

REVIEW

Mats Melin and Jennifer Schoonover. *Dance Legacies of Scotland: The True Glen Orchy Kick*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 272. ISBN: 978-0367489472. \$136.00 USD.

Writing a book about the history of dancing in Scotland is a difficult task. Texts in multiple languages, especially Lowland Scots, Gaelic, and English, must be examined carefully. This surviving evidence tends to be impressionistic and subjective, rather than exact and precise, and can say more about the observer than the dancers s/he is describing. The terms used for types of dances and their constituent movements are notoriously slippery, changing in usage over place and time. Dances performed and the styles in which dancers embodied them varied according to local traditions, the social classes of the dancers, the audience, the nature of the occasion, material conditions, and a myriad of other factors. Accounts of the history of dance in Scotland can be so driven by an agenda to legitimize the practices of a particular community or institution, and authenticate the forms of dance that it advocates, that inconvenient variations or deviations from expected norms can be easily ignored or deprecated.

This new volume by veteran ethnochoreologist Mats Melin and his collaborator Jennifer Schoonover is an effort to provide a concise but comprehensive and impartial history of dance in Scotland from about the seventeenth century to the modern day, with excursions into the diaspora. At the core of the book is an investigation into the legacy of the dancing masters who dominated the art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the function and vestiges of foot percussion in solo and group dances, and the effects of institutionalization or vernacularization on dance forms. Questions about the origins of step dance practiced in Scottish Gaelic communities in the Canadian Maritimes, and its relationship to other forms of dance in other locations, especially Scotland, fueled both authors into these research efforts.

I commend the approach taken by the authors in presenting their findings. They are careful to define concepts and terms carefully (even such basic issues as the notion of dance itself), to cite the

sources from which these are derived, and to compare sources to highlight differences in usage or interpretation. The concluding section of most chapters summarizes the terms explored.

Melin and Schoonover have synthesized a considerable mass of scholarship about Scottish dance, including recent work on Gaelic sources and perspectives often inadequately represented in previous accounts. Their volume also includes some new primary sources—travelers’ accounts, poems and songs by insiders, dancing manuals, and more—and summaries of Melin’s own fieldwork. Placing developments in Scottish dance history in the context of wider European practices and trends, as they do, helps to de-exoticize and demystify dance genres that are too often portrayed as ancient and characteristically unique, rather than closely related to others and explicable within the same frames of reference.

The authors exhibit curiosity and an openness to the diversity of forms, styles, and innovations of dance through the generations. This acceptance of plurality and of the evolving transformations and interpretations of dance inspired them, as they explain in the first chapter, to choose the word “legacies” rather than “traditions” in the title of the book, eschewing artificial and arbitrary notions of correctness, purity, or authenticity. They mention the interventions of prominent authorities to “improve” dances and dancing according to the prevailing norms and expectations of the times without using an unnecessary tone of scorn or blame. Over the course of the book, they demonstrate that dancing masters in Scotland included percussive footwork as a common and unexceptional element of their discipline, but that a variety of social factors caused it to decline in Scotland during the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while it developed further in the vernacular practices of the Canadian Maritimes. These trans-Atlantic divergences have led to a great deal of mythmaking and misunderstanding in recent generations but much can be learned about dance history, cultural aesthetics, the social role of institutions, and the obfuscation of tradition through this objective and fair-minded assessment of Scottish dance.

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