A Response to Newton’s ‘The Origins of the Strathspey: A Rebuttal’

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A RESPONSE TO NEWTON’S ‘THE ORIGINS OF THE STRATHSPEY: A REBUTTAL’

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5 November 2014

At the end of 2013, Michael Newton sent me a blog (Newton 2014) that he had written challenging two of my recent papers: an article from last July (Lamb 2013), and another that was available to him before it was published (Lamb 2014). His comments contest my account of the history and development of the musical form known as the strathspey.

My first article (Lamb 2013) maintained that the ‘strathspey’, so called, has precursors in Scottish Gaelic song. The characteristic ‘rhythmic matrix’ of the strathspey – short and long notes¹ organised in duple time – is ubiquitous across Gaelic songs involving rhythmically joined-up human movement (ibid.: 81-88). The ‘strathspey rhythm’ is not only a feature of dance song, but is also found across work song more generally (e.g. waulking songs, quern songs and lullabies), indicating the possibility of a common origin. Bücher (1899, in Chamberlain 1901: 69) said much the same long ago; dance music and song tend to originate in ‘labor rhythms’.² I suggested that what we now take to be the ‘strathspey’ was, at some point in the past, the distinctive way that Gaelic speakers sang and played for Reels. I described the rhythm characterising it as a meme³ embedded in Gaelic work song, concluding that its development most likely preceded the Reel.

The second article (Lamb 2014) attempted to answer the question, if this is the case, why is it that the ‘strathspey’, as a type of instrumental dance music, is named thus? Strathspey was an influential hotspot of musical activity from the 17¹ century onwards. Through mapping the place-names of 18th century fiddle tune collections, it appeared that the strathspey region was on the borderline of the Gaelic-Anglo divide; it was ‘known’ to Anglo society in a way that Gaelic-speaking areas to the west and north were not. I concluded that the strathspey, as a tune type, is a culture graft (ibid.: 96), a hybrid idiom showing both native, Gaelic elements and influences from early modern Anglo musical society.

Newton (2014) concedes the main point of my first article (2013): that the strathspey rhythm originated in Gaelic, not Anglo culture. He also agrees that its characteristics are found across various types of Gaelic song. On the other hand, he takes a different perspective on its history. To him, the strathspey is a localised variant of French dance music, and – if I read him correctly – its rhythmic matrix is a consequence of Gaelic phonology⁴ and not, as I have claimed, a product of cultural inheritance.

Studies in Gaelic dance and music are hampered by significant lacunae. The available evidence begins late (cf. Brennan 2001: 16) and can be read variably. Neither Michael nor I would claim that the strathspey, as a tune type, is a survival

¹ Typically known as ‘Scotch snaps’ and ‘dots’, respectively.
² Bücher gives as an illustration the Mincopy, of the Andaman Islands, who created songs during work that they would later use for dancing.
³ That is, a culturally inherited form (cf. gene).
⁴ ‘The rhythmic matrix of Gaelic speech and song, characterized by the Scotch snap, allowed the new social dance music to be assimilated and yet acquire particularly Gaelic features’ (Newton 2014a).
from the distant past, although he seems not to recognise this when he suggests, ‘as a professional player of modern Scottish instrumental music, [Will] is too close to those forms to imagine a time when they did not exist’ (2014). On the contrary, we concur that the strathspey is a hybrid form that developed in an intercultural region or buffer zone:

Strathspey was a significant intercultural zone (Lamb 2014: 99).

The evolution and diffusion of the strathspey qua tune type was a product of the Anglo musical sphere, although its roots are in a form of Gaelic tradition that preceded it (ibid.: 101).

The strathspey reel was […] a product of hybridization between Gaelic rhythms and non-Gaelic musical forms happening primarily in the buffer zone between Highlands and Lowlands where Highland gentry were welcoming foreign musicians (and styles) (Newton 2014a).

In the above, our crossover is clear, yet so is the crux of the debate. We have a different answer to the question, ‘what came before’.

Michael argues that the Reel5 and other forms of social dance6 – including attendant music forms such as the reel and strathspey – are not native to Scotland, Gaelic or otherwise. He maintains that they emanated from French aristocracy as a ‘package’ – mediated through the Gaelic nobility – and were marked by the entrance of the modern violin (Newton 2013: 52). In contrast, the evidence seems strong enough to me to suggest that some form of the Reel, including pair-danced versions, was already present in Gaelic Scotland before the exogenous influences that he has identified came to play. Undoubtedly, the violin was part of a European revolution in dance practices. However, song7 – along with the tromb ['Jew’s harp'] – would have been the driving force for what we would now call ‘dance’ across most of the Gàidhealtachd ['Gaelic-speaking Scotland'] into pre-modern times, and well into the violin-dominant era that occurred in other parts of Britain and Europe.

It is unclear how important modern social dance is apropos the rhythmic roots of the strathspey.8 However, pace Newton (2013: 66),9 music and dance forms are not necessarily connubial and, if they are, they are far from monogamous. It will not be possible to address all of his objections here. Yet, I would like to assess two lynchpins of the ‘exogenous origin’ argument at the heart of his ‘Rebuttal’ in some detail: 1) that Gaelic social dance and dance-music are a ‘package’ which arrived

5 Following the Fletts, I use capitalisation (e.g. Reel) to indicate dances, and lower-case to indicate musical forms (e.g. reel).
6 In this article, ‘social dance’ refers to dancing in small groups or pairs. This is to distinguish it from large circle and line dancing, and solo dancing.
7 While song is universal in human culture, instruments are not. In a European context, ‘Musical instruments are important […] but it is a fact that singing accounts for the preponderance of music making’ (Nettl 1965: 50). As Seahill (2009: 48) says: ‘outside élite culture, probably the only instrument that would have been available to the peasantry is the trump [i.e. ‘Jew’s harp’]’. Due to their price, apart from anything else, instruments would have been rare in poor, isolated regions. Not surprisingly, the only instrument found by Martin Martin in 1697 amongst the St Kildans was the tromb, ‘which disposes them to Dance mightily’ (1703: 38).
8 Given the appearance of Scots snaps in a common time tune from the mid-17th century – ‘Scotts Man’ (see Purser 2007: 17) – it is clear that these roots are deep in Scottish culture. Of course, one half of the country was Gaelic speaking in 1500, so the further back we go, the more we can conflate ‘Scottish’ culture with ‘Gaelic’ culture.
9 ‘I have already made the obvious observation that these social dance forms are inextricably interconnected with the dance music played to accompany them’ (Newton 2013: 66).
from elsewhere and 2) that the Scottish Reel developed from a French dance form known as the hay (also hey, haye).

The Relationship Between Traditional Music and Dance
Like many couples, the relationship between traditional music and dance is best described as ‘complicated’ (McGowan 2008: 268n; cf. Newton 2013: 66). The following quote, in which a Jig is danced as a Minuet to the tune of a reel, exemplifies this fact:

[When we had danced the minuet, I asked the favour of the lady to dance a jig.\(^\text{10}\) She answered she would. She buttoned up the skirts of her gown, and I called for Lady Kitty Carstair’s Reel. We both danced together in the form of the minuet, though quick (MacDonald 1790, in Flett & Flett 1972: 114).

In Scottish culture, the link between specific dance forms and the music used to accompany them is not always clear. For instance, the strathspey can be used to accompany a variety of dances, such as solo step dancing, various Reels (e.g. Foursome Reel, Eightsome Reel, Old West Highland Reel) and the Highland Schottische. Ceilidh-goers ‘Strip-the-Willow’ to both reels and jigs: musicians often switch from one to another in the middle of a set. We find inconsistency in the written record as well. Early notated reels are across a range of time signatures, including ‘typical’ common time reels, but also a fair number of other ‘tune types’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Comers of Largo Areel</th>
<th>9/4</th>
<th>Playford (1700)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reel of Harden</td>
<td>9/8</td>
<td>Oswald (1743-1759)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Colquhoun’s Reel</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td>Bremner (1757: 98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Murray’s Reel</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>Bremner (1757: 11)</td>
</tr>
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Thus, in times past, Reels could be accompanied by a diverse set of tunes. Indeed, we must not read too much into designations such as ‘jig’, ‘reel’ and ‘hornpipe’; before the beginning of the 19\(^\text{th}\) century, they were used interchangeably (Brennan 2001: 90).

Given their fickleness, it is difficult to imagine how particular genres of dance music could have followed genres of dance, or vice versa, as part of an indissoluble package. While we cannot ignore the firmer links between specific forms of music and dance after the late 18\(^\text{th}\) century, especially in urban and haut society, only a fuzzy association obtains between them in a more diachronic context:

[D]ance melodies have their own patchwork history. Although it is possible to discern a few main stylistic categories, there are no rigorous ties binding given dances to specific melodies. Neither is it possible to set fixed dates to the categories of dance melodies. Thus it is not easy to give an overview of dance melodies in Europe: the material itself is endless and varied (Ling 1997: 180).

Ring and line dances are found throughout Europe, but the accompanying music itself is often regional (ibid.: 181, 185). In the Complaynt of Scotland (1549: see Murray 1872: lxxvii-xci; cf. Leyden et al 1801: 276-277), continental dances appear, but the dance songs mentioned are of English and Scottish provenance. Similarly, Dolmetsch (1949: 71) discusses the disjunction between the music and dance of the branle in Scotland and France: ‘It is amusing to think that the Scotch musicians imagined they were composing a “branle de Poitou” and the French “les branles d’Ecosse”, whereas each side was merely producing its own national music’. Brennan (2001: 101)

\(^{10}\) Mats Melin (2014) suggests that the word ‘jig’ could be taken to mean ‘any dance’ in this quote.
concludes that, while some of the forms of traditional Irish group dancing can be found elsewhere in Europe, the ‘distinctive Irish flavour’ is imparted by the music. In sum, dance and music are interdependent, not inextricably conjoined entities, and the history of one cannot be assumed to parallel the other.

Extrapolating to our present concern, there is no reason to yoke the rhythmic and contextual impetus of the strathspey to the musical innovations of the 17th and 18th centuries. In Lamb (2013), I provide evidence that the ‘strathspey’ was – leading up to the time that it entered the written record – the distinctive rhythmic style with which Gaels sang and played for Reels, whenever they emerged. One of the ways that this can be seen is by slowing down the faster ‘reels’ and comparing their rhythm to the slower ‘strathspeys’ in Gaelic dance song and instrumental music: they are nearly identical (http://youtu.be/LP188D6Phlo). The musical idiom that came to be known as the strathspey in the 18th century is a hybrid form, combining influences from the Gaelic movement song tradition and European musical aesthetics. Emmerson’s comments (1972: 12) about the reel are relevant: although reels only begin to appear in the written record from 1700 onwards, ‘reel music’ can be found amongst earlier songs. Instrumental dance music tends to come upon the heels of an earlier song-driven tradition (Sachs 1937: 181), and this seems to be the case with Gaelic dance music as well. As Keith Norman MacDonald says in Puirt-à-Beul:

[The] dance songs which are here preserved are only a fragment of what was once actually in circulation generations and even centuries ago […] When we consider that many more must have died out since instrumental music was first introduced into the Highlands, it is a marvel that they did not become entirely extinct long ago. Their preservation is a powerful argument in favour of the tenacity of the tradition in the Highlands (Lamb 2012: 135).

The Origins of the Scottish Reel

Turning to the origins of the Scottish Reel, some authors suggest that it developed from a French dance known as the hay (e.g. Breathnach 1971: 47; Brennan 2001: 21, 94; Doherty 2011: 571). Newton follows this line in several publications and extrapolates from it in his ‘Rebuttal’ (2014a):

The figure of the Scottish reel corresponds directly to the English ‘hey’ and both are likely to have derived from the French hay d’ Alemaigne during the sixteenth century (2009: 279; cf. 2006: 231).

After the hay d’ Alemaigne was adopted into Scottish dance from France in the sixteenth century, it came to be called the “reel” in Scots’ (2013: 65).

there is no reason to doubt that the reel was ultimately […] of non-Gaelic origin (2014a).

Breathnach (1971), Brennan (2001), Doherty (2011) and Newton (2013; 2014a; 2014b) do not provide references for the relationship between the Reel and the hay. Breathnach (1971: 40) simply says that ‘written accounts’ indicate the hay was a couple dance involving women winding around their partners, and that it eventually became known as the ‘reel’ in eighteenth-century Scotland. Newton (2009: 387n) cites Flett and Flett (1972), but uncharacteristically omits the page number. His seems to base his stance upon the Fletts’ work, but the Fletts offer a more nuanced perspective. They are tentative about the relationship between the hay d’Alemaigne and the Reel, and limit their argument temporally, socially and geographically:

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11  His source may be Murray (1872: xc).

[I]t is possible that about the year 1500 a dance involving a figure similar to the ‘reel of three’ or ‘hey for three’, was imported from France to both Scotland and England, and that this dance was the original source from which both the Threesome Reel in Scotland and the Hey in England descended. A possible candidate here is the “hay d’Alemaigne” (1972: 113).

The ‘alman haye’ is amongst the dances listed in The Complaynt of Scotland (1549). Its provenance seems to be indicated by a reference to the haye d’Alemaigne in an earlier French poem. However, the Fletts state (1972: 113) that any impact the haye d’Alemaigne had on Scottish culture was restricted to the Lowlands and nearby Eastern Highlands: it would have only slowly diffused into ‘more accessible parts of the Highlands as it was adapted to native idiom’ (ibid.). The Strathspey area can be included as part of the Eastern Highlands (see Lamb 2014), but the Fletts seem to suggest that the rest of the Highlands and Islands were too isolated at the time (cf. Rackwitz 2007: 151) for the haye to have had much or any influence there. On the other hand, they conclude that a widespread social dance existed in more remote regions of the Gàidhealtachd that pre-dated the haye d’Alemaigne by some measure. This was the Circular Reel (Flett & Flett 1964: 156-159; 1973: 93). Their position is that the Reel is indigenous to Scotland (1964: 2).

Newton (2014a) contests my suggestion (2013: 74) that the Circular Reel could be a pre-Reformation form:

As I have already demonstrated (Newton 2013), the dance forms that are now associated with the Highlands and survive to the present have their ultimate origins in the French court and certainly do not represent any “pre-Reformation” traditions, as Will suggests.

I need hardly point out the irony that we use the same source to substantiate very different positions. To clear up any remaining confusion about the Fletts’ message, consider the following.

Any parts of the West Highlands and the Western Isles retained their Catholic faith throughout the Reformation period, so that social dancing would have taken place there in an unbroken tradition dating back to mediaeval times, and the circular Reel could be part of this tradition (Flett & Flett 1972: 111).

Irrespective of whether the Reel is a post-Reformation French innovation or not, Newton’s use of the Fletts’ work on this point weakens his argument.

Before moving on, let us imagine that the haye did diffuse through the Highlands in the 16th or 17th century, extinguishing earlier dance practices amongst the peasantry (cf. Newton 2013: 64-65). We should be able to extrapolate from what we know of the Threeosome Reel and English ‘hey’ and identify dances in the Highlands sharing similar characteristics. However, the endeavour is a non-starter. As Payne tells us in The Almain in Britain (2003: 50), ‘Apart from its obvious popularity [in 1549] as a country dance, at least in Scotland, nothing whatever is known about the Alman Hay’.

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12 Clémont Marot’s ‘Le Temple de Cupido’ (c1515-1520)

13 In a similar vein, Joan Flett (n.d.: 3 in Brennan 2001: 16) states that English country-dances originated with the peasantry and only after the 17th century were taken up, and straightened out, by noble society.

14 Knowles (2009: 5) discusses English Protestants regarding dancing as a papist trapping, and a confirmation of the wickedness of Catholicism. McGowan (2008: 248) speculates that more French might have forgone Catholicism in the post-Reformation period had the ministers had a lighter touch when it came to dancing.

15 This is unlikely, in any case. As Bakka (1991: 225-228) shows, new dance forms are met with a range of responses, and older practices often continue in one way or another.
Intriguingly, Payne’s assessment is that the ‘hay’ was indigenous to Scotland, regardless of its name (ibid.: 47). How could this be? One possibility, offered with only a modicum of mischievousness, is that the anonymous writer(s) of the Complaynt, who likely had ties to France, simply encountered the Reel and labelled it a ‘hay’. As Dolmetsch (1975: 55) says, ‘one can never say when a dance began, because it has usually evolved from something similar bearing another name’ [emphasis in original]. The Almain itself (< Fr allemand) is no different: it was simply the word used outside of Germany for ‘a German dance’ (Knowles 2009: 23).

The Circular Reel is a simple social dance involving two couples (Flett & Flett 1964: 156). Newton (2013: 52; 2014a) maintains that the advent of social dancing in Gaelic Scotland was only after French court culture had diffused into the Highlands, from the 17th century onwards. Pair dancing was a feature of Ancient Egypt (Lexova 1935: 26-27) and Greece (Wilson 2013: 201), although evidence indicates that it tended to be unisex. In the case of Ancient Egypt, however, it should be noted that our information comes from paintings and carvings on tombs and temples (Spencer 2003: 113-114). These cannot be taken as representative of everyday life, for they were only meant for viewing by the gods and a few devotees (ibid.). Secular, courtship dancing was certainly a feature of 11th century Germany (Knowles 2009: 20). The copperplates of Hans S. Beham (see below) provide pictorial evidence of couple dancing in Germany in the first half of the 16th century. McGowan suggests that Beham’s pictures may impart ‘something of the real flavour of peasant dancing’ (2008: 193) and as her book predominantly concerns European court culture, this is significant. Taken together, our glimpse of pre-Reformation pair dancing in another European country, the several references to ‘Reels’ in late 16th century Scotland (see Flett & Flett 1973: 93-94) and the survival of the Circular Reel in remote, Catholic areas of the Gàidhealtachd all seem to indicate that the Reel existed in Gaelic Scotland before pervasive French influence came to play. Indeed, strong evidence of such influence only comes with the dance masters; in Ireland (Brennan 2001: 22) as in the Highlands of Scotland (Newton 2013: 50), their activity can only be traced to the late eighteenth century.

We will never know when the Reel began, what it resembled, nor how consistent it was across Scotland in pre-modern times. One of the problems in such enquiries, which I have discussed elsewhere (Lamb 2013: 71-72), is that tricky semantics are involved when discussing historical dance traditions: the English word ‘dance’ conveys only a fraction of the practice, as understood of old.

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16 It was published there.
17 This begs other questions such as, if similar dances were being practiced in France and Scotland in the 16th century, were they independent developments, or did both originate elsewhere in an earlier period?
18 Mats Melin (2014) speculates that Circular Reels might have been smaller, localised versions of the larger song-led circle dances that presumably once took place in Gaelic communities. Across Europe, in the larger circle dances, it is common to find a couple breaking away at certain points to dance in the middle of the group. The Circular Reel might have evolved from this.
19 The strong link between couple dancing and weddings may be a clue to its underlying impetus; perhaps it began as a ritual echoing of the betrothal amongst celebrants.
20 Mats Melin (2014) communicated to me that couple dancing in Sweden amongst the peasantry is attested from about 1500.
21 It is likely that considerable variation would have been found, in the form of ‘dance dialects’ (cf. Bakka 1991).
How we conceive of dancing in modern Western society is a product of social segregation and musical professionalism. In chthonic societies the world over, the movement component of ‘dance’ is not semantically dissociated from words, melody, rhythm and ceremony (Ling 1997: 180; cf. Blankenhorn 2013: 83-84 and Lamb 2013: 71-72, 85). It is ill advised to apply our notion of ‘dance’ to the practices of societies very different from our own (Kaeppler 2001: 50), or even to those of our own ancestors:

Dance, or structured movement systems, may be universal, but dance is not a universal language. Structured movement systems can only communicate to those who have “communicative competence” in this cultural form for a specific society or group [...] Relationships between dance and the social order are constantly modelling, modifying, and shaping each other over time (ibid.).

Human movement as ‘dance’ only became a distinct semantic category when instrumental music took the place of song in earnest, from about 1500-1650 in mainland Europe (Ling 1997: 180). This innovation correlated with a growing split between the ‘movers’ and ‘music providers’.

Peasant ring dances throughout Europe commonly involved dancers singing in unison (ibid.: 183). Similarly, a tradition of self-accompanied, song-led dance – to Reels, specifically, in some cases – was recorded in isolated regions of Gaelic Scotland, such as St Kilda, North Uist, Eigg and Eriskay (see Lamb 2012: 22 and 26). The circular formation of the Reel in the Gàidhealtachd, the practice of simultaneous group singing and dancing and the resistance to performing older dances with instrumental music (Lamb 2012: 26) – not to mention the very fact that danssa [‘dance’] is a loan word – are hallmarks of this earlier world view and its practices. In order to characterise couple dancing accompanied by unison song as an innovation, as Newton appears to do, we must postulate the reinstatement, somehow, of cultural practices that likely existed before the innovations. Apart from being tautological, this requires a greater number of assumptions than positing that couple dancing existed in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands in the pre-Reformation period.

To say, categorically, that social dancing in pairs did not exist in Gaelic Scotland before early modern times resembles Osborn Bergin’s farcical statement (see Rimmer 1989: 20) that dancing in Ireland could not have existed in the same period due to

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22 For example, this excerpt from Eriskay (Murray 1906: 316): ‘Sometimes at ceilidh […] the couples stand up for a reel. Then you will hear a lively Port-a-Bial; one of the company will take the tune, and the rest will all lift on it’.
lack of written evidence.  

Brennan (2001: 15) points out that the early Irish would have considered dancing so innately a part of social life that it was unnecessary to describe it in writing, and perhaps even inappropriate to do so. The general absence of early references to couple dancing simply may be due to it having been carried out in homes, and, therefore, out of the sight of external observers. Once again, lack of evidence does not necessarily equate to lack of practice.

The collocations that Newton (2013) finds involving the French and dancing in late 17th and 18th century Gaelic poetry are interesting, although their significance to wider questions of provenance is unclear. This is due to the limits of this evidence and the fact that it generally derives from prestigious social spheres, referencing nobility and tacksman. When assessing our early musical evidence, it is obvious that the manuscripts and books do not reflect all levels of society. Our first real glimpse of Gaelic musical traditions is not until the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. However, in the years between 1745 and 1759, we see an important cluster:

- The first notated strathspey (Oswald: c1745)
- The first account of the strathspey as dance song, sung by Charles Edward Stuart (Forbes: 1895 [1747])
- The first anonymous strathspeys (Bremner: 1757)
- The first notated Gaelic labour song (Oswald: 1759)

Their co-occurrence is no coincidence; this is the period of the closest historical contact between Gaelic and Anglo society in Scotland. Although the evidence is mediated through literate, English-speaking society, it suggests traditions that had been going on ‘off the radar’ in the Gäidhealtachd for an indefinite period of time. Oswald’s use of the title ‘A new strathspey reel’ indicates that he knew a number of ‘old strathspey reels’. He must have assumed that his readers did as well (Purser 2007: 11). Bonnie Prince Charlie singing a ‘Strathspey reel’ implies an earlier association between the strathspey and Gaelic dance song. The labour song genre is reckoned to precede Oswald’s publication by two centuries, at least, on the basis of references within them (Campbell & Collinson 1969: 22-23; 1981: 27): its appearance confirms detection, but not inception.

As a cautionary example, Bottigheimer (2002) claimed that the entire ‘fairy tale’ genre was the invention of one 16th century Italian writer, Giovanni Francesco Straparola. Her take on the ubiquity of the genre across Eurasia is that talented French authors mediated its diffusion and subsequent oralisation: ‘The French literary efflorescence that followed spread Straparola’s stories along with their magical motifs into France, England, and Germany’ (ibid.: 129). Her positions were debated in a dedicated issue of the Journal of American Folklore (2010).

It is common practice, of course, to claim that some facet of culture emanated from the earliest literate source in which it appears, or from the particular demographic that fostered the source. Notwithstanding, it is useful to consider the ideologies

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23 Bergin might not have been aware of the following reference, from the 1540s (in Harris 2007: 283-286): ‘Appellantibus festive arrident, et non nunquam choreas ad Arpen ducent, quam utroque genu contentam per aereas impares chordas argutis digitis pulsant, et modulos alludente voce comitantur’ [‘They laugh festively at suitors, and sometimes lead dances to the harp, which held tightly against both knees, they strike with adroit fingers along copper cords of various lengths, and they adorn their settings with playful voice’]. Thank you to Keith Sanger for making me aware of this source.

24 I am indebted to John Purser for making me aware of this. It is ‘Hi ri ri ri ho’ (Vol 12, p 155: see Purser & Parks 2007). Purser says in his notes that this is an example of an iorrám, or rowing song.
underlying such positions. Newton’s narrative (2013: 63, 72) of French court culture usurping prior Gaelic traditional dance and music practices resembles Bottigheimer’s account of fairy tale literati. Both are based upon limited, textual evidence from prestigious, Eurocentric spheres, and do not give sufficient attention to endogenous continuity. As Vaz da Silva (2010: 42) remarks about traditional narrative, Bottigheimer’s perspective is hard to reconcile with indications that its crucible has been amongst the peasantry since time immemorial. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said for Gaelic traditional dance. Peacock (1805: 85-86) indicates that peasant children in the Highlands were proficient in Reel steps as early as five or six years of age: ‘The fondness the Highlanders have for [Reel dancing] is unbounded … This pleasing propensity, one would think, was born with them, from the early indications we sometimes see their children show for this exercise’. Newton (2014a) exaggerates when he says:

This excerpt from Peacock is too late and broad a statement to be useful. We do not know anything about these youth – what age they were, where they were from, or what social class they belonged to.

Peacock (1805: 85-86) tells us the age of three of the five children discussed (5 or 6, and about 12), says that they are Highlanders (i.e. Gaelic-speakers) from ‘a remote part of the country’, and that three are ‘a herd boy and two young girls’ (i.e. not gentry).\(^25\) Whether it is too late or not is an open question. If it concerns the period before 1790, when Peacock would have been 67 years old, there is no evidence of dance masters teaching in the Highlands, as already stated. Keith Sanger (2014), who regularly combs music-related Scottish archives, corroborates this point. Finally, these are clearly recollections from an earlier time: Peacock would have been 81 in 1805. This is rather old for a remote, Highland jaunt – in that period, in any case.

Perhaps something will yet come to the fore allowing us to triangulate the origins of Gaelic dance song and the Scottish Reel. Until then, it is best to entertain the possibility, at least, that they are older than we can claim at present.\(^26\) As Virginia Blankenhorn (2013: 84; cf. de Silva 2010: 401) suggests, ‘we need to think again about these so-called “arguments from silence” – the idea that if there wasn’t something written down about a practice, then it didn’t happen’. Let us not impose too firm a *terminus post quem*, when all we have is a soft *terminus ante quem*.

**Summary**

- Dance forms and their associated musical accompaniment are interdependent, and not an inextricable or inexorable ‘package’
- While pan-European dances are found, their musical accompaniment tends to be regional
- To date, no evidence has appeared to validate the claim that the musical forms associated with early modern social dancing in Scotland originated in France, or elsewhere in mainland Europe

\(^{25}\) Strictly speaking, as Wilson McLeod points out, we are not told anything about the social class of the girls. However, their association with a herd boy, and the fact that they are from the remote Highlands, suggests that they are unlikely to have been from a noble background.

\(^{26}\) Melin (2014) points out that, ‘Song dances were most likely part of the Viking tradition as well and no doubt travelled with them’. 
• There is no evidence that the Reel, as practiced in the Gaelic-speaking regions, came from France; indeed, the Fletts considered it to be indigenous to Scotland.

Addendum

Isn’t the lack of references to nobility in puirt-à-beul a sign that they arose, mainly, in the late 18th century?

Newton (2014a) argues on the basis of a lack of class distinctions in puirt that their primary development was in the post-Culloden period: ‘[they seem] to depict the life of the peasantry, devoid of consciousness of or interaction with the nobility, a “flattened out” Gaelic society’. I agree with Michael about their rustic nature. However, his observations are not indicative of their historical origin, per se, but involve register variation and the social position of their main authors.

It is a non sequitur to suggest that puirt developed primarily in the post-Culloden period due to a dearth of gentrified reference. We would not expect it in this register. The appearance of nobility in waulking songs, discussed by Newton (2014a), tends to involve the upward aspirations of women, who love particular noble lads, or have been impregnated and abandoned by them. We may as well compare Emma with Mad Magazine, on this count. There is nothing highbrow about Gaelic dance song; it is an earthy genre. Most puirt are satirical, bawdy or observant of the natural world (Lamb 2012: 18; cf. Brennan 2001: 78). Take, for example, the following heretofore-unpublished specimen, which may be sung (if desired) to ‘The Braes of Marr’:

Nam biodh agam bod air fhichead,  If I had twenty-one willies,
Magairlean a chuireadh thuige;  And balls to keep [them] going;
Nam biodh agam bod air fhichead,  If I had twenty-one willies,
Gheibhinn fichead maighdeann.  I would get twenty maidens.

Phallic male fantasy is just what we would expect of puirt-à-beul; lamenting the loss of a noble romance is not.

One can find a parallel for puirt-à-beul in German Schnadahüpferl, which date from the Middle Ages. These are short, satirical, often ribald songs used to initiate a dance (see Oetke 1982 in Ling 1997: 179). Bennett (2011: 596) claims that most Gaelic puirt are ancient: ‘there is no basis whatsoever for the common, but senseless, notion that they were “invented” post-Culloden’. Of course, not all are ancient, at least in their current dressing. Yet we ought not judge the age of a tree by its foliage, but by the depth of its roots and thickness of its trunk. Even ancient puirt would have been renewed through history in the meandering way of oral tradition, accreting some elements and losing others, and shaped by each generation and locale (cf. Sparling 2014: 96).

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27 Melin (2014) notes that the word ‘reel’ (Sc Gaelic ruidhle) once might have been a non-specific term for dancing in general.
28 I’m not even sure that the premise itself is true: ‘Biodag Dhòmhnail ‘ic Alasdair’ is an example of a port with noble references. It is likely that even the most well heeled Gaelic worthies enjoyed dance songs, but that does not mean that the genre was reflexive of social class distinctions, as a rule.
To date, no musicological evidence – for example comparing French dance music of the 17th century with Scottish music from a later period – has been produced to support the notion that the genre of Gaelic dance song and music originated ab initio from early modern French influences. I have no issue with the argument that the Highland nobility introduced new dance forms to the Gàidhealtachd and that these might have conditioned, or reconditioned, pre-existing musical traditions. It is feasible that the musical structures that characterise most Scottish dance tunes were taken up amongst the Gaelic peasantry, particularly in the Outer Hebrides and Northwest Highlands (cf. Newton 2006: 232) is unclear due to the nature of our evidence, and its general paucity.

Obviously, whatever types of dance music or song existed in earlier times in Scotland, standardisation occurred in the 18th century. This might have included the organisation of melody and dance into regular, repetitive, four-based structures, but perhaps not: binary (e.g. AABB) structures of 4 or 8 bars may be very old in Britain. For instance, Jabbour’s (2008: 5) ‘new style’ of music can be found in some of our earliest manuscripts, such as Sinkler (1710). There, ‘MacPherson’s Lament’ has many of the qualities that Jabbour links to the late 18th century, and it is arguably our first written strathspey (see Lamb 2013: 67-68). We have no idea when binary tunes emerged in Scotland, or for that matter in continental Europe (Sparling 2014: 82). We only know that they existed in the early 16th century (ibid.). More comparative and historical research is needed. In any case, it would be foolish to assume that no significant cultural interplay occurred between Gàidheil and Goill30 until the 18th century, it would be equally foolish to ignore the fact that the western Gàidhealtachd is a relic area, and that Reel dancing – accompanied by binary-structured song – may be much older than some are prepared to believe.

Acknowledgements
I am indebted to the following individuals, who provided feedback and suggestions for improvement based upon a draft of this paper: Virginia Blankenhorn, Wilson McLeod, Mats Melin, Michal Newton, John Purser and Keith Sanger. I take responsibility for any remaining inadequacies or inaccuracies.

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30 i.e. Highlanders and Lowlanders


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