, more in the nature of mere mechanical functions which had to be got through in a given time and were not enlivened by gay costumes'. She urged the introduction of foreign dances

including the waltz and foreign fashions in dress to enliven the proceedings. However Mrs Tuohy, who presided over the meeting, responded to the lecturer's suggestions by saying that there would be no need for such a plea if 'Irish dancing was taught properly and danced as it should be danced'. In her opinion it was enough 'to make one ashamed of it' and that it was a 'bad combination of Irish and foreign dances'. Commenting on the newspaper report historian Margaret Ward sees it as conjuring up 'a dreadful image of solemn young people, desperately concentrating upon the intricacies of the various steps as they dutifully attempted to revive the ancient culture' (Ward, 1983: 65).

A passage from the annual report of the *Árd Craobh* for the year 1907-8 of the League hints at a similar tension between the relatively more light-hearted pursuits such as dance and the more serious pursuits such as political discussion. The report records that there was an informal 'ceilidhe' held every Friday evening in Calarogan Hall (after the history lectures) in which 'merry cailini and light-hearted buachailli danced to the music of fiddle and pipes'. The report goes on: 'those to whom the 'poetry of motion' did not appeal quietly discussed the situation and other matters' (p.16). And while it is not clear in the report, I assume from the context that it refers to the political situation.

'Merry Cailini': Women, Dance and Nation

It is to the 'merry cailini' that I would now like to draw your attention since one of the most striking transformations in dance practice during the Revival was the decline of the dominance of male step dancers, the increased number of female dancers, and the gradual transition from the male dance master to predominantly female dance teachers.

It was this image of ‘ merry cailini’ - of girls and young women, costumes emblazoned with national symbols, long hair in ringlets (with contemporary addition of wigs and fake tan) that became the symbol of Irish national dance for most of the twentieth century. Indeed, it became so commonplace that it was unremarkable. How and why did it emerge?

The linking of women, dance and nation was not unique to Irish nationalism of the Revival era but was also a trope of British colonial discourse in the same period. Indeed, the positive colonial representation of the Irish female body was in stark contrast to the negative representation of the Irish male body^{vii}. Some of the early representations of colleens dancing were those of the Franco-British exhibition held in White City, London in 1908. Among the display of cultures at the Exhibition from all corners of the British Empire was the ‘Irish village’ of Ballymaclinton, peopled by hardworking, clean, and chaste Irish women who gave exhibitions of Irish dance at set times over the duration of the Exhibition. Annie Coombes (1994, p. 207) in her extensive analysis of the Exhibition sees the representation of the ‘Irish colleens’ (as the contemporary press referred to them) as serving to solidify a number of ideologies.

Coombes draws on the anthropological tome, *Women of All Nations* and published in the same year as the Exhibition to illustrate the dominant view of Ireland and Irish women within British colonial discourse of this period. She claims that the portrayal was in entirely sexualised and gendered terms. Ireland was seen as both feminised and impotent, where ‘the virility of the country has been sapped by excessive emigration’ and where those remaining were ‘stagnating below the line of reason and even sanity’. Despite this degraded state of the country at least the women knew their place, since

‘no country in Christendom reveals a higher standard of chastity’ (quoted in Coombes, p. 298). According to the writer, Ireland had the lowest standard of living anywhere in the British empire, and any invitation to marriage for the lower classes (who were group classified as ‘solidly Roman Catholic and Nationalist’) would simply mean starting ‘another homestead of indescribable dirt and untidiness, a fresh breeding-place for consumption, the curse of Ireland’. The representation of Irish women as chaste within colonial discourse stemmed from the British fear of the Irish breeding which would lead to further poverty and disease.

The chastity of Irish women was reinforced by the colonial racialisation of bodies in the Exhibition. The discourse on Irish women’s bodies operated by comparing them with women in other parts of the British empire. The stark contrast between the innocence of the dancing ‘colleens’ and the threatening sexuality of the African dancing ‘girls’ is particularly noteworthy. Coombes (p.207) observes that the latter were operating in a context where:

Physical prowess had already become a naturalised precondition of blackness... and the concepts of ‘natural’ racial characteristics, biologically determined, is consistent with that emphatic preoccupation with the body and with details of black and white physiognomy...

The popularity of dancing for black women had already been established within this colonial frame. The sexualisation of the womens’ dancing bodies posed a potential problem for respectable exhibition attendees and the reading public viewing the newspaper photographs of the exhibition. The problem was solved by keeping the

‘perennial’ dancers but they were now ‘described as girls rather than women in order to play down any hint of unregulated sexuality’.^{viii}

The imagery associating the ‘colleens’ with ‘nation’ at the Exhibition was, of course, a British nation. And this particular representation of nation had the clear political purpose of maintaining the union with Britain:

Through the living out of a Celtic tradition, eulogised in the guidebooks as it was in the press, the ‘village’ served as irrefutable proof of the possibility of a unified Ireland with Protestant and Catholic peacefully cohabiting – a harmonious resolution under Liberal guidance (Coombes, p.211).

The colleens ‘demonstrating cottage industries and producing items for sale to the exhibition-goer in the ‘village shop’, making soap or dancing and singing in their identical costumes, presented a harmonious picture of archaic and simple living’ (p.210). Coombes argues that the idea of a common Celtic heritage within a national British culture as a resilient ‘folk’ culture, surviving in rural communities (p.210) ‘was a popular fantasy shared by those at both ends of the political spectrum’. These positive images of the dancing colleens at the Exhibition were intended as a marker of the simple, traditional values that brought order to everyday rural life in Ireland.

Women, Dance and the Gaelic League.

The ‘folksy’ representation of the women in Ballymaclinton was also seen as a weapon against the more militant aspects of the Gaelic Revival. This ‘folksy’ image

of Irish women was not confined to British colonial discourse, however, but was also present within Irish cultural nationalism itself. It is not surprising that militant women in organisations such as as *Inghinidhe na hEireann* vehemently opposed it. An article in *Bean na hEireann*, the first women's paper produced in Ireland denounced as 'pernicious nonsense' another article in the *Irish Homestead* (the paper produced by the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society) for romanticising the 'barefoot Irish cailin in her red petticoat and hooded cloak when the reality was that poverty determined what Irish girls wore and not the desire to look picturesque' (quoted in Ward, 1983, :74). This extract is typical of the lively debates over political and cultural issues during the Revival. Many of the women who were actively involved in promoting Irish culture at this time were informed by the socialist, nationalist and feminist debates revolving round the issues of Home Rule, independence, worker's rights, votes for women that were ongoing between the 1890s and coinciding with, and at times generated by, events such as the fall of Parnell, the 1913 Lockout, and the First World War (see Ward, 1983). Women's activities were not confined to the drawing room either. Margaret Ward finds that the activities of *Inghinidhe na hEireann* were characterized by an expressive public theatrical element. They organized a massive 'Treats for Children' event in opposition to an equivalent event offered on the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland in 1899, dramatic productions including nationalist tableaux vivant and anti-recruiting activities on the streets of Dublin (Ward, 1983). There was frequently cross-over female membership between political organizations such as *Inghinidhe na hEireann* and the Gaelic League. Membership of the League in its early days was predominantly male but the numbers of women increased as the 'organisation found its legs' (MacMahon, see 98-99).

Commentators are agreed that it was very attractive to women. Margaret Ward sees it as ‘revolutionary in its attitude to women, accepting women and men equally into classes’. Timothy Macmahon (2008: 99) too sees it as much more democratic than Irish society as a whole, providing women with mixed -sex activities in a non-sectarian, non-political environment. The female membership of the League was mixed in terms of social class including ascendancy women such as Lady Esmonde and Lady Gregory (founding and leading branches in their own community of Wexford and Galway respectively) and lower middle class women such as Sinead O’ Flanagan, active in the teaching of Irish language in the League and who was later to marry Eamon de Valera.

The increased female membership of the League had an effect on the shaping of the idealised dancing body. Between 1893 and 1920 Irish step dance had become transformed from a predominantly rural and male activity to a female and urban activity (see Hall ,1994, p. 92, Cullinane,). In this regard Cullinane observes that competitive dancing of the Cork school had been an adolescent and adult male preserve, taught by artisan dance teachers. Only adult men competed in the two dancing competitions at first Oireachtas in the Rotunda, in 1897 even though they were open to all ages and both sexes and that this was in keeping with the practice of the time (Cullinane, 2003:122). Another indicator of dance as a masculine activity pre-1900 was the link forged between dance, drink and sport. A case in point was the donation by Murphy’s Brewery, Lady’ Well, Cork, of a solid silver belt to be competed for as a ‘Challenge Belt’ in All-Ireland dance competitions open to male dancers only. The Belt was first competed for in 1895 as part of a Gaelic sports event at Turner’s Cross in Cork City. (Cullinane, 2003p. 123. However, by the end of the

century dancing was being taught at Cork Piper's club to male and female adults, adolescents and children. This practice was to be adopted by Gaelic League branches increasingly during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The participation of female entrants from the Cork Piper's Club was evident in a preliminary analysis I conducted of feis programmes between 1902-1918 detailing the names of entrants to the competitions and their club affiliations. The analysis also confirms the intergenerational shift from older male to younger female competitors^{ix}. For instance a comparison of the earliest feis in the sample, Laighean and Midhe, 1902 where the hornpipe competition was open to men only and in which there were 9 competitors with the Feis na Mumhan 1910 in which there were 36 adult females and 10 adult males. We also see the increase in female participants at the Fearmanach Feis of 1916 in which 8 women and 7 men competed in the hornpipe competition. The hornpipe competitions continued to attract male competitors however as indicated by the programme for Feis Uisnig, in 1912 where there were out of 19 entrants there were 10 identified as male and 4 as female. In the programme for the Oireachtas held in Cill Airne 1914, there were 27 adult men in the hornpipe and double jig competition (which wasn't open to females) whereas there were only 9 in the junior (under 16years) competition. There were 14 adult females in the Reel comp and 16 in the Reel and Slip jig (combined) junior competition. The tendency appears to be a decrease in the numbers of males from senior to junior competitions while the opposite seems to be the case for females ie. an increase in numbers from senior to junior.

The increase in the number of women and girls in public dancing between 1902 and 1918 as evidenced by their participation in feiseanna can be partially understood by the increase in women's participation, visibility and mobility in the public sphere. We can see evidence of this in the advertisements placed in feis programmes indicating that they were becoming increasingly involved in paid work and in education. Examples include an advertisement for a typist course for females in McGuire's College and for 'the Lady's Cycle' (programme for Cuirm Ceoil & Dráma, Halla Father Maitiu, 30th. January, 1914). The MacColuim papers include a feature brochure of Paterson's match company with photographs of women workers on the factory floor. Also among the papers was a 1909 rough proof for a pamphlet on Parliament na mBan (Women's Parliament). Furthermore, women were beginning to enter some of the professions, most notably primary- school teaching (see Cullinane, 1997). By the early 1920s, Lily Comerford, the first woman to make a career out of dance teaching, had opened a class for children. By the following decade many of the dance classes were taken by young women and the majority of dance teachers were female. This trend continued and of the first cohort of teachers registered with the Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (Irish Dancing Commission) just over a decade later 17 were men and 54 were women^x.

It is worth noting that while women may have found a new role for themselves in the League both as prominent members and as participants in social and competitive dancing they continued to be a minority on the Executive where men (clergy and lay) occupied the top positions. (McMahon, 2008: 95-96). For example in 1903-4, 34 of the 38 members of the Coiste Gnótha were men and this had not changed a decade later when 30 of the 34 of the committee members were men.

It is also the case that there were internal tensions and disputes about the role of women from the very early days of the League. One such was what became known as the 'Battle of Portarlinton' where conflict arose between lay members of the League and the local clergy over the offering of mixed male and female adult evening classes. The practice of having separate classes was not confined to Portarlinton but was common throughout the country. The separation of the sexes tended to reinforce more traditional gender roles'. (MacMahon, 2008: 100)..

If there was a gender divide in League classes generally, separate styles for men and women were also encouraged in the teaching of dance. We see in the following quote from O'Keefe and O'Brien's (1912) handbook that it was the light, dainty and graceful steps that were seen to be appropriate for female dancers and 'battering' was out of the question. In the authors' opinion contemporary teaching styles were:

... entirely at variance with the dancing practice of the old dancing masters, who always taught women steps of a lighter and simpler character than those taught to men. This was in harmony with the general good taste of the old dancing master, a man usually of courtly ways and fine manners, ever jealous for the dignity of his profession. To such a man it would have been the source of the most utmost pain to witness a girl 'treble' or 'batter' or perform other manly steps; he possessed a large repertory of light, somewhat dainty steps for women, which were so framed as to make up in grace what they lacked in complexity (p.28).

increased participation in dance does go some way towards explaining the strengthening association between girls/young women and dance. However, it is not the whole story and in this regard it is useful to look at the international dance context. Historical research indicates that folk dancing was becoming increasingly associated with women in the early years of the twentieth century in Britain and the USA. In the latter, for instance, there was a fashion in the big cities for performances of folk dance by young women in public parks under the direction of women such as Elizabeth Burchenal. Burchenal who was an anthropologist as well as a dance scholar and teacher had traveled widely throughout Europe in her endeavour to popularize European folk dances. She visited Ireland in 1913 responding to an invitation from Lady Aberdeen, then vicereine of Ireland. Lady Aberdeen had been so impressed by a performance of two thousand girls folk dancing in a Manhattan public school under Burchenal's direction that she invited her to Ireland to train dance teachers. During her visit Burchenal made the acquaintance of one JM Lang, the Principal of the National School of Irish Dancing which he had just founded and where he taught a variety of dance styles. It was he who collected the dances that were later published in Burchenal's book under the title *National Dances of Ireland* (see Cullinane, 1998:52-54). Burchenal's philosophy of dance would not have gone unnoticed in her discussion with dance enthusiasts and teachers during her visit. It is plausible to suggest that in Ireland, as in the USA, the public dance demonstrations empowered female teachers to gain and claim expertise as folk-dance educators, thereby 'making inroads into the largely male-dominated enclave of dance pedagogy' (Tomko, 1996: 171-172).

The turn of the twentieth century also saw a trend to demarcate gender in physical culture more generally. There were serious gender concerns around dance and other movement forms in England and the USA at this time. American men, according to Kimmel (1994) were fearful of cultural feminisation and the loss of the masculine self. Physical cultivation systems especially sport and dance were pivotal in marking gender differences. Sport was instrumental according to Kimmel (1994, p.33) ‘in the fight against the feminisation of men’ and ‘made boys into men’. In the Irish context the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) founded in 1884 is the exemplar devoted as it was to getting Irishmen involved in manly sporting activities (see Cronin, 1994/5). In the following extract from a letter written by Archbishop Croke to Michael Cusack, founder of the GAA he sets up native Irish sports as manly and simultaneously opposes it to what he regards as a feminised British culture:

We are daily importing from England not only her manufactured goods, which we cannot help doing since she has practically strangled our own manufacturing appliances, but together with her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, *her dances* [my emphasis] and her manifold mannerisms, her games also, and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our grand national sports, and to the sore humiliation, I believe of every son and daughter of the old land (quoted in Cronin, 1994/5, p.13).

Croke goes on to accuse Irish people of slavishly following the ‘effeminate follies’ of English culture. This effeminacy could be countered, in his opinion, through developing masculine athleticism in boys and young men through the sporting activities of the GAA. Dance was encouraged for girls as an alternative to sport

according to dancer and dance scholar Catherine Foley (2001: 36 because it reflected ‘the belief, until relatively recently, that dance is a girls’ preoccupation and too “sissyish” for boys’. For many city girls she believes that Irish step dance became the national physical outlet.^{xi} So while both sport and dance were spectacular displays of skilled athletic bodily movement in the performance of nationhood, sport was focusing on inculcating the qualities of manliness and toughness while the primary emphasis in dance was on lightness, grace, and beauty.

While physical cultivation systems were important in determining popular ideas about dance of the period so too were mental cultivation systems. Rationality was one of the key requirements of political self-governance and essential to the operation of modern nation-states. It is likely that the cultivation of rationality was of primary concern to those seeking to establish an independent Irish state, as well as being a response to the colonial stereotype of the Irish as irrational. The mind was believed to be the source of rational thought. The body on the other hand was linked to nature, the instinctual and the emotional, and deemed to be inferior.^{xii} As Thomas observes (2004, p.191) ‘The mind/body dichotomy... constitutes the cornerstone of the western humanist tradition of thought, wherein the mind is elevated to a spiritual plane and the body is relegated to the natural, mechanical, instinctual plane’. This Cartesian model was overlaid onto gender with men being associated more with the mind and women with the body. (see Ward, 1993). We could reasonably expect, therefore, that these dominant discourses would have influenced ideas on dance in such a way as to see it as more appropriate for women than for men.

If Irish women were becoming increasingly involved in the public sphere through dance activities, and becoming increasingly symbolically associated with national dance, how did this impact on women? There is no doubt that teaching dance empowered women; it enabled women to enter and have an influence in the public sphere and gave them the opportunity to earn an independent livelihood. However one could argue that as dance practice became more disciplined and nationally standardized female teachers were more constrained by the rules established by men in top positions in the main dance organizations. The disciplining of their bodies in line with the requirements of a patriarchal national ideal may have represented a usurping of their power. From what we know dance performance at the experiential level it was felt as empowering, as a competent achievement, as a freedom of expression and a great source of pride and pleasure. At the same time the changing gender dynamics of step dance at the point where it was moving away from relatively more spontaneous to a more restrictive style may be significant. Perhaps there is an argument to be made that Irish step dance became infantilized by becoming more associated with young women, girls and (to a lesser extent young boys) –that is transferred to relatively powerless bodies. Or to put it another way, as the idealised dancing body became *symbolically* more powerful *actual* dancing bodies were becoming less powerful.

Summary

So we have come towards the end of this dance of words. If I retrace the steps I have taken, I will find that the mission of Revalists was to create a unique and authentic dance culture in which dance was transformed from a practice enjoyed for its own

sake to becoming ‘a conscious symbolic act’ (Snape, 2009 :298). In this case the ‘conscious symbolic act’ was that of invoking the Irish nation. Key influences on the shaping of the Irish dancing body, I have suggested, were the colonial relationship with Britain and Irish nationalist ideology and each of these was underpinned by deep-seated gender and social-class discourses. The Irish dancing body, I have argued, was shaped in such a way as to reflect the body politic. Inscribed onto that body were the cherished values of the ‘old’ nation and those of the nascent independent state. The values of the ‘old’ nation were invoked through ‘folk’ culture and the efforts to collect native dances; in the attempts to eliminate any foreign, and especially English, influences from the new dance canon; in the deference shown to the ‘old’ dance-masters. The values of the aspirant state are seen in the desire for dignity and authority inscribed within the upright but relaxed dance posture that was called for in the new canon; in an increasing discipline leading to the establishment of a national standard, in the increasing participation and visibility of women in dance. We have seen that the ‘ideal’ dancing body was being continuously and selectively shaped during the Revival era weaving its way between tradition and modernity, between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, between the Irish and the foreign, and between men and women,

We are one hundred years on from the Gaelic Revival. But the Irish dance we know today and whose foundations were laid down during those decades continues to flourish. This year, 2014, is the twentieth anniversary of *Riverdance*. And it too, no more than the first Gaelic League céilí, continues to be a symbol of Irishness, shaped by the historical circumstances in which it finds itself. And so the dance goes on. One final thought. I wonder what the dance enthusiasts of the Revival would make of the

recent appearance of the a troupe of 15 young female step dancers from Northern Ireland performing step dance with a 'modern twist' to pop music and reaching the semi-finals of a television talent show with the title *Britain's got Talent!*

ⁱ Indeed, for Anderson it was frequently the cultural element that preceded and gave birth to the political. Ireland seems to be a case in point since the Gaelic League, the primary organisation of Cultural Revival movement, was founded in 1893 almost thirty years before the establishment of the independent state.

ⁱⁱ By the end of the nineteenth century Celtic culture had become fashionable among sections of the British establishment partially as a result of Queen Victoria's interest in Scottish culture in particular. The 'revival' of the Scottish céilí had proved to be a great success and thereby encouraging the promotion of similar events by Irish cultural revivalists.

ⁱⁱⁱ It was not until the setting up of An Coimisiún that a compromise was agreed. An Coimisiún was charged with overseeing 'the evolution of the dance form by controlling its rate of change and its stability through a system of exclusive competitions coupled with a programme for official certification of dance teachers' (Meyer, 2001, p.71)

^{iv} It is interesting to note that Munster and especially Kerry was the base for developing canons in Irish language and literature around the same time (for example see Nic Eoin, 2003).

^v Seoníní is the plural of the Irish word 'seonín' or 'seanín' translated into English as 'little John' or John Bull symbolic figure of Britishness. It is a term of derision for those who ape foreign manners and customs.

^{vi} Connerton (1989) applies the distinction between natural and forced bodily ease to social class positions and is in this regard similar to Bourdieu's (1984) work on how social class position can be inferred through bodily orientations or 'habitus'.

^{vii} Differences in colonial representations of Irish men and women at this time may be accounted for by the predominance of the ideology of the 'separation of spheres' in which women were seen as guardians of hearth and home with the potential to exert a

‘good’ influence on both their own family and the family of the nation. Irish men, alternatively were actively involved in public political protest as well as armed resistance to British rule in Ireland.

^{viii} The ‘purity’ of Irish women of British colonial discourse had an equivalent in Irish national discourse. They both stemmed from the fear of reproduction of population and the consequent regulation of relations between the sexes. However, the avoidance of reproduction in post-famine Ireland was generated by concern with consolidation of family farms by the emerging rural middle-class

^{ix} Fully comparative data was not possible for a number of reasons. The number and categorization of dance competitions was not standardised. For instance some feiseanna had a hornpipe competition while others had a composite category of Irish jig, reel and hornpipe competition. There may also have been different rules for confined competitions. Some entrants used initials rather than first names so it was impossible to tell whether male or female. There was also a rule in some competitions that dancing competitors were required to have ‘a simple conversational knowledge of Irish’ (e.g., Clar Feise Charman, 1918) but it is unknown if and to what extent this rule was enforced.

^x Cullinane (2003: 63) makes a distinction between the Cork and Dublin in relation to the gendering of dance teaching. Cork had a long tradition of the male dance teacher (dance master) whereas in Dublin dancing was only popularized in the decades after the foundation of the Gaelic League, Because Dublin was relatively unconstrained by traditional practices female teachers could enter the profession more easily.