

# Preface

The history of traditional step-dancing in Ireland can be reliably traced only to the first part of the nineteenth century. The first reasonably full accounts of the art come from that period. However, unless it then sprang, fully-formed, into existence, it must be considerably older than that, for the descriptions we have from that time give the impression of an already elaborate and sophisticated form of dance. If we assume that the music and dance developed together it would be reasonable to suggest the mid-eighteenth century as the time when Irish traditional step-dancing crystallised into the form that would be recognised nowadays.

In the nineteenth century emigrants brought it to America where it influenced (some say caused) the emergence of American tap-dance. At the end of the nineteenth century in Ireland it was one of the activities co-opted by the Gaelic League in their effort to foster a “more Irish Ireland”. The early twentieth century saw the creation of an apparatus to regulate the teaching of the dances and the accreditation of teachers. This led to the situation in which step-dance found itself by the 1980s—popularly perceived as a form of dance performed primarily by children in a competition setting, wearing costumes which “display an Irishness which eludes any association with a particular locality or period” (Breandán Breathnach), and with little or no exposure in the form it originally had, that of ordinary social entertainment. This “dance-school” form was to combine, in America, with the earlier tap-dance form to produce Michael Flatley’s style which represents the ultimate development, so far, of Irish dance and which has caught the attention of the world.

Remarkably however, while these developments were taking place, the old form of Irish step-dance, true to the styles of the dancing masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, continued in existence. The traditional dances continued to be taught by dancing masters of the old style, and it is to two of these, Dan Furey and James Keane of Labasheeda in co. Clare, that we are indebted for the survival of the dances in this book.

The post-war years have seen several waves of musical revival in the western world in general and in Ireland in particular. Folk-song, instrumental music and social dance (set-dancing) have each in their turn experienced a massive resurgence of popularity. It was only going to be a matter of time before the turn came for the more difficult step dancing. There had always been enthusiasts who loved the traditional dances and the style and music associated with them. However it was the Willie Clancy Summer School, catalyst and begetter of so many positive developments in Irish music over the past quarter century, that facilitated the new widespread enthusiasm for these dances, by engaging Dan Furey and James Keane to teach them at the annual Summer School. They found a ready audience for the new classes. Many set-dancers in particular found the step dances attractive and their study a way of learning new skills over and above those required for dancing sets. The future of the genre is assured as more and more people every year take it up.

In all their history these dances have never been published. They may have been committed to paper in various ways by various people, but no such record of the dances has ever come to light, and no systematic method of notating the dances has ever been devised. They have survived for a quarter of a millennium by being passed on by example and imitation. Oral transmission is a wonderful mechanism, in good times, to impart vigour and diversity to a tradition. But when the number of practitioners of a tradition falls to very low numbers, as in the recent past, that tradition is dangerously exposed to the risk of extinction.

A system for notating the old dances has now been devised. Its inventor is Michael Tubridy of county Clare, former member of *Ceoltóirí Chualann* and The Chieftains. Michael is also a set-dancer and was an associate of Connie Ryan in the Slievenamon Set-dancers. Michael's system might appear at first sight elaborate and complicated, but it is no more so than the dances it is used to describe. It is, in fact, no more difficult to learn and use than ordinary music notation, upon which it is based. The aspiring dancer who invests the time in learning and understanding the system will discover that the time so spent will be saved over and over again as they find they can use the transcription of the dance as a perfect *aide-memoire* to a dance already seen. As Michael emphasises, these transcriptions are not intended to be a replacement for personal instruction, but should prove a valuable adjunct to it.

The adoption and use of Michael's system should facilitate the dissemination of traditional step-dances and make them far more widely available and appreciated than ever before. We in Brooks Academy believe that this publication may turn out to be of historical importance in the evolution of Irish traditional step-dancing. We are proud and honoured to be associated with it.

*Terry Moylan*