

Master 2 LLCE Anglais  
Mémoire de recherche  
British Civilisation

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# Introduction

Research into traditional dancing has shown that every form of dance is a product of a form of society and that as society evolves, so does its style of dancing. Jean-Michel Guilcher explained why country dances slowly replaced the popular « branles » during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France :

Deux facteurs ont progressivement remis en question cet état de choses [la prédominance du branle dans les campagnes françaises]. L'un, déjà signalé, tient à la recomposition de la société et au désir que certains éprouvent de ne plus se confondre avec le commun du peuple. L'autre – mal séparable du premier – tient à la modernisation du répertoire. Il est clair que les adeptes de contredanse et les fidèles du branle ne peuvent s'ébattre simultanément au même endroit. De toute évidence, les premiers ne sauront longtemps se satisfaire du sol herbu ou caillouteux dont se contentent les seconds.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the « branle » was danced in circles or unbroken chains. The step used for it differed from one area to another and was a clear marker of community belonging.<sup>2</sup> The branle was a social link that unified communities, and it was danced at a time when the power of village life and communities was paramount. When country dances slowly took over, society was being transformed too: property, production, work, the influence of cities and people outside community circles, inter-community relations. Society was changing, therefore its tastes were changing too.

The same phenomena can be observed with the success of couple dances in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and of individual dances in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of which are still very fashionable. Today, the emphasis has been placed on individual careers and happiness, personal achievement and creativity are much sought for, and we are targeted by individual commercials. It therefore comes as no surprise that from the perspective of social dancing, our current society has fostered individual forms of dancing such as disco, hip hop, tecktonik, ragga, wantek, etc.

In my Master 1 research paper<sup>3</sup> I explained that Scottish Country Dancing (SCD) is a direct heritage of English country dancing modified in Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to suit the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Michel Guilcher. *Danse traditionnelle et anciens milieux ruraux français: tradition, histoire*. Paris, L'Harmattan, Ethnomusicologie et anthropologie de l'espace français, 2009. (p.72.).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* (p.36.).

<sup>3</sup> Raphaëlle Orgeret. *The Evolution of the Country Dance in Scotland and in the rest of the World. Historical Approach*. 2010.

tastes and manners of Scottish society at the time. Undoubtedly SCD as a dance form reflects some aspects of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century society. A major feature of the country dance is that there is no or almost no bodily contact, apart from giving hands. In addition the etiquette of the dance requires the formal acknowledgement of partners through the execution of a bow or curtsy at the beginning and at the end of a dance, and gives priority to women over men in all crosses. The music used for Scottish country dancing today, although it has evolved, is still a clear reminder of 18<sup>th</sup> and especially 19<sup>th</sup> century musical tastes. Far from being confined, however, to museums and costume dramas, Scottish country dances are still enthusiastically danced today by thousands of people worldwide. We can therefore suppose that it somehow reflects the social interactions and tastes of today's society as well, but in what way? Who are the Scottish country dancers of today?

The act of dancing is a kind of social projection. It gives an insight into who the dancers are, their personalities, and their values. Our individualistic society enables us to choose our leisure activities, and choosing SCD out of the thousands of other available hobbies may be considered as telling. We shall therefore probe into the psychological components of the attraction SCD may have: attitudes, beliefs, motivations. What are people looking for when they choose to practise SCD? What makes them keep it as a hobby, sometimes for many years?

In a ballroom, the number of men and women is hardly ever even: men are usually outnumbered, which requires women to dance as men, a practice made possible by the almost perfect symmetry between the two gender roles throughout the dances. Both sexes are virtually interchangeable, which brings an extraordinarily modern touch to SCD, since the equality between men and women is established from the start. There is also a total equality between the four couples of each of the sets. All of the couples will dance the same succession of figures twice through and go to the "bottom" of the set. Each couple will have their moment of glory as the leading couple and then will become an assisting couple for the rest of the set. Scottish country dancing also requires teamwork. The SCD form of dance thus stages a very egalitarian society,

but does it imply that all or most Scottish country dancers are staunch supporters of social equality?

On the other hand, SCD is both a national and a traditional kind of dance. One may wonder whether all or most dancers feel strongly about these features. As values, they might in some ways clash with those of gender and social equality.

More generally, is there any isomorphic link between Scottish country dancers' attitudes in real life and their chosen form of dance?

Scottish Country dances are a result of neo-classic 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics, order and harmony being the key concepts. However, the style has been interpreted and greatly modified by the 20<sup>th</sup> century revival and standardization brought by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS), whose work is still in progress: books and CDs are published frequently, bringing more dances, more changes. What is the impact of those changes on the profile of dancers? Is there any structural similarity between the organization of this Society and the form of dance? What role does the RSCDS play in promoting SCD? Do other social actors contribute to the success of SCD?

Scottish country dances are fundamentally social dances used for balls and "socials"<sup>4</sup>, but they can sometimes be displayed in shows or demonstrations if some costumes are added and a more complex choreography used. To best appreciate watching a Scottish Country dance ball, show or demonstration, one should watch it from above where one can then see the collective and synchronised moves (fig 4 and 5). They could somehow be compared to a military parade (fig 3) or to the shapes formed by bodies in some big shows (fig 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Informal balls. The difference between balls and "socials" lies not with the choice of dances but mainly with the dress code for the evening. Formal or highland wear will usually be required for balls.



Fig 2<sup>5</sup> and 3<sup>6</sup>: Beijing Olympic games opening show. 2002



Fig 4<sup>7</sup> and 5<sup>8</sup> : covering in SCD

The ultimate accomplishment is thus the collective shape (social body) formed by the sum and movement of all the bodies describing the same figures. Can this ideal be understood or interpreted in aesthetic, social, psychological terms?

I will attempt to explore the above issues using the following outline:

## 1. Methodology and figures

- 1.1. Explanation of method, aims and limits
- 1.2. Profile of dancers who completed the survey and hypotheses

## 2. Dancer's motivations

- 2.1. Tradition
- 2.2. Sociological factors
- 2.3. The dance factor

## 3. Influence of the group

- 3.1. Regional factors
- 3.2. The local group or branch
- 3.3. The RSCDS
- 3.4. "Dance with your soul"

## Conclusion

<sup>5</sup> [http://home.wangjianshuo.com/archives/20080808\\_beijing\\_olympic\\_games\\_opening\\_ceremony.htm](http://home.wangjianshuo.com/archives/20080808_beijing_olympic_games_opening_ceremony.htm) (11/07/2011).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/showthread.php?139629-This-Weekend-s-Pics!-August-9-amp-10-2008/page2> (11/07/2011).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thescottishtattoo.com/TartanGate.html> (11/07/2011).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.corryvreckan.org.uk/gallery.html> (11/07/2011).