



A floor of Scottish *ceilidh* dancers in action. Photo courtesy Kevin MacLeod

Scottish Dance

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Traditional Scottish dance is as varied as its music, and includes both social and performance forms. People dance at weddings and at public dance events, many of which are held in village halls. The origin of most dances in Scotland can be traced to the mid-18th century, but many are older. Traditional social dances have remained popular in rural Scotland, and recently in towns and cities, interest in them has revived in the form of *ceilidh* (pronounced “kay-lee”) dancing. *Ceilidh* is the Scottish

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Gaelic word for “party.” Traditionally, a *ceilidh* might include music, dance, story, and talk as part of the festivities; today, “*ceilidh*” has come to mean a public or private dance event. The most popular *ceilidh* dances include “Strip the Willow,” “The Dashing White Sergeant,” “The Eightsome Reel,” “The Canadian Barn Dance,” “The Highland Schottische,” “The Gay Gordons,” “St. Bernard’s Waltz,” “Broun’s Reel,” and “The Britannia Two-Step.” At rural village dances, you may find people doing old-time waltzes, the Lancers and Quadrilles (in square formation), as well as popular longways dances. Most urban *ceilidhs* feature a caller, whose instruction helps those unfamiliar with the dances to have a good time. The role of the present-day caller is analogous to the one played by the peripatetic dancing masters of the 18th to 20th centuries, who went to villages and towns to give dance classes.

The oldest Scottish social dances, those born of village life, are the Three-some or Foursome Reels mentioned in early Scottish literature and first described in the 1700s in forms similar

to those enjoyed today. In a basic reel, three or four people in a line do setting steps (dancing in place) and then a figure-eight pattern. There are regional reel variations, notably in Orkney, Shetland, and the Hebrides. During the 16th to 18th centuries, the Scottish social dance repertoire grew incrementally by incorporating couple dances, longways set dances, and square formations from continental Europe and England. These forms were adapted to Scottish tastes with Scottish tunes and steps. Dance Assemblies began in the early 18th century in civic buildings in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and eastern Scottish towns, attended mostly by the landed gentry and a new and wealthy merchant class. The traveling dancing masters brought the latest dances to people even in remote country districts.

In 1923, in response to a decline in country dancing, Jean Milligan and Ysobel Stewart, supported by publisher Michael Diack, founded the Scottish Country Dance Society in Glasgow; it later became the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS). It established standardized and stylized steps, figures, and dances. The RSCDS



Ceilidh Dance in Strathdearn Village Hall, Inverness-shire. Photo by Ian MacKenzie. © Ian MacKenzie

provides education and training for teachers and dancers and has group affiliates worldwide where you can learn the figures and do the dances (see list of Web sites on page 93).

Most Americans have seen Highland dancing, especially the “Highland Fling” and “Sword Dance,” which are solo and competition dances. Another Highland dance is the “Seann Triubhas,” or “Old Trousers,” which supposedly refers to the Highlanders’ disdain of the trews they had to wear instead of kilts when these were outlawed by the 1746 Act of Proscription. Highland dance competitions evolved as part of early 19th-century bagpiping competitions, and later of Highland Games. By the end of the century, women dared to compete; children’s competitions were added in the early 20th century. Today, two organizations oversee the teaching of Highland dance and competitions.

Research in traditional Scottish dance forms—including that done by Tom and Joan Flett in the 1940s and 1950s and more recently by the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust—has documented dances that are sometimes only remembered by people in their communities of origin, but are actively performed by revivalists and reconstructors outside. Among these are the ritual “Sword Dance of Papa Stour” from Shetland, Hebridean dances such as “The Dirk Dance” and “The Reel of the Black Cocks,” Scottish hard-shoe dances such as “The Flowers of Edinburgh” and “The 21st of August,” and hard-shoe solo step dancing. The last had been thought to survive only in areas of Canada where Scots settled like Cape Breton and Newfoundland, but it is still remembered by a few individuals in Scotland.

The bagpipe and the fiddle have been the principal instruments used to accompany dance. In some remote parts of Scotland influenced by Calvinism, fiddle and pipe

music was discouraged, leading to the development of a musical genre of sung nonsense syllables known in Gaelic as “*puirt a beul*” or “mouth music” and in Lowland Scotland as “diddling” or “deedling.” The building of village and community halls from the late 19th century onward affected the music used for dance as fiddles and pipes—effective for small dance spaces such as kitchens—were reinforced by the accordion to fill larger spaces with sound. The late master accordion player Sir Jimmy Shand (1908–2000), one of those who set the standard for Scottish dance music in the 20th century, made his first recording in 1933. Dance bands today may feature accordions, banjos, fiddles, pipes, drums, bass, electric keyboards, and saxophones.

The tunes for many dances derive from a military “light music” repertoire of 2/4 and 4/4 marches, reels, and jigs. The strathspey, the only form of dance tune unique to Scotland, emerged in fiddle repertoires in the 18th century as an exciting new way to play reels in the Highlands and North East region of Scotland (near the River Spey). The strathspey’s special energy derives from a distinctive combination of dotted eighth and sixteenth notes—called a “Scottish snap” when the shorter note precedes the longer one. The formations for country dance reels and strathspeys are identical.

Dance is enjoying a renaissance in contemporary Scotland. In addition to the “*ceilidh* boom” of the late 20th century, other forms of traditional social and performance dance, new hybrids such as Scottish hip-hop, and ethnic dance from other countries are being taught and performed in the major cities. The establishment of The Scottish Traditions for Dance Trust and dance centers such as Dancebase in Edinburgh bodes well for the vitality of dance in Scottish culture. ■