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Embodied Culture: An Exploration of Irish Dance through Trauma Theory

Erica Burgin
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Erica Burgin

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Debra Sowell, chair
Francesca Lawson
Carl Sederholm

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Embodied Culture: An Exploration of Irish Dance through Trauma Theory

Erica Burgin
Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature
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This thesis examines traditional Irish dance as a locus of cultural memory, inscribed on the body. The native people of Ireland experienced invasion and oppression for nearly a millennium, beginning with Viking invasions at the end of the 8th century and ending in the 1940s, when the British finally departed Ireland, now an independent country. During the years of English rule, the British imposed harsh laws and sought to eradicate all vestiges of Irish culture in an attempt to diminish Irish identity. Through the ages, the definition of what it means to be Irish has changed widely, frequently resulting in revolt against invaders and internal armed conflicts. Physical alterations of the Irish body also occurred, though in a more representational context than a literal one. Traditional Irish dance grappled with how to present the Irish body, endeavoring to use it in way that overcame the cultural traumas of invasion and suppression.

When Ireland began reclaiming its identity in the twentieth century, it soon became clear that dance had been profoundly affected by the traumatic oppression. Interestingly, the emerging dance form that became codified as distinctively Irish dance both reflects the history of suppression and seems to repeat the oppression, as if the living body were caught up in traumatic repetition. Traumatic experiences have shaped the collective and individual Irish bodies, and dance performance highlights a culture that is continually repeating its oppressive past in an attempt to find a cure from that traumatic heritage. By examining the solo dance tradition, Irish dance becomes a fertile field for studying the qualities of an embodied dance form that, in this case, performs a cultural history marked by oppression and traumatic repetition. As developed under the Gaelic League and the Irish Dancing Commission, traditional Irish dance reflected a rather proscribed art form, meant to specifically embody certain qualities of "Irishness." Looking back to pre-invasion Ireland, they intended to display the distinct, pure Irish identity of the past; instead, they continued the pattern of control and suppression. However, Ireland and Irish dance have grown beyond those early structures of traumatic repetition. In 1994, *Riverdance* grabbed worldwide attention as it presented Irish dance in a new context, with movements that broke from proscribed forms and expressed a non-traumatic Irish identity. *Riverdance* and the ensuing global craze for Ireland demonstrate a cultural artifact that has successfully stepped from the past into the dynamic present. While still acknowledging and preserving its original roots, the traumas of the past have been healed through embodied representation.

Keywords: dance, trauma, Ireland

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Qualifications

My interest in folk dance and Irish dance in particular has guided my personal interests and academic research for several years. I trained in ballet and tap for over fourteen years before I encountered international folk dance. In 2006, I turned my attention specifically to Irish step dance. I was awarded an ORCA grant to travel to Ireland for three weeks and attend an intensive Irish dance workshop at the University of Limerick in conjunction with the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, with prominent Irish dance scholars Dr. Catherine E. Foley and Dr. Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, and acclaimed Irish dance choreographer Michael Ryan.

The time I spent in Ireland allowed me to study the culture, history, and especially the dance of that country, enabling me to learn about the historical climate of Ireland and the development of Irish dance. I wanted to explore how Irish dance has played a pivotal role in preserving Ireland's cultural identity. I attended *Blas Iomlan,* an intensive two-week program designed to give dancers a taste of Irish dance from its early roots to current styles. The instruction given at this workshop, in addition to interviews and library research, allowed me to see parallels in Irish history and dance.

Upon my return from Ireland, I continued to participate in Irish dance classes, learning more advanced steps and movement patterns in both solo and group dances. As my academic education continued, I found myself still intrigued by the structure and history of Irish dance. My paradigm for viewing folk dance acknowledged that nearly every aspect of the dance provided

clues to how the people constructed their identity. Although my earlier research established definite links between Irish dance and history, it did not adequately answer certain questions such as: how does the construction and adjudication of the competition dance form relate to Ireland's history? Why does the competitive style focus so much on individual performance while conveying a sense of group identification? Why does Irish dance so frequently feature repetition in its execution? While taking a course entitled "Trauma and Representation," I realized that trauma theory offered a productive way to analyze the structured tradition of Irish dance, revealing many links between the dance form and Irish history.

Introduction

In addressing the topic of traditional Irish dance as both a bearer of trauma and a means of finding healing, it is important to note that my research addresses a very specific portion of the Irish dance tradition, not all facets of it. Ireland has a rich and varied cultural dance heritage, inclusive of many regional dance styles. These vernacular dance traditions thrive, offering other artistic representations of identity beyond the well-recognized competition style. Vernacular dance forms are those that have not been codified and taught in master-pupil settings, but rather are transmitted informally, "picked up" more than learned. Because of this quality, the vernacular dance forms remained largely sheltered from the traumatic affect of Ireland's past. Among these vernacular forms are sean nós (literally, old style), North Kerry step dance, Connemara step dance, and other localized forms of dance. Each tradition showcases different techniques and styles of step dance, but the thread of step dance does remain largely consistent through these and the formalized Irish step dance (see Figure 1). Though these forms were not

selected by the Irish Dancing Commission for canonization and have less recognition nationally

and globally, they do add to the beautiful, rich tradition of Irish dance. For my purposes of

connecting trauma theory into an examination of Irish dance and identity, however, I have chosen to focus solely on the most visible and recognized category of Irish dance – competitive Irish dance style.

Figure 1. Sean nós dance

Art by Alexis Olsen

In contrast to the vernacular forms, competitive Irish dance is the highly-developed and highly- regulated form of

Irish step dance. Various groups adjudicate it in both instruction and competitions, making sure it

adheres to the rules, standards, and traditions of the form. While competitive Irish dance

excludes certain aspects of the dance tradition in Ireland, it serves as a strong foundation for the

discussion of trauma for several reasons. First of all, it is the most widely recognized style of

Irish dance, existing in the worldwide arena. Competitors train in countries all over the world,

from the Diaspora (England, Australia, and USA) to throughout all of Europe, and even as far

distant as Japan. Additionally, *Riverdance: The Show* draws on the competitive Irish dance style,

though it is altered for staging and increased narrative expression. Dancers in the show always draw from competitive Irish dance, so much of the basic technique and expression of that style remains strongly visible in the staged shows. These masterpiece shows have toured all over the world, increasing the visibility and familiarity of Irish dance among diverse cultures. Since competitive style Irish dance is a widely recognizable body of material, it provides an accessible entry for addressing questions raised by my previous research.

Selectively studying competitive Irish dance style within the terms of trauma theory also allows for explorations within the growth and development of the form itself. The very structures and organizations that have preserved Irish dance have also suppressed aspects of it. Groups such as the Gaelic League and the Irish Dancing Commission made concerted efforts to maintain a truly Irish dance

Figure 2. Contemporary competitive Irish Dance

Art by Alexis Olsen

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form, promoting the development of certain styles and forms while eliminating anything they did not perceive to fit within their guidelines.

Irish dance is a continually evolving dance form. This propensity for change and innovation opens avenues for addressing and healing past historical experiences. Throughout the codification and expansion of Irish dance, it has continually provided an outlet to showcase skill, strength, and the fiery competitive spirit of the people. *Riverdance* stands out in Irish dance development as a landmark performance in which the dance form breaks free from the restrictions of the past. Even now, as Ireland evolves and grows, the dance grows with it. Examining Irish dance can provide subtle clues regarding the construction and expression of Irish identity throughout the centuries.

Irish Dance and the Mind-Body Relationship

As people and civilizations pass through time, they are indelible actors in reflexive interactions – they alter the space they live in while simultaneously being influenced by that same space. As Walter Benjamin succinctly put it: "To dwell means to leave traces" (9). Viewing the traces of a culture by examining their artistic creations allows a meaningful perspective that surpasses a merely historical approach, for art encompasses history, geography, politics and social factors along with aesthetics and creativity. Dance, in particular among the arts, stands as an amalgamation of influences inscribed on a living body. The living body performing dance bears indelible markers of its individual past; however, it also has the capacity to bear traces of a collective past that precedes its physical existence. This is where the mind-body connection comes into focus, with the acknowledgment that the psychological components

are just as significant as the somatic, corporeal being and equally bear the traces of human experience.

In recent years, dance scholarship has turned to questions of cognition and the role of the mind in choreography and performance. The idea of embodied memory fits well into this current vein of inquiry, addressing the nature of dance as an art form while exploring its connections to processes and motivations from the mind. Irish dance specifically has grown as a field of academic inquiry, but much ground remains to be covered. With a long past filled with invasions, tensions, and upheaval, Ireland offers fertile ground for memory studies; to this point, however, such research has primarily focused on history and literature, only occasionally addressing other arts such as music and dance. Serious study of cultural memory in Ireland must include a close examination of its representative arts, particularly dance. Such an inquiry is vital to understanding a nation whose memory and identity is inextricably linked to its dance performance.

Recognizing that dance may originate from psychological impulse giving rise to physical impetus, it becomes necessary to examine this art form in a manner that addresses those factors. Contemporary researcher Anna Pakes raises this concern in her discussion of the mind-body problem and its relationship to dance. Her approach to dance through philosophy and aesthetics, combined with her personal experience as a dancer, provides an insightful method for discussing the experiences and motivations of dance performance. She states:

> From a dance perspective, in other words, the movement of the dancer's body –
> like my raising my arm – is a physiological event determined by other
> physiological or neurological occurrences – the firing of neurons in a certain

pattern, say – which themselves may be caused by other physical stimuli. Whilst

we may talk in terms of creative freedom, artistic intention, aesthetic response,

meaning and embodied thinking, therefore, these are ultimately ways of speaking

about brain processes and messages passing across the nervous system (Pakes 89).

This link between brain processes and the dance experience is a new perspective emerging in

dance scholarship. Memory, individual and collective, influences the movement of physical

bodies, and studying that interrelationship can reveal deeper context for why a dance is

performed a particular way.

Applying this paradigm to Irish dance allows for new connections to be made that

address why the dance is performed the way it is. Irish dance has existed for hundreds of years,

although it has grown and changed during that time – an evolution that will be addressed in the

following chapters. It is not a stagnant art form, but has continually evolved as Ireland itself has

developed and changed throughout the centuries. Irish dance seems to be an ongoing mode of

expression amongst many in Ireland, although its alterations and deeper meanings may pass

unnoticed. John Szwed, in his research on race and embodied culture, suggests: "since history

demonstrates that the stylistic components of the arts are slow to change and difficult to destroy,

it is often easy to feel that particular performances are 'natural' to particular races" (259).

Regardless of the veracity of this viewpoint, the connection between Irish dance and national

identity was reinforced when Irish dance exploded into the global arena in the mid-1990s with

astounding power and success. Tracing the development of Irish dance from its early days

through *Riverdance* showcases how performances have retained certain qualities and features

despite changes and regulations to the body itself.

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Examining the growth of Irish dance into its current form in terms of the mind-body connection reveals that certain experiences and choices have explicitly shaped the Irish dance form. The development of Irish traditional dance from a vernacular dance form to a regulated competitive form to a globalized phenomenon showcases the body as a locus of cultural memory. The physical body bears witness to a traumatic past represented through dance and ultimately healed by those representations. In this path that navigates through trauma and seeks for healing, dance becomes a powerful force that negotiates both personal and collective recovery.

Previous Analytical Frameworks

Scholarship in Irish dance has been relatively limited, though interest in the field has increased in the past two decades. The majority of the research falls into roughly four categories which, while useful and insightful in their own right, leave room for the introduction of new paradigms in Irish dance research.

Arguably the most prominent research paradigm has been a chronological approach. Dr. John Cullinane has worked extensively in the field to document the history of Irish dance. A native Irishman and experienced dancer and instructor, his approach is extremely thorough. Isabel Healy, in her article on Cullinane's work, relates that "[over] thirty years ago he began recording the memories of old dance masters and collecting information, photographs and letters" (Healy). He has been a major contributor in creating a clearer understanding of how Irish dance developed through the years, no small feat to accomplish. She continues,

The tradition of ethnic dance in Ireland is a long one, but as solo dancing was

almost exclusively an oral tradition, there is no record of its evolution, either in

steps or costume until a century ago. "There are lots of books on Irish music but if

you look for background information on Irish dancing, there is little or nothing,

and very few film clips of people dancing" – according to Dr. John Cullinane

(Healy).

Cullinane's statement illustrates some inherent difficulties in Irish dance research. Faced with a

largely oral history, it makes sense that many researchers have focused their attention on tracing

and documenting the rise and progress of the dance form itself. While any research of a

traditional dance form should acknowledge its history, chronological exploration of Irish dance

can only go so far before it is exhausted and must be supplemented with new perspectives.

Ethnochoreology is another framework used to examine Irish dance, a perspective that

still addresses the historical elements of the dance while adding in questions of motivation and

meaning. Catherine E. Foley is a leader in the field of Ethnochoreology in Irish Dance and has

made significant contributions to the academic development of ethnochoreological studies. Her

experience and research in Irish dance tends to focus on all genres of Irish dance, not just the

competitive form most commonly recognized. This holistic approach provides insights into

community values and interactions, personal and group aesthetics, and cultural and expressive

boundaries. Examining Irish dance with an ethnochoreological approach is very useful and

continually provides space for new connections to be made.

Two other theoretical approaches to Irish dance stand out, particularly because they are

quite new to the field. First is the theoretical approach to dance as an embodied art. Theresa Jill

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Buckland is one influential researcher taking this approach to dance in general, and traditional dances in particular. She states, "the recent shift of scholarly focus towards the body and performance has helped to raise the profile of dance as a significant academic site for cultural investigation and to open up channels for dialogue with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences" (Buckland 1). Researching dance as an embodied process opens the door for questions regarding identity, memory, and the role of the body as a whole unit. These qualities make this avenue of research particularly fruitful when seeking connections between individual and group correlations.

The final theoretical approach that is growing in dance research is that of memory. This approach to dance takes a few forms: there are scholars like Pakes who are interested in the explicit mind-body connection in dance, while there are others like Helena Wulff who are studying dance as a bearer of social memories. Wulff relates:

> Dance and body theorists argue, however, that because of the multivocal quality
> of dance performances, they can offer opportunities to learn more about the past,
> as in relation to the Famine, while performances also unite people with different
> perspectives on the same issue. Like any good piece of art, in any genre, a dance
> performance can release emotions and uncover new connections and alternative
> interpretations on a personal, cultural and political level (38).

Recognizing the power of dance to express knowledge about the past while unifying people with a wide variety of perspectives, this approach to studying dance offers many opportunities to make new and insightful connections to things both inside and outside the dance. Approaching dance through the lens of trauma theory stems from the analytical frameworks of embodiment

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and memory, combining them to explore how the Irish dancing body has been shaped by trauma and how it functions in the complementary relationship of trauma and healing.

Trauma theory, as an analytical tool, can be useful in addressing many types of dances, not just Irish dance. On a broad scale, traumatic events are part of the human experience, and they frequently become the subject of representative activities, like dance. Every culture has some traumatic story in its past, regardless of its impact as compared to others' traumas, and representation plays a fundamental role in dealing with those experiences. Key elements of traumatic theory also appear in dance presentations; for example, dances in the Western tradition frequently display repetition in their movements and rather constrained body posture. Trauma theory provides a new method for examining qualities of repetition, constraint, suppression, omission, and contradiction within dance forms. In many cases, trauma theory will not successfully answer all questions regarding these qualities, but the insights it provides may open the way for other connections to be made, ultimately broadening the field of dance research.

Trauma and Re-presentation

Addressing dance through the lens of trauma theory focuses attention on the dance performance and witnesses to those presentations – the audience. Dance provides multiple access points for understanding ideas and objects, but such access can never be direct knowledge because the dance is an interpretation, a translation of those concepts and objects. Because of this interpretation and translation, there arises a need for an audience, or witness, to view the performance. Dance can be a very personal experience, but it becomes increasingly meaningful when there is a witness to it, someone to view and take in what is presented and study it out. Irish

dance has historically served as a means of both personal and group expression. For much of its development, knowledge of Irish dance outside of Ireland was relatively limited. However, with the advent of *Riverdance* and other shows similarly expressing Irish identity through dance, the global community can participate in witnessing the dance event and exploring a wide array of interpretations.

As this thesis will address, dance representation correlates with understanding trauma in historical narrative. Just as dance never entirely captures or translates the object of its design, trauma, by definition, cannot be fully comprehended. Trauma theory, then, becomes a useful vehicle that offers a range of ways for understanding dance performances, while simultaneously providing for the ever-necessary witness. Cathy Caruth, a contemporary researcher in trauma studies comments that

> If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is
> not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each in its turn, asks what it
> means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple
> knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness (5).

Trauma theory challenges the notion of a stable, locatable event, requiring an interpretative tool in order to begin to be comprehensible. Similarly, dance as an art form exists in both space and time, resulting in an ephemeral experience. Helen Brennan, in her research on Irish dance, similarly notes that "dance is, by its nature, ephemeral. One moment the air resounds to the tapping of feet and the lilt of the accompanying music. Then, the silence surges softly backwards and the swirling energy of the dancers' movements is but a fleeting memory" (15). Dance phrases and movements occur in time, requiring the audience to utilize their memory to

comprehend the whole work as it continually slips from present to past. Speaking of dance performances, then, raises issues similar to those brought up by the traumatic experience, both of which allude to events that cannot be precisely located in time because they cannot be fully comprehended until they are over, gaining completion in the past.

By its very nature, trauma overwhelms the psyche with an influx of affect (psychical energy) that cannot be processed through typical channels. While there are several viewpoints as to how trauma registers in the brain, it almost unfailingly comes out as a highly fragmented, emotional, and often conflicting narrative. This representative aspect of trauma links it to dance productions, which similarly take a vast amount of information and use narrative processes to make it accessible again.

Theories of Trauma

The definition and understanding of trauma itself is widely debated, requiring an examination of major contributors to that field. Sigmund Freud, with his key work in psychoanalysis, provides the earliest examination of trauma and its psychological effects; he stands as a veritable "founding figure in the history of the conceptualization of trauma" (Leys 18). In addition to Ruth Leys, Cathy Caruth also acknowledges Freud's role in the development of trauma theory. She states:

> The centrality and complexity of trauma in our century was first most profoundly
> addressed in two important and controversial works by Freud, *Beyond the*
> *Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*. These two pieces, written during
> the events surround World War I and World War II, respectively, have been

called upon by contemporary critics as showing a direct relation between Freud's

theory of trauma and historical violence, a directness presumably reflected in the

theory of trauma he produces (58).

Freud's ensuing theory of trauma, drawn from these texts, sets the stage for my examination of

Irish dance as a representation of trauma. However, current researchers interpret Freud

differently, even in an opposite manner. Caruth and Leys are two contemporary researchers who

use Freud's primary texts but reach nearly opposite conclusions. It seems fitting, for Freud often

had contradictions in his theories and made no attempt to resolve them. Their individual

contributions expand the field of trauma studies and offer insightful contrasts. Despite their

differences, all three seem to agree on at least one thing: trauma is a defining aspect of the

human experience.

Theorists

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud, widely recognized as the father of psychoanalysis, stands as the pivotal

figure in trauma studies, being one of the first to tackle the issue and extensively theorize about

it. Though many scholars prefer not to reference Freud in contemporary research, favoring the

continuity of more modern researchers, he laid the groundwork for trauma studies and thus

provides an important foundational base. In addition, many contemporary trauma theorists refer

back to his works, so understanding his primary contributions is useful in distinguishing between

various approaches to trauma theory. His research into the anatomy of the brain and its

psychological drives motivated continual writing and exploration. His interest in what motivates people led him to research traumatic repetitions in individuals. Researching dreams led him to explore why some patients repeatedly experienced nightmares of traumatic events. He, along with another early psychoanalyst, declared that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 12). Trauma, therefore, relates significantly to memory. Having approached trauma studies in individuals, he passed his later years focused on applying psychoanalysis to society and civilization. Additionally, Freud saw a fundamental link between human existence and trauma.

Freud's theory also hinges on the idea of representation as an integral part of trauma. *Moses and Monotheism*, a key text on trauma, discusses the role of text and textual distortion as identifiers of trauma. Representations of trauma cannot fully express the actuality of the past, but the significance and impact can often be conveyed more thoroughly that way. He observes: "it has long been recognized that delusions contain a piece of forgotten truth, which had at its return to put up with being distorted and misunderstood, and that the compulsive conviction pertaining to the delusion emanates from this core of truth and spreads to the errors that enshroud it" (Freud *Moses and Monotheism* 107-8). Freud makes a case for distortions within representations, stating that such misrepresentations allude to traumatic events that have been altered by the organism out of necessity. Narrative and artistic representations contain intentional omissions and contradictions to help make the trauma understandable and controllable, thus reducing the overwhelming impact of trauma on the mind.

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Cathy Caruth

Cathy Caruth, who approaches trauma studies from the background of comparative literature, offers a more contemporary examination of trauma and its functioning in the human mind and body. Like Freud, she tackles the fundamental issues of event and latency, particularly developing her theory of how trauma registers in the mind. Additionally, she furthers the idea of representation in trauma, linking the discourse of narrative into the idea of wounding, thus highlighting representation as the primary method of understanding an inaccessible past. She proposes that "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available"(Caruth 4). For Caruth, the wound stands as a witness to the trauma, an outward manifestation of an internal truth. The emphasis she places on the physical aspect of trauma plays into her idea of trauma literally registered in the brain, as well as the obligation she places on the witness.

Ruth Leys

Ruth Leys tackles the idea of trauma from a perspective that in many respects collides with and counters Caruth's analysis of trauma. Interestingly, both look to the wound as a significant indicator of trauma, but while wounds for Caruth indicate a narrative feature, wounds for Leys point to a more literal injury. She states that "trauma was originally the term for a surgical wound, conceived on the model of a rupture of the skin or protective envelope of the body resulting in a catastrophic global reaction in the entire organism" (Leys 19). Expanding

from this definition, psychological trauma becomes a rupture in the brain's coping mechanisms, which in turn instigates an array of reactions.

In developing her theory of trauma, Leys, like Caruth, draws on the initial work done by Freud. In fact, many of her theoretical approaches deal quite directly with Freud's conclusions and forays into trauma theory. She looks specifically at the idea of a traumatic event and draws out another interpretation of the latency concept. Unlike Caruth, Leys draws on a science and medicine based background from her extensive training in physiological and psychological sciences ("Ruth Leys"). This difference in background translates into a distinct conception of how trauma works in the mind and how representation is involved in the process.

Key Aspects of Trauma Theory

Event

One of the most important features of trauma is the idea of "event." This relates to locating the original moment of trauma, but this process of location is fraught with challenges. Can a traumatic moment be recognized and understood in the moment it occurs? Evidence seems to indicate that the brain cannot fully grasp traumatic occurrences in the moment they happen. Based on his classic example of a train crash, where a person escapes and believes he is unharmed yet later experiences nightmares and flashbacks, Freud himself advocates for the idea of latency. With latency, an original event occurs and may even be recognized as overwhelming, but the traumatic content is not comprehensible at that time. Typically, a secondary event must occur, after a period of latency, which makes the first event become traumatic. When a long period of time has passed between the first and second events, it can

become extremely difficult to specifically state what the original traumatic moment was, for the second experience may have no logical connection to the first. The concept of "event," then, becomes a challenging matter with a secondary trigger moment and a seductively elusive original moment that can never be exactly located.

Like other trauma theorists, Caruth is aware of the discourse begun by Freud's examinations into the psychology of the mind. Instead of implicitly agreeing with Freud's understanding of the event, she uses his conceptual framework as a springboard for her own view of the issue. Specifically, Caruth believes that trauma is literally registered in the brain, but it is inaccessible to retrieval. According to her approach,

> In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation. Taking this literal return of the past as a model for repetitive behavior in general, Freud ultimately argues, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that it is traumatic repetition, rather than the meaningful distortions of neurosis, that defines the shape of individual lives (Caruth 59).

Not only does trauma pass unmediated into the brain and leave a literal imprint, that imprint is forever inaccessible and can only be alluded to through repetition and representation.

Caruth's theory of event pertains particularly to the discussion of traumatic histories because it highlights the overwhelming nature of the past. Charting the past typically involves setting big events on a timeline, but this tends to minimize the actual experience of the past in favor of creating a comprehensible flow. This process reveals two things: first, that key historical events tend to point to an inherent trauma, and second, that such incomprehensibility of events is fundamental in coming to terms with the past. Caruth continues: "for history to be a history of

trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence"(Caruth 18). In making this correlation, Caruth develops a useful link between trauma and history that points to the difficulty of grasping the event, while also alluding to all human history as a tracing of trauma.

Looking at Irish dance, it can be quite challenging to pinpoint a specific moment when the form began or changed, or what exactly precipitated the alteration. Locating an original moment in Irish dance is quite difficult, especially in its earliest days. No one really knows if the Irish were dancing before history documents it, and if they were then no one really knows what kind of dancing they did. At some point in the past, the certainty of the event becomes ambiguous. For those seeking to utilize dance as a tool for recovering a specific idea of the past, this ambiguity is beneficial. They can never be proven wrong in their conception of this unwritten past. On the other hand, those seeking to truly be Irish and discover their roots will find the lack of written record to be troubling. If there was an original moment, it either was never fully understood when it occurred, or it was, yet remains inaccessible. This sense of ambiguity and uncertainty of origin carries through Irish dance and is closely linked to the "event."

One example of the ambiguity in Irish dance is the origin of ring dances. Ring dances, those that feature dancing in a circle either facing the center or moving around a central axis, appear in many ways throughout Irish dance. Group dances frequently incorporate rings into their choreography, and even solo dancers often replicate the circular motion in their floor patterns. While the use of the shape is eminently clear, the origin of its usage is not. One

hypothesis traces the ring dances back to pre-Christian Ireland, when Druid priests conducted

ritual dances in rings around oak trees and fires. Arthur Flynn suggests that "traces of their

circular dances still survive in the ring dances of today" (13). Other noted Irish dance historians,

however, suggest a different source for the ring, or round, dances. Drawing from the popular

carole dances in Europe, "the Normans are given the credit of having introduced round dances

into Ireland" (Breathnach 36). Since the early roots of Irish dance remain undocumented until the

1600's, determining the origin of round dances is impossible. Like the unlocatable traumatic

event, only hints and clues suggest the possible beginnings.

Latency

Latency is an important element of trauma that relates to understanding the event. It is a

concept expressed by Freud and further elaborated upon by Caruth in her theoretical

explorations. Essentially, latency refers to the necessary gap between the occurrence of the

original event and the later expression or realization of trauma. This standard definition of

latency follows Freud's early discussion of the topic, but the significance of the latency period

takes on greater precedence for Caruth. Following along with her view of the event as being

literally recorded in the mind, yet ultimately inaccessible for retrieval, the latency period

becomes more significant than just being an interim time. She states:

> the experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in
>
> the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent
>
> latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just

that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through

its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all (Caruth 17).

The idea that trauma and history can only be experienced through latency is quite interesting, for it suggests that primary experience is more significant in tandem with secondary repetitions than on its own. The power of trauma lies directly in this conception of latency, that because trauma spurs repetition and representation, it allows an otherwise unavailable experience to be remembered and experienced/accessible.

One of the first things Leys addresses is the idea of latency and trauma. She, like Freud, sees the traumatic event as a challenge, conceptually speaking. The mind receives impulses in a continuous flow, making each moment a present experience; however, this natural flow can make it difficult to locate specific events within the timeline as they are happening. In almost every case, a moment or experience is defined as such *after* it has passed, when a specific beginning, middle, and endpoint can be determined (an impossible feat in the moment itself). She discusses how

Freud problematized the originary status of the traumatic event by arguing that it was not the experience itself which acted traumatically, but its delayed revival as a *memory* after the individual had entered sexual maturity and could grasp its sexual meaning. More specifically, according to the temporal logic of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action," trauma was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences – a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently

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traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given

traumatic meaning and hence repressed. For Freud, trauma was thus constituted

by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic,

and a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a

deferred act of understanding and interpretation (Leys 20).

Leys' notion of deferred understanding makes her approach to latency more useful than Caruth's; it also fits more accurately with how Irish dance developed over the years. Timelines show that dance masters began codifying the form hundreds of years after Ireland experienced its earliest invasions, so this notion of latency and trauma assists in explaining the time lapse.

The "first moment" that is initially not specifically traumatic is the invasion of Ireland by Vikings and Normans. The very fact that many of the earliest invaders actually adopted Irish traits, and became fully assimilated into the culture, lends credence to the idea that the earliest invasions were not perceived to be overly threatening or traumatic. There are several decades where Ireland, while an occupied country, had a relatively peaceful existence. However, after a short time, England begins imposing legal restrictions on the Irish people, as well as the mixed-blood settlers. It is this second moment that, in Ireland's history, refers back to the first invasions and causes them to be traumatic. Separately, neither event is particularly outstanding, but combined they create a trauma.

When examining Irish dance in terms of event, questions of belated understanding quickly arise. In many ways, Irish dance follows a pattern of latency between major events. Irish dance, as a vernacular dance form, existed far beyond the time of recorded history. It was a natural extension of life in Ireland and not originally seen as something to be worked at or

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preserved. Szwed observes that "to most people, then as now, motor habits - the way one moves, blinks eyes, stands and walks - the way one pitches one's voice, laughs, cries and collectivizes with others socially - are seen to be rooted in some mysterious racial, or at least 'instinctive' fact" (258). In the mid-18th century, dancing masters arrived in Ireland and began to develop the existing dance tradition into a regularized system of movement. The dancing masters drew from the raw materials and developed Irish dance into a social form (group dances) but more importantly into an artistic form through the solo step dances.

Repetition

The repetition compulsion is perhaps the most significant feature of Freud's theory of trauma. It appears widely throughout many of his texts, and it frequently has a strong correlation to the unbound affect in the brain. He theorizes:

> The effects of trauma are twofold, positive and negative. The former are endeavours to revive the trauma, to remember the forgotten experience, or, better still, to make it real – to live through once more a repetition of it […]. These endeavours are summed up in the terms "fixation to the trauma" and "repetition-compulsion" (Freud *Moses and Monotheism* 95).

Victims of trauma exhibit an unfailing tendency to representatively repeat the trauma. For Freud, such representation appeared most frequently as recurring nightmares, but the repetition compulsion recognizes that nearly any psychosomatic repetition can fit into that category. Memory and representation play key roles in this process. Freud connects memory and representation as he describes the patients he treats:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he

cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no

sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been

communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a

contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see,

remembering it as something belonging to the past (*Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle 18-19).

In this case, Freud points out that repetition keeps the trauma incessantly in the present,

forbidding it to be categorized and assimilated as something in the past. It becomes nearly

impossible to move forward and realize future potentialities because the timeline is continually

interrupted.

Because trauma and repetition so significantly impact the ability to progress and

effectively handle excess stimuli or affect, the concept of representation opens a way for

breaking out of those cycles. Freud emphasizes that remembering the occurrence will allow it to

fit into the past in a comprehensible timeline. Representation offers the chance for trauma to be

remembered – literally re-membered – thus breaking out of rote repetition and giving hope for

healing from the trauma. While Freud himself offers little discussion on this idea of healing, he

points the way toward representation as a key to dealing with trauma.

Caruth's exploration of trauma particularly emphasizes the link between trauma and

human experience, a facet which makes her theories particularly applicable to the study of

artistic representations as bearers of trauma. She points out that recounting a traumatic

experience reinforces the link with life, despite its perplexing ability to disrupt the normal flow

of time. As she puts it, "the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on life" (Caruth 7). Caruth further clarifies her view that trauma endlessly impacts life. Part of what makes trauma so impactful is that it points to a past moment that has entered the brain directly, with practically no realization of the event as it actually happened. In a sense, this becomes a brush with death, and thus a reminder of mortality and survival. Caruth elaborates:

> Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one's own survival*. If history is to be understood as the history of trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own (64).

Repeating the experience of trauma becomes a way of reaffirming one's survival and life, a process which simultaneously assists in building identities. As individuals move through various experiences, they come to grasp a sense of who they are and what factors shape them. Traumas create moments in which the corporeality of being human is hyper-realized, the contrast of life and death brightly outlined and affirming the individual's survival. Experiencing trauma thus seems to be an important element of the human experience, showing survivors to be human because of their capacity to experience trauma and survive it. Likewise, the histories of people and civilizations, in their affirmation of survival, also point to the fact that trauma is an integral part of being human.

While it may not be immediately apparent to the casual observer, Irish step dance exhibits a remarkably high amount of repetition, on both large and small-scale elements. In broader terms, Irish step dance is a nearly perpetual repetition of song forms as it varies between slip jigs, jigs, reels, and hornpipes. Within these song forms, the tunes also undergo repetition as the main tune is presented then played with variations in instrumentation and ornamentation. The dance structure itself, further discussed in Chapter 3, repeats everything from large floor pattern figures to mirrored step movements. Aware of the myriad of repetitions inherent in Irish dance, it behooves one to understand the role of repetition within trauma theory.

Binding

Binding plays a role in trauma theory, exemplifying one method used by the brain to cope with the influx of psychical energy that accompanies traumatic experiences. Essentially, it involves making associations between previous memories, feelings, and thoughts that allow current traumatic affect to be cathected (disbursed). Freud adopts an economic model for his discussion of binding and trauma that focuses on the propensity of the mind to uphold the status quo and equilibrium. Essentially, he states that the mind attempts to maintain balance within the psyche with minimal loose affect. Freud declares, "the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 67). Like all organic systems, the mind functions best when it preserves ideal conditions; therefore, it reacts to external stimuli in a way that will minimize disruption to the system. Freud goes on to emphasize that this functioning of the mind acts more as a protective shield, rather than a welcoming receptor for new information.

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He says, "*protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception* of stimuli"(Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 30). Traumatic happenings bring an extensive influx of stimuli into the brain that must be dealt with somehow. As much as possible, the mind seeks to bind those influences to other existing memories in the brain, but when there is an overload of stimuli, the unbound affect tends to wreak havoc. Trauma can then be classified as the effect of unbound affect in the mind.

Leys also addresses the concept of binding. There is a certain level of affect, or energy, with which the brain is comfortable and can process without undue stress on the organism. Traumatic events break past the level and large amounts of unbounded affect pour into the brain, negatively impacting the brain until the energy can be processed and cathected. Leys clarifies:

> *Binding* is thus the mechanism that serves to protect the organism against the unpleasurable *unbinding* of the ego caused by excessive stimulation, or trauma. It is only when the ego is caught unprepared and insufficiently "cathected" to bind additional amounts of inflowing energy that its protective shield is breached and a massive release of unbound or unpleasurable energy occurs (29).

Binding plays a vital role in processing trauma, and it frequently relies on representative means to accomplish its task. In binding, features of the traumatic experience are connected to existing memories, thus reducing the excess energy by channeling it through existing lines of memory. Representation aids in this process because it allows aspects of the trauma to integrate with familiar processes and experiences, in a way translating the trauma into new exploration within an old pattern, rather than leaving it as an overwhelming, incomprehensible experience.

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The act of binding traumatic experiences by utilizing existing mental pathways can be seen in Irish dance. For example, the Munster region is commonly called the womb of Irish dance. The style fostered in the Munster region spread across Ireland and eventually became the standard for competitive dance. Several possible reasons explain the preference for this region – these will be discussed at length in Chapter 3 – but one result of having Munster be the center of Irish dance is that it allows all of Ireland to cathect unbound traumatic affect from the past. Historically, the Munster area survived the invasions and suppressions of outside groups with the least amount of cultural loss, due to its geographic location. This allowed the Irish people in Munster to cope with the traumatic experiences and losses that they did experience far more easily than other areas, where suppression and trauma hit harder and deeper into the Irish people.

Embodied Cultural Memory

Trauma theory frequently focuses solely on the psychological aspects of the experience, dealing minimally with the physical body. While some theorists, such as Elaine Scarry, address the body in traumatic experiences, there often seems to be a disconnect between the psychological experience of trauma and further bodily action precipitated by those unique psychological states. My premise is that the dancing body may manifest the psychological influences of trauma through both spontaneous movement and codified forms. It acts as a microcosm of national experiences, shaping the living body rather than the political body.

When examining artistic productions, psychological influences become most apparent in the physical actualization or performance event. In those moments, inner motivations are put on display for the audience to see, critique, and interpret. Dance researcher Randy Martin declares,

A formal performance event is supposed to hold a mirror up to [life], its "double." The audience for a given performance, however, is not simply viewing some other experience, but using the occasion of the event to look at itself. […] If performance not only produces images of life, but acts as the very mirror through which we reflect on life, then it is possible to study not only certain depictions of the world, but how the world is depicted (47).

Dance provides a mirror to the world, allowing the audience to see reflections. What the performance also does is offer a particular perspective within that reflection, making both the mode of presentation and the reflected image or event equally significant. To best understand how dance is functioning, one must look at what is being done and how that is accomplished. This combined approach reveals how dance can express a living and even embodied memory.

In considering the lived or embodied quality of dance, it quickly becomes apparent that the very nature of dance lends itself to ephemerality and defies objectification. The lived experience itself always expresses something that cannot be simplified into words. Indeed, that is the beauty of dance. It does something in its performance that no other art medium can adequately copy, and it does so in a fleeting, unique presentation. Sondra Fraleigh elaborates on this idea:

[D]ance, more than any other art, remains impervious to complete objectification. It is created anew in each action of the dancer and in the perceptual enactment of the other. It can never be completely objectively positioned for the choreographer, the dancer, the audience, or the critic. […] The dance begins and ends in lived time and immediate perception. It leaves nothing concrete – as object – behind. It

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might be critiqued, filmed, or notated; but these are records of the dance – not the

dance itself (*Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetic* 48).

The dancing body moves forward through time; and when its past is re-interpreted, it occurs in a

way informed by contemporary methods of presentation and current views on historicity.

Through this pattern of presentation, each performance, each dance, each movement can express

a wide possibility of meanings.

While rooted in formal components, there exists a special quality to dance that opens it to

infinite response and interpretation. Defining this quality of dance presents a challenge, for it

defies simplification and objectification; it exists outside of quantifiable terms. Dance resists

essentialization; to take dance out of its performative context eliminates a major source of its

meaning. Theorist George Steiner argues,

Form is the root of performance. In a wholly fundamental, pragmatic sense, the

poem, the statue, the sonata are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are

lived. The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious

and metaphysical experience, the most 'ingressive', transformative summons

available to human experience (143).

The dance experience must be lived. Primary interaction with dance – performing dance to

interpret its meaning – provides the most useful way to understand the communicative power of

dance. Of course, that is not necessarily possible, but recognizing the unique *lived* quality

inherent in dance is a vital step in understanding how dance functions. Acclaimed Balanchine

dancer Edward Villella touched on lived experience of dance:

Dance is very difficult to talk about. It's difficult to talk about motion. I can't

explain the technique to you. I can't explain where the movement comes from and

how I center the feelings. I can work for six months, and then suddenly I get that

feeling, that sensation, and it's a milestone in my life. But I cannot articulate it to

you. To really know the feelings, you have to *do* it (Forsdale 135).

The moment Villella mentions is exactly that indescribable feeling that allows dance to be such a

unique mode of expression. Existence in a body is a shared, universal experience, but one can

never truly grasp what it is like to live in a body other than one's own.

The universality of bodies and expression forges bonds between Irish dance and people

throughout the world. Irish dance is an embodied way of sharing cultural experiences rooted in

tradition and inextricably linked to identity, and because it is a shared experience, the world can

look in and even join in the expression. This quality makes Irish dance accessible to people

worldwide and accounts, in part, for the astounding global interest in a national dance style: as

anyone dances it, they become connected in a web of shared experiences and expressions of

identity.

Looking specifically at the body and mind, memory truly can be a lived experience – it

can be expressed a multiplicity of ways, and the type of memory will affect how it is played out

in the body, but there is a union of memory and lived experience. Proceeding with this

connection, it is important to note that not all memory is the same, especially when discussing

cultural memory. Deborah Peck elaborates,

There are primarily two types of memory: formal and informal. The formal

memory tends to be written and objective. The informal memory is oral and tends

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to be more subjectively rendered. The written memory transmits facts and dates

more accurately but is not as good at capturing the emotional content or impact of

an event. […] Both types of memory are needed for an accurate, more mature,

and complex rendering of large-scale societally significant events (Peck 165).

Ireland's cultural history is embodied in both formal and informal memory. As such, it

becomes less daunting to explore questions of identity and cultural expression in relation

to historical events. Even traumatic events become tractable in this framework. Embodied

cultural memories, both formal and informal, tell the story of their peoples, a complex

narrative woven through the fabric of humanity.

Chapter Two: Dance and Ireland's Traumatic Past

Guiding the theoretical perspectives on trauma is the concept that it is inherent to the human experience. Residing as it does in the psychical mind within a physical body, the nature of trauma points to the possibility that trauma is inherent in human experience because of its relationship to identity. An individual's understanding of self is informed primarily psychologically, as awareness and logic develop; physical information about identity, though often apprehended early on, dwindles in importance compared to the mental perception of who one is. Group identity, on the other hand, does seem to deal more closely with physical aspects; in addition to appearance, identity is closely linked to physically-created aspects such as language/voice, music, and movement. Sondra Fraleigh links individual bodies with group identities when she states, "I hold that dance (all dance) expresses our given body-of-nature and at the same time our acquired body-of-culture. The bodily synthesis of nature and culture in dance makes it an intriguing locus for research" ("Witnessing the Frog Pond" 192). This conjunction between natural bodies and culturally imprinted bodies recalls the human experience of trauma: it deals with natural bodies and shaped bodies and carries with it elements of individual identity and group identity. This chapter will examine the chronology of Ireland in conjunction with the development of competitive Irish step dance, focusing on early Ireland and the era of the dancing masters.

Invasions

In terms of traumatic experiences, invasions stand out as key moments of violence and shifting identity parameters. The best-case scenarios involve a relatively peaceful co-existence marked by mutual assimilations of values and traditions, while the worst-case scenarios are marked by intensely hostile violence resulting in obliteration of existing peoples and traditions. Over the years, Ireland experienced various levels of invasion, some conquerors assimilating into the local cultures while others fought extensively, both physically and politically, to abolish all indicators of a distinct Irish culture. In order to understand how Irish step dance points to a traumatic past, one must have a basic understanding of events within that past, particularly their effect and their span across time.

Although most trauma theory deals with the effects of trauma, rather than types of trauma themselves, Ruth Leys does allude to the terminology of invasion in her discussion of trauma. She asks, "but what if – as Freud suggests – trauma is understood to consist in *imitative or mimetic identification itself*, which is to say in "the subject's *originary* 'invasion'" or alteration?" (32). It is here that the links between trauma, representation, and invasion are made evident. When trauma is examined in the context of mimetic identification, a connection with the invasion of the subject can be detected. The traumatic experience is its own invasion into the psyche of an individual, who then reacts and responds in specific ways to that invasion. Extrapolating this experience to Ireland's multiple invasions, the nation responds to those invasions in ways that reveal the profound impact of the traumatic invasion. Invasions lead the

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way to importations, suppressions, and exportations that affected the physical country of Ireland itself, as well as its artistic and identifying productions, such as step dance.

Pre-literate Ireland

Ireland's self-representation, both in general and in dance, frequently hearkens back to a mythical past, almost a land-before-time image. In a sense, this push to the perpetually distant past reveals a desire to return to a type of Golden Age, a time when Ireland was purely its own country and had not undergone centuries of invasion. This theme, a trademark in contemporary dance productions such as *Riverdance*, also exists in trauma discussions, due to its link with memory. Freud states:

> Remote times have a great attraction – sometimes mysteriously so – for the imagination. As often as mankind is dissatisfied with its present – and that happens often enough – it harks back to the past and hopes at last to win belief in the never forgotten dream of a Golden Age. […] Incomplete and dim memories of the past, which we call tradition, are a great incentive to the artist, for he is free to fill in the gaps in the memories according to the behests of his imagination and to form after his own purpose the image of the time he has undertaken to reproduce. Once might almost say that the more shadowy tradition has become, the more meet is it for the poet's use (*Moses and Monotheism* 89-90).

Freud posits that the nature of distant and dim memories provides excellent fodder for the artistic imagination. People seeking to (re)construct Irish history have continually fallen into this pattern of looking to a remote time where memory allows the imagination to play.

While it resists authoritative verification in writing, Ireland has been a long-inhabited island, its past extending back to perhaps 10,000 BC. Irish Historian Edmund Curtis said, "the traditions of the Irish people are the oldest of any race in Europe north and west of the Alps, and they themselves are the longest settled on their own soil" (1). This claim, of course, is potentially troublesome. Ireland's history has been marked by the arrival of various groups, often violently invading and taking over the land. Myths and legends give Ireland its heritage, some attributing its settlement to Spanish fisherman and others adhering to the European Celtic migration theory. The only lasting remnants that provide clues to these early inhabitants are architectural pieces, primarily elaborate funerary tombs. Thomas Bartlett, a contemporary historian, stated:

> The archaeological and historical evidence for pre-Christian Ireland unfortunately
> does not enable us to confidently discern fable from fact. It seems that around 700
> BC the *Keltoi* or Celts, migrating or, very probably, fleeing from northern Europe
> in the face of Roman and Germanic expansion, moved into Ireland, and by the
> first century AD their language and culture had been firmly established; but quite
> how, and precisely when, all this was done remains a mystery (2).

Ireland's past remains veiled in mystery for thousands of years, leaving behind a perpetually hazy line between fact and fiction, reality and imagination.

The earliest date that is agreed upon by scholars is the arrival of Patrick to Ireland in 432 AD. His Christian mission to the island vastly changed the cultural landscape, increasing literacy and record-keeping while revolutionizing the spiritual direction of the people. Paul State commented on the significance of Patrick's Christian mission, stating that "the importance to Ireland's subsequent history of the coming of Christianity cannot be overstated, and the

centrality of the new religion to Irish life is apparent from its beginnings on the island" (State 21). The missionaries working to convert the Irish were not intent on eradicating the existing traditions, so the religion emerged in Ireland as a fusion of paganism and Christianity, peacefully spreading throughout the land. The Catholic Church would grow and eventually become a significant player affecting the Irish dance traditions.

Viking Invasions

After the spread of Christianity, Ireland seemed to experience a period of relative peace for a few centuries. Internal conflicts did arise between the kings of the various regions, but these skirmishes were minor. However, this all changed with the first Viking invasions around AD 795. Hailing primarily from the Norwegian (Norse) Vikings, these sea-faring invaders attacked coastal villages all around Ireland, raiding and pillaging but not yet conquering the land. Near AD 841 the Viking invaders finally set down permanent roots in Ireland, a move that would eventually incorporate them into the natural human geography of the country. They penetrated coastal areas from north to south and established settlements from Dublin on the east, Waterford on the south, and Cork in the west. The Irish faltered under the Viking reign, experiencing suppression and alienation in their own homeland for the first time. While their influence extended across the majority of populated Ireland, it was the Munster region in the west that began moving to prominence as it resisted the Viking rule.

While many developments occurred throughout Ireland, Munster's strategic importance in the development of Irish dance justifies a brief survey of its particular role in Irish history. The importance of the Munster region in Ireland traces back to early times in Irish history, though it

was not the earliest seat of political power. Descendents of the Gaels around AD 100 subdued "a

great revolt of the pre-Celtic subjects […] and there followed a great historic event, the

formation of a united kingdom […] which provided Ireland for centuries with a central High

kingship" (Curtis 3). The Gaelic rulers set up the two capitals for the High Kingdom in the west,

but after various conquests over the native peoples, power shifted further north and east to Ulster

and Tara. It was Dál Cuinn "who made Tara's ancient and sacred hill the capital of Ireland"

(Curtis 4). Part of his nation-making endeavours included the organization of the "Feis of Tara, a

great national assembly for law, homaging, music, games, and literary contests" (Curtis 4).

Dating back to around AD 300, this practice of holding feisanna demonstrated an early

propensity to unify the people through both political and cultural means. It is a feature of Irish

self-identification that would re-appear over a thousand years later, organized with almost

identical motivations.

The High kings of Tara retained a strong influence over much of Ireland until the

Norman invasions in 1022, though it was by no means universal power. Over the centuries,

succession troubles left the High monarchy in a weaker state than such a power might have

desired. To the south, a minor kingdom was also established; by about AD 400 it had been built

up into "a powerful kingdom, including the present Munster and Clare" (Curtis 4).This southern

kingdom proved fractious and rebellious, remaining a loose coalition of vassal states for several

hundred years. When Scandinavians took to the seas around 800 AD, the weak political

alignments in Ireland grew increasingly strained and eventually crumbled in the face of

continuous invasions. The Irish subjects faced political turmoil and the threat of religious

change under the invading ruler, conditions which left them discontent and hoping for freedom from the invaders.

Rising to power near the end of the 9th century and into the early 10th century was Dál Cais, a ruler in northern Munster. Dál Cais produced an heir who succeeded him in 976: Brian Boru. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, in his history of early Ireland, states that Brian Boru " was to make himself king of Ireland [and] rival of the Uí Néill" (Ó Corráin 37). The Uí Néill kingdom had been the other major ruling faction in Ireland, the famed kings of Tara. When Brian Boru came to power, he did so in dramatic fashion. Within a few short years he had brought all of Munster under his rule and began engaging the Uí Néill in combat. Ó Corráin continues, "[he] pushed his armies into Connacht and Leinster. Mael Sechnaill's attempts to contain him did not succeed, and in 997 Brian and Mael Sechnaill met at Clontarf and divided Ireland between them. This made Brian master of Dublin and Leinster" (38). While Brian Boru had certainly not brought Ireland into a unified polity – Ulster posed a nearly impossibly challenge – he did make several contributions that have granted him legendary status in the annals of Ireland. He fought against the Ostmen (Viking invaders) and essentially acknowledging the Dublin area as Ireland's political center (Ó Corráin 38). Brian Boru is also widely considered to be the first High King of Ireland, referring to the overall unity he achieved, which had never been accomplished before. Later, he fought and died in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, which "assumed symbolic status in subsequent Irish history as effecting the expulsion of the invader from the soil of Ireland" (Comerford 21). Despite dying in the fray, the Munster-born Brian Boru solidified his mythic hero status in this battle that symbolically freed Ireland from invading forces of the time.

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Norman Invasions

Roughly fifty years after the Battle of Clontarf and the symbolic freeing of Ireland, Normans from England began invading. Though the Irish fought and resisted these intrusions, the Normans steadily grew their foothold in the land. They established their first control in Dublin, the city that would become the English seat of power for centuries to come. From there, they extended their influence across Ireland, particularly in Leinster, Ulster, and even the majority of Munster. Initially, Norman influence in Ireland seemed somewhat positive, as the establishment of farming and agriculture grew more sophisticated and urban centers began to develop. As the Normans became more settled in the land, other significant changes took place, some that prefaced a system of absentee land ownership. Historian Richard Comerford observed that

> Elsewhere in Munster and Connacht, they established lordships over the pre-existing population, introducing their accustomed system of land tenure more or less completely, but not a large body of colonists. In the south-west of Munster, in the territory of the O'Briens beyond the lower Shannon, and over central and western Ulster they failed to establish any foothold (Comerford 24).

It is important to note that a portion of western Ireland evaded the Norman invasion and rule; in conjunction with that area's notoriety as the birthplace of Brian Boru, the Munster region now had a second claim as a haven of true Irish culture.

By the end of end of the 12th century, the Normans had spread widely across Ireland, in many cases building quick bonds with the Irish people. Unlike the Viking invaders, who

assimilated readily and without cultural consequences into the native culture, the Normans that took on Irish manners and customs were strictly censured, reactionary response going so far as to legislate what constituted proper interactions with the natives. This enforced differentiation of Normans and Irish marked the beginning of cultural separation, subjugation, and suppression that would continue for hundreds of years.

One of the most significant pieces of legislation that solidified the subservient relationship of the Irish to the English was the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny. Handed down by the English government, it dealt with Anglo-Norman colonists in Ireland. The preamble to the statutes refers specifically to the English that had begun to adopt the mannerisms and mores of the Irish, derisively referred to as "enemies." In order to preserve the purity of English law and practice, these strict statutes were enacted. Not only were the Anglo-Norman colonists forbidden to marry the Irish or utilize Irish entertainers like storytellers and musicians, they had stringent rules about their regular interactions. Curtis related a few of the curtailments set forth in the Statutes:

> They must not sell to the Irish in time of peace or war horses or armour, or in time of war any victuals. They and the Irish among them must use English surnames of colour, trade, place, etc., must speak English and follow English customs. […] If they use the Irish speech they shall forfeit their lands to their lords until they undertake to use English. The Irish are excluded from cathedrals, abbeys, and benefices among the English (98).

Clearly, these rules severely limited the expression of the Irish culture, language, and likewise limited them in political and religious matters. It comes as no surprise to learn that such

restrictions were not perfectly enforced, but these "Statutes of Kilkenny remained in force for over two centuries" (Curtis 99). Remarkably, those that could have protested on behalf of the native Irish did not. Colonists clung to them in order to maintain their lands and power, caring little for the Irish and their subsequent sufferings under these laws. Though the statutes represented English colonists, they essentially gave parliament power to "legislate for all Ireland and had now legalized the outlawry of the native race. […] The statutes of Kilkenny became to the colonists almost as sacred as Magna Carta and were many times reissued. The penalties were always there and served to keep the privileges in the hands of the Englishry" (Curtis 102). This very specific set of rules marked the first use of political legislation to enforce cultural separation and set a standard for "appropriate" cultural expression. The next 400 years perpetuated Irish suppression. Documentation of Irish dance did not appear until the 1600s, when foreigners documented the celebrations attending their arrival in Ireland. Not until the mid-18th century would a truly definable dance tradition take shape.

Eighteenth-Century and Nineteenth-Century Dancing Masters

Irish traditional dance, as a unified dance form, dates back to the mid-18th century when dancing masters traveled across Ireland. Though documentation remains scarce on these individuals, they seem to have taken part in the larger European trend of dance masters of the time. Frank Hall, whose research included the beginnings of Irish dance, observed that "nearly all the extant literature on Irish dancing contains references to dancing masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Breathnach, *Folk Music;* Cullinane, *Aspects of History;* Carty; O'Rafferty and O'Rafferty; O'Keefe and O'Brien). Often these works refer to "the" dancing

master, that is, they describe in general terms the character of this personage rather than actual people and what they did" (Hall 21). Many descriptions of these men reference the stylish clothes they wore, subtly pointing out social distinction between the dance masters and their pupils. As an itinerant group, the dancing masters joined musicians and storytellers in a "trinity of peasant entertainers," as identified by Francis O'Neill (421). Although they were entertainers, the dance masters played an important role in imparting social etiquette and manners while also teaching dance steps. Steps and movements were passed directly from teacher to student, creating a widespread dance tradition. While few written records prior to this time mention a history of dance, most scholars presume that dance in Ireland existed prior to this time. Deirdre Mulrooney indicates that the lack of written records about dance is not necessarily negative: "simply documenting something validates it, and assigns it value. We can document things into existence. The absence of documentation on dance and movement speaks volumes" (4). Dance in Ireland existed in a different form than a written text – passed down as an oral tradition, it existed in the bodies of the Irish themselves. Having an oral (or bodily) transmission of dance styles reinforces the concept of an embodied cultural memory, while also connecting with the "infection" aspect of trauma theory. Infection theory stems from the view that as trauma as shared, it can be passed from person to person, i.e. as a victim relates their experience to a psychoanalyst, the traumatic experience can transfer and affect the psychoanalyst as well. In Irish dance, bodies shaped by trauma become those that teach and transmit the tradition, arguably passing down the traumatic underpinnings as well.

When the Irish dancing masters first traveled through Ireland teaching steps, the country was generally divided into four geographic regions: Ulster, Connacht, Leinster, and Munster (see Figure 3). Each region had its particular way of dancing, so that dancers could generally be recognized as being from one region or another. In a sense, the way the body moved served as a type of signature. During the late 18th century, dancing masters focused on teaching
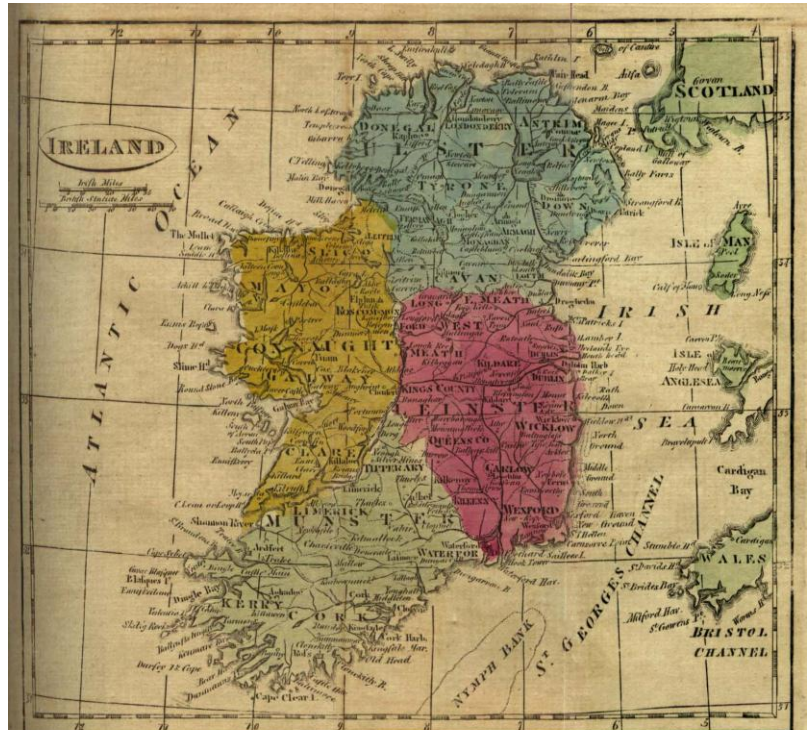

Figure 3. Ireland 1808

Ulster – blue; Connacht – yellow; Leinster – pink; Munster - Green

steps and dances to the people in the towns they would visit, rather than concerning themselves with setting particular stylizations. Of course, each dance master had his own personal preference for how the dancer should look, but the resulting body still reflected the regional style. At the same time, however, the process of homogenization was beginning to take place. Dancing masters would remain in an area for about six weeks, teaching groups as well as instructing solo dancers. As they moved to new areas, they frequently encountered other dance masters either coming or going from the area. The overlapping of teachers and styles produced dancers that were more well-rounded in their training.

Traditional Irish dance grew as a national pastime by the nineteenth century, with barn dances and house dances happening frequently. These events became places to perform the new

dances taught by the dancing masters, both group dances and individual dances. Group dances were called set dances, referring to organization of the couples into sets of four. Another branch of group dancing developed alongside this for when space or attendance was too limited for a full set. In those cases, half-set dances were performed, meaning that the dance was meant for two couples, rather than four. Dances such as these bore strong resemblance to French quadrille dances, a style that grew very popular throughout all of Europe. Of course, the dances had been adapted to include traditional Irish steps such as side-sevens, leaps, and skips (three distinctively Irish dance steps). Rather than emphasizing individuality or intricate step movements, the sets encouraged social interaction and brought a sense of community to the dance floor. Complex movement patterns mirrored the intricate layering and interweaving of society, all the while underscoring the qualities of joy and vitality, so integral with Irish identity. The sets soon evolved into a form of their own, becoming a popular staple at dance events.

After a bit of set dancing, solo dancers took to the floor to showcase their skills. It is in the solo dancer that heart of traditional Irish dance truly resides. Breandán Breathnach famously stated that "Irish dancing reached the height of its perfection in the solo or step dances" (43). Solo dancing displayed the footwork movements that exemplified vernacular Irish dance and had been adapted into a more formalized movement vocabulary. It drew on the three uniquely Irish steps of side-sevens, leaps and skips and elaborated them into intricate sequences that demonstrated skill and musicality. Occasionally the dancing masters would treat the audience to a performance of their own, furthering the excitement for an Irish dance style.

As the dancing masters traveled through Ireland teaching their pupils, they fulfilled an intriguing, even ironic, social function. In a sense, they became the arbiters and teachers of Irish

identity as they taught dances that quickly became part of the Irish dance tradition. The dancing masters made concerted efforts to transpose outside dances and make them uniquely Irish, as well develop the solo step dance tradition in ways no other country had ever explored the form. Comprised of both native and foreign masters, they became responsible for codifying and transmitting traditional Irish dance. Helen Brennan noted that "the breakdown and codification of the step elements and the creation of new steps was one of the main contributions of the dancing masters, whose influence is still apparent in the performance of old-style step dancers in Ireland" (54). Even contemporary Irish dance bears the influence of the early dance masters who developed a tradition that accommodated innovation.

The dancing masters promoted a particular form of Irish dance, one that differed significantly from the older traditional styles still at play in the island in several ways. The pattern of formalized instruction broke from the traditional patterns of transmitting dance. Prior to the time of the dancing master, Irish dance forms were less regularized and passed on through very informal means. Brennan remarks:

> Not every dancer in the older traditional style has gone through such a formal and
> extended learning process, and indeed in many areas of the country […] there
> survive styles of dance which are not in any way influenced by the dancing master
> tradition. In the northern style, dancing was (and is) learned from a relative or
> from "going about." […] The concept of a formal class in traditional step dancing
> ("the old stuff") is nonexistent. In the same way, a dancer in the old style or *sean
> nós* of west Galway will pick up the elements of the local dance style in the home
> or in the community generally (59).

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Like the idea of formal and informal memory, the acquisition of a dance repertoire through either

formal or informal methods illustrates the different values inherent in the forms. Sean nós dance

represents the informal method of instruction and, correlatively, an informal mode of memory.

This type of dance shows a very subjective experience, individualized by the nuanced

improvisation of the dancer. In contrast, the increasingly formalized form of Irish step dance

illustrates a more regulated experience, reducing the individual improvisation in favor of

standardization. What keeps Irish dance from falling cleanly into a formulaic mode of

representation is its combination of tradition and innovation (further discussed in chapter 3) and

its inherent individualism expressed through competition.

Irish step dance, both in its early days and in its current expression, has been powerfully

shaped by the impetus to compete. One feature that the step dance tradition retained from its

vernacular roots is the spirit of individualism. That spirit of individualism arises quite literally

because "the solo dance tradition in Ireland is essentially a virtuoso affair. The purpose is to

amaze, to intrigue, to invite wonder and respect. In a word it is exhibitionistic. Even in informal

situations there is an underlying element of competition, of rivalry, of the throwing down of a

choreographic gauntlet" (Brennan 73-74). Irish dance offered an opportunity to showcase

individual skill, strength, and spirit. Hall emphasizes the link between Irish dance and virtuoso

competitions, stating that

> It is nearly impossible to separate Irish solo step-dancing and competition. As far
>
> back as memories, records, and legends go there have been competitions of one
>
> sort or another between dancing masters, their pupils, or simply people with
>
> clever feet. Contests were said to be part of county fairs or markets, and they were

a part of pub culture, house dances, and informal home entertainment generally

(35).

The use of competition as a means of personal expression has allowed Irish step dance to continue representing emotional qualities and subjective factors while adhering to the rules of an increasingly formalized dance form. Additionally, the competition dynamic created a strong social network that still retained individuality, a trait that translates into Irish dance and its ability to be simultaneously expressive of individual and collective experiences.

The Teaching Process

Dancing masters traveled around Ireland, spending a series of weeks in towns and villages instructing. Most often they worked with younger pupils, particularly when teaching the solo step dances. For group dances, such as the sets, the dancing masters would often include nights when older members of the area could learn the new dances. Each master had their own particular style of teaching and dancing, but they made sure to teach the newest, popular dances along with their own choreographies. Brennan states,

> Whereas each dancing master had his own system of teaching and repertoire of
>
> dances, it is fair to say that, at any period, he would have taught the main solo
>
> dances based on the hornpipe, jig and reel and the group dances which were in
>
> demand locally, depending on the fashion of the time. The universally popular
>
> group dances which were the mainstay of the traditional repertoire - the two-hand,
>
> three-hand, four-hand and eight-hand jigs and reels - were passed on by the
>
> dancing masters (51).

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Because of their itinerant nature, the dancing masters significantly aided in creating a widespread dance tradition in Ireland, disseminating the traditional and popular dances through their extensive travels. Irish dancing became something of a national pastime, with groups frequently gathering on a Sunday at the crossroads for a bit of dancing. Francis O'Neill, writing near the end of the dancing masters' era, related the following anecdote about crossroads dancing. He shared:

> The "patron" at Colomane Cross[1], at which [Peter "Bawn"] played every Sunday afternoon in summer time, was the event of the week to the peasantry for miles around. Besides the actual enjoyment of attending it, free rein was given to the pleasures of anticipation and memory. The *"Piobaire Ban"* was a busy man, for there was no let up to the dancing while the daylight lasted (O'Neill 230).

Whether it was at someone's home or at the crossroads on a Sunday, dancing had a strong following all through Ireland, keeping the dancing masters busy as they traveled from district to district instructing their pupils.

One of the first elements of learning and teaching dance is identifying basic steps. In Irish dance particularly, many of the group dances are built on various combinations of relatively basic steps. According to Brennan, "the dancing masters generally began their course of lessons with the side step of the reel, which was an essential element in both the solo and group reels. Others preferred to begin with the 'raisin' or rising step of the jig" (52). These two steps, basic

---

[1] Colomane Cross is located in county Clare, Munster region, Ireland.

building blocks in both solo and group dances, exhibit some interesting similarities. Each involves a repetitive stepping motion, and in execution the dancer moves in somewhat bouncy manner. The side step of the reel, known commonly as side-sevens, begins with a hop off the floor and progresses in a lateral motion across the floor as the leading foot steps out and the trailing foot closes behind it repeatedly for six counts. Depending on how the stepping is performed, the dancer can appear to be moving in a gently rolling manner. The rising step of the jig creates a similar movement. In this step, the dancer remains in place, hopping to switch the front foot to the back then doing four quick steps in place, alternating between the back and front foot. While the gentle rising and falling motion may be significant in these two steps, what stands out more is their similar use of repetitive foot motion in the stepping patterns. Although it is challenging to definitively link these steps to any clear external concept, they both demonstrate a propensity for repetitive motion and a rising/falling action.

Music and Dance Styles

Throughout the centuries, Irish dance forms have been inextricably linked with the musical tunes, largely because of the emphasis placed on dance's rhythmic interpretation of the music. In fact, the classification of different types of dances actually refers to the distinction of musical tunes, having absolutely no relationship to movements or steps. This connection of dance and music lends credibility to the historicity of Irish dance because the musical forms have been more consistent in their transmission through time, as well as their documentation. Additionally, research into Irish music frequently explores the connection of Irish musical expression in the face of English cultural suppression. "Ethnomusicologist Gearóid 'O

hAllmhuráin suggests a further implication of English hostility to Irish music: that it 'reinforced the power of music to represent a distinct Irish identity in opposition to Elizabethan occupation of the Ireland'" (O'Shea 7). It is essential to understand the basics of the musical forms and the corresponding dance forms when analyzing Irish dance; the expression and development of these forms illustrates how various external forces have been at work shaping the dances.

As the dancing masters traveled and spread Irish dancing, they promoted forms that stood as distinctly Irish in their conception and execution. In particular, the development of a solo step dance tradition using various musical forms differentiated Ireland from other countries. Within Ireland, the greatest growth and innovation of step dance occurred primarily in one area: the Munster region. Munster is part of the southern tradition, which "has a larger repertoire of forms and tempos than the other regions. An accomplished dancer in the southern style would be able to perform the hornpipe, the reel and the jig as well as a brace of the intricate solo set dances such as 'The Job of Journeywork' or 'The Blackbird'" (Brennan 65). Among the southern repertoire are four major music/dance forms that provide the basis for traditional solo step dances. The tunes came from Ireland, Scotland, and England, but the dance expressions and rhythmic interpretations make these forms distinctively Irish. In distinguishing between the four dance types, it is important to realize that the same dance steps can be performed in each style: what makes the dance types different is the music.

The slip jig, written in 9/8 time, is considered to be the most ancient of the dance tunes. Tradition holds that it got its name from the hopping or slipping motion common to the dance. Over the centuries, this dance form has changed the most from origin to contemporary expression. In the days of the dancing masters, this dance was most commonly performed as a

couples' dance and not as a solo piece. Because the dancers wore regular leather shoes until the 1900s, elements of battering footwork (rhythmic striking of the floor) appeared in the most traditional presentations of this form[2]. Such exhibitions are rarely seen these days, however. With the development of ghillies (see Figure 4) – a soft shoe similar to ballet slippers in concept – the slip jig quickly evolved into a solo dance performed almost exclusively by women. Performed exclusively as a solo dance now, it no longer[3] incorporates any of the battering movements, instead displaying expansive use of horizontal and vertical space, flexibility, and the grace of the female dancers.

Jigs are a major part of the Irish dance and music tradition. Irish music researchers Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott concluded that "the jig has been part of Irish music since at least the seventeenth century" (66). Composed in 6/8 time, the jig is performed at different speeds depending on whether the dancer is performing in ghillies or hard shoes (see Figure 5). The tempo is slowed for hard shoe dancing so the performer can embellish the music with intricate rhythms. Jigs figure prominently in the special solo set dances that the dancing masters created, as the musical qualities allow the dancer great interpretive range.

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[2] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLeCLRK8Ws8 to view a couple performing a battering slip jig.

[3] There is a solo set dance (a form not addressed in this thesis) performed in slip jig time: "Is the Big Man Within?" Men and women both perform this dance in hard shoes, making it an exception to all other slip jigs.

One of the most identifiable forms of Irish dance and music is the reel. Hast and Scott state that "reels are the most popular tune type in the Irish traditional repertory today" (67). They are characterized by their 4/4 time, providing a strong rhythmic base for the dancer. Unlike jigs, the reels are not native to Ireland. Hast and Scott continue: "the reel was played as the 'reill' in Scotland by the late sixteenth century and brought in its modern form to Ireland by the late eighteenth century. Many of the older reels in the repertory are of Scottish origin, but Irish reels began to appear in print by the end of the eighteenth century" (67). Dancers just beginning to learn Irish dance frequently begin by learning reels. Since the musical structure is so common, it is easier for dancers to hear the beats and keep their steps synchronized with the music. Reels are performed in both ghillies and hard shoes, but the tempo differences are less extreme than in jigs.

Hornpipes are arguably the most challenging of the four dances and music styles, due to their intricate footwork and musical structure. Says Brennan: "the hornpipe is the main southern step dance, endlessly embellished by the Munster dancing masters. It is slower than the other solo measures, allowing great complexity of steps" (66-67). Performed solely in hard shoes, hornpipes utilize the musical structures to create complex rhythms. Hornpipes and reels are both written in duple meter

> But [the hornpipe] is characterized by a somewhat slower tempo and the use of
> dotted rhythms. Early references to the hornpipe characterize it as a dance and a
> related musical form with some relation to sailors. In the late eighteenth century it
> was probably brought from England to Ireland, where it was used by dancing
> masters for intricate show pieces (Hast and Scott 68).

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Hornpipes present dancers with challenging musical structures and elaborate footwork combinations that make it ideal for competitions.

Figure 4. Ghillies

Figure 5. Hard Shoes

With four distinct solo dance types, the emerging tradition of Irish dance produced virtuosic performers steeped in traditional Irish music. Although group dances bore similar

connections to the traditional Irish music, the structure of the dances connected more with non-Irish trends. In general, the group, or set dances, reflected international trends found commonly throughout European countries. These group dances were called set dances[4] and drew heavily on the French quadrille format. Dancing masters adapted the dances to utilize traditional Irish tunes and incorporate basic Irish steps, and set dancing became a widely popular pastime for Irish men and women of all ages. These group dances would later play a pivotal role when the Gaelic League set out to define traditional Irish dance.

Stylistic Contributions

As the dancing masters taught their repertoire of dances, they disseminated certain stylistic conventions which influenced the performance of Irish dance. These ranged from minute aspects of foot placement and leg height to broader issues of body posture and space usage. Two of these ideas impacted the dance form so profoundly that they are among the first few things any observer of Irish dance notices: the role of arms in dance and the proper dancing posture. The dancing masters left indelible stamps on the Irish bodies they trained, creating a very specific visual aesthetic that stands out from other national step dance forms.

The role of arms in Irish dance – or rather, their lack of use – is one of the most obvious conventions of Irish dance. It was codified early through the efforts of the dancing masters,

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[4] Group set dances are not to be confused with the solo set dances, which are choreographed to specific tunes with a variable "step" and a consistent "set".

though popular myths ascribe multiple reasons to the convention. Anecdotal stories attribute the still arms to a variety of factors: holding skirts down in the wind, avoiding a haughty look. One story mentions that since the Scottish danced with their arms raised, the Irish chose the opposite position for the arms, consciously asserting their identity in opposition to another's mode of cultural expression. Perhaps most interesting to the discussion of Irish dance in terms of trauma is the myth that Irish dancers held their arms still so that any Englishmen or church priests passing by an Irishman's window or hedge would think he was standing in place. Clearly, this explanation is more fanciful than logical, but it strongly points to the omnipresence of English cultural suppression in Ireland. The variety of myths surrounding the stillness of the arms illustrates Irish resistance to the cultural suppression instituted by the English. Rather than quit dancing entirely, the Irish found a way around the rule, resisting the oppression with a feisty character that likewise appears in the loud, vibrant dance. Additionally, the use of myths to explain bodily conventions showcases the power of abreacting. In trauma studies, this term refers to a compensatory reaction to trauma that balances out the affect. It represents one method of responding to traumatic experiences that minimizes the overall psychical disruption. Perpetuating these myths empowers the Irish, abreacting the overall situation of cultural suppression.

While myths offer more creative reasons for this particularly convention, it is more likely that the arms were restrained because the dancing masters preferred it that way. Evidence survives in orally transmitted "accounts [that] tell of the dancing masters' attempts to deter 'Paddy' from raising his arms and clicking his fingers, movements which were part of the earlier dance style and arose naturally in the course of an exuberant jig or reel" (Brennan 57). Other

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regional traditions of Irish dance allowed more freedom in the arms, which alludes to a natural

inclination for involving them in the dance performance, but the dance masters preferred the

clean look of arms held to the sides (see Figures 6 and 7). Stories relate different techniques used

by the dancing masters to encourage their pupils to learn good arm technique. Brennan shares the

following story:

> Joe O' Donovan, the dancing master of Cork, who is still teaching, says that the
>
> older dancing masters used to weigh down their male pupils' hands with stones if
>
> they showed a tendency towards arm movements. As late as 1946, a woman from
>
> Limerick said that girls danced with the right hand on the hip in her young days
>
> and that she did the same until some adjudicator spoke against it (57).

This story illustrates the long-lasting effects of the dancing masters' contributions to Irish dance

technique. Female dancers wishing to portray an image of the distant Irish past will often place a

hand on the hip while performing. It stands out from the strictly still arms common today and

helps carry viewers back to that older time.

The second major contribution that dancing masters made to the codification of Irish

dance was the upright body posture (see Figures 6 and 7). Irish dancing masters preferred an

upright posture that remained relatively still, starkly contrasting with the complex movements of

the feet. Part of this most likely came from the dancing masters' own training, originally. Many

of them hailed from France, where ballet was the dominant tradition. Key components of ballet

such as pointed toes, turned out feet, and upright posture made their way into the Irish dance

corpus (see Figures 8 and 9). These components became synonymous with the "proper" way of

dancing, both in set dances and solo dances. Maintaining social propriety, even as expressed through the dancing body, was paramount to the Irish.

In terms of the effects of trauma on the dancing Irish body, body carriage reflects the underlying sense of resistance ingrained into the Irish mind and body as a result of political and cultural suppression. Tracing through the early history of Ireland, it is amply evident that invasions, laws, and suppressions have been present in nearly every generation. This can unconsciously lead to an individual and group sense that some type of restraint must always be present: in daily life there are laws limiting what the Irish people can do, what they can be, and how they can express themselves, and in those expressions similar restraints are unconsciously carried over, repeating the suppressions. There is a fascinating juxtaposition at play in Irish dance, where the desire to be free and express oneself is limited by the very conventions of the form itself. Additional discussion of repetition in Irish dance is in Chapter 3.
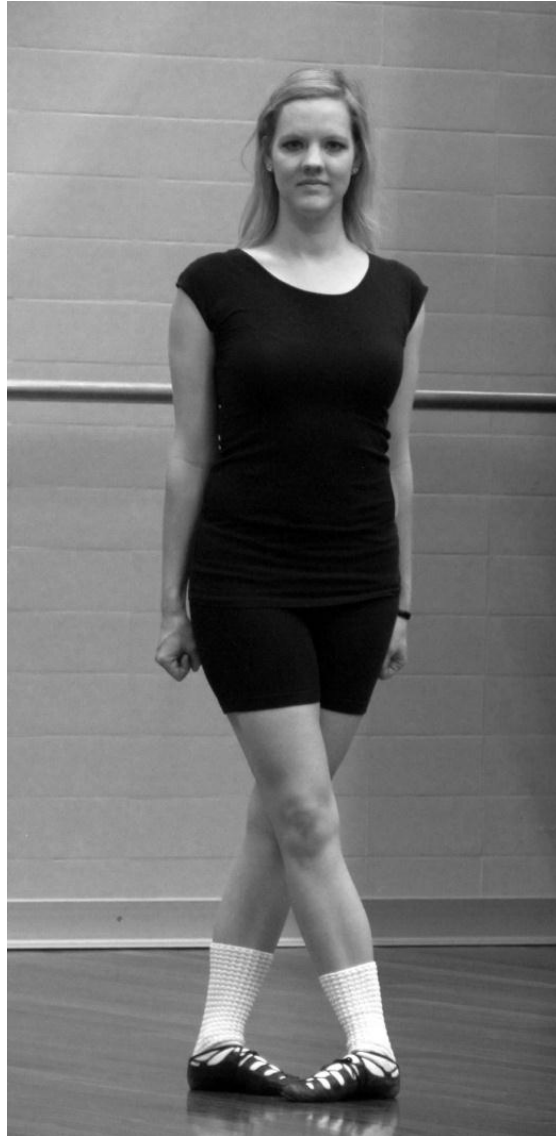
Figure 6. Sean nós posture

Figure 7. Common Competition Dance Posture

Figure 8. Common foot placement ca. 1900

Figure 9. Contemporary competition foot placement

Diaspora and *An Gorta Mor*

Ireland experienced invasions and suppressions for hundreds of years, historical effects that shaped the development of Irish dance. While those forces contributed significantly to the internal shaping of Irish dance, one watershed event occurred in which Ireland flowed beyond its national borders. It was unquestionably one of Ireland's darkest times, devastating and decimating, yet it proved to be one of the most significant features in the growth of the Irish dance tradition. It was the Great Hunger, *An Gorta Mor*.

An Gorta Mor, known in English as the Great Hunger or the Great Potato Famine, swept across Ireland between 1845 and 1852. This event recalls the blighted potato crops that affected mainland Europe, but the political situation in Ireland turned these years into a horrific memory. It was a watershed event that became mythic in its status as it changed the cultural geography of Ireland. Along with the corresponding emigrations which created the Irish Diaspora, *An Gorta Mor* played a key role in the development of Irish dance. Both the famine and the ensuing emigration are inherently traumatic events, marked by loss: loss of life, loss of homeland, loss of control. Whelan states,

> The Famine disproportionately impacted in the 3 million potato-dependent people
> who comprised the notoriously poverty-stricken base of Irish society. These
> effects were compounded by doctrinaire government policies […]. Over 1 million
> people died and 2 million more emigrated within a decade: the population of the
> island halved by 1900 (137).

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So many lives radically changed during the years of the Great Hunger, and it truly became a defining time for the Irish. After centuries of oppression, the multiple crop failures and lack of intervention by absentee landlords – Englishmen – finally spurred the Irish to relinquish their homeland and seek for survival elsewhere. Many carried their tenacious spirit and cultural expressions with them, ensuring that Irish identity would live on in its people, no matter their geographic location.

Irish dance was profoundly affected by the Great Hunger, both in Ireland and abroad. With all physical and mental efforts exerted towards surviving in harsh conditions, very little energy remained to promote or even participate in Irish dance. People still gathered for dances, even if they were fewer in frequency, for it offered a chance to momentarily forget the awful realities. It served as an outlet for relieving social tensions, recalling the vibrant Irish spirit, and reinforcing Irish identities. Sadly, opponents of Irish dance used the weakened state of Ireland to promote their agendas, which actively worked to control the Irish bodies and dictate propriety. Whelan relates that "in the post-Famine period, the dance tradition was leached of its vitality, exuberance and hybridity; like the hedge schoolmasters, the dancing masters were inexorably squeezed out as churches increasingly frowned on their activities" (143-44). After the Great Hunger, Irish dance remained fairly stagnant for several decades. Irish dancing masters dwindled in number, forcing them to travel longer distances to spread the form. As it had so many times in the past, Irish dancing kept itself alive in small, intimate places, waiting for the time when it could grow and reach its potential.

The Irish Diaspora – England, Australia, and the United States of America – contained thousands of Irish emigrants who clung to their cultural history and expressions with the same

tenacity they had displayed in the face of oppressions in their homeland. Although they did not meet the most welcoming arms in their new countries, their location away from Ireland opened a new discourse for Irish music and dance, a discourse that would prove beneficial to the maintenance and growth of Irish dance in years to come. Mary Kelly, researching the Famine and Irish-American aspects observes: "visibly augmenting and reconstructing the early national and pre-1840s immigrant presence, the Famine also anchored a set of connections between the United States and Ireland that exerted long-term influence over the course of settlement and over Irish-American history in general" (Kelly 123-24). The relationship of Ireland and the Diaspora, internal and external, assisted the development of Irish dance by providing new perspectives. Irish dance in the Diaspora preserved the strong traditional roots of the dance and allowed it to move into bigger public spaces, granting it a status never fully realized in Ireland up to that time. In the homeland, Irish dance actually became more innovative than it was abroad, because in Ireland the people already had a connection to their identity through location. The two branches of Irish dance worked to inform each other, solidifying the simultaneous impulses of preserving tradition and exploring innovations.

One of the interesting features about the Great Hunger is its relationship to trauma and memory. Artists have used the Hunger as a point of creating works that explore that time and its effects. Even dance has been employed to express the social memory of the event, as Helena Wulff points out:

> The fact that there is no one around anymore who has witnessed the Famine, leads
> to the question of how social memory of historical events in the past is constructed
> and conveyed. Father Pat Ahern […] had an aural personal memory of crossroads

dancing, he remembered listening to the music. When he combined this with his

memories of stories he had heard about crossroads dancing, it became a part of a

social memory. Dance tends otherwise to be associated with watching and thus

primarily produces visual memory (38).

In this respect, dance has specifically been used to address a traumatic experience in the past and

represent the social memory of it. Doing so makes it accessible to all those who are connected to

that social memory but were not present at the original traumatic moment.

Chapter Three: Constructing Identities, Constructing Dance

State, Church, and Dance

About forty years after the trauma of the Great Hunger, Ireland experienced a cultural resurgence that definitively altered the shape of Irish dance. This revival towards the turn of the century finally acknowledged Irish cultural expressions such as music and dance and brought them into the public performance space. Ireland started to make strides in gaining political separation and freedom from England, beginning with the March Rising in 1867 and including the 1881 Land Act, which returned land ownership to the Irish and eradicated the landlords as a social class (Comerford 39-41). English suppression began to dissipate in Ireland. At last the time had come when the Irish could express themselves in their native language, music, and dance.

In an era in which the Irish should have freely returned to their long-suppressed cultural expressions, minds were at work modifying the very conception of what it meant to be Irish and how that heritage should be portrayed. Three separate entities significantly shaped Irish dance as it grew in the 20th century: the politically-oriented Gaelic League, the propriety-concerned Catholic Church, and the dance-interested Irish Dancing Commission.

State: Conradh na Gaelige – The Gaelic League

From approximately 1850 – 1890, Irish dance suffered from the effects of the Great Hunger and continued English suppression. Despite some political concessions from England

that removed portions of the stringent laws oppressing Catholic Irish citizens, the British government still kept a close watch on expressions of Irish identity. They recognized the power that dance held in maintaining a unique Irish tradition and identity, and various laws were passed to prohibit its continuation.

As Ireland began its cultural rejuvenation, one group sprang to life with the intention of shaping a national identity that reflected the "true" Ireland. In 1893, Douglas Hyde founded *Conradh na Gaelige* (the Gaelic League), serving as its first president. The League wanted to de-Anglicize Ireland, particularly in the realm of language. While promoting the Irish Gaelic language took first priority, the League showed a vested interest in promoting Irish arts such as music and dance,

> For the project of "inventing Ireland" manifested itself most eloquently in the
> National Project Part Two, the unspoken one of "inventing Irish bodies." Central
> to the events that shaped the future of Irish dancing and the curtailment of Irish
> bodies at the turn of the century was the foundation […] of Conradh na Gaelige,
> or the Gaelic League (Mulrooney 9).

Deirdre Mulrooney makes two key points here: first, that the project of developing a national identity was indeed more of a construction than a rediscovery. All throughout Ireland there existed a sense that Ireland needed to return to its pre-occupation days and capture that essence of identity; everything after the first invasion and subsequent oppression of the natives pointed to a misshapen past. True identity lay in the pre-historic Ireland of centuries past. Mulrooney's second point is that the desire to create an Irish identity acted as a means of shaping and

manipulating Irish bodies in certain ways. Both the form of Irish dance and the structuring of bodily movement reflect the impulse of Ireland to re-write its history and invent a nation.

Douglas Hyde himself, along with other members of the Gaelic League, recognized the importance of Irish dance as expressing Irish identity. Catherine Foley aptly noted that "for the nationalist movement in Ireland, a cultural representation was needed to establish an Irishness that was positive and different from Englishness" ("Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local" 35). In order to ensure that Irish dancing was, in fact, Irish, members of the Gaelic League arbitrarily decided what aspects of the existing tradition would exemplify their vision. The influence of the Gaelic League was so profound that even Helen O'Shea, a musicologist, noted that "one of the Gaelic League's lasting interventions was in promoting a form of social dancing it considered uniquely Irish. The League's dancing commission denounced as 'foreign' the most popular social dances of the day - quadrille sets - in favour of 'ancient' figure-dances newly choreographed for the urban ballroom" (18). Interestingly, Irish dance lost a large segment of its past in favor of new dances that better-represented the values and spirit of the Irish which the Gaelic League wanted to promote. As neither dancers nor dance scholars, they acted with very little expertise in Irish dancing itself and, as a whole "[attempted] the impossible: to construct, canonise and control the protean nature of culture and its constant reinvention and reinterpretation" (O'Shea 24). Thus, efforts of the Gaelic League produced an Irish dancing body that embodied a very selective history and represented the sharply politicized views of cultural expression.

An example of the Gaelic League's appropriation of the past can be seen in the ceili dance, "Walls of Limerick." This group dance exemplifies the mission of the Gaelic League to

promote dances that express certain qualities of Irishness. The dance itself contains almost no specific movements referencing a battle or walls, although it does have several linear elements[5]. Performed by at least two couples facing each other, they advance and retire, creating the illusion of a group encountering resistance and being forced back. In another segment of the dance they take hands with the dancer across and move away from their original partners. This step, done perpendicular to line of dance, reinforces the idea of long, unbroken walls. By name, it hearkens back to the battle for Limerick in 1690, when the Irish held off the British attack. This momentous victory gave rise to many celebrations and is still a point of historical pride. Appropriating this historical moment for a social dance reinforces the sense of Irish victory and strength through adversity, advancing the Gaelic League's agenda of constructing a particular Irish identity.

In deliberately shaping Irish bodies and identities, the League also perpetuated an element of suppression. If they intentionally included this, they were self-suppressing, rather than optimizing their new freedom of expression. If they were not intentionally enacting those bodily suppressions, then they were still caught in the repetition of previous traumas. Since many of their new ceili dances recalled past events where Ireland had emerged victorious, it seems that the suppressions resulted from an unconscious impulse, indicating that past traumatic experiences still affected them.

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[5] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOrUEPZfAsU&feature=related for a performance of "Walls of Limerick."

When examining the concerted efforts made by the Gaelic League to develop a truly "Irish" dance form, it may not be immediately apparent how past events affected their choices. At a glance, it seemed that this group of men, primarily non-dancers, made rather capricious decisions based on personal whims and prejudices. Face-value assumptions never reveal the depth of interactions, however. Shelley Berg, writing on the relationship of historiography and dance, perceptively states that "the past is shaped by the present and the present is reshaped by the past. At any given instant, we both live history and live in history" (Berg 225). One of the most subtle, yet surprisingly unsurprising examples of past and present intertwining is the seemingly arbitrary selection of the Munster style over all other regional styles.

The Gaelic League was composed of men whose first interest was the preservation and rejuvenation of Irish Gaelic as a national language. Douglas Hyde, founder of the League, had worked with William Butler Yeats on Ireland's National Literary Society, but that group focused on Anglo-Irish literature. Hyde stated that "the functions of the League […] would be to preserve and extend the daily use of the Irish language, to create favourable conditions for the study and publications of existing Gaelic literature, and to create new works in Irish"(de Longbhuel). Because the group defined itself as a cultural group, it took interest in traditional Irish music and dance as well, though on a secondary level. This linguistic element actually offers a plausible theory for general interest in the Munster region.

Anglo-Norman invasions into Ireland, and the resulting subjugation of that country to England for hundreds of years, profoundly affected cultural geographies. England set up its stronghold in Dublin, logical for its physical proximity to the main island and its symbolic significance as Ireland's center. As early as the mid-1500s, the area immediately surrounding

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Dublin had become known as The Pale, a term which indicated a region of English governance where all native language and cultural expression was forbidden. Both in Ireland and abroad, "the 'Pale' has come to stand as a metaphor for an alien element in the national body, politic and cultural, a metropolis materially comfortable but spiritually barren, drawing from foreign rather than native wellsprings" (Comerford 25). During the next two centuries, the boundaries of the Pale expanded further, eventually taking over all of Ulster and Leinster and butting against Connaught and Munster. These two provinces in the south and west of Ireland became known as the Gaeltacht, a term that came to connote the wild, free, untamed essence of Ireland, untainted by the English. Of course, the entire country was subject to English rule and oppression, but life in the Gaeltacht did offer some small freedoms. Even current Irish residents acknowledge a significant difference between urban areas influenced by the Pale as compared to the rural fringes in the Gaeltacht. Catherine Foley, who was born in urban Ireland and moved to the rural Gaeltacht area, commented on her experiences. She stated,

> Ever since we moved to the Ring Gaeltacht when I was eleven, I've been trying to reconcile my two worlds: my early childhood years, with the impressions of holidays, grandparents, and the self-deprecating tones and tensions of a repressed Irish city, and my teenage years in a different, starkly beautiful landscape with a different culture and a different language, where life was deeply felt and tinged with the poetry of the past (Foley "Home to Ring" 9).

This personal account, tracing back less than 60 years, illustrates the very real difference that existed between cities in the Pale and cities in the Gaeltacht. It seems only natural that when the Gaelic League was formed – a time when the difference between the Pale and Gaeltacht was

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surely more marked than in the mid 1900s – they would seek out Irish traditions in the locations that had best-preserved them already.

To this point, making the connection between the Gaeltacht's linguistic preservation and Munster's importance as a regional dance form has been a well-guided assumption, based on reasonable and logical conclusions. Concrete evidence linking the dance and linguistic preferences does seem to be in shorter supply. Much research has been devoted to Irish language and its preservation, but rarely do researchers draw parallels to other cultural forms of expressions, such as dance. One researcher who does make this connection is Kevin Whelan. He comments specifically on the exclusion of various dances which occurred under the guidance of the Gaelic League: "thus, the 'Highlanders,' 'Lancers' and 'Flings' of Donegal and the *sean-nós* (old style) dance style of Connemara were rejected in favour of a Munster-based canon of Irish dance, *just as 'Munster' Irish was promoted as the canonical dialect by the (Munster-dominated) Gaelic League*" (Whelan 144, emphasis added). Clearly, Whelan's statement points out a link between Munster dance and language dialect, even if this link has more to do with the native roots of members of the Gaelic League.

While the Gaelic League may have chosen any number of reasons to locate the roots of traditional Irish dance in Munster, they were ultimately successful in their endeavor. Helen Brennan notes that

> The process of selection was relentless. It was also successful from the League's
> point of view. By the time the first dance schools under its auspices opened their
> doors in the 1920's, the style of solo step dance being taught was a modification
> of the old Munster style developed by the dancing masters of that region, and all

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other styles of vernacular dance had been consigned to obscurity outside their

immediate geographical areas (42).

By setting Munster style as the acceptable mode of Irish dance, the Gaelic League tapped into a

history that emphasized ideas of freedom from complete suppression, power and royalty through

Brian Boru, and linguistic purity. Repeatedly drawing on the Munster location invested Irish

dance with particular traits, which in turn reinforced each other by all pointing back to Munster

as well. It became a powerful cycle of affirmation.

Church: Dance Halls Act of 1935

The Catholic Church, so long a part of Ireland that Catholicism itself was measure of Irish

identity, rarely agreed with how the Irish people chose to express themselves through dance.

Given its view that the body had to be tamed and could not be trusted, the church leaders in

Ireland disapproved of the freedom inherent in traditional Irish dance:

> The Catholic church turned against the robust tradition of dance, because it could
>
> be free, intoxicating, spontaneous and sexual. It involved close encounters
>
> between male and female and could occur in unregulated spaces, like public
>
> houses and at cross-roads. Dance belonged to the participants without mediators
>
> or masters. The church moved to domesticate its wilder energies and to control
>
> the time and places of performance (Whelan 143).

The Dance Halls Act of 1935 answered the needs of the Catholic Church, which wanted to

maintain propriety at all times. Passed by Irish Parliament under British supervision, the Act

strictly limited the Irish, similar to stringent laws of previous centuries. It banned all house

dances, informal gatherings held in the intimate setting of homes or barns where small entrance

fees were often charged in order to help raise funds for struggling families. Crossroads dancing,

popular, informal gatherings on Sunday after worship services, fell under the guidelines of the

Act and were similarly made illegal. These gatherings were ruled as dangerous by the Church for

their close male-female interactions, while government officials found them inappropriate in

charging entrance fees. Once the law passed, dances had to be held in public halls and a variety

of rules needed to be met in order to even use the hall space for dancing. This mandated change

in venue altered the shape of Irish dancing, almost annihilating dancing at the crossroads and

pushing traditional solo forms into obscurity. A generation of youth had no real understanding of

Irish dance in its original forms and contexts because it had been so suppressed[6]. In terms of its

overall effect in Ireland,

> The impact of the 1935 Act was draconian, making it practically impossible to
>
> hold dances without the sanction of the trinity of clergy, police and judiciary.
>
> Both the setting as well as the style of the new Irish dances acted to dampen down
>
> sexuality. The invented dance style was purposely asexual, involving minimal
>
> physical contact, as opposed to the full-blooded, full-frontal engagement of, for

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[6] "In the twentieth century, the world of dance in Ireland changed almost beyond recognition in little more

than a generation. To the young people of the 1950's and 1960's, the terms "swarees" (soirees), "rips",

"prinkums", "tournaments" and "kitchen dances" had become unrecognisable as the names for nights of

dance fun." Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Kerry, Ireland: Mountain Eagle Publications, Ltd,

1999) 103.

example, the traditional sets. This evolution from passion to pallor, from erotic to

neurotic, almost buried the existing forms (Whelan 145).

While the Dance Halls Act of 1935 was a legislative, and therefore, political action, the Catholic

Church actively worked to enforce its rulings. Although the Act caused an erasure of dance from

many of the Irish bodies, it cemented dance in others as a clandestine expression. The Irish had

defied many laws and rulings in the past intended to curtail their exuberant dancing spirits, but

they always found ways to subversively meet and dance. Exerting even this small amount of

control over their situation aided them in abreacting the repressive situation and minimizing the

traumatic impact.

Dance: An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha – The Irish Dancing Commission

The final group to significantly shape the future of Irish dance was the An Coimisiún le

Rincí Gaelacha (CLRG), established in 1929. It began as a specialized sub-committee of the

Gaelic League, created to monitor the dance form. When they became fully established as the

CLRG, they did so with two primary goals: preserve traditional Irish dance and ensure that

competitions abide and perpetuate that tradition. They established a network of approved

competitions where Irish identity would be shaped through the expression of dance. In a way,

their formation as a group directly responds to the traumatic experiences of the Irish past. A loss

of control typically marks traumatic experiences, leaving victims in a state of ambiguity. Victims

must seek for ways to either regain control over that particular loss, or compensate with

exaggerated control in other areas. The formation of CLRG exhibits qualities of both responses,

being a way to reclaim Irish bodies and direct their movements without foreign influence or

mandate and being a way to exert unprecedented authority over every minute aspect[7] of traditional Irish dance.

Members of the Commission took their role very seriously, desiring to preserve and perpetuate traditional Irish dance in a way never before possible. According to these criteria, they have been extremely successful. The CLRG has undeniably influenced the shape and growth of Irish step dance more than any other impulse, law, or organization:

> Since its inception, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha has gradually established official regulations concerning dances, dancers, teachers, adjudicators, dance events, feiseanna, clothing, and music. The agenda and the rulings of this hierarchical cultural and political organization served to centralize, homogenize, institutionalize, and standardize Irish step dance. In so doing, the Coimisiún declared itself the mainstream, or center zone, in Irish step-dance practice, while at the same time assisting, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the gradual demise of both the transmission and performance of Irish step-dance practices in the margins and thus placing them on the periphery (Foley "Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local" 36).

Wielding great power over the shape of Irish dance, the Commission imposes numerous rules on what types of movement are appropriate. To facilitate this, they instituted a system for examining

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[7] The CLRG has rules pertaining to every aspect of Irish dance: what dances are approved, at what ages children can compete, how elaborate their dress can be, what length it can be, what thickness of tights adult female competitors can wear, etc.

Irish dance teachers to be sure they would adhere to the regulations. Only dancers taught by a certified teacher holding a TCRG (Teagascóir Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha) can train Irish dance students who wish to participate in feisanna. Because the CLRG adjudicates the vast majority of feisanna worldwide, this requirement effectively keeps the bounds of acceptable Irish dance clearly marked and safe-guarded.

The CLRG has evolved into an international body, regulating competitive Irish dance with a firm hand. Originally, the Commission worked to make sure Irish dance remained traditional to its roots, in order to maintain a certain identity expressed through those movements. As seen with the dancing masters and in the relationship with the Diaspora, Irish dance as a form has always tended towards innovation, even as it worked within tradition.

Trauma and the Irish Dancing Body

Reviewing how the history has been inscribed on the Irish bodies offers a method of understanding Irish traditional dance as a representation of trauma. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud introduces the idea that the writing of history functions as a distortion; it is a representation of the past that has been re-written with certain inclusions and exclusions. He discusses two opposing forces at work on the text, resulting on one hand in transformations and alterations to the text, and on the other hand in "indulgent piety" (Freud *Moses and Monotheism* 52). These forces working on the text result in visible, traceable omissions, repetitions, and contradictions. Freud sees this distortion of history as indicative of a traumatic experience, and given the historical invasion and oppression in Ireland, it seems natural to conclude that such forces have been at play in the writing of history through dance. In the case of Irish dance, the

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source of these two impulses can be found in the Gaelic League and its later counterpart, the Irish Dancing Commission. The work of these groups simultaneously served to transform an existing tradition into a very particular, stylized form whilst it rigorously defended a "pure" Irish dance style. "[…] Irishness itself is represented in body movement"(Hall 4). Ultimately, the final product – traditional Irish dance as it is known today through competition and shows – is a quandary of omissions, repetitions, and contradictions.

Omissions in Irish Dance

The formation of the Gaelic League and its desire to write an Irish history in the arts opened the door for omission in the dance tradition. Freud, in his statement about forces shaping the writing of history, first mentions the tendency of transformation, falsification, and other manipulation that alters the original product into something nearly its opposite. He says, "the difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces" (Freud Moses and Monotheism 52). In order for the Gaelic League to write its history of traditional Irish dance, it necessarily involved informational omissions and manipulations. What they defined as truly Irish was promoted and vaunted; what they felt to be "foreign" was actively excluded.

The first omission or exclusion made by the Gaelic League occurred in regards to regional style. Because of its distance from Dublin and the Pale – the British-imposed area where all Gaelic activities, from language to dance, were banned – the Munster region of Ireland proved to be fertile ground for both preserving the Irish Gaelic language and providing excellent Irish dancers. It was, for all intents and purposes, the womb of Irish dance. When Cork dancer Tim O'Leary traveled to Dublin and opened a dance school there, his style of dance became the

vogue, effectively placing Munster's regional style of Irish dance above all the others. The Gaelic League perpetuated this idea, slowly pushing other regional styles out of practice. While regional variance still appeared for the next few decades, the accepted form of traditional Irish dance stood firmly in Munster style and Munster style alone.

To divorce a country's dance style from the variety it had previously known seems nearly preposterous, but, in consideration with other omissions made by the Gaelic League, it soon looks fairly tame in comparison. Having established a general consensus on how the dancers should move, the League then turned its attention to what types of dances qualified as "Irish." The Gaelic League wanted to eliminate anything in Ireland that was "foreign," that is, anything that could trace its origin to something or somewhere besides Irishness and Ireland. Re-establishing Irish Gaelic as a national language took primary importance for the League, but their influence extended into the arts as well, particularly into Irish dance.

The solo step dance tradition, developed into a specialized dance form under the influence of the dancing masters, always held a unique place in locating Irish identity. It seemed to be the quintessential expression of Irishness through movement, and as such, the League developed events to promote the step dance tradition. They held the traditional step dance in high regard:

> The heritage of step-dancing was evidently unquestioned by members of the
> Gaelic League, although indigenous origins would be very difficult to prove. For
> example, a factor that may indicate a foreign origin for step-dancing would be the
> existence of dancing masters, a continental European phenomenon during the
> preceding century in Ireland. However, since the introduction of step-dancing

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preceded the limits of contemporary living memory, its pedigree was not at issue

(Hall 33).

Operating on particular assumptions, the Gaelic League overlooked the possibility of step-dancing representing a "foreign" tradition because they believed it had its advent in a pre-historic (pre-written) past. The transition from orality to literacy marks a shift in how cultural memory is preserved, and in the case of Irish dance that shift makes all the difference in classifying what types of dance are "Irish" and which are "foreign." Since step-dancing gained significance in the un-written past, it was easier to overlook the possibility that non-Irish influences may have been involved in its development.

As the dancing masters spread the solo step dance tradition, they also taught set dances. These dances, deriving from the widely popular French quadrilles, allowed groups to dance together. The few recorded instances of dance prior to the late 18th century refer to group dances, so clearly community dancing and interaction was a significant part of the dance tradition. As the dance masters taught the imported set dances, they adapted the music to use traditional Irish tunes. Unique Irish dance steps were also incorporated, giving the dances a distinct Irish flair. The sets, however, did not find favor in the Gaelic League. Irish dance researcher Frank Hall stated:

Nationalist thought more purposely excluded these from 'Irish dancing' based on

their foreign origin. While it is most likely true that quadrilles were introduced to

Ireland by French- or English-trained dancing masters, the form as it was

practiced in the Irish countryside in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

had certainly undergone transformations that could only be described as Irish. As

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performed today, the two features that most readily distinguish the sets as local

(Irish) in form and sensibility are the music and the basic steps. The latter

includes the practice of making rhythms with the feet using step patterns that are

distinctively Irish. While in musical and aesthetic qualities the sets are native to

Ireland, in name they make no claim to represent Irishness in the way that

competitive 'Irish dancing' does (11).

Regardless of the changes made to turn the set dances into distinctively Irish pieces, the Gaelic

League viewed them as foreign and excluded them from the new Irish cultural identity, as

prescribed by the League. This bold move effectively suppressed a huge portion of the dance

tradition in the effort to create a truly Irish identity.

Since the majority of popular group dances had been eliminated, the Gaelic League set

out to "find" appropriate dances. Their tastes seemed to be guided by the Catholic Church, as

they developed new dances that limited male-female interaction and stayed proprietously refined

in energy. Influence from the Catholic Church shaped a

new canon of Irish dance [that] involved a number of principles. Invented group

dances like 'The Walls of Limerick' and 'The Siege of Ennis' were adapted as ideal

for large social occasions, because they involved large numbers and traversed the

whole floor[…] The distaste for the batter was also because of its raw male sexual

libido, an insistent theatrical performance of masculinity, displayed in covert

competition with other males (Whelan 144).

These new dances were known as ceili dances. The Gaelic League instituted gatherings called

feisanna (singular: feis) where these new dances could be displayed. It did not take long before

the feisanna incorporated solo competitive dance as well. Unlike the competitions of times past,

these formalized settings minimized the sexually objectionable nature of the competition. Dances

were performed as solos, not in direct competition like the dancing masters would have done;

when multiple dancers were on stage, it was still a very personal experience and did not build

into direct tension as in previous times.

To look at the Irish dance tradition today, those early omissions of regional styles and set

dances fulfilled their roles in shaping what is accepted as traditional Irish dance and in

eliminating the traces of anything that did not fall within those parameters. Freud pointed out the

inherent difficulty of effectively removing traces of the omission, but the progression of Irish

dance points to a surprisingly efficient method that has elided unapproved elements from the

mainstream conception of what Irish dance is.

Repetition and Trauma

Trauma studies place significant importance on the role of repetition, using it to

demonstrate the unconscious significance of an event or memory. Freud watches a young boy

repeatedly throw a toy out of sight so that he can find it again. He sees this to be a repetition of

trauma, a repetition of an unpleasant loss, slightly mitigated by the ability to reclaim the lost

object. "This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return. As a rule one only

witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt

that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act" (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

14). Repetitions act as reminders of loss, but they simultaneously allow a measure of control

over the loss and reclamation that most likely was not present in the original loss that triggered the repetitive acts.

Repetition is most apparent in the general structure of traditional Irish dance, particularly the solo step dances. Regardless of the type of dance – reel, jig, hornpipe, slip jig – the basic flow of movements across the floor follows the same pattern. (More experienced dancers modify the floor patterns, but the structure is still derived from the basic pattern.) As the music begins to play, the dancer stands towards the back of the stage. Once the introduction has passed, the dancer begins performing their step work, moving downstage in a circular fashion. This movement is called a "lead around" and is a fundamental part of every solo step dance. Once the dancer has completed the lead around, returning to the original starting point, a step to the side is performed. This lateral motion moves the dancer downstage a little, but it primarily travels towards stage right and stage left, ending with the dancer near the center of the stage. Finally, the dancer ends with a step that carries him/her further downstage in a (generally) straight line. Traditional Irish step dances follow this pattern of movement; the repetition of movement is such a key element of Irish dance that it survives almost unchanged in contemporary Irish dance competitions.

Even more significant than the mere repetition of this particular floor pattern is what the movement symbolizes. As the dancer moves across the floor performing the dance, a particular image is traced on the floor: a Celtic cross. Having every dance re-create the image of a Celtic cross connects contemporary Irish identity with its pre-invasion past. Repetition, on one hand, provides control over the displaced Irish identity by relocating the present expression of Irishness to the pre-historic past. On the other hand, the persistence of the Celtic cross motif throughout

the growth and codification of traditional Irish dance reaffirms Freud's view on the repetition compulsion. His discussion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* indicates that while the first act, the loss, is recognized, the compulsion to repeat is spurred by the act of reclamation. The pleasure associated with reclaiming the loss plays a key role in repetitive acts; being able to locate an Irish identity *not* dictated by the English oppression seems more than enough reason for Irish dance to continuously repeat, through movement, the tracing of the Celtic cross as a symbol of identity.

Traditional Irish dance features repetition on a secondary level as well; while not so symbolically significant, it provides further evidence of a traumatic Irish past. In the solo step dances, movements are performed on the right foot then repeated on the left foot. Each movement set comprises eight bars of music and includes smaller units of movement. These are all replicated in mirror fashion, giving the overall dance a very balanced look. Additionally, the very ordered structure of the dance reflects the impulse to control the body. For the Irish, the repetition of a highly controlled body speaks to the traumatic experience of being suppressed by the English, who dictated almost every aspect of Irish life, as well as the Irish reaction to freedom, where Irishness was dictated and controlled to create an identity "free" from outside influence. Ironically, repetition serves to illustrate a traumatic past, an unpleasant loss, as well as to express a reclaimed identity.

Contradictions in Irish Dance

Irish dance has continually performed a balancing act between staying true to tradition and allowing for creative innovations. While some may look at the progression of Irish dance and be upset by the seemingly modern elements at work in it, such an incorporation actually

alludes to a living tradition – one that is not dead but is re-lived in each dancing body. Helena Wulff notes the relationship between tradition and innovation, stating that

> Contrary to the designation modern, 'things traditional' will always be traditional. It is a label that sticks and expands. Friel (2004:54) concludes that 'tradition, if alive, must keep changing, evolving and adapting. Each generation must find some element within a tradition that it can relate to and make its own. This process is alive today in Irish music and dance' (30).

As an art form, Irish dance has successfully negotiated the balance of tradition and innovation, keeping those two contradictory forces in harmony with each other. Part of its aesthetic strength derives from this very balancing act.

Traumatic texts are fraught with contradiction, a point which Freud makes amply clear in *Moses and Monotheism*. He describes the traumatic text as inherently self-contradictory: "on the one hand, certain transformations got to work on it, falsifying the text in accord with secret tendencies, maiming and extending it until it was turned into its opposite. On the other hand, an indulgent piety reigned over it, anxious to keep everything as it stood" (Freud 52). Essentially, traumatic texts work to evolve beyond their original bounds through a series of falsifications and alterations, until they become the opposite of what they were originally. They simultaneously attempt to preserve the original through strict piety. These two contradictory qualities stand out in traditional Irish dance, making significant contributions to the development of the dance form.

Looking at the changes in Irish dance across the decades reveals that it is a dance genre constantly in flux. Freud comments that "the distorting tendencies we want to detect must have influenced the traditions before they were written down" (52). From its roots Irish dance

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exhibited the tendency for change and integration of outside influence. It preserved elements of ancient Druid dances (ring formations), integrated dance and music styles brought in by Viking and Anglo-Norman invaders (caroles, quadrilles, reels, hornpipes), and combined them into an aggregate form accessible to all. From movement quality and step-work, shoes and costuming, to gender and globalization, competitive Irish step dance has evolved into a dance form that seems to bear little connection to its original roots. In the twentieth century alone, available video footage shows vast changes in the dance form[8].

Changes in movement quality and step-work vividly demonstrate the development of Irish dance from a vernacular dance form into a living memory. These features experienced the most concentrated change largely because of their significance in the competitive aspect of Irish dance. Frank Hall, who closely researched competitive Irish dance, observed: "the elaborate development of Irish dancing, perhaps in contrast to many other folk or national dance forms, is a result of a century of creativity powered by competition" (94). Competition played a key role in Irish dance from its early days, initially serving as a way for dancing masters to compete and determine who would have "rights" to teach a particular area; later it grew into a form of

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[8] View http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYvU7oBBgKA to see John Cullinane dance a hornpipe in 1963. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC-YgxWAbqk to view a 2008 hornpipe. Although the dancers are of different genders and don't demonstrate the changes in costumes, the step work in these two dances differs significantly.

entertainment and finally culminated in a method to determine a local, regional, and/or national champion dancer.

The growth of competition as a primary motivation for performing Irish dance altered the dancing body and how it moved. First, competitions advanced the push for a regularized style, slowly excluding even the most minor regional variations. Dancers emulated the posture and technique of the champion dancers and frequently exaggerated the movements to stand out from other competitors. Dancing masters instructed their students to have good posture – a common saying was that a dancer should be able to hold a cup of water on their head and not spill any – but as competitive culture increased, dancers made the stillness of the upper body even stricter. The same thing occurred with the crossed and turned-out feet. Originally taught by the dancing masters so students could maintain balance and an aesthetic look to their performance, it has been pushed to the extremes of emphasis through the influence of competition.

Individual steps also evolved through the rise of competition culture. One of the primary influences on the changing movements was the growth of stage space. Prior to the institution of feisanna (events specifically for dance competition), dancers had to contain their movements to a relatively small space. Myths surrounding Irish dance often tell of competitions taking place on half-doors and barrel tops, a very limited space with viewers on all sides of the dancer. As competitions gained popularity, proscenium-style staging grew in popularity by the late twentieth century. Dancers integrated intricate footwork movement with simpler traveling steps, pushing the dancer to be creative in their choreography and use of space.

Contemporary competition continues to demonstrate creativity in movement, pushing the bounds of innovation in ways that seem to counter the basic core of a traditional dance form.

Changes occur so rapidly that "the hyper-development of Irish dancing technique has outstripped most teachers' abilities to keep up. Many of them can no longer perform the competitive movements they must teach" (Hall 57). Intriguing tensions occur when the dance form moves beyond the capacity of a teacher to demonstrate. However, the impulse to innovate does not necessarily indicate a desire to reject the past. Freud, in speaking of repetition and the death drive, makes a particularly profound statement regarding the nature of modifications and alterations. He states, "those instincts are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new"(Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 45). He continues, arguing that the goal of life is to return to an initial or originary state following "circuitous paths along which its development leads" (ibid). It may seem a stretch to apply that motivation to something inorganic, such as Irish dance, but as a metaphor, it is particularly fitting in illustrating how an art form that purports to be deeply rooted in tradition can accommodate continual innovation.

One recent development in Irish step-dance and competition that exemplifies Freud's hypothesis that things return towards their origins by moving forward is a step called the butterfly. Maria Duffy created the step in 1980 by combining a very traditional cross key[9] with a jump, in response to the CLRG's encouragement of traditional steps (Hall 110).The Irish Dancing Commission kept close watch on the development of Irish dance and often sent around

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[9] View http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qat1dpY0_kY to see a traditional cross key.

fliers reminding teachers and choreographers to use traditional steps in their dances, not introduce foreign steps. The cross key is a very traditional step where the feet roll to the heels in a pigeon-toed position, then switch the front foot to the back to return to the standard position. It was a step that the CLRG had specifically promoted for use in choreography. A jump is also a very basic traditional step in which the dancer pushes off the ground with both feet, switches the front foot to the back while in air and then lands, so when Duffy combined the two she was following the mandate of the Commission. The resulting step, however, was a feat of aerial movement that astounded viewers with its visual motion and technical difficulty, and it rapidly spread through the Irish dance world. Duffy's intent to adhere to traditional movements paradoxically pushed the dance style further from those traditions; her step is now common fare at the feisanna, while cross steps seem to have disappeared from performance.

In conclusion, viewing the regularization of Irish dance under the auspices of various organizations illustrates the desire to construct a particular Irish identity through dance movement. The underlying traumas of Ireland can be seen at work in the construction of the dance. Representations of trauma in Irish dance do not specifically speak to historical events of trauma, but their structure clearly indicates a relationship between dance and trauma. Irish dance shows a re-writing of history that exemplifies Freud's definition of traumatic texts: it is inscribed by the influence of two opposing forces, transformation and piety, and it exhibits omission, repetition, and contradiction at all turns.

Chapter Four: Dance and Healing

Viewing dance as a representation of trauma may be a rather depressing matter, pointing out a seeming inevitability that these embodied representations are doomed to repeat and re-enact a painful past. To this point, Irish dance appears to be caught in this cycle of continuing suppression and recalling a fractured past. However, to leave the dance form suspended in this repetitive and traumatic location would result in overlooking the complementary opposite of trauma: healing.

Healing is a significant factor to consider when examining trauma. Inherent in the traumatic theory of Freud, Caruth, and Leys is the idea that recovery from the influx of unbounded affect (energy) and its negative effects on the person is, in fact, possible. Such recovery and healing may not be easily attained, but the possibility remains open. One reason healing is possible is precisely because the traumatic event is in the past. The past is complex, comprising " more […] than simply what happened; at any given point in time, multiple trajectories towards the future are open" (Whelan 151-52). This commentary, given in an article responding to effects of the Great Potato Famine, highlights how past events offer multiple ways of moving into the future. Traumatic events definitely happened, but they can be addressed in such a variety of ways that at some point, healing can occur.

The interplay of past and present addresses a significant feature of trauma theory: time. Trauma essentially disrupts the linear flow of time. Freud's research points out this disruption in time: "we have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless.' This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in

any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 31-32). Victims who experience trauma get caught in a cycle, like a vortex in time. Events prior to the trauma can be placed on a timeline, but once trauma is experienced everything revolves in a circle. This accounts, in part, for continuous repetition: because the traumatic event cannot be placed on a timeline, it remains, essentially, ever-present to the victim. Healing ultimately resolves the cyclical patterns and allows a linear timeline to once again progress.

Freud indicated that one of the goals of psychotherapy on trauma patients was to help them get at the repressed memories in order to deal with them, reduce the emotional affect, thus allowing those events to fit into the past and no longer intrude into the present. He states that:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 18-19).

Clearly, being able to align events in their accurate historical past is an essential aspect of recovering from trauma. Putting events into a timeline makes trauma manageable and comprehensible, both to the victim who can now contextualize the past and to outsiders who can gain access to the experience.

One of the first steps in healing past traumas is to acknowledge their existence and recognize that they have affected the current state of things. This can be a difficult process for

those most directly connected to the traumatic past, because they do not realize they are caught in a cycle. Many times the remaining effects of trauma become a seemingly natural part of living, even unconscious alterations that seem innocuous but point to deeper issues. Boheemen-Saaf discusses this primary step in healing and how essential it is to healing, stating that

> The wounds of the past will remain active and spoil the present, unless we heal them through mourning. We must become conscious, accept the past, and find the words to voice and feel the desolation it occasions. Coming to terms with the causes of a past which keeps haunting us […] depends upon an imaginative act of witnessing sympathy as well as the reorientation of subjectivity. […Reading] the "art of trauma" may engage the reader in a dialogue with that trauma which might open him or her up to begin to acknowledge its hitherto repressed presence (10).

As awareness of the traumatic qualities of the past increases, the ability to consciously grapple with the effects also increases. As Boheemen-Saaf mentions, this understanding comes through the "art of trauma," the representations of traumatic experiences through various mediums. Viewing these created works offers a more neutral entrance into the moment of trauma while providing an artistic distance.

In addition to the sense of safety created through representations of trauma, these pieces of art serve a more subtle purpose as well – they illustrate the triumph of creative powers over the destruction of trauma. Judith Herman has researched the link between trauma and healing, closely examining the effects of trauma on the individual. She argues:

> Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is

assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness. Their capacity for

intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear.

The identity they have formed prior to trauma is irrevocably destroyed (56).

Trauma shatters identities – perhaps the most destructive act possible, for it annihilates an

essential component of self-understanding, not just wounding the physical body. In this

ultimately vulnerable and broken situation, representation opens the possibility of creation and

healing, directly countering the effects of trauma. Dance is a particularly powerful means of

representation because, as Randy Martin points out, it

is an artistic practice where time and space are expressly generated in the course

of performance and not simply an activity that passes through an already given

spatiotemporal medium. Dancing bodies reference a social kinesthetic, a sentient

apprehension of movement and a sense of possibility as to where motion can lead

us, that amounts to a material amalgamation of thinking and doing as world-

making activity (48).

Dance organizes space and time within the choreography, creating a world that exists as

connected, yet distinct, from the ordinary and real. It can gather the broken pieces of identity left

behind by traumatic experiences and reorganize them into a new understanding of self,

community, and world. This creative power inherent in dance as a representative form makes it a

prime method for addressing trauma and seeking healing; additional correlations between dance

and trauma bolster the view that dance provides a prime medium for dealing with and healing

traumas of the past.

Reshaping the body

Trauma and dance are both embodied, made unique because their realms fuse the capacity of the mind with the physicality of the body. On the one hand, the body itself is a victim of trauma and suffers various effects from that experience. On the other hand, this makes dance an exemplary art form for conveying purposeful representations of trauma. In both cases bodies are shaped, contoured, sculpted, marked in visible ways that can be analyzed and interpreted. The traumatic experience of centuries of invasions and suppressions left indelible marks on the physical bodies of the Irish. Even bodies that were not directly shaped by the traumatic Irish past become marked and inscribed by those experiences as they participate in constructed dance acts. Looking closely at the dance, it quickly becomes apparent that bold, rebellious, and even revolutionary movements are built over a structural base that reflects traumatic patterns. These movements formed the core of Irish dance as it developed into a codified dance form during the mid-18th century, until *Riverdance* radically altered not just the movements, but the underlying structure as well.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman explores how trauma affects individuals and communities along with how healing can be possible after trauma. One of the key factors she discusses is the isolation of the victim. Because trauma tends to be a paradigm-shattering experience, victims lose vital connections to their own self-concept and their relationship to others; "thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion" (Herman 52). While individuals in Ireland did not necessarily experience alienation

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from each other, the validity of this statement certainly fits when viewing the collective situation in Ireland.

As an island nation, Ireland already experienced some geographic isolation from its neighbors. Traumatic invasions caused more jarring disconnections, seemingly separating the native Irish from their actual land and property. In addition to appropriating land away from its rightful owners, the controlling powers in England intensified Irish disconnection by perpetuating perceptions of them as sub-human. Although visual depictions of the Irish in English publications did not illustrate significant differences, "[a] perusal of early English writings on the Irish shows that […] Irish culture was seen as alien and threatening" (Szwed 254). Identifying Irish people as "alien and threatening" solidified the cultural disconnection and isolation that made Ireland's collective trauma resoundingly profound and long-lasting. Szwed continues,

> In many ways the Irish sound remarkably like Africans as described by the nineteenth-century English –sensual, slothful, affectionate, garrulous, excitable, humorous, etc. – except that the English appear to have initially often found Africans preferable to the Irish. The unasked question for the Elizabethans was simply, were the Irish, with their different culture, truly human? And the question was not to be settled quickly, as the following several hundred years show (254-55).

In their homeland, amongst their nearest neighbors, and even across oceans, the Irish suffered isolation and distancing on all sides for hundreds of years. The only truly cohesive bonds they managed to maintain were those of family and local community. National bonds developed

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during those centuries, but that only came through slow, sustained growth as the Irish re-established their internal connections.

Ireland gained a type of political healing in 1922 with the formation of the Irish Free State, but a total healing of the traumatic past required new forms of representation (State 254). Despite having broken away from the subjugating structures of the past, artistic representations perpetuated traumatic reminiscences rather than reshaping their content to fit the new Irish context. Specifically, Irish dance maintained the look and presentation codified in the mid-eighteenth century by the dancing masters. Although it had had evolved somewhat in the ensuing two hundred years, it primarily hearkened back to a time when Irish dance was still suppressed. These effects remained recorded in the dancing Irish bodies, though quite unconsciously. In many ways this distinctiveness of movement held Ireland back from developing a form of dance representation that could offer healing and freedom from the still extant global isolation.

Understanding the past formulas present in Irish dance, it becomes clearer how *Riverdance* radically breaks out of those repetitions and consigns them to the past, itself moving into contemporary, relevant expressions. Most obviously, the rigid structures of the various dance forms are largely abandoned in favor of broader choreographic possibilities. Instead of rigidly adhering to tradition, the alterations allow for narrative dances along with the virtuosic performances typical to Irish dance. These changes from traditional structures also introduced a hybridity in dance performance, unifying solo dancers into a group piece.

The Advent of *Riverdance*

"*Riverdance:* The Phenomenon was born on 30 April 1994, in a Dublin theatre with 3,000 people in attendance, before a television audience of 300 million" (Smyth 35). The show intentionally rewrote past events into a dynamically contextualized present, resulting in a representation that illustrates the healing of a traumatized cultural identity. Its advent in 1994 at the Eurovision Song Contest marked a shift in Ireland's self-identification through dance. Irish dance broke through the restriction and control that had characterized the form. Under the ruling bodies of the Gaelic League and the Irish Dancing Commission, Irish dance conformed to numerous rules in order to embody particular qualities of Irishness. *Riverdance* expanded beyond these restrictions, aspects of the art that were implicated in trauma, and became a healing force. Natasha Casey, in her article on *Riverdance* and Irish Americans highlights the changes made in representing Irish bodies: "instantly, Riverdance embodied a new respectable Irishness, neoteric and traditional, spiritual rather than religious, sanitized—devoid of both political signifiers and, as the New York Times observed, stage leprechauns" (12).Dance transcended mere entertainment to serve as a sociopolitical tool, consciously working to portray a specific Irish identity that defied stereotypes and moved Ireland into the global consciousness.

The advent of *Riverdance* at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest marked a shift in Ireland's self-identification through dance and paved the way for the globalization of "Irishness." It accomplished this powerfully, developing a new text to be inscribed on the Irish bodies, one that addressed the trauma of the past and demonstrated cultural healing. *Riverdance* and the ensuing global craze for Ireland demonstrate a cultural artifact that has successfully stepped from

the past into the dynamic present. While still acknowledging and preserving its original roots, the traumas of the past have been healed through embodied representation. The body as text has been re-worked to illustrate the freedom, individuality, and vitality of the Irish people.

While *Riverdance* began as a relatively minor piece of entertainment to simply fill a time slot, it carried a great deal of cultural significance with it as well. Moya Doherty wanted an interval showpiece that "'would be a five-minute commissioned work from a contemporary Irish composer. A percussive piece which would give us an opportunity to showcase top Irish musicians, dancers, performers and singers.'[…] It came with a warning: 'This would not be a "back to our roots" routine, rather the opposite'" (Smyth 23-24). Doherty wanted to explore and highlight the current expressions of Irishness, and the worldwide event of the Eurovision song contest provided an opportunity to break past stereotypes and illustrate the vibrant, dynamic heritage of Ireland.

Viewing the phenomenon of *Riverdance* through the lens of trauma studies adds to the monumentality of the show in terms of Ireland's storied past. One of its most significant contributions is how it changed the way Irish and Irishness was presented on stage and in the public arena. The creators of *Riverdance* had grown tired of clichéd images and wanted to break away from the past. Casey notes:

> From its inception, Riverdance actively eschewed the archetypal Stage Irish
> image and insisted on emphasizing "modern" Ireland. In 1996, about one month
> before the production attracted mass attention in the United States, the New York
> Times ran an article under the headline "Ireland Without Clichés" in which the
> producer of Riverdance, Moya Doherty, stated, "I was tired of cliché images of

Ireland . . . I wanted to show the Ireland I know and love, that it is modern and in

step." (14).

Prior to the advent of *Riverdance,* Irish dance appeared on stage primarily in its competitive

format; when it was geared more towards entertainment, it still tended to embody the styling of

competitive dance. Irish theater, while more expansive in its presentation of the Irish, frequently

reinforced existing stereotypes rather than replacing them. Maintaining preconceived notions of

Irishness in public presentation allowed outsiders to comfortably keep the Irish culturally

subjugated, while the Irish themselves stayed in unperturbed normalcy born of centuries of

suppression. Sam Smyth, who documented the story of *Riverdance*, noted:

> The stage Irishism that had cast its men as amiable or pugilistic drunks, and its
>
> women as retiring or fiery redheads in a shawl, was anathema to Ireland in the
>
> mid-1990s. With more than 50 per cent of the population under 25 years old, the
>
> Irish nation was no longer touching its forelock or looking over its shoulder as it
>
> moved towards the twenty-first century (Smyth 54).

With a primarily younger generation laying claim to an Irish heritage, it made sense that they

would strive to understand themselves and their nation in a present, modern context. Armed with

the experiences of the past, the creative team worked to build a dynamic presentation of

Irishness.

A significant factor in re-establishing Ireland's connection with the global community is

that *Riverdance* acted as a vehicle for sharing some of the traumatic experience. No longer

confined to the victims, this process of sharing helps contextualize the trauma on a broad scale

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and minimizes the unbound affect. Herman emphasizes the need for sharing, going so far as to call it a necessary element of healing trauma. She states:

> Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process, the survivor seeks assistance not only from those closest to her but also from the wider community. The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma (Herman 70).

Riverdance shared aspects of Ireland's traumatic past to a global audience, using sweeping thematic elements rather than specific plot points to best-express the lengthy history of trauma. And truly, the worldwide reaction to this presentation had immense influence on resolving the past and moving forward into the future.

Riverdance: Analysis[10]

Riverdance, as the original interval act, featured a combination of traditional Irish music and dance styles. Bill Whelan, composer of both the original music and later the full show, drew on a variety of musical influences to create a masterpiece. James Flannery noted the power of Whelan's use of multiple musical influences, stating that " in Riverdance we have an example of a quintessentially Irish work whose very Irishness is all the more eloquently realized by being juxtaposed to, and influenced by, powerful contributions from other non-Irish musical and dance

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[10] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWyhH5z92ps to view the video footage analyzed in this thesis.

traditions" (Flannery 57). The music provides a narrative base to the piece, centering the ideas and choreographies in a way that "[…] reflects the fluidity, diversity, and hybridity of the modern tradition (Scahill 71). Whelan's contributions are immense, in this respect. Sensing the need for representing a new Ireland that had never before been expressed to the world, he skillfully weaves a musical foundation that, on the surface, underscores and supports the existing traditional Irish music, though upon closer inspection what sounds so intrinsically "Irish" is in fact a hybrid mixture of scales and rhythms drawn from other traditional music styles. As Scahill states, "In its centering of hybridity, Riverdance both constructs and reflects an image of Irish culture that is postmodern in texture, embracing the ancient and the modern, the local and the global" (71-72). This exquisite handling of the music to unite the past with the present, the near with the far, also creates a mystical realm in which the idea of the interval piece can be explored and expressed.

Central to the idea and theme of *Riverdance* is the symbol of the river itself. Moya Doherty, in collaboration with Whelan, chose to unite the production around a symbol that carries connotations of past, present, and the constancy of the journey. Irish spiritualist John O'Donohue explained:

A river somehow illuminates the beauty of time. In a river, past, present and future coalesce in the one passionate flowing. A river is continuous flow of future. Though it flows through landscape, it never divides space into 'sooner' or 'later,' 'before' or 'after.' The river is a miracle of presence. Each place it flows through is the place it is. The river holds its elegance regardless of the places it flows through. Though a river maintains a line of direction, it somehow turns still, fixed

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space into the embrace of a flowing circle of presence. It gives itself to the

urgency of becoming but never at the cost of disowning its origin. It engages the

world while belonging always secretly within its memory and still strives forward

into the endless flow of emerging possibility. In the sublime and unnoticed

artfulness of its presence, the wisdom of a river has much to teach us (114).

O'Donohue beautifully describes the unique qualities of the river, pointing out the mystical

spiritualism associated with it. Indeed, it is a very fitting symbol for the dance concept being

developed. The liquid embracing of all times into a unified space, continuously flowing and

changing yet staying so much the same, simultaneously conscious of origin and possibility – the

river is undeniably the best metaphor for representing a modern Irish dance style that remains

closely unified with its roots while blazing new trails of innovation.

Utilizing a recording of the original performance of *Riverdance* at the 1994 Eurovision

Song Contest, four key segments trace the pathway from the past to present, from tradition to

innovation. The piece begins with traditional sean nós singing, transitioning into a slip jig solo

followed by a reel solo, after which the whole ensemble joins onstage for a powerful finale.

Sean Nos Singing

Riverdance, in its original seven-minute format, begins with a contemporary style of sean

nós (old style) singing, drawing the audience into the story about to play out on the dance floor.

The pure voices, alternating between the lead female the mixed ensemble, evoke the ethereal

past. Having the crystalline tones of the female soloist open the act unconsciously draws on the

ancient mysticism of the powerful female, the strength of mother earth and the natural forces.

Emphasizing this link between voice and nature is the projected image of a rippling river, accompanied by the deep blue lighting on stage. Likewise, the costuming points to specifically distant time in Irelands past. The men are dressed in simple dark slacks, white blouses, and dark shawls draped over one shoulder, while the women wear dark dresses and the Colleen Bawn cloak popular during the mid 19th century. Theirs is an image of the distant past. The ensemble joins into the chorus, lending deeper, richer tones to the song and effectively linking the ancient and soaring sean nós tones with a more familiar, if still aged, a capella sound. As the singing concludes, the music transitions into the first dance segment of the piece: a slip jig solo performed by Jean Butler.

Slip Jig

Beginning with a slip jig shows a very deliberate choice on the part of the creators. Musically, the slip jig is commonly believed to be the oldest of the dance tunes, hearkening back to ancient origins with its 9/8 time signature. Through the ancient nature of the music, the dance likewise seems to allude to ancient origins as well. Even as it has evolved through the years, the slip jig has been described as "the most graceful of the step dances" (Breathnach 45). Butler's interpretation of the style enhances the juxtaposition of the distant past with contemporary choreography.

Butler makes subtle yet effective changes to the traditional slip jig dance to weave layers of narrative into her choreography. Before the dance begins, she walks slowly downstage holding a large swath of blue-green fabric as she is symbolically born from the river. Like the allusions of power invoked by the solo female singer, Butler continues spreading the female

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power. Her presence, as she moves downstage, seems to push the singers off stage. As she raises her arms to lift the wing-like cloth, Butler evokes images of modern dancer Loie Fuller, who frequently utilized large pieces of cloth in her choreographies. As she spreads her arms up, reaching to the heavens, it seems as though she is communing with the elements, especially the sky, invoking their mystical influence into her body. Her pose, frozen in time, appears highly iconic. Her two deliberate steps forward further emphasize her centrality as she stands as the epitome of the powerful feminine aspects in Irish dance and history.

She then begins her graceful dance, moving across stage with high leaps and nimble footwork. This beautiful presentation is actually a grand moment of rebellion against the form, however. Unlike typical slip jigs, this one has no specific lead around, nor does it maintain the rigid structure of right foot then left foot repetition. The steps work with the music, which likewise avoids strict repetition in favor of a fuller exploration of the melody and its possibilities. Also breaking with traditional slip jigs, Butler utilizes her hands occasionally to accent her steps. While it is sparse, it bursts through the confines of past restrictions.

Butler opens her slip jig with a switch step transitioning into a turn, followed by a gravity-defying leap and nimble twisty steps. Within two measures, she has set forth an image of the ideal female Irish dancer: deft feet, light-weightedness, intricate steps and nimble dexterity. She progresses into traveling steps that demonstrate her agility and strength as she dances easily across the large floor-space. She continues to use leg movements that emphasize her gracefulness and unboundedness, finishing the step with a series of delicate turns. Butler then moves into her second step, the energy rising as a flute and tin whistle join the simple fiddle and drums. She begins with a serious of jumps that highlight her strength and underscore her athleticism, while

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yet again showing her skill and intricacy of movement. The twisties and whips, used in combination, reinforce the powerful femininity which exemplifies the ideal representation of the modern Irish woman. She is agile, powerful, and, as Butler subtly incorporates, sensuous. In this slip jig the iconic woman of the past meets with the updated modern version, one that celebrates the values of her ancient sister and further frees her into contemporary contexts.

Reel

As the music transitions from the ethereal, light sound of the fiddle, flutes, and tin whistles into the primal pounding of the drums, Michael Flatley makes his sweeping, impressive entrance. In a moment where the music alludes to the most ancient parts of history, he comes flying across stage with outspread arms, high leaps, and crisply impressive footwork. He epitomizes the new Irish identity – bold, young, vibrant, proud. His dancing connects with the past yet pushes beyond its boundaries to explore the vitality of a living tradition.

There is a primal urgency in the call and response between Flatley and the drummers. The lights shift from blue to red, mirroring the increase in energy and bringing additional excitement to the stage. Flatley executes remarkably intricate rhythms that showcase his amazing virtuosity within the form. His style introduces flair and individuality in ways never before expressed through competitive Irish dance. He incorporates his hands into his movements as well, very boldly breaking from the traditional still arms. The arms are raised high in the air in various poses, or they point to the feet, drawing attention to the impressive display being executed. Breaking tradition and letting the arms move lends a sense of the carefree to the dance, making the steps seem more relaxed and effortless. Flatley's dancing shifts the mood of the piece

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from echoes of the past to the vibrancy of the present, incorporating more musical variety within the traditional style and instrumentation. It leads into the final segment of the interval performance where Irish dance takes its definitive steps into the new living tradition.

Finale

For one of the first times, and certainly the first time for such a large, worldwide audience, the underlying sexuality of dance, movement, and vitality make their appearance in the Irish dance. As the music shifts yet again, Jean Butler joins Flatley on stage, developing an understated sexual tension through a brief duet. Butler and Flatley build the mood through their eye contact, body orientation, and even through slight physical touch, as Butler slides her arm along Flatley's shoulder as she circles him. They then face off in a call and response style competitive moment in which Flatley performs a step filled with rapid footwork and leg pops that incorporate hip movement, countered by Butler performing a very feminine step with delicate toe stands. They then join hands and begin performing steps in mirror precision and execution. The rich music itself adds to the excitement and anticipation in the dance, relying heavily on unique rhythm combinations drawn from other traditional music styles.

As the ensemble begins to enter the stage, Butler and Flatley do a relatively simple rhythm step in a tight circle formation, replicating in tandem the circular symbol articulated in each of their solos. Once the ensemble has joined the stage, they advance in a very simple rhythm step that allows for subtle hip articulation, again hinting at a previously suppressed sexuality, an embracing of body and its potentialities as an expressive form. The unison dancing and movement downstage creates a definitive sense of power within the piece, as well as unity

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amongst the dancers. This leads into the most stunning and powerful segment of the entire interval performance: the chorus line performance, in unison, of intricate Irish step dance – a modern take on a traditional form. The audience receives a sense of solidarity and unity about what it means to be Irish, for the chorus line becomes a synecdoche for all of Ireland coming together and uniting in modern contextuality. Moving into the final long line with all the dancers further reinforces the technical skill, the unity, the undeniable power of the people. Their final steps moving forward point to a people who refuse to be overlooked any longer.

As the last notes of the resounding music die out, the audience erupts into applause, quickly rising for a standing ovation. Response to the interval showpiece was overwhelmingly positive. The surprise on Butler and Flatley's faces is a witness to the fact that they had no idea this presentation would make such an impact. Theirs was an artistic vision through which they hoped to show modern Ireland. Instead, it exploded beyond those bounds and re-wrote the global perception of Ireland, simultaneously resolving many slights of the past and presenting a new, healed country and culture.

For seventeen years, Riverdance has captivated audiences worldwide on five continents, selling out shows from England, Ireland, the United States, and Australia to China, the Middle East, and Africa. As a piece of entertainment, its bold rhythms and elemental story draw audiences into a presentation that stands unique among the performing arts. It successfully weaves a narrative line into dynamic cultural dance, a feat of dance choreography and artistry that has yet to be replicated outside of Irish dance. *The Washington Post* described the show as "[a] phenomenon of historic proportions!" (Byrne, Garvan and O'Donnell). Truly, *Riverdance* is a phenomenon, both for its artistic value and for the cultural healing it brought to Ireland. Where

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once there was ignorance and stereotype, now there is respect, admiration, and a new understanding of who the Irish truly are in contemporary contexts. The dancing body, a new icon of Ireland, leaps beyond the past and continues to carry Ireland forward, leaving behind the traumas of yesteryear for the dynamism and possibility of the present.

In seven minutes, national and global perceptions of Ireland changed forever. Gone were the shackles of a repressed people; gone were the images of country bumpkins and ignorant masses. The chains of past stereotypes had been broken, releasing Irish identity from its oft ambiguous and unflattering position and launching it into an international sensation celebrating the vitality and spirit of the people. Smyth declared:

> It was seven minutes that shattered the hermetically sealed world of television, seizing the attention and igniting the imagination of 300 million viewers. Something happened. It was one of those rare moments when indifference was suspended and it left an indelible imprint on the memory of anyone who experienced it (33).

Those who saw the performance could not help but be moved by the driving music and resounding dance. It presented an image of Ireland that had never been fully expressed before, particularly in the international realm. Reminiscences of the past gave way to an embodied living memory that resonated with Irish and non-Irish alike.

Conclusion

Applying trauma theory to Irish dance supplies credible answers to the questions raised by my earliest research into Irish dance: why is it done the way it is? Traumatic concepts of

event, latency, and binding are evidenced in many of the generalized facets of Irish dance, embodied in the performers themselves. A history of invasions and ensuing suppressions continued to shape Irish bodies, affecting the trajectory of Irish dance development. Irish dancing masters played a significant role in setting up a tradition, creating a strong and widely-accepted form of dance that resisted the English efforts to stamp out Irish culture. Organizations such as the Gaelic League and the Irish Dancing Commission (CLRG) operated within particular paradigms, seeking to consciously create an Irish identity through dance expression.

The *Riverdance* phenomenon in particular illustrates a global fascination with Ireland and Irish culture. Operating on the belief that trauma truly is a part of the human experience, the interest in Ireland and Irish dance can be construed as a way for those outside the Irish tradition to bind their own traumatic experiences. Irish dance showcases a people that have retained their vitality and persevering spirit in spite of, or perhaps because of, the long history of suppressions and traumas experienced by them. Understanding how trauma underscores traditional Irish dance allows outsiders to see how trauma is manifest in cultural expressions and how healing, partial or complete, can be found.

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