Watch the Feet: Understanding Irish Dance Traditions as an Embodied Archive

Abstract

Irish traditional step dance is an embodied cultural expression that has reached a global audience as a commodified artform. It also continues to be performed in community settings, sometimes with local distinctiveness that reflects processes of transmission and performance that are deeply connected with a sense and expression of place. In this essay, I examine performances of the set dance 'The Blackbird', focusing on steps from the Munnix tradition of North Kerry and highlight differences in performance aesthetics that incorporate different levels of cultural understanding or a kinaesthetic sense of place referring to how the movement of the dancing body reflects the milieu and cultural experiences of the dancer. I identify 'The Blackbird' set dance as a cultural container, and I critically consider how performances of these steps reflect changes in culture and aesthetics in a context in which dancers and audiences have sought to revisit regional traditions, even and especially when located in disparate places across the world. Drawing on theories from ethnochoreology that recognise the role of dance and the body as both a form of expression and an archive of cultural values, and adopting an autoethnographic approach, I critically reflect on the dissemination of the Munnix tradition and steps internationally, and how they have been reinterpreted by various dancers, drawing in particular on my own experience as a dancer and through dancing with others. I am challenged to go beyond the text by engaging with dance as an expressive form, and incorporate video recordings into my documentation and analysis.

Introduction

As a child in the 1980s and 1990s, I learned both competitive Irish dancing and local step dancing traditions.[1] My first teacher was Patricia Hanafin in Tralee, Co. Kerry. Patricia was one of the first dancing teachers in Kerry to complete the *Teagascóir Choimisiúin le Rinci*

Gaelacha (TCRG) or Commission Irish Dance Teacher enabling her students to compete in feiseanna [competitions] with *An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha* (CLRG) [The Irish Dancing Commission], the oldest and largest governing body for competitive Irish step dancing globally. Patricia was also a founding member of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* [Entertainers of the Kingdom], later *Siamsa Tíre* [Entertainment of the Land], and is credited as an early choreographer with the group, who performed a form of Irish folk theatre incorporating Irish dance internationally from the 1970s.[2]

I learned the steps and style of dance required to compete alongside many of my generation but, with Patricia's encouragement, I also auditioned for Siamsa Tíre. With them, I learned another older style of dancing, which owed much to the travelling North Kerry dancing master, Jeremiah Molyneaux (1883–1965), often referred to as Munnix, who gives his name to the local dance style.[3] On occasion Pat Ahern, a pupil of Munnix who established Siamsa Tíre and documented many of the older generation of dancers from North Kerry, would comment on my dancing and offer advice in relation to the execution of the steps. He highlighted differences in how a step may be performed, seeking to promote a style of dance that replicated some of the dance traditions of North Kerry in the early part of the twentieth century. For Ahern, the act of dancing in this manner represented a ritualization of tradition, reflecting sociologist Paul Connerton's assertion that the 'past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances'.[4] As demonstrated in this essay, examining the practice of Irish dancing is not solely an engagement with history but rather provides alternative perspectives on the present that questions the 'transgenerational stability of knowledge'.[5] When these steps are no longer passed on and performed, an understanding of local distinctiveness and a sense of place can be lost.

Dancing in a particular way is not solely about examining the past but, as Reneé Fox, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair write, 'understand[ing] culture as an always mobile

interchange between past and present, tradition and modernity, and individual and collective'.[6] Borrowing Arjun Appadurai's description of anthropology as 'my archive of lived actualities',[7] I seek to embody my physical and virtual encounters with others through dance, enabling my body to become an archive and an expression of culture that is both an alternative and complementary to a written text. In contrast with Appadurai, my ethnographies engage with people whose lives are not remarkably dissimilar to my own, as I seek to understand the ongoing development of a culture. In my research I seek out examples from the past but embody them in the present, and seek out interpretations and performances that engage tradition and modernity, focusing on the solo dancer but mindful of the community of practice associated with the dance.

Although emanating from North Kerry, the Munnix style has become part of a globalised artform, sometimes fetishised and in danger of losing connection with its place of origin but paradoxically increasingly known and performed by dancers around the world. As Appadurai identifies, globalisation is a localising process but it is necessary to recognise that 'the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global […] there is nothing mere about the local'.[8] The interest in the Munnix dance style across the world places a focus on a localised dance practice that elevates the local but in turn leads to new interpretations of formerly local practices. Recognising the impact of emigration, travel and mobility on Irish culture, Helena Wulff recognises 'webs of regional, national and global movements, enhanced and connected by media and new technology'.[9] Contrasting my localised experience learning dance in North Kerry with my engagement with performances in a virtual space, I consider how the bodies in motion articulate different identities while performing the same dance steps.

My story demonstrates parallels in particular with the work of ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley; her *Irish Traditional Step Dancing in North Kerry* (2012) develops an

analysis of dance steps and the context for the development of a regional tradition,[10] while her monograph, *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* (2013), provides a historical overview that recognises the role of cultural institutions, including Siamsa Tíre.[11] We examine, write about and perform the same subject and materials but from different perspectives, with our embodiment communicating a level of understanding beyond the text.[12] Our foregrounding of the dancing body, noting the importance of understanding changing contexts and approaches to performance, leads to conclusions that speak to the outline for this special issue, engaging with embodied cultural practices that have moved from the local to the global and reflect changes in Irish society and culture.

I was barely a year old when Foley began her fieldwork in North Kerry, learning from dancers I would never meet. My experience of learning dance was not unlike that of the core group, a team of professional performers employed by Siamsa Tíre in the 1980s, some of whom were amongst my teachers. They learned steps from video recordings and made selections under the guidance of Ahern. Later, Foley incorporated marginalised step-dances practices, including steps from her research in North Kerry, in the curriculum of the MA in Irish Traditional Dance at the University of Limerick in order 'to provide students with a somatic and alternative way of performing step dance from different places and times' and illustrating 'how step dance could be performed differently, depending on different functions, contexts and historical times'.[13] These alternatives to written texts are critical to developing a more holistic understanding of Irish dance practice and the society that shaped, performed and consumed the tradition.

Methodology

My essay follows Foley's engagement with a set dance, 'The Blackbird', engaging in a similar methodological practice by 'using my own step-dancing body as a research tool' to

develop a detailed analysis that draws on my kinaesthetic sense and a proprioceptive awareness of the dance steps.[14] Whereas Foley focuses on the world of Irish competitive step dancing, my focus is on my own experiences of dancing 'The Blackbird', the meaning ascribed to that act, and the differences in how I dance it in comparison with other dancers I have encountered, including through online sources. As Marie Louise Coolahan recognises in the context of Irish Studies, 'we are all digitally engaged scholars now',[15] and the presence of recordings online reflects the globalisation of a local artform.

In seeking to re-embody a style of dance, I am an archive but, as Amanda Harris, Linda Barwick and Jakelin Troy state*:*

> Embodied modes of enquiry repeatedly destabilise the very definition of "archives" and can reimagine different forms in which cultural knowledge can be held and conserved for current and future Indigenous stakeholders. Re-embodying historical performances creates another kind of store of songs, dances and stories that has the potential for long-term continuities and safekeeping, and that points to other ways that cultural heritage records are "archived".[16]

'The Blackbird' represents a cultural container[17] and I seek to explore 'the layered capacity of music performance to connect cultural ideas and identity over time and across cultural realms'.[18] By engaging with digital ethnography and examining videos of dancers on YouTube, I am able to view performances by dancers across the world. These videos, like those in the archives of Siamsa Tíre and Muckross House, require an understanding of the context in and for which they were created.

While watching other dancers facilitated one form engagement with a text, performing the movements myself provided me with another level of understanding, creating a physical experience through which to explore somatic knowledge.[19] My younger self would

leap about and raise my leg high but as I grew older my body helped me to appreciate the reserved nature of the mature dancers on the screen and the artistry in the foot movement, as well as develop an understanding of the context for dancing that these videos represented. The physicality of my engagement reflects Frank Hall's writings on competitive Irish dancing as sport-like, highlighting the need for flexibility and speed.[20]

Utilising performance ethnography, it is not enough to only pay attention to the feet but the factors – physical, social and cultural – that impact on the use of the whole body, and how this communicates aspects of the socio-political and cultural circumstances in which the dance developed.[21] It responds to Nessa Cronin and Karen Till's call to understand how 'artistic practices and knowledge enhance scholarly interrogations of Irish pasts and presents', moving 'from traditional approaches in reading culture as a 'text' to embracing methodological flexibility when analysing the dynamic experiential, performative and relational geographies inherent in artistic practice and its impact on public dialogue in Ireland today'.[22] As social anthropologist Barbara O'Connor asserts, 'Dancing individuals not only experience culture but they also actively produce it'.[23] The confident young dancers I watch online are part of a post-national Irish dance community who are confident, competitive and glamorous, verging on kitsch. They are determining the trends and stylistic development in Irish dance practice and challenging, through their bodies' movements, perceptions of Irishness.

Like previous studies,[24] my research involved a detailed analysis of detailed descriptions of dance steps but also sought to examine the use of the rest of the body and the interconnections between bodies in the performance space. Although a solo act in many instances, the archival footage I engaged with included instances of hand holding and other acts of encouragement that reflected connections within a community of practice. Further to this analysis, I interpreted the dance steps and my experience of learning and dancing them

through poetry, engaging primarily with the personal and somatic knowledge.[25] This essay relies on past experiences involving others but focuses more on an engagement with archival material and digital ethnography, finding examples of other dancers and examining their practice without engaging in interviews or other forms of data gathering, as might be expect in an anthropological or social enquiry.[26]

Sources and Digital Ethnography

My performance practice and analysis of recordings of other dancers attempts to identify some of the key stylistic features of the Munnix tradition that are absent or altered in performances by competitive dancers. Engaging in virtual ethnography, I have viewed videos available on YouTube, presented primarily by Irish dancing teachers for the purposes of teaching the steps. These dancers include Canadian dancer Joelle Anderson, who holds an MA Irish Dance Performance from the University of Limerick and TCRG, and a video of two dancers shared by Katy Pederson who teaches with the Shelley School of Irish Dance in Utah, USA.[27] The CLRG posted a video of an unidentified male dancer performing the Molyneaux Blackbird in 2018,[28] and 'The Blackbird' Set Dance is included at Grade 6 in their syllabus. A video of World Champion Julia O'Rourke was shared by *Irish Dancing Magazine* on their YouTube channel on 22 August 2017.[29] These videos are influential, accumulating thousands of views in some instances – over 160,000 views in the case of O'Rourke, indicating an audience and potential impact far greater than was possible for the dancers in North Kerry in the earlier twentieth century.

Shared by another organisation *Cumann Rince Dea Mheasa* (CRDM, founded in 2002), Kirsty Jordan dances what is described as 'the Ulster version of Molyneux Blackbird'.[30] Such a description, which has echoes of Anderson's video that states traditional dancing masters travelled throughout Ireland, is part of a confused constructed narrative of

tradition that does not appreciate the geographical reach of the teachers and localised dance styles. It reflects the identification in some quarters of competitive Irish dancing with an Ulster style utilising intricate steps to slower tempos, in contrast with an older Munster style of dancing where dancers performed less intricate steps in time to faster music. In addition to my own dance practice, I have also examined videos of Jonathan Kelliher and Jimmy Smith, who were influential in my own development as a dancer.[31] Reminiscent of the stories that Munnix would tap out the steps with his fingers, by dancer and ethnochoreologist Siobhan Butler has recorded a version focusing on her hands, presenting an alternative embodiment of practice.[32]

The Dance, The Feet, the Leg, the Style

My interrogation of style in Irish dancing is motivated by a statement by Ahern that can be heard on a video recorded at a launch of his autobiography in Dublin as I am dancing.[33] Interrupting an individual talking to him, he urges the man to 'watch the feet', instructing him to pay attention to how I was dancing. This resonates with two statements included by Foley in her article on the inclusion of the Munnix Blackbird in competitive Irish dancing. She cites an Irish dance teacher who stated:

> Many of the teachers and adjudicators do not know the Molyneaux style of dancing and although it is great to see these sets being danced in competition, the style is not taken seriously. They're not doing it right. They don't have the style. Some of them are doing it in a very technical way. The flow of it is gone. Dancers are finding it difficult to learn and so are teachers. They expect to learn it quickly, but you have to spend time getting the style.[34]

She also quotes Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, an ethnochoreologist and Irish dance teacher and adjudicator with *An Coimisiún*, who stated:

> While dancers are executing the steps in terms of material, many champion dancers are unaware that the Feis style is far removed from the close to the floor style associated with the dancers in North Kerry. The over crossing, verticality and strict posture which are features of many competitive dance performances do not compliment the relaxed style of original exponents of these Kerry dances.[35]

In 2018 I danced the Munnix Blackbird at the launch of Ní Bhriain and Mike McCabe's book *Jigs to Jacobites* at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2018. A video posted on Facebook drew a number of comments including one dance teacher from Australia who exclaimed 'now THATS [sic] a Moyneaux', followed by 'dem [sic] ankles though'.[36] I interpret this comment to refer positively to the fluidity of the foot movement in keeping with the aesthetic of the performance practice in the Munnix tradition in contrast with the sharper movements of competitive practice.

My analysis of the Munnix Blackbird begins with the opening movements – tip and tip batter jump bang, bang, jump out. Rather than the relaxed jump of the Munnix style in the local tradition, there is a tendency amongst the younger dancers engaged in competitive Irish dance to 'cut' the first jump, bringing the left heel to the right hip, creating a sharper movement. The following 'jump out' can also be exaggerated as the competitive dancers I have witnessed seek to quickly raise a straight leg from the hip in contrast with the more gently raised bowed leg of the traditional dancer. Continuing to 'jump batter hop kick out, jump heel step', the practice amongst the competitive dancers is to add in an extra tap or drum with the foot movement going from right to left rather than left to right as in the style of the older North Kerry dancers. The next element 'swivel bang kick up, jump heel heel click down' again involves sharper movements and the addition of taps. In each of the two jumps, the younger generation of dancers raise their legs straight. The next movement offers an opportunity for some movement of the whole body, banging to the right and then left; this is

something that was exaggerated by Siamsa Tíre when the element was incorporated into dances influenced by contemporary dance, such as 'Bímís ag Rince' and this extended movement is again evident in the competitive dancers observed. As per Ní Bhriain's observation, the younger dancers employ an over-crossing of the feet and, in contrast of the tradition of dancing in tight spaces, competitive dancers utilise much more space that the traditional dancer.

For the second part of the set dance, a noticeable stylistic difference between the 'traditional' and 'competitive' dancers is the tendency of the competitive dancer to kick their feet up behind, whereby it is possible to see the soles of the shoes. There is greater control and definition to the movement through space of the dancer, emphasising changes in the direction they are facing. Technical elements like the rock, a movement whereby the dancer locks their two ankles together and rocks side to side on their toes, are much sharper when danced by the competitive dancer. It is the drum pattern that is perhaps most different; as per the first part where extra taps are sometimes added, the competitive dancer is more inclined to raise their front toe rather than maintaining the connection to the floor.

Both styles of dance have merit and beauty and our appreciation and understanding is shaped by our experience of dance. My performance practice is shaped by those who taught me and, in particular, by comments made to me by Ahern. In particular, I remember comments on three aspects – the shape of the raised leg in front, not raising the foot behind, and keeping the front toe down when executing the drum. As a teenager I was engaged in learning both styles and did dance some of the traditional steps with the stylistic approach of a competitive dancer, sometimes to Ahern's chagrin. As I become older and my body is no longer either flexible or strong enough to achieve the sharpness and range of movement of the younger competitive dancers, I find I can dance more akin to the older dancers of past generations in the videos.

The Body, Masculinity and Irish Society

It is important to be cognisant of the factors that shape the presentation of the steps in contemporary performance. The act of dancing has been linked to conceptualisations of the nation, from studies that focus on the impact of colonisation and the emergence of the Irish state,[37] through diasporic contexts[38] and contemporary dance.[39] For Hall, an anthropological approach examines how people symbolize themselves when they perform Irish dancing, embodying 'the values they associate ideally with the construction of their identity as a nation'.[40] Irish culture and identity is evolving and, as Kelly Fitzgerald argues in relation to folklore studies, 'the domination of the backward look must be broken'.[41] Wulff sets herself the challenge of analysing the Irish dancing body and its relationship to the construction of social memory, expanding on this in her 2007 monograph to 'analyse in ethnographic detail what dance conveys about Ireland'.[42] As Deirdre Sklar states, 'the way people move provides a key to the way that they think and feel and to what they know'.[43] The dancers I observed, and their movements, reflect and outward facing, confident and competitive generation whose sense of Irishness is more global than local.

Changes in the embodiment of Irish dance have been contiguous with changes in Irish society and these bodies, including my own, provide an opportunity to engage with these changes. Whereas Breandán de Gallaí and Fergus Ó Conchuir look to their own choreographic practice to explore to speak to contemporary social issues, I return to archival footage of traditional dance, juxtaposed with contemporary interpretations of these steps.[44] My practice has enabled me to develop my understanding of change in Irish dancing, with the steps becoming an embodied alternative to text for understanding not only the artform but changes in context and reception. Wulff asserts that tradition and modernity seem to coincide in the Irish dancing community with 'modernity reinforcing tradition: the success of *Riverdance* triggered a new wave of traditional and competitive dancing'.[45] The titles of

chapters in several studies point to the impact of *Riverdance*, including '*Riverdance* Mania',[46] 'The *Riverdance* Effect: Culture Industries and Global Irishness',[47] and 'The *Riverdance* Moment'[48] but, as Wulff and others have demonstrated, the forms of Irish dancing were changing prior to the development of *Riverdance*, which is often critiqued as 'an instance of commodification in the global marketplace'.[49] Notably, she states that 'this larger exposure of Irish dancing has made Irish dancing more accessible and known'.[50]

Although the commodification of Irish dancing in the wake of *Riverdance* has been argued to represent the appropriation of local cultural expression by cultural entrepreneurs and, in the process, a loss of authenticity and value,[51] as is so often the case, the conceptualisation of authenticity is not so simple. Although my writing ascribes a sense of authenticity to a regional tradition,[52] Anthony McCann highlights the 'need to assert the contemporary validity of traditional practices as a contemporary response to contemporary conditions'.[53] No less than *Riverdance*, an interest in the Munnix and other localised traditions of Irish dance has economic and ideological, as well as aesthetic motives. The past decade has witnessed an increased interest in Irish dance styles, reflected in the Leitrim Dance Project established in 2022 and organised by Edwina Guckian,[54] which attracts dancers from around the world, or the visual album *From the Floor* (2020) by American-based dancers Jackie O'Riley and Rebecca McGowan. As a globalised artform, Irish dance is shaped by 'the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures'.[55] The performance of the Munnix steps reaches back in tradition, but they become altered by interpretation in a modern style or relocated through re-embodiment by dancers in other places, many of whom are women.

The majority of the dancers recorded by Ahern and Foley in North Kerry were men, which contrasts with the greater number of women engaged in Irish dancing today. These

dancers reflect and challenge constructs of 'rural, untamed masculinity', explored by Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire in the context of sean nós singer Joe Heaney.[56] The topic of gender identities in the discourse on Irish traditional music and dance has greatly expanded in recent years, giving consideration to queer identities[57] and the sexual undertones of Irish dance productions.[58] Less attention is paid to the historical performances that embody a gender identity. Returning to videos and focusing on footage from 1974 filmed for the opening of Teach Siamsa Finuge, my focus moves from the dancers' feet to consider their whole body. The dancers included three dancers, representing three generations of the one family – eighty-two year old Willie O'Donnell of Kilgarvan, Ballylongford, his son John Joe and his grand-niece, Margaret. Also present are Liam Tarrant (1921–1974) and Jerry Nolan (1915–1984), two influential dancers in the development of Siamsa Tíre. When they dance, they each embody a local style, facilitated by their physical capabilities and shaped by age. There is crossing of the feet and jumping in the air but the movements are mostly relaxed rather than exaggerated, with some exceptions. A notable feature of the dancing is the holding of hands. There is not a standard hold, as per formal céilí dancing, but a variety of connections. The practice of holding hands is also demonstrated by Ahern and Tarrant, two mature men who were close friends. Albeit a solo tradition, the steps are shared by the community; the holding of hands is a gesture of solidarity and encouragement. The dancers stand tall and proud and there is a hint of uniformity.

The aesthetics of competitive Irish dance, channelled to a global audience through *Riverdance*, incorporated sharp movements, demonstrations of gymnastic-like flexibility and gravity-defying leaps. It was about speed, as the celebration of Flatley's Guinness World Record from 1998 of 35 taps per second signified.[59] He was a professional athlete, in contrast with the dancers in the archival videos and the man I am. Flatley's hyperbolic masculinity is referenced in Helen Brennan's reflection that 'the former much-resented image of the Irish

male dancer as a sissy in a skirt, a reference to the former requirement for boys to wear a kilt when competing, has been replaced by the iconography of black-leather-sheathed thighs and oiled pectorals'.[60] The men in the videos from 1974, for the most part, are dressed in their 'Sunday best', collared shirt and tie – Liam Tarrant and Jerry Nolan are wearing buttoned suit jackets.

Two more contemporary videos shared by Siamsa Tíre demonstrate a continuation of the Munnix tradition parallel to engagement in competitive Irish dancing. In the minute-long 2011 YouTube video 'Munnix to Modern' performed by John Fitzgerald, a three times World Champion Irish Dancer and a member of Siamsa Tíre's Community Cast, aspects of the Munnix style are evident in the first 25 seconds.[61] Notably – and echoing the comments by the Australian dancing teacher in reference to my performance of 'The Blackbird' – the swivelling of the ankles can be clearly observed. The drum pattern is more akin to the Munnix than the modern, with the front toe raised only slightly from the floor. The relaxed rhythm of the first section is in contrast with the rapidity of taps in the second section. There is a move from the gentle Munnix style with varied movements to the more repetitive, percussive and quicker modern steps, demonstrating the changing nature of the dance.

In a video shared on 18 May 2020 'to celebrate 30 years of 'the creation of the world famous "Blackbird"', 28 dancers from the Siamsa Tíre cast recorded videos of themselves dancing the step.[62] This was during COVID-19 restrictions and the videos are created in a variety of locations, many of them outdoors. The dancers, including myself, reflect individuals at different life stages and performing to variable standards of technique and execution. Some younger dancers are noticeably lighter on their feet and visibly more akin to competitive dancers. Many of the videos demonstrate dancing in a small space, echoing the old saying of 'dancing on a sixpence'. More than the quality of dancing, the video represents how a dance can communicate a meaning beyond the steps; although the invention of

tradition is explicit and arguable (see Kearney, 2022), the deeper resonance of the steps providing a connection between people kept apart by circumstance is noteworthy. The video represents a tribute to the community of practice in the locality. As the closing lines of the song at the end of the Siamsa Tíre production *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991) express:

Roinnimís bhur saibhreas	[Let's share our riches
Caomhnaimís bhur noidhreacht	Guard our heritage
Is bímís choice 'g rince	Forever dancing
Is aoibhinn linn gach céim	Cherishing every step]

Conclusion

The dancing body presents a text that is shaped by a variety of factors. Although the steps of the Munnix Blackbird are included in Graded and Feis syllabi, the performance aesthetics that incorporate different levels of cultural understanding or a kinaesthetic sense of place are absent in many of the performances that I viewed. In my youth, I encountered dancers older than I who emphasised the style and aesthetics of a community of practice. Although the steps have been disseminated globally, a local community continues the traditional interpretation. Without prompt, in UCC for the conferring of an honorary doctorate on Ahern, I was amongst a group of dancers including Hanafin and Smith who joined hands and demonstrated uniformity of motion in celebration of a shared tradition. We were an embodied archive that reflected a kinaesthetic sense of place and community; a tribute that was beyond text. While *Riverdance* reflects a move from cultural nationalism to increased commodification and engagement with an in international audience and a global market,[lxiii] it is a foil for local dance practices that reflect the evolution of the dance and changes in Irish society. Dancers who perform the Munnix Blackbird in a Feis style are often wonderfully talented performers who demonstrate great artistry and athleticism but they reflect a different

way of knowing through dance to mine. Their bodies, and mine, require us to read beyond the text and understand the embodiment of culture through dance, which I seek to evoke in my poem ‘Watch the Feet’.

Watch the Feet[lxiv]

They stood straight, the dancers
Hands by side like soldiers
Or holding hands in kinship
Masculinity in every step
Yet feminine caring in the whole
Embodiment of tradition, the soul
That they expressed in movement
With absolute commitment

It's not enough to watch the feet but
Even feet betray paths cut
Through time to the old half door
Laid out upon the kitchen floor
Surrounded by wise eyes
Who understood without need to analyse
Wondrous writings ephemeral
Yet joyously unforgettable

Maintained by muscle memory
Artful archives, a treasury
Of metadata without which

Interpretation is unrich

Unintelligible accents create

Sound in movements to generate

Neither carbon copy nor an

Affective imitation

As I walk in step I soldier

Becoming a beholder

Embodying inheritance

In my dance and stance

Stretching, moving, learning

I must grow to further meaning

Relax in the rhythm and rhyme

Of footsteps from another time

[1] Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain states: 'Step dance refers to dances composed for presentation by individuals or groups where the key emphasis is on the virtuosity of the stepping or footwork'. 'Irish Dance Music – For the Feet or for the Soul?', in *Close to the Floor: Irish Dance from the Boreen to Broadway* ed. by Mick Moloney, J'aime Morrison and Colin Quigley (Wisconsin: Macater Press, 2009), pp. 13-22, p. 13.

[2] Daithí Kearney, 'Tourism, Touring and Staged Folklore' *in Staged Folklore, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland 1968-1998,* ed. by Susan Motherway and John O'Connell (Cork:

Cork University Press, 2022), pp. 27-45; Pat Ahern *Forging the Dance: Eachtraí Mo Shaoil* (Kilkenny: Ó Riain Publishing, 2022).

[3] For more on Molyneaux see Catherine Foley *Step-Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

[4] Paul Connerton, *How societies remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.39-40.

[5] Arjan Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 43.

[6] Reneé Fox, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair, "Culture" in *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies,* ed. by Reneé Fox, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 271-273 (p.271).

[7] Appadurai, p. 11.

[8] Appadurai, pp. 17, 18.

[9] Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland*, (Oxford NY: Bergahn Books, 2007), p.47.

[10] Catherine Foley, *Irish Traditional Step Dancing in North Kerry: A Contextual and Structural Analysis* (Listowel, Kerry: North Kerry Literary Trust, 2012).

[11] Foley, *Step Dancing*.

[12] Catherine Foley, 'Steps, Style and Sensing the Difference: Transmission and the Re-contextualisation of Molyneaux's Traditional Set Dances Within the Irish Traditional Dance Competitive Arena', *Research in Dance Education,* 21.3 (2020), 312-327; Catherine Foley, 'Traditional Step Dancing: Staging Performance and Embodying Culture' *in Staged Folklore, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland 1968-1998,* ed. by Susan Motherway and John O'Connell (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), pp. 135-152.

[13] Catherine Foley, 'The Roots and Routes of Irish Step Dancing: Issues of Identity and Participation in a Global World' in *Routes & Roots: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 4,* ed. by Ian Russell and Chris Goertzen (Aberdeen, Scotland: Elphinstone Institute Occasional Publications, University of Aberdeen), 144–155, 151.

[14] Foley, 'Steps, styles', p. 313.

[15] Marie-Louise Coolahan, 'New Technologies of Research and Digital Interpretation for Early Modern Irish Studies', *Irish University Review* 50.1 (2020), 175–186, 184.

[16] *Music, Dance and the Archive.* 2022, p. 7.

[17] Méabh Ní Fhuartháin '"Mise Éire": (re)imaginings in Irish Music Studies' in *Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies,* ed. by Reneé Fox, Mike Cronin and Brian Ó Conchubhair (London: Routledge, 2020), pp.323-333.

[18] Ní Fhuartháin, p. 326.

[19] Deirdre Sklar, 'On Dance Ethnography', *Dance Research Journal* 32.1 (2000), 70-71; Dunja Njaradi, 'Performance Ethnography: Theatre and Anthropology Through the New Study of Ritual' in *Performance and Ethnography: Dance, Drama, Music* ed. by Peter Harrop and Dunja Njaradi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 23-44.

[20] Frank Hall, *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty, by Frank Hall* (Madison: Macater Press, 2008), p. 150; See also, Frank Hall 'Irish Dancing: Discipline as Aer, Sport and Duty' (unpublished PhD, Bloomington, Indiana, 1995); Michael Schumacher 'Irish dance: performing national identity through sports' (unpublished MPhil, Universitat Wien, 2012).

[21] Aoife McGrath, *Dance Theatre in Ireland: Revolutionary Moves* (New York: Springer, 2012).

[22] Neasa Cronin and Karen Till, 'Embodied geographies of the nation', *The Irish Review* 54 (2018), 1-7, 1, 2.

[23] Barbara O'Connor, *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900–2000* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2013), p. 2.

[24] Foley, *North Kerry*; Hall, *Competitive*; Daithí Kearney, '"They must know me": Embodied Intertextuality and the Reworking of Local Irish Dance Traditions by Siamsa Tíre', *International Journal for Traditional Arts* 3 (2022), 1-20.

[25] Daithí Kearney, 'Seeking the Soul: Innovation and Returning to Tradition in the Dance Repertoire of Siamsa Tíre', *Anthropology Ireland* (forthcoming).

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[48] Wulff, pp. 109-124.

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[lxiv] A poem by Daithí Kearney first published in Society for Ethnomusicology Newsletter, 58.2 (2024), p. 12.