

Barra native Fearchar MacNeil was born on 23 April 1909, in Leanish, Barra, and died in 1997 at the age of 88. He was perhaps one of the last dancers to learn the ‘Hebridean’ solo dances along the old-fashioned informal way. He danced some of these dances in his youth. Fearchar, or Farquhar MacNeil, also known by the patronymic *Fearchar Eoin Fhearchair* / Fearchar son of John son of Fearchar, was left without a mother at age 4. Fearchar and his younger brother were brought up by his Buchanan grandparents in Leanish. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all joiners and boat builders. His father was in the navy during the First World War and remarried a widow a couple of years after the war ended. Fearchar’s father and second wife moved to Eoligarry, but Fearchar spent as much time as possible with his grandparents.

Fearchar grew up a fluent Gaelic speaker and a Catholic. He learnt his trade as a joiner, but never found employment as one, as work was extremely scarce in 1920s Barra. He took various labouring jobs and ended up with the Forestry Commission where he worked until the Second World War. Between 1936 and 1939, Fearchar taught dancing in Barracaldine, north of Oban on the mainland, where his pupils gave concerts at the end of each term. He was with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a dispatch rider for the duration of the war. He was in France until four weeks after Dunkirk, and then spent time in England until being stationed in Jedburgh in the Borders. It was here he met and married Ann Wood. Shortly afterward, he was sent to North Africa where he received minor wounds. Following that, he spent four years in Italy, which he left on V.E. Day, and was demobilised in January 1946. After a spell in Barra, Fearchar and his family moved to Jedburgh where he worked in a silk factory. Fearchar and Ann had two daughters, and in addition, brought up a boy. After about 15 years, the couple went their separate ways, and Fearchar moved to Ayr where he spent the next 22 years working in a metal foundry.

Fearchar returned to Barra in November 1984 and settled, first in Upper Brevig, then in Leanish where he lived about 50 yards from where he grew up with his grandparents.<sup>145</sup> During his childhood and right up to World War Two, the Scotch Reel was the best-known social dance, at least in Barra. The Scotch Reel was usually the first dance a beginner would attempt in public, and often it would be danced six or seven times in one night. Dances ended with a Grand March and the White Cockade, also known as the *Danmsa nam Pòg* / Dance of the Kiss.<sup>146</sup>

I stopped teaching in Barra in 1936 and at that time there were hundreds of children able to dance Hebridean dances and in fact, competed at both the Uist and Barra Highland Games. South Uist and Benbecula had a teacher, a Mr MacLeod who taught them there, and he left about the same time as I left Barra. These Hebridean dances were the main dances at both games. I never went back to stay in Barra and after the war I was teaching in Jedburgh, but as Hebridean dances were not in competition, there was no demand for them, however I kept doing them myself at displays and that kept them fresh in my mind. I stopped dancing altogether when I came to Ayr in 1963 but did a little judging at minor events, and about 1970 I gave that up. In 1982, I was asked to judge a competition in South Uist and that appealed to me, for I was keen to see the Hebridean dances done once more. I was of the opinion that they were still as well-known as they were in the 30s, but I was wrong. It

was all Highland and National dance they did. I made inquiries both in Uist and Barra and could not find one person who could remember a complete dance although quite a few of the older people could remember one or two steps of nearly all the dances. I appealed on the radio for anyone who knew them to contact the BBC but with no success. [...] However, they have been rescued. Luckily the dancing Associations of both Uist and Barra were very interested and allowed me to teach their teachers and pupils and anyone else who wanted to learn, and I am today in the happy position of knowing that they are being taught at every dancing class in Uist and Barra, and are in competition at the Uist Games (the Barra Games didn't restart after the war) and what is more important, they have a better chance of survival now thanks to modern methods (Video etc.).<sup>147</sup>

Fearchar was taught dancing by his grandfather Neil Buchanan, frequently referred to as *an Clench*, from Earsary, Barra, who lived from 1858–1940 and made his living as a fisherman. In an 1982 interview he said; 'S e....Niall beag Dhòmhnail a' mhathain. Ach 's e an Clench a b'fheàrr thuigeadh e fèin 's a thuigeadh càch. Thuigeadh a bhean cuideachd-sa. [It was ... Small Neil [son of] Donald the bear. But it was 'the Clench' he was best understood [known] as by himself and others. His wife [knew him as that] too.]

'The Clench' never left the island apart for fishing trips off the East coast of Scotland and on the lochs in Skye and the west coast. Neil Buchanan was taught social and solo dancing by two people. One was a student of Ewen MacLachlan: Ronald Morrison, known as *Raghnall Dannsair* / dancer Ronald; the other was a MacLeod from Skye who was a stonemason and known as *An Clachair* / The Stonemason.<sup>148</sup> Fearchar deliberated on this in an interview from 1982:

*Thill esan a-nall, cha b'urrainn dhomh ràdh an ann o'n Eilean Sgitheanach a thàinig e no gu dè mar a fhuair e Sgitheanaich ach tha mi a' smaoineachadh gur e Dòmhnall a bh'air, Dòmhnall MacLeòid, fear à muinntir an Eilein Sgitheanaich a dh'ionnsaich na dannsaichean o Eòghann MacLachlainn, no Eòghann nan làmhan beaga mar a bheireadh iad ris. 'S e sin am fear a chaidh a Bharraigh, Dòmhnall MacLeòid, agus aig an àm a bha sin chan urrainn dhomh 'g ràdh a-nisde an robh duine sam bith eile eadar mo sheanair agus Dòmhnall MacLeòid, no an e Dòmhnall MacLeòid a dh'ionnsaich mo sheanair. Chan eil cuimhne 'am ach 's ann daonnan air Dòmhnall MacLeòid a bhiodh esan a' bruidhinn. Agus cha do bhodradh mo sheanair ri duine sam eile ionnsachadh idir ann am Barraigh, cha robh ach an rud a bha sinn a' dèanamh a-staigh airson—tha fhios agad—airson an teaghlaich fhèin.*

He returned, and I couldn't say if he came from the Isle of Skye or how he got [the name?] Sgitheanaich but I think his name was Donald, Donald MacLeod, a man from Skye folk who learned the dances from Ewen MacLachlan, or Ewen of the Small Hands as they called him. That was the man who went to Barra, Donald MacLeod, and at that time I couldn't say now if there was anyone else between my grandfather and Donald MacLeod, or if it was Donald MacLeod who taught my grandfather. I don't remember, but he was always talking about Donald MacLeod. And my grandfather didn't bother teaching anyone else in Barra, it was only ever something we did in the house—you know—for the family.

Fearchar described his grandfather as an entertaining dancer, who only danced privately for friends and perhaps at ceilidhs, and who danced simply for pleasure. He was a piper and was generally an athletic sort of man. To Fearchar's knowledge, his grandfather did not teach anyone other than himself. Fearchar last saw his grandfather dance at Hogmanay in 1938, two years before he died at the age of 82.

According to an interview with Fearchar by Joan Henderson in the early 1980s, Neil Buchanan taught him: 'He started me on Hielan' Laddie. He also taught me Fling, Swords, *Seann Triubhas*, Over the Water to Charlie, Sailors' Hornpipe, Irish Jig, Scots Measure, Scots Blue Bonnets, First of August, Aberdonian Lassie, and Tulloch Gorm.<sup>149</sup> Fearchar continued: 'Grandfather taught me in the house. I was in stockings soles or barefeet. First, he taught the steps, and then he would use a chanter.'<sup>150</sup>

Again in the 1982 interview he recalled: ...*chan eil cuimhne agam, thòisich mo cho òg sin. Anns na làithean a-sin am Barraigh far an robh mi—[far an] do rugadh 's do thogadh mi, far an robh mi 'nam phàisde beag—bhiodh mo sheanair air oidhche 'gheamhraidh gu sonraichte nuair nach robh dad eile ri dhèanamh (cha robh an uair sin telebhisean na sgàth sam bidh eile a chuireadh seachad ùine), agus 's ann do mo sheanair bu tric 's a bha mise. [...I don't remember, I started so young. In those days in Barra where I was—where I was born and raised, where I was a wee child—my grandfather would be—on a winter's night, especially when there was nothing to do (there was no television then or anything that*

would pass the time) and I was often at my grandfather(’s place)]. Family learning was well practised in the island communities in Barra and South Uist at the time as further evidenced in the 1980s research by Henderson and by extension in the Cape Breton Gaelic communities in Canada by Melin.<sup>151</sup>

Fearchar’s grandfather did not have any names for the various steps in either Gaelic or English, but he did have Gaelic names for most of the dances, i.e., *Tulach Gorm*, *Thairis an Aiseag (gu Teàrlach)*, *Mac Iain Ghasda*, and *Bonaidean Gorma*, as would have made sense with Gaelic being the daily spoken language, with the exception being the name for the dance Aberdonian Lassie. In a letter to Joan Flett, Fearchar elaborated on learning to dance:

As a boy I was very keen on dancing especially solo dancing but unfortunately none of the local boys of my age were, which meant that on many occasions I was ridiculed for even mentioning dancing, boats and sailing were the only subjects considered worth talking about. I was not aware of one boy or man who could dance but I was told about two sisters who did dance solo dances and this did convince me at the time, that solo dancing was indeed a female pastime, however my desire to learn solo dancing was so strong that I took every opportunity to do so but had to be unknown to my pals.<sup>152</sup>

Fearchar told me in 1990 that he had 34–35 steps<sup>153</sup> in the Highland Fling when he was young, so he could dance at least three Flings without repeating a step. He always taught just eight steps but only ever danced six when performing. He taught ‘hundreds’ of people to dance in Barra over the years he said but he never ‘took a penny’ for it. He taught Barra locals for the love of it, but when he lived on the mainland, he charged students fees to take his classes to cover hall charges and other expenses.<sup>154</sup>

Fearchar said he visited D.G. MacLennan in Edinburgh at one time in the early 1930s, and MacLennan asked Fearchar to show his dances to him. When he came to the Blue Bonnets, MacLennan said ‘I did not know that one, I saw it but did not write it down, but if you don’t mind, I’ll write it now.’ Fearchar felt there was nothing that special about the dance, but MacLennan asked him to start repeating the steps: ‘Do that first step again, so I did, and then he said, I wonder could you do the step this way.’ Over a period of three or four weeks, MacLennan changed the dance from what Fearchar did to what he wanted. Fearchar admitted he liked the new way, and he was not too worried about whether it was changed or not. At that time there were very few dancers in Barra apart from the ones he taught, and he was always asked to perform locally. He felt he was running out of dances to show, so with the new version from MacLennan fresh in him, he decided to perform it, as he was just back on Barra after his Edinburgh visits. So, he performed MacLennan’s version at a ceilidh. In the audience, was Fr John MacMillan, present as the ‘chairman’ for this ceilidh, and he came over to Fearchar after the dance asking ‘what dance is that you did? I told him it was Blue Bonnets, and he said, ‘I did not know it was done like that, I never saw it before.’ Fearchar told Fr John about how MacLennan had encouraged the changes in Edinburgh. ‘Oh no, he said, don’t do that! He was a purist, you know, don’t do that he says. Either give it another name. It is nicer than the original but give it another name. Did you teach it to anyone else? No... that was it. Either drop it or give it another name.’ So Fearchar was left with instructions to keep the dance by all means but not to call it Scotch Blue Bonnets.<sup>155</sup> He stopped teaching the version in 1936 or 1937.

Fearchar never realised that D.G. MacLennan disseminated this version of the dance without crediting Fearchar including publishing it in his book in 1950. Fearchar was quite surprised to see this ‘new’ version performed many years later by a girl from the mainland at a *ceilidh* in the early 1980s, thinking this version had been forgotten. MacLennan’s version is the one known by Highland dancers as a ‘National Dance’ in a slightly altered and evolved form.<sup>156</sup> Fearchar only resumed teaching after the war when he went to live in Jedburgh where he taught the Fletts Aberdonian Lassie in 1953.

In my interview in 1990, I asked Fearchar how his versions compared to Jack McConachie’s descriptions in his book that based on John / *Iain Ruadh* MacLeod’s steps. He said there were some differences, and also that there were more steps to the dances than he knew. Fearchar had, for example, never heard of or seen a ‘treble shuffle.’ He used to do double or single shuffles himself and he preferred the ‘double.’ He also said the only version of the Flowers of Edinburgh he knew was the version

he learnt through McConachie's 1972 book. He had never seen it before that. He never danced Miss Forbes himself, but knew about it, and had at one time had a written description of it, which he had lost. He believed it was more suitable as a girl's dance.

Fearchar was interviewed by Frances MacEachen for the Canadian paper *The Clansman* in 1993. In this interview, he recalled seeing Barra people step dance in his youth, and the way he met Cape Breton step dancer Mary Janet MacDonald when she taught at the *Feis Bharraigh* a few years earlier:

There was an old woman, a cripple and her sister who used to come to our house very often. And one time I called in on them to find out how she was, you know, while I was passing. "Oh dance for us, dance for us," they said—I was then dancing on the q-t [quiet, in secrecy], however, I did dance. (Then) the fit one, she got up and she said, "this is how I danced when I was young." And of course, there was an earthen floor and she had a long skirt on, and I could see the toes peeping out underneath the bottom of the skirt. I said to myself, she must have seen tap dancing or something somewhere. But I did admire the way, the rhythm of it. You couldn't hear anything but seeing the toes peeping out. Well a year or two later I was in another house, maybe three or four miles away and something the same happened. It happened on three different occasions and different people. But it was this tapping thing, and the moment I saw Mary Janet [MacDonald] dancing, I knew that was what they were doing.

Farquhar does not remember any hand movement and says he is almost positive their hands were kept by their sides. After seeing Mary Janet dance, he set out with a bit more determination to see if he could find any clues as to what they were doing before [Ewen] MacLachlan. "No one could give me anything on what they were doing. Not a soul. I was searching, searching, and not just the islands. What I found was that when the Free Church got kind of strong, dancing and musical instruments were the work of the devil. [...] But I think that Cape Breton dancing is not far away from the origin of the dance [here in Barra]. And there's nothing like that here [now]."<sup>157</sup>

In my 1990s interview with him, Fearchar told me he could not find any trace of solo dances, either Highland or Hebridean, before Ewen's arrival in South Uist, which led him to believe that the dancing before that time was more in line with the percussive style he saw Mary Janet doing and what he recalled the Barra women dancing in his youth. In addition to the recollection in the interview above, he told me that he recalled three different times, in different years, when he had been shown step dancing in a style similar to that done in Cape Breton, and unlike tap or Irish dance, in which he had taken a class at one point to learn what it was like. On one occasion at a ceilidh, after he had danced several solo dances, an elderly woman danced in a similar way as in the above story and showed him 'how they danced in her day.'

On 5th January 1935, Fearchar, then aged 25, performed three Hebridean dances at the EFDSS Festival at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Fearchar recalled the event in both 1982 and 1993:

6. **HEBRIDEAN SOLO DANCES**  
By FARQUHAR McNEIL of the Isle of Barra  
Aberdonian Lassie  
Highland Laddie  
Scots Blue Bonnets  
Piper: DR. GEORGE MACKENNON  
These dances, according to Mr. John McPherson, of the Post Office, Barra, were introduced into the Island by Ewen-of-the-short-arms, whose house was destroyed by fire, and with it perished the history of the dances and records of old stories. The islanders claim that both in their dances and their mode of dancing there is a clear distinction from the generally recognised Highland tradition.

*Bha mi a' dannsadh ann am Bàgh a Tuath aon oidhche agus thàinig boireannach a bha seo, Margaret Dellahie [?]. Bhuinnedh i dhan English Folk Dance and Song Society is chan fhaca ise riamh na dannsaichean agus thug i- dh'fhaighnich i dhìomsa an rachainn sìos gu Lunmainn [...] agus uill cha robh fios 'am ach co-dhiù chaidh mi sìos a dhèanamh na dances anns an Albert Hall. Is chaidh an t-ainm an uair sin a's gach pàipear is a h-uile sgàth mu dheidhinn agus bha feadhainn a' sgrìobhadh thugam [...]*

I was dancing in North Bay one night and this woman came, Margaret Dellahie [sp?]. She belonged to the English Folk Dance and Song Society and she never saw the dances and she asked if I would go

down to London ... and, well, I didn't know, but anyway I went down to do the dances at the Albert Hall. And the name then went into every paper, and everything about them, and some people were writing to me [...]

[To me, in 1990 he added:] That there was a lady here from the English Folk Dance and Song Society [...] who saw me dancing [...] and she picked the dances I was to do. I did not realise that there was any significant difference between them and Flings and Sword dance, but told me “Oh, we don't know these” [...] and I think that is when they were being started to be called “Hebridean dances.”<sup>158</sup>

But, as described earlier, the term was used slightly earlier in the *Oban Times* in 1925. That was, however, the first time Fearchar heard them labelled ‘Hebridean Dances.’

*The Irish Free Press* (Thursday January 3, 1935) reported:

From Scotland will come Farquhar McNeil, a solo dancer from the Island of Barra in the Outer Isles, who dances in his stocking soles to bagpipe accompaniment the traditional Hebridean dances. These are closely akin to the Highland dances and the tunes are variants of the Highland airs.

*Evening Herald* added on the 5 January 1935:

[...] Farquhar McNeil has also arrived in London to dance at the Albert Hall to-night. He is going to dance, this dark-haired sturdy islander, just as he would at home—in his stockings pulled up over the bottoms of his trouser-legs. The Albert Hall does not frighten him. “I know my dances and I don't know the people so I shall be all right”—that is the way he looks at things. “I think I should be more nervous if I knew the people who were watching or if they knew me,” he told a reporter. [...] He had not seen the hall until he went there for the rehearsal—but he had bought a photograph of it. “I have danced in all the halls in Barra, but never in a great place like this,” said young McNeil. In Barra, where he was born and where he still lives, he works at joinery and masonry. [...] He has had a look round London now. But he prefers Eoligaray, which is the name of the lonely village where he lives. [...] Young McNeil has heard the stories of Eoghan Beag or Ewen of the Short Arms. “It is said that Ewen danced on a table that he had a candle at each corner and that he was able to put out the flame of the candles with his feet as he danced without knocking them over.” Said McNeil. “I hope they don't expect me to do that to-night.” [...] Approximately four hundred English dancers representing twenty county and city branches of the Society [EFDSS] will take part. Scotland will be represented by a traditional country dance team of “bondagers”—the old border name for servants bound to the farm which is still applied to women farm workers.

The *Sunday Post* (January 6, 1935:2) reported a small notice titled ‘*Dancing joiner from the Isles makes a Hit on His first visit to London*’ adding that ‘M'Neil [sic], a sturdy, dark-haired man, is a joiner [...] [is] a 25-year-old native of Barra [...] His part in the London performance, for which he was dressed in a blue sweater and trousers, not a kilt, consists of three dances performed in the manner of the Highland Fling. These are danced in stockinged feet to the accompaniment of the bagpipes.’ After this he recalled in 1982 that

*Agus às a dheoghaidh sin bhithinn a' dol sìos gu Lunnainn. Bha mi shìos ann a South ... [?] Hall is dhà no trì de dh'aitichean eile—bhithinn a' dol sìos trì no ceithir uairean sa bhliadhna. Ach thòisich an cogadh is dh'fhalbh mise is sguir an danns. Agus an deoghaidh dhomh tilleadh, an dèidh a' chogaidh, bha mi ann an Jedburgh agus, och, bha mi a' dèanamh beagan de dhannsa a' sin nuair a thàinig Flett, Professor Flett, a-nuas à Liverpool. Is thug mi dha an dà dhannsa ... airson a leabhair. Ach gu mi-fhortanach bhàsaich e mus tàinig an dara leabhar a-mach. A' chiad leabhar, 's e dannsaichean ceathrar no còignear a bh' anns'. Bha danns aon-duine a bha dol san ath leabhar.*

And after that I would go down to London. I was down the in South ... [?] Hall and two or three other places—I would go down three or four times a year. But the war started and I left and stopped dancing. And after I returned, after the war, I was down in Jedburgh and, och, I was doing a little bit of dancing when Flett, Professor Flett, came over from Liverpool. I gave him two dances ... for his book. But, unfortunately, he died before the second book came out. The first book was of dances for four or five people. It was solo dances that were going in the next book.

Again, in the 1982 interview from the School of Scottish Studies archive Fearchar recalled his thoughts

on the dancing he knew from Barra when he left the island and later realised people did not know or remember the dances:

*Nuair a dh'fhàg mi an t-eilean cha robh duine sam bith eile anns an eilean aig an àm a bhiodh a' danns fhad 's fhiosrach mise, [sin gu math?] a' teagasg danns. Ach bha aon fhear ann, Tommy Beag a bh' aca air, Ruairidh [Ruarachain?] agus chunna mi esan a' dèanamh Danns a' Chlaidheimh ann an Sgoil a' Bhàgh a Tuath aon turas agus sin a' chiad uair a chunna mise riamh duine a' dannsadh, sin a-mach o'm sheanair fhèin.*

When I left the island there was no one on the island at that time who was dancing, as far as I know [?] teaching dance. But there was one fellow, Little Tommy they called him, *Ruairidh Ruarachain*, and I saw him doing the Sword Dance in North Bay School one time and that was the first time I ever saw someone dancing aside from my own grandfather.

[...]

*Chuala mi an uair sin, thàinig fear a-nall à Uibhist a Bharraigh agus bha e ag ionnsachadh nan dannsaichean Gàidhealach—Fling, Swords is rudan dhen t-seòrs'—agus bha e ag ionnsachadh an fheadhainnse [Hebridean Dances] cuideachd. Agus fhuair mi an uair sin a-mach gu robh gu leòr dhiubh ann an Uibhist is bha mi just a' feuchainn ri faighinn a-mach mu dheidhinn sin. Agus 's e MacLeòid a [bh'ann] cuideachd a thàinig às an Eilean Sgitheanach a dh'ionnsaich aig Eòghann MacLachlainn. Chan eil fhios 'am an e an aon fhear a bh'ann, neo an e dithis – bha e furasda gu leòr dà MhacLeòid fhaighinn anns an Eilean Sgitheanach. Agus 's e Mac a' Phearsain a dh'ionnsaich [bh]uaithesan. Agus thug Mac a' Phearsain na dansaichean air aghaidh ann an Uibhist.*

I heard then that a man came from Uist to Barra and he was teaching the Highland dances—the Fling, Swords and dances of that kind—and he was teaching those ones [i.e. the Hebridean Dances] too. And I then found out that there were plenty of them [Hebridean dances] in Uist and I was just trying to find out about that. And he was a MacLeod as well who came from the Isle of Skye and learned from Ewan MacLachlan. I don't know if he was the same man, or if there were two – it was easy enough to find two MacLeods on the Isle of Skye. And it was MacPherson who learned from him and MacPherson brought the dances on in Uist.

[...]

*Nuair a dh'fhalbh mi gam chosnadh, chaidh mi dhan Òban. Agus bha mi aig na geamaichean san Òban agus anns an àm a bha sin, cha bhiodh duine fo shia bliadhna deug a' dannsadh aig Geamaichean an Òbain agus cha bhiodh boireannaich idir ann. Agus bha mi car a' coimhead an latha a bha seo agus rinn iad na dannsaichean a b' àbhaist: Danns a' Chlaidheimh, Flings, Seann Triubhas, danns no dhà eile. Thug mi an aire nach robh gin dhen fheadhainn a bha mise ag ionnsachadh: Mac Iain Gasda, 's Thairis*



Fearchar MacNeil outside his house in Upper Brevig, Barra, March 1990.  
Photo Mats Melin.

*Air an Aiseag, 's Tulach Gorm, cha robh gin dhiubh air...*

When I left for employment, I went to Oban. And I was at the Games in Oban and in that time, there wasn't anyone under the age of sixteen dancing at the Games and there weren't any women there at all. And I was kind of watching, this one day, and they did the usual dances: the Sword Dance, Flings, *Seann Triubhas*, one or two other dances. I noticed that there weren't any of the dances I had been learning—*Mac Iain Ghasda* [Highland Laddie] and *Over the Water*, and *Tulloch Gorm*, there were none of them.

'S cuimhne 'am [gun do dh'fhaighnich mi do] f[h]ear dhe na dannsairean nuair a fhuair mi cothrom, carson nach do rinn iad na dannsaichean a bha seo is dh'aidich e dhomh nach cual' e riamh [sgeul?] orra gu dè...no rud san bi eile. 'S thòisich mi an uair sin a' faighneachd is 's ann a thuig mi nach robh iad ach ma na h-eileanan fhèin. Agus rinn mi tuilleadh sgrùdaidh mun cuairt air a' gnothach agus fhuair mi a-mach gur e 'Hebridean Dances' a t-ainm a bh'aca orra. Is fhuair mi a-mach beagan mun eachdraidh aca, is cha b'urrainn dhomh 'g ràdh co-dhiù a bheil e fìor no nach robh ach [chuala mi?] mar a thàinig iad dhan eilean.

And I remember I took [?] one of the dancers when I had the opportunity, why don't they do these dances and he admitted to me that he had never heard [of them?] or anything else. And I started asking then and I came to understand that they were only around the islands themselves. And I did more research around the matter and I found out that they were called 'Hebridean Dances'. And I found out a little about their history, I couldn't say if it is true or not but [I heard?] how they came to the island[s].

Agus às a dheoghaidh sin, bhithinn a' dol a Bharraigh ach chan fhaca mi danns' ann, cha d'fhuair mi cothrom. Ach bha mi riamh a' smaointinn gu robh Uibhist is Barraigh làn dha na Hebridean Dances a bha seo, gu robh iad mar a chunna mi fhìn iad ron chogadh. Ach o chionn trì seachdainean, fhuair mi bràth a dh'Uibhist a dhol suas airson [a bhith] nam bhrìtheamh gu dannsa—judge—[aig] danns anns an Iochdar, b' e sin Disathairne sa chaidh. Is cha robh dùil sam bith agam a dhol a dhèanamh sgàth sam bith le dannsa ach bha mi ag ràdh, uill, Uibhist, tha sin diofraichte. Dh'fheumainn a dhol a dh'Uibhist is chaidh mi ann.

Ach bhrìst an cridhe agam – cha robh aon fhear... Bha dannsa no dhà aca nach robh riamh agam ri'm linn-se, nach fhaca mise riamh iad a' dèanamh ann an Uibhist, a tha cumanta gu leòr air tìr mòr. Agus bha na dannsaichean Gàidhealach a b'abhast dhaibh bhith dèanamh ach cha robh gin aca de na Hebridean Dances. Is nuair a thòisich mi air faighneachd [...] thòisich a h-uile duine, 'ò, chan aithne dhuinn' is, 'cha chuala'. [Bha] feadhainn a chuala is feadhainn nach cuala. Ach tha mise a' smaoinneachadh gu bheil gu leòr beò an-diugh fhathast ann an Uibhist a bha a' dannsa [aig] na Games ron chogadh, agus leis gu bheil cha bhiodh iad cho sean sin. Ma tha cuimhn' aca air na dannsaichean, 's dòcha nach eil.

And, after that, I would go to Barra but I didn't see dances there, I didn't get the opportunity. But I always thought that Uist and Barra were full of these Hebridean Dances, as I had seen them before the war. But three weeks ago, I was called to Uist to go and be a judge at a dance in Iochdar—this was last Saturday. And I wasn't expecting to go and do anything with dance, but I said, well, Uist, that's different. I had to go to Uist and so I went.

But my heart broke—there wasn't a single one... They had some dances that I never had during my time, that I never saw them doing in Uist, [but which] are common enough on the mainland. And they had the usual Highland dances, but they didn't have a single one of the Hebridean Dances. And when I started asking ... everyone started [Fearchar shrugs his shoulders], 'oh we don't know' and 'I never heard'. There were some who had heard [about the dances] and some who hadn't. But I think there are still plenty of people alive today in Uist who were dancing at the Games before the war, and who therefore wouldn't be too old. If they remember the dances, maybe they don't.

Towards the end of the interview Fearchar was asked *Agus co-dhiù, tha sibh airson 's gum faic sibh na dannsaichean sin a bheòthachadh a-rithist? / And anyway, you would like to see the dances brought to life again?*

*Tha mise deiseil airson rud sam bith a ghabhas dèanamh airson an toirt beò 's an cumail beò. Tha mi glè chinnteach gum faodainn a bhith air tuilleadh ionnsachadh dhan fheadhainn a tha mi ag ionnsachadh ann an Uibhist. [...] Agus bha mi a' smaointinn air dòigh eile, bha trìùir ann agus nam bithinn air dà dhannas an t-aon a thoirt dhaibh, diofair danns, agus às deoghaidh sin bha mi ag ràdh rium fhìn, ma*

—*Hebridean Step Dancing*—

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*chailleas gin aca sgàth chan urrainn duine an cuideachadh. Is thug mi na trì dannsaichean dhaibh—an aon seòrsa dhan a h-uile duine. Ma chailleas an darna tè aca, ionnsaichidh an tèile, bidh fios aig tè dhan triùir co-dhiù.*

Oh, I am ready for anything that can be done to bring them to life and keep them alive. I'm very sure I could be teaching more to the ones I'm instructing in Uist. [...] And I was thinking of another way, there were three [women] and if I was giving each one two dances, different dances, and after that I was saying to myself, if any one of them loses [a dance] no one can help her. And [so] I gave them three dances – the same one to each of them. If one girl loses one, the other can teach her, at least one out of the three will know it anyway.

Some years later Fearchar kept promoting the dances he loved and he had started choreographing a new dance, *Caisteal Chiosamul*, which was eventually and first performed at the *Feis Bharraigh*, a children's music festival centred on Gaelic traditions, in 1986 in tribute to the late Fr John MacMillan of Barra.

Fearchar taught and influenced many dancers over the years in Barra and on the mainland. Among them were sisters Mona and Nellie MacNeil, Katie-Ann MacKinnon, and Mona MacKenzie, née Douglas, who in turn held dancing classes in Barra.