

Closer to the floor: reflections on Cape Breton step dance

Pat Ballantyne

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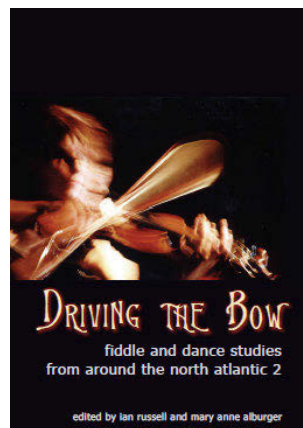
Driving the Bow

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 2

Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger

First published in 2008 by The Elphinstone
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-5-7



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Closer to the floor: reflections on Cape Breton step dance

PAT BALLANTYNE

Why should the expression ‘close to the floor’ matter so much to a Cape Breton step dancer? Melanie MacDonald explains, ‘My own style? I would just say, close to the floor, as neat as I can be, and to try to keep it still traditional, ‘cause if I don’t, then eventually it’s going to be lost.’¹

No standardisation, apart from tradition itself, is found within Cape Breton step dance, so a variety of styles and steps exist alongside each other. This is in marked contrast, for example, to the strictly standardised dance descriptions and musical directions published by the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing.² Step dancers practising older or more traditional styles of the dance perform alongside those whose interests lie in newer styles. This allows us to track the evolution of step dancing and reflect on how change can happen naturally, without the intervention of an official body. It also allows us to assess what aspects of the dance are most important to the dancers themselves.

The traditional form of step dance, which appears to be reasonably close in style to the dancing that was brought by nineteenth-century emigrants from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, is characterised by a tremendous neatness. The feet remain very close to the floor at all times; not a beat is missed. There are only a relatively small number of short, symmetrical steps, but the foot has an exact position in each. The newer forms show many influences from other styles of dance, such as Irish, tap, Acadian, and Ottawa Valley step dance.³ Many of the steps are ‘offbeat’, that is, they do not fit exactly with a four or eight-bar phrase of music, and they are asymmetrical: what one foot does is not mirrored exactly by the other.

Willie Fraser (born c.1914) is one of the best-known and oldest of the old-style dancers. Born into a Gaelic-speaking family in Inverness County, he is also well known as a storyteller. He learnt his first steps from his Scottish grandmother, but the rest of his early repertoire was garnered in a novel manner: through a series of dreams he experienced as a child. In these dreams, a man appeared and taught him a different step each night, which Willie was able to reproduce the following day. He developed around fifty steps in this manner, according to his granddaughter, Melanie MacDonald.

With a great interest in his Gaelic heritage and culture, and in preserving traditions, Willie can be seen as a *seanchaidh*, or tradition bearer. Every township in the Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland had its tradition bearer, who could recite the genealogy of the inhabitants and could tell tales and stories to enthrall his listeners.⁴ This cultural aspect of handing traditions down through the generations continually reveals itself in that, almost without exception, everyone I interviewed had learnt their first steps from a parent, or from a relative in the generation above. Dancing was a natural form of family activity. Given the Gaelic-speaking people's close connection with their own cultural traditions, it seems clear that a dancer's preoccupation with being 'close to the floor' is the result of a tradition that has been handed down through the generations. It has therefore become accepted as being the way in which this form of dance has always been performed.

I have taken Willie's style as the standard for 'old' style dancing, just as the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing's manual has become the benchmark for Highland dancing. Each of the older generation of dancers I interviewed, not all of whom are discussed in this paper, has cited Willie Fraser as being a major, if not the major influence on their dancing.

Willie taught his children and his grandchildren to dance. One granddaughter, Melanie, found him to be a strict teacher who was very specific about where she should place her feet, about how far she should – or should not – travel within a step, and who was most particular about which steps she should perform. 'You don't have to move in order to create a step. The step should happen. I mean it's only your feet moving. You don't need a large amount of floor space to dance.' This fits with her grandfather's belief that only a very specific and neat amount of travel should be used – 'a tile width' forwards, sideways or back. Every step she danced had to be performed perfectly, with beats fitting exactly to the music. Willie taught that leg and foot movements should never be too big, and that the working foot – that doing the figure – is always placed in an exact, rather than a random, position in relation to the foot which supports the body. He discouraged the creation of new steps, and the performance of steps that he himself had not taught her:

When it was just, say, myself in the kitchen with [him] and my mum, well, he would be very, very particular. 'No, you go closer to the floor. No, your heel is here. No, that's not it. You almost have it.' I heard that for years and years – 'You almost have it'.

It could indeed be argued that Willie was so strict in his teaching that he passed on a standardised form of dance, albeit without reference to written or printed materials.



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d Melanie MacDonald demonstrating her grandfather's style

Melanie points out that use of the heel is of vital importance in old-style step dance and that this must be given careful attention. Willie, she says, was quite rigid about this. The use of the heel is often ignored by some of the younger dancers in the pursuit of speed, as a percussive use of the heel demands a strong technique. The very quick, shuffling repetitions performed with the toe only, found in the dancing of some of the younger, new-style dancers, is quite probably an influence that has come from tap dancing.

The noted step-dance teacher, Mary Janet MacDonald of Port Hood, analyses her own style carefully. She is aware of symmetry in her dancing and she always, for example, starts off on the left foot, and teaches this. Being close to the floor, she feels, is vital. She performs regular repetitions of steps in fours and eights and counts carefully, but is fully aware that before she began teaching she did not do this. In those days, her dancing was more spontaneous and she did not feel the need to start a step on the same foot each time, nor was she concerned about commencing a step at its starting point. She was also unlikely to count the number of repetitions she might make of any given step. All this gave her dancing an asymmetric form (often found in self-taught dancers); her steps would not necessarily have fitted exactly with particular phrases in the music, and may indeed have carried on over cadential points.

I might start my first step on my left foot, like the shuffle on my left foot. I wasn't counting bars and counting the steps that I'd do four [repetitions]. I might do only three of one step and two, no one of another, then one on the other foot [...] And you'll see that in dancers who are not teachers.

Willie Fraser has always advocated the symmetry of commencing each step by stepping onto the left foot and then executing a regular number of repetitions of each step. His dancing has been a great influence on Mary Janet's own style which is very neat and close to the floor in the traditional manner.



Figures 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d Mary Janet MacDonald dances in her kitchen.

The following illustrations show a self-taught dancer who only developed his style after moving to mainland Canada from Cape Breton.⁵ His dancing is highly thought of in his home territory and is compelling to watch. It is also very close to the floor, and his steps are all based on old-style steps. His dancing demonstrates Mary Janet's point about spontaneity and irregular repetitions, and illustrates her observations about her own dancing before she embarked upon a teaching career. In common with all dancers, he spontaneously performs steps that he instinctively feels fit with the music and frequently continues steps over cadences and performs irregular repetitions. This feature contradicts Willie Fraser's strict regularity and symmetrical style, but is often found in older, more traditional styles of dance, where steps are 'offbeat', and it has been adopted and extended by those performing in the newer, innovative style.



Figures 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e Close to the floor

Spontaneity is a feature of both old- and new-style dancing. Almost without exception, step dancers state that they do not rehearse particular routines or follow any predetermined orders of steps. The sole exception I have found so far was an older dancer, who performed frequently in her youth, but now only rarely.⁶ When she was regularly getting up to dance, she could let the music dictate what steps to perform.

When you get older, again, and you don't dance as much, you forget a lot of your steps. I've forgotten a whole lot of my steps because I don't do them. So, there is a little pattern in there that still sort of remains with me, and if I have that little pattern, I'll sort of go by that and get through it that way. But when I was younger and dancing, I didn't have the pattern in my mind. It just went

from the rhythm of that music and whatever turn that fiddler would take to the next tune. You'd just know those steps [...] that you got to get in there because they'd just go so well. And it was easy. We were doing it all the time and it wasn't anything to think about.

Now that she rarely dances, she no longer has the repertoire to allow an instinctive choice, but instead has a routine, should she be required to dance at any time. When a step dancer is dancing and performing frequently, spontaneity is a natural result; infrequent performance demands more preparation. I have observed dancers spending a day, or even days, teaching certain steps and then, at a public performance, dancing these same steps in an apparently instinctive response to the music. This appears to illustrate the premise that although the steps are a spontaneous response to the music, the *choice* of step depends on whatever a dancer has in his or her recent memory that fits with the specific melodic and rhythmic dictates of the music.⁷

Moving towards a newer style of dancing, one of the younger generation of dancers, Mac Morin, describes himself as being a 'neat dancer and close to the floor'. Although he borrows motifs from contemporary dancers he has seen and admired, he insists that he would not wish to base his dancing completely around newer types of movement as he feels traditional aspects are vital. He uses a lot of quick, complicated steps to build up tension and will perform no more than two repetitions of a step at a time. He also likes to incorporate sideways movement in his performances as he feels it keeps the dance from becoming static. Although an extremely good dancer, neat, fast, and fascinating to watch, his dancing does display tendencies towards the new style, not only in his choice of step – many of which he creates – but also in a slightly higher, wider, and more visual style.



Figures 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d Mac Morin displays the more 'visual' style.

Many dancers practising the newer style of dance will travel quite a distance during a step. Mac describes the new style as follows:

Lots of movement – forward back, side to side – a lot of offbeat steps – those are borrowed from other styles of dancing, which are great, and I don't have anything against them. They're just not part of the old Cape Breton style. So, lots of movement side to side, offbeat rhythms, a lot of stopping.

Morin feels that stopping – where the dancer momentarily stands still, usually at cadential points in the music – impedes fluidity and that new-style dancing would work much better without such showy aspects, which are certainly not a feature of the traditional style. He refers to the longer, more complicated steps which have become a feature of the new style as being difficult for observers to follow and he feels that they have been created by dancers who adhere to routines, rather than by those who respond instinctively to the music.

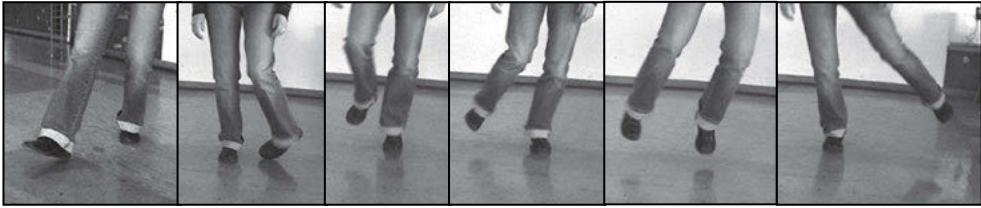
You can have a nice complicated step that'll only take you as long as one of the old long steps would, as opposed to having a step take you through half a tune and then you switch to the other foot. To me that's a bunch of little steps in one, but some people consider that a whole step. It's just too long because it's hard for somebody who's watching to keep track. [...] It's hard to believe that you might only get two or three steps, or two or three and a half that are offbeat to one tune. And I find a lot of people who have danced to routines only, seem to have more of these put-together steps, as opposed to doing just a random thing that comes into your head.

Morin also suggests that step dance should be allowed to develop through the use of new-style rhythms in steps using old or traditional movements. This concept fits closely with developments in the style of musical performance in Cape Breton. The music is now played faster than it was some years ago, with even more of a dance 'drive' than it had before; the resultant sound is often rawer and harsher.⁸ The piano accompaniment in particular is jazzier, with an increased emphasis on offbeat rhythms. This stylistic development contributes to a progression in the style of dance – new interpretations of old forms of music need new interpretations of old forms of dance to go with them. This, in turn, accentuates the advantage of retaining non-standardised forms of dance.

The final dancer, whose style is nearest to the new style, of those discussed feels that she stays 'as close to the tradition as possible.'⁹ Nevertheless, it is equally important to her that there should be a strong visual aspect to her dancing. As a frequent performer, well known and admired, she believes that her dancing should include, 'just something to catch the eye. [...] But you have to try to be imaginative, and if you can stay within the tradition and still be imaginative, I think that's a good thing [...] Cape Breton with a flair.'

Given that step dance was not originally considered a performance or stage art, she has a point. The largely local audience of earlier days, who knew and understood the steps, is being supplanted by a tourist market without the necessary knowledge and understanding of the dance or the music, an audience in more need

of a visual frame of reference (a requirement also identified by Mac Morin, who himself frequently performs for uninitiated audiences).



Figures 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d, 5e, 5f Cape Breton with a flair

Her style is compellingly visual, and technically superb. Although she incorporates many untraditional motifs such as aerial heel clicking, syncopated rhythms, twists and other movements, she still tries to remain as close to the floor as these movements will allow. One notable side effect is that she makes all her movements wider than a traditional dancer does. Very often she will kick out during a step at a forty five degree angle rather than the more conventional five or ten degrees from the line of travel. In creating her own steps, she seeks types of movement that mark out her individuality. This is a strong feature of the new style – the need to break away from tradition, whilst retaining important features, such as neatness, and closeness to the floor. Of course, many of the newer-style steps make a close-to-the-floor style, as in the old style of dancing taught by Willie Fraser or Mary Janet MacDonald, almost impossible. Using such movements as aerial heel clicks, for example, require the dancer to jump higher than is traditionally the case.

In her quest for different types of movement, she prefers to combine features from no more than two ‘new’ steps at a time, as she feels that any more will cause confusion for the audience. She deliberately attempts to create ‘completely different types of movement. I try not to put too many combinations together. I think that if you take one step and then you take another step and you try to combine the two, it’s enough’. She believes that her style fits somewhere ‘in the middle. I’m not ready to – I don’t think I’ll ever cross that boundary’.

As we have seen, Melanie MacDonald’s style, taught to her by her grandfather with great attention to detail, can be considered as a benchmark for the old style. All but the last dancer of those featured here considers themselves to be old-style dancers, and even she is reluctant to be classed as new style. Mary Janet MacDonald also dances in the old style, but her dancing differs from Willie Fraser’s strict form in that she will use newer steps and has made up many herself. The dancer in Figure 3 is also mainly old style, though his offbeat use of regular, old-style steps displays an influence of the old on the new.

The final two dancers discussed perform in the new style in that they incorporate asymmetric, offbeat steps, with a lot of movement, such as side to side, and use ankle breaks, heel clicks, and fast repetitions. This breaks with the old style

convention held by Willie Fraser that a dancer should move no more than a tile width forward, side or back. The last two dancers' highly visual style, although relatively close to the floor, is still consistently higher than that of the other dancers discussed.

Many step dancers practising today in Cape Breton wish to be seen as adhering to the old, close to the floor style, even though the new style imparts fresh aspects to the dance form. Changes in the way the music is played, and the need for dancers to have a style that appeals to the eye and incorporates 'new' ideas, creates a new style which differs quite dramatically from the old. In spite of this, the main features of the tradition – neatness and keeping the feet close to the floor – are still considered of great importance by dancers and are therefore, to an extent, maintained. Although there will always be a desire for change and new ideas, there is just as much of a desire for dancers to identify with the traditions of Cape Breton step dance and to retain what they feel are the most important and characteristic aspects of those traditions.

Appendix Interviews

Interviews were recorded on cassette and transcribed for this paper; dance examples were recorded on video tape. All quotes and figures are drawn from this material, which is in my personal collection.

Melanie MacDonald, Mabou, Cape Breton, audio and video, 12 October 2005 (Figure 1).

Mary Janet MacDonald, Port Hood, Cape Breton, audio and video, 12 October 2005 (Figure 2).

Male dancer, audio and video interview, July 2006 (Figure 3).

Mac Morin, Mabou, Cape Breton, audio and video, 13 October 2005 (Figure 4).

Younger female dancer, Cape Breton, audio and video, 13 October 2005 (Figure 5).

Older female dancer, Cape Breton, audio interview, 12 October 2005.

Notes

¹ Quotes are taken from interviews conducted with Cape Breton step dancers (see Appendix).

² *Official Textbook of the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing*, 6th edn (Glasgow: Lindsay Publications, 1993).

³ These include: jumps with heel clicks, stopping at cadence points, shuffling with the toe only, and bigger, higher, and wider movements.

⁴ For information on *seanchaidhean*, see Derick Thomson, *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

⁵ This dancer wishes to remain anonymous and is referred to in the list of interviews as 'male dancer'.

⁶ This dancer, too, wishes to remain anonymous and is referred to in the list of interviews as 'older female dancer'.

⁷ This is clearly a parallel to the ideas of passive and active repertoires discussed by Carl von Sydow, 'On the Spread of Tradition', in *Selected Papers on Folklore. Published on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, ed. Laurits Bødker (Rosenkilde and Bagger, Copenhagen 1948), pp. 11–43, and Kenneth S. Goldstein, 'On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Traditions

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to the Study of Repertory', *Journal of American Folklore*, 84/331, Toward New Perspectives in Folklore (1971), pp. 62–67.

⁸ For analysis of Cape Breton fiddle style, see Glenn Graham, *The Cape Breton Fiddle: Making and Maintaining Tradition* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 2006), and K. E. Dunlay and D. L. Reich (eds.), *Traditional Celtic Fiddle Music of Cape Breton* (East Alstead, NH: Fiddlecase Books, 1986).

⁹ This dancer also wishes to remain anonymous and is referred to in the list of interviews as 'younger female dancer'.