

always worried first about doing it right and second about their right to do it. The same seems true of “diaspora” singers—whatever they are.

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*Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty.* By Frank Hall. (Madison: Macater Press, 2008. Pp. xvi + 150, illustrations, preface, acknowledgments, introduction, online appendix, notes, works cited, index. \$29.95 paper.)

For much of the twentieth century, scholars believed that the body had no place in Irish culture; Irish literature and drama was focused on the text, and many believed that the Irish had no real tradition of movement or even gesture. As a result, there has been a dearth of critical texts to address the somatic nature of Irish dance, theatre, or society. Recent books including *Irish Moves* by Deirdre Mulrooney, *Close to the Floor* by Mick Moloney, and *The Story of Irish Dance* by Helen Brennan have sought to address this gap in the literature, and Frank Hall's new book is a welcome addition to the study of the body in Irish culture; his monograph takes seriously the role of Irish step dance as an embodied expressive form and seeks to “bring attention to the art, depth, and significance of modern solo Irish step-dancing, not the only but perhaps the best-known genre of dancing in Ireland” (cf. on-line Appendix, p. 2).

Hall's book is written for a general audience, seemingly meant to be enjoyed by scholars and practitioners. He uses a minimum of jargon and theory and any detailed theoretical perspective—including a short burst of Labanotation—is relegated to the online appendix. I do wish that the press had included this theoretical statement in the printed book, as it is relatively short and accessible. Hall has been observing and practicing Irish dance since 1991 and today lives in Ireland as a musician (in the interest of full disclosure, he and I were part of the same Irish dance community in Bloomington, IN in the 1990s).

Due to the popularity of Riverdance in the mid-1990s, Irish step dancing entered the mainstream among people who were not really familiar with Irish dance, music or culture. For anyone who has seen little girls participating in Irish dance, one of the most perplexing elements is the strange posture: Irish step dancers must stay upright and stiff (but relaxed) in their upper body while their lower bodies explode in movement. Hall finds a multiplicity of meanings and possible origins for this posture, yet provides no single answer: his engaging discussion of the posture of Irish dance opens up rather than closes down meaning, and he maintains that style throughout the book.

Hall shows that just as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) famously forbade its amateur athletes from participating in “non-Irish” (read: English) sports, *An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha* (The Irish Dancing Commission) also prohibited its member dancers and teachers from attending non-Irish dances. He provides a very interesting history of the institutionalization and standardization of Irish dance in the early twentieth century, explaining why the Gaelic League was interested in Irish dance and why those who judged the dances

were interested more in the presentation of Irish identity than in professional dance. It might seem natural that such a discussion might eventually evolve into a discussion of the arrival of the New Irish in the late twentieth century and how their participation in Irish dance classes may have affected the performance of nationalism. Hall avoids this discussion, however, remaining as apolitical as possible and leaving it to the reader to make the connection between the past and the present.

One of his particularly helpful discussions is that of the national or personal *value* of Irish dance, during which he again picks up the topic of the dancer's posture. During dance classes, the new student is to develop discipline and “good posture,” as these are associated with physical development and morals via “comportment” and good appearances: “The development of positive appearances ... specifically involves the social level of physical culture through presentation” (89). The teacher then engages in important acculturation and participates in a process of “physical, moral, social, and aesthetic education” that goes beyond merely dancing (90).

Another important element of learning Irish dancing is to engage in a performance: in Irish culture, performance has a high social value, as people are occasionally called upon to perform “party pieces.” We see this in literature of the early twentieth century, including Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and James Joyce's “Clay.” Irish dance emphasizes the importance of the presentation (or performance) of self in relation to the community. Hall emphasizes that the dance class is part of socialization: the child is taken to dance class by a parent, but handed over to the teacher or an older child. In a sense, the child is joining the community for the first time, a sentiment reinforced when Hall describes a child in dance class preparing for her First Confession in the Catholic Church (the child is afraid to dance too much lest she tire herself out before the big event). Hall never explicitly draws the connection, but the reader may: the process of beginning dance classes is a ritual that brings the child into the community, and the child will perform this belonging at a school *feis* (festival or competition).

Overall, this book is a readable and necessary addition to the scholarship of Irish movement and is fairly singular in its ethnographic investigation of contemporary Irish dance and its place in society. The book will be of interest to scholars of Irish society, of dance of any culture, and to the hopefully increasing numbers of people interested in how and why people move their bodies doing something we call dance.

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*Meng Jiangnü Brings Down the Great Wall: Ten Versions of a Chinese Legend.* Translation and Introduction by Wilt L. Idema with an essay by Haiyan Lee. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. Pp. 312. Glossary, bibliography. \$60.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.)

Wilt Idema writes that “‘The Tale of the Maiden Meng Jing or Meng Jiangnü’ was one of the most popular and widespread legends of traditional China during