

Square sets as 'folk' dance in Cape Breton community life

Jørn Borggreen

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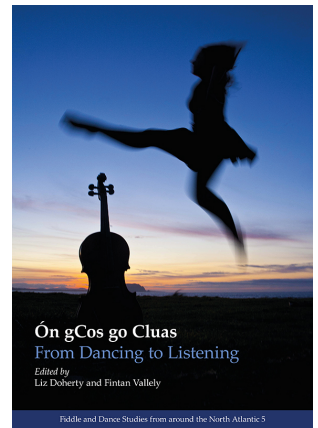
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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About the author:

Jørn Borggreen has been dancing and instructing traditional American square and contra dance in Denmark since the early 1980s. He has also been dancing Irish set dances for more than a decade, and became aware of the uniqueness of Cape Breton square sets during a visit to the island in 1999. Surprised that only a few of the dances were actually in a printed form, he was inspired to research them, and with the support of a travel grant from the Danish Ministry of Research he interviewed several of the older people involved. From this he assembled a monograph which describes more than a dozen different Cape Breton dances.

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Square sets as folk dance in Cape Breton community life

JØRN BORGGREEN

When I first visited Cape Breton in 1999 as a tourist, I became aware of the presence of a strong dance tradition in certain communities, but also what I perceived as a seemingly chaotic situation on the dance floor. Being a dance instructor myself, I was somewhat frustrated, yet I wondered whether there were descriptions of such apparent chaos and, if so, where could I see them? Yes, indeed, there are ‘descriptions’, but they are oral, only in the mind of the prompters. Nothing, or near to nothing, was ever published or written down. My initial research on the internet and in libraries gave very meagre results, but through e-mail exchanges with people in Cape Breton I found out that I had to come into direct contact with those who carried the knowledge. As I dived deeper into the subject, a picture began to develop and a very good reason for my study emerged. This took ten years and the result is published in the form of a booklet, now in its third edition.¹

History of the dance

Before square dancing came to Cape Breton around the turn of the twentieth century (1890–1900), there was an established tradition of dancing that predated French, Scottish, and Irish immigration to the area in the late 1700s.² Later, the ‘square’ formation originated in France and England, and is represented in many quadrille dances carried abroad by emigrants. The Caledonian and the Lancers became the most popular forms from the turn of the twentieth century,³ and in the 1920s and 1930s, new figures were added to the old forms with the importation of quadrilles from New England. Instructions for the new square dances came partly from mail-order books and partly via Cape Bretoners who went to Ontario and the USA as itinerant workers and returned for summer reunions;⁴ the same, also, was done by travelling musicians or dance instructors who went from place to place teaching and setting up dances.⁵ The quadrille dances of that time were done in homes, at weddings, at barn raisings, and such, but in the late 1930s the first public dances began to be held in schoolhouses, and later in parish and community halls. Square dancing became very popular in the 1950s and 1960s, but declined in the 1970s, though the dance music itself was revived through the efforts initiated by the documentary *The Vanishing Cape Breton*

Fiddler in 1970. In the late 1980s the dancing was revived, as described in Mats Melin's 1997 comprehensive account of the history of the square dance on Cape Breton.⁶



Figure 1 Map of Cape Breton.

Square dancing in Cape Breton in earlier days was guided by a prompter, as Johnny Stamper stated in 1988:

The way we learned in those days, you'd go to a dance in Boisdale or Bras d'Or or George's River. That used to be a great thing and, if you wanted to try to dance, you could drive 'er all night long! So, I started picking it up. We had the real sets in those days; today they've got them all mixed up. We had the Lancers and the Caledonia. I used to know that Caledonia well myself; I prompted a lot of them at one time. There were four figures in our set and I have a book on that. But, you see, they don't understand it today. The Scottish music started to die out and this darn rock 'n' roll came in and ruined everything! But it's starting to come back now, just here in the last few years.⁷

Peggy MacDonald Beaton noted:

Then, when you'd go to a dance, they'd have 'ladies to the right and gents to the left' and that's when everyone would be step dancing. And when we used to go, they'd be prompting the sets and it was like a drill, really nice to do and nice to watch – two slow figures and two fast. But today, if you get a prompter, they won't listen!⁸

As the role of the prompter diminishes, instead, in each of the sets one couple is 'looked to' as most knowledgeable and sets the timing for the figures.

Dancing today

Square dancing on Cape Breton at present takes a number of different forms with rather diffuse borderlines between them. At one end of the spectrum there are performance groups that give shows with very strictly rehearsed dances that are gracefully danced and display the figures in a form very close to the original. In that category I particularly note the *Just Four on the Floor* project,⁹ a collection of three square sets prepared as teaching material for the public schools in Nova Scotia; I consider it an important initiative for keeping this dance form alive.

During the busy summer season square dancing is an important part of gatherings when family, friends and community members meet at social events, it may be a kitchen gathering, a ceilidh, with music, songs – often in Gaelic – and a square set. If the event is advertised as a square dance, it will often have square sets alternating with couple dances. These events are mostly dominated by the locals, both those who live in the community and those who come back from abroad for a summer reunion. No caller is in action; everybody knows the dance and only four couples are allowed in a set. This creates a community togetherness, where the square dance is a basic instrument, as found at such places as Washabuck, Glendale and Christmas Island (see Figure 1: Map of Cape Breton).

At some of the busy tourist places, such as the parish hall in Baddeck, a ceilidh is announced on several – if not all – nights of the week during the summer; the venues are normally community or parish halls. As part of the programme, a square dance is announced and people present are invited into square sets. A caller/prompter both takes part in and conducts the dance, while the large number of non-dancers watch. Since the prompter is in charge, they choose the traditional local form of the square set, rendering the occasion a good opportunity to see a specific local set. At the other end of the spectrum, three or four dance halls around the central part of the west coast have very well-attended weekly square dances during the summer. Here, the tourists outnumber the local dancers and the dance style is strongly influenced by that. Many more than four couples are allowed in a set and, once a figure starts, the dancers determine how long the music should play, as well as when one movement is over and the next begins. This is a very dynamic form of dancing, appealing to the younger generation, and is especially popular in the halls at Glencoe Mills and West Mabou. Jigs and reels are used throughout a dance event, often interspersed with a strathspey for a solo step dance.

The present compilation

This compilation of square sets has its origin in two study tours to Cape Breton during the summers of 2001 and 2003. It is based partly on interviews with, and notes from, both formerly – and currently – active prompters, and partly on video and audio recordings made at square dances. Published material, as well as material found in archives was also consulted. The results are published as *Right to the Helm*.¹⁰ In this, the dance descriptions are kept as close to the original calls as possible. Since there are different definitions for many of the moves and positions, due to the non-standardised nature of the dances, *Right to the Helm* uses the language of New England contra dances in an effort to be understood by a wider public.

A list of the places to which I have allocated specific dances is given, too, with a number in parenthesis, indicating how many (if more than one) different variations exist within that community: Baddeck (3), Big Bras d'Or, Cape North (2), Chéticamp, Glendale, Ingonish, Inverness (3), Mabou, Margaree Forks, St. Peter's, Sydney, Washabuck and West Bay. Since many Cape Bretoners moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where they continued to play music and dance, the Boston Set is included in the study as a distinct set of its own, and it is presently enjoyed at dances at the French-American Victory Club and at the Gaelic Society at the Canadian-American Club. Also, since the Lancers and the Caledonian are the most often-mentioned immediate predecessors of the square sets, these two sets are also included in the study. The French speaking community around Chéticamp has an additional rich tradition with its own definitions, which are beyond the scope of this study. For those interested in this subject, refer to *All Join Hands: A Guide to Teaching Acadian Traditional Dances in Schools*.¹¹

In spite of the accreted 'indigenous' nature of the Cape Breton square sets, several figures occur more or less frequently. The most popular are those where the gents in turn get to dance with all the ladies in the set. 'All join' is by far the most common introductory call in Cape Breton square dancing; it means 'join hands in a circle and go up to the centre and back', and to me it signifies the awareness of being together in the dance – you are dancing not only with your partner, but with a group of people, your neighbours. During my study, I noticed a comment by John Alex MacMullin MacNeil who recalls from the late 1930s:

There was no round dancing in our day; it was all square sets. There were two different styles of dances: *The Caledonian* and *The Plain Lancer* – two different things altogether. I was years on the floor prompting. You'd go to the north and it was all Caledonian. You'd go to the south and it was all Lancers.¹²

And indeed, when one looks carefully at the individual figures of the dances, a certain pattern arises: in that, six or seven of the sets have figures that are similar to one or two of the Caledonian figures, and another six have patterns similar to The Lancers figures. On the map, a line from north-west to south-east divides the north with the Caledonian style from the south with The Lancers style (see Figure 1). This gives an indication of how the new figures were added on to the old framework of dances.

The future

I see a striking similarity between Cape Breton and Ireland with respect to indigenous dances that are – or have been – on the verge of being forgotten, but have, happily, been revived. Cape Bretoners ‘must balance a fine line between – on the one hand – maintaining the unique character of the different sets and – on the other hand – institutionalising the dances so that they become rigid museum pieces with many rules and no changes. The most likely way to do this is to maintain the social aspect of these dances. This can be done by providing relatively unstructured events at which the dances can be enjoyed’.¹³ With respect to square dancing, I see positive things happen occasionally. In Cape North, St. Peter’s, and Sydney, dance sessions during the winter, a dancer wrote to me: ‘We somehow knew the dances because we have been doing them years ago; now we see them explained in print it’s like rediscovering our own sets’.¹⁴

Indeed, at the Glencoe Mill dances introductory instructions are given to newcomers to the dance. The whole of Cape Breton should be considered in connection with this form of dance, because it has roots in all parts of the island and, collectively, the forms should all be seen in a wider perspective. The square sets of Cape Breton are such a unique piece of folk culture that it would be a great pity if it were not to be preserved and developed. All in all, square dancing enjoys healthy and enthusiastic participation in Cape Breton, and this promises to keep a traditional dance form active. However, since tradition is – and should be – constantly changing, it is important to preserve the original forms in some manner. I see the present study as a small contribution to that – to not forgetting the sources – giving more people the opportunity to see the beauty in these dances and to actually take part in them.

Notes

¹ Jørn Borggreen, *Right to the Helm: Cape Breton Square Dances*, 4th edn (Jyllinge, Denmark: Jørn Borggreen, 2015).

² Barbara LeBlanc, Mary Janet MacDonald, Betty Matheson, Dianne Milligan, Dolena Roach, *No Less No More, Just Four on the Floor*, Report (Halifax, NS: Dance Nova Scotia, 1997).

³ LeBlanc et al.

⁴ Maggie Moore, ‘Cape Breton Dancing’, in *Scotland’s Dances* (Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council, 1994), pp. 17–21.

⁵ Dianne Milligan [private communication, 2001].

⁶ Mats Melin, *One with the Music: Cape Breton Step Dancing Tradition and Transmission* (Sydney NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2015).

⁷ Allister MacGillivray, *A Cape Breton Ceilidh* (Sydney, NS: Sea-Cape Music, 1988).

⁸ MacGillivray.

⁹ LeBlanc et al.

¹⁰ Borggreen.

¹¹ LeBlanc et al.

¹² Private correspondence.

¹³ Borggreen.

¹⁴ Private correspondence.