A Brief History of Solo Irish Step Dancing
By: Joelle Sheppard B.G.S., M.A., T.C.R.G.

Introduction
Irish dancing has spread in popularity worldwide since the seven minute worldwide debut of "Riverdance" on Eurovision in 1994. Since that time, Irish dancers are no longer defined by location or ethnic descent. In fact, "over 70 million people worldwide class themselves as Irish" (Ó Cinnéide 2002, p.91) and the number of Irish step dancers in North America outnumber Irish dancers in Ireland itself. (Cullinane 1994, p.195)

Organizations
The majority of modern Irish step dancers today are competitive Irish dancers. The largest organization for competitive step dancing is An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha / Irish Dancing Commission, established in the 1930's. The next two popular competitive organizations are An Comhdháil Múinteora Rinnce Gaelacha / Congress of Irish Dance Teachers (established in 1969) and CRN (Cumann Rince Naisiunta / National Dance League) formed in 1982. Although over the last ten years, there have been many new Irish dance organizations formed worldwide, many of which operate on an open platform basis. Some of these include: Cumann Rince Dea Mhease (CRDM), Cumann Rince Gaelacha (CRG), Celtic Association of Irish Dancing (CAID), and World Association of Irish Dancing (WIDA). I will limit discussion to the formation and history of An Coimisiun.

The dancing
As much as the organizations that promote Irish dancing have changed over time, so too has the dancing. The dancing being taught in its current form cannot truly be considered "traditional" Irish dancing; having only began its journey to its present form in the past hundred years, and continuing to change year by year. Irish dance before the advent of An Coimisiun, was a much more subdued form of dancing; the emphasis being on poise, grace and musicality of the steps rather than on speed and complexity of steps and footwork.

Past dancing
Starting with the earliest forms of Irish dancing is difficult since references to Irish dancing in literature prior to the sixteenth century are few and vague, giving very little insight about the form of the dancing taking place. From the 1540's and on, literature indicates that a number of different large group dances were popular. There is mention of "Jig" group dances, the "Hey" which may resemble modern round dances, a sword dance (of which there is no accurate description) and a dance that may have been similar to the Rince Fada (long dance) that is performed today.

These dances were performed by all classes of people and may have been used as a form of celebration. Some accounts describe dancing being performed at wakes, around bonfires, and at important events such as the Eve of May Day and St. John's Eve. Keep in mind that these descriptions have often been written by non-dancers. As well, these references contain only a few instances of dancing that would have been taking place. Therefore,
it is likely that there existed many different types and variations of Irish dancing that we have no current record of.

**Dance masters**

Irish step dancing didn't begin to take on its present form until the advent of the Dance Master in the seventeen hundreds. Only lasting for approximately two hundred years, the Dance master's effects on Irish step dancing's present form has been profound.

The dance master was the first official Irish dance teacher. Before Dance Masters came about, Irish dance was improvisational. Steps were acquired by watching other family members or friends dance casually at parties or gatherings where music was being played. The dance masters introduced discipline and choreography into the dancing that had not existed previously.

Because the majority of Ireland's population was rural and therefore widespread, the dance Masters had to travel around from community to community and take the lessons to the students. Each dance master had his own territory and would take about a year to travel around their entire route. So, each student only got to see their teacher for one week out of every year! Due to the traveling nature of the dance master's job, Dance masters were all male.

**Why the arms are straight**

There are a few crafted stories as to why the Irish dance with their arms by their sides. One such story claims that dancing was banned by the English or by the Clergy so the Irish confined their dancing to indoors (or behind hedges) and kept their arms down by their sides so that people walking by couldn't tell they were dancing. As you can imagine, this is unlikely due to the simple fact that anyone walking by such a strange sight would most likely want to investigate into why someone was bouncing up and down so vigorously.

In truth, there is no proven documentation explaining why the Irish didn't use their arms in their solo dancing so we can only speculate. It is this author's opinion that since Irish dancing evolved as a past time amongst friends in small kitchens and bars, there was limited room to accent their foot work with fancy arm gestures. Furthermore, Irish dance is tied closely to the music, the emphasis being on the sound that the shoes made on the floor more than on the aesthetic look of the dancing and as such, the arms were largely ignored.

Once the dance masters started to demand discipline in dance, they required that the arms remain rigid by the sides instead of loosely hanging, thus creating the stiff, regimented arms that you see in Irish dance today.

In addition to demanding straight arms, the dance masters also implemented the eight bars danced on the right followed by same "step" or series of movements being executed over the next 8 bars on the "left " foot. This also helps a dancer's movements to match more closely to Irish music. An Irish musician will play each section of a tune twice through before moving onto the next section creating a pattern such as AA, BB and so on.

**Dance master's music**
Back in the time of the dance master, the only way to have music for dancing was to provide live music. To remedy this, a dance master would often be accompanied by a travelling musician. Often a fiddler, and in many cases, they were blind. Other dance masters would play their own music. Yet when traveling, the dance master would wear their finest clothing and hide their instrument when traveling so as not to be mistaken for a "mere" musician.

The dance masters were very territorial about their teaching areas. It is said that if there was a dispute among two dance masters as to who owned a particular area, they would compete to solve it. This would create quite an event for spectators. Two barrels were taken and overturned. The barrels were then coated with soap to make them slippery. The two masters would then climb on top of the barrels and would continue to dance until one of them either ran out of steps, fell off the barrel, or one of them dropped from exhaustion.

This begins to give a good idea as to how much Irish dancing has changed since the 19th century. In the time of the dance master, the more a dancer could remain on the spot during their steps, the better the dancer was deemed to be. Nowadays, a dancer would be hard pressed to attempt to dance even their basic steps on the spot as the movements today require that the dancer cover large distances. In fact, part of the judging for modern Irish dancers is how well they use whole stage throughout each dance.

**Gealic league**

The next major influence on the dancing came about because of an organization called the Gaelic League, founded in 1893 (Cullinane 2003, p.16). The Gaelic League was an organization formed to preserve Ireland's rich culture and help to achieve independence for Ireland as a country. The Gaelic League promoted all aspects of Irish culture; the dance, music, attire, and their main focus, the Irish language.

The Gaelic league in their hopes to keep Irish culture alive, established language and dance classes throughout Ireland. This resulted in regular, weekly classes being held in urban centers. This opened up on opportunity for women with families to begin teaching.

The Gaelic league is also responsible for the creation of organized Irish dance competitions (feiseanna) from 1890's - 1930's. The adjudicators were members of the gealic league in high standing and not dancers or teachers themselves. At this time, Irish dance teachers had formed a few separate associations throughout Ireland to try and regulate feiseanna and teaching standards. Yet, without one central body regulating Irish dance, the competitions started to become uncontrollable with disputes and even violence erupting in the late 1920's.

**Coimisiun**

To create some type of sanity in the Irish dance world, four members from the teaching associations (Leinster and Dublin Dance teachers associations) paired up with four members of the Gaelic league to form the "Coiste Stiurtha" (in English the steering committee) in 1924. Which later become the "Coimisiun an Rince" English: dancing commission in 1930.

Once the Coimisiun was established and regulated competitions started taking place, Irish dancing grew in popularity and began its journey to its present form.
Currently, competition continuously causes both teachers and students to come up with new jumps, more complex footwork and increased use of space. Even comparing Irish dancing performed at the Worlds competition 5 years ago with what is danced today will show an evolution in choreography.

**Outside influence on Irish dance**

With increased worldwide popularity, the outside influences on Irish dancing have also increased to include Tap, Jazz, Ballet and other dance forms that are native to countries where Irish dance is now taught. With Irish dance being so popular worldwide, it can be said that Irish dancing and, culture in general have become "...one of Ireland's greatest exports." (Ó Cinnéide 2002, p.4)

**References**


