

Galway Dancers on Their Way to Lorient

There is a general lack of specific references to dancing in our older literature, but it would be remarkable if there was no dancing in ancient Ireland, if a people with a native taste for music had no knowledge of the kindred art of dancing. The two words in Irish for dance, 'Damhsa' and 'Rince', are derived from the French 'Danse'; and the English 'Rink', meaning to skate on ice.

Allusions to country dances are abundant during the 17th century, but they give very little idea as to how the dances were done. Irish dancing reached the height of its perfection in the solo or step dances, which most likely were invented at the end of the 18th century. They owe their existence to the dancing masters. The word 'céilí' means a gathering of neighbours in one house. It was not correct to describe an organised dance as a 'céilí' though it emphasised the social nature of the gathering. The first céilí was organised in 1897 at a time when many traditional Irish art forms were becoming popular.

Among the earliest dance teachers in Galway were Tommy Flanagan, a blacksmith from Merchants Road and a member of the old pipe band. He taught pupils in the Bish in the early part of the last century, and was helped and encouraged by Mrs. Little from the Crescent and Dr. McEnri from the Square. Among those he taught was Patrick 'Mopsey' Philbin from Bowling Green, who in turn taught hundreds of Galwegians figure dancing, step dancing and set dancing.

Since then we have had many fine schools of Irish dancing run by people like Jim Murphy, Nora Moore Flaherty, Bríd Hanley from Eyre Street who also taught ballet, Maire Ní Scolaí who taught in An Taidhbhearc, Mary Semple, Peggy Carty, Martin King, Mairéad Ó Flaherty, Celine Hession and many others.

Our group today were from the Peggy Carty School. They were known as the Galway Folk Dancers and were taken at Galway station on their way to Lorient for the twinning ceremony of that city with Galway. They are, front row, left to right; John Shaughnessy, Áine Spellman, Caitríona Flaherty, Ian O'Brien, Louise Cahill, Carmelita Leyden, Anne Shaughnessy, Albert Reilly. At the back are Breda O'Connor, Peggy Carty, Marie O'Connor, Noreen Costelloe and Patricia Kennedy. Patricia's mother made the leather bags they are carrying which featured the Galway crest. The group did a number of fundraising gigs to buy costumes and suits and white scarves in Penneys. Many of this group still meet regularly to dance.

Also on that trip were West United soccer team, playing members of Galway Tennis Club, the newly formed folk group De Danann and the mayor, Fintan Coogan.

Finally, may I thank all those who supported this column through the year with photographs, information and comments. It would not be possible without you. And, may I wish you all a Happy New Year. Lets hope we have lots of reasons to dance in 2011.

TK

Please forward any queries/comments to oldgalway@kennys.ie

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