

New book on Festival Dancing in Northern Ireland – October 2018

When Orangemen and soldiers took to Irish dancing: the new book which traces the huge influence of Protestants on a tradition mistakenly believed to be preserve of Catholics

Writer **Angeline King**, from Larne, was intrigued when a friend told her that Protestants didn't take part in Irish dancing. After all, she'd been a keen dancer since childhood. But then she embarked on a fascinating journey of discovery which culminates tomorrow in the publication of her book on the history of Irish dancing festivals. Here Angeline (43), charts her path to publication



Angeline Kelly (nee King), author of the new book on dancing festivals

It was an old boyfriend from Belfast who first sparked my interest in the history of Irish dancing. He saw me dancing once and assumed I was Catholic, not realising that Irish dancing was popular among tens of thousands of Protestants across the province.

A few years after university, I demonstrated a reel at a St Patrick's Day party and a Catholic friend from west Belfast exclaimed: "That's not Irish dancing - that's Scottish dancing!"

I was never a good dancer, but I knew the difference between Scottish and Irish dancing. "Protestants don't Irish dance," he went on, and I admit that I was mildly surprised given the number of hours I'd dedicated to the Andrews School in Larne on a Saturday morning, a dance school located in the same hall in which I had practised the triangle on a Wednesday night with the Chainé Memorial Flute Band.

When I began novel writing, word came back from Dublin that a scene in my book, *A Belfast Tale*, was not accurate because there were some Protestant Irish dancers in it. I was on my way out to an adult Irish dancing class at the Old Presbyterian Church around the corner, and I stopped in my tracks and asked myself if there was a story there after all. I began writing a blog and before I knew it, I'd clocked up 80,000 words.

I explored the reasons why Protestants got involved in Irish dancing of the Gaelic League variety when other aspects of Gaelic culture were not so readily received, and I discovered a Belfast gentleman called Mr Peadar O'Rafferty, who had gone into unionist communities in the 1920s to teach Irish dancing. This was much to the surprise of nationalist observers in Derry who kept a close eye on the development of Gaelic arts in a recently partitioned Northern Ireland.

A folk dancing revival had swept across the British Isles and, in Ulster, middle-class folk dancing enthusiasts scoured the countryside for dances. On their travels, they crossed paths with the Gaelic League who were also seeking to record old dances. Mr O'Rafferty represented both the Gaelic League and the Irish folk dancing associations, and he took Irish dancing to dozens of Girl Guide units in the 1920s and set up a class in Larne in the British Legion hall.

Mr O'Rafferty's most important achievement was to initiate Irish folk dancing competitions at musical festivals. Back then, the genre of dance was called Irish folk dancing and it was based on adaptations of dances found in the Ulster countryside as well as those found in the south-west of Ireland.

Mr O'Rafferty was a busy man, spreading Irish dancing into many church-based and educational organisations. By the 1940s, it would have been difficult to find a girls' Protestant church-based organisation that did not include Irish dancing in some form, be it country dances or step (solo) dances.

It wasn't all about girls, however. Boy Scouts were also keen Irish folk dancers.

Irish dancing even spread into the British Army, with Territorial Army units sending Irish dancing teams to musical festival competitions.

Irish folk dancing was extremely popular in my home town, Larne, where it is now common to find families with four, five or even six generations of dancers. In Larne, Irish dancing has a legacy stretching back to the first Irish folk dancing festival in 1928. A silver cup called the Cashel Bowl has survived 89 years, and it contains the names of many of Ulster's foremost dancers. In the early 1930s, most of the Larne dancers were pupils of the Belfast sisters, the Misses Stella and Patricia Mulholland.

Stella Mulholland, who had been tutored by Mr O'Rafferty, set up an Irish dancing class at the British Legion in Larne in 1931. Like her contemporaries, she had learned a variety of dance genres, including Scottish. Later, rules came into force meaning that Irish dance teachers could not teach 'foreign' dances if they were registered with the Gaelic League's Irish dancing governing body, An Coimisiun. Irish folk dancing burgeoned when it was added to the musical festivals. Up until that point, the focus of festivals had been on music, singing and verse speaking.

Stella's sister, Patricia, succeeded Mr O'Rafferty by teaching Girl Guides to Irish dance. Most notably, she travelled to the Festival of Britain in London with a team in 1951. Miss Mulholland was most renowned for her Irish ballets, theatre spectacles that featured Irish dancing instead of classical ballet. She also ran a class from her home in north Belfast throughout her lifetime. Such was her reputation that parents were willing to travel from Bangor, Larne, Ballymena and other provincial towns to her home, even during the most violent years of the Troubles. Protestant and Catholic children held hands in Miss Mulholland's living room while adults waged war at a stone's throw from the location.

On the other side of town, the Ballynaveigh School also offered a setting for children to mix together when sectarian tensions were at their height.

Ballynaveigh School teacher Gertie Mulligan was a great proponent of cross-community relations, actively promoting the festival tradition of Irish dancing through her work on the committee of the Festival Dance Teacher's Association (FDTA).

Fellow FDTA committee member Marjorie Andrews, my own teacher, dedicated more than 60 years of her life to Irish dancing, opening up a class in Larne in 1936 that grew to be one of the largest and most competitive in Ulster. In the middle of the Troubles in the 1970s, the Larne Irish Folk Dancing Festival was attracting 2,400 dancers from around the province. By that time, the festival tradition of Irish dancing was well established in Coleraine, Portadown, Bangor, Ballyclare, Ballymoney, Ballymena, Belfast, Portrush, Portstewart, Ballycastle, Glenravel, the Glens, Loughel, Greenisland, Carrickfergus and Newtownards.

The festival tradition can be identified today by its dress code. No wigs, tan or flamboyant costumes are allowed. What is more unique, however, is that festival Irish dance classes have always comprised an equal number of Catholics and Protestants. In Ballymena in the 1960s, four of the five Irish dancing teachers were Protestant, including Sadie Bell, who ran the famous Seven Towers School. Ballymena remains one of the most important centres of Irish dancing in Ulster, and many classes and competitions over the years have been hosted in the local Protestant hall, not least the FDTA Ulster Championships.

By researching dancing prior to the Gaelic Revival, I discovered a very good reason why Protestants were such keen Irish dancers: it transpired that they had been Irish dancing all along.

In the 1800s, solo Irish dancing was simply called step dancing, and when the men of the Orange Order provided a party piece at the end of an installation or social event, the more nimble-footed brethren demonstrated their steps to old and new Irish tunes. The social dances among Catholics and Protestants of

Ulster were known as 'country dances'. These country dances were renamed ceili dances by the Gaelic League in London in the late 1890s.

Although the dances were given something of a polish by middle-class Catholic and Protestant Gaelic Leaguers in the early 1900s, they still hold an important link with Ulster's past.

As for those Scottish influences, there was some truth in the words of my friend from west Belfast. There are Scottish influences in Irish dancing, but they are to be found in both the festival and feis traditions. The Gaelic League went to great lengths to remove foreign elements from their dances in the early 1900s, but it was an impossible task.

The Scottish influences were too ingrained in a dance genre made up of English, Scottish, Irish and pan-European steps, figures and tunes.

I feel it is important to tell the story of our shared culture in Northern Ireland, and I hope that I have done justice to the work of dozens of festival Irish dance teachers, those great champions of peace, who placed the hands of Catholic children into the hands of Protestant children in the name of Irish dancing.

Angeline King is the writer and researcher for Mid & East Antrim Council's three-year exhibition, *An Irish Dancing Story*, which opened in Larne in April and travels to the Braid Centre in Ballymena next year. *Irish Dancing: A Festival Story*, is published by Leschenault Press tomorrow, priced £20. Angeline, who has also written two novels, *A Belfast Tale* and *Snugville Street*, and children's book *Children of Latharna*, is appearing at the Nineteenth Literature of Irish Exile in the Mellon Centre in Omagh this Saturday at 3pm, Larne Library on Thursday, October 25 at 6.30pm, Ballymena Library on Thursday, November 15 at 6.30pm, and Suffolk Library in Belfast on Monday, November 19, at 6.30pm