

SEXING THE NATION: Discourses of the dancing body in Ireland in the 1930s

The establishment of a politically independent state in Ireland in 1922 was preceded and followed by an intensive cultural project of nation building that was marked by a public interest in embodied identities and a concerted public effort to mould individual bodies to the shape of the 'ideal' body politic of the new state. Dancing bodies, both theatrical and social emerged as sites of identity formation and of competing discourses on national identity. This article is concerned with the dance hall – the public space in which social dance was practiced- and, specifically, the ways in which national gendered identities were constructed and mediated through this space.

The discussion may be broadly placed within dance, gender and cultural studies and their points of intersection. My approach is informed by a body of work on the relationship between the movement of individual bodies and the body politic (eg. Douglas, 1975 ; Foucault , 1981; Elias, 1978[1939] , 1982[1939]) and is concerned with constructions of the dancing body in popular discourse. It also draws on subsequent feminist and other studies on the importance of gender in moulding embodied practices and representations (eg. Polhemus, 1995; Sherlock, 1996; Davis, 1997; Desmond, 1998; Thomas, 2003). Of particular interest here is the operation of disciplinary power on the shaping of gendered subjectivities in specific historical periods and in specific social domains including social dance. Articulating with the theme of disciplinary power is that of nation building; specifically the role played by the gendering of dance in the formation of national identities at certain times in particular countries (eg. Daniel, 1991; Browning, 1995;

Savigliano, 1995; Power, 1996; Masayo, 2002). In an Irish context too, a number of writers (Breathnach, 1983; Lynch, 1989; Tubridy, 1994 ; Brennan, 1999; Foley, 2001) have attested to the role played by the state in promoting certain kinds of dance as emblematic of national identity and of simultaneously discouraging others. This article sets out to explore the relationship between gender, nation and the dancing body through an analysis of newspaper coverage of dance and to this extent is engaged with representations of dance rather than with dance practice *per se*.

The discussion is based primarily on an analysis of representations of dance in the provincial newspaper, *The Leitrim Observer* for the year 1934. The case study material is supplemented by material from other provincial newspapers, *The Connaught Tribune*, *The Western People* and, the *Wexford People* for the same yearⁱ. My analysis suggests that the primary newspaper discourse was that of ‘nation’ and was most frequently expressed in terms of an opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Articulating with, and embedded within, the discourse of ‘nation’ was that of ‘gender’ which showed very clear demarcations between the positioning of women’s and men’s bodies within the dance hall space. I go on to argue that the gendering process operated through the association of women with the private sphere, modernity and consumption and, conversely through the alignment of men with tradition, production, and a custodial role in the public sphere.

Dance and identity construction in the 1930s

In order to contextualise the discussion it is necessary to give some idea of the political and commercial interests that were instrumental in shaping the public meanings of social dance at this time. As indicated above, dance had emerged as a significant marker of cultural identity and one of the main arenas in which competing discourses on national identity was played out. From the 1890s on a canon of ‘authentic traditional’ Irish dance (see Brennan, 1994) which came to be known as céilí dance had been established and espoused by members of the Roman Catholic clergy, the Gaelic League and other culturally nationalist organisations. I have suggested elsewhere (O’Connor, 2003) that social dance became a site of cultural struggle between the forces of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Within this framework, céilí dance was perceived as authentic, pure and graceful while non-national, or what were commonly referred to as ‘modern’ⁱⁱ or ‘foreign dances’, were constructed as ‘other’ (see Foley, 2001). The era was marked, therefore, by displays of public concern about appropriate types of dance, duration of dances and venues.

Coterminous with the sustained efforts to promote national dance was the increasing popularity of ‘modern’ and ‘foreign’ dances in the form of ballroom and jazzⁱⁱⁱ.

Opposition to jazz was most notably expressed by the two groups who were promoting ‘traditional’ Irish dance - the Catholic clergy and the Gaelic League on the grounds that it was both morally indecent and culturally corrupting. However, it is worth noting that opposition to jazz was not unique to Ireland and that the negative response here echoed those of religious and cultural groups in Britain, mainland Europe and the US (see, for

example, Back, 1997). The opposition mounted by the Anti-jazz Campaign finally led to the Irish government capitulating to their demands by introducing the Dance Halls' Act in 1935 which legislated for the control of public dancing.

The 1930s also witnessed the commercialisation of social dancing; the demise of house dancing (see for example Brennan, 1999; Tubridy, 1994) and the establishment of commercial public dance halls. Dancing was a very popular leisure activity in Ireland in the 1930s and its commercial potential was becoming increasingly evident. At this stage there were two main players involved in the ownership and control of dance halls, the Catholic Church through local clergy and commercial owners in the form of individual/family enterprises. While commercial interests were ostensibly represented by local businessmen and, voluntary interests by Catholic clergy and local community groups, in reality the picture is not so clear cut. Commercial and moral interests appear to be complexly interwoven. Though more detailed research would be necessary to provide a definitive picture, a couple of pertinent observations can be made here. The clergy were heavily involved in the building of local parish halls. According to Brennan (1999, p. 126) '[A]ll over rural Ireland, the clergy organised the construction of parochial halls, and thereafter Church and state combined to eliminate the organisation of any dances outside these halls'. At least some of the profits would have accrued to local clergy personally (eg. repair of parochial houses) or to parish institutions for which they were responsible (eg. repair of primary schools). Local/community groups were also dependent on the authorisation of the clergy for use of parochial halls for dancing. Whatever the intricacies of ownership and control of dance venues, there were now a wider variety of indoor venues than heretofore. They included a minority of private houses or outhouses

such as barns (such venues to be declared illegal on the enforcement of the Dance Halls Act), parochial halls with variable flooring, heating, lighting, and sanitation facilities, and, commercially owned dance halls with better facilities predominantly, though not exclusively, in the bigger urban centres. Though by no means monolithic, a pattern of association between venues and types of dance began to emerge. Traditional céilí dances tended to be organised in more local and downmarket venues by either clergy or local community leaders whereas ‘modern’/ jazz dances were organised in the commercially owned dance halls in the bigger towns.

Newspaper representations of the dance hall space

Dance references generally appeared in three specific sections of the newspapers. They carried advertisements for dances. Dance was also addressed in the local news sections (or parish notes) where announcements of upcoming dances and accounts of dances that had recently taken place were printed. And finally, there were references to dance in the main news pages such as reports from local council meetings and district court proceedings. A perusal of these references led to the identification of four main discourses two of which represented and were addressed to women, and two of which were related exclusively to men. Within these discourses I have categorised the dance hall variously as a ‘degenerate space’, as a ‘utopian space’, as a ‘battleground’ and, finally, as a space for the construction of local and national identities^{iv}.

The dance hall as ‘degenerate space’

The dance hall was constructed as both a dangerous and degenerate space for women and was expressed mainly in reports of statements from clergy, cultural leaders and, local and national politicians. This particular construction of the dance hall must be viewed in

the context of women's role in public space generally. Women's vulnerability in public space was of particular concern to public figures in Ireland of the 1930s and can be seen most clearly in the setting up by the national government of the Carrigan Committee to report on widespread prostitution and on the physical and sexual abuse of young women (see Keating, 2002). Conversely, women's bodies were feared as they were perceived to present a threat to the patriarchal order (see Bordo, 1993, p.5). This duality was expressed in sexual terms as women being 'at one and the same time childlike, vulnerable and easily seduced but also as having moral responsibility for men's proper conduct and thereby presenting the greatest danger to moral probity and sexual purity' (O'Connor, 2003, p. 56, see also Gray and Ryan, 1997 and McAvoy, 1999 for reference to double sexual standards). Concerns about the sexual conduct of young people led to the dance hall becoming a site for close monitoring as it was virtually the only public space where women were present in an unsupervised capacity. Hence, women's appearance, demeanour and behaviour in this space exercised the guardians of public sexual morality greatly. Ambivalence towards women dancing in public has also been commented on by Cowan (1990). She suggests that it is noticeably present in a society where there is an uncertainty about, or antipathy towards, women engaging in the public sphere. There is no doubt that Ireland of the 1930s was just such a society. Throughout the decade women were being increasingly encouraged, and in some instances, forced out of the public sphere and into the private/domestic arena^v (for example, see O'Dowd, 1987). These dominant public attitudes towards women are reflected in the newspaper coverage. Though related to leisure activities generally, rather than specifically to dance, the following newspaper extract gives an indication of the ways in which women's public

appearance and activities were perceived to be problematic. The case in point is a report of a discussion at a County Council meeting regarding regulations in the interest of public decency. One of the suggestions for bye-law was that ‘*persons* [my emphasis] in bathing costumes be prohibited from promenading public roads and other places other than the immediate shore unless wearing wraps or overcoats’ (LO, 19 May). One of the contributors from the Wexford County Board, a Mr. T. Cooney, stated in response that: ‘We are not supposed to be critics of *ladies* [my emphasis] bathing dresses’ (LO, 19 May). Gender in this instance is not initially attributed but is subsequently inferred. There had been no mention of gender in the interchange until the last statement and, though the speaker is adopting a liberal stance on the issue, the interchange itself serves to indicate the predominant public nervousness about women’s bodies in public space. The extreme antipathy to women actively displaying themselves in public, and mingling with members of the opposite sex is captured in an extract from *The Wexford People* in this instance, on the sports field. Dr J.C. McQuaid, then President of Blackrock College, a prestigious Catholic boys’ school, is protesting against what he termed the ‘un-Catholic and un-Irish decision^{vi}’ taken at the annual congress of a national athletics organisation in favour of women competing in the same athletic meetings as men. ‘I hereby assure you’, he is quoted as saying, ‘that no boy from my college will take part in any athletic meeting controlled by your organisation at which women will compete no matter what attire they may adopt’ (WXP, 10 February).

The power of the Catholic Church is also reflected in the frequency of newspaper reports of the pronouncements of certain clergy on dance. “‘Giddy Girls’ Warned’, the title of one such report, states:

We cannot “ says the Bishop of Galway Most Rev. Dr O’ Doherty “ close our eyes to the fact that the evil of impurity is on the increase. Want of parental control, evil reading, senseless company keeping *and above all, degenerate dance halls*, [my emphasis] are the chief causes of corruption. There are impure men who would willingly prey upon innocence and inexperience. But there are also some giddy girls who by the levity of their words and actions are often more guilty than their partners in crime. There was once a public penance for public crimes of impurity: I hope that it may not be necessary to reintroduce it.

(LO, 17 February)

Two elements in the extract above that are worthy of note. The first is the manner in which the attribution of blame is shifted from men onto women and the threat of punitive action if the warnings were not heeded. The second is that the admonishment is limited to ‘degenerate dance halls’ and, by inference to modern/jazz dancing and to the category of ‘modern’ women.

Antipathy towards the ‘modern woman’ is not confined to the Catholic clergy, however, but form part of a wider culture of complaint. The following report of a woman’s death at the remarkable age of one hundred and twenty three is utilised as an opportunity to, as the subheading indicates, be a ‘Critic of the Modern Girl’. The women in question was quoted as saying:

Her [the modern girl] dress is nothing but a ridicule... It would make a modest man blush. The cosmetics she uses make me ashamed of being a woman at all.

Her late hours and *dance hall amusements* [my emphasis] will not help her reach my age.

(LO, 24 February)

While some of the warnings to women are based on national incidents and events, other snippets originally culled from overseas newspapers and probably copied from the Irish national press, are also included. Under the heading of 'Lipstick Banned', one such short news item reports that; 'An order forbidding Catholic women to use lipstick during the Eucharistic Congress has been given at Buenos Aires' (LO, 20 October). Whether from local, national or international sources, the message to the 'modern woman' is clearly normative (see also Ryan, 1998) and strongly points to the dance hall space as potentially dangerous and degenerate

The dance hall as 'utopian space'

The dance hall as 'utopian space' is the second of the main newspaper discourses aimed primarily at women. I am using this concept in the same way as Dyer (1992) as based on sensibility rather than on political models and refers to 'what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized' (p.18). The particular aspect of Dyer's analysis which is pertinent here is the 'enjoyment of sensuous material reality' (p.20) which, he claims, emanates from the need for abundance. In the dance context under discussion the enjoyment of 'sensuous material reality' is determined by the general ambience of the dance hall, the people, music and décor and is closely linked to consumption. So if the news sections of the newspapers were constructing the dance halls as degenerate, the messages coming from the advertising sections were constructing women in an alternative way as consumers. And while it is true to say that actual consumption was limited for the vast majority of people, because of the national economic and political situation ^{vii} it is also the case that a consumption ethos was gaining widespread popularity

both explicitly in the form of advertising products and implicitly in terms of promoting certain lifestyles through media such as newspapers, women's magazines, and cinema. With reference to the newspapers under discussion, I want to suggest that the content, mode of address and juxtaposition of advertisements combined to construct the reader as an embodied individual female consumer. And furthermore, that this construction may have had a particular appeal to an 'interpretive community' of women. In the absence of accurate data on the consumption patterns of female readers it is impossible to make definitive statements on the issue. However, I would like to draw attention to a number of sociological observations that support the case. Historically the association between women and consumption can be attributed to the separation of the public and private spheres in industrial capitalism in which women became responsible for household management and the associated procurement of goods and services for the family. Women, therefore, were one of the first groups to be targeted as consumers and this continued to be so until the arrival of 'mass consumption' after World War II. Coupled with this was the growth of the ideology of femininity and the resulting emphasis on the presentation of women *qua* women led to the expansion of the market for goods of personal adornment such as clothes, jewelry and cosmetics. The display advertisements for female fashion and beauty products associated themselves with the cultural cachet, service ethos and modernity of the metropolis.^{viii} Hence, the consumption ethos set up a dichotomy, I would suggest, between the local and cosmopolitan, creating a sense of fantasy around the extra-local and paralleling in some ways the 'other' more glamorous and exciting world of cinema (see Byrne, 1997). It would be incorrect to say that men were totally absent from the discourses of consumption discussed above but

advertisements aimed at men were generally for leisure products such as tobacco or products associated with work such as work boots, animal welfare products, farm implements and machinery. In many cases illustrations for ladies fashion and beauty products were placed next to advertisements for leisure activities such as dance and cinema their juxtaposition being just one illustration of the intersecting worlds of the cinema and the dance hall. Though not systematically pursued, I did notice that dance films and films which included dance appeared to be very popular in local cinemas (see also Kuhn, 2002 for corroboration of this in a British context).

Dance-hall names such as the ‘Savoy’, the ‘Gaiety’ and ‘Pavilion’ also function, I would suggest, to invoke an urban theatrical and cinematic scenario with connotations of luxury and cosmopolitan sophistication. Ambience is created through reference to décor, lighting and quality of the dance floor in addition to catering arrangements and musical accompaniment. The consumption ethos is also apparent in the emphasis on customer service in the advertisements. Ever present is the suggestion that the dancers’ comfort and enjoyment are the primary concern of the organisers. According to *The Connaught Tribune* of 16 June,

‘The season at the Dance Pavilion, Salthill, Galway is now in full swing. With an excellent maple floor and a good band the Pavilion provides *everything possible for the enjoyment of dancers*’ [my emphasis].

An advertisement for a dance in the Gaiety, Carrick-on-Shannon claims that, ‘[T]he hall possesses all facilities which go to make it one of the best for dances being well lighted, modernly equipped and heated, and having a specially-sprung floor for dancing’ (LO, 3 November). Other advertisements for the same venue are attempting to reinforce its

reputation as the dance venue par excellence. The ‘Grand Opening Dance’ at the Gaiety in Carrick-on-Shannon announces that Charlie Harvey’s Capitolian Band will be providing the music and:

Visitors to Dublin who heard this band at the Capitol Theatre will appreciate the quality of the music engaged for the occasion. They will present a programme containing all the *new* [my emphasis] orchestral selections and the *very latest dance* [my emphasis] hits...It is hardly necessary to say that this is one of the best halls in the West for dancing, *possessing all the necessary essentials for comfort and convenience* [my emphasis]. The catering will be under the *personal* [my emphasis] supervision of the Management, and as on former occasions the details as to the wants of patrons will be exactingly looked after.

(LO, 22 September)

An account of a Ballina Post Office Dance held in the Arcadia stated that it:

...proved to be a huge social success . “The loveliest and most perfectly arranged function of its kind held in Ballina for years” was the general opinion of patrons...The decoration of the hall evoked general admiration. The scheme was carried out by ...and his work certainly left nothing to be desired...The *recherché* supper supplied at Moylett’s café, was splendidly served and much enjoyed.

(WP, 17 February)

The dance halls as constructed both in the advertising section and in ‘news’ accounts such as the above, would have had a particular appeal to women, purporting as they did to offer glamour, luxury, romance as well as cultural capital (for example note the use of

French in the quote above) to the dancing ambience. The attractiveness of these ‘modern’ venues must be seen in the light of the relatively more Spartan environment of everyday life and, specifically, of local dance venues lacking these ‘modern’ facilities. In this way, dance advertisements and accounts also operated as markers of social class and status. I have also been claiming that the advertisements’ mode of address was to women as individual consumers, seeking personal enjoyment and excitement outside the local social arena. This has been demonstrated through the positioning of advertising space, through the use of language which emphasises romance, novelty and glamour, and, through constant allusion to a dance space in which the comfort and enjoyment of dancers is of primary importance.

The rhetoric of glamour and novelty noted in the above extracts appear to be associated with advertisements for bigger halls in the larger urban areas which suggests that these were the halls that could boast of the superior facilities advertised^{ix}. Conversely, the smaller rural halls did not, or could not, boast of such modern facilities.

While there were some exceptions to the pattern of association between the more up-market venues and the rhetoric of modernity it remained predominant. So, if the ‘modern’ woman was represented as a potential threat to social order in the ‘degenerate’ dance hall space, she was now represented, through the act of consumption, as a glamorous figure to be envied and emulated.

The dance hall as ‘battleground’

One of the most striking observations was that in the court reports section of the newspaper the dance hall emerged as a site of physical combat between individual or, more commonly, groups of men in the form of brawls, fights and shootings. Many of the

reported disturbances around the dance hall were ostensibly motivated by political divisions and conflict and were most frequently motivated by political divisions and involved ‘The Blueshirts’^x, an ultra-conservative political movement which had attracted a substantial number of young people to its ranks. Other fights appeared to be motivated by longstanding personal grudges (sometimes masquerading as political differences) and the dance hall arena provided an opportunity for local factions to engage in verbal and physical tussles. Under the headline ‘Shots At Dance’ and subheading ‘Incidents reported in Three Counties’ we learn that:

At a Blueshirt dance in Shannonharbour, Offaly, it is stated that the hall was attacked by rifle and shot gun firing. The roof and sides of the hall were riddled with pellets and rifle bullets. When the firing started all lay on the floor. It is said that one man got a pellet in the knee and that another had his face grazed.

(LO, 13 October)

In these reports the gender of the perpetrators of such incidents isn’t identified but there is an implicit assumption that they are men.

In other instances the gender of the perpetrators is clear as in the report of a court case under the following headline ‘Incidents After Dance’, and a sub-heading ‘County Cavan Affray’ and even further detail provided in a third sub-heading ‘Blue Shirt Torn in Cootehill’. In this instance, and indeed, in other reports of court cases, the names of the individual men involved are provided and an attempt is made to provide exact reconstruction of the event. The report reads:

Donohue deposed that on the night of 2nd. February he was at a dance in the Town Hall, and on coming away at 11.30 p.m. with Peter Cusack he was passing

Carroll's corner when McCannon caught him by the shirt (a blue shirt which plaintiff had on in court) and tore it.

(LO, 3 March)

Another story 'Alleged Scene at a Dance' is taken from the London Daily Express newspaper and concerns Free State Army Officers who attended the Louth Hunt Ball at a city hotel during Horse Show Week:

At the conclusion of the ball there was a general demand from those present that the band should play "God Save the King" and the people then began to sing the anthem with members of the Diplomatic Corps in Dublin and foreign visiting officers standing to attention. The officers, in uniform jumped onto the platform, and to the amazement of all present scattered the band instruments and music on to the dance floor.

(LO, 18 August)

In the above incident it is worth noting that in addition to the disruption caused, dances were occasions where political allegiances were clearly marked through the playing of the national anthem.

A headline 'Shots Fired at Dances' continues with the following copy:

It is reported that about five shots were fired near the County Ballroom, Tullamore during the UIP [United Ireland Party] dance on Sunday night. Guards on duty outside the hall say they heard the shots, which are believed to have been fired from a field near the railway line and overlooking the hall.

(LO, April 14)

At one level the fights between different factions of young men is unsurprising given the political strife in Ireland before and after the War of Independence and the Civil War which followed. But the fact that they were commonplace does not tell us how they might have been interpreted by readers. It might be argued that the newspaper reports of court appearances served as a signal to other young men that this kind of behaviour was unacceptable. In a similar vein, one could suggest that given the importance of respectability, the public naming of court defendants would be perceived as a cause for shame and disgrace of individuals and families. However, given the socio-political climate, I am inclined to suggest that these fracas were regarded in a more positive light and that they performed the symbolic function of devaluing the dance hall as a 'feminine' space by setting up an opposition between men as fighters and women as dancers. The fact that it was 'Blueshirt' dances which comprised the majority of reported cases possibly lends itself to a further development of an association between the anti-nationalist – ie. pro-Treaty - party and women. Both would have been perceived as agents of modernity and as such perceived to be opposing the project of nation building being undertaken by the government party, Fianna Fáil. Speculatively, one could also suggest another positive interpretation linked to the film genre of 'the western' and specifically to the figure of the cowboy - a man of action who, when required to, takes the law into his own hands to save the community. And this identificatory position might be especially relevant to the attacks on 'Blueshirt dances'. In such a scenario fighting men might be viewed in a very positive light as heroes defending the nation^{xi}.

Further support for the hypothesis that the dance hall was constructed as feminine space, comes from an observation on men's attitudes towards dance^{xii}. There is no doubt that

modern dancing enjoyed widespread popularity among men and women as already evidenced, but it was also accompanied by a cultural ambivalence. This ambivalence, I suggest, may have been particularly strong amongst rural men and similar to that identified by Bourdieu (1962) in his study of bachelors in the Bearn region of France in 1959-60. His findings seem to offer the closest empirical case to the one under discussion here. He identified the problems associated with displaying the male body as spectacle and also found that the men were unwilling to adopt the urban techniques of the body required to do modern dance. So, while dance- going was a popular leisure pursuit for men as well as women in Ireland, I want to suggest that the ritual had different meanings for both. For men, the activity of dancing was not their primary motivation or source of most enjoyment. Though sparse, evidence from the period indicates as much. Quinn's recent biography of the poet Patrick Kavanagh provides an illuminating account of his dancing days in a rural community where she observes that:

For him[Kavanagh] , as for most of his acquaintance, the draw of the dance place was the proximity of so many pretty young women; would select the prettiest and then follow her progress, rarely approaching her but agonising over the possible success of those who did. At least he did not stoop to the antics of some of his non-dancing companions, who showed their appreciation by sticking out a foot and attempting to trip up the girl they fancied as she danced past... one of the young men's chief aims was to secure a female partner for the journey home.

(Quinn, 2002, p.62)

If the motivations attributed to Kavanagh and his companions are an accurate reflection of rural Ireland of the time then it would appear that dancing *per se* was not valued as a

leisure activity for men. The newspaper reports of court cases represent the dance hall space as one encircled and controlled by men, rather than as one centrally occupied by them. Though some of the reported incidents are initiated inside the dance hall itself, the majority of those reported here would have been initiated outside but proximate to the hall. Within this spatial mapping, women might be considered a ‘structured absence’ and it is tempting to conceptualise a structural opposition between the inside and outside spaces; the inside as domestic space, safe, feminine and the site of (passive) consumption, and the outside as metaphor for the male, public, site of (violent) action.

Constructing Local and National Identity

Newspaper coverage of traditional/céilí dance was markedly different from representations of modern dances. While the men represented in the last section subverted the world of modern dance, the men involved in traditional dance were represented in a strongly positive way as custodians of local communities and nationalist identity in a number of ways^{xiii}. Advertisements for traditional dance tended to highlight the purposes for which the dance was held most commonly for political fundraising, to commemorate historical events, or to raise funds for local community projects. The rhetoric appeared to draw on the well-springs of collective historical memory in which the present was a renewal of the past, to call for the consolidation of local community and the newly formed nation through dance^{xiv}. This is in sharp contrast to the advertisements for modern dance, where the primary emphasis was on the enjoyment of individual dancers. The two rhetorical strategies provide opposing ideas of service, the service is *to the dancer* in modern discourse has now been converted to one in which the dancer provides a service *to the local community or nation*. This is not to say that

enjoyment is not referred to in the advertisements for traditional/céilí dance but that it occupies a secondary role, the primary appeal being to a sense of duty to one's community and nation. Though usually implicit, this sense of obligation is explicitly expressed in an account of an upcoming céilí under the auspices of the Ballinamore Hurling Club where the item closes with the sentence, 'Considering the object for which the ceilidh^{xv} is being organised, we hope to see the hall taxed to its utmost capacity' (LO, 22 September). Though the mode of address is, once again, implicit since no gender is specified, I would like to suggest that these discourses had more relevance to a male readership because of men's dominant role in the public sphere both locally and nationally.

The rhetoric of advertising for céilí dances provided a stark contrast to the 'sensuous materiality' of the advertisements for modern dance. Advertisements for the former were generally smaller, used sparser prose, and evoked a world more frugal and communitarian than the modern counterpart. The following advertisement exemplifies the style; 'Commemoration Ceilidh will be held in Mooney's Hall, Drumshambo on Easter Sunday night, Adm. 1/6' (LO, 31 March). In this instance it is worth noting a number of points; the brevity of the notice, the economy of words and, confidence in the readers' awareness that it is the event of the Easter Rising of 1916 that is the object of commemoration.

The venues mentioned in advertisements were generally more local and down-market and did not refer to ambience or facilities. Admission prices were almost invariably much lower than for modern dances in extra-local venues. It is also the case that many of the local/rural venues would have been multi-functional and would have hosted a range of

community activities in addition to dance. Generally speaking, funding for improving facilities and for advertising would have been more limited than that available for commercial halls in urban areas.

An advertisement for a dance in Drumkelanmore National School assures prospective dancers that ‘the fee of admission has been fixed at the moderate figure of 1/=’ (LO, 31 March)^{xvi}. This is important in an economic context where disposable cash would have been minimal for the majority of dancers. The proceeds of the dance in Drumkelanmore were in aid of school repairs. Similarly the support for local community projects is indicated in the advertisement for dance ‘to be held on the 26th. December in the Urbal School, Ballinaglera, ‘For Parochial Purposes’.

The ‘imagined community’ of the nation is explicitly mobilised in the following advertisement for a dance under the auspices of the Dromahaire Cumann where details of the event are followed and underpinned by the slogan ‘A Dia (*sic*) Saor Eire’[trans. ‘God Save Ireland’] (LO, 8 December).

The theme of nation building was also the predominant one in the news sections of the newspapers. Here, too, men are the main protagonists both in terms of their attendance at dances and in terms of their pronouncements on traditional dance. The views expressed, mostly by members of the Gaelic League and Catholic Clergy, indicated that traditional dance had an important and urgent role to play in the creation of an authentic Irish culture. Journalist’s reports of céilí dances were often extravagantly nationalist in tone. The following account is typical:

There was a big attendance at the Fainne Ceilidh held at Cloone on Sunday night last, amongst those present being Very Rev. P. Conefry, P.P., Cloone; Rev. Fr.

Lee C.C. do. ; and Rev. Fr. Skelly C.C. Gortletteragh.. The music was indeed excellent, and was supplied by the Cloone Gaelic League Ceilidh Band, which comprises four fiddles, three concert flutes and a drummer. Fr. Conefry addressed the gathering and appealed for support for the Irish Language, Irish Industries, Irish music and Irish dancing. Irish songs were contributed in abundance by members of the local Gaelic League branch and others. There was also a number of Irish step-dancing items. The ceilidh was typically Irish and was thoroughly enjoyed by all who patronised it.

(LO, 24 November)

In similar vein a report of a ‘successful Blacklion dance’ claims that “ it was a *truly Irish night* [my emphasis] brought to a close by the band playing the national anthem’.

Another example reads:

The Breffni No. 1 Ceilidh Band which supplied the music gave a rendering of our beautiful Irish dance music which could not fail to enliven the spirits of those present and the ceilidh itself was, from every point of view, a triumphant proof that a Gaelic entertainment is one of the most potent factors *we* [my emphasis]have for the fostering amongst *us* [my emphasis]of the traditional Irish kindly spirit.

(LO, 7 April)

Reported opposition to jazz-dancing, constructed as the enemy of Irish dance, marked another major way in which boundaries were represented. As noted earlier jazz dancing was represented in terms of its foreignness and its perceived threat to authentic Irishness. In addition to the instances of clerical opposition to jazz mentioned earlier, the papers

also carried numerous reports of resolutions adopted against jazz- dancing by local public representatives (county councillors) and of protests against the broadcasting of jazz music on national radio. A report of a meeting held in Manorhamilton to form a branch of the Gaelic League described the criticism of jazz:

Mr Brian Gilgunn said there was a society called the G.A.A. [Gaelic Athletic Association] which would expel members for attending foreign games and at the same time its members were the greatest exponents of jazz dancing. If it was wrong to attend foreign games, it was much more wrong to attend jazz dances.

(LO, 3 March)

From my reading of the representation of the relationship between men and dance it appears that male identities were mediated in two opposing ways. With reference to traditional dance, men with power and influence controlled the dance hall space and provided a marked contrast to the men lacking in power and influence who disrupted the ‘modern’ dance hall space.

Conclusions

The dance hall space, in this analysis, has emerged as a place redolent with meaning, a site in which national and gendered forms of embodied identities were constructed and mediated. I have argued that this process of negotiation was inextricably bound up with the socio-cultural and political concerns of the time, specifically the consolidation of the new state and the tensions that were in play between the discourses of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Gender discourses were found to be inextricably intertwined with those of nation and the examination of newspaper representations revealed that four main discourses on the dance hall could be identified and which illustrated the links between

dancing bodies, national bodies and male and female bodies. Each of the discourses identified proffered normative and, in many respects, distinct embodied identities to both sexes.

In pronouncing the dance hall as a 'degenerate space' women's bodies were singled out as the main targets of publicly expressed concerns about sexual purity and propriety in that space. And since the dangers of immorality were seen to inhere in 'modern'/jazz dance, I have suggested that a negative association developed between the dancing woman and modernity. Thus at a symbolic level, the fear of modernity (constructed as the non-national and foreign) was mapped onto the body of the modern dancing woman. As we have seen, she was the figure who was publicly castigated and reviled. However private and/or less conscious attitudes to her may well have been characterised by an ambivalence which included fear and disgust on the one hand, and desire on the other. Within the discourse of the dance hall as degenerate, the ideal female dancing body was the traditional dancing body, to which was attributed purity, grace and authenticity. Alternatively, the modern body represented the reverse side of the coin, being characterised as in-authentic, dis-graceful and im-pure.

Competing with the discourse of the dance hall as 'degenerate space' was the dance hall as 'utopian space', the latter representing the positive side of modernity for women and was expressed most clearly in newspaper advertisements. The emergence of the public dance hall gave women an opportunity to exercise relatively more independence in terms of meeting prospective marriage partners and was, arguably, the only public space in which they could experience the extraordinary - a sense of the luxury, glamour and romance which they witnessed in the cinema. The ideal female body within this discourse

was the romantic body, adorned and glamorous. The latter body type was substantially embedded in, and dependent on, an ethos of consumption which originated in, and valorised, the extra-local.

While the female body was constructed, albeit implicitly, as centrally occupying the dance floor space, the male body was represented, in contrast, as being either ‘around’/‘outside’ or ‘above’ that space. Rather than being ‘within the dance’ they were represented as controlling the dance, one group through disruption, the other through their role as custodians of a traditional culture (both in terms of sustaining local communities and in terms of promulgating nationalist ideology^{xvii}). For men then, one of the body types was the ‘battling body’ representing men as fighters rather than dancers, the latter representation being associated with ‘modern’ dances. As I have already discussed, it is difficult to assess the normative significance of this type or how attractive it would be as a role model for male identity. The interpretation which I have offered is that the ‘fighting male body’ resulted in the symbolic annihilation of the ‘dancing female body’. The symbolic dimension could be further extended, I have suggested, to the wider arena of work and leisure. It could be seen as an attempt to have male activity (production) take precedence over the passive activity of women (consumption) and the ‘real/serious work’ of fighting over the leisure activity of dancing.^{xviii}

The male body was also predominant in the newspaper reports of traditional dance and was most commonly associated with the construction of local and national identity through the promotion and monitoring of the dance genre. The archetypal male body in this instance might be termed the ‘powerful’ ‘paternal’ or ‘custodial’ body. This body type was principally represented by the clergy and community leaders in their roles as

dance organisers, members of dance committees, notable attendants at dances and, as public spokespersons on dance.

These bodies are ideal types and need to be considered as such for at least two important reasons. One is that there is almost no newspaper evidence on how these embodied identities were negotiated in real dance halls by either women or men. It is likely that different embodied identities could be adopted at different times depending on the context. For instance male organisers of traditional dances may well have enjoyed the activity of dancing. However, it is highly unlikely that the local parish priest would be an avid dancer (even of traditional dance) as the reverence for his office would have precluded bodily movements and activities which were popularly perceived as lacking in *gravitas*. It is also conceivable that the categories of embodiment vied for dominance with each other in specific dance situations. For instance, it is probable that women were torn between the opposing embodied identities on offer that might entail a tension between respectability on the one hand and sexual expressiveness on the other. However, the permutations and combinations regarding embodied experiences of dance calls for further research and cannot be developed further here.

The second reason for treating the ideal types with caution is that the newspaper discourses were neither monolithic nor discrete. For example, while men's relationship to the dance hall was generally represented in terms of the public and political sphere, women were also represented in a similar manner in a minority of cases, one example being advertisements for dances organised by Cumann na mBan.^{xix} This also holds for the opposition between representations of traditional/ceili and modern/jazz dance. While the distinction is very clear in the newspaper reportage of *The Leitrim Observer*, it was

absent from the *Wexford People* for the same period. This might be expected considering that Leitrim was the locus of the most extreme opposition to jazz. It is also the case that the advertising for women's clothing was more 'up-market' in the *Wexford People* and in *The Connaught Tribune* than in *The Leitrim Observer*. This may have reflected differential disposable income and accessibility to the larger urban centres among the various readerships. To this extent, newspaper representations did differ in accordance with local socio-political circumstances. It is worth bearing in mind, therefore, that the present discussion is based on a limited number of observations and any further claims would warrant a more extensive newspaper analysis to explore the most typical patterns of newspaper representation and how they may have reflected local situations.

It would also be necessary to consider discourses on dance in the context of a range of discourses on identities in circulation at the time. On this point I would concur with Ryan (2002, p.6) who has claimed that during this period an 'examination of the national and provincial press uncovers a variety of conflicting and competing discourses...[and] that newspapers provide an insight into the complex and multi-faceted nature of attitudes and opinions in the Irish Free State'.

The findings presented here are suggestive rather than representative but they clearly attest to the fact that dance culture was neither monolithic nor static in Ireland of the 1930s and that the dance hall was an important site in which the relationship between bodies, spaces and cultural identities was being continuously negotiated and that gender was a primary marker of those identities.

NOTES

ⁱ The abbreviations used in extracts from the newspapers are as follows: LO for *The Leitrim Observer*, CT for *The Connaught Tribune*, WP for *The Western People*, and WXP for the *Wexford People*. The year is omitted from subsequent extracts from the newspapers as they all refer to the same year, 1934.

ⁱⁱ ‘Modern’ should not be confused with the more common use of the term to mean American Theatre Dance. In this context it means the newest and most up-to-date ballroom dances which accompanied the popular music (non-traditional) of the time and which originated in the US. And Britain.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jazz-dancing was somewhat of a misnomer since it was an umbrella term for non-traditional social dance and was frequently used interchangeably with ‘modern’ or ‘foreign’ dance. Newspaper coverage indicates the widespread public confusion about the precise meaning of the term jazz- dancing. Whether it was a jazz foxtrot or quickstep was not at issue the main point of contention being that it involved closed couple dancing (as did ballroom) thereby allowing closer physical contact than céilí dance where minimal body contact was the norm. ‘It is a fundamental characteristic of Irish dancing that the nearest approach to contiguity is the joining of partly outstretched hands’ opined one writer on the subject (Anelius, 1943, p.).

^{iv} The degenerate discourse was emic in so far as it is taken from clerical pronouncements. See quote from the Bishop of Galway reported in *The Leitrim Observer* of 17 February and also the infamous phrase ‘Irish dances do not make degenerates’ quoted in Breathnach, 1983, p. 44 . The other three discourses are based on categories developed by the author.

^v This trend was most explicitly expressed in the Constitution of 1937 in which womens’ primary role was constructed as mothers within the home and, *inter alia*, led to the implementation of the ‘marriage bar’ which denied married women access to Civil and Public Service jobs.

^{vi} It is interesting to note the equation of Irishness with the Catholic faith in this quote. The conflation of religion and ethnicity had been ongoing since the mid-nineteenth century when the Church strategically manoeuvred to gain control of education and health institutions and was formally sanctioned in the 1937 Constitution when it was given a ‘special position’. For further details see Whyte, 1980.

^{vii} The economic climate of the 1930s was characterised by a state policy of protectionism and an economic war with Britain which restricted the availability of consumer goods and encouraged the value of frugality.

^{viii} A typical example is the announcement of the opening of a ladies hairdressing saloon and beauty parlour in Carrick –on-Shannon in which the proprietor indicates that she is ‘late of MR. A. PALCIC’S, [note the capitalisation], Grafton Street, Dublin’ and where ‘All Modern Machinery and Equipment, as used by the leading Dublin Hairdresser’s will be employed...’, and where ‘Patrons are assured of Personal Attention and Efficiency’(LO, August 25).

^x The name is derived from their uniform distinguished by the colour of their shirts.

While they can to some degree be seen as analogous to other youth movements such as the Brownshirts, their ideologies and activities are generally regarded as ultra-conservative rather than fascist. They were in conflict with both the IRA and the de Valera led Fianna Fáil government; a conflict which originated in the Civil War and was both political and class-based/economic. 1934 was marked by incidents such as the relatively minor ones reported at dances but also more serious ones such as murder and attempted murder of rivals. For further reading on the ‘Blueshirts’, see Manning, 1981.

^{xi} The following programme announcement for the Gaiety Cinema in Carrick-on-Shannon seems germane to the discussion . It includes a film called ‘The Last Trail’ based on one of Zane Grey’s books of the same name. It is characterised as bringing ‘in conflict the tough gangsters of the eastern cities with the hard-riding, straight-shooting cowboys of the Western plains’. (LO, September 22).

^{xii} Men’s attitude to social dancing has been the subject of much discussion in sociology, cultural studies and dance studies. See Ward (1993) for a critical and insightful overview. To further the debate in an Irish context would require further empirical investigation of men’s dance practices and attitudes in a wider variety of contexts and, specifically the gradual transformation from rural to urban techniques of the body with rural to urban migration.

^{xiii} Newspaper coverage indicates that ceilis were generally held in local venues whereas dances were held in both local and extra-local venues.

^{xiv} Twenty six of Ireland's 32 counties achieved independence from British rule in 1922 which was subsequently known as 'The Free State' until the declaration of a Republic in 1949.

^{xv} Ceilidh is the most common spelling in the 1930s.

^{xvi} Prices varied according to venue, purpose, and type of dance. The range was from six pence for a concert followed by a céilí, to seven shillings and sixpence for ladies and ten shillings for gents for an annual Agricultural Show Dance. In the latter case it is worth noting the common practice of pricing according to gender. The average price for non-céilí dances was about two shillings. The price for the Gaiety in Carrick-on-Shannon was five shillings.

^{xvii} While the independent state was but a little over ten years in existence, the nationalist ideology which underpinned it was based on the idea of a long and unbroken thread of cultural traditions which were required to be transmitted from one generation to the next.

^{xviii} This gendering process may be homologous to the gendering of attitudes towards television viewing where research has indicated that men tend to overestimate the amount of factual programming they view and where they express criticism of 'women's genres' such as television soap-opera.

^{xix} Cumann na mBan [trans. The Society of Women] was the name given to the women's organisation of the Irish Republican Army.

REFERENCES

- Anelius, J. (1943) *National Action : A Plan for the National Recovery of Ireland* (2nd. Edition), Gaelic Athletic Association, Dublin.
- Back, L. (1997) 'Nazism and the Call of the Jitterbug' in *Dance in the City*, ed. H. Thomas, Macmillan London.
- Bordo, S. (1993) *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Bourdieu, P. (1962) 'Celibat et condition paysanne', *Etudes Rurales*, Vol.11, pp.32-135.
- Breathnach, B. (1983) *Dancing in Ireland*, Dal gCais Publications, Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare, Ireland.
- Brennan, H. (1994) 'Reinventing Tradition: the boundaries of Irish dance', *History Ireland*, Summer, pp. 22-4.
- Browning, B. (1995) *Samba: Resistance in Motion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Brennan, H. (1999) *The Story of Irish Dance*, Brandon, Dingle, Co. Kerry.
- Byrne, H. (1997) ' Going to the Pictures', in *Media Audiences in Ireland: Power and Cultural Identity*, eds M.J. Kelly & B. O'Connor, University College Dublin Press, Dublin.
- Cowan, J. (1990) *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ.

-
- Daniel, Y.P. (1995) *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Davis, K. (1997) *Embodied Practices : Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, Sage, London.
- Desmond, J. ‘Embodying difference: dance and cultural studies ‘ in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. A. Carter, Routledge, London.
- Douglas, M. (1975) ‘ Do dogs laugh?: a cross- cultural approach to body symbolism ‘ in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Dyer, R. (1992), ‘Entertainment and utopia’ in *Only Entertainment*, Routledge, London.
- Elias, N. (1978 [1939] *The History of Manners: The Civilizing Process, Volume 1*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- Elias, N. (1982) [1939] *State Formation and Civilization: The Civilizing Process, Volume 2*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Foley, C. (2001) ‘Perceptions of Irish stepdance: nationa, global and local’, *Dance Research Journal*. Vol. 33, No. 1, pp.34-45.
- Foucault, M. (1981) *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Gray, B. and L. Ryan (1997) ‘(Dis) locating ‘woman’ and women in representations of Irish nationality’ in *Women and Irish Society*, eds A. Byrne and M. Leonard, Beyond the Pale Publications, Belfast.
- Keating, A. (2002) ‘Secrets and Lies: An Exploration of the Role of Identity, Culture and Communication in the Policy Process Relating to the Provision of Protection and Care for

Vulnerable Children in the Irish Free State and Republic 1923-1974, unpublished PhD thesis, Dublin City University.

Kuhn, A. (2002), *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, I.B. Tauris, London.

Lynch, L. (1989) *Set Dances of Ireland: tradition and evolution*, Séadna Books in collaboration with Dal gCais Publications, San Francisco and Milltown Malby, Co. Clare, Ireland.

Manning, M. (1971) *The Blueshirts*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin.

Masayo, M. (2002) *Gesture, Gender, Nation: Dance and Social Change in Uzbekistan*, Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Conn.

Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, Oxford.

McAvoy, S. (1999) 'The regulation of sexuality in the Irish Free State, 1929-35' in *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940*, eds. G. Jones and E. Malcolm, Cork University Press, Cork.

O'Connor, B. (2003) 'Ruin and romance: heterosexual discourses on Irish popular dance, 1920-1960, *Irish Journal of Sociology*, Vol.12, No.2, pp. 50-67.

O'Connor, B. (1997) 'Safe sets': women, dance and 'communitas' in *Dance in the City*, ed. H. Thomas, Macmillan, London.

O'Dowd, L. (1987) 'Church, state and women' in *Gender in Irish Society*, eds C. Curtin, P. Jackson & B. O'Connor, Galway University Press, Galway.

Polhemus, T. (1995) 'Dance, gender and culture in *Dance, Gender and Culture*, ed. H. Thomas, London, Macmillan.

-
- Power, R. (1996) 'Healthy motion' : images of "natural" and "cultured" movement in early twentieth-century Britain', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol.12, No. 5, pp. 551-565.
- Ward, A. (1993) 'Dancing in the dark: rationalism and the neglect of social dance' in *Dance, Gender and Culture*, ed. H. Thomas, Macmillan, London.
- Quinn, A.(2001) *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin.
- Ryan, L. (1998) 'Negotiating modernity and tradition: newspaper debates on the 'modern girl' in the Irish Free State', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 7, No.2, pp.181-197.
- Ryan, L. (2002) *Gender, Identity and the Irish Press, 1922-1937: Embodying the Nation*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston.
- Thomas, H. (2003) *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*, London, Palgrave.
- Tubridy, M. (1994)'The set dancing revival', *Ceol na hÉireann*, Piobairí Uilleann, pp.23-34.
- Savigliano, M.E. (1995) *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.
- Sherlock, J. (1996) ed. *Women's Studies International Forum* (special issue on Gender and Dance) Vol. 19., No. 5.
- Veblen, T. (1953) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Mentor, New York.
- Whyte, J. (1980) *Church and State in Modern Ireland 1923-1970*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 2nd. Edn.
