

# The Local, the Global and the Virtual: The Distance Feis in Step Dance in Newfoundland and Labrador

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Step-dancing in Newfoundland has undergone significant changes in context and function, evolving from a social event into a performance genre primarily through the influence of Irish culture on Newfoundland: through immigration in the 1930s, then through popular culture in the 1990s. This has led to three distinct but interrelated styles of step dance: traditional Newfoundland step dance, Irish-Newfoundland step dance and traditional Irish step dance.<sup>1</sup> While the dance-specific influences arrived in these two waves, it is because of the established prevalence of Irish culture in Newfoundland and Labrador society that these dance forms have flourished. Although a majority of the population of Newfoundland and Labrador is of English descent, it is arguable that Irish vernacular practices and popular entertainments have had more staying power and more consumer appeal in Newfoundland and Labrador culture, from the proliferation of Irish music on the radio beginning in the 1950s to the “rediscovery” of Irish roots through the flourishing of Memorial University of Newfoundland programs such as Folklore and Newfoundland Studies to the popularity of Irish step-dancing in the 1990s (Mannion 2007). Ireland and Newfoundland share perceived and real similarities – landscape, vernacular belief, stereotypical characteristics of their people, hegemonic influences, culture, and economy, to name a few – that have enabled and perhaps encouraged Newfoundland culture to model itself after that of Ireland (Harris Walsh 2009: 121-3). Moreover, the globalization of the stylized Irish step dance show *Riverdance* has brought step-dancing to the world stage. Catherine Foley uses the case study of *Riverdance* to illustrate how forms of cultural representation tend to become homogenized; she argues that “‘*Riverdance*’ theatricalized Irish step dance from a Western perspective” (2001: 39). The homogeneous nature of *Riverdance* is one reason for its appeal; its implication of Irishness may be why it has been easily integrated into Newfoundland culture and, in fact, is considered by some to actually be traditional Irish – or Newfoundland – step-dancing. Since nationalist sentiment as expressed through dance is something that has existed in Ireland since the late 19th century, combined with the current concrete and ideological links between Ireland and Newfoundland, it is no surprise that step dance in Newfoundland is a creative means by which that critical link is maintained and promoted.

What is interesting is that prior to the 1990s there seems to have been no formalized Irish step dance in Newfoundland and Labrador. Perhaps it is the isolation of an island culture, perhaps the lack of cable television, the lack of internet and comparative global influences until the late 20th century, coupled with the strong vernacular Newfoundland culture stemming from the province’s cultural revival in the 1970s (Overton 1996: 56). Irish dance is a latecomer to the dancescape in Newfoundland, but has made up for lost time since. At the time of this writing, Irish step dance is available at four dance studios: Dance Studio East and Mount Pearl School of Dance, which feature Irish step dance alongside myriad other dance forms, including ballet, contemporary, and hip hop; and two exclusively Irish dance schools, Shawn Silver’s iDance in St. John’s, and Sara Sheehan’s Celtic Spirit Dancers in Grand Falls-Windsor in central Newfoundland. On occasion other dance schools offer Irish step dance, but these studios have committed to teaching the style on an ongoing basis.

Much of my earlier research has focused on the significance of “Irishness” in the province’s contemporary manifestations of traditional dance; however, I have recently become intrigued by a new pocket of Irish step dance: that of Sara Sheehan’s Celtic Spirit Dancers, located in Grand Falls-Windsor, a long-standing pulp-and-paper-mill-company town in central Newfoundland. With a population of 13,000, Grand Falls-Windsor is merely one hour’s drive away from the neighbouring town of Gander, population 11,000, but is more than 400km from St. John’s. This area, whose early settlers were drawn from Britain (as well as other parts of Newfoundland, Canada, and the United States) has, over the past six years, become a hotbed of Irish step dance, the largest outside St. John’s. This paper is an ethnographic exploration into the development of the Celtic Spirit Dancers in a mill town, fairly isolated from both St. John’s (arguably the artistic centre of the province) and the larger diasporic community of competitive Irish step dance. Using field research and interviews with Sheehan as its basis, I explore how, through its participation in the feis, or competition – both as observers and as participants – the school has overcome its geographic isolation to become linked to the global competitive Irish circuit, and how it has used its uniqueness in central Newfoundland to carve a niche.

Grand Falls-Windsor is best known as a mill town, although, since its closure by parent company AbitibiBowater in February 2009, the town is clearly re-visioning its image – an examination of its municipal/tourist website reveals photos of golf courses, whitewater rafting, the annual Salmon Festival and an “old-time” Main Street, images that challenge conventional wisdom about the town. In fact, in order to glean any significant amount of information about the mill, searchers need to bypass the town’s website and click on the link to the Grand Falls-Windsor Heritage Society’s website, where details on the mill are prominent. However, despite efforts to revitalize the town’s image to feature its beautiful geographic features, such as the Exploits River, its attractiveness to businesses as being located centrally in the province, and its appeal to tourists with its festivals and landscape, many in the province still remember the long-standing industrial history that both necessitated the creation of the town and sustained it for many years. So how, and why, does the Celtic Spirit Dancers flourish in such a town, with a small population, lack of Irish ancestry, small arts community, and even smaller dance community (the only other dance studios in the town are the Lesley Oake School of Dance and ShiMoves, which feature ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop, and/or bellydance)?

The Celtic Spirit Dancers has grown organically and was created almost accidentally, because of Sara Sheehan’s personal interest in learning Irish dance. In 2006, Sheehan invited Shawn Silver of iDance out to Grand Falls-Windsor. Sheehan was an Irish step dance enthusiast who wanted to help create a pocket of Irish dance in central Newfoundland. Someone who had trained in other dance forms throughout her life, Sheehan had initially learned some Irish step dance from videos, but elicited help from Silver so she could learn new dances and increase her own training. Their partnership created the Exploits Riverdancers, but eventually dissolved several years later. At that point, Sheehan felt that she had enough experience and community demand to open her own dance school, which she did in 2008, called the Celtic Spirit Dancers. She enlisted the help of Don McCarron, well-known from “Lord of the Dance” (whom she had met when he came out to Newfoundland a year or so earlier) to raise her own level of technique and advise on teaching her students so that they could get to competition level. In order to deal with the cost and logistics of competing, Sheehan registered six students in a distance feis in Philadelphia in 2009, through the AAIDT (Association for American Irish Dance Teachers) and has done so annually since then. While the feis, or competition, has its roots and cultural heart in Ireland, feiseanna are held throughout the world, both in the Irish diaspora as well as in

many jurisdictions where Irish dance is taught, performed, and competed. The response has been so overwhelming that Sheehan recently took her dancers to Ireland in April 2012 to watch the World Irish Dance championships in Belfast, then to Donegal to train with McCarron, and then to tour around Ireland. As of 2012 she had 60 dancers at a relatively new school that is run part-time, in the evenings, a significant number considering the small size of the town in which she resides. She continues to maintain her studio.

In his 2003 article “The Heritage Arts Imperative”, Barre Toelken argues that the most intense cultural products are found on the periphery. He states:

In the old homeland, culture and language continue to be modified and naturally change, but out on the margins, among people trying to maintain a cultural identity in new places, arts often become more noticeably conservative and yet, of course, also dynamic and emergent due to their performance in a fresh setting. (2003: 199)

Although this reliance on Irishness and its symbols is found in step-dancing throughout the province, Sheehan does face the challenge of isolation from not just the larger Irish dance world, but the Irish dance scene in Newfoundland as well. Thus, she relies on a number of Irish and Irish-inspired symbols – shamrocks, ghillies, green costumes, and (after recent purchases in Belfast) Irish dance wigs – to claim a space for Irish dance in Grand Falls-Windsor and to be clear, through tangible as well as intangible cultural products, on what her school is about and where its heritage lies.

So Sheehan created both the only Irish dance school in Newfoundland outside St. John’s, as well as the only Irish dance school in the province that participates in competitions. Competition is a longstanding phenomenon that is critical to most Irish dance schools worldwide, and has overtaken numerous other dance genres as well, with a small number of local dance schools that offer ballet, tap, and hip hop participating. How has this happened in four short years?

In part, Sheehan attributes her success to the fact that she does not make her living from her dance school. With full-time employment at the College of the North Atlantic campus in Grand Falls-Windsor, Sheehan feels she can run the Celtic Spirit Dancers exactly as she wants to, and whether that means having 30 or 100 students. She says that she would not be able to run her school in this way if she was depending on high enrolment numbers to earn a living. Because she has this freedom, Sheehan says that once she moved towards competition with her students, how she teaches – and how the dancers feel about

class – changed significantly. She says, before she began adjudication and competition through the distance feis:

When I first started Irish dancing, I taught them the basics but if I started to see the students getting bored, then I would not push them along. I would give them stuff that they weren't necessarily ready for, because I wanted to keep their interest. That was my goal, to keep them interested in Irish dancing. And what happened is that I could see bad habits developing.

I wasn't able to put together a lesson plan for the class because I had too many people in there at all different levels. They [students] didn't have the discipline to work on it themselves because it was all the process of "we're having fun". Whereas the girls I've got now, they're having fun but they're having fun because they love it, because they know that they're trying to get something even harder and something a little bit higher. They absolutely love it and they are completely focused. My whole focus now is, you're going to do something over and over again until you get it perfect. And if you find that boring, well then, leave. That's it. I'd rather have 50 die-hard, dedicated students who come in and they know right off the bat that when they walk into the studio they[ve] got to warm up, they[ve] got to get for me on the yellow line, and they [have to] start those over-two-threes, and I don't have to say to them "higher", "point your toe out straight". And they're the ones that never, ever get tired of doing the same thing over and over again, because through the distance feis, they've learned that even the most basic steps need to be perfected in order to get them to reach a higher level.

Not only has the feis driven Sheehan and her dancers to push more and more towards stronger technique and higher levels of performance, but it has provided a means by which Sheehan, initially an outsider to the community, a way to connect to Grand Falls-Windsor. However, unlike Irish dance in the St. John's area, which tends to rely on the Irishness inherent in the performance culture of much of the Avalon peninsula, Irish dance has become a welcome part of the town through a very different ideological route.

Sheehan feels, although the association her school competes through is American-based, and the vast majority of the other participating schools are also American, that the distance feis strongly connects her and her dancers to the larger Irish dance world. And this is particularly important to her, living in a company town with no dance colleagues nearby. Despite

the town's industrial history, Sheehan says that she has been surprised with the support she gets:

Received by the community? It's fantastic. I'm not from Grand Falls, I'm from St. John's. It is a mill town; it's very, very hard to get in, to make your way in. But it's very family-oriented. It's probably the most family-oriented community that I've ever experienced. And I've lived in Corner Brook and I've lived in Mount Pearl and I've lived in St. John's. In Grand Falls, if you have a family, and you're involved with your kids and you're involved with your family, then all of a sudden you become part of the community and they'll support everything that you do. Because I had girls who are from Grand Falls in my dance schools, and they're going to Ireland, well the whole community is abuzz about it and money's pouring in left, right, and centre to do anything they can to help those girls. It's very, very family-oriented in that way. So in terms of the support in the community, fantastic.

Thus the Celtic Spirit Dancers attending the Worlds has given the larger community a window through which to see and better understand the distance feis in which the local dancers participate. The feis therefore serves multiple purposes for Sheehan and the Celtic Spirit Dancers. Its manifest function is to raise the level of professionalism of her dancers and dance schools; competition has shifted her mindset in terms of what she wants her dancers to achieve and what she wants her school to be about. The latent function of the distance feis, however, has certainly been a critical way to connect: to connect her, as a dance teacher, to other teachers across the world; to connect her dance school to the larger Irish dance community; to connect her dancers to other dancers in far-off places in terms of personal development and competition achievement; to connect her school to the community of Grand Falls-Windsor, and the community to the worldwide Irish diaspora, whether the town itself sees itself as part of that world or not. In her introduction to *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Liliane Weissberg discusses the link between culture and the collective social group. She argues that cultural memory not only is linked to the past, but also frames the present (1999, 16-18). To draw a parallel to step-dancing in Newfoundland today, the cultural background of the dancer is not relevant here; it is the cultural memory of Newfoundland as Irish, and the dance style's Irish roots, that are important. And whether that cultural memory is embedded across generations, as it is in many parts of the province; or whether it is recently forged, as in the case of Grand Falls-Windsor, it serves as an im-

portant key to an understanding of how culture is embodied and performed through groups such as the Celtic Spirit Dancers.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the lexicon is somewhat confusing, each step dance style boasts its own provenance and stylistic distinction. Traditional Newfoundland step dance would be what would be known as "kitchen dancing": untrained, improvised, social. Irish-Newfoundland step dance was brought to Newfoundland in the 1930s by the Christian Brothers and is now carried on through the St. Pat's Dancers. Finally, traditional Irish step dance may now be more commonly known as "Riverdance" step dance, originating in Ireland but now found throughout the Irish diaspora and beyond.



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