

Memories of the Barra women step-dancing

by Frances MacEachen

One subject which seems to raise many questions in Scotland is the origin of dance. Strangely, there is no Gaelic word for dance which is referred to as *Dannsa* and very little written or oral sources which give a satisfying account of the historical development of dance. Except for the book "Traditional Dancing in Scotland" (Flett and Flett, 1964) there isn't a lot written about the type of dance ordinary Gaels did in their homes and communities, especially prior to mid 1800s and before the Victorian and Scottish Country dance influence.

This void is further emphasized when Cape Breton style step dance is performed in the old country, to be met with enthusiasm but scepticism that this is a true dance of Scottish Gaels. The overwhelming response in Scotland is that this must be something influenced by Irish Gaels in the New World. For those who have grown up in

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Cape Breton, this reaction is a frustrating one. What Irish Gaels they wonder? Communities where this type of dance flourished were very isolated and almost totally Gaelic speaking areas settled by Scottish Gaels.

more research. All I could say is that this is something we always did, that came naturally, and was passed down to us."

Among the people who came to her class in Barra was an elderly gentleman who watched silently from the side as Mary Janet conducted her class. When she found out he was a respected dancer and instructor on the island Mary Janet became a bit intimidated wondering if he were going to take her to task for not dancing as they do in Scotland.

To her surprise his first words praised her dancing. "I have no doubt in my mind that this is the dance we lost over here," he said.

The elderly gentleman was Farquhar MacNeil, *Fearchar Eoin Fhearchair* who still lives in Castlebay, Barra. On a recent trip to Barra, I stopped by Farquhar's home where he lives alone. When I got there he was sitting on his bed, reading old letters from people in Canada. His face lit up when

I said I wanted to talk to him about dance and he settled in his chair for an afternoon of discussion on a subject Farquhar he would talk day about.

"I was mad for dancing," said Farquhar who now suffers from



Hebridean dancer, Farquhar MacNeil and friend, Justine Cassell

went to war. He says his grandfather, who learned to dance from a teachers from Uist and Skye, wasn't a particularly good dancer.

"He was just doing it for his own self-pleasure. It was the same with bagpipes. He could pay them, but he never went forward to play. I remember there was a piper who lived next door, and we were there one night, and my grandfather had a wee heavy weather (a few drinks) and he asked me to do this dance "MacIain Gasda", Highland Laddie but he never called it that, it was "MacIain Gasda". I did this and he played, he was playing the pipes. When I was finished I had a wee rest and he (grandfather) says to the other piper, "You play MacIain Gasda and I'll show him how to really do it."

would not be able to raise the chalice about his head during the consecration of the Mass. MacLaughlan apparently continued to live in France and began dancing. Farquhar said there are many variations to this stories on how he learned to dance. One says MacLaughlan met up with descendants of Jacobites who fled to France and who taught him the dances which, by that time, had been influenced by French dancing. Another is that MacLaughlan learned new dances from the French and another is that he invented the dances after he returned. What ever the origin, it seems MacLaughlan did introduce a new form of dance to the islands with classes in South Uist from 1840 until 1879.

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, 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 dancing, I knew that's what they were doing."

Farquhar doesn't remember any hand movement and says he is almost positive their hand 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 are doing before MacLaughlan.

"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. Of course some even think that still. There's a place in Skye, I've been there. And they got all the instruments, fiddles and accordions-heaped together and burned. They'll tell you about it yet. Dancing was absolutely taboo...but the people who

Gaelic speaking areas settled by Scottish Gaels.

When Inverness County Step dancer, Mary Janet MacDonald went to Scotland in 1984 to teach children how to step dance at the Barra Feis, she became one of the first to encounter this scepticism. "...Some people felt this was Irish dancing and that it didn't come from Scotland," said Mary Janet. "I was interviewed by the BBC and they asked how I knew they brought this from Scotland. I didn't come prepared to defend the dance and I wish I had done

Buddy MacMaster video to be released

A musical documentary on Cape Breton fiddling great, Buddy MacMaster will be on sale the end of November as producer Peter Murphy of Seabright Video Productions, Antigonish completes the final editing. It's a project that took Murphy almost two years to complete as he followed Buddy from Glencoe Mills to Scotland.

Amidst the magnificent scenery of the Isle of Skye, Buddy taught a week-long workshop in the Cape Breton Style of music. Ironically, this form of music has disappeared from the Highlands. Scotland and America's finest fiddler/teacher, Alasdair Fraser explores the international significance of the soft-spoken gentleman from Judique and his vibrant style of Celtic music.

"I was mad for dancing," said Farquhar who now suffers from arthritis and walks with a cane.

In fact, he was so mad for dancing that at a time when dancing was "a lassie's thing" he would sneak out to the barn and dance to the tunes that he whistled.

"I didn't believe it was a lassie's job (to dance) but everyone around me did. I wouldn't tell anyone because they would laugh at me."

Farquhar learned to dance from his grandfather who he lived with after his mother died and his father

Cape Breton's natural beauty also provides the backdrop for much of the video. The insights of Archie Neil Chisholm, Sheldon MacInnis, Havey Beaton, Natalie MacMaster, and Dave MacIssac complete the portrait. We visit Glencoe Hall for some stepdancing and a dynamic duet with Buddy and his niece, Natalie. The production ends with an uninterrupted lively set of tunes.

In an article in *String* magazine (Jan./Feb., 1992) fellow musician Jody Stecher said "Buddy MacMaster is unique because of his 'tone, his timing, his choice of tunes and the order in which he plays them, a rare combination of gracefulness and power, and depth of feeling with a religious tinge not found in all fiddling'".

MacInnis Gasda and I'll show him how to really do it."

Farquhar said that's the only time he ever remembers him doing a complete dance. He would usually show him only parts of a dance, or describe steps which Farquhar would then execute. Farquhar said he later picked up more steps on the mainland.

When he reached his twenties Farquhar began to do solo dances around the island; dances like 'Over the Water', 'Tullochgorum', and 'Scotts Blue Bonnets', many which were interpretive dances.

Around 1935 a woman from the English Folk Dance and Song Society came to Barra and saw Farquhar dancing. She was intrigued and eventually brought him to dance in London's Alberta Hall. It was then that Farquhar first heard the term "Hebridean Dancing". He feels the dances which she had never seen before were coined 'Hebridean dances' after the area in which she found them. Other than a few different dances, Farquhar can give few examples of how Hebridean differs from Highland dancing.

When asked about the origin of Hebridean dance, Farquhar tells a story about Ewan MacLaughlan, an ecclesiastical student from Morar, who studied in France and was later let go from the priesthood after he injured his arm. He said he has heard him called *Ewan na làimheadh bige* (Ewan of the short hand) and said the reason he was discharged was because he

classes in South Uist from 1840 until 1879.

What is less certain is what the Gaels on the islands and on the mainland were doing before MacLaughlan. When asked that question, Farquhar perks up in his chair, leans forward and continues as if waiting for the perfect set up for his story:

"This is what I am getting at. I think it is the dancing they have in Cape Breton...I saw someone dancing Cape Breton step dancing at the Mod in Ayr (around 15 years ago). That's when I first saw them dancing Cape Breton style. And, Oh I said personally to myself, that cannot be. They couldn't have taken that from here. To me, I really thought at first that it was the Irish and Scotch in America, that it was one picking up the dance from the other and eventually it ended up as they dance in Cape Breton. However I started to learn Irish dancing and when Mary Janet came here I saw the difference right away. What's more it brought back something I remembered as a young, young boy. 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, 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

you about it yet. Dancing was absolutely taboo...but the people who went to America, they took their dancing with them. This is my own idea completely. I cannot say I have any proof or anything else."

Farquhar said this lack of information was very frustrating for someone like himself who is so interested in dance. As he talks about dancing, Farquhar will stop many times to emphasize that he never considered himself a good dancer, only someone who loved to dance and who had an above average curiosity on the background of Scottish dances. When asked what he liked about Cape Breton stepdancing his answer implies that it was more the origin of the dance than the dance itself.

"I'm interested in the past time the people had... I feel, we call it Cape Breton dancing, but I feel it is as much Highland Dancing, more so than the Highland Dancing we know. Highland dancing is more of a war thing. It's not a social thing. Who could call a sword dance a social thing? And they're not doing sword dances today like they once did. When the sword dance started it was stuck in the ground, one sword and dancing around it and all that sort of thing and they wouldn't have fancy dancing shoes. They may be tackety boots or that sort of thing. That's well away from the origin of the dance. But I think that Cape Breton dancing is not away from the origin of the dance. And there's nothing like that here."