

“Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance” Part 10 -The Irish Equation.

Peter Ellis



I would have liked to include information on any Irish connections but it's difficult to find anything with certainty of accuracy. This is partly to do with the English influence over the centuries, at least in Dublin and the larger towns and then the ‘cleansing’ and cover-up of information by the Gaelic League at the turn of the 19th/20th Century in an attempt to recreate an Irish Ireland. As with most countries of the Western World of the day Ireland had taken on much of the fashionable ball-room dances and style of music via Paris and in the context of their settlement in Australia, this is the key factor.

There were Irish tunes and dance descriptions included in Playford's collections from 1651 (*The English Dancing Master*). However by the extended Regency period relative to the history of social dance in Australia anything described as Irish such as

'Himes Irish Dances' is more likely referring to English dances in the repertoire of Dublin's Irish Society. In seeking clarification on the possibility of Irish dances in this period from Ellis Rogers (expert on dances of the Regency period England and author of *'The Quadrille'*) makes the following comment:-

“I believe most, if not all, the books of ‘Irish’ country dances published in Ireland in the late 18th. Century and 19th were intended for the literate and upper class in townships dominated by the English, or English educated. The reason is a commercial one. No one could make a profit writing for a dispersed unreachable (No Railways) mainly illiterate (In English) audience. When the American Country Dance Society published ‘A Choice Selection of Country Dances’ by John & William Neal Dublin c.1726 they said in the introduction “Thus, this is really a collection of English country dances published in Ireland”. “When, some years ago I ran a ball for the ‘Irish Georgian Society’ we took our entire programme from late 18th Century Irish dance books and although there were some wonderful tunes none of them sounded characteristically ‘Irish’. But then, do I know what late 18th Century truly Irish dance music should sound like?”

But it is also possible some dances from those sources could be taken up by the itinerant dance masters and passed onto the general Irish dancing patrons. For example by the 1770s Minuets and possibly Cotillons had entered the repertoire of ordinary folk and it is quite clear that later in the nineteenth century the dances the Irish were performing were those shared particularly with Scotland, but also generally throughout the British Isles. There was not such delineation between the dances of these countries then, but the teachers may have incorporated an ‘Irish twist’.

This information is taken from *A Tour of Ireland* by Arthur Young, Dublin 1780 and reprinted in *Arthur Young's Tour of Ireland 1776-1779*, edited by A. W. Hutton, 1892, London, Bell & sons: -

“Dancing is so universal among them that there are everywhere itinerant dancing-masters, to whom the cottars pay sixpence a quarter for teaching their families. Beside the Irish jig which they

can dance with a most luxuriant expression, minuets and country dances are taught: and I even heard some talk of cotillions coming in."

Also when travelling through Killarney he wrote again:

"All the poor people, both men and women, learnt to dance, and are exceedingly fond of the amusement. A ragged lad without shoes or stockings was seen in a mud barn, leading up a girl in the same trim for a minuet."



Caption "Extracts from a 2007 exhibition catalogue 'A Time and a place – Two Centuries of Irish Social Life' by the National Gallery of Ireland. My thanks to Treasa Harkin of the Irish Traditional Music Archive for forwarding this information and to Louise Morgan of the National Gallery of Ireland for assistance in securing permission for use of the illustration. Courtesy from a 'private collection'."

The quadrilles in Ireland are said to have been brought back by the soldiers returning from the Napoleonic Wars; I'd suggest the diseases had far more widespread circulation than any of the dances troopers might have encountered. Wellington's officers at least returning to Britain and Ireland did learn the Quadrille (as well as the Waltz) while in Europe; Brendan Breathnach references Wellington's troops returning with it to England and Ireland:- Folk Music and Dances of Ireland of 1971, Dublin (p. 46):-

*"Intervening between the reel-of-three and the common reel and that of the **later** céilí dances were the sets and half sets which were the most popular dances throughout the country in the last and present century. In their many localised forms all these derive from the quadrille, a dance in which couples faced each other in the form of a square (whence the name). Quadrilles were tremendously*

popular in the Paris of Napoleon. The victorious armies of Wellington became familiar with them and later introduced them to England and Ireland.”

To what extent the general troops would learn this via society I remain to be convinced, but certainly the officers and those in 'position' were able to dance during the time of Napoleon's imprisonment over 1814 and both the Waltz and the Quadrille were brought back to Britain. Ellis Rogers's references the connection in his authoritative book 'The Quadrille' adding that when Napoleon escaped from Elba, numerous balls for Wellington were held in Holland and those occupied areas of France. Special music for quadrille dances was dedicated to Wellington in Brussels in the two months leading up to Waterloo, and the most famous ball was on the eve of Waterloo, 1815. Ellis points out there were only about 150 at the ball, that's all the ballroom could hold, and that producers of films should take note of that as well as adding historical nuance by using the music especially dedicated to the occasion(s). Clearly the surviving number of officers and others who attended the balls when on their return to their homes spread out across England, Scotland and Ireland, would be comparatively small in number. But there is also the question of anyone regardless of their station, simply introducing a new dance that is not part of a planned programme repertoire. It first has to be accepted or vetoed by the MC and teaching a dance or a demonstration at a dance or ball just didn't happen in that way; but it's possible at a private do or in a family gathering and perhaps from there to the 'Irish crossroad dances'.

Ellis Rogers further points out that thousands (12,000) of upper crust English society, raced to France to learn 'the latest', during 1814 while Napoleon was imprisoned. I wonder if any of the elite Irish society did like-wise. Very probable and Ireland certainly had contact with France.

A date of 1803 as to when the Quadrille was first danced in England at Devonshire House is noted by Ellis and that Quadrille Music was first published in London in 1810. The latter two references in manuscripts are held by the records department of one of the local County Authorities in England. The 1803 reference to Devonshire House is likely that of a Miss Berry's mention of it and the Duke of Devonshire in her journal, thanks to this link from Dan Worrall, author of the social history of the Anglo-German Concertina. Miss Berry was present at a quadrille in Paris in 1802 and apart from the 1803 account, saw one danced by the nobles in Warwickshire in 1808 – *Extracts of the journals and correspondence of Miss Berry: from the years 1783 to 1852, Volume 2; Longmans, Green, publishers, London 1865*. In the following years it was gradually taught to the upper classes, and around **1816** many people could dance a quadrille. It was 1822 before Wilson provided a special publication on quadrilles - *The Quadrille and Cotillion Panorama*.



DANCING A QUADRILLE
Coloured copper engraving, c. 1815

This is the Quadrille or First Set (of quadrilles), most likely the final figure, at the time of Wellington.

Helen Brennan in her 'The Story of Irish Dance' points out the cotillons were danced at Irish crossroads by 1813. (This seems to follow Arthur Young's 'hearing of it coming in' during the late 1700s). Also according to her:-

'The first performance of "The First Set of Quadrilles" in Ireland took place in 1816 in Dublin Within months the resultant quadrille craze would produce a whole raft of newly composed dances (referring to other quadrilles such as Lancers and later the Caledonians in that context) to meet the intense public demand.'

This coincides with Elizabeth Grant's description of the first season of quadrilles in Edinburgh 1816 and 'Quadrille Mania'. Also the first description of the Lancers appears in print by Duval in Dublin in 1817; presumed of British origin (because of the music – P. Richardson) this quadrille certainly didn't come from France or with Wellington's troops – French dancing master Gardel as editor in his edition of '*Nouveau Manuel Complet de la Danse*', refers to the 'English Lancers' as a popular set of the day in 1866. Note the first known reference to the Lancers is from Dublin, not England.

Philip Richardson (*The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century*) says Lady Jersey introduced the Quadrille to Almack's most prestigious Assembly in London in 1815. This certainly created the 'seal of approval' with London's society for the new dance. Elizabeth Grant provides a description of her involvement in the first demonstration of the Quadrille in Edinburgh the following year and that the Dunn brothers had brought it back from France to teach their set. (This is in my opinion how the Quadrille was initially introduced (including Ireland); by the teachers returning from France after Napoleon was toppled).

From 'Memoirs of a Highland Lady' by Elizabeth Grant and published by her niece Lady Strachey 1898:-

'It was the first season of quadrilles, against the introduction of which there had been a great stand by the old-fashioned respectables. Many resisted the new French figures altogether, and it was a pity to give up the merry country dance, in which the warfare between the two opinions resulted; but we young people were all bit by the quadrille mania, and I was one of the set that brought them into first notice. We practised privately with the aid of a very much better master than Mr Smart. Finlay Dunn had been abroad, and imported all the most graceful steps from Paris; and having kept our secret well, we burst upon the world at a select reunion at the White Melvilles', the spectators standing on chairs and sofas to admire us.'

One thing of the youth of Wellington's generation following the ordeals of Napoleon and Waterloo, they were ready to break loose and in no mood to be restricted by the protocol and command of the 'old guard'. Wellington in contrast was turned away from Almack's doors for being inappropriately attired; he was wearing the latest in pantaloons (trousers).

Ellis Rogers points out it was a limited number within society that at first knew the Quadrille until such time as the dancing masters gradually taught and introduced it; that it took about 5 years before becoming widely known and percolating down the levels of classes. He also documents the fact it wasn't known in some of the remoter parts of Scotland and Ireland until between 1870 and 1895. However it certainly had spread to some areas in a short time. I would emphasise as with Australia, the quadrilles initially arrived as the latest in fashion per the documentation provided. From there they could quickly move into general circulation and of course as Helen O'Shea has conferred to me:-

"British soldiers were stationed all over Ireland, and there were also many more country houses of English and Anglo-Irish upper class ownership, so balls where the latest quadrilles (and all the other dances of the period, right up to the polka) were commonplace and slipped into the popular culture fairly rapidly, although the Irish steps, as we know, were different (and also differed in various parts of Ireland)." (Servants were sometimes enlisted to make up numbers)

There were also debutante type presentations at Dublin Castle that may have resulted in some dance percolation out to ordinary folk, perhaps via the same dancing teachers that were instructing all over the country as in the rest of the British Isles and exemplified by 'the dancies' in Scotland. It is likely the 'Irish polkas and dances' that bear little resemblance to the original music and steps have nevertheless been derived from the quadrilles and polka quadrilles in particular, altering as native styled tunes and Irish stepping were incorporated. Tunes of course circulate far more rapidly than the dances under 'control' of the MC or Dancing Master, unless of course an absolute craze that can sometimes bring a dance to the fore. The tune 'Downfall or Paris' moved into the Irish aural circulation very quickly whereas the Country Dance of that name did not survive beyond the Regency. On the other hand a good tune deserves to be danced and the Irish coined one of their dances to the Downfall of Paris. This tune had been taken up soon after Waterloo and an Irish set dance (routine of steps) is reputed to be the first set dance ever in the Irish step dance tradition. It's a hornpipe in the Irish step dance tradition, called a 'set dance' - that is a set routine of steps choreographed to the tune and is not connected in any way to the Country Dance by Wilson. Note that in Australia a 'set dance' refers to a quadrille set generally of four couples. It can also refer to a cotillion, or perhaps an earlier country dance such as sets of Sir Roger de Coverley, Highland Reel, Spanish Waltz or the Circassian Circle.

The Dubliners play a fine rendition of the Downfall of Paris and in New Zealand in the 1970s 'The Ginger Minge Bush Band' put out a cassette which included a brilliant version.

The tune can also be found on You Tube played by Eugene O'Donnell, one of the best fiddlers of Irish dance music. The link is: - dance<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1aF1ttydXg>

After the Gaelic League was formed in 1893 the Irish branch set out (following Scotland's example) to find their native dances. Generally they found only the Step-dance and/or Irish Jig. Well of course by the 1890s there were heaps of dances, quadrilles, country dances, jigs and reels that had evolved incorporating Irish nuance and stepping. At any rate many were discarded being considered foreign because of links with the dances of England, Scotland and Europe. Nothing was put in their place except where the Gaelic League could disguise origins under the cloak of the 'real old style'; when in fact they commissioned 'invention' of new dances such as Siege of Ennis by placing Irish stepping into the English La Tempête – the Walls of Limerick, Sweets of May etc. followed and this is during the early 1900s, well after the major period of immigration of Irish to Australia.

Proinsias de Roiste in his "Note on Irish Dancing" Nodlag 1927 in the Roche Collection of Traditional Irish Music wrote:

“It was unfortunate that in the general scheme to recreate an Irish Ireland, the work of preserving or reviving our old national dances should have largely fallen to the lot of those who were but poorly equipped for the task. For the most part they were lacking in insight and a due appreciation of the pure old style, and had as it appears, but a slender knowledge of the old repertoire The musicians were, apparently as slack in tunes as most others proved to have been in dances The spectacular and difficult dances for the few were cultivated to the neglect of the simple ones for the many, leaving the social side untouched except to criticise or condemn The ballroom dances in vogue at the time were the quadrilles or sets, lancers, valse, polka, schottische or barn dance, two step and mazurka. These were all banned and nothing put in their place but for a couple of long dances.... An exception should have been made, one would imagine, in favour of the popular old Sets (that had become Irishised), if only on account of the fine old tunes with which they were associated; but they were all decried amongst the rest.”

(The Siege of Ennis tune is included in this edition by Roche as an old tune, but says the dance is one of the new introductions). Ellis Rogers in 'The Quadrille' p 223-226 gives a good overview of the history of the Gaelic League and confirms the Siege of Ennis was adapted with Irish stepping from the old dance known from 1820 in Europe, Britain and the Colonies as 'La Tempête'.

The interesting point from Ellis is that the Gaelic League when 'extinguishing' the popular dances, - that these had been much loved by the Irish in general. Mass opposition to the 'do gooders' resulted as the League tried to create an Irish Ireland. In contrast by the late 1920s the various newer dances like Siege of Ennis and Walls of Limerick were supported by the Church as it loathed the short hold couple dances (as immoral). It took the side of the Gaelic League and made their church halls available for dances that only programmed the new longways dances and any Irish invented quadrilles with the long arm hold. He goes on to say the Gaelic League did invent some very good dances and that the Irish people reacted against them because of their annoyance – that this was a pity as they lost some interesting dances in that way as well.

In his authoritative book “Toss the Feathers” by Irish Dance teacher Pat Murphy, the following points are made:-

“Before the ban, the reel of three and eight-hand reel, which sound remarkably like the Scottish dances of the time, were very popular. The main differences between the two cultures were in the style of dancing, with the Irish eliminating the hand movements and toe pointing parts as effeminate. It would appear that at all times, steps and dancing style defined and even created the 'Irishness' of the dances.” “After the ban, some members of the Gaelic League Dancing Commission, formed in 1929, endeavoured to resurrect some of the dances they caused to disappear and when this was not possible, they composed others in their place.” -

The Irish Equation to be continued next issue
