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"… a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun…" A Brief Non-Academic Reflection on *Riverdance,* a Seemingly Never-Ending Success Story of Diasporic Cultural Cross-Fertilisation

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Abstract:

A long chorus of native, diasporic and elective "Irish" danced along the embankment of the River Liffey in Dublin in July 2013 as a very modern bid to enter the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's longest ever *Riverdance* line; a form of contemporary "religiosity" celebrating a blend of fame and fortune, entertainment and fun. Later, as I watched these myriad click-clacking feet on YouTube, I asked myself two questions. First, what the James Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* might have written about this interesting example of commercially successful Irish diasporic circulation and recirculation, given his tormented relationship with the river, the city's famous brewery, music and money. And secondly, who and how many the diasporic Irish are, where they live and how they helped to forge *Riverdance.*

Keywords: Irish music and dance, James Joyce, *Riverdance*, The Great Hunger or Famine, Water

On the 21st July 2013 a mile-long chorus of 1,693 people, all Caucasians and mostly women and girls[1], click-clacked in hard shoes for over five minutes in the sun, along the embankment of *Anna Livia Pluribella* not far from "Eve and Adam's" without, however, taking a "commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (Joyce 2012 [1939], 7). Here the destination was the *Guinness Book of Records*, the purpose that of

[1] Evident when one looks at the YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66ZKf6qeG54> (05/2019). The only unknown are two persons wearing a horse's head mask.

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http://www.fupress.com/bsfm-sijis

making history joyfully – judging by the hundreds of smiling faces – as the longest *Riverdance* line ever. They succeeded. When I watched the footage a few years later, on YouTube, I did not think so much of the performance as such as of *Giacomo Joyce*[2] (Joyce 1968), his rapport with the river and the famous brewery (Gubernatis Dannen 2011), the closing and opening words of his ebb-flowing[3], riverrunning *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce 2012 [1939]), especially the last water-referred eight words of the book: "a lone a last a loved a long", with their four iambic feet and lilting L's, which bring to mind the names of the rivers upon which three of Ireland's four provincial capitals[4] stand: Liffey (Dublin), Lagan (Belfast) and Lee (Cork). Today, these rivers lend their names to three of the ten companies which perform various versions of *Riverdance* worldwide[5] a quarter of a century after its first embryonic seven-minute slot during the interval of the 1994 Eurovision Contest broadcast by RTÉ which made the international audience present at Dublin's Point Theatre jump spontaneously to its feet to attribute the performance a standing ovation, and which mesmerised TV audiences who began to feel that Irish showmanship had undergone a sea-change and that Irish dancing would never be the same again (Carr 2017). After this seven-minute "Big Bang", the amazing success of *Riverdance* was to produce a diaspora of its own and impact significantly on the practice and reception of Irish music, dance and choreography worldwide.

Riverdance's successful bid to enter the Guinessian annals of human endeavour was part of an initiative called the *Irish Gathering of the Clans*, also known as *The Gathering*, a commercially-driven project seeking to tempt at least 2% of Ireland's presumed 70/80 million diasporic population[6] (Kenny 2015) to visit the country during 2013 and take part in local get-togethers and events held throughout the year, including the longest-Riverdance-record bid. The *Gathering* was designed and championed by the Irish Republic's National Tourism Development Authority (Bord Fáilte) (Holland 2012), and the Tourism Ireland organisation – one of the six cross-border initiatives set up after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The campaign, morally endorsed by the Dublin Government, could count financially only on a response

[2] The title of a posthumous text by James Joyce published by Faber & Faber in 1984 and set in Trieste. The only one of his works not set in Dublin.

[3] The time span of *Finnegans Wake* is 18 hours, 37 minutes, three times that of a single tidal ebb or flow which is 6 hours and 12 minutes.

[4] The fourth, Galway, the gateway to the west, to Irish-speaking Connemara and Aran Islands, stands, exceptionally, on a river called the Corrib.

[5] The enterprise has grown so much that there are *Riverdance* continues to be performed all over the world by ten various-sized companies, each named after an Irish river: Liffey, Lee, Lagan, Avoca, Shannon, Boyne, Corrib, Foyle, Moy and Bann.

[6] <https://www.irish-genealogy-toolkit.com/Irish-emigration.html> (05/2019).

from private individuals and non-governmental organisations as it received no public funding. While aimed at attracting the "Irish of the diaspora" to visit the home of their ancestors, its main goal was to boost the country's tourist industry (*ibidem*) which, like most of the rest of the Island's economy had been shaken to the foundations by the 2008 crunch and tarred as one of the I's in the ominous PIIGS[7] acronym, the other being Italy, the elective destination of my own personal "diaspora". The *Gathering* was a resounding financial success (Miley 2013) though many criticised it as a mere money-maker (Mullally 2012). *Riverdance* especially the lead male dancer, Michael Flatley, came under criticism for this and other reasons, though nobody could find fault with the excellence of its showmanship (Sweet 1996)[8]. So, twenty-five years after its debut, the show has become so "viral" that it still continues circulating like the children's reiterative street rhyme *Michael Finnegan*[9], which Joyce probably knew and which, along with the famous Dublin song *Finnegan's Wake*[10] and reference to the ancient myth of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, may have inspired the title of the book as Joyce himself wrote in a letter to a friend[11]. On Saturday 25th of August 2018, sixty-three members of the various *Riverdance* casts performed alongside five hundred Irish Dancers from all over the country at the World Meeting of Families in Croke Park, Dublin, in the presence of Pope Francis[12] thus bringing together the essential elements of the three-fold cliché we often associate with Ireland: water (including the "water of life", *aqua vitae*, *uisce beatha*[13], whiskey), music and religion, all very

[7] PIIGS is an acronym for five of the most economically weak Eurozone nations during the European debt crisis that started in 2008-2009: Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain. At the time, the acronym's five countries drew attention due to their weakened economic output and financial instability, which heightened doubts about the nations' abilities to pay back bondholders and spurred fears that the nations would default on their debts. See: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/piigs.asp> (05/2019).

[8] The words "extracting the Michael" are an obvious parody of the well-known colloquial saying "taking the Mick".

[9] "There was an old man named Michael Finnegan / He had whiskers on his chin again / Along came the wind and blew them in again / Poor old Michael Finnegan.... Begin again". For the complete version: <https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/m/michaelfinnegan.html> (05/2019).

[10] For the lyrics see <https://genius.com/The-irish-rovers-finnegans-wake-lyrics> (05/2019).

[11] "Joyce informed a friend later, he conceived of his book as the dream of old Finn, lying in death beside the River Liffey and watching the history of Ireland and the world – past and future – flow through his mind like flotsam on the river of life […]"(Ellmann 1984, 543-546).

[12] <https://riverdance.com/blog/2018/08/29/riverdance-performs-during-pope-francis-visit-to-ireland/> (05/2019).

[13] The words *Uisce beatha* feature twice in the song by the *Anúna* choral ensemble which opens *Riverdance*: "Hear my cry / In my hungering search for you, / Taste my breath

much present in the life and works of James Joyce who, though a voluntary exile, a member of the Irish "intellectual diaspora"[14], seems to have been unable to free himself of the rivers, sounds and beliefs of his native country, especially Dublin[15], against which he protested so much. Too much? That's for the critics, not me who have always imagined Nora Barnacle's Jim smiling sardonic-benignly at readers trying to make sense of his final book, his masterpiece, his hilarious "fun-for-all-funeral" of traditional narration pushing language to the limits of comprehension[16] which he actually believed anyone could read, if they put their mind to it[17].

Diaspora, etymologically "dispersion of seed", conjures up explosions, scattering elements from circumscribed centrifugal "somewheres" to centripetal "elsewheres". Like demographic Big Bangs, the fragments fly out from the centre in all directions to enter other spaces, although, perhaps the Cyclic astrophysical theory[18] with its succession of explosions might suit Ireland's case better and reflect Joyce's G.B. Vico-inspired notion of *corsi e ricorsi*, which we might call here "circulation and recirculation". When we associate the terms "diaspora" and "Ireland" we are inclined to think of departures only, although one of the most important mediaeval Irish manuscripts in Middle

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 it 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."

[14] Like Swift, Wilde, Shaw and Beckett before him, Edna O'Brien and Eavan Boland, by way of example, after him.

[15] "The clearest object in time in the book is the Liffey, Anna Livia, Dublin's legendary stream, and the most continuous character is HC Earwicker, 'Here Comes Everybody': the Liffey as the moment in time and space, and everything, everybody, all time as the terms of reference, back to Adam or Humpty Dumpty, but never away from Dublin" (*The Guardian*, 2002 [1939]).

[16] "and look at this prepronominal fun feral, engraved and retouched and edge wiped and pudden padded, very like a whale's egg farced with pemmican, as were it sentenced to be nuzzled over a full trillion times for ever and a night till his noddle sink or swim by that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia […]" (Joyce 2012 [1939], 44).

[17] In Hoffmeister 1979, Joyce is quoted as saying, "I don't think that the difficulties in reading it are so insurmountable. Certainly, any intelligent reader can read and understand it, if he returns to the text again and again. He is setting out on an adventure with words. 'Work in Progress' can satisfy more readers than any other book because it gives them the opportunity to use their own ideas in the reading. Some readers will be interested in the exploration of words, the play of technique, the philological experiment in each poetic unit. Each word has the charm of a living thing and each living thing is plastic" (131).

[18] <http://www.physics.princeton.edu/~steinh/endlessuniverse/askauthors.html> (05/2019).

Irish, *Leborgabála Érenn, the book of the taking of Ireland*[19], provides accounts of the many "takers", who, according to the ancient oral tradition, are reputed to have hailed in successive waves from Israel, Greece and Spain among other places. There is also a fascinating theory that the Native Americans may have reached the shores of Connemara before Christopher Columbus ever set out to find a westward route to India (see Forbes 2007).

These *gabálaí* of Irish mythology were followed by historically documented series of "takers" like the Vikings, the Normans, the Henrician, Marian, Elizabethan, Jacobean and Cromwellian Planters, as well as more recent immigrants from abroad seeking a living from the *Celtic Tiger*. Even today, ten years after the so-called crunch of 2008, the country, according to a 2014 survey, hosted a proportionally higher non-national population (11.8%) than any other of the EU member states[20]. However, here, I shall concentrate on "diaspora" as the outward flow, that is to say emigration rather than immigration.

While the disastrous *Gorta Mór* or Great Famine of 1845-1848 caused the unstaunchable haemorrhage of Irish people which continued well into the second half of the 20th century, it was by no means the first demographic "dispersion", not all dictated by despair, the country witnessed in the course of its history, although it was the humanly most disastrous and culturally most far-reaching.

We might mention the mediaeval Irish monks who travelled to the European Continent, including Italy, to rekindle Christianity there (Ó Fiaich 1986), the Flight of the Earls from Ulster in 1607[21], the *Wild Geese,* Irish nobles who fled the country, after the 1690 defeat of James the II/VII Stuart and the failure on the part of the victors to honour the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, to fight in Europe where they formed Irish Brigades[22], not only in France, Spain and Austria but also in countries as far apart as the USA and Russia[23]. Irish emigration to the Americas actually began in the late 16th century with the transportation of criminals, mendicants and prisoners of war to the West Indies, a pattern emulated in the 19th century when lawbreakers were

[19] <https://www.vanhamel.nl/codecs/Lebor_gab%C3%A1la_%C3%89renn> (05/2019).

[20] <http://www.theirishworld.com/foreigners-in-ireland-11-8/> (05/2019).

[21] Their tombs are in Rome, in the Church of San Pietro in Montorio on the Janiculum Hill.

[22] There was also a Saint Patrick's Brigade, later Company of St. Patrick, in the army of Pius IX in 1860-1861: papers on this topic can be consulted at the Roma State Archives in Corso Rinascimento, at Propaganda Fide, at the Vatican Library, and at the National Library, Dublin.

[23] <https://militaryhistorynow.com/2014/03/14/the-wild-geese-a-brief-history-irelands-foreign-armies/> (05/2019).

transported to Australia and New Zealand. In the mid 17th century, under Cromwell, thousands of young Irish people were shipped to the plantations in Barbados[24]. The first large-scale wave of civilian immigration from Ireland came mostly from Ulster in the 1700s, when several families of descendants of the Northern-Irish Ulster-Scots Planters sailed to Philadelphia to settle in the Appalachians, the Ohio Valley, New England, the Carolinas and Georgia[25] where, unlike the 19th century Catholic Irish immigrants who forsook agriculture, they continued farming. The size of this Ulster-Scots diaspora to North America meant that in 1790, of the US white population of about three million, about half a million were Irish-born or of Irish ancestry. Furthermore, about 300,000 of these seem to have originated from Ulster (Leyburn 1962, xi). Besides their Presbyterian religious beliefs and their farming techniques these Ulster-Scots brought to the States many of the musical ciphers and sounds we associate with the folk tradition of the Appalachians and a lot of Country and Western, which the less-informed distracted ear might place under the generic umbrella of "Celtic music" (Ó hAllmhuráin 2017).

The Irish Diaspora *par excellence* is certainly that provoked by Ireland's Great Hunger [26] of the mid-19th century which created a dispersive trend that continued right into the second half of the 20th century. The devastating human and cultural effects of this century-long haemorrhage have long been discussed by scholars from all fields – from history to sociology, economics to psychology, from medicine to chemistry, from linguistics to literature, from religion to music and dance, to name but a salient few. Besides their Roman Catholic beliefs and mindset, their often imperfect mastery of the English language, the first generation of "economic refugees" who fled the country between 1845 and 1849 hounded by hunger, cholera and despair brought with them a wealth of oral culture, especially music and dance, while the decline and loss of their ancient cradle tongue was the price paid to this particular outcome of agricultural-mono-culture-induced destitution.

Most of those who departed the country at the time and did not die *en route* on the "coffin ships", landed in Great Britain and the USA where, initially, as the latest arrivals, though formally English-speaking, they began their new lives in menial jobs, working as labourers, domestic servants while some of the more fortunate males swelled the ranks of the police forces of cities like New York and Chicago. Not all of those who left back then were

[24] <https://www.historyireland.com/early-modern-history-1500-1700/shipped-for-the-barbadoes-cromwell-and-irish-migration-to-the-caribbean/> (05/2019).

[25] A detail which may help readers understand why Margaret Mitchell made a girl of Irish descent, Scarlet O'Hara, the heroine of her 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind.*

[26] Quoting part of the title of one of the best documented accounts of the famine (Woodham Smith 1962).

destined to soar to the ranks of the truly wealthy like the Kennedys and the Kellys[27]. Since then and up until a few decades ago, the outflow from Ireland continued towards the traditionally preferred destinations of the world's Anglophone states only to be staunched by the "miracle" of the "Celtic Tiger" when, not only did people remain in Ireland but the country attracted workers from abroad. With the arrival of motorised transport, when ships and trains were superseded mostly by planes, migrations of all kinds, including tourism to and from the country, changed the face of Ireland and the perception of its history and culture at home and in the rest of the world. The impact of the Northern "Troubles" of the 1970s brought the country to the attention of the world, kindled interest in the Island and, in a manner that may be defined as perverse, made "Irish" or "Celtic" music a fashionable phenomenon leading to the mushrooming of groups performing this genre all over the globe.

As to dance itself, we might recall Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy's rude retort to Sir William Lucas in chapter VI of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, that "every savage can dance" (Austen 2006 [1813], 28). Despite its caustic intent, this statement is fundamentally true. Dancing is one of the world's most common though most ephemeral forms of art and has been an aspect of Irish culture as far back as we can trace it, in history as well as in mythology. There are very few accounts of banquets or gatherings in Irish mythology where music and dance are not mentioned. The first documented reference of dance in Ireland are the frequently-quoted two lines from a 14th century middle-English love poem entitled "Ich am of Irlaunde":

Ich am of Irlaunde
Come and daunce with me in Irlaunde. (Brennan 1999, 15)

It is not clear whether the implication is that there was a consolidated tradition of dance in Ireland back then, or whether the poet referred to the smaller sister island as some kind of idyllic, exotic *topos*. It is plausible, however, that there was a long standing and high standard of performance in Ireland before these verses were penned given that the Norman clergyman Giraldus Cambrensis (1146-1223), hypercritical of everything else Irish and who branded the inhabitants of the "*divisa dal mondo ultima Irlanda*" (Tasso 2014 [1581], 16), as "barbarians", found that when it came to music, they were "incomparably more skilled than any other nation I have seen" (Giraldus Cambrensis 1982 [1951], 103). So much for Mr Darcy's acrid comment.

The problem with trying to trace Irish music and dance is that they belong largely to the oral tradition. The traditional music and dance of Ireland introduced by the Irish to America in the 19th century was by no means mon-

[27] The forebears of Grace Kelly, Princess Grace of Monaco.

olithic, as each area of the country boasted a style of its own (Brennan 1999, 165-171) also because each of the home-country's provinces spoke a different dialect of Irish, which, in turn, imposed different kinds of prosody on song which overflowed to affect instrumental and dance performance. The loss of the language itself, the encounter between traditional modes and the pre-existing cultures of the host countries had an impact of the old styles in the so-called pure form. Later, the arrival of cinema, records and television produced a "circulation and recirculation"[28] of musical and choreographic ideas, blending endogenous and exogenous elements, so that, while the essence remained familiar, the form was refreshed, refurbished as it were, making the practice and role of music and dance change both at home and abroad. Once a social event, a homespun pastime, Irish music today has entered the globalised world of industrialisation, become a show-business commodity, performed for a fee before audiences, a fact which has changed the function and quality of performance considerably, altering the expectations and taste of musicians and listeners alike and depending for success on excellence of showmanship.

This takes us back to the success and proliferation of *Riverdance,* which, in twenty-five years not only has become a thriving business, but also a paragon of performing excellence, so much so that, besides its ten official companies, it has generated spin offs like Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* and several other imitations. Due to their commercial success, these shows have provided the world with a rather narrow view, however beautifully packaged, of what Irish dancing used to be, regardless of its references to the country's "glorious past". And since scholarship and philological accuracy are not the task of entertainment, we cannot honestly accuse these shows of betraying the tradition as others have done. They are simply what they are: well-produced, well-honed enthralling pieces of profitable showmanship which have put Irish dancing on the global map of gobsmacking professional performative art, have impacted on the syllabi Irish dancing schools offer their pupils today and ignited the (often misplaced) ambitions of learners and parents alike, both in the home country and in those of the diaspora. As international cultural historian Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin puts it, when commenting on *Riverdance*:

> Since 1994, this formulaic bastion of national dance has changed from an old competitive world of medals and *feiseanna* to a new commercial milieu of theatrical extravaganza. In the resulting cocktail of Celtic twilight and Broadway panache, World Music Esperanto and Hollywood, Irish musicians and dancers, like their

[28] If we see the cinema, recording and television industries as "products of America and England" we might say that their influence on Irish music and dance belongs to the domain of Joyce's of never-ending circulation.

vaudevillian predecessors, have radically retailored their art for a new stage, a transnational audience and an intensely competitive marketplace. (Ó hAllmhuráin 2017, 89)

He adds that the success of the show has triggered much debate concerning continuity, change, purism and innovation in traditional music, including dancing resulting in "intergenerational dissonance, passive aggressive entrenchment, and an unspoken distrust of intellectual discourse around the music" (*ibidem*), as the younger generation of musicians seeks fame and fortune at home and abroad, especially in the countries with the largest populations of people claiming Irish descent, in particular the United States of America.

And this brings us riverrunning back to the unsolved issue of who the diasporic Irish may be and to the "overwhelming question" of "insidious intent" (Eliot 1963, 3); that is, what it takes to qualify as a member of this global community. How many generations weaken the link, how many Irish-born forebears does one need to be included? The purists sustain that the diasporic Irish need to be Irish-born, while those with the broadest view retain that any forbear from a grandparent to a great-great-great-great-grandparent suffices. Some speak of "jus sanguinis", others of "jus soli", and so the debate continues. I feel that rather than a question of time, blood or territory the issue is psycho-socio-cultural, a matter of perception, tradition and practice. If people, wherever they may live, have been taught to believe they are "Irish", continue to observe certain customs and practice the oral tradition, we may consider them as belonging to the Irish diaspora. As to *Riverdance*, it was cross-fertilisation between the Irish-born and those who believed they belonged to the diaspora, especially the large transatlantic, Hiberno-American contingent, that produced the mix that underscored and continues to underscore the show and its offshoots.

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