

The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900–2000. By Barbara O'Connor. Cork: Cork University Press, 2013. 192 pp. ISBN 9781782050414.

From the outset, author Barbara O'Connor reminds the reader of the many ways in which dance is part of a globalised Irish culture – not just a niche or folk culture but a pervasive element of everyday life, integrated into many artforms and responsive to the social, political and economic worlds from which it emerges. As becomes clear as the book develops, Irish dancing is not a singular cultural form confined to Ireland (or Riverdance) but a multi-faceted culture of movement that has been shaped by and part of a globalised Irishness and global economy both before and throughout the 20th century.

The tone and structure is that of an academic text but the book can appeal to a broader readership, although tone and methodology may fail fully to satisfy either. The writing style tends towards presenting a theory or concept, engaging in the relevant academic literature beyond Irish dance in relation to this concept and returning to the development of a more focused narrative that may be based on a variety of sources including literature, archival or fieldwork sources. Themes include cultural identity, the role of dance in community identity and formation, the changing role of women in dance and society, and globalisation. The inclusion of some dancers' personal accounts only highlights the need for further ethnographic research in the area, a point made by the author in criticising not only her own text but the field more broadly. In her conclusion, O'Connor acknowledges the methodological challenges presented by a book of this nature, particularly the limited scale of her empirical research. However, an extensive bibliography clearly informs the arguments throughout the work and provides direction for further research.

As the author herself points out, this is not a text on Irish dance but, as suggested by the title, 'the Irish dancing', and goes beyond cute girls in wigs to consider the ballrooms of Boston and the Broadway stage. What becomes clear throughout is that O'Connor is engaging with an element of popular culture at different points in time that has created links and highlighted differences between Irish communities and identities around the world. While early chapters focus on more historical aspects of the Irish dancing, engagement with definitions of modern and postmodern in Chapter 5 brings the discourse quickly forward to the 1990s, contrasting céilí and disco, and drawing primarily on the voices of women.

Each chapter could conceivably stand alone as an individual article but collectively they highlight a complexity around the imagination of Irish dance that heretofore was lost in narrowly focused narratives that lack O'Connor's level of interrogation or critique influenced by her critical cultural-studies approach. However, O'Connor's efforts do, as the author admits, suffer from her selection of themes across a broad narrative, pointing directions for further study rather than reaching an immediate level of comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, O'Connor presents an authoritative narrative on a cultural form that has changed from a 'substantially amateur and voluntary leisure activity to a professional and commercial enterprise' (p. 125) while maintaining an awareness of the diversity that exists today, exemplified by the contrast between the stereotypical conservative imagination of set dancing and the more complex realities that she experiences or is communicated by her informants.

Many of O'Connor's chapters begin with reference to familiar and seminal authors such as Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai and Michel Foucault but

these are merely a platform upon which to place very accessible observations from O'Connor's broad engagement with the literature on Irish dancing, archival research in the area and awareness of the cultural sphere of Irish dancing that includes social céilís, competitive feiseanna and commercial dance shows. Nevertheless, as O'Connor herself concludes, there is no grand narrative to the book, rather a number of recurring themes that re-emerge through the eight chapters.

The book gradually develops an overview of the Irish dancing that considers both the nationalist politics and gender politics of dance through the 20th century, gradually moving from one to the other as if chronologically. The author is concerned with the consumption and commodification of dancing from a number of viewpoints, and these viewpoints, contrasted as Riverdancers and set dancers, highlight the complexity of Irish dance as a multifaceted art form that has changed throughout the 20th century. There is a recurring theme of gender, particularly referring to women, highlighted by the inclusion of all-female sources in Chapter 4 when the methodology and approach change from archival to oral sources. O'Connor highlights how the role and identity of females in dance have changed alongside their roles and identities in society but, despite the inclusion of some male voices latterly, fails to engage with masculine identities or queer identities in the same manner.

As a globalised art form with a global audience and disparate communities, O'Connor's consideration of the Irish dancing both in Ireland and beyond, particularly in America, is the focus of Chapter 6. Returning initially to a historical approach, O'Connor gives consideration to the role of Irish dancers in the development of vaudeville and Hollywood, and carefully presents arguments for and against the possibility of cultural mixing amongst Irish- and African-American communities and the complexity in America of social and class identities and Irish dance. Building upon both historical and contemporary perspectives, through reference to films such as *Titanic* (1997) and *Gangs of New York* (2002), and to Riverdance and related shows in the following chapter, O'Connor implicitly highlights the relevance of her book to popular culture studies in the present.

This book builds upon the author's personal passion for the subject matter, experience as an academic, awareness of literature and her own prior publications to present an informed, complex and broad critique of the Irish dancing that both theorises Irish dancing within wider academic paradigms and brings together references and signposts for future research in the area. Despite weaknesses, some of which are also acknowledged by the author within the text, I found the breadth of this book to be engaging and provocative, pushing the reader to think beyond a limited imagination of aspects of Irish dance to the broader interpretations of the Irish dancing.

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