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*RIVERDANCE*

HERITAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IRISH IDENTITY

VOLUME 1

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# FACULDADE DE LETRAS

## *RIVERDANCE*

### HERITAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IRISH IDENTITY

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## **Abstract**

Among the many European nations, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era became a prime example of economic success, Ireland being its orchestrator. As a member of the European Union and as a free nation with a burgeoning economy, Ireland was prepared to create a new identity for itself following decades of economic recession and social issues. *Riverdance*, originally a seven-minute interval act performed in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest would enjoy immediate success, becoming an unparalleled cultural phenomenon and a beacon of Irish culture to the world, spawning a ‘craze’ for Irish dance and culture as well as showcasing an Ireland that had successfully made its way into the modern age while remaining ever mindful of its tradition. The success of this act turned full show would, however, raise some questions on lack of authenticity and invention of tradition which *Riverdance* seemingly thrives. In this thesis, we will be taking a look at what defines the heritage industry and the circumstances, both historical and cultural, which allowed *Riverdance* to become such a successful enterprise at the height of the Celtic Tiger years, to which the Irish diaspora will prove to be an important contributor. Equally important to the show’s success were its inventive and clever components and some degree of cultural hybridity with recognizable Irish overtones. Not only will we analyse *Riverdance* as a piece of the heritage industry, but also how successful it was in its mission to bringing a positive and modern view of Ireland to the rest of the world.

**Keywords:** Heritage Industry; *Riverdance*; Irish identity; Irish music and dance; Reinvention of Tradition

## Resumo

Entre as muitas nações europeias, a era do ‘Celtic Tiger’ tornou-se um excelente exemplo de sucesso económico, sendo a Irlanda o seu orquestrador. Como membro da União Europeia e como nação livre com uma economia florescente, a Irlanda estava preparada para criar uma nova identidade para si mesma após décadas de recessão económica e problemas sociais. *Riverdance*, originalmente um entreato de sete minutos, realizado no Festival da Eurovisão de 1994, teria um sucesso imediato, tornando-se num fenómeno cultural ímpar e um bastião da cultura irlandesa para o mundo, gerando uma ‘mania’ pela dança e cultura irlandesas, mostrando também uma Irlanda que havia conseguido entrar na era moderna, mantendo-se sempre atenta à sua tradição. No entanto, o enorme sucesso desse ato, que se tornara espetáculo completo, levantaria algumas questões relativas à falta de autenticidade e invenção da tradição da qual *Riverdance* parece prosperar. Nesta tese, examinaremos o que define a indústria do património e as circunstâncias, históricas e culturais, que permitiram a *Riverdance* tornar-se uma empresa tão bem-sucedida no auge dos anos do Celtic Tiger, dos quais a diáspora irlandesa provará ser um colaborador importante. Igualmente importantes para o sucesso do espetáculo foram os seus componentes inventivos e inteligentes, assim como um certo grau de hibridiz cultural com conotações irlandesas reconhecíveis. Não analisaremos o *Riverdance* apenas como sendo parte da indústria do património, mas também a forma como foi bem-sucedido na sua missão de trazer uma visão positiva e moderna da Irlanda para o resto do mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** Indústria do Património; *Riverdance*; Identidade irlandesa; Música e dança irlandesas; Reinvenção da Tradição

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# Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have always had a keen interest in all things English. From a very young age I began taking steps towards learning the language and culture with Penguin Books and *Magic English* DVDs. As I grew up, my tastes diversified from England proper, and I soon found myself learning more about the United Kingdom as a whole: the history, culture, linguistic differences and to a larger degree, the people. Eventually, my search for knowledge lead me to that one country which seems to be on everyone's lips nowadays. Ireland has so many interesting elements to it that I struggled to make a decision on what to pick when it was time to narrow down my main point of research for this thesis. Although I have never been to Ireland, my intention is to provide a critical account of some aspects of Irish culture. My perspective will inevitably be the perspective of an outsider but hopefully still a valid one.

The theme itself might be intriguing. Why speak of *Riverdance* when one could easily find a plethora of different cultural themes in Irish history? Many people (Irish included) frowned when told of my theme for this thesis, as if spreading salt on an open wound. Michael Flatley was called a *poseur* and his popular show 'fake traditional Irish culture', created in order to cash in on the implied allure of Irish culture, and taking advantage of the international community's lack of familiarity with it. Of course, what we will understand by the end of this thesis is that not everything about *Riverdance* is 'fake', nor was it ever intended to be a fully historical/traditional representation of Irish culture (although it might have sold itself as such for commercial purposes), but rather a modern take on the many elements which comprise such a culture. Nonetheless, being such a massive cultural phenomenon worldwide, it may very well serve as one of the first instances of contact with Irish culture and tradition for a lot of people, thus bearing a big



responsibility in the dissemination of Irish culture, and in my opinion deserving to be critically discussed and assessed.

The initial plan was to go deeper into the musical intricacies of the country, which are in and of themselves extremely varied. From a young age I had listened to artists such as U2, Seán Ó Ríada, Flaggging Molly, The Pogues, Loreena McKennit and others, all of which share an Irish identity (to varying degrees) and yet have very different musical styles. Writing a thesis on the entirety of Irish traditional music thus proved to be far too ambitious for one lacking knowledge on the finer aspects of dancing and musical technicality such as myself.

My choice of *Riverdance* was intended to serve two main purposes. Firstly, it is an attempt at clarifying (as much as a Master's thesis allows for) what exactly constitutes 'traditional Irish dancing', for while several dancers and *aficionados* may tell us that *Riverdance* is based on traditional Irish dancing, we are never exactly told what makes it traditional; is it the step-dancing, the clothing, the positioning of the arms? Hopefully we will have a definite answer by the end of this thesis. Secondly, as a person interested in the cultural aspects of the country, I wish to analyse how *Riverdance* is treated as an important piece of Irish heritage, and sold to the world as such. I will be taking a look at what constitutes the heritage industry and what makes this particular Irish-American musical such a successful example, linking it to the diaspora of Irish culture throughout the world. In short, the main question to be answered is: does *Riverdance* represent Irish traditional dancing faithfully? Or to put it another way, is it a piece of the heritage industry, and if so, should we consider it traditional in the first place?

In order to achieve this goal, the thesis will be divided in four chapters that will gradually lead up to the final answer we seek. In the first chapter we will be dealing with the theoretical basis for the thesis. We will be mainly focusing on identifying and dealing

with the nature of tourism, heritage and its associated industries, and the invention of tradition, definitions of the utmost importance to understanding *Riverdance* as a global phenomenon. For the purpose of this thesis, we will be giving a special emphasis to the concept of tourism specified in John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze*, which as the title implies focuses on the gaze of the tourist as a socially organised and systematised gaze. As previously stated, *Riverdance* was the first and main point of entrance into 'traditional' Irish music and dancing, and one of its most popular and widely accepted representations, for many people. As a result, it has become a 'standard form' of Irish dancing for a new generation. Urry's work will prove useful to understand where the gaze of this new generation is coming from. As for the concept of heritage and its industry, two works will prove particularly helpful. On the one hand, David Brett's *The Construction of Heritage* will prove fundamental in our task of defining 'heritage', that is to say, the different meanings of the word, how it is employed, and everything that has grown around it, ranging from places to images, institutions and others. On the other hand, one could not mention the industry surrounding heritage without mentioning Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry*, one of the first and by now a classical study on how such an industry came to be and to what extent it influences the societies in which it is present. Last but not least, Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* will prove indispensable for us to understand in what ways tradition can be (re)invented and how such a (re)invention seeks to inculcate certain ideals and norms of conduct through repetition, which are dependent on an idea of continuity with the past. Through knowledge of these definitions, the answers we seek should become clear to us.

With that in mind, we will dedicate the second chapter to the social and economic conditions that underpin the rise of *Riverdance*. Starting with Éamon de Valera, we will go through the Troubles and the recession while paying very close attention to the 90s,

which will allow us to better analyse and understand the present social and cultural scenario in Ireland. This will be the chapter in which we introduce *Riverdance* proper and explain why it is used as the focus for the thesis. It should be noted, however, that for obvious reasons we will not be covering every single moment of Irish history from de Valera onwards, as that would prove to be too massive of a subject and would risk detracting us from the main subject of the thesis. As such, we will only be mentioning the points in history and cultural development deemed the most important while specifying the reason for choosing them, rather than making a purely chronological list of events. This chapter will thus introduce the economic and social events which would eventually give birth to *Riverdance*.

This brings us into the third chapter, in which we will be analysing where Irish dancing and music stood before *Riverdance*. Once again, the thesis is primarily concerned with *Riverdance*, and should not be taken as a treatise on Irish dancing as a whole. Many elements of Irish dancing will be left out should they be deemed unimportant to answering the central questions of this thesis. Thus, the main body of this chapter will be defined by the establishment of the *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League) in 1893, which sought to unify (or rather ‘standardize’) the different dancing styles into a single, well-defined one, with a clear preference for the southern-most styles. We will also introduce the term ‘Celtic’, a socially-charged word which has been splitting the community of historians for decades and which bears direct implications in what the League attempted to portray. Then, in 1927, the establishment of the organization known as *An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha* (The Irish Dancing Commission) sought to promote Irish music, song and dance through competition between dancers, establishing the first international competitions and contributing to the globalization of Irish dancing. This gives rise to further issues. How exactly would this task be accomplished? In which way would both

of these bodies perform the task, and how would the resulting music and dance pave the way for *Riverdance*? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions, while seeking to identify the several elements that could be considered ‘traditional’ and which may or may not have inspired Bill Whelan in the creation of his *magnum opus*.

The last chapter will be entirely dedicated to *Riverdance*, not only to the historical interval act of 1994, but also to its subsequent years of successes and setbacks, playing close attention to how each performance is conducted and why certain decisions regarding the show were made. In other words, this chapter will give us an inside view on how *Riverdance* came to be, how it was received by the public and the journey it took following its initial success. This chapter is intended to allow us to understand what made this performance in particular so iconic compared to other forms of Irish dancing. The long-term implications of *Riverdance* for how Irish dancing is perceived in Ireland and overseas should also become clear to us. For such a purpose, we will analyze the themes and techniques at play in the performance, how they came about and in what ways they contributed to the worldwide success of *Riverdance*. Having answered all of these questions, we will be in a very good position to understand the massive influence of *Riverdance* in how Ireland came to be perceived by the world.

Ireland has lived its own share of misfortune throughout the long-reaching centuries of its past. And throughout its history, the island underwent many changes, be it socially, politically or economically. During this time period, Ireland experienced war, revolution, famine and humiliation, much of it at the behest of its much more powerful neighbour, the United Kingdom. Living under the latter’s shadow, much of Ireland’s history is defined by a constant struggle for self-assertion and preservation. And with that in mind, it is only natural that heritage and culture would be extremely valued assets in the country, by both the state and the many people sharing Irish descent throughout the

globe, the children of the post- and pre-Famine Irish diaspora. By the end of this essay, we will also understand how and why *Riverdance* plays a big part in this.

# Chapter 1

## *The Theory Behind Riverdance*

Whereas in the introduction we laid down briefly the main focus and aims of this thesis, this first chapter will be dedicated to the establishment of the theoretical basis, which will in turn be used as a conducting line in the ensuing chapters. We have briefly mentioned words like ‘heritage industry’ and ‘authenticity’, both of which will be fundamental if we are to better understand the global phenomenon that was *Riverdance*. And hopefully, its implications on visions of authentic culture and tradition both in and out of the country from which *Riverdance* came to be will become clear to us. ‘Heritage industry’ is a particularly interesting concept in this sense, which will be deserving of special attention due mainly to how central a part it plays in the creation of not only *Riverdance* but many different venues for the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990) all around the world. Other questions are also equally deserving of our attention: what counts as ‘authentic’? What consequences may arise from turning history into an industry? And why is the perception of tourists so important in the first place? These questions will be promptly answered as we first discuss the concept of ‘tourism’. As we do so, we ought to take a closer look at the related concept of ‘heritage’. Before continuing, however, we ought to make clear that while this thesis focuses mainly on Ireland, this chapter will be dealing with theories which apply across a wide range of phenomena and locations. As such, and merely for illustrative purposes, examples from other countries and/or societies will be drawn when deemed relevant or necessary. Ireland’s case will nonetheless be our main focus.

## 1.1 From Tourism to Heritage

“Tourism provides employment to the poorest of the poor. Gram seller earns something, auto-rickshaw driver earns something, pakoda seller earns something, and tea seller also earns something.”

*Narendra Modi*

Tourism as a concept has appeared in many instances throughout history, including such notable examples as the pilgrimages to sacred spots around the world or even going as far back as the classical period or ancient Egypt, the journeys of Marco Polo in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the traditional Grand Tour carried out between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Grand Tour, prevalent in the United Kingdom but of equal prominence in other majorly Protestant countries in Europe, was of particular importance in establishing the basic guidelines that constitute what we now know as ‘modern tourism’. It comprised of a trip carried out by young nobles seeking to broaden their education and hone their social skills; a rite of passage, so to say. The voyage entailed a round-trip through several major cities in Europe and the Middle East, where the young nobles could attend European courts and partake in all manner of festivals and parties, activities of the utmost importance for learning the courtly ways proper to the nobility. While these tours might have been politically and socially motivated, there was an obvious layer of leisure and pleasure which drew these young men and women to the aforementioned destinations.

With all of this in mind, it comes as no surprise that for a long time the concept of tourism became intrinsically linked to activities one carried away from one's usual

residence or work place, for a set period of time, sometimes as an escapism from the bustle of modern life and society (not necessarily in the case of the Grand Tour) and was mostly an upper-class activity. John Urry shows a particular concern with the analysis and surveying of tourism and the several elements which directly or indirectly affect the perception of a tourist. In *The Tourist Gaze*, Urry reinforces the notion that when one abandons one's familiar environment, the interest and curiosity for new, unseen places is the only natural sentiment to follow. The resulting gaze however is never the same between individuals, for it is intertwined with a plethora of different platforms, be it the historical period, the social group or the society; in fact, the slightest influence from any of these elements may dramatically change the way any particular person gazes upon a certain building, person or time period. This ultimately leads to a multitude of experiences varying from one tourist to the other. What Urry then concludes is that the tourist gaze is greatly depended on what it is contrasted with, or in other words, what, according to a certain individual, qualifies as non-tourist activities (usually regulated and organized work), and activities which would in one way or the other provide a certain degree of leisure and/or pleasure (Urry, 1990).

As leisure and pleasure became increasingly pervasive in modern society, resulting in a considerable increase in tourists, so did tourism suffer a severe structural and socio-economic evolution throughout the years until it became the global phenomenon that it is today, with a baffling and often unfathomable – given the incredibly vast network of interdependencies it creates – industry encompassing such elements as societal, political, cultural and chiefly economic institutions backing it. It is no wonder then that tourism is for many nations a driving force behind its economy, society and culture (see Ireland). And by the end of WWII, with the middle and in some cases the working-class engaging in tourism, the tourism of the masses would further contribute to



the expansion and diversification of the tourism industry. From this new market arose a new chief merchandise, one that includes both material and immaterial objects and is capable of being sold in many different shapes and forms. This new ‘industry’ would take full advantage of the new derivatives of modernity, which is to say an increasingly incessant search for pleasurable experiences, constantly publicized in the media, coupled with the “mass character of the gaze of tourists” (Urry, 1990). The product being sold is what David Brett identifies as “the representation of the past” (Brett, 1996). This product would be none other than heritage.

## **1.2 A World that Never Was**

“It is perhaps little wonder that the end of Victorianism almost exactly coincided with the invention of psychoanalysis.”

*Bill Bryson*

Starting in the late-eighteenth century, the advent of the British Industrial Revolution would dramatically change the balance of power in the world in a way never seen before in history. In an unprecedented and near instantaneous manner, economic growth rates saw a three percent increase, an amount worthy of respect for any nation but of particular concern for those deeply-rooted in tradition. Once static societies, plagued by stunted growth and isolation would overnight attain a seat at the forefront of economic growth<sup>1</sup> and scientific innovation, becoming juggernauts of their own right and earning their place as major players in the world theatre. But if on the one hand some nations were

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<sup>1</sup> Japan and the 1868 Meiji Restoration is a prime example of this growth

riding the wave of socio-economic upheaval and reaping tremendous benefits from it, on the other hand the gap between developed and developing countries was growing ever greater. Apart from the obvious social implications, which we will be revisiting, one of the main repercussions was that from this point onwards economic theories and practices had to re-adapt themselves to new markets and new socio-economic realities brought upon by such a revolution. One of the more commonly accepted theories, still in use by many theorists, tends to divide economic activities into three different sectors: an extraction-oriented sector, a manufacturing-oriented sector and a services-oriented sector, also known as primary, secondary and tertiary sectors respectively.

The extraction sector is, as the name implies, related to such industries as mining and agriculture, which form the 'raw materials' with which one may place the economy into motion. These will then be used to fuel the manufacturing sector, represented by the factories and plants where raw materials are transformed into objects aimed at serving the needs of the public. And then the services sector is tasked with the distribution and communication of these goods to the public, tasks which are traditionally associated with bankers, lawyers, accountants, etc. and whose part is of the utmost importance in ensuring the perfect balance between a particular society and its industrialized economic order. Out of these three, the services, or tertiary sector, is seen by many economists as the epitome of a modern and fully-developed economy, for it is the final step of a continuous process which involves going from an extraction-driven economy to a manufacturing economy which then sees the services come into their own. And this theory is of even greater importance when we realize how deeply-rooted it is to the birth of a 'heritage industry'.

Thus, the industrial headway of the nineteenth century proved fundamental in the refinement and diffusion of an ever-growing and increasingly sophisticated

manufacturing industry. This in turn allowed some degree of social mobility, with the growth of the middle-class and the emergence of the urban proletariat. It certainly contributed to the enriching of a lot of people (particularly the owners of big enterprises) while making jobs profuse. These were however prone to horrible conditions, child labour and a never-ending cycle of grinding poverty. Nonetheless, the general feeling pervading Victorian society was one of optimism, becoming a staple of the Victorian times in the United Kingdom and overseas. There was an age firmly rooted in its belief of progress, in which technological and social advances would prove instrumental in improving mankind's lot. With such abrupt changes and evolution taking place in such a short time span, the average Victorian would likely not have any reason to believe these merry times were not to last. However, Queen Victoria's health began to slowly deteriorate. The uncertainty arising from the queen's poor condition, coupled with less than desirable results in foreign wars would become of such a major nature to cast a doubt on the ability of the 'establishment' of its day to govern effectively. By the time Queen Victoria passed away, the social and political tone of the nation had already changed.

And at the dawn of the twentieth century, what befell a humanity blinded by the allegories of progress, peace and science was a grim spectacle of unrelenting carnage. The technologies which had once marveled and benefited the world, when put to the test by bellicose nations bent on world conquest, would prove to be weapons of the deadliest kind. Soon, two world-scale conflicts would unfold, forever to leave a gruesome mark in history. In these conflicts, where nationalism, conflicting morals and ambitions came head-to-head through the force of arms, the result was an unsurmountable loss of human lives and completely ravaging the lands caught up in the crossfire. What happened, then,

to the optimism that once permeated the Victorian society? What happened to the grand fairs and idyllic dreams of the future?

The uncontested and proud head of an empire where the sun never set would equally see its own foundations shaken to the core. Following the devastation brought upon by the two world wars, the technology which had once been a sense of pride and joy for humankind and a symbol of permanence and progress had in turn proved to be a weapon of incalculable carnage and destruction when employed wrongly. Long gone was the optimism that once pervaded Victorian societies. Instead, the heavy industries of war fueled the economy, serving as its *raison d'être* and often proving crucial in a nation's very survival. Yet as the end of the Second World War closed a most dark chapter in human history, the heavy industries which once blotted the landscape would slowly be replaced by service-oriented industries, as the former ultimately lost their purpose in this new world order. Bullets and shell casings were, little by little, giving place to a new kind of industry.

### **1.3 The Heritage Industry**

"That's how it is with legends. The greater they sound, the more must've got left out."

*Tim Tharp*

If there was to be a defining staple of the 70s and 80s, it would certainly be the widespread social unrest permeating every strata of society. The I.R.A. (Irish Republican Army) and U.V.F. (Ulster Volunteer Force), having kick-started the Irish Troubles, were wreaking constant havoc upon the Irish and British populations, turning bombings and

deaths into common occurrences in Irish soil. Britain in particular was being choked by a plethora of social issues, which by the day threatened to devolve the weakened state into anarchy. And yet, violence was not the only thing forthcoming. The post-war economy and industry saw a period of large scale mechanization process. Eventually, the Digital Age allowed for the appearance and perfecting of computers, which saw the rise of a new social class: the yuppies. In a society deeply scarred by bombs, riots and an overall violent atmosphere, these young men and women, both *nouveau* and *vieux riche* who knew their way around the new technologies, were in a sense the personification of a time where the constant and swift technological advances were leaving a more traditionalist population behind. But despite all advances, there was no betterment in sight for the economy. The culmination of impending social disaster came with Margaret Thatcher's rise as the leading political figure of Great Britain.

The economy, already at an all-time low, would suffer a long-term severe blow due to the policies put in place by the newly-appointed leader. For many people, hope had been all but lost in their present condition. Constantly flanked by a present too fast-paced to keep up with, and a future likely not to have a place in store for the old, the best option was to embrace the past. If the grand advancements of technology left many in awe as to what they had accomplished, for others it was a sure sign that society was losing its way, and that the values, lessons and glories of the past would be forgotten. And with the heavy industries gone, service-oriented industries would slowly but surely take their place. Into them came three symbiotic elements: an ever increasing tourism, a progressively greater interest in heritage, both discussed in the previous section, along with the need to create new industries to replace the old ones. And thus, the service-oriented industry known as 'heritage industry' was born.

Robert Hewison would become the first person to employ the term ‘heritage industry’. In his book adequately titled *The Heritage Industry*, the author mentions a post-war Britain that finds itself in a “climate of decline” (Hewison, 1987). Coincidentally, Hewison released his book in the same year as both the Great Storm and subsequent Black Monday of 1987, which would likely serve to bolster this claim. With that being said, the author delivers a concise definition of the concept:

I call it the ‘heritage industry’ not only because it absorbs considerable public and private resources, but also because it is expected more and more to replace the real industry upon which this country’s economy depends. Instead of manufacturing goods, we are manufacturing heritage. (Hewison, 1987)

What does it mean to ‘manufacture heritage’? The ‘heritage’ presented is composed of neither unfounded ideas nor scholarship, but rather, as John Urry argues, a “self-critical reflection on itself, being usually aimed at confirming a given knowledge, but it does seek integration and coherence, and therefore ‘truth’, rather than merely presenting data.” (Urry, 1990). The past is gentrified and tamed, 'antiqued' or made the object of longing. What Hewison argues is that heritage industry is made to exploit that very sense of longing in a way that would bring profit. And for such an end, the ‘heritage’ presented has to be sanitized to some degree, even if that would mean risking an ‘inauthentic’ reproduction. How does this affect tourists? What will their reaction be when gazing upon Stonehenge, for example? Will they dismiss it as a forged reproduction? Will they embrace it with awe and (in some cases) nostalgia for a ‘golden age’ of civilization? Or have people become so hyper-restless that they would accept everything, even fakery, could have a claim in authenticity, as Urry seemingly implies? Each answer will be

personal, for as Urry tells us, each gaze will be dependent on a plethora of elements from which the tiniest variation may produce a completely different result.

## 1.4 The ‘Celticness’ of Ireland

“Irish history stretches back into the dark days of the Celts, yet there is light, laughter and a sense of laissez-faire in the Irish men and women of today.”

*Richard Benson*

We can hardly discuss *Riverdance* and its remarkable overseas success without giving a brief mention to one of the main elements of its success: the use of ‘Celtic’ symbolism. Before we can think of discussing the existence of an Ireland with ‘Celtic’ traits, there are a lot of preconceptions to untangle with the word Celtic. When employed, the word will generally refer to one of three associated meanings. It may refer to either a linguistic group (i.e. Irish, Welsh, Gaulish, Celtiberian, Brythonic, etc.), a particular style of material culture (i.e. similarly designed objects bearing mutual influence) or as being part of a certain ethnic group, the latter being the one definition more commonly employed in the ‘Celtic Ireland’ narrative. And for many centuries, the idea of an ethnically unified Ireland following a ‘Celtic invasion of Europe’ had been largely corroborated by historians and archaeological findings. However, the actual origins of what we tend to refer to as ‘Celtic’ culture are somewhat vague.

The material culture, or tools identified as ‘Celtic’ by archaeologists are said to have first appeared in the area comprising the northern section of the Alps around 700 BCE, becoming known as the “La Tène culture” due to its geographical location. From

there it would spread and evolve throughout Central and Western Europe, eventually making its way to the British Isles. As it spread, the culture would eventually branch-off into dozens of local variations and styles, mainly in the form of world-renowned metalwork. Contrary to popular belief, however, there is no evidence that these styles of metalwork were spread via invasion or migration, as the often employed notion of ‘Celtic invasion of Europe’ makes us believe. Rather, these would spread much in the same way other cultural objects do: through mutual exchange, locally made bad copies with varying degrees of success, a fusion of new and pre-existing styles and/or outright appropriation. The result were the many differences among a number of ‘Celtic’ cultures. In Britain things were done differently from the mainland Celts, one notable example being usage of chariots in war, long after their usage had fallen out among other Celtic tribes. Ireland would witness the birth of the Goidelic languages, which would eventually become Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic, each with their own proper idiosyncrasies.

Much of this information then seemingly asserts the fact that the Irish, in conjunction with other European countries, do in fact share a common Celtic past and identity. But such a label would by modern terms only apply to people or societies who speak or spoke a Celtic language (such as Irish or Scottish Gaelic). The main issue however lies in the age-old belief of the Celts as a unified, warrior-aristocracy and druidic priest-caste, and the figure of the druid is particularly prevalent in classic representations of ‘Celticness’. In an article published by *The Times Literary Supplement* titled *Celticities*, author Tom Shippey is quick to note the relationship established between Celts and druids as “one of the tangled threads of identity” (Shippey, 2016). The author asserts that in the Middle Ages, “druids remained “a major presence in Irish literature”, but elsewhere had “almost totally disappeared””. The figure of the druid as an ancestral sage, Shippey writes, would be first adopted by Germans, only to be challenged by French writers who in turn



“seized on the works of an Italian friar, Annius of Viterbo”, whom in 1498 would at the behest of Pope Alexander VI produce a “series of forged texts presenting Druids as the sponsors of early non-Roman civilization” (Shippey, 2016). The resulting pseudo-history was “taken on by Scots, by the Elizabethan historians Holinshed and Camden, and eventually by John Aubrey, who popularized Avebury and Stonehenge as druidical sites (which they still are to many)”. All that remained was to create a striking visual reference, shortly to come under Aubrey’s follower, Aylett Sammes, whom created “the visual image of the wizard, still very much alive as Tolkien’s Gandalf” (Shippey, 2016) and often in close association with the druids. But while the notion of the druid as a “genuine [and unifying] symbol of Britishness” fell out of favour as the “component peoples of Britain “began reaffirming their separate cultural identities””, that very same notion is still found quite vividly in a lot of Irish imagery, especially those pertaining to a form of ancient ‘Celticness’ and accompanied by *triskelions* and a nature untouched by man.

But as the story of Celtic discourse in Ireland and in the British Isles became clearer, we still ought to find an answer to the main question: how ‘Celtic’ is Ireland? Over the past few years, many things Irish came to be known and appreciated throughout the world in ways never before seen or felt. As writer Chris Rosser puts it, himself Welsh by birth, “[t]hanks to Irish music, Guinness stout, silver knot-work jewellery, modern-day revivals of Pagan religions and festivals and Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, Celts became cool.” The perceived ‘coolness’ of the Celts would prove instrumental in the creation of a new popular narrative, as previously identified by David Brett, of the “defiant yet tragic underdogs of history; the woad-tattooed poetic, beer-drinking warrior who gave a collective 'Up Yours' to successive invasions of Romans, Germans, Normans and, eventually the English.” (Rosser, 2017) This perception of identity is present not only in Ireland (and others) but also in the offspring of the Irish diaspora. But the reality is far

less spectacular than the more generous accounts might infer. The matter of fact is that much of what is presently perceived as ‘Celtic’ is as mentioned by Rosser a “constructed modern myth” (Rosser, 2017), or in other words, an invention of tradition.

*The Invention of Tradition* is Eric Hobsbawm’s work which discusses this very issue. For Hobsbawm, invented tradition is established through certain practices, normally guided by a set of rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). This continuity is, however, largely fictitious. It involves a “process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). And this formalization will eventually make its way to modern societies, with the Irish being a notable example. And the so-called ancient materials are taken over by certain movements and narratives in order to (re)construct traditions for modern purposes. The notion of a ‘Celtic Ireland’ is a perfect example of this, reinforced by the very same movements which sought to establish a connection between the past and the present that was unbroken and unchanged, making it the basis of ‘tradition’ in Ireland.

However, there are several elements which contest the notion of a ‘Celtic Ireland’. The first point made is that the word Celtic is a misnomer. The term itself was assigned to Ireland in the 17th century by a pioneering Welsh linguist, named Edward Lhuyd. Where Lhuyd’s linguistic work proved to be exemplary, the same could not be said about his historical theories, Rosser points out. The reason lies in the very conclusion reached by the linguist:

Lhuyd concluded that the Brythonic languages (Welsh, Breton and Cornish) originated from France and the Goidelic (Irish and Gaelic) languages originated from Spain. In fact, Lhuyd was drawing on the assertion made by Paul-Yves Pezron, a 17th century monk who wrote a book about

the common origins of the Breton and Welsh people. Linguistically, Welsh and Breton are closely related but linking them to the Celts was at best, an educated guess. (Rosser, 2017)

The word is actually originated from Ancient Greek. *Keltoi* (and associated variants) was the word employed by Greek (and later Roman) writers to define the numerous groups of 'barbarians' living to the north of the Mediterranean. But there was not a single, general term in use, for in Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* the Gauls are said to self-identify as 'Celts' in their own language. In both instances, Rosser will tell us, "we've got outsiders pinning a label on what are a hodge-podge of illiterate, Iron Ages tribes". In other words, were Ireland's ancestors truly 'Celtic' in the clump-up way commonly attributed in modern times? The answer appears to be a no. This opinion is shared by many modern scholars and archaeologists. But even if Celtic identity is a 'lie', it may become the 'truth' if repeated often enough.

Without going much deeper on the subject, for we would risk discussing an entirely different topic to what our thesis seeks to answer, we can by now understand that Celtic identity is a very tricky and complex element to deconstruct and define. But even so, Rosser makes an interesting claim:

[T]he assertion that Welsh and Irish are Celtic is still accepted as fact by modern Linguists and an embarrassingly large amount of TV historians. Again, the linguists are sound, but the history (and Archaeology and Genetic evidence is not): they are related languages but there's no [palpable] evidence they belong to the group of ancient peoples we call the Celts. (Rosser, 2017)

Why is it, then, that 'Celtic' identity is so thoroughly advertised and championed in Ireland and its neighbouring countries despite such weak evidence in its favour? The answer lies in Brett's words: the character of antiquity is a highly marketable cultural

commodity in recent years (Brett, 1996). And such a character, the very heritage we have thus far been discussing, would encompass an industry with a magnitude and scale never seen before. It was to be the birth of a ‘heritage industry’.

The purpose of this industry was, as we have come to understand, to present a sanitized, comforting version of the past to a population disgruntled by times of turmoil or rapid change. The true question we ought to be answering then is how and why we can relate such an industry to Ireland? While the elements that we have analyzed above surely arise from societies experiencing ‘decline’, David Brett very correctly states that ‘in decline’ would likely be the least adequate adjective to describe contemporary Ireland, in particular at a time *Riverdance* would see its first live performance. The economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger would for the first time turn the eyes of the world to Ireland. For a country which had seen its own share of misfortune, flourishing under a renowned vigour, Irish commercial tourism presents an ‘image’ of an essential Ireland to the world that is sharply at variance with Ireland’s existential reality. A booming economy representing the modern and the latest trends brought upon by the Celtic Tiger, shouldered to a picturesque and frugal lifestyle, championed by Éamon de Valera, in opposition to the expensive and eccentric clubbing and routine of the yuppies. By extension, the idea behind *Riverdance* was not to show Irish dancing in its most traditional and “boring” form, but rather an Irish dancing which had seemingly evolved and ‘modernized’. In other words, rather than attempting to present a heritage which had remained untouched by the ages – stopped in time - *Riverdance* is instead presenting Irish heritage as a fluid element which can remain relevant no matter the age. *Riverdance* is therefore a fusion of the old and the new, of several styles which comprise a ‘new form’ of Irish dancing. As correctly identified by Hobsbawm, Irish tradition had been (re)invented for a novel purpose. Aside from the aesthetic benefits from having such a blend, this choice bore a very strong

symbolism. No matter how rich or developed Ireland may become, in steep contrast with its past famished self, their traditions would be carried over and transformed in conformation to Ireland's place in the world. Or at least, that was what was intended.

*Riverdance* spawned one of the most polarizing arguments in Ireland, directed at the very purpose of this controversial dance performance. Moya Doherty, the mastermind behind *Riverdance*, intended to create a 'modern take' on Irish dancing, to reflect the country's economic success and rapid modernization. And interestingly, the words 'tradition' are used *ad nauseam* in the context of the performance: it comprised of 'traditional' Irish dancing, performed by 'traditional' Irish dancers, and 'traditional' Irish music performed by the 'Celtic' choir Anúna, all matters that we will be discussing at a latter chapter and which are of the most importance to this thesis. However, many Irish felt that the performance misrepresented themselves and their culture. On the one hand, one of the main offenses seemed to be that the blending of elements became such that one could hardly call *Riverdance* 'traditional' anymore, despite it being one of the main selling points. On the other hand, the choice of performers was just as controversial. The fact that two Irish-Americans would become the "catalyst in relation to changing Irish dance" (Warren, 2014) raised some questions on what hampered the validity of Ireland-born dancers. We will soon understand that this was all part of Doherty's 'vision' of a modern Ireland. And while her vision did in the end become a million-earning world phenomenon, what it created could very well be one of the most well-known and enduring misconceptions about Irish traditional culture.

## Chapter 2

### *The Society Behind Riverdance*

Before we can properly answer such a question, however, we should first take a look at how Irish society developed in the years before *Riverdance* had its triumphant debut. In this chapter, we will be taking a closer look at the historical events which culminated in the creation of *Riverdance*, along with the lasting legacy it left behind (and still prevalent) to this very day. Was *Riverdance* a *new wave* of Irish traditional culture, or a very clever piece of heritage industry? The answer should become clear by the end of this thesis. But first, one must understand the society that allowed such a show to appear in the first place.

#### **2.1 The Devil's Era of Ireland**

“God has been pleased to save us during the years of war that have already passed.

We pray that He may be pleased to save us to the end. But we must do our part.”

*Éamon de Valera*

When the 1920s dawned over Ireland, the stage was set for what is often referred to as the ‘devil’s era’, a play-on-words describing the decades subsequent to the rise of Éamon de Valera and his position at the helm of Ireland’s politics, marked by his ascension as the head of Fianna Fáil in the first elections held by the Irish Free State. His predecessor was W. T. Cosgrave, who had competently held the reins of the newly-

formed state, managing to ensure some degree of stability through conservative policies and good statesmanship. The country was making a slow but steady recovery from the disastrous civil war and poverty. The economy would eventually worsen, however, and the people had reached a limit. Fianna Fáil would ultimately win the election of 1932, with de Valera as President of the Executive Council.

Éamon de Valera's character and deeds would become a polarizing subject in the following years. A former leader of the Easter Rising of 1916, de Valera was one of the very few to be spared from execution following the Rising's failure. Being a living symbol of one of Ireland's most pivotal moments in history imbued de Valera with a distinct aura of seniority and authority. It is mainly due to this that many accounts on de Valera are of mixed opinion, for he is the person held accountable for the establishment of early Irish politics for decades to come.

He was present during the first key moments of Ireland following the establishment of the Irish Free State (further cemented by his skilful dismantling of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921) and occupied pretty much every major senior role in existence within its government. While there were certainly positive aspects to his rule, such as the aforementioned dismantling of the treaty and the way he addressed Churchill's broadcast on Ireland's neutrality during WWII (considered by many the finest rhetorical performance by an Irish head of state), one of the greatest faults attributed to his administration were his government's social conservative policies. The use of contraceptives was proscribed. Divorce was made a constitutional offense after de Valera's drafting of the 1937 Constitution, and thus only removable by means of a referendum; hardly a possibility given the highly conservative and Christianised Irish society of the day. The Catholic Church itself pushed for the establishment of a *de facto* church of the Irish state, something carefully avoided by de Valera despite it being

established as the church of the majority. Last but not least, women were confined to their roles ‘within the home’.

What should be noted is that while these measures may appear appallingly old-fashioned and regressive to the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were certainly not new for many countries of that period. This was a decade when nations such as Portugal, Italy and Spain (only to name a few) would have Catholicism as their official state religion. Nevertheless, as World War II came to a close, the nation’s economy faced a severe crisis with high rates of unemployment and emigration. Éamon de Valera was a shell of his former self, plagued by health conditions and a mandate which had stretched for far too long and drained both himself and the country. While the rest of the world was experiencing a post-War euphoria coupled with high rates of child birth and employment, Ireland moved ever closer to the abyss, with massive emigration and terribly high unemployment rates. De Valera, however, had a plan. What he idealized for Ireland was a nation that was “pro-natal, anti-materialist, respectful of old age, religious, nationalistic, purposeful, transcendent, communitarian, and rooted in the generational experiences of the same people living in the same place for a long time” (Fitzgerald, 2019). How successful would he be in this endeavour?



## 2.2 Dancing at the Crossroads

“Life was simple, everybody had the same and grass always grew in the middle of most roads...”

*Gerry Costello*

During the years between the Easter Rising and World War II, the conservative and protectionist measures adopted by the government greatly contributed to a lasting poverty in the country. This poverty had retained Ireland as a majorly rural and agricultural country, which despite some degree of industrialization had never really taken off unlike what was happening for many other nations. There seemed to be, however, a great disparity between reality and the ideals of de Valera for Ireland. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1943, marking both St. Patrick’s Day and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gaelic League’s founding (which we will be returning to later on), Éamon de Valera would utter a speech on *Raidió Éireann* to celebrate the occasion. The words he spoke would decades later remain in the popular imagination as ‘the Ireland that we dreamed of’:

“The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live. [...]. It was the pursuit of such an Ireland that later made our country worthy to be called the island of saints and scholars. It was the idea of such an Ireland - happy, vigorous, spiritual - that fired the imagination of our poets.

[...] One hundred years ago, the Young Irelanders, by holding up the vision of such an Ireland before the people, inspired and moved them spiritually as our people had hardly been moved since the Golden Age of Irish civilisation” (de Valera, 1943)

De Valera’s speech is very important to us, for it will help set the tone to what we will be analyzing in the following chapters. It is undoubtedly a speech filled with clichés. From it emerged the famous idiom “dancing at the crossroads”, a misquotation of de Valera’s speech which meant “an Ireland that either never existed or was long gone but which was in either case an embarrassment” (Fitzgerald, 2019). The term ‘Golden Age’ is also employed for the first time, becoming a frequent and will be of particular importance in the contest of this thesis, for reasons we will soon realize. It reminds us of what Hewison called a ‘society in decline’, a nation that must rely on heritage and the past to ‘find’ and ‘define’ itself. While the Ireland that de Valera speaks of “is gone and cannot be recreated – it’s not certain we’d want to”, it nonetheless “acknowledges the existence of Irishness, a spirit that can’t be commodified, bought, sold or taken on and off” (Fitzgerald, 2019). But we can find something very peculiar in this speech. While we may regard most of its content as *faux* Irish history; a longing for an Ireland that never had (and never would) exist, we can certainly pick from a palpable notion of ‘Irishness’. Although de Valera’s Ireland may have not existed, it was something that had a chance of existing in the future: a utopia.

Yet, de Valera would ultimately do more harm than good to the economy. His popularity had greatly diminished, leading to his defeat by a coalition of parties and the establishment of Costello, a man lacking experience in politics, as the new *Taoiseach*. After a few shaky years, which culminated in the Republic of Ireland Act of 1948, the time was right for Seán Lemass to take over the reins of the country.

## 2.3 A First Step into Modern Ireland

“We were born into an unjust system. We are not prepared to grow old in it.”

*Bernadette Devlin*

Seán Lemass would replace de Valera as *Taoiseach* of the Republic of Ireland in 1959, an office ~~which~~ that he would hold for 7 years. He was, like his predecessor de Valera, a rebel who participated in the Easter Rising. While his role in the uprising was minor compared to many of his fellow insurgents, he is said to have been a member of Michael Collins' elite squad of assassins attributed with the killing of “14 British agents on the morning of Bloody Sunday on November 21 1920” (Ireland Calling, n.d.). He was also one of the founding members of Fianna Fáil and occupied many positions in the government before taking over as *Taoiseach* and undisputed leader of the party. His greatest achievement, however, was what many argue to be the laying down of the foundation for the establishment of a modern Irish state. Considered today one of the best (if not the best) *Taoiseach*, Lemass proved to be the antithesis to de Valera's policies and ideals, instead “encouraging commerce and industry, attracting foreign investment and [...] developing early links with the European community” (Ireland Calling, n.d.).

At an early stage, the general affairs of the Irish state did not look very good. A trade war with Britain carried out by Lemass and de Valera between 1933 and 1938, after the former imposed tariffs on Irish goods, placed Ireland on the losing side, greatly damaging its already weakened economy. This, coupled with the sustainment of the protectionist policies carried out by de Valera placed the economy in dire straits. However, Lemass had begun to take notice of this by the time of his appointment. Years before,

after World War II, he had managed to acquire \$100m from the United States following the Marshall Plan, which was invested in roadworks. Despite of this, there was no economic growth to be seen whatsoever. Coupled with unemployment, low life standards and massive emigration, a very gloomy future was cast for Ireland. It was then that Lemass's economic philosophy of 'a rising tide lifts all boats' came into play; a belief in which improvements to the economy would benefit rich and poor alike.

Although Lemass was the man in charge, many of the economic policies put in place are actually attributed to his Secretary of the Department of Finance, Thomas Kenneth Whitaker, who took office in 1957. Whitaker sought to implement free trade, putting an end to protectionism and fomenting a competitive economy through an increased industrial input as opposed to relying solely on the primary sector, which had been Ireland's bread-and-butter until that point. In order to achieve this, Whitaker began setting the stage for what would be a major shift in Irish economy. He formed a team of officials tasked with providing a thorough study of the economy, which would allow Whitaker to ascertain which improvements should be prioritized. The culmination of this study would become the 'White Paper', also known as the *First Programme for Economic Expansion* in November 1958.

What resulted from this was a memorandum which acted as a *résumé* of this intricate study. On a first basis, the study established "how revenue should be allocated to hospitals, schools, roads, and 'productive' investment", as well as issuing a number of warnings about forthcoming difficulties the national economy would face (Coogan, 2004). But it would seem like Whitaker's plan was more than just a practical approach to the economy, but rather, a psychological one as well. On the introduction to his line-up, often called 'Grey Book' due to its grey cover, Whitaker wrote the following:

There is a sound psychological reason for having an integrated development programme. The absence of such a programme tends to deepen the all too prevalent mood of despondency about the country's future. A sense of anxiety can be justified but it too easily degenerates into feelings of frustration and despair. After thirty-five of native government people are asking whether we can achieve an acceptable degree of economic progress... (Coogan, 2004)

This is a very interesting remark, which we ought to remember for it will be important once we reach the second chapter of this thesis. Nevertheless, what this programme kick-started was the complete reshaping of several economic sectors within the country. There were however two main measures which were instrumental to this major shift: a larger focus on high technology, accomplished through a reform of education (which prioritized information technology schools) and the encouraging of foreign investment. Overall, Ireland benefited greatly from the post-war economic boom and developing economy as policies of protectionism were abandoned and the country was opened up to international trade and industry. Unfortunately, good things rarely ever last, and what was once a booming economy would be facing new formidable challenges.

## **2.4 The Sick Man of Europe**

"I stuck on the lunchtime news. More riots. Tedious now. Depressing. You ever read Thucydides? I'll boil him down for you in one easy moral: intergenerational war is a very bad thing."

*Adrian McKinty*

What first began as an economic boom for Ireland would soon be turned on its head. The 60s saw the beginning of the Irish Troubles in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, a decades long conflict which reaped the lives of 4000 people including up to 2000 civilians. Despite the Good Friday agreement of 1996, which greatly toned down hostilities, lingering deep scars are still very visible in the northern side of the country. But the intergenerational conflict was far from being the only challenge the government would face.

The 70s and 80s were particularly eventful decades for Ireland, but not in a good way. With Ireland's entry in the European Economic Community in 1973, together with Denmark and the United Kingdom, the island nation saw some form of economic growth and for a while there were hopes of slowly catching up to the rest of Europe. However, that was not yet destined to be. Together with several industrial and bank strikes, one particular event would throw the world into disarray. The oil embargoes carried out by Arab countries in 1973 and 1979 would prove disastrous in an oil-dependent world economy. Ireland's oil prices skyrocketed, coupled with an overall bad economic management on the part of the government, which threatened to undo the stimulus put in place by Lemass and Whitaker.

The 80s were not much better in this regard. The governments led by Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald greatly worsened the already poor economic situation by borrowing massively while greatly increasing tax rates. Much of this borrowed money went towards sustaining an overvalued currency. It was only natural then that foreign investment in the form of risk capital, which the economy direly needed, was discouraged by all the manifest difficulties. This dire situation would have its *coup de grace* delivered by great political instability and corruption, fostered by constant power alternations between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, constantly alternating in power. Were it not for

constant European support, there was a chance that these economic issues would have been far worse. Economists were all too aware of this, and had long since forecast a gloomy future for Ireland:

Even more than historians, economic forecasters have an inbuilt tendency to see tomorrow as being the same as today. The pessimism about the Irish economy which prevailed in Ireland until very recently highlights the poor self-image that persisted throughout the post-war years, influencing economists, historians and politicians alike. Even if Ireland were truly a tiger its citizens would be the last to see it. (FitzGerald, 1999)

However, the earlier investments done in education, coupled with EU membership and a change in demographics would soon see Ireland undergo an economic growth the likes of which had never been seen before in the country.

## **2.5 The Celtic Tiger**

“Celtic Tiger portrays the oppression of a people and the tiger symbolises the awakening of their Spirit and their struggle for freedom.”

*Michael Flatley*

One may have noticed that so far there have been barely any mentions to *Riverdance* or Irish dancing for that matter, with the greater emphasis being placed on the socioeconomic evolution of Ireland. As previously explained, this was not done without purpose. For us to explain the phenomenon known as *Riverdance*, some background information was necessary to understand the emergence of Ireland’s Golden Age’. And

just as we reach the 90s, the long penance endured by the Irish economy would seemingly come to a close. In a little over a decade, Ireland was transformed from one of the poorest countries in Europe into one of the EU's richest countries. There were several causes for this, the main ones being “low corporate taxes, low wages, US economic boom, foreign investment, stable national economy, adequate budget policies, EU membership, and EU subsidies” (Celtic Countries, 2007). Obviously, such a rapid economic growth did wonders for Ireland’s prestige around the globe, especially among the immigrant community. But as Brianna Hynes puts it, the Celtic Tiger was very important for Ireland for a number of reasons:

The Celtic Tiger made Ireland one of the top global economies, a large shift from Ireland’s not so distant past that included events like the Famine and the Troubles. [...] The Celtic Tiger appeared to be a much welcomed change for Ireland for a number of reasons. Ireland has a history of suffering both under British colonial rule, but also as an independent nation. The Celtic Tiger and the growth in the economy seemed to offer a new path and future for Ireland that could be a distinct break from the past. (Hynes, 2017)

In short, what Brianna Hynes argues is that for many people, the Celtic Tiger was the perfect time for ‘reinventing Ireland’. Because it is just as easy to reproduce the economic success and mention how advantageous it became in the lives of everyday Irish citizens as it is to forget the deeply negative aspects that may equally result from it. Yet, in the eyes of Hynes, the Celtic Tiger phenomenon “brought with it many negative consequences that have affected large populations of Irish people as well as the authenticity of Irish culture” (Hynes, 2017). This last bit of information is of the utmost importance to us. How exactly would the “authenticity of Irish culture” be affected?



The fact is that during the 1990s, Hynes tells us, “the focus on nurturing the economy took precedence over nurturing a culture and identity that could both claim and understand its own history, and embrace new aspects of a modern culture. Irish culture instead became a commodity that simply served the economy.” (Hynes, 2017)

In the same vein, the aim of Ireland’s revisionist discourse was to transmit the existence of a “modern, vibrant economy and society”, in stark contrast to the country’s “reactionary, nationalist Catholic past” (Hynes, 2017). This small decade of pride, coupled with forgetfulness and renouncing of the past would be at the heart of much of the Celtic Tiger period. The economy was, however, far from being the only motive Irish people could be proud of themselves. Ireland would still have a few moments of glory in store.

## **2.6 Jack Charlton and the Boys in Green**

“We never had a huge squad and we never had a great deal of choice. But in many ways that helps because you’ve got to make do with that you’ve got.”

*Jack Charlton*

It may sound strange to speak of soccer in an Irish dance thesis. Although not directly connected to *Riverdance*, it is nonetheless an important episode for us to further understand the ‘fluidity’ of Irish nationality and how the diaspora came to play a big role in Ireland’s future. Soccer was a well-liked sport in Ireland. The national team had its first international match against Bulgaria at the 1924 Summer Olympics, and had played ever since. With varying degrees of success, the Irish squad consistently delivered decent

performances, having been the first team from abroad to defeat England at home in 1949 and even managing a qualification for the quarter-finals of the 1964 European Nations' Cup. It would however be under Jack Charlton (a member of the English team that won the World Cup in 1966), who assumed leadership of the national team in 1986, that Irish soccer would produce its best results in history. As the first non-Irish manager of the national team, and an Englishman to add insult to injury, Charlton's appointment was a very controversial move at the time, taking some sensible negotiation on the part of the organizers.

Nonetheless, the proposal came through, and the Northumbrian-born footballer now had free rein to turn the Irish football team into a force to be reckoned with. A member of a family of famous footballers, and an accomplished footballer himself, Jack Charlton had a different way of doing things, and would soon begin making unprecedented changes to the team. Tactically, the team adopted a style more akin to English football. But his most famous decision would come in preparation of the new Irish roster. In FIFA, there is a rather controversial rule dictating the people who can be selected for a national team. Article 17 of the current FIFA statutes, regarding the 'acquisition of a new nationality', states that:

Any player [...] who assumes a new nationality and who has not played international football [in a match (either in full or in part) in an official competition of any category or any type of football] shall be eligible to play for the new representative team only if he fulfils one of the following conditions:

- a) He was born on the territory of the relevant association;
- b) His biological mother or biological father was born on the territory of the relevant association;
- c) His grandmother or grandfather was born on the territory of the relevant association;
- d) He has lived continuously for at least five years after reaching the age of 18 on the territory of the relevant association. (FIFA Eligibility Rules – Article 15-18 of the FIFA Statutes, n.d.)

This is what is popularly known as the ‘granny rule’, a rule which became particularly beneficial for the Republic of Ireland.

Due to the several economic and social issues which plagued the young Irish Republic before and after its establishment, there had been a very significant Irish diaspora throughout the years, mainly to countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. However, the way citizenship laws are conceived in Ireland make it so that no matter where a person is born, as long as the parents or grandparents are of Irish citizenship, then the person in question will also be entitled to Irish citizenship. The UK, with its deeply-rooted and rich footballing traditions, was one of the main destination for Irish emigrants. Given the small size of Ireland as a country, and with a small population to boot, Article 17 and Irish citizenship laws gave the country a huge and much needed pool of resources to draw from. And Charlton, aiming to turn his team into a world-class competitor, would make sure to exploit this rule to the nth degree.

Taking advantage of the few loopholes present in the article, Charlton would invite a handful of Hiberno-English players into the team, some of the most notable being John Aldridge, Andy Townsend, Phil Babb, etc., who performed exceptionally well during their time serving the Irish team. Naturally, many of these young talents would jump at the prestigious opportunity of playing on an international stage. But this did not happen without protest. The Irish media accused Charlton of filling the national team with ‘plastic Paddies’, to which Charlton replied it was a necessary step for producing results, which he did. At a certain point however, the Irish-born players were actually a minority in their own team. And this was not all. Some of these players had dubious, if any, links with Ireland proper. Tony Cascarino, who joined the team through his Irish grandmother, later revealed to have been adopted into the family.

This seems to tie in nicely with Brianna Hynes' points made earlier, in which by the time of the Celtic Tiger was seemingly permitted so long as they projected a positive image of Ireland overseas, even if it meant parodying and dissolving the traditions and culture of the country. Naturally, the achievements accomplished by the Irish football team under Charlton's leadership would bring an enormous amount of prestige and admiration to Ireland and Irish football, cementing Jack Charlton as the most successful manager in the history of the Irish national football team. But at the same time, it would bring to the table important questions regarding Irish identity and traditions. If it meant casting a positive image of Ireland abroad, and the production of results, was anything permitted? And with such a question, we get ever closer to the main topic of this thesis.

## **2.7 Ireland in the Eurovision Song Contest**

"Once in a decade, something happens in musical theatre that really reinvents itself.

In the 90s, it was *Riverdance*."

*Helen Brennan*

As far as big shows in Europe are concerned, few can claim to have the sheer size and prestige of the Eurovision Song Contest. Held since 1956, it was an ambitious project to bring the war-torn European countries together, under the pretense of a singing competition. To this day, the Eurovision Song Contest has become one of the greatest shows on Earth, bringing into the spotlight many different artists from 42 different countries, each with their own cultures and stories to tell.

After a while, however, it became obvious that the competition was deeply embroiled in politics. *The Secret History of Eurovision* is a documentary charting the history of the Eurovision Song Contest and its impact on European political and social structure. In it, we are told that the contest was likely fundamental in setting up a “big offensive by the West” (Youtube, 2017). Thus, the Eurovision could very well be one of the most “important diplomatic arenas in the world”, and a ripe opportunity for national exaltation. Ireland knew this all too well. And since their debut in 1965, they have maintained their title as the most successful country to ever participate in the contest, with a total of seven wins, three of them in a row. Other than the obvious implications of fame and status, these victories sent a very strong and important message to the world.

In *The Insiders, The Riverdance story*, we get to know the behind-the-scenes work of *Riverdance* as told by the people who had an active role in it. The documentary begins by using the 1993 Eurovision preparations as a backdrop for the role played by Ireland. The contest was being held in County Cork after Linda Martin had won last year’s contest. Niamh Kavanagh would ultimately win the contest for Ireland that year as well, but this time around, it felt different. Even though it was the RTÉ’s fourth time presenting the song contest, as director Liam Miller puts it, “there was something that was different this time: we won at home” (YouTube, 2014). However, as the narrator points out a few minutes after, the Eurovision song contest, despite being arguably the largest and most successful show on Europe, still was not “widely regarded as a cultural beacon [...] and the impact of the interval entertainment wasn’t always permanent” (YouTube, 2014).

Such a thought has permeated every Eurovision competition. Given the nature of the show, and at a time when television was not as ubiquitous and developed as it is today, it was all that more important to make a fantastic first impression, as that would likely be one’s only moment to shine. Being once again the hosts of the contest, and wishing to

make a truly memorable interval act in the 1994 edition, which would both entertain and showcase Irish culture to the world, Miller procures the help of show-making veteran Moya Doherty. What Doherty intended to create was something “urban, edgy, innovative; a new image for Ireland” (YouTube, 2014), something which many others had tried before her. This was done in several layers. First and foremost was the creation of postcards, which in her own words were “edgy and urban, almost like a pop video”, which was something “quite new, quite different, giving them all a contemporary sense” and imbuing Ireland with a rough look rather than a ‘pretty’ recreation (YouTube, 2014).

Moya Doherty’s ultimate goal would be to showcase Irish music and dance to the world. In the words of Doherty, she knew it would have to come from Irish “roots”, and she knew it had to be “traditional”. And immediately, one of the crucial questions of this thesis comes to mind: what tradition? In a pre-*Riverdance* world, references to Irish dancing tradition came in various shapes and forms. In Doherty’s case, inspiration seemingly came from dance master John Cullinane, at the time a world-reference as far as Irish dancing was concerned. Before *Riverdance*, “the style of dancing was very different. [...] It evolved from the social aspects when performances were in a little small kitchen or on the top of a barrel. So the style was neat and tidy.” One such example is a video found on YouTube, recorded in 1963, where Cullinane himself is dancing the *Liverpool Hornpipe*. As soon as Cullinane started to dance, we can immediately see what he meant. The space of the dance is quite reduced, and does not allow for a whole lot of movement as opposed to what an Eurovision stage would. He kept his arms down during the whole performance, never once lifting them, and thus corroborating his initial statement.

But this kind of dancing, while ‘traditional’, was not quite what Doherty had in mind. And there was a very simple reason for that: as it was conceived, ‘traditional’ Irish

dancing was not ‘cool’. The point many Irish dancers make in the documentary is that doing Irish dancing back in the day was not something to be very proud of, even less if you were male. The nature of the traditional gowns of the dance made it so that men wore kilts, which despite being deeply ingrained in the culture and tradition of countries such as Ireland and Scotland, were still seen as skirts by a large swath of the population. The stigma of men wearing skirts was naturally very strong in a deeply Catholic country such as Ireland, and a deterrent to the practice of the art for many young boys. The kilt would eventually fall out of use, and with it, something else was coming.

One night in 1993, Doherty attended a performance at Dublin’s National Concert Hall, entitled *The Spirit of Mayo*. It was an orchestral performance featuring drummers and the choir and choral group Anúna. The performance began very normally, staying true to its namesake and depicting small episodes of Mayo life. However, three very important elements would catch Doherty’s attention. The first is the duo comprised of Jean Butler and Colin Dunne, two very accomplished dancers. The second, and perhaps most influential element was Michael Flatley. Doherty recalls their meeting quite vividly: “[...] and out comes Flatley. A Spanish *sombrero* hat with his bare-chested spats [...] and I went ‘Wow, is that Irish dance?’ and I was completely intrigued by it” (YouTube, 2014). Michael Flatley would also comment on it at the end of the performance: “it’s mostly Irish, I try to let people know in the States that Irish dancing is really the forerunner for tap, and I try to make something a little flamenco [...]” (YouTube, 2014). And at that moment, Mayo Doherty knew she had found the recipe for success. But there was one third missing piece left; the one person to bind it all together. That person was the composer behind the performance: Bill Whelan. Before being involved in what would later become his *magnum opus*, Whelan had already partaken in many trailblazing projects, working with household names such as U2 and The Dubliners. And now, he

would be charged with bringing 'trad' Irish music to the big stage and making it fresh and urban.



## Chapter 3

### *The Tradition Behind Riverdance*

In the previous chapters we have laid down both the theoretical and economic and cultural basis that preceded the historical 1994 Eurovision interval act. Having made a brief presentation on the history of the country's socio-economic conditions and its causes and effects, we will now be moving into a chapter more directly preoccupied with analysing the dance aspects of *Riverdance*. As previously stated, the analysis will focus not so much on the technical aspects of the dance, although we will inevitably mention a few whenever pertinent. Our main objective within this chapter will therefore be to provide a comprehensible and abridged history of Irish dancing. The clarification of this point will prove essential if we are to better understand and answer the questions we have proposed at the beginning of this thesis: how 'rooted' in traditional Irish dancing is *Riverdance*? Could it be considered Irish traditional dancing at all?

Nevertheless, answering questions of authenticity in regards to *Riverdance* is not in any way easy or obvious, for the performance is a very clever *pot-pourri* in which its creator(s) adamantly defend the authenticity of its Irish roots. But one aspect we should be inspecting is the fact that the 'tradition' of *Riverdance* is never really put into question. Words like 'traditional Irish dance' and 'traditional Irish music' are continuously thrown around as if people knew exactly what 'traditional Irish music and dance' was all about. This implies that either the creators of *Riverdance* assumed that the majority of Irish people were well-versed in the traditions and history of Irish dancing, which could be a plausible explanation given the long-lasting relationship between Irish culture and dancing, or it could also mean that the majority of people are unfamiliar with the actual

history of Irish dancing, but instead immediately recognize certain ‘signs’ in the performance which allow them to identify *Riverdance* as being steeped in tradition. We have understood some of these ‘signs’ as being socially constructed, and we have recognised much of what is presently perceived as ancestral culture and tradition as a mere ‘invention’ or hasty conclusions based on incomplete facts. That was the case with the notion of a ‘Celtic Ireland’ born from elusive druids and supposedly universally shared Celtic traits.

The focus of this chapter will be on determining how deeply these inventions and erroneous notions of history have influenced the perception of Ireland’s own history throughout the decades, in particular the origins and evolution of its dancing. By finding an answer to this very elementary question we ought to be concluding whether the Eurovision performance bears any semblance to tradition or if instead it merely pretends to.

### **3.1 The Origin of Irish Dancing**

“While many of the contemporary and show dance styles of Irish dance have a more relaxed upper body and make use of the arms, the traditional form of Irish dance still keeps the arms close to the sides of the body.”

*Ally Gavigan*

When it is necessary to study and determine the origin of any particular tradition, the adequate procedure will most likely be to seek the earliest moments of history in which the first forms of that tradition materialized. Usually these are found in the so called

‘primary sources’, historical documents from a set time period which may contain important information on world views, lifestyles and thoughts of a certain community. As far as Irish dancing is concerned, we can find many sources explaining the origins and evolution of dancing in Ireland, the occasions in which it was performed and the rules of the performances themselves. However, the most readily found sources present a few fundamental issues.

In a quick search for the origins and history of dancing in Ireland, the most immediate results will tell us that they are neither clear-cut nor well-defined. Instead, several pieces of information on former practices and early forms of dancing are brought together by enthusiasts of Irish dance in an attempt to create a semblance of cohesion for the origin and history of Irish traditional dancing. However, the most commonly cited fact is that Irish music originated from ‘sun-worshipping’ Celtic druids carrying out religious dances on the Hill of Tara. In a previous chapter we have already seen how questionable the narrative about druids and ‘Celts’ can be, and claiming that Irish dancing originated from a handful of Celtic druids is made less reliable by the fact that there is also no concrete evidence to back such a statement, not so much on the existence of these worshipers, but rather on whether they danced at all. While several websites are quick to admit that data on the earliest forms of Irish cultural practices are scarce or nearly non-existent, the influence of druidic and Celtic culture on what later became Irish traditional dancing is seemingly taken as an undeniable and obvious fact, something that inevitably should give us grounds for thought. As Helen Brennan claims, “Dance is, by its nature, ephemeral” (Brennan, 2001), with a few performances often lasting a brief moment before all movement is ceased. In such transience lies the main cause for nearly non-existent early accounts on Irish dancing, for according to Brennan there would be no real possible “notation of dance” in a time when these sun-worshipping druids would be dancing to

honour their gods, and registering of those dances would therefore not be deemed “necessary” (Brennan, 2001) even if they ever existed in the first place.

As we will soon find out, academic accounts place the early forms of Irish dancing much later in time. The first proper mention of what we may associate with Irish dancing appears in the sixteenth-century, when visitors to Ireland describe a few dances performed at their receptions upon arriving in the country. An account by lieutenant Sir Henry Sydney in a letter to Queen Elizabeth I describes a group of girls dancing in Galway County seemingly doing the Irish Jig, claiming “They are very beautiful, magnificently dressed and first class dancers” (Lord, 2003) On a quick note, one could claim that the praise done by Sir Henry Sydney was likely strategic: it is certainly reminiscent of Sir Walter Raleigh’s praise for the new world, when he was trying to convince Elizabeth I to fund the colonization of the America. In any case, other often mentioned forms attributed to Irish dancing included the *rinne fáda* (The Fading) and the Trenchmore. It is not certain, however, whether or not these two styles were originally Irish dances. As far as Trenchmore is concerned, Seán Donnelly believes that “the circumstantial evidence that the dance originated in Co. Kilkenny, and that members of the Earl of Ormond's household introduced it as a novelty to the court of Edward VI, appears fairly convincing”, although Donnelly is quick to remark that “there would have been nothing particularly Irish, in the sense of Gaelic, about the dance” (Donnelly, n.d.). The *rinne fáda* would gain particular importance and renown as one of four dance styles taught in Ireland on the latter half of the nineteenth-century, for reasons we will be visiting shortly. Finally, Professor Catherine E. Foley also mentions the *feis*:

“Historically, the *feis* was an ancient Gaelic assembly of Irish nobility, chiefs, politicians, judges, doctors, poets and bards, who gathered for the annual festival at Tara, the residence of the high King of Ireland. This event focused on politics and law-making, but it was also accompanied by

much festivity, including entertainments and sports events. Ireland's 800-year colonization put an end to the *feis*, but it was re-invented at the end of the nineteenth century [...]" (Foley, 2013)

The conclusion that we thus reach is that while we can certainly begin seeing some semblance of Irish traditional dancing in early historical records, there is little information which would allow for an accurate definition of 'early Irish dancing' or anything which could be considered intrinsically Irish. Some of the aforementioned dances were a mixture of styles, usually originating in Italy and France and eventually making their way to English court. By the end of the nineteenth century, music historian Terry Moylan reports, only three literary pieces on Irish dancing had been published in Ireland, consisting of "Neals's collection of country dances (1726); James Cassidy's *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Dancing* (1810); and Leggett-Byrne's *Terpsichore, Her Votaries and Fashions* (1898)" (Moylan, 2000), all of which proved to be the most in-depth and credible accounts of Irish dancing up for that point in time (and certainly some of the first written sources).

Another great contribution to the diffusion and knowledge on Irish traditional dancing was the advent of the 'dance-master'. Michael Hayes mentions a "Dancing Master", describing it as a "peripatetic figure who, according to the few social history sources available, appeared as a recognised 'institution' in Irish rural life around the middle of the eighteenth century" (Hayes, 2007). These "Dancing Masters" were wandering dancing teachers who travelled for village to village, usually within a certain county (Hayes, 2007). Hayes further assesses the importance of these teachers for local communities:

"[A dance master stopped] anywhere between two and six weeks [...], often staying with a particular and hospitable family – (who were generally honoured by their selection as host). These

Irish dancing teachers who seem to have been predominantly male, taught Irish dancing in kitchens, outhouses, crossroads and even in hedge schools. [...] The dancing floors or stages used for performances there were much smaller than the Riverdance-style auditoriums and concert halls of today and included table tops, half-doors, or the roomier “stage” of a crossroads, the latter practice being referred to in some older Irish poems as “tripping the sod”. Tests of agility and technique incorporated such difficult manoeuvres as dancing on barrel-tops or a soaped table with which was used to test a dancer’s sense of finesse and balance!” (Hayes, 2007)

The lessons would be given for a small fee, which was free of charge for the families housing the dance master. This practice happened frequently and in many areas across the country. However, the schools of dancing from counties Cork, Kerry and Limerick were of particular prominence, eventually enhancing the visibility and prestige of the southern dancing styles over those of the rest of the country, something which would be of particular importance in the years to come.

## **3.2 The Gaelic Revival**

“Nationalist ideologies built out of symbolic forms drawn from local traditions [...] tend, like vernacular [...] to be socially deprovincializing but psychologically forced.”

*Clifford Geertz*

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the failure of Home Rule and the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, people often refer to Ireland in this period as a ‘dead island’. Politically, ‘the chief’ Parnell had been the most influential figure in the Irish political scene at the time, and there was no one of comparable ability and importance to replace him. His death meant that the failure of the Second Home Rule Bill would bring

an end to Home Rule in Ireland. To make matters worse, the period of the 1890's was the time in which the British Empire was at its most powerful, proving a serious threat to any hope of Irish self-sovereignty. With the ever increasing fear of seeing the Irish identity lost and mingled with that of the British, cultural nationalists in Ireland began undertaking a continued and serious effort to establish their nation as having its own cultural identity. And thus, nearing the end of the nineteenth century, these cultural nationalists, which included within their ranks such illustrious personalities as Douglas Hyde and Michael Cusack, set about constructing a programme that would assist in promoting a fully developed Irish cultural identity. While there had been scholarly movements dedicated to the Irish language in the past, such as the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language (of which Hyde being a co-founder), none had actively promoted Irish as a spoken language, a cause which would be thoroughly championed by the cultural nationalists (even though Hyde was not one of them).

To this purpose, Cusack would form the *Cumann Lúthchleas Gael* (Gaelic Athletic Association) in 1884, with the aim of promoting the so-called 'native Gaelic sports' such as Gaelic football, handball and others, and Hyde would in turn form the *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League) in 1893, with the primary goal of 'de-Anglicizing' Ireland through the preservation of the Irish tongue and cultivating modern Irish literature. For these cultural nationalists, Foley tells us, "a cultural representation was required to establish an 'Irishness' that was positive and uniquely Irish, and that was different from Englishness, and indeed any other culture" (Foley, 2013). For Hyde, Ireland required Irish organizations supporting 'Irish things', and even the Parliament would have to speak Irish and not English for such an endeavour ever to be successful. In short, Ireland would come into its own by rejecting British cultural colonialism and by extension any and everything British in an Irish person's everyday life. And to ensure the

success of such a project, several institutions would have to be put in place. The teaching of the Irish language and literature were given priority by the newly-founded League, and by 1901 around 600 branches related to Irish classes were already in existence. It garnered much support among the middle-class, who openly voiced their support for the cause. The Gaelic Athletic Association was also enjoying much success in its endeavours. As claimed by Foley, “this association had nationalistic associations and aimed to achieve its objectives by means of structure[d] competitive games which stimulated local club, county and provincial pride and a national patriotism” (Foley, 2013). But these were merely the tip of the iceberg, for the Gaelic League had much greater plans. Eventually music, singing and dancing would also become part of the curriculum.

### **3.3 The ‘New’ Irish Dancing**

“What I advocate brings with it no substantial or material advantage at all. It will neither make money nor help to make money.”

*Douglas Hyde*

One of the primary concerns of the Gaelic League in regards to Irish dance was to somehow create a standardized dancing tradition from the plethora of different variations of style and execution in existence throughout the country. Some of the dances originally taught would be the four-hand reel, eight-hand reel and the *rince fáda*, also known as the Kerry Country Dance, a supposedly traditional country dance from County Kerry. But eventually the authenticity of the dances being taught was put into question:



“Is it a true Irish dance, or is it a Kerry dance at all? It seems to me to be neither the one nor the other, but a mixture of *quadrille* and *polka*, with some promenading and a few crude steps, like the mis-named eight-hand and four-hand reel...Eighteen years ago I was at the Puck Fair in Killorglin, and saw there hundreds of dancers from different parts of the country. I saw Irish step-dances in plenty and some *quadrilles*, called by the country people "sets", but nothing at all with the slightest resemblance to the *rinche fáda*. If this is an old Kerry dance, surely one would expect to find it at Puck Fair along with the step-dancing” (The Traditional Tune Archive, 2019)

This quote reflects a major fault with what the Gaelic League was trying to achieve. In order to reach the closest thing to a ‘standard’ form, one would have to ignore the insurmountable amount of unique styles in each community and region. Worst still, if one of the aims of the Gaelic League was to promote dances which were ‘fully Irish’, then what to be done with those styles that had received elements from dances not native to Ireland (i.e. *polka*), as the quote seemingly implies?

Faced with the same question, the Gaelic League would eventually focus its attention on the styles considered to be native to Ireland. And as far as natively created styles went, Brennan speaks of the solo set dances, of which there were three main styles: the northern or Ulster style, the western or Connaught style and southern or Munster style as well as the hornpipe, the reel and the jig (Brennan, 2001). There could possibly have existed a fourth eastern or Leinster style, but it likely had by then disappeared and left no trace. Of the three styles in existence, the Munster style had the most variation in form. Skilled dancers trained in the southern style could, according to Brennan, perform “the hornpipe, the reel and the jig as well as a brace of intricate solo set dances such as “The Job of Journeywork” or “The Blackbird”” (Brennan, 2001). This would eventually become the standard style that would form the basis for most modern schools of Irish dancing. The choice of this particular style was, more than a practical choice, a political one. Ulster had long since the 17<sup>th</sup> century Plantation been a majorly Protestant region, which

immediately placed it at odds with any plans of making a banner for Irish unity out of it. Connaught, on the other hand, was ‘wild and untamed’. The expression “to hell or to Connaught” is still well-known to history, first employed by Oliver Cromwell in the 17<sup>th</sup> century incursions into Irish land, during which, historian Justin McCarthy tells us, “the Irish were driven into Connaught and compelled to stay there” (McCarthy, 1901). During this time, the inhabitants of Connaught would see strict rules placed on them, enforced by the threat of death. But this forced settlement would ultimately bear no fruits, for even with the draconian rules placed upon them, many would succumb to what McCarthy jokingly refers to as the “detestable malaria of Irish influence” (McCarthy, 1901), where even Cromwell’s troops would not be exempt from being ‘contaminated’ by the Irish language and customs. There was an ever-present fear of ‘going native’.

In short, and also in large part due to the earlier establishment of dance schools in Munster by the dance masters, who would guide the teachers of the newly-formed League, increased the visibility and prestige of the style in question in the rest of the country, the southern style would take precedence over the remaining styles and become the main style taught in the 600 branches of the Gaelic League, with about 50,000 affiliated members by 1901. Teachers would travel from branch to branch, teaching Irish language and literature alongside traditional music and dance. Lectures would also be hosted and competitions were often organized, as Foley indicates, “in the form of *céilithe*. *Feiseanna* were also organized, where local people competed in the different culturally specific areas of Irish literature, traditional music, song and dance” (Foley, 2013). Events and news related to the Gaelic League were regularly published in affiliated newspapers, and overall, the awareness and diffusion of these traditions was slowly becoming profuse in Ireland. Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, step-dancing would receive an extra layer of control through the employment of *An Coimisiún le Rincí*

*Gaelacha* (the Irish Dance Commission) in 1929. The job of this commission was to regulate the way Irish dance was taught in schools. The way it did so was by requiring registration and the acquisition of a license from every prospecting teacher, allowing them to teach Irish dancing officially.

Eventually, this commission would become the governing body of Irish dance in Ireland, and in 1969 they establish the first World Championships of Irish dancing, granting not only native-born Irish but people from all over the world the opportunity to compete and indulge in Irish dancing. For the first time in history, Irish dancing was becoming a global affair. The competitive side to the dancing enabled Irish dance to reach heights it had never reached before on the world stage, with each competition bringing new elements into the dance and ensuring its continued popularity. But the Irish in Ireland would not be the only ones to see such an investment in all things ‘Irish’, for overseas great efforts would be made to reproduce the same success.

### **3.4 Dance in the Irish Diaspora**

“In old times people used to try and square the circle; now they try and devise schemes for satisfying the Irish nation.”

*Samuel Butler*

As previously stated, the Gaelic League was not seeking to establish its presence only in Ireland. Following decades of emigration, which reached its height during the years of the Famine, many Irish would settle all across the globe. The majority would establish themselves in the United States, Australia, Canada and other English-speaking

countries, with the less well-off settling in neighbouring England. Once there, new branches of the Gaelic League would be formed in each respective host country. From among many of these branches, the London-based branch would overtime attain a particularly high reputation for its dancing practices. The height of its popularity would, however, come after the establishment of the *céili*, first of many Irish social dance events to originate and one that is still in practice to this very day. Having been inspired by the Scottish *céilithe*, with which the group dances taught at branch classes bore many similarities, the London branch would host its own Irish *céili*, which would prove to be a big success. The Gaelic League would thus turn the *céili* into a genuine Irish celebration, being subsequently popularized both at home in Ireland and overseas. Foley further asserts how important the *céili* was for Irish national expressionism:

“The *céili* became a social dance event where Irish people and others could interact socially and culturally, and could, through their dancing bodies, assert and express their identity and cohesion as an *Irish* community. [...] The appropriation of dance and the construction of this social dance event by the Gaelic League was a manifestation of the fact that dance was perceived to be an important and powerful ideological tool which facilitated the shaping, sensing and experiencing of Irish culture and identity” (Foley, 2013)

Furthermore, solo step dancing also took place through organized dance classes at different Gaelic League branches, Foley tells us, as well as competitions at *feiseanna* and the *Oireachtas*, the national festival (Foley, 2013). Much like how the Gaelic Athletic Festival had fostered a competitive feeling through Irish sports, so did these *feiseanna* and the *Oireachtas* promote a similar feeling of competitiveness and self-pride among its participants, further contributing to the creation of a national sense. And as the *Coimisiún*

was hosting its first World Championships, the prospects were bright for the future of Irish dancing.

While for many generations Irish dancing had remained a local, recreational pursuit, enjoyed among the Irish communities both at home and abroad, the Gaelic Revival formalized and institutionalized the practice, bringing to it an edge of competitiveness which had been lacking up until that point. But there is one question that remains unanswered. While the Gaelic League certainly accomplished a lot in the way of promoting many aspects of Irish philology, with a very strong dancing element, how authentically Irish were the dance tunes being promoted? We have seen how the Munster style took precedence over the others, only serving to increase the factionalism between regions and styles. But when one turns tradition into a competition, is there not a risk of morphing tradition into something else?

In the United States, Irish dancing was coming into its own in a slightly different manner than in other parts of the world, Ireland included. It should be noted that the dance masters in Ireland remained “the final authority on steps, style, and choreography” (NYU: Arts & Science, 2018). The American branch of the Gaelic League hosted big competitions in four major cities every year, while other countries were also enjoying a great boom on the interest in Irish dancing among their Irish communities. Ironically, the United States, with a combination of high standards and very capable performers, would eventually become the uncontested leader of Irish dancing worldwide. In a sense, they had beaten Ireland at its own game. And by the end of the twentieth century, “young Irish-American dancers like Jean Butler and Michael Flatley were among the elite Irish dancers who were not only proficient in the art form, but also seasoned performers” (NYU: Arts & Science, 2018). And the role they would play as lead dancers in *Riverdance* would not

only bring them unthinkable wealth and fame, but would also deeply affect the way Irish dance was perceived and performed for years to come.

## Chapter 4

### *The People Behind Riverdance*

#### **4.1 The Interval Act**

“And now my friends, *Riverdance*. A full-bodied orchestral dance piece, composed by Bill Whelan, involving traditional Irish dancers, the Celtic choir Anúna and the magical dance partnership of Jean Butler and Michael Flatley. Ladies and gentlemen; *Riverdance!*”

*Gerry Ryan*

The 1994 Eurovision Song Contest was held on the margin of the River Liffey, and in the words of Whelan, “the life of the river would become the actual motif for the inspiration for the music and for the dance” (YouTube, 2014). As he was composing the tune for the act, he stated that he would not strictly use the traditional rhythms of the song, rather opting for more international forms which would all congregate around the project. Nonetheless, the resulting tune would become a hugely iconic staple of traditional and ‘Celtic’ music. And in the words of the dancers themselves, it was quite ‘empowering’ and ‘sexy’; a far cry from the more self-restrained and traditional form of Irish dancing. The talented team was formed, and both the music and dancing painstakingly prepared. Everything was seemingly in place. However, there was something nagging at the back of the mind of many of the elements of the team. How come they were making an act representing Irish music and the two lead dancers, Butler and Flatley, were American? Certainly, any Irish person could have risen to their role just as well. However, this too

was part of Doherty's vision. She wanted to project a 'modern' Ireland, and this identity blend, be it musically, in dance or even in the performers' 'double-nationality', were all part of the plan. Irish and American dancing were very different, both in execution and also in nature. American-Irish dancing brought into the show a 'brashness' and 'liberty' which had been lacking in the more traditional forms of Irish dancing, and which was precisely what Doherty aimed at recreating.

Then there were the dresses. Moya Doherty was not afraid of voicing her complete distaste for "all that Celtic nonsense" (YouTube, 2014), which funnily enough was nevertheless a very important element of her show. The implication of this was a change done in the wardrobes of the dancers. Jean Butler explains how her *Riverdance* dress "resembled nothing of tradition [...] it was a modern take on what an Irish dancer could wear" (YouTube, 2014). And thus, the colourful and intricate dresses worn by dancers in Ireland was replaced by a plain dress. But one important characteristic was its length: from *Riverdance* onwards, the dresses became much shorter, with mini-skirts becoming prevalent. Not only that, but Butler specifically asked for the upper half of her dress to be cut-off, with the result resembling a cleavage. A similar take was adopted for Flatley's own attire, with a shirt more closely resembling a ballet dancer's, and equally empowering. The last step in a game-changing performance was the recording of the tap sounds. This is still a very controversial decision today, as many find it to be a 'mechanical' take of the dance. However, this was done for practical purposes, as the sound of the shoes hitting the floor is a very important aspect of tap dancing. As the sound was often muffled by the music, the organizers deemed it necessary to record the sounds beforehand so as to not affect the quality of the final product. And despite the voices raised against it, it is still used to this day, and with much success.



And with that, everything was ready. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1994, around 300 million people across the globe would tune in to the Dublin-hosted contest, with three thousand people watching it live. At that time, many were completely unaware that a historical moment for Irish music was about to unfold – of all places – in an interval act. The competition went on as normal, and the tension among the organizers grew as each country presented their song. Then, when the time of the interval arrived, Gerry Ryan and Cynthia Ní Mhurchú, presenters of the contest that year, announced what would come to pass. And so, it happened. From an image of flowing water, a hooded female figure emerges, singing. The choir Anúna join their voices with hers as the song reaches the chorus, and so it went for nearly two minutes. Then, the tune changes, and Jean Butler arrives onstage, emerging from an Irish cloak. Her dancing was unlike anything the audience had ever seen. There was something definitely Irish about it, and at the same time, there was not. That feeling was further reinforced when Michael Flatley burst onto the stage, unlike any Irish dancer before him. As the two joined together, it likely became certain to the people watching that something special was going on. The song slowly builds up to a *crescendo*, as more and more people come on to the main stage and join in on the dancing, creating a titanic barrage of sound and visual stimuli as they remain perfectly in sync with each other. Both traditionalists and modernists alike were astonished at what was unfolding before their eyes. And at the end, people realized that for better or for worse, history had been made in that stage. This was *Riverdance*, initially a seven-minute long performance which would eventually become a full-length stage production and spawn a world craze for Irish dancing and culture the likes of which had never been seen before.

And this is where it all began. The initial performance was very successful and liked by Irish and non-Irish alike, and it is still regarded as a high point in the history of

*Riverdance*. But from the very start, there were serious objections to what *Riverdance* was doing to the supposed Irish tradition. After looking for answers directly from Irish people, the answers seemed to point exactly in this direction. All-in-all, *Riverdance* became a money-making enterprise. One forum user in particular puts it very bluntly:

It's stage Oirish. No doubts that it's impressive and that everyone involved is talented at what they do but it (and its imitators) tours the world making money on the idea that that we're all twee little jiggers with a glint in our eye and a pot o'gold somewhere. Like, fair play to them, make that money but it's like expecting Irish people to love Ed Sheeran's "Galway Girl" because he shoe horns [so] many Irish cliches into it. I don't necessarily hate touring Irish dance shows but 'ders more to oireland dan dis. (Reddit, 2019).

Other people seem to agree with this vision, while at the same time showing distaste for Flatley's "headband, half-open shiny shirt, and leather pants" (Reddit, 2019). It is only natural then that many Irish people might want to distance themselves from these perceived stereotypes. But this is precisely where we were trying to get at: *Riverdance* as a piece of heritage industry, and the role these stereotypes play in the representation of Irish culture throughout the globe. To properly bring these aspects across, we need to fully understand the elements at play in the performance, for they are very significant in their representation of tradition in Irish dancing.

## 4.2 An Inside View of *Riverdance*

“I'm not an egomaniac like a lot of people say. But I am the world's best dancer, that's for sure.”

*Michael Flatley*

First, we ought to take a closer look at the opening sequence. After a brief introduction, the audience is greeted by the Celtic choir Anúna. Some of the members are wearing cloaked robes, mainly of brown and green colours, while the remaining members wear what appear to be linen shirts juxtaposed with a half-open robe. The lyrics of their song appear calm and soothing, while the light upon them is kept to a minimum. Even without seeing the garments themselves or the scene, we can probably guess what this particular piece is trying to portray. We have seen how the ‘ancient Celts’, and particularly the druids, are one of the more frequently employed origin myths in Irish history. In dress, the choir members very closely resemble the stereotypical look of these enigmatic druids, or at least how they are popularly portrayed in several forms of media. They remain still throughout their performance, likely to add weight and believability to their roleplaying as a secretive and ‘magical’ sect.

There is a lot to comment on in this opening segment of the act. To begin with, we are once again confronted with a choir being presented as, or claiming to be ‘Celtic’. In musical terms, ‘Celtic’ is generally identified as a subgroup of folk music bearing close association with the assumed presence of the Celts in Western Europe. This ‘label’ is, however, a very broad and misleading one. On the one hand, we have asserted the

insubstantiality of a ‘Celtic invasion of Europe’ narrative. On the other hand, even if such a narrative were true, it would likely be very inappropriate to place every Celtic people(s) in the same group, for variations in style and thought would be notable in between clans or groups. This ‘label’ likely reflects an attempt at creating a close-knit pan-nationalist Celtic grouping, but in doing so it overshadows the evident idiosyncrasies that exist in each country in which ‘Celtic’ artists emerged. And yet, what exactly is it that makes a certain band or artist Celtic? Could it be the clothes one wears? The songs and their themes? The mannerisms? Or could it perhaps be a mere construction, based on pre-fabricated notions of ‘Celticness’ which we have already dissected in a previous chapter? Based on our earlier findings, we can conclude that the latter would be the more appropriate answer, although perhaps it would be even more appropriate to claim that it is a combination of all the elements listed above. That is to say that an image of ‘Celticness’, in the popular mind, is constructed from a combination of mannerisms, clothes and song themes in conjunction with bards, druids and Celtic symbolisms which when brought together create something which the public can instantly recognize as ‘Celtic’. Now, the choice of a ‘Celtic’ theme is quite strange, as Doherty had blatantly claimed her revulsion of “all that Celtic nonsense” (YouTube, 2014), but we will soon begin to realize that it too was a necessary step for creating a certain image. Nevertheless, Anúna perform a short interlude; a foreshadowing of what is to come. Among them, at the centre, a single figure stands, not moving and not making a sound. As the music changes, her cloak is uncovered, revealing a beautiful pattern with several tones of blue: a traditional Irish cloak we are told. And from it emerges Jean Butler, one of the central pieces for the long-lasting success of *Riverdance*.

Jean Butler was a perfect fit for the role Doherty had envisioned: a young, attractive and accomplished dancer and a product of the Irish diaspora in the United States.

Her appearance in the performance would ripple through the entire Irish dancing world. The first reason for that was the choice of dress. It was a plain dress, unlike the colourful and intricate dresses that had been used until that point by other Irish dancers. Not only was this dress much simpler in design, but also shorter and more revealing than anything the Irish dancing world had seen up until that point. In other words, Jean Butler intended to appear ‘sexy’, and was fully aware that the dress she was wearing was bound to evoke those feelings. This is an important point to mention, for Irish dancing had, for much of its history and particularly immediately following the Gaelic Revival, been subject to a set of sexual mores imposed by a Catholic Church with a very strong presence in the country. As we have seen in previous chapters, Ireland was slowly doing away with the more radical and archaic laws of the Church as it entered the Celtic Tiger era. And this allowed the Irish dancing of the United States to truly shine. As Jean Butler would herself comment, “Irish dancing in America is very different to Irish dancing in Ireland, [,..] coupled with the American dream there was this idea that you could do anything you wanted with Irish dancing” (YouTube, 2014).

One of Butler’s co-dancers would further expand on this point, claiming that they (Butler and Flatley) “had a different attitude to Irish dance, they weren’t afraid to put their hand on the waist and [of] giving a look [...]” (YouTube, 2014), which implies that Irish dancing in the States was not afraid to embrace the implied ‘sexiness’ of the dance rather than covering or repressing it. That by itself was already a considerable shift from the moralism that had been a staple of the Irish state in previous years. As for the dance itself, there were some interesting elements already pointing to a fundamental difference that set *Riverdance* apart from other styles. For one, as we have briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, *Riverdance* was not about table tops or half-doors, but concert halls and auditoriums: the big stage. The change of stages not only imbued the performance with a

much grander sense of scale, but would also allow for a full usage of the space available. While dancing, Butler effectively used all of the space provided by the stage. We can see her darting from one side of the stage to the other in quick succession, which was something not really seen in Irish dancing up until that point. And obviously, another big advantage was that one could fit more people onto a bigger stage. A large number of dancers was another key feature of *Riverdance*, which once again really contributed to a grander scale which Irish dancing had previously not enjoyed. But the group of people was yet to come, for the preliminary performance was something particularly extraordinary.

The music began slow but as Butler finishes her first minute of dancing, the tone and tempo completely change. Suddenly, drummers appear on stage, the lights turn a crimson red, and from the wings of the stage, Michael Flatley makes a triumphant entrance. His movements, clothes, poise and attitude are all elements never seen in an Irish dancer before, probably both puzzling and entrancing the many spectators watching him that night. Unlike the graceful movements of Butler, resembling ballet, Flatley presents the audience with a dance that is brasher, brimming with confidence and full of power. He is wearing a different attire from everyone else, which in a sense provides him a role of a 'main character' in the dance, which would also explain why his dancing is 'noisier' than everyone else's. His feet stamp furiously on the floor, and for the first time during the act, we hear tapping sounds, albeit pre-recorded, and the audience could fully listen to these taps, in particular to how fast they were being made. This technique is put to good use as Flatley engages in a percussive rhythmic battle with the drummers, seemingly overtaking their drumming with the speed of his tapping. Finally, his arms are anything but stiff, frantically moving in accordance with the rhythm.

This is what Brennan identifies as one of the legacies of modern schools of Irish dancing, whose task consisted of “producing dancers who will enter and hopefully score well in competitions” (Brennan, 2001). This point is further expanded upon by Angelika Masero, who claims that “[a]lthough traditional and modern styles are composed of the same stepping elements, the execution is different. Modern dancers execute fast, ornate tricks, and move all over the stage” (Masero, 2010). This would become one of the most sought-after qualities of *Riverdance*; the speed and intricate technique of the modern dancing. One further interesting thing to note here is that Bill Whelan had specifically tailored his music to both styles. While in the beginning the serene music is better suited to Butler’s ballet-like dancing, it quickly turns into a style which empowers Flatley’s salsa and flamenco-tap dance hybrid dancing. This hybridity of styles would be a very important component in the context of *Riverdance*, and the salsa and flamenco elements, along with other style variants, would eventually become trademarks of the show. Concluding their individual performances, both meet at the centre of the stage, playing their roles in a love duet. Their eyes meet provocatively, Butler’s hand is on Flatley’s half-exposed chest, and seemingly both proceed to challenge each other with dance, their dancing styles matching one another’s.

The two principal dancers are joined by a larger group. Equally attractive young women with flowing long hair, wearing the same short dress as their lead dancer are joined by young men in elegant black shirts and trousers at the middle of the stage. What ensues is a fully synchronized dance; a thunderous sound of hard shoes hitting the surface of the stage, on a scale never seen before. The audience was transfixed. What was happening before their eyes certainly contained some Irish overtones, but at the same time, it sounded different. But it was no less spectacular for that. The performance was met with a large standing ovation by the audience, confirming to every member present that

history had been made. The elements at play would all be subsequently taken over by three separate tropes dedicated to *Riverdance*: ‘Liffey’, ‘Lee’ and ‘Lagan’ and carried all across the globe, becoming one of the greatest dance enterprises in the world. Having seen these elements in action, we have begun to understand in what ways *Riverdance* differs from the dancing we have explored in the previous chapter. While efforts were made to keep a recognisable ‘Irish style’, *Riverdance* had been turned into something of a spectacle, mixing several dance styles, cleverly using light and sound and several visual stimuli that had been scrupulously put together so as to create an image of a modern, revitalized Ireland; one that was capable of creativity and yet with tradition close to its heart. With the world finally setting its eyes on the little country that was Ireland, *Riverdance* proved to be the personification of the Celtic Tiger, blazingly taking the world by storm and changing how Irish dance was performed (and perceived) for years to come. Or so it was meant to go, for subsequently, *Riverdance* would see a period of decline.

On 3 October 1995, *Riverdance* was to have a triumphant return to London, where they had performed in May that year, on the invitation of Prince Charles himself. That performance was a great success, earning the troupe more fame than it had ever had. Their October performance was to be another great hit. However, lead dancer Michael Flatley would, on the eve of the show, be sacked from the troupe. The reason was a disagreement over pay and profit-sharing, resulting in Flatley abandoning *Riverdance* and setting up his own rival act, *The Lord of the Dance*, which would arguably go on to garner more popularity and gross profits than the former. To add insult to injury, the profits of *Riverdance* have been on a steady decline. While enjoying fantastic success immediately after their debut and well into the noughties, the teenies brought an increasing drop in revenue for the dance enterprise, with 2017 seeing the greatest slump. By that time, most of the old history-making members had left *Riverdance*, and both Flatley and Butler had



left the limelight, and the show had already “transitioned from huge arena venues to smaller theatres for a more intimate feel with simplified performances” (Claddagh Design, 2017). Overall, the future seemed grim for the iconic performance. Yet, the architects of the show still had plans for *Riverdance*. Cambridge Live reports that “[t]wenty-five years on, composer Bill Whelan has rerecorded his mesmerising soundtrack while producer Moya Doherty and director John McColgan have completely reimagined the groundbreaking show with innovative and spectacular lighting, projection, stage and costume designs” (Cambridge Live, 2019). All that remained was the most important piece for the survival of *Riverdance*, and in all probability one of its greatest legacies: the new generation.

### **4.3 The New Generation of Irish Dancers**

“That music, it sends tingles down your spine, and it does that to the audience too and they love it.”

*Amy-Mae Dolan*

It is undeniable that *Riverdance* was one of the main driving forces behind modern Irish dancing and its arrival on the world stage, but to explain its recession in profits would be difficult, for it could have many different causes. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the ‘craze’ for Irish dancing was disappearing, which would be one of the most likely explanations for the decline. But the state in which *Riverdance* finds itself today tells us otherwise. Visiting the official website of the show, we can find many scheduled performances in the US and the UK. Many of these shows also provides VIP

tickets. One of the concert goers retells her whole VIP experience in the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin:

“The VIP Experience gives you the inside scoop on all things *Riverdance* as well as access to an exclusive lounge [...] It begins with a welcome to the Gaiety Theatre by *Riverdance* VIP Host and Troupe Dancer, Darren. He's there to give you the real ‘backstage insight’ as you watch the dancers run through their pre-show rotations onstage. Darren is there to explain all and to answer any burning questions you might have. You're then brought into the VIP Lounge, which is almost like a mini *Riverdance* museum, where Darren talks you through the journey of *Riverdance* over the last 24 years. There are costumes from the show and even the original Jean and Michael Eurovision costumes in their full 1990's glory and a short film on the impact of the dance show worldwide [...] You then get to meet some cast members for a Q&A, selfies, autographs and chats [...]”  
(Fitzmaurice, 2019)

This is one perfect example of the marketability of *Riverdance*, and a staple of its continued success. The allusion to the ‘Golden Age’ of the show is always present, with onlookers gazing upon the ‘journey’ taken by the act in its quest to be in the vanguard of modern Irish dancing. It does a good job at creating a sense of the ‘continuity’ and history and renewal of the show. But if there is a sense of continuity and renewal, how is it mirrored in the show? The answer lies undoubtedly with the cast.

If on the one hand *Riverdance* has attracted many people around the world to performances of Irish dancing, and by extension other aspects of Irish culture, on the other hand it proved to be a rallying call for many people around the globe to take up Irish dancing. And those who most promptly answered the call would be the new generation. They had been introduced to Irish dancing through *Riverdance*, even though most were not born when the act was first performed. This new generation would form the bulk of the newly-assembled ‘Riverdancers’. These young men and women proved to be quite

different from the ones found in the original *Riverdance* team. For one, many of its members were not Irish or of Irish descent. Throughout the nearly 25 years of its activity, *Riverdance* has gathered members from Russia, Japan, India and other countries. The act had been so successful that even countries completely unaffiliated with the Irish diaspora began opening their first schools of Irish dancing. But that was not the only reason behind the enthusiasm of the younger generation, for as Lauren Smyth (one of the lead dancers) explains, there was “something for everyone. There’s not only the Irish dancing --we’ve got our tappers, our Russian dancers, Flamenco, singers [...]” (Smyth, 2016). In short, what drew these young men and women to *Riverdance* did not have to necessarily be the ‘Irishness’ behind the performance, but rather the many elements which comprised it. In short, there was something for everyone. One did not necessarily need an interest in Irish culture to become part of *Riverdance*, for it contained a lot of non-Irish elements. But at the same time, the Irish overtones certainly drew a lot of people to the show, and by extension to Irish culture, music and dance.

How did this all affect *Riverdance*? Apart from the internationality of the cast and the smaller stages, did something about the performance itself change in the slightest? As a matter of fact, it did. We have mentioned the changes in light, staging, soundtrack and costumes made to accommodate for the new life of the show. But was that all? To answer this question, we will be analyzing one performance in particular. There would be many to choose from, as the show still has quite a presence worldwide. However, this one performance served as an apotheosis to *Riverdance* and Irish dancing in general. The sheer amount of themes and techniques make it one of a kind and a perfect reflection of what we have been discussing on this chapter thus far. In 2018, Ireland hosted the World Meeting of Families between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of August. More than an important religious ceremony for Roman Catholics, it is also a prestigious event for the host country, for the

culmination of the ceremony entailed a visit by Pope Francis himself. His arrival in Ireland would be marked by the Festival of Families, to be held on the 25<sup>th</sup> at Croke Park, which included contributions from highly acclaimed artists such as Andrea Bocelli and Celine Byrne. But what would arguably be the crowning event was the very same act that had brought Ireland to the lips of the world years previously. With 63 cast members, *Riverdance* would be performed before Pope Francis.

The Gaelic football stadium was filled to the brim with eager spectators. A recognizable tune is heard, and like her predecessor, from an Irish cloak emerges Amy-Mae Dolan, the first of two lead dancers. She was one of many young Irish dancers who grew up idolizing Jean Butler, and has managed a role in the show being an accomplished dancer herself. Both share many similarities physically, with Dolan's red hair being her most prominent feature. Just as she begins her dancing, however, we can immediately perceive something curious. While the dance itself is not too different from the one performed by Butler years ago, some movements were not there before. Throughout the performance, rather than having her hands stiff by her side as Butler had, Dolan will continuously rub her hands along the line of her body, chest and hips as she danced, sometimes shoving her hair up and down. We have seen how *Riverdance* embraced the implied 'sexiness' of Irish dancing and made it one of its main selling points. But if Jean Butler and Michael Flatley had merely pried open the door to allow it inside in small bursts, Dolan was tearing the door down and letting it all in at once. There was nothing to denote any level of 'discretion' in Dolan's performance, the contrary being quite evident. On the video of the performance, one spectator jokingly comments that "[i]n the old days the nuns would be beating her with a wooden ruler for dancing that way" which denotes how such a dance would have been taboo in the conservative Christian society of pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland. It was nonetheless somewhat ironic that such a dance was being

performed to the head of the Catholic Church, no less. Then it is the turn of Bobby Hodges, the male lead dancer. Like Flatley, he leaps boisterously unto the stage along with the drummers, making grand arm gestures as he dances, something with seemingly increases his presence on stage. His style is very reminiscent of John Travolta. Out of both performances, his is the closest to the original, with the same percussive battle with the drummers.

The two dancers then meet at the center of the stage for the same love duet, and more dancers enter from both sides, flanking the two lead dancers. Again, the group would perform a synchronized tap dance as more dancers end up joining, filling the whole stage. But something was different this time. As the thundering sound of tap dancing commences when all dancers on stage break into a matched dance, the sound appears louder than usual. Soon, we understand why. The cameras focus on a group of people standing at the edge of the stadium. They are donning jumpers, with different colours, and all are accompanying the dancing on stage. For the purpose of this performance, around 500 Irish dancers had been gathered from around Ireland, all of them children or teenagers. They hold hands and stand uprightly as they dance synchronized with the main team of dancers, making their presence known as their feet echo through the whole stadium. Never before had this been done in a *Riverdance* performance. If we wanted to make a point that *Riverdance* was or would be taken over by the new generation, then there could be no better example than this. How many of these boys and girls, proud of representing their country and culture at the forefront of one of the most impressive dance acts ever, and in the presence of the Pope, will go on to join the team themselves? The message is clear and powerful: the cycle continues, and *Riverdance* will likely never die while there are people, in Ireland or abroad, young or old, willing to pick up the torch and

keep it ablaze. And from what everyone witnessed that day, *Riverdance* will probably be staying around for a few years more.

# Conclusion

For the many centuries of its history, Ireland did not see as much prosperity as it did in the 1990s. In that decade, Ireland emerged from a long period of stagnation and achieved unprecedented economic growth. The ‘Celtic Tiger’ period saw Ireland becoming a prime example of economic success. Both as a member of the European Union and as a free nation with a burgeoning economy, Ireland now had free reign to carve a new identity for itself. As a nation reemerging from its former status of dependence, in various forms, on the United Kingdom, Ireland would have to cement its new position among its European peers. Irish ‘heritage’ in particular went beyond mere matters of culture, becoming instead a deeply political issue. Efforts had already been made in the past to promote ‘truly Irish’ (read Gaelic) culture, be it in literature, sports, or more importantly in this context, music and dancing. These organizations arose from a necessity of creating a culture that was unique to Ireland, in direct opposition to the culture of the British.

For the Gaelic League, established in 1893, Irish culture would have incorporated traditions deemed ‘adequate’ by the League members, while everything else should be discouraged. Styles not native to Ireland were shunned and even many of the native styles would be left out in the name of standardization. But this intended standardization came at a cost. On the one hand it largely ignored the incredible variety of styles found in the regions of Ireland, instead choosing to focus on a select few and discarding all others. But on the other hand, many of these styles deemed ‘adequate’ by the League were not entirely native to Ireland, for over time they had received influences from a handful of foreign dances, placing the acceptability and authenticity of native Irish dances in question. The problem lies with a tendency shared by many organizations of its kind, in

which one attempts to establish a continuous and unbroken past for traditions which are largely young and modern. Why did the Gaelic League need to ‘(re)create tradition’ in the first place?

The appearance of the League and organizations of its kind came at a time when Ireland was arguably in a period of decline, following the untimely death of Parnell and Home Rule failure. In *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*, W.B. Yeats referred to “The dead Ireland of my youth” (Yeats, 1937) giving expression to a widely held view of 19th century Ireland. The grasp of the British over the Irish nation grew ever stronger, and Irish cultural nationalists were clinging to any and everything which they could claim to be completely Irish, and totally devoid of influences from foreign powers; the British in particular. Not only would these traditions and cultures be (re)invented to conform with the cultural nativist agenda, but they would also attain the status of ‘ancestral traditions’ despite some of them being of, at best, dubious antiquity (the druidic tradition being a prime example). This made ‘tradition’ a heavily politicized, strategic and selective process rather than merely a cultural interest issue/question.

But by the 90s, post-colonial Ireland was a far cry from what it had been decades prior. The economic success enjoyed by the Irish, coupled with their membership in the EU, meant that they no longer required to identify themselves in stark contrast with their British neighbours, as they had done years before. The European project instead called for the creation of a transnational, global society; a cultural mosaic where citizens were encouraged to bring out the best in their respective cultures while leaving out the worst. The ‘European dream’ was one that embraced multiple cultures, ethnicities, religions and cosmopolitanism, and Ireland, in its quest for self-definition, now also had a big role to play in this project. Symbiotic with this quest was a decline in the power of the Church, resulting in a more open and tolerant attitude in Ireland. And the results of this quest



would spawn a product which would prove to be one of Ireland's greatest cultural signifiers and icons for years to come: *Riverdance*. Originally an interval act, it quickly turned global. *Riverdance* granted a clear insight to a country that was evolving, in its quest to create a new global identity in the midst of the economic turmoil and excitement that was the Celtic Tiger era.

The appearance of *Riverdance* during the Celtic Tiger years was thus no mere coincidence. The economic boom placed Ireland in the spotlight, granting it an opportunity it never had before, for Ireland could now sell an image of itself to the world that would not only attribute a certain uniqueness to Irish culture in this new global society the country was a part of, but also bring further contributions to the rising economy of the country. Also central to it were the several forms of Irish culture available, from Seamus Heaney and academic conferences to boys bands with t-shirts, coffee mugs, etc. All of these elements would prove to be good earners as well. And *Riverdance*, aside from being one of Ireland's most successful cultural exports, was also a very successful company, bringing a lot of revenue back to Ireland and enriching whoever came into its orbit. But while we certainly understand how important *Riverdance* was for Ireland, there is still a fundamental question which requires further clarification: if Hewison tells us that the heritage industry was a product of societies "in a period of decline" (Hewison, 1987), why would Ireland invest in such an industry when 'decline' was nowhere to be seen in the glorious decades of the Celtic Tiger? To answer this question, we must look at the very nature of the heritage industry and the context in which it appears.

In the case of Britain and other societies which undergo a 'period of decline' as stated by Hewison, the heritage industry becomes a commodified version of the past. Hewison focuses on an economic viewpoint (hence the term 'industry'), in which the past is commodified so that it will make money, thus slowly replacing the "real industry"

(Hewison, 1987) as the main source of income. However, more than being merely an industry, one could argue that heritage can be a great source of pride for any nation to which it belongs. In this heritage one would find the country's history and culture. While there is always a risk involved with the 'construction of heritage', as we have seen in this thesis, the fact is that for many societies it can serve as a reminder of the past and beacon for the future, which is why it becomes of such importance for societies 'in decline'. But this is also where the fundamental difference lies. For societies in decline, the heritage industry is an industry that is facing inwards. That is to say, while it certainly can produce tremendous benefits from foreign interaction, mainly in the form of tourism, this type of heritage industry is aimed mainly at a local community or society in which it is located. It serves as a guiding light for a society that has lost its way, and is uncertain about its future. The intended purpose is that through the heritage industry, these societies can regain their sense of pride and strive towards relieving a 'Golden Age' of yore.

*Riverdance*, however, bears an important difference. Ireland in the 90s was at a peak in many respects: soccer, new technology, Heaney's Nobel in 1995, etc. and for the first time in its history, the world had its eyes set on the small island. And as a result, the heritage industry in Ireland was, unlike Britain's, facing outwards. *Riverdance*, although arguably a source of pride for the Irish, was not meant for the Irish in Ireland (who actually tend to show some distaste for *Riverdance* as we have seen), but rather for the international community. In a sense, one could call *Riverdance* an ambassador of Irish culture (particularly dance) abroad. While ultimately a money-making enterprise, one of the main ideas behind *Riverdance* was to present a certain image of Ireland to the world. Therefore, it accommodates itself to the message it is trying to portray. It generates a lot of soft power, which not only increases tourism, but also in a sense projects a positive, inviting image of Ireland even for people who were never in the country. In short, rather

than being a 'reminder of the past', tailored specifically to accommodate the nostalgia of a society in decline, *Riverdance* was a byproduct of the nation's development, earning worldwide respect for the nation it represented. However, interestingly enough, when the Celtic Tiger years ended abruptly and *Riverdance* was beginning to suffer a continuous drop in revenue, both would suddenly attain the status of 'Golden Age'; a past that was gone, but perhaps not forever, for if it happened once, it could happen again. But this also happens to be one of the effects of 'heritage'. Commodifying the past, like de Valera had done in his (in)famous speech, implies turning it into a 'golden age'. The past is in some way romanticized and all negative traits are removed, forming an idyllic and unrealistic 'recreation' which never did exist.

It is equally interesting to see how such a small country like Ireland can have such a widespread global projection. One of the main reasons for Ireland's success can be largely attributed to the significant diasporic population living abroad (particularly in the United States), to whom *Riverdance* speaks volumes. Having English as an official language also proved to be fundamental in making Irish artefacts more accessible to a wider audience. But this was merely the tip of the iceberg. The Celtic Tiger, with its booming economy, replaced the old image of Ireland as a poor, backward-thinking and underdeveloped country with something completely opposite. The Celtic Tiger, and *Riverdance* in particular, were for the first time giving the world an image of a 'cool' Ireland. This would be especially true among the younger generation, many knowing very little about or being disconnected from Ireland and its past. The result would be the creation of other million-earning shows, one notable example being Flatley's own *Lord of the Dance*. This also proved true for other countries in very similar situations to Ireland's.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A good example being South Korea with its 'Korean wave'

In the end, *Riverdance* possessed creative and ingenious components that largely contributed to its success. The ‘new Ireland’ was an Ireland that embraced cultural hybridity, with *Riverdance* having not only Irish overtones but a wealth of elements (dances, clothing, etc.) taken from other sources and cultures, all brought together in a spectacle never before seen. While issues of authenticity, and by extension traditional legitimacy can be brought into question when analyzing *Riverdance*’s hybrid dancing, the fact is that the show was very successful in its mission to bring Irish dance and music to a global stage, and also to showcase the new Ireland that had emerged from the Celtic Tiger to the world. In other words, *Riverdance* not only transformed its past into a marketable commodity and a successful product of the heritage industry, but unlike what one would find in a society in decline, placed great expectations on the part of global audiences upon this ever-growing nation. While ultimately the Celtic Tiger and the success of *Riverdance* were not to last, the show still had much in store. And for better or for worse, it had succeeded in leaving its mark, and Ireland’s, in the world.

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**Note:** All of the references cited above have been referenced in accordance with the Harvard style.

# **Annexes**

## Annex 1

“Hear my cry,  
In my hungering search for you,  
Taste my breath on the wind,  
See the sky as it mirrors my colours,  
Hints and whispers begin.

I am living to nourish you, cherish you,  
I am pulsing the blood in your veins,  
Feel the magic and power of surrender,  
To life. *Uisce Beatha*.

Every finger is touching and searching,  
Until your secrets come out,  
In the dance, as its endlessly circles,  
I linger close to your mouth.

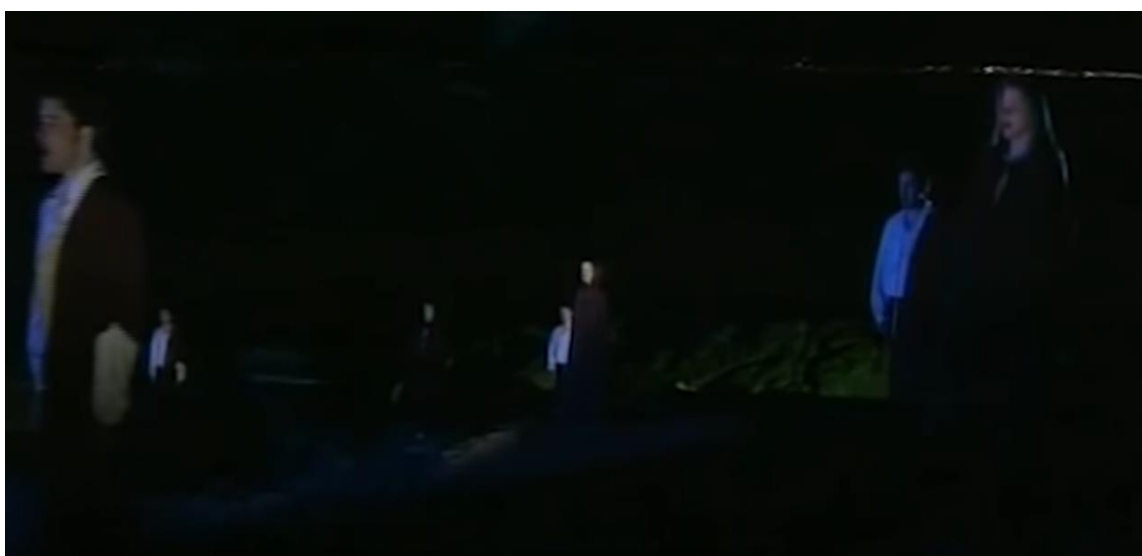
I am living to nourish you, cherish you,  
I am pulsing the blood in your veins,  
Feel the magic and power of surrender,  
To life. *Uisce Beatha*.”

- *Riverdance* lyrics, as sung by Celtic choir Anúna (1994)

## Annex 2



- Soloist of Celtic choir Anúna (1994)



- Members of Celtic choir Anúna (1994)

## Annex 3



- Jean Butler and Michael Flatley performing *Riverdance* (1994)



- Accompanying 'Riverdancers' (1994)

## Annex 4



- **Amy-Mae Dolan, female lead dancer of *Riverdance* (2018)**



- **Bobby Hodges, male lead dancer of *Riverdance* (2018)**