"*Dannsair air ùrlar-déile thu*": Gaelic evidence about dance from the mid-17th to late-18th century Highlands

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From the 1950s to the 1970s, three scholars – Tom and Joan Flett, and George Emmerson – probed archival evidence to recover aspects of the history of dance in Scotland, both that of the anglophone Lowlands and the Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands. One of the clear conclusions of their research is that forms of dance ultimately developed in and derived from the French court had a strong and pervasive influence on dance in Scotland, particularly in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, including in the Scottish Highlands. This is true of both social and solo dance traditions.[1]

Although these works remain useful starting points in exploring the history of dance in the Highlands they suffer from two major deficiencies: first, these authors did not have the necessary skills to access and interpret the various kinds of Gaelic sources available, many of which remain unedited and untranslated; second, they did not have an adequate framework – chronological or aesthetic – for interpreting and contextualizing how music and dance traditions were adopted and adapted in Gaelic society. Fortunately, a great deal of progress has been made in the last couple of decades on the history and culture of Gaeldom generally, and this is an

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appropriate time to apply these latest insights to the field of dance history in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd.

This article will confirm the extensive influence of French dance on that of the Highlands to the end of the eighteenth century, culminating with the development of sophisticated solo dance styles showcasing precise leg and foot movement, by tracing terminology, cultural allusions and imagery in Gaelic texts, particularly song-poetry. By the late eighteenth century, anglophone dancing masters teaching in the Highlands became the intermediaries of French (and other European) dance fashions. Contrary to modern expectations and sensibilities, dance was not merely a form of entertainment but was a means of conveying social class and thus was a reflection of the stratified nature of European societies, including that of the Gaels.

It is appropriate to begin the story of Scottish dance of the early modern period in Renaissance France, for "by the end of the sixteenth century, the French court had become a kind of crucible, the source of inspiration for dance forms and choreographic spectacles in other European countries and the touchstone by which would-be rivals would be judged."[2] Given the prestige of French élite culture and its wide geographical reach, these innovations eventually spread virtually all over Europe.[3] The paradigm shift in European court culture represented social dance as a package of interlocking ideas, values and practices. Dance was understood to be:

1. a physical expression of ideas about order, structure and coordination in which the courtly world of humans paralleled nature
2. a crucial aspect of the training and education of the élite; the resulting refined manners and graceful deportment distinguished them from the peasantry

3. able to impart by itself moral qualities important for political life: control, vigour, and sound judgment
4. accompanied by stringed instruments of the court (especially fiddle)

Dance was an integral aspect of courtly life all over Renaissance Europe; all of those who expected to associate with the aristocracy had to be able to participate in courtly social dancing. Even the clergy in France received dance instruction.[4] During the Renaissance, "dancing, with its capacity to renew and extend its forms, had become the measure of civility [… and] an indicator of social status."[5] The rapid spread of French dance styles to the noble courts of England, Italy, Sweden, Germany, Russia, and so on, complicates the search for the line of transmission into the Highlands, given that Gaels were in contact with many of the social contexts as merchants, mercenaries, churchmen and aristocrats. Although these secondary lines of diffusion must have also played their part in spreading the new dance fashion (and some discussion below acknowledges this), this study will concentrate primarily on direct French connections.

There is virtually no mention of dancing as such in Irish or Scottish Gaeldom before the sixteenth century, and references are still rare until the late seventeenth century. Bodily movement to music, especially for groups in ring or circle formation, was an aspect of vernacular culture performed for rites of passage or seasonal customs but was beneath the notice of the Gaelic literati as such rites were not a distinctive aspect of élite culture.[6] It was this "paradigm shift" in French court culture that made dance an interest of the Gaelic élite as a way of expressing in physical form their refinement and education that distinguished them from the peasantry.[7]

There was a complex network of relationships that would have been capable of transmitting dance trends from

the French court to the halls of Highland chieftains. Not least of these was the influence of French dance in the Scottish court itself. French fashion was firmly implanted with the arrival of Marie de Guise in 1538 and Stewart monarchs continued to follow it even after the move to England.[8] Two further channels of influence connect Scottish Gaels with French dance traditions during the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century: travel to the continent for general education or training in the priesthood; and contact engendered by Royalism or Jacobitism

Although it is widely appreciated that the Highland élite were subject to increasing anglophone cultural influences after the Statutes of Iona (1609) mandated their education in the Lowlands, it is perhaps less well known that many of the scions of Highland families (especially Catholics) sent their sons to be educated on the continent. The results of this out-migration for education and training can be seen in epithets appended to personal names such as *Gallta*, *Frangach* and *Spàinnteach*, which are not uncommon amongst the Gaelic aristocrats of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Such men would have instruction in French dancing as a matter of course in their youth and would not have been taken seriously by their non-Gaelic peers without some mastery of these skills. Many of the Gaelic sources of this time period that mention social dance imply connections with continental court culture (as demonstrated below).

Court social dances did not arrive silently; they were, at least initially, accompanied by fiddlers. It has now been well established that the modern fiddle did not enter Irish or Scottish Gaeldom until the second half of the seventeenth century.[9] Given the court dance practices which had evolved on the continent, there can be little question that when the modern fiddle arrived in Gaeldom, it came as part of a "package" of social dance practices that included dance tunes. Texts expressing the disapproval of the old Gaelic

professional classes to these musical and choreographic innovations remind us of their challenge to older established norms.[10]

The poetic example with the earliest reliable date which illustrates Renaissance dance ideals is the celebrated poem composed by An Clàrsair Dall (Ruaidhri MacMhuirich) after the death of his former patron, Iain Breac MacLeòid of Dunvegan, in 1693. Iain Breac's court is described in a memorable word portrait as being a place of patronage for music and dance traditions:

> *an déidh ceilearadh beòil*
> *dannsa oileanach ordail suas*
> *le fear-bogha 'nan còir*
> *chumail modha ri pòr an cluas.*

> After voices had been lifted up in song, they took the floor for dancing, accomplished and precise, with one who wielded a bow near at hand to make the measure sound in their ear.[11]

Music and dance are described here in terms of expressing order, skill and refinement, and are closely associated with the fiddle. This is precisely the dance package as developed and exported by the French court. France is actually mentioned twice in the song, the second time (line 958) to castigate the son, Ruaidhri, for extravagant spending on the latest fashions from France. A similar nod towards French and continental connections appears in the well-known Jacobite anthem *Tha Tighinn Fodham Éirigh* "I Am Minded To Rise," composed in 1715 by Iain mac Dhùghaill for Ailean Dearg, the chief of Clanranald, who lived in France for many years before returning to Scotland.[12]

> *Is iomadh maighdeann bharrasach*
> *Do'm math a thig an earasaid*
> *Eadar Baile Mhanaich*
> *'S Caolas Bharraigh a tha an déidh ort.*

Tha pàirt an Eilean Bheagram dhiubh
Tha cuid 's an Fhraing 's 's an Eadailt dhiubh
Is chan eil latha teagaisg
 Nach bi 'n Cille Pheadair treud dhiubh.
Nuair chruinnicheas am bannal ud
Bréid caol an càradh crannaig orr'
Bidh fallus air am malaighean
 A' danns' air ùrlar déile.

"There are many lovely maidens who well become the arisaid, all the way from Balivanich to Barra Sound who love you."
"With some in Eilean Bheagram and some in France and Italy, and there's no day of preaching without some in Kilpheder."
"When those womenfolk gather, wearing tight pulpit-shaped kertches, they'll have sweat upon their brows, dancing on a deal floor.[13]

Here we see an example of Jacobite code talk where the female suitors of Ailean Dearg are cyphers for Jacobite warriors; these plays on gender identity were elaborated even further in Jacobite poetry of the 1745 Jacobite Rising. Without delving into discussion about Jacobite poetic rhetoric, I simply wish to point out that Ailean is associated geographically with France, Italy, and Scottish Gaeldom, accurately delineating his life experiences and range of contacts, and the channels of influence that would have brought French court dance practices to Highland contexts. The poet plays with the associations of dance to represent a range of potential meanings, but especially to make an analogy between courtship of noble men and women, and the campaigning of the chief for men to join the Jacobite cause.

A more direct implication about dance being an aspect of courtly life in the Gàidhealtachd can be seen in the song

composed by Iain Dubh MacDonald for Aonghas MacDonald, tacksman of Baile Fhionnlaigh, between 1709 and 1715:

> *Nach tug mi greis de'n dùltachd*
> *Anns a' chùirt am bitheadh danns'?*

> Did I not spend a part of the winter (or gloom) in the court in which dance was done?[14]

A similar remark about adoption of the "dance package" in Gaelic courts can be found in a song that, in its sole surviving source, is attributed to Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, who praised her subject for his patronage of the arts:

> *'S ann 'na thaigh mór*
> *A fhuair mi am macnas*
> *Danns' le sunnd air*
> *ùrlar farsaing*
> *An fhìdhlearachd 'gam*
> *chur a chadal [...]*

> It was in his great house that I was entertained; dancing gleefully on a wide floor; the fiddle music putting me to sleep.[15]

"Courtly culture" could find performance contexts outside the courts of royal residences. Gaelic aristocrats mingled with Lowland and European leaders at the many military camps formed during the international warfare of the seventeenth century and there is evidence to suggest that dancing was one of the skills exhibited and acquired in such contexts. The elegy for a young MacLeod soldier, killed in a duel by a son of Alasdair mac Colla, praises him for the refined manners and talents that he learnt while fighting under the Marquis of Montrose (c.1645):

> *Cha robh filidheachd cainnt*
> *Cha robh lùthchleas no danns'*
> *Nach do dh'ionnsaich thu 'n camp Mhontròis.*

> There was no eloquent rhetoric, no athletic feat or
> dance, that you did not learn in Montrose's camp.[16]

It is worth emphasizing that the Stewart court was kept in
exile primarily in France and that the Jacobite cause drew
many of the Highland élite to France, as well as created social
networks between continental and Highland aristocrats.

Another reflection of élite French influence and
terminology appears in a choral song published in the *Gillies
Collection* of 1786.[17] The anonymous author contrasts solitary
life in the Highland shieling with conviviality of the "big
house," where

> *Bhiodh cuadrail aig bhur mnathan*
> *Flut ri aighear cur ceòil aiste.*

> Your womenfolk would have a quadrille, a flute
> gleefully making music.[18]

The complication in the interpretation of this text is that the
French term *quadrille* (borrowed here directly into Gaelic)
denoted any performing group in the eighteenth century and
did not specifically denote dancing. Given the norms of the
age, we could interpret this as women performing something
to the music of the flute, probably played by a male flautist,
but what kind of performance this may have been is elusive.
The term did not come to be associated with the dance form
as we now know it until c.1800.[19]

John MacInnes has written extensively on the
complex, interlocking matrix of images and conventions of
Scottish Gaelic poetry that form a cohesive, pervasive
rhetorical system, which he has deemed the "Gaelic panegyric
code."[20] By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the
formula *Dannsair air ùrlar-déile thu* "(You are) a dancer on a
wooden-plank floor" (and variations thereof) became
somewhat common in the set of stock images and phrases
used by Gaelic poets for praising their subjects, fitting easily

into the élite characteristics of their subjects and their noble rank in Gaelic society.[21]

These new dance forms (and poetic phrases which depict them) are a reflection of, and rely upon, a particular form of material culture found only in élite habitations: wooden floors. In these recurrent oral formulae, *urlar-déile / ùrlar-clàraidh / bordaibh*,[22] all indicating wooden flooring, appear in association with the dance, demonstrating not only the refined manners of the dancers as an aspect of their aristocratic background and training, but also the material signs of wealth in the form of domestic architecture. Anyone who has spent much time dancing can appreciate the difference between a sprung wooden floor and a hard floor and the kinds of dance afforded by these differing materials. Beyond this, some texts imply that the wooden floor is a better resonator for percussive dance effects.

Such luxuries as wooden floors were not to be found amongst the peasantry, whose houses contained very little if any wood, and hard floors of packed dirt or stone, but only in the grandest halls of the élite. The word "deal" in English (meaning "a plank of wood about nine inches in width") was borrowed from Low German c.1400.[23] The corresponding Gaelic term *déil* also has a very long history of usage, appearing in O'Clery's Irish Glossary of 1643 and in some recensions of Cormac's Glossary.[24] For varieties of both English and Gaelic, the word was borrowed along with the importation of the resource itself. Scotland had been importing timber from Baltic and Scandinavian sources since the fourteenth century; by the sixteenth century, Scottish timber sources were becoming depleted and the builders of ships and great houses relied upon these imports. In fact, many of the builders of great houses in seventeenth-century Scotland purchased "kits" from Norway that had been predesigned and only needed to be assembled to form entire portions of houses, not unlike modern furniture sold by

Ikea.[25] It should also be noted that the peasantry did not possess hard-soled shoes needed for dancing in wooden halls. These material conditions were necessary prerequisites for the evolution of percussive dance in the later eighteenth century (even if dance styles have been subsequently adapted for other types of surfaces and visual/aural effects).

One of the most explicit Gaelic statements about wooden floors is the waulking song in which a female asserts the noble status of her lover by drawing contrasts in material culture:

Tha mi torrach dùmhail trom
Leis an lasgaire dheas dhonn
Nach danns air an ùrlar lom
Gun an lobhta làir fo bhonn.

The handsome, brown-haired gallant has made me
heavy, full-up, with child; he does not dance on a bare
(earthen) floor but with a wooden floor under his foot.[26]

This package of ideas, practices, and material conditions relating to courtly social dance appear in various permutations in Gaelic poetry of the eighteenth century. Several further examples will illustrate how they were used to emphasize or highlight particular qualities or associations of the poet's subject(s). A love song composed to the daughter of MacKenzie of Applecross by Murchadh MacMhathain some time before her marriage in 1715 depicts her as a fine dancer in a home full of excellent music:

Siud na ruidhlichean bu mhire
Bhòidhche, bhinne dh'éisd mi;
Bho na meòir bu chaoile, ghile
'G iomairt air na teudan;
Mar cheòl sìdh-bhrùgh no fuaim fidhle
'N òigh as finealt' eugasg;
'S cuimir, bòidheach, eutrom, sunndach
Air an ùrlar réidh i.

Those were the most beautiful, melodious, playful reels that I (ever) heard, (coming) from the most fair, slender fingers working the strings; like the music of a fairy mound, or the sound of a fiddle, the maiden of most refined appearance; she is elegant, beautiful, light, and merry on the level floor. [27]

The emphasis on her refinement, manners and learning and the stateliness of her family are quite explicit in this poem, for in a later quatrain she is praised in precisely those terms:

tha 'sàr fhoghlam 's a deagh ghiùlain
Cosnadh cliù thar cheud dhi […]
Beul o'm blasda Beurl' ga cleachdadh

Her excellent education and goodly deportment wins her fame beyond hundreds of others […] from her mouth is spoken well-formed English.

A song for the chieftain of the Grants portrays his chiefly residence as a site of clan entertainment that included music and dance. The (unnamed) poet composed the song because the chieftain was sick and away in England.

Chunnaic mise ge b' òg mi
Ioma cuilm 's an taigh mhór
Damhsail, urramach, ceòlmhor;
Mnathan 's fleasgaichean òga
'S iad gu furanach ceòlmhor a' damhsa.

I saw, even though I was young, many feasts in the great house, full of dance, dignity, and music; young women and men while they were dancing musically and welcomingly.[28]

The implication that the dance itself could have an aural and possibly musical aspect is slightly more pronounced in the song composed by Mairghread nighean Lachlainn to Ailean MacGilleathain, tutor of Brolas, Mull, in 1722:

'N àm tilleadh on bhlàr dhuibh
Gur n-àiteachan còmhnaidh
Chluinnte foirm air an dannsa
Fìon is branndaidh ga òl ann.

When you returned from the battle to your dwelling
places, the noise of dancing was to be heard, wine and
brandy being drunk there.[29]

These two drinks – wine and brandy – were themselves also
imports from France and part of the rituals of conspicuous
consumption that marked the lifestyle of the élite.[30]

Raonaid nighean mhic Néill MacDonald, a native of
North Uist, composed a love poem in the late-eighteenth
century (c.1770?) that describes both the fiddle and bagpipe
in use for social dance music. It also emphasizes the manners
and nobility of the household:

Rachainn leat air cùl taigh chùmhnaidh
Far am faighinn modh is mùirn ann
'S daoine uaisle mu bhòrdaibh dùmhail,
Ruidhle gu tric air an ùrlar
Le pìob mhór nam feadan siubhlach
'S le fiodhall bhinn nan teudan ciùine.

I would go with you to the back of the residence, where
I would find manners and merriment; aristocrats around
tightly-packed tables/floor-panels, frequent reels on the
floor from the great bagpipe of the lively chanters and
from the melodious fiddle of the calm strings.[31]

Having established these conventions and associations, the
formula *Dannsair air ùrlar-déile thu* (and variations)
sometimes appears without further elaboration, as in this
female song of praise to a suitor:

Mo cheist am Mórthireach bàn
Dannsair thu air lobhta làir.

My darling is the blonde Morar-man; you are a dancer
on a wooden floor.[32]

Or the ode to Ailean Camshron of Inbhir Sgathadail by
Seumas Seadhach (*Bàrd Loch nan Eala*, c.1758-1828):

Damhsair thu air ùrlar-clàraidh
Cho math 's a tha measg nan Gàidheal.

You are a dancer on a wooden floor as good as any
Gael.[33]

The evidence in Gaelic song-poems can be complemented by
that in oral narratives, especially those recorded in the
nineteenth century by Iain Òg Ìle (John Francis Campbell of
Islay) and his cohorts. Although it may be the case that the
oral narratives captured from the peasantry in the nineteenth
century are not necessarily a representative sample of what
existed in previous centuries and amongst the élite, there is a
corpus of several hundred to examine. Modern folklorists
have argued that these texts are essentially rooted in the
cultural sensibilities of the pre-Culloden era.[34] What is
significant to this study is that they have so little to say about
dance. This is probably not surprising, given that early
folktale collectors were interested in international wonder
tales, hero tales, and Fenian materials, genres that would not
likely depict scenes of social dance. Regardless, this absence
strengthens the hypothesis that social dance was a recent
import that did not figure in the older oral narratives. There
are, however, to my knowledge, three interesting exceptions
(listed here in order of the dates of their transcription).

The first of these, recorded by Hector MacLean in
1859 in North Uist, is the adventure (set in an unspecified era)
of a rustic shepherd's son from Skye who went to live with
his uncle in Perth where he attended a dance school for three
years.[35] These skills in dancing allowed him to win a high-
born lady in an unnamed, far-away city.

The second, contributed by Domhnull MacLeòid (origin unknown) to *An Gàidheal* in 1877, is a tale on the theme of Gaelic-Norse relations and rivalries during the age of Norse ascendency in the Western Isles. In the tale, a man named MacCruimein, the major landholder in Lewis, makes regular trips to the city of *Beirbhe* (usually understood to mean "Bergen") to visit the Norse King. He becomes entrapped by the pride of the queen to prove the superiority of the resources and people of *Lochlann*, and ends up demonstrating the pre-eminence of the people in Lewis (whose ethnicity is not explicitly stated). This first happens in a contest over fuel types, and then happens in a dancing contest. MacCruimein spends three years teaching his three eldest daughters to dance and they beat the three Norse princesses on his next visit.[36] Although the projection of social dance into the distant past of Gaeldom is anachronistic, it seems reasonable to see the tale as reflecting attitudes and practices of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The third of these was contributed by Mrs. J. Wallace of Tiree to the *Highland Monthly* in 1889, although it was likely recorded by her brother (Rev. John G. Campbell) somewhat earlier. The protagonists of the tale are MacDonald of the Isles and his vassal, MacDonald of Glengarry. They decide to have an adventure in a foreign country and allow their boat to take them to a random destination. They land where they are strangers and their clothing alien (implying somewhere outside of Gaeldom). They are invited to a social gathering where there is dancing. There is a strong emphasis in the description on good manners, noble descent and the demonstration of expert dancing skills. The portrayal of social dance in the life of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Gaeldom is also anachronistic in this tale and Wallace does point out that it is a migratory legend that was also told of a more recent, non-Gaelic aristocrat.

In these three tales, then, dance is associated with urban centres and the aristocracy, demonstrating the education and manners of those of high rank. They imply that Gaels have the innate capacity to learn to dance well, but they do so by contact with a foreign, urban élite.

Recent research on Gaelic Ireland has similarly emphasized the discontinuities of the seventeenth century as the old Gaelic aristocracy and its attendant cultural norms and practices were extinguished, and innovations were introduced during the anglophone colonial process and frequently adapted by the Gaelophone lower classes. Many of the cultural expressions now considered traditional in Gaelic Ireland date from this period, including dance music played on the fiddle meant to accompany social dance. In fact, Martin Dowling argues that Irish "traditional music is a modern phenomenon" not "the survival of some ancient and timeless manifestation of the essence of Irishness or the Celtic spirit, but rather a modern pursuit that kept time with the dramatic and often violent modernization of Irish society in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[37]

It is clear that the same holds true for Gaelic Scotland: although the aristocratic strata of Scottish Gaeldom survived for almost a century and a half longer than in Ireland, it was not impervious to the music and dance innovations emanating largely from French court culture and carrying with them a great sense of international cachet and prestige. Once introduced by Highland aristocrats moving in international circuits to their homes, it was quickly and easily transmitted to their peers and dependents, and it was effectively localized and adapted to native Gaelic musical aesthetics in a very short time.

The linguistic evidence which cinches this argument is that the very term in Gaelic to describe dancing (in a general, unmarked sense), *danns(a)*, is clearly derived from French and largely displaced whatever previous terms existed for

bodily movement to music during the seventeenth century. This is not to say that there were no Gaelic dance traditions previous to the influence of the French courtly social dance package, but that Gaels perceived a major shift in the style of dancing, its performance contexts, and its social significance.[38] A parallel development is reflected in the seventeenth-century diary of Tadhg Ó Cianáin, who borrowed the term *múisic* into Irish to describe the "art music" which he encountered on the continent of Europe.[39]

      If a reliable corpus of dateable Gaelic texts could be collated, the first appearances and semantic developments of Gaelic terms describing dance movements might be traced to help clarify the issues raised in this article. For example, the Gaelic term *dannsa* has a variant, *damhsa*; the first may be a borrowing from English or Scots while the last may be a borrowing directly from French.

      The term *rin(n)ce* is the standard term for dancing in Irish[40] and an entry for it appears in Dwelly's Scottish Gaelic dictionary under *ringeadh*.[41] The standard explanation for the origin of the Irish term is that "*Rince* is a borrowing of the English rink, meaning to skate on ice,"[42] but this is unnecessarily tortuous. The seventh entry for "ring" in the online *Dictionary of the Scots Language*[43] gives "A particular dance, game or the like, for which a circular formation was employed," with evidence of usages from the early sixteenth century onwards denoting a ring-dance performed to song, called by some scholars the choral dance. One of these texts is the song recorded in the proceedings of the notorious 1590 North Berwick witch trial, which also contains the first usage of "reel" in Scots.[44] I have discussed the choral dance in Gaelic tradition elsewhere,[45] and the evidence there and in this article suggests that this earlier dance form, associated most closely with the peasantry and vernacular culture, was displaced by new French fashions at a fairly early stage in the documentation of non-élite Highland society. This would help

to account for the lack of textual attestations of *ringeadh* in Scottish Gaelic sources.[46]

After the *hay d' Alemaigne* was adopted into Scottish dance from France in the sixteenth century, it came to be called the "reel" in Scots, a metaphor taken from the spinning of yarn.[47] The term was subsequently borrowed into Gaelic as *ruidhle*, along with the dance figure. In some texts, the terms *dannsa* and *ruidhle* appear to be somewhat synonymous, while in others they appear to be used in distinct ways to describe the bodily position(s) and figure(s) of the performers respectively. Lines from an anonymous, undated *port-à-beul*, collected in Badenoch in the mid-nineteenth century, offer an example:

> *[…] Tha car ùr an ruidhl' a' bhodaich*
> *Car gu deas is car gu tuath*
> *'S car mu'n cuairt an ruidhl' a' bhodaich […]*
> *'S ged a dhannsadh tu gu 'chùl e*
> *Bhiodh car ùr an ruidhl' a' bhodaich.*[48]

> […] There is a new turn[49] in the old man's reel-figure, a turn to the right and a turn to the left, and a turn around in the old man's reel-figure […] and even if you danced up to his back, there would be a new turn in the old man's reel-figure.

The term *ruidhle* in this verse seems to connote the figure of the old man's movement, while *dannsa* is somewhat ambiguous. Alternatively, it may have once been the case that *dannsa* connoted the refined style of the élite while *ruidhle* was used of the dancing of the peasantry.[50] Not only is it likely that *ruidhle* and *dannsa* became less distinct in vernacular usage over time, but the demands of rhyme and rhythm in song texts may elide such distinctions. Further research is needed, however, before firm conclusions can be made about the semantic development and distinctions of these and other terms.

Even if already compromised since the seventeenth century, after the Battle of Culloden (1746) the social fabric of Gaeldom was rent and the élite were increasingly Anglicized and alienated from the Gaelic peasantry. From this time onwards, the balance of influences in Gaeldom tipped inexorably towards these international dance trends, especially with the influx of dancing masters having direct contact with the general population and the growing popularity of dance balls in the Lowlands with which Gaels were in increasing contact. For these and other reasons, the new dance forms were propagated to all ranks of Highland society and were no longer the preserve of the élite. It would have no doubt amused the earlier Gaelic aristocrats to see how the dance forms of the court went feral in the rural Highlands, as portrayed in this scene in a *port-à-beul*:

Leannanachd air feadh nan coilltean [...]
Dannsadh faramach air lèanaig [...]
Agam a bha 'n dannsa sùrdail
Ruidhle cùirteil anns an àirigh.[51]

Courting among the forests […] Dancing merrily in a small meadow […] I had a spirited dance, courtly reels in the sheiling.

I have already made the obvious observation that these social dance forms are inextricably interconnected with the dance music played to accompany them. During the eighteenth century, music and dance forms, having been cut loose from their aristocratic origins, were vernacularized according to local aesthetics and contexts. In an extremely important and insightful article about the origins of fiddle tunes, Alan Jabbour examines and characterizes the structure and style of dance music throughout the British Isles – including those in modern Gaelic tradition – and finds them to be a product of the eighteenth century:

I now believe that the fiddle-tune repertoires and styles of the modern English-speaking world arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They constituted a revolution in instrumental folk music, and in the dances that instrumental folk music accompanies. The advent and democratization of the modern violin spurred the revolution. … The revolution occurred roughly simultaneously in all regions of the English-speaking world, so that the modern repertoires and styles might better be considered cultural cousins than ancestors and descendants of each other, even if some of the cousins are from New World regions. But each region developed its own version of the new revolution, tapping into regional and ethnic musical tastes and preferences.[52]

It is worth noting, in this regard, that William Lamb's recent research correlating *port-à-beul* texts to tunes in written collections finds that the earliest recorded versions appear in 1703 and that the "median date of appearance in the collections was 1789."[53] This new genre tied to social dance, in parallel instrumental and vocal forms, was incorporated into the lower rung of Gaelic musical tradition. The words composed to social dance tunes, called in Gaelic *port-à-beul* (singular, *puirt-à-beul* plural) were recognized as a distinct genre of such a low register as not to be classified as *bàrdachd* "poetry" at all, but as a kind of playful doggerel which remains separate from older song types.[54] *Port-à-beul* is infuriatingly hard to date, as it is nearly all anonymous and the texts contain few references to material culture specific to narrow periods of time.[55] One of the only named authors of *puirt-à-beul* was the Jacobite soldier-poet John Roy Stuart, a well-educated Highland gentleman from Strathspey who visited the courts of Paris and Rome.[56] To him is ascribed a reel-time *port* and a strathspey-time *port*, one composed after fleeing the Battle of Culloden,[57] endorsing the idea that the

mid-eighteenth century Central Highlands were particularly important centres for the creation of these Gaelic musical-verse forms.

There are several interesting references in late eighteenth-century Gaelic verse to the activities of dancing masters which were responsible for furthering the penetration of dance fashions into the Gàidhealtachd among a wide range of social classes. The common presence of Gaelic terms of English origin to describe leg and foot movements suggests that the dancing masters were trained in anglophone centres (such as Edinburgh or London) or used English in dance instruction for Highland pupils.

The author of an anonymous love song *An Nighean Dubh Ghuanach* "The Giddy, Black-Haired Girl" says that he does not regret the expenses of dance school for his sweetheart:

An uair thig an samhradh
As Dàmhair na sgoil-dannsa
Ged chosg mi seice gamhna
Gun cuir mi ann mo nighean dubh.

When the summer and autumn time of the dancing school comes, even if it costs me a calf-skin, I will send in my black-haired girl.[58]

In another song by Seumas Seadhach, this time to Seumas Caimbeul of Aird Chatain, he recalls conversations in younger days (c.1770-85) about courtship during dancing school:

'S nuair a bha mi 'm sheana-ghiullan
Gur cuimhne leam bhith seanchas
Gun robh thu-sa 'd ghille-mearachdadaich
Ri suirghe anns an sgoil-dannsa.

And when I was a bachelor I remember discussing how you were an errant lad, courting in the dance school.[59]

Another poem by Raonaid nighean mhic Néill MacDonald about a visit to Skye in the late eighteenth century describes the action of beating the feet on wooden floors to produce a percussive effect, possibly the first reference to step-dancing in Scottish Gaelic literature:

Far am biodh na fleasgaichean
A' breabadh air an ùrlar;
'S pìob mhór nam feadan bras ann
Ri caismeachd air gach taobh dhiubh.

Where the lads would be kicking on the floor; and there would be the great bagpipe of the lively chanters playing to the procession on each side of you.[60]

One of the most direct comments about the choreographic influences of France and Edinburgh in the Highlands comes from a song composed by Uilleam Ros (1762-90) during his life in Gairloch, Wester Ross. Ros puts the song in the mouth of a sailor originally from a southern region of the Gàidhealtachd but resident in Gairloch who spends his idle hours flirting with the local girls in the new dance hall. Assuming this persona allowed Ros to mock these rival suitors, who must have seemed threatening to the young men of the region.

Chan 'eil shig 's na puirt Fhrangach
nach danns iad air uair,
no car an Dùn Éidin[n]
gun aig té san Taobh Tuath.
Miann sùil bhith 'gam féachadh
's iad a' leumnaich mun cuairt
mar ri balaich chinn-fhìdhleach
's sgal pìobain 'nan cluais.

There's no jig amongst the French tunes that they won't dance in turn, or a (fancy) step in Edinburgh a northern girl doesn't know. A sight for sore eyes to behold them

cavorting about with fiddle-headed boys and the skirl of
pipes in their ear.[61]

The foreign associations of these popular new dances are
clearly marked in the verse with the terms *Frangach* "French"
(which needs not be read literally) and *shig* (a Gaelic
rendering of the word "jig" for which there is no native term).
Ros is probably voicing the anxieties, especially amongst the
older generation, that by following exotic dance trends young
women may also be stepping outside the conventional bounds
of moral behaviour as prescribed by the local community.[62]

Gaels of all origins were exposed to an increasing
array of influences as they migrated seasonally to the
Lowlands, entered British regiments, crisscrossed the oceans
on sailing ships and attended the schools of dancing masters
who had been trained in France and/or England. Dance was
inevitably further cross-pollenated by the creative possibilities
offered in this multicultural melting pot. It was the newer solo
dance forms, variously called "high dances," "hornpipes," or
"jigs," which evolved in the late eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries into distinct forms that are now recognized as "step
dancing" and "Highland dancing."[63]

The "Jacky Tar" was originally a solo hornpipe dance
born on the English stage no later than 1740 and commonly
performed by a character dressed as a sailor.[64] This dance was
one popular influence that made its way to the Highlands
before the end of the eighteenth century, even though it was
evolving multiple variants as it spread.[65] The Jacky Tar is
mentioned in a song by Ailean Buidhe nan Òran (Allan
Macdougal) of Gleann Domhain, Loch Awe-side,
Argyllshire,[66] praising noble women over their lower-class
counterparts. The mark of a well-bred lady is that she spends

Greis eil' air Jack-reel
Cur chutaichean cruinn
A bhuidhinn a' ghill le gleusdachd;
Le h-òrain cho grinn

'S gum bu bhinne guth cinn
Na fidheall cur fonn le teudan.[67]

> A bit more time on a Jack-reel, making neat cuts [leg movements], to win the wager with adroitness; with her lovely songs, her singing voice would be more melodious than a fiddle playing a tune on its strings.

The execution of leg movements is described here by an English word ("cut") which has been adapted into Gaelic.

The Jacky Tar is explicitly mentioned in an anonymous and undated *port-à-beul* titled *Ruidhlidh Cailleach Eachainn Mhóir* "Big Hector's Old Wife Will [Dance the] Reel," in which the old wife states, "*'S ro mhath dhannsainn 'Jack Tar' ann an làithean m' òige*" ("I could dance the Jacky-Tar very well in the days of my youth").[68] The text also uses the Gaelic term *seat*, a borrowing of the English term "set" (as in "to set to someone," usually one's partner, using setting dance steps). Both the use of this English borrowing and the recollection of this dance form in far-off youth indicate that the text cannot predate the late eighteenth century, even though the tune itself (commonly called "Cawdor Fair" in English) existed no later than 1734.[69] This should alert us to the fact that there is a complex relationship between dance tunes and associated Gaelic texts, and given the speed at which innovation can become tradition and cover its tracks with self-legitimating archaistic lore, we need to be careful about taking common claims of antiquity at face value.

Although there has been a great deal of heated debate over the origins of Cape Breton step-dancing since the 1990s in particular,[70] it is ironic that few scholars take the argument back further than the time of departure of the immigrants to see that these dance forms were fairly recent immigrants themselves. Illuminating the early stages of the development of dance traditions is crucial to understanding later forms in

Gaelic Scotland and Nova Scotia and their relationships to related forms of dance in other parts of Europe and North America. The resemblances between various "folk" dances with an emphasis on foot movement and percussion – step-dance in Canadian Gaelic communities, Irish *sean-nós* dancing, Quebecois step-dance, Appalachian clogging and buck-dancing, etc. – are due to their common descent from the inexorable influences of French dance traditions, especially those promulgated by French-trained dancing masters of the eighteenth century, dancing in hard soled shoes on wooden floors. All of these elements derive from and represent the prestige lifestyle (in material and ideological terms) of their French courtly predecessors. It is simply an ironic accident of history that these traditions were inherited by the peasantry and their élite origins largely forgotten, and instead are now popularly ascribed to a fictional "Celtic" heritage.

Notes

[1] George Emmerson, *Ane Celestial Recreatioun: A Social History of Scottish Dance* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972), 78, 144, 150-1, 162-3; J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London: Routledge, 1985), 4-5; idem., *Traditional Step-Dancing in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996), 4-6.

[2] Margaret McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), xv. The metaphor of the "French court as crucible" should not mislead us into thinking that all of those engaged in defining and refining dance there were of French origin.

[3] Ibid, 35, 245-7.

[4] Ibid, 13.

[5] Ibid, 244.

[6] Breandán Breathnach, *Folk music and dances of Ireland* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1977), 35-41; I. F. Grant and Hugh Cheape, *Periods in Highland History* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2000 [1987]), 255-7; Adrian Scahill, "Irish traditional music and the seventeenth century." In *Irish Musical Studies 10: Music, Ireland, and the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Barra Boydell and Kerry Houston, 40-61, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 44-7; Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 272-9.

[7] Even if dance would eventually permeate Gaelic society and no longer indicate social status by the late eighteenth century. See discussion at the end of the article.

[8] Emmerson, *Ane Celestial*, Chapters 3, 4, 10.

[9] Scahill, "Irish traditional music," 49; John Purser, *Scotland's Music* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Music, 2007), 115-27; Raymond Gillespie, "Seventeenth-century Irish music and its cultural context," in *Irish Musical Studies 10: Music, Ireland, and the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Barra Boydell and Kerry Houston, 26-39 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 32; Newton, *Warriors*, 253, 258, 271-2.

[10] Michael Newton and Hugh Cheape, "'The Keening of Women and the Roar of the Pipe': From Clàrsach to Bagpipe (ca. 1600 - 1782)," *Ars Lyrica,* 17 (2008): 75-95; Newton, *Warriors*, 264-7, 270-1.

[11] William Matheson ed., *An Clàrsair Dall / The Blind Harper* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1970), lines 873-6 (Matheson's translation).

[12] See notes in Ronald Black ed., *An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 383-4.

[13] Black, *An Lasair*, 48-9 (Black's translation).

[14] Colm Ó Baoill ed., *Iain Dubh* (Aberdeen: An Clo Gàidhealach, 1994), 20 (my translation).

[15] James Carmichael Watson ed., *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son Limited, 1934), 34 (my translation). The sole source for this song is a manuscript transcribed by D. C. MacPherson of Lochaber c.1865: we should treat a text recorded so far removed in time and space from its presumed place of origin with caution, especially in light of accretions that may have adhered to the text while circulating in oral tradition during the rapid changes in music and dance styles discussed in this paper.

[16] Alexander Maclean Sinclair ed., *Mactalla nan Tùr* (Sydney: n.p., 1901), 106; Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod eds., *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979 [1964]), 91 (my translation).

[17] Most of the texts in the Gillies Collection were taken from the manuscripts written and/or collected by Rev. James McLagan (1728-1805), now held in Glasgow University. This text appears in MS. 81 of the collection but the manuscript has not been dated.

[18] John Gillies ed., *A Collection of Ancient and Modern Gaelic Poems and Songs* (Perth: n.p., 1786), 124 (my translation).

[19] My thanks to Mats Melin for this important consideration and information. See further Ellís Rogers, *The Quadrille* (Orpington, England: Rogers, 2004).

[20] John MacInnes, *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays by John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 264-319.

[21] For example, ibid. 281-3, 295, 309.

[22] The formula *bord(aibh) dùmhail* "tightly-packed planks/tables" appears in several poems describing dancing in a residence. This is ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so, because it could equally imply dancing around a dense arrangement of tables in a room as well as dancing on tightly-packed wooden planks on the floor.

[23] Oxford English Dictionary online entry for "deal."

[24] Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language entry for *déil*.

[25] Kate Newland, "Norwegian Timber and the Scottish Great House," *Architectural Heritage,* 18 (2007): 35-53.

[26] MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 309-10.

[27] *Mac-Talla* 3.23 (1894): 8 (my translation). There is also a variation of the poem and some historical discussion in William Matheson, "Further Gleanings from the Dornie Manuscripts," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness,* 45 (1967): 148-95 (at 179).

[28] Pàruig Mac-an-Tuairneir ed., *Comhchruinneacha do dh'Òrain taghta* (Dun Eidionn: Stewart, 1813), 181 (my translation). I have modernized the orthography and emended *a-staigh mhór* to *'s an taigh mhór*.

[29] Colm Ó Baoill, *Mairghread nighean Lachlainn: Song-maker of Mull* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 2009), lines 799-802.

[30] Grant and Cheape, *Periods*, 162-3; MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 41.

[31] A. and A. Macdonald, eds, *The Macdonald Collection of Gaelic Poetry* (Inverness: The Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Pub. Co, 1911), 242 (my translation).

[32] Angus Matheson, "Gleanings from the Dornie Manuscripts," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness,* 41 (1952): 310-381 (at 356) (my translation).

[33] Peter Macfarlane ed., *A Choice Collection of Gaelic Poems* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1813), 131 (my translation).

[34] Alan Bruford and Donald A. MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1994), 15-17.

[35] John F. Campbell ed., *More West Highland Tales*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 1994 [1960]), 230-7.

[36] This tale bears obvious thematic resemblances to the *Dubh a' Ghiubhais* tale type in which a Norse princess destroys Scottish forests out of jealousy. See Alan Bruford, "Scottish Gaelic Witch Stories. A Provisional Type-List," *Scottish Studies*, 11 (1967): 13-47.

[37] Scahill, "Irish traditional music," 53.

[38] Breathnach, *Folk music*, 35-6; MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 254; Newton, *Warriors*, 272-80.

[39] Gillespie, "Seventeenth-century Irish music," 29.

[40] Breathnach, *Folk music*, 36; Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle, Ireland: Brandon: 1999), 15-20.

[41] Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1994 [1911]), 761.

[42] Breathnach, *Folk music*, 36.

[43] http://www.dsl.ac.uk

[44] Purser, *Scotland's Music*, 141.

[45] Michael Newton, "Dancing with the dead: ritual dance at wakes in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd," in *Cànan & Cultur / Language & Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3*, ed. Wilson McLeod, James Fraser and Anja Gunderloch, 215-34; Newton, *Warriors*, 272-9.

[46] Further research is needed to explain why the term had such divergent lines of development on either side of the Irish Sea.

[47] Emmerson, *Ane Celestial*, 151-2; "Reel" in the online *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, http://www.dsl.ac.uk.

[48] Thomas Sinton, "Snatches of Song Collected in Badenoch," *The Celtic Magazine*, 13 (1888): 113-22 (at 119-20).

[49] The primary meaning of the term *car* is "a twist, bend, turn." I would interpret this as a single movement in the figure, but it is interesting to note that the Angus Fraser Manuscript (in the National Library of Scotland) defines *car damhsa* as "A succession of steps in dancing equal in time to a bar in music." This consideration should be applied in the translation of the verse by Uilleam Ros above as well.

[50] I owe this suggestion to Mats Melin, who encouraged me to re-examine the issue of semantics in general.

[51] William Lamb, ed., *Keith Norman MacDonald's Puirt-à-Beul: The Vocal Dance Music of the Scottish Gaels* (Breakish, Scotland: Taigh na Teud, 2012), 107 (Lamb's translation).

[52] Alan Jabbour, "Fiddle tunes of the old frontier," in *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic*, ed. Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger, 4-13. (Aberdeen: The Elphinstone Institute, 2008), 11-12.

[53] Lamb, *Keith Norman,* 23.

[54] William Matheson, "Some Early Collectors of Gaelic Folk-song," *The Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological and Folklore Society,* 5 (1955): 67-82 (at 69); MacInnes, *Dùthchas*, 265-319; Heather Sparling, *Song Genres, Cultural Capital and Social Distinctions in Gaelic Cape Breton*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation at York University (2005); Newton, *Warriors*, 97-101, 105, 253; Scahill, "Irish traditional music," 40-1.

[55] Lamb, *Keith Norman*, 20-5.

[56] Neil MacGregor, "John Roy Stuart: Jacobite Bard of Strathspey," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 63 (2002-4), 1-124.

[57] MacGregor, "John Roy Stuart," 99, 113.

[58] *Co-Chruinneachadh de Dh'Òranan Taoghta* (Glasgow: MacVean, 1836), 11 (my translation). This collection is now generally believed to have been the work of John Mackenzie (1806-1848).

[59] Rev George Henderson, "Lamh-Sgriobhainnean Mhic-Neacail," *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness,* 27 (1908-1911): 340-409 (at 387) (my translation).

[60] Macdonald and Macdonald, *Macdonald Collection*, 113 (my translation).

[61] William Gillies, "'No bonnier life than the sailor's': A Gaelic Poet Comments on the Fishing Industry in Wester Ross," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 35-6 (2008): 61-75 (at 70-1). Many thanks to Professor Gillies for drawing my attention to this source and providing me with a copy of his article about it.

[62] Ibid, 63-4.

[63] Flett and Flett, *Traditional Dancing*, 272; Newton, *Warriors*, 282-3.

[64] Emerson, *Ane Celestial*, 205-22; J. S. Bratton, "Dancing a Hornpipe in Fetters," *Folk Music Journal*, 6.1 (1990): 65-82.

[65] The last text discussed (*Ruidhlidh Cailleach Eachainn Mhóir*) mentions setting to a partner, indicating that it was no longer a solo dance. Mats Melin informs me that he has seen a couple's dance called Jacky Tar in Sutherland. The female archetype in the song by Ailean Buidhe appears to be dancing alone. For more on dances of this name in the nineteenth-century Highlands, see Flett and Flett, *Traditional Step-Dancing*, 18, 38, 41, 126.

[66] There is a brief sketch of the poet in John MacKenzie, "Ailean Buidhe," *The Celtic Magazine*, 2 (1876): 403-5. The poem is impossible to date. We can at least observe from the information given in Mac-an-Tuairneir, *Comhchruinneacha*, 204, that Ailean was a young man during the 1745 Jacobite Rising (this source also gives his home as Gleann Domhain).

[67] Mac-an-Tuairneir, *Comhchruinneacha*, 212 (my translation).

[68] Lamb, *Keith Norman,* 74.

[69] Ibid, 159.

[70] Maggie Moore, "Cape Breton Dancing," in *Scotland's Dances* (Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council, 1994), 17-22; Jonathan Dembling, "You Play It As You Would Sing It: Cape Breton, Scottishness, and the Means of Cultural Production," in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray, 180-97 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Mats Melin, *Exploring the Percussive Routes and Shared Commonalities in Cape Breton Step Dancing*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Limerick, 2012.