

# The Wind that Shakes the Barley

A Teaching Supplement from Celtic Fest, Inc.

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## Mad About Plaid

### *Tartans and Kilts*

Tartan is popular all over the globe, but is most often associated with Celtic (particularly Scottish) people. Although the origins of the tartan are rather obscure, the existence of Scottish tartans can be traced all the way back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. What we think of now as "Highland Dress" most likely came from the Irish Celts, who crossed the Irish Sea to settle in Scotland. The Highland dress of this time was based loosely on the Roman tunic, which was usually made of saffron yellow-dyed linen. In order to display their rank, the Irish Celts marked their shirts with stripes – the more stripes, the higher their rank.

The Scottish Highlanders favored warm, woolen garments and preferred to use purple and blue dyes to color their cloths. Darker colors provided better camouflage to keep the wearer hidden among the Scottish heather.

The first unsewn kilt was known as the "Breacan-feile," or belted plaid. It was made from fifteen yards of the tartan material. The lower part of the garment was wrapped around the body and belted, to form the kilt, and the rest of the plaid material was flung loosely over one shoulder and pinned in place with a brooch. The remaining material hung down the Scotsman's back. The outfit was quite practical for the Highlanders, because it left their arms free for fighting, and also provided enough material to shield them from bad weather.

Highlanders could even use the cloth of their kilts as a primitive sleeping bag!

Around the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most tribes or clans in Scotland had their own identifying tartans. Weaving these cloths became an integral part of the craft industry of the area. Weavers collected their dyes from local mosses, plants and lichens. The women kept count of the layout of checks and stripes in each of the various patterns.

In the late 1740s, the English government passed several acts banning, among other traditions of the Highlands, the wearing of the kilt. This act, which was known as the Act for Abolition and Proscription of Highland Dress decreed that no one in Scotland could wear the plaid or any other item associated with tartan dress. Initially, the ban was enforced in order to punish the Highlanders for a failed revolt by one of their leaders, Bonnie Prince Charlie. However, the ban on the kilt lasted for 35 years before it was finally lifted in 1822, when King George IV visited Scotland and the clan chiefs were asked to greet him in full Highland Dress. The Proscription Acts were not fully lifted from the general population, however, until 1782.

Since that time, the popularity of the tartan and the kilt has grown throughout the world.

### *The Origins of Tartan Day*

In order to acknowledge the contribution of the immigrant Scots upon North America, many

Scottish organizations and societies in the United States and Canada began to use the anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) as an opportunity to celebrate their heritage.

The practice became so common within Canada that on December 19, 1991, the Ontario Legislature passed a resolution proclaiming April 6<sup>th</sup> as National Tartan Day, recognizing the significance of the tartan to Scotland and its history.

The United States did not hesitate too long after Canada's proclamation. On March 20, 1998, Senate Resolution Number 155, which had been proposed by US Senate Republican majority leader Trent Lott, unanimously passed, declaring April 6<sup>th</sup> Tartan Day in the United States as well.

## Activities

- Research the Senate Resolution 155, in its entirety. Have the students each research and report to the class about a Scottish American who made a valuable contribution or achievement in one of the following fields: science, technology, medicine, government, literature, visual arts, economics or performing arts.
2. Write an editorial article for a fictional newspaper arguing why you believe Tartan Day should or should not be celebrated in the United States.
  3. Tartan Day became a reality in part because of the Scottish societies, clubs and organizations within the United States. There are many of these types of cultural organizations in the Lehigh Valley. Contact a member of one such organization, and find out what other holidays and special days these organizations observe and how.

4. Families in Scotland and each of the counties in Ireland have their own distinct tartan. Even the City of Bethlehem has its own tartan! Students can research their own tartans, the City of Bethlehem tartan or design their own tartan for the class.
5. As a result of Prince Charles Edward Stuart's defeat at Culloden, the English imposed many strict laws banning the traditions of the Highlands. Instruments of war, including the bagpipes, swords and targes were banned. The tartan, kilt and other traditional Scottish apparel were banned. Even after some of these bans were lifted, the Scots experienced a period known as the Highland Clearances, in which Scots were forced to emigrate as landowners found that it was more profitable to raise sheep on land which previously held farms. Brainstorm other instances in history in which one group restricted the rights of another by limiting what they could wear, how they could behave or where they could go.

## The Fling's the Thing

Although many people associate Highland dancing with the graceful young women leaping and turning on the stage of a Highland dance competition, the earliest Highland dancers were most likely hunters and warriors. It is believed that the dancing began as a form of storytelling. Clan members would dance about to regale their fellow adventurers of their hunts, battles and journeys.

Much later, Highland regiments used versions of these dances to train their soldiers. The soldiers would do drills of dancing to increase their stamina and agility in battle, or even sometimes as a superstitious gesture of luck, as in the case

of the Sword dance. In *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, you will see three different distinctive types of Highland Dance.

**The Sword Dance** – According to legend, this victory dance originated near Dunsinane in 1054. At that time, Malcolm Canmore, King of Scotland, defeated a MacBeth chief in battle. The victorious king danced over his bloody claymore or two-headed broadsword and the severed head of his enemy chieftain. In a less macabre version of the story, the king merely crossed his sword over the sword of his fallen foe and danced triumphantly over both. Whatever the truth behind the dance's origins, it quickly became a ritual that soldiers performed on the eve of battle. If, during the dance, a warrior touched either of the crossed swords beneath his feet, he was doomed to die in battle. If a dancer's feet avoided the swords, the soldiers would be victorious and safe at the end of the battle.

**The Highland Fling** - This upbeat <sup>DANCE</sup> ~~is~~ is among the most recognizable of the Highland dances. The dancer holds his or her arms overhead to imitate the antlers of a stag. Intricate, light footwork calls to mind that same deer leaping about the Highlands. According to legend, the Fling was originally a dance of victory performed by a solo warrior upon his shield, called a targe. The targe had a sharp metal spike embedded in the center, so intricate footwork was needed to avoid injury during the dance.

**Seann Triubhas** – Pronounced “shawn trews,” this dance gets its name from the Gaelic words for “old trousers.” When the Act of Proscription banned Highland customs in the 1740s, no one in Scotland (except for members of the Highland regiments of the British Army) was permitted to wear a kilt. The motions of the

dance depict a man shedding his tight-fitting English trousers in favor of the freedom of a kilt.

## Activities

Celtic hunters used dance to convey their adventures in battle or on a hunt. Have each student think of an exciting event in their life. Students must devise a way to convey their story to the class without speaking.

2. Celtic warriors and hunters often told of their battles and adventures through song as well as dance. Brainstorm examples of songs that tell of war or battles in the United States.
3. Celtic warriors kept in top physical condition by dancing the Highland dances. Today, athletes sometimes use dance (usually ballet) to keep their bodies trained and limber. Research at least one well-known athlete who uses some form of dance to stay in shape.

## Keeping in Step

For those of you who may have watched *Lord of the Dance* at Stabler arena this St. Patrick's Day, you may have observed that Irish step dancers keep their upper bodies rigid as their feet tap out intricate steps and rhythms. Historically, traditional Irish step dance is the only individual folk dance that does not use the hands. According to legend, at the end of the nineteenth century, a parish priest in Donegal decided that girls appeared haughty and suggestive when they danced with their hands on their waist or hips. He ruled that they be removed, which resulted in the traditional Irish dances

characterized by stiff upper bodies and very active feet.

Irish dancing can be categorized into three distinct groups: Country House Set Dancing, Ceili Dancing and Traditional Irish Step Dancing.

Country House Set Dancing is derived from quadrilles or square dances. British officers became familiarized with these dances in France during the Napoleonic Wars. These officers, in turn, brought the dances to Ireland. The counties of Ireland each had its own unique set, which was danced at weddings and other such social gatherings. Set dancing is danced to polka-like tunes, and has enjoyed increasing popularity in both Ireland and the United States.

Ceili Dancing became popular in pre-famine Ireland, when dancing at rural crossroads was a popular pastime. These dances were held on Sunday evening in the summer, usually with a lone fiddler playing for money and encouraging folks to dance with lively reels and jigs.

Ceili Dancing grew significantly in popularity in the years that followed the Great Irish Famine. The word ceili referred to a gathering of neighbors in a house for an evening of music, dancing and storytelling. Due to the severe economic conditions that the Irish faced after the potato famine, many people were forced to emigrate to Britain, Canada and, most often, America. On the evening before an Irish family set off for the United States, a dance known as the "American Wake" was performed, which became the model for modern-day ceilis.

During the eighteenth century, a figure known as the dancing master began to appear commonly throughout Ireland. He was a wandering dance instructor who

moved from village to village within a district and taught the peasants to dance. He was traditionally a flamboyant character who wore brightly colored clothing and carried a large staff.

Dancing masters generally stayed respectfully within the realms of their own districts, and rarely encroached upon another master's territory. When dancing masters met at local fairs or festivals, they would challenge one another to a public dancing contest that ended only when one master dropped over from fatigue and exhaustion.

The dancing masters developed group dances so that their less-gifted pupils would be given the opportunity to enjoy dancing. Accomplished solo dancers were held in such high esteem that people would often take their doors off the hinges and place them on the ground so that the soloists had a hard surface to dance upon. Given these high standards for dancing and the high regard in which dancers were held, it should not be surprising that villagers sometimes kidnapped dancing master from a neighboring district.

What we know of as Traditional Irish Step Dancing developed with the dancing masters in the eighteenth century. It is the type of dancing you may see in *Riverdance* or as performed locally by the Maureen O'Grady School of Irish Dancing. Dancers stand with their upper bodies taut as they perform various reels, jigs, slip jigs, horn pipes and solo set pieces.

Irish dancers wear costumes that commemorate the clothing of the past. Each school of dance has its own distinctive dancing costume. Dresses are modeled after those worn by Irish peasants two hundred years ago. Many of the dresses are decorated with hand-embroidered Celtic

designs, and the costumes themselves are surprisingly heavy. Male dancers usually wear a plain kilt and jacket, with a folded cloak draped from one shoulder. Both male and female dancers wear hornpipe shoes when dancing. Softer shoes similar to ballet shoes are worn for reels and jigs.

## Activities

1. The Potato Famine had a tremendous effect on the population of Ireland. Many immigrants came to America, dreaming of a land where the streets were paved with gold and every man had the opportunity to seek his fortune. Unfortunately, many of these immigrants faced discrimination when they reached America's shores. Try to imagine what it would be like to come to America as a poor potato farmer in the late 1800s. Write a week of journal entries describing your first few days in the United States and what prejudices you encounter.
2. Every culture seems to have its own background in dance. Research some other cultures that have a strong folk dance tradition. What do these dances have in common? How are they different? When and where were many of these dances performed?
3. The Irish Step Dancer's costume is modeled after traditional Irish peasant dress of the nineteenth century. What were peasants in other countries wearing? How did their dress reflect their climate and other living conditions? Using modern publications as their guidelines, have each student design a mini fashion magazine for the well-dressed and well-traveled peasant in the nineteenth century.

4. Form a roundtable discussion and explore the various issues that faced immigrants in the nineteenth century and those issues that might face modern-day immigrants. Include any of the following questions to keep the discussion moving:
  - a. What are the reasons people immigrate to other countries?
  - b. Why might immigrants be particularly vulnerable to being taken advantage of or otherwise "abused"?
  - c. What common obstacles do immigrants encounter, and why aren't these obstacles easy to overcome?
  - d. How does geographic location affect the experiences an immigrant might have?
5. Create a profile of your city's immigration history. Include your perceptions of the influence of immigrants on your city's economy, relationships among residents of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and resulting changes in your city's neighborhoods.
6. Learn about the laws that govern immigration in the United States and create a timeline of important legislation and related court cases.

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