Images, Voices, and Reflections on Cape Breton Step Dance Style

Mats Melin, University of Limerick

Every dance form has its own stylistic traits ascribed to it by its community of performers, and Cape Breton step-dancing is no exception. Even though this vernacular percussive dance style shares many traits with other Canadian and North American step dance forms, it has certain markers that are singled out by its practitioners as aesthetic key points. In my book *One with the Music: Cape Breton Step Dancing Tradition and Transmission* (2015), I discuss many aspects of this traditional dance style, but here I would like to single out a few reflections and comments on some aesthetic keywords.

American dance scholar Adrienne Kaeppler (2001) posits that the notion of "dance" is understood as its "form" (or perhaps better thought of as the content entity), and that form is a combination of structure and style. The *structure* is the different combinations of all those little movements (referred to, for example, as *elements* and *motifs* – or steps – by dance analysts) that are conceptually understood emically by a certain group of people. These individual movements are then combined into meaningful segments. In Cape Breton, what would be called "a step" or "part of a step", such as shuffles, back steps, or the hop step, dance researchers would call "motifs". When these movements are strung together in a specific way, it creates a dance (as conceived by a specific group of people at a specific time) (Kaeppler 2001: 51). Kaeppler approaches style by positioning it as an emic, or insider, concept, part of the idea of "dance," and draws on Schapiro's (1962) notion of style as "form, quality, or expression of whole cultures, groups, or individuals" (Kaeppler 2001: 51). Kaeppler continues:

> Style seems to refer to persistent patterns in ways of performing structure – from subtle qualities of energy to the use of body parts as recognised by the people of a specific dance tradition.... The resulting form is understood by an observer through communicative competence in a specific system of movement knowledge. (62)

Those who have "communicative competence", to use Dell Hymes's term (1977), among both performers and observers (often the same people, in Cape Breton), have learned the shared rules that apply to Cape Breton step dance. Thus the dance may tell us something about the culture itself, based on who performs, how many perform and the interactions between performers and their audience or community. The way the dance itself is realized

through the use of vertical and horizontal space, and the way the dancer moves in a locally accepted fashion, informs us generally of socially accepted cultural norms. By looking at how Cape Breton step-dancing is realized with the help of certain keywords and notions, all which are closely interconnected, we may learn aspects of its stylistic hallmarks.

Close To the Floor and Old Style
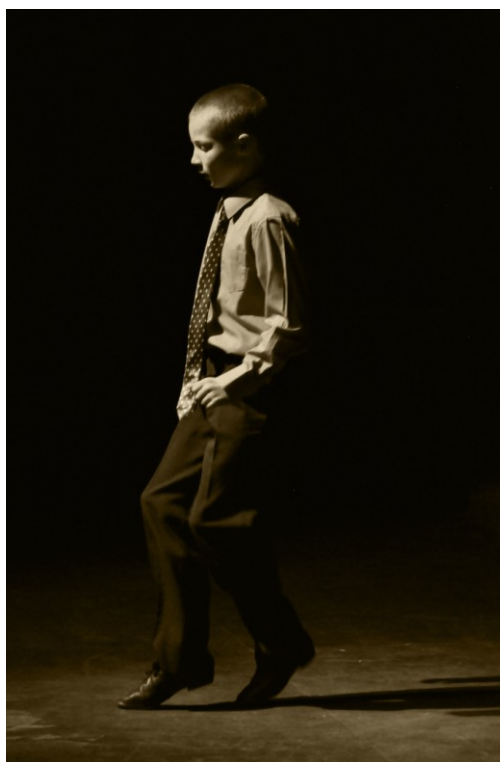
Figure 1: Stephen MacLennan dancing at a Celtic Colours concert at Strathspey Place in Mabou, October 2014.

In Figures 1 and 2, young dancer Stephen MacLennan, son of Kelly MacLennan of the well-known Warner Sisters, perfectly shows the notion of step-dancing "close to the floor". The term is often used as an all-embracing umbrella term incorporating the notions of light, neat, nifty, and tidy dancing, as well as connotations of "old style" hallmarks. The idea is that you keep close to one spot on the floor without elevating or moving laterally too much whilst dancing, but at the same time expressing a lot of energy through foot movements performed in a small, low and precise fashion. Stephen's aunt, Melody (Warner) Cameron, told me that this "close to the floor" notion, for her, goes right back to what her father taught her and what his father in turn

taught him (interview with author, 2007). Melody's father, Norman Warner, learned to dance on a small board. It prevented him from moving around too much. Melody said that dancers aim to keep their feet close to the floor but still look lively. They stay relaxed, with their hands down by their sides. "Just do the movements," she instructs.

Figure 2: Stephen MacLennan dancing in West Mabou hall in October 2016.

Minnie MacMaster, mother of fiddler Natalie MacMaster, told me that many steps have changed

over time, but the basics – the hop step, shuffles, and the backstep – all remain (interview with author, 2009). The backstep, for example, was for her the hard thing to learn to do stylistically correctly. Mechanically executing the four movements of the backstep (step on your supporting foot [beat 1], shuffle with your working foot [beats 2-3] and hop on your supporting foot to end [beat 4]), is, at one level, fairly straightforward to do. But applying the right energy, creating a flow of movement, keeping the feet close to the floor while at the same time appearing light and neat is harder to achieve when trying to embody the Cape Breton step dance style. Some of the steps were a bit more complicated, but all were very "close to the floor". Minnie's grandfather, "Big" Dan Cameron or Dòmhnull Mòr (Iain 'Ic Aonghais), was a very close-to-the-floor dancer, according to Minnie's mother, Maggie Ann (Cameron) Beaton. All the people Minnie looked up to when growing up danced close to the floor. They may have differed in their ability to maintain their good poise – the way they held and presented themselves, for example – but they were all nonetheless good dancers. Those dancers with strong core stability and an appearance of lightness to their verticality, with their heads held naturally level, seem to be favoured. These dancers did not move around too much or use any wide "flinging" movements of the legs and arms. Perhaps one could say that they were all equally competent on one level while expressing small differences on another.

A young fiddler and dancer from Little Narrows, Anita MacDonald, explained that she likes the fact that the Cape Breton style is close to the floor, as opposed to styles in which the dancers lift their legs high off the ground (interview with author, 2009). The local style is very relaxed. When she was learning to dance, she was told to pick a spot on the wall and focus on it. Later, as she watched Jean MacNeil and Bonnie-Jean MacDonald-Cutliffe dance, she specifically noticed and admired their relaxed manner of dancing. The steps they both did were very traditional, in her opinion, which is what she wants her own style to be. She does not like to do steps with a lot of lateral movement or that involve flicking her legs up and forward and back, or movements such as twisting the foot sideways and so forth. Her grandfather Charlie Ellis's style was very traditional. Although it involved a lot of complicated elements, the way he put them together was not overly flashy.

One of the famed exponents of this close-to-the-floor style of dancing was the late Willie Francis Fraser of Deepdale near Inverness. He was known for his good timing, musicality, and particularly subtle take on footwork. Willie passed away in March 2015 at age 100. Throughout his life he had remained committed to all things Gaelic, including songs, stories, and especially step-dancing. Willie

did not particularly approve of new innovations such as "ankle bends" or "ankle twists", which he famously labeled "quivers". His children and grandchildren have maintained the family style, one that prioritizes subtle rhythmic nuances over flashy visuals. As his daughter Clare MacQuarrie told me, their family style thus has very tight boundaries compared to how many other younger dancers perform, who sometimes favour flashier steps and push the boundaries when looking for or creating "new" steps (interview with author, 2007).

In Figure 2, Willie Fraser, then aged 82, step dances to the fiddle playing of Fr. Angus Morris at a ceilidh on the island of South Uist in Scotland during the first Ceòlas Summer School in 1996. Note that Fr. Angus is keeping a close eye on Willie's feet as he is dancing. The communication between the fiddler and dancer is visually strong in this picture.
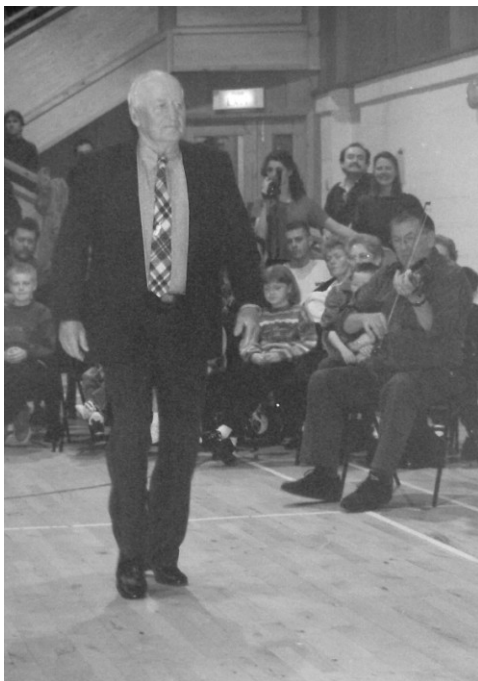
Figure 2: Willie Fraser step dances to the fiddling of Fr. Angus Morris at the Ceòlas Summer School, South Uist, Scotland, 1996.

Changes to the close-to-the-floor style continue, however, as part of an ongoing process. Port Hastings-born dancer and pianist Harvey Beaton remarked that combining steps by dancing a step on the right foot but then a different step on the left foot, and then repeating this combination by starting on the left foot (doubling back), would be something relatively new (interview with author, 2007). Earlier dancers would have typically done four single steps on alternate feet followed by two "doubles", or doubled-up steps. Some might have done a four-bar step combination on each side.

Taking combinations of old steps and making them into longer new steps is a new concept, but some more conservative dancers consider them borderline acceptable. Personally, I agree with Harvey that in some cases it can also become difficult for the observer to distinguish one step from another. The flow of clear movements and steps can become cloudy compared to the older way of presenting the dance material.

John Robert Gillis, who was born in Kenloch, described different patterns of dancing back in the 1950s and early 1960s compared with today (interview with author, 2009). The movement repertoire was smaller in those days, and movements introduced subsequently (by innovation or assimilation from other dance styles) allow for different motif combinations, which in turn create a different movement flow. Of course, certain dancers today still use "old steps" that have been around for years. Other steps are regional, performed more often in one area of Cape Breton but not as much in others. Dancers' individual styles can differ quite a bit. Current dancers do a "lot of stuff you didn't see back in those days". Newer motif material includes, for example, what appears visually as a bending or "breaking" of the ankle or the current use of steps with a "5-count" feel to their rhythm which were unheard of in the heyday of dancers such as Willie Fraser. Change is constant and natural.

However, change, as is often the case, is also fraught. Pianist and step dancer Mac Morin from Troy expressed his personal concern about certain types of change: "my biggest [anxiety] is [that] I'm concerned about where some of the Cape Breton dancing is going. Because I'm really … just like anything else, everything changes, it has to change a bit. As long as it changes with the appreciation of where it's come from. But I don't [always] think there is that appreciation or the conscious knowledge of what [it] was or where it's going" (interview with author, 2008). In my encounters with the Cape Breton dance community over the years, I have found that Mac Morin's concern is quite representative. Many are asking the same questions about where the tradition is going and about the level of respect for, and knowledge of, the past. A common notion is that if a dancer has an understanding of the core concepts and movements, then nobody has to worry that the important aspects of the style will be lost. A dancer with a solid knowledge of core movements recognizes how important they are and, in turn, passes them on to other dancers.

Neat, Light, and Nifty

Figure 3, of sisters Kelly MacLennan and Melody Cameron, shows the desired qualities of neatness, lightness, and "nifty" dancing. They embrace these qualities in order to stay as much as possible on the

spot, and dance lightly while keeping their bodies erect and their heads held up, looking straight ahead. Their hands are held by their sides in a relaxed manner, allowing just their feet to work from the "knees on down" or even from the "ankles on down" as typical expressions go. A few other terms are in use as well to signify these qualities, such as "nice" and "snappy". This variety of descriptors illustrates how each individual, using his or her own choice of words, explains similarly appreciated qualities in a dancer. There seems to be no need for a standardized terminology, as all these words convey a similar meaning and are understood in the Cape Breton community. Often the words "neat" and "nifty" are used to infer lightness, such as when, for example, talking about a large, heavy man dancing neatly or as "light as a feather". The notion of neatness or tidiness seems to be very important within Scottish Gaelic aesthetics as it appears in the words of puirt-a-beul (mouth music, songs used to accompany dancing), such as "*Grinn donn sgiobalta mo ghiobag air an ùrlar*" (Neatly-formed, brown-haired, agile, my neat one on the dance floor) (Dòmhnallach 2012: 142). Sheldon MacInnes explains: "*neat* sum[s] up some kind of quality that old-time dancers possessed. You can do a lot of steps without much movement above the knees ... a lot of steps in a very small area" (cited in MacGillivray 1988: 97).

Figure 3: Kelly MacLennan and Melody Cameron, Celtic Colours International Festival, 2014.

Considering the quality of men's dancing, fiddler and dancer Andrea Beaton told me that often men are thought to be heavy but then, when they dance, they are light on their feet and can hold themselves well (interview with author, 2009). They display a particular stance and hold their arms appropriately. They are powerful and graceful at the same time.

Harvey MacKinnon of Whycocomagh (originally from Hays River) recalled in conversation back in 2007 that years ago he saw a different style of dancing than what he mostly sees today:

The last time I saw [Hector MacKinnon] dancing was in Iona at the Highland Village and he was 75 years old then and that must be 35 years ago, maybe. He danced there and I thought he was a very neat, nice dancer. I didn't think he danced so much different to the way I danced myself, with that style. [It was] probably not the same; [he had] some of the same steps but not all the steps I do. (interview with author, 2007)

Port Hastings native Harvey Beaton (see Figure 4 in which he is in full flight), certainly exhibits light, neat, and nifty footwork when he dances. He is also known for his great timing and musicality, fitting suitable steps to the tune played. Many also ascribe the terms "close to the floor" and "old time" to Harvey's dancing (Melin 2012). I first met Harvey in 1992 in Scotland and remember my first impressions echoing all the sentiments above. Seeing him perform for the first time, I was struck by how evenly balanced his footwork was, how lightly and effortlessly he performed long routines of strathspeys and reels, and how impeccable his timing was. I also recall noticing how he always seemed to match his steps to the tunes played by Buddy MacMaster. Most of the time it was like they were performing as one, feeding off each other's performance energy! It was exciting to watch and perhaps one of the reasons I now, some 23 years later, write this article, having spent much of my time since that encounter exploring the Cape Breton step dance tradition.

Figure 4: Harvey Beaton performing at the Buddy MacMaster tribute concert, Celtic Colours International Festival, 2014.

Timing and Dancing inside the Music

Timing indicates how well a dancer is able to perform his or her movements in relation to the music (or song). A good sense of timing, hitting the feet on the floor exactly right to create good flow, conveying a sense of ease, and dancing with a lift that matches the swing of the music, are all seen as very important. Having good timing enables a dancer to achieve the criteria required to be considered *neat* and *light,* for example. Indeed, many dancers have told me that good timing is even more important than the number of steps one can perform. The general message is that the number of different steps counts for very little if one's timing is off. A judgment of good timing is one of the highest accolades awarded a dancer, and it is essential for good dancing practice (Melin 2015).

Harvey MacKinnon emphasized just this:

"I always thought that one of the real important parts of dancing is the timing. I always loved the timings. If you have impeccable timing and you can hear the feet.… I like to hear feet. If someone's dancing and I can hear their feet and you hear that it's right with the music, it makes it that much better" (interview with author, 2007).

Harvey, pictured in Figure 5, is indeed known for his good timing and he also displays that good poise in a dancer, described earlier.
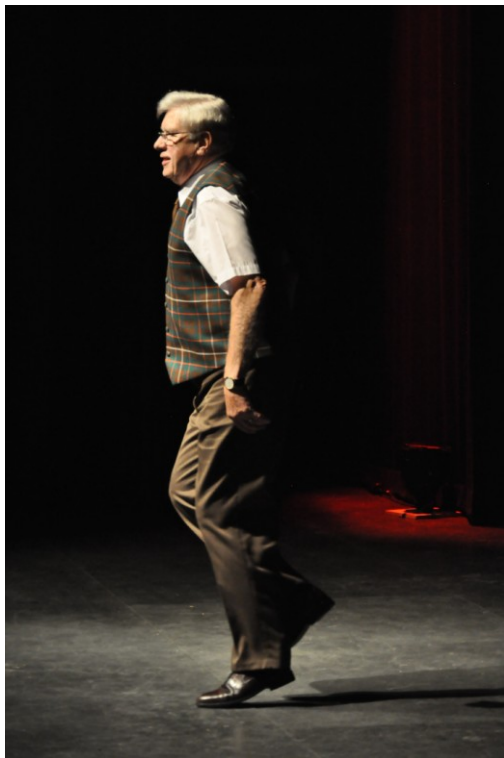
Figure 5: Harvey MacKinnon performing at a Celtic Colours concert, 2014.

West Mabou guitar player Derrick Cameron explained that dancing is often undervalued with respect to what it contributes to maintaining certain aspects in the fiddle style (interview with author, 2011). The connection between dance and the fiddle is very important. The dance helps maintain a certain emphasis of the beat and the drive that is expected of the fiddler when playing for dancers. The symbiotic relationship between the dance and fiddle tradition also helps maintain that particular tempo that dancers like, while ensuring that a body of dance tunes remains part of fiddlers' active tune repertoire.

Figure 6: Mac Morin performing at a Celtic Colours concert, 2014.

Mac Morin, seen above dancing while holding his fiddle, has many different steps, and also makes up his own which have a particular stamp to them. "He is thin and light which adds to his style", explains fiddler and step dancer Andrea Beaton, showcasing his nimble footwork and good timing (interview with author, 2009).

"He has great accents. When he comes down on his foot, [it creates a] wow factor. It works, as he uses a timing that is different. He comes down on a spot [in the music] that others don't. He can travel if he wants to, [he kind of] floats. He travels without looking like he is trying to do so. It just happens." (ibid.)

Sandy Beaton of Mabou, in explaining what signifies good dancing, simply stated that being "on

the beat is number one". The question for him is often whether a person is "dancing" or are they merely "doing steps" (interview with author, 2008). Andrea Beaton explained: "Knowing the tune is important, knowing where the tune is going … know[ing] the character of the steps, [and that] this tune will fit this step as the shuffle fits quite nicely to that part of the tune" (interview with author, 2009).

Margaret (MacEachern) Dunn of Queensville told me that she never followed a routine in her life (interview with author, 2007). The tunes have nearly always dictated her steps, she said, because some steps fit certain tunes better than others. She danced "freestyle" but with a sort of pattern, or an order of steps, in mind, which can be deviated from as required; a freedom was there to connect to the tune as she felt was appropriate. She recalled that, in her younger days, dancers always danced to both a strathspey and reel. Dancers told the fiddlers whether they wanted one, two or three strathspeys, but the norm would have been two strathspeys followed by a bunch of reels. This is still very much the case, but there seems to be an inclination by many dancers to favour dancing and innovating new reel steps rather than strathspey steps. The standard length of dancing strathspeys is today one tune twice through, followed by a number of reel steps. Furthermore, at square dances, when solo dancers share their steps, most commonly only the first dancer dances both strathspey and reel steps while all the others dance reel steps alone.

When she was getting up to step dance in her younger days, Mary Janet MacDonald reflects,

I don't know if I would start with my left foot or my right foot. It didn't matter … Would I start at the beginning of a phrase or in the middle of a phrase, or would I do three steps instead of four, would I do them all evenly? I don't know and ... that was not something that was taught, it wasn't structured like that….

Speaking for myself, there is a spontaneity that occurs when you're at a square dance because it's not something that you've pre-planned. You just get up and you dance. If I'm going to be at a concert by myself, solo dancing … I would do the exact same thing on the stage as I would in the hall. It would be totally spontaneous, [I] wouldn't know what step I was going to do next, the same as the fiddler doesn't know what tune he's going to play next. However, if I'm going to dance with my family, I'm going to make everybody dance the same and it takes a lot of planning and yes, it would be different on stage. But if the family were at a square dance, which is rare, but if we go to a square dance and there's me and Kelly, Krista and Margie, ... all of us love to dance, so we all get up to dance together. So we call out the

steps to one another so we're all doing the same thing. So we're not spontaneous. We're not spontaneous just because we know it kind of looks better if you're all doing the same thing, but that's not traditional. (interview with author, 2007)

Joël Chiasson, pianist and step dancer from Chéticamp who now lives in Sydney, observed that "you can tell when a dancer is interpreting a tune" and that is what he appreciates most (interview with author, 2009). He feels that others dance almost a routine, regardless of the music. Joël remembers reaching a stage in his dancing when he could almost subconsciously dance the music. As he played piano more, he gained knowledge of the music, which in turn helped his dancing. The music suggests movements to him. He appreciates other dancers who he sees responding to the music in a similar manner.

Harvey MacKinnon explained:

I've danced to people that just played violin and they said "Look, that's just as good as having somebody on the piano." Because... the tap is there and keeps time to the music. A lot of the young people ... that play, they'll always mention just hearing you dancing on the floor ... how much it helps them along when they're playing. I think a good dancer makes a better fiddler and a good fiddler will make a better dancer – they'll just ... they complement one another. So, lots of times, I remember going to [square] dances years ago and you'd start the dance and it was maybe a little kind of draggy or wasn't quite up to par and you'd get three or four good couples on the floor, right up close to the stage, and before that set was through, boy, the fiddle was just coming back ... give him a lift to get him over that hump starting out. The music would be just great after that. (interview with author, 2007).

Andrea Beaton made the point that dancers who also play fiddle or piano (or both) understand the beat and timing well. Their instrumental experience gives them good rhythm, and many of them have a variety of good steps. They are all confident dancers who do not hold back when performing: "They don't have routines; they just feel whoever is playing" (interview with author, 2009).

The sense of timing is deeply connected to the notion of aural learning (Melin 2012, 2015), and the ability to know and hear the pulse – or "drive", to use the local term – of the music. Understanding how the local music is realized, knowing the tune repertoire, knowing individual players' ways of performing particular tunes, and understanding the bowing technique, for example, will assist a dancer to achieve good timing. A dancer's timing also

provides a point of reference for the musicians, confirming that they are playing a tune just right. Thus, two-way communication is at work here, mutually benefiting each performer, as I observed between Harvey Beaton and Buddy MacMaster when they performed together in 1992 (described above). What is also at play here is the ability to hear the music's rhythm and pulse in the dance (Melin, 2015).

In my experience, the Cape Breton music and dance community shares a general understanding of how the upper body, head, and arms are held when dancers are in action. Even though certain individuals' appearances differ from the norm, by leaning forward while dancing, for example, or swinging one or both arms, the generally accepted stance is that the body and head are held upright, to which most dancers adhere. The interaction between dancers and musicians, and between dancers performing together, is another aspect of the dance tradition that can be observed when dancers acknowledge each other in small subtle ways, with looks or little nods or the like, while dancing, or showing increased energy if the playing is particularly good. This is again often acknowledged by the musicians with an increase in the energy of their playing. Some of this can be seen when sisters Dawn and Margie Beaton step dance. Observe the example of the "broken ankle" movement, described earlier, in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Sisters Dawn and Margie Beaton.

In summary, the keywords highlighted above – "close-to-the-floor", "light", "neat", "old style", and so forth – do, when combined, articulate the aesthetic preferences of the Cape Breton dance community as a whole. Today the performers of step-dancing in Cape Breton hail from many different ethnic groups. Even taking into account that Scottish Gaelic settlers were once the dominant group in step-dancing, and that many of these keywords may well come from them, it may currently be better to think of these aesthetic preferences as spanning across the whole of traditional Cape Breton step dance culture. Having said that, I get a feeling that many of the aesthetic preferences verbalized above are based firstly on family and individual tastes rather than purely based on the often-unvoiced and presumed community aesthetic preferences. Adrienne Kaeppler says that terms such as "aesthetics" and "style" are "slippery", as "these are all words that we use every day, but we do not have any common understanding of what they mean" and particularly not when applied cross-culturally (2001: 50). Aesthetics, on the surface, may seem to be a fairly straightforward term inferring the appreciation of beauty or harmony from a primarily visual perspective, but as Raymond Williams rightly reveals, it is a rather complex term that cannot be divorced from social or cultural interpretations (1981). Aesthetic, as a term, has plasticity, which allows individuals to interpret its meaning and usage to any cultural expression such as dance, thus creating "untraceable" problems in relation to the criteria used in defining it in each instance.

When I reflect on all I have learnt over the years about Cape Breton step dance, I see the maintenance of these keywords and phrases, together with a deep understanding of what they mean, as being as important as the practical transmission of the actual dance movements. If all these aspects of the tradition are maintained, I see Cape Breton step-dancing continuing to evolve slowly along the same lines it has successfully done so far.

Interviews and Personal Communication

Beaton, Andrea. 2009. Recorded interview with author. Limerick, Ireland. 4 June.

Beaton, Harvey. 2007. Recorded interview with author. Port Hood, Cape Breton Island. 31 July.

Beaton, Sandy, Jessie Beaton and Donald Roddy MacDonald. 2008. Recorded interview with author. Mabou, Cape Breton Island. 28 July.

Cameron, Derrick. 2011. Skype interview with author. West Mabou, Cape Breton Island. 14 January.

Cameron, Melody. 2007. Recorded interview with author. West Mabou, Cape Breton Island. 30 July.

Chiasson, Joël. 2009. Recorded interview with author. Sydney, Cape Breton Island. 14 October.

Dunn, Margaret (MacEachern). 2007. Recorded interview with author. Antigonish, Nova Scotia. 11 August.

Gillis, John Robert. 2009. Personal communication with author. Gaelic College, St. Ann's, Cape Breton Island. 11 October.

MacDonald, Anita. 2009. Recorded interview with author. Cape Breton University, Sydney, Cape Breton Island. 14 October.

MacDonald, Mary Janet. 2007. Recorded interview with author. Port Hood, Cape Breton Island. 31 July.

MacKinnon, Harvey. 2007. Recorded interview with author. Whycocomagh, Cape Breton Island. 6 August.

MacMaster, Minnie. 2009. Recorded interview with author. Troy, Cape Breton Island. 9 October.

MacQuarrie, Clare. 2007. Recorded interview with author. Inverside, Inverness, Cape Breton Island. 2 August.

Morin, Mac. 2008. Recorded interview with author. Kilmurry Lodge Hotel, Limerick, Ireland. 11 November.

References

Dòmhnallach, Rob. 2012. An Cùrsa Gàidhlig. Gaelic 521 Course Notes. An Gearran: Àrd-Sgoil Chòirneil MacIlleghlas.

Hymes, Dell. 1977. *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kaeppler, Adrienne L. 2001. Dance and the Concept of Style. *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33: 49-63.

MacGillivray, Allister. 1988. *A Cape Breton Ceilidh.* Cape Breton: Sea-Cape Music Ltd.

Melin, Mats. 2012. Exploring the Percussive Routes and Shared Commonalities in Cape Breton Step-dancing. PhD dissertation, University of Limerick.

———. 2015. *One with the Music: Cape Breton Step Dancing Tradition and Transmission*. Sydney, Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Press.

Schapiro, Meyer. 1962. Style. In *Anthropology today: Selections*, 278-303. Ed. S. Tax. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1981. *The Sociology of Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Canadian Society
for Traditional Music

Société canadienne pour
les traditions musicales