



A Short History of Irish Dancing

Although not much is known about Irish dancing, there are records of Druids dancing. They honored the oak tree and the sun with circular dances. Those Druid dances survive today in ring dances.

When Christianity came to Ireland around 400 AD, the priests borrowed the pagan symbols and styles to illuminate their manuscripts. But the peasants did not change their music and dancing.

The Irish world was not always peaceful. Waves of invaders came from across the water. Each new culture brought their own forms of dance. At first the Vikings raided the land, killing the people, destroying their homes, and stealing their possessions. Gradually, the former enemies become friends. Rather than stealing from the Irish, the Vikings began trading with them. In 1014, the Feisianna began: part trade fair, political gathering, and cultural event. It lasted for days. The people played sports, listened to storytellers, learned crafts, played music and danced.

After the Vikings, the Normans from France and the Anglo-Saxons from Britain invaded Ireland. They built great castles and large manor houses. They also brought their own dances. The Irish mixed these new dances with their own. In the Sixteenth Century, many dances were performed for visiting royalty. The Norman Carol, Trenchmore, Rinncé Fada, Hey, and Jig were all very popular.

Not all dances were performed in the courts. In the countryside, rural people met at a crossroad to visit with each other, listen to music, and dance. A musician had to have an instrument that was easy to carry; like a fiddle or a bagpipe, or a small accordion. Group dances were (and are) called Ceili (*kay-lee*).



In the 17th Century the Penal Laws were introduced in Ireland. Everything Irish was suppressed including language, music and dance. Dance was done in secret.

Dance Masters, who traveled from town to town teaching children how to dance, appeared in the 18th Century. Many children did not know their right from their left, so the Dance Master would have each student tie a hay rope on one foot and a straw rope on the other so they knew which foot to use in each step. The Dance Master made up group dances to help the children learn. Students who were very talented became solo dancers.

Each region had their own Dance Master and their dances were a little different from other regions. When the people met at the Feis, the Dance Masters competed with one another to see who had the best dance steps and could last the longest.

The theatrical production called *Riverdance* brought Irish dancing to a worldwide audience. The World Irish Dance Association hold competitions all year long leading up to the final Grand Feis held in Ireland every Easter. Dancers come from all over the world to compete. Costumes are very elaborate with many Celtic symbols embroidered onto the fabric.

Irish Dance looks much different today than it did in early times. Just as it evolved through history, it continues to evolve as new steps and new influences make subtle then grander changes over time.