

Saving the Set Dance by Paddy Corry (1970)

Paddy Corry (1916-71) was founder of Ardclough Branch Cómhaltas Ceoltóiri Éireann and first chairman of Kildare County Board of Cómhaltas. This article appeared in the May-June edition of *Treoir*, the Cómhaltas magazine.



On With the Set Dances (By Séamus Ó Cinnéide) in the recent issue of *Treoir*, prompts me to ask what is the position of set dancing throughout the country today. Is that age-old form of enjoyment dying out, and, if so, what can be done to revive set dancing as it was practiced in the country kitchen?

Clare sets have a long tradition. They survived for generations through the popularity of house dances in the county, as did our music.

These house dances were lively and enjoyable affairs and were well organized. Preparations got under way by early afternoon. The “house” was cleared.

The kitchen was always called the “house” and anyone who mentioned a kitchen invariably put in people’s minds a small poky, shiny workshop. But the spacious country kitchen, with its flagged floor, had the status name of “house” and to clear it required moving all moveable furniture into obscure corners. Space, and plenty of it, was needed in the middle.

After that, seats had to be placed in around the walls. Long “forms” were borrowed from the neighbours. Chairs were awkward and relegated to the parlour for old ladies and long-lost friends, who would later gather there for a seanchas in comfort.

One row of chairs was placed near the open hearth. These were the reserved seats for honoured guests and musicians. Granda usually presided over this “cabinet” and saw to their comforts.

By nightfall, all was in order. A blazing turf fire was the focal point. Lamps were trimmed. The dresser gleamed and a cosy calm prevailed before the hilarious scrum that was about to burst.



Ardclough Comhaltas session

Older people came early, some of them by nightfall. Visitors or relatives who travelled a distance came for tea. The dance was given in their honour, or they provided the excuse for the dance anyway – depending on which way you liked to look at it. In Clare a dance would begin at the drop of a hat, but there was always to be a reason for it, however far-fetched, to show respect and appreciation for the function.

Invitations were usually issued to the ladies and, in this too, there was a touch of ceremony. It was deemed offensive to pass on an invitation through someone to the neighbourhood. A messenger sent from the host to each household for that specific purpose was appropriate, or, if time permitted, a note delivered by the postman.

The men and boys were free to come from far and wide. Musicians, or “players” as they were called, received a special invitation and, on arrival, were fussed over and brought to the places of honour by the fire.

Dancing started early – all sets. There was neither a “*Walls of Limerick*” nor any old time waltz, and before the house filled up, the most senior citizens had their fling. These were often the best sets of the night the most respected dancers getting the flag of the fire to stand on.



There was good reason for this too. In the building of every hose an old pot was placed upside down in the foundation below this flag, which was directly on front of the open hearth.

The “*flag of the fire*” resounded musically to the tapping of feet and every learned dancer listened attentively for missed beats or dragging feet in the slide-in. It took courage as

well as skill to take “*the flag of the fire.*”

As the night progressed the young people had their sway. Every set had six figures, four of which were danced to reels, the fifth in jig time, and the last one as a hornpipe. As soon as this tune started the next set of dancers were ready to take the floor.

The dances never lagged, nor did those sitting around lose interest. Rival dancers were well known in every locality and manoeuvres were always afoot to get at least two rivals in the same set.

Sometimes there were four, and the guests climbed on seats to cheer, encourage and praise them right through every figure, battering and tapping, wheeling and double wheeling.

Special reels were called for, and the air was charged alternately with excitement and extravagant words of praise. When the English writer, the [Rev Dr Campbell](#), wrote of [Irish dancers in 1775](#): “they dance as if dancing was the one and only business in life” he might have been watching such a set in progress.

The players’ set was a special and honoured one. For this, the host cleared as large a space as possible and sometimes joined the group. Care was taken that the musician got his seat in comfort and he called the tunes. Everyone respected the “players” and it was customary for the dancers to pause and whisper a word of thanks in their ears before leaving for home.

The male dancers performed all the boisterous and vigorous antics during the dances. It was the privilege of the female to float like thistledown on her partner’s arm throughout the dance. Her feet yielded rhythmically to the music but tapping or “battering” was not encouraged. Indeed, it was considered ungracious to call any attention to herself by tapping her feet at all.

There were good set dancers and bad ones, both male and female. It was no pleasure to play for the poorest dancer, but patience and wit saw the musician through, and good teamwork between dancers and musicians provided superb entertainment for everyone present.

The house dance is fast fading into the realms of folklore, but set dancing is still popular in Clare and in a number of other counties. Practically every county has its distinctive set, some no longer practiced, unfortunately. There are instruction booklets available on céilí dances, but we are standing by while our set dances are allowed to decay. Perhaps the time has come for Cómhaltas to act on this matter., to delve into the past, to rescue and revive our ancient sets and to promote the “*Old Testament*” of Irish dancing.

[Paddy Corry article Treoir May-June 1970 lo res](#)