

ESSAYS

An Interview with David Roy:
The Edinburgh Ceilidh Consultant

KIRBY FULLERTON



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An Interview with David Roy: The Edinburgh Ceilidh Consultant

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When I messaged David to arrange a time for our interview he replied: “Well why don’t we kill two birds with one stone, and you can come round for lunch!” I was very pleased, feeling that my first attempt at interviewing was well on its way to being a success. That being said, David deserves most of the credit for our budding friendship, as he greeted me warmly upon my first visit to the Edinburgh Ceilidh Club and eagerly invited me to the pub to join him and the other kilt-clad regulars afterwards. I was kindly permitted to record our lively lunch, and I have reproduced some of the dialogue here, combining it with notes and final observations collected as part of a larger study on gender and the performance of tradition at the Edinburgh Ceilidh Club.

As I arrived, he yelled from the kitchen for me to let myself in the front door. After entering his third floor flat, I was greeted, as I am every Tuesday night at the Ceilidh Club- with a warm hug, a kiss on both cheeks and a pat on the back. He took my coat and we sat down on barstools framing the small table in his cozy, yet comfortable kitchen. Jolly and at ease he joked and laughed as he talked about his experiences in the Ceilidh and Scottish dance world with the confidence of a self-proclaimed “Edinburgh Ceilidh dance expert”. Our interview ended up being more of a conversation that I prompted and ‘drove’ in different directions, focusing on my interest in the performance of gender in the tradition of Ceilidh dance.

Kirby: “It’s nice that people seem to change partners though, and ask different people to dance.”

David: “Yes, that’s significant. The nature of Ceilidh dancing is that it is a chance to socialize, a social occasion. A chance to meet up with so many other people. Some of the dances force you to, because you swap partners around the line. You get no choice.”

Kirby: “There does, however, always seem to be a few less boys than girls there...”

David: Well, yes, generally speaking, it’s only a few less boys than girls, which, compared to most dance scenes, is...”

Kirby: “Impressive?”

David: “Yes, very impressive.”

Kirby: “It seems that the girl can play the role of the boy in most dances, that’s the impression I’ve gotten.”

David: “Well, yes, if you’ve run out of boys. I do think, though, as society has gotten more and more accepting towards, ummmm, same gender relationships, it’s getting more acceptable for two guys to dance together...Which, for the heterosexual one...makes it, hmmm, interesting, when you get passed a dance partner down...”

Kirby: “Right. I guess as a girl I’m much more used to dancing with girls.”

David: “Guys, heterosexual guys, are definitely not used to dancing with guys.”

This conversation proved very fruitful for my later research on the performance of gender in Ceilidh dance. The simultaneous existence of a certain gender fluidity together with restrictive traditional ideals made for a very interesting point of inquiry in later interviews and conversations.

Kirby: “I know this is a broad question, so take it any direction you wish, but could you describe your ideal Ceilidh? What is characteristic of some of the best Ceilidhs you’ve been to?”

David: (*David pauses, contemplating the question seriously*)... “I think it is very important to have a good, bouncy wooden floor.”

Kirby: “Okay! I didn’t expect you to say that!”

David: "It just makes it softer to dance on if you've got what's called a 'suspended floor'. So, if you've got a concrete floor, that's very hard work. Ummm...and I certainly notice that because I've got osteoporosis in the knees, I can do about two hours dancing, then I begin to feel the strain in my knees. I can last longer if I'm on a suspended floor. Any dancer would say that."

Kirby: "So, a good floor. What else?"

David: "A band that can play at a steady speed. A band that can read its audience."

Kirby: "Okay, so is that in the calling of the dances?"

David: "Yes, but [a band that] can play at a speed that the audience can cope with. Sometimes, you get to the point where the band isn't playing the band, it's playing the audience. So they're really watching the dancers. It might be an age thing, a generation thing, if they [the band] can see that the dancers are up for something faster, a faster dance, then they'll play more dances up to speed, rather than, say, a waltz. You'll often find that at a Ceilidh with the older generation, they play a lot more waltzes."

Kirby: "What about Scottish identity and Ceilidh dancing, especially the way it seems to be interpreted by tourists as a cultural event, as opposed to another type of social event?"

David: "Well, I think there are two aspects to that. Yes, it is a traditional thing, and if you go to a Scottish wedding, well, it just isn't a Scottish wedding unless it's got a Ceilidh. If they only have a disco...it's not a Scottish wedding (*laughs*)."

Kirby: "Did you have one at your wedding?"

David: "We didn't have a Ceilidh, we had a live jazz band I think... I got married in Kent, you see. I hadn't found Ceilidh at that time, you see, or else we would have, no question."

I later discovered, after a bit of prodding, that David, although Scottish, was raised in England. After marrying his wife, they both moved to Edinburgh to start a family. Although David readily admits that his premier interest in dance was for exercise, his love of country is apparent in his passion for Ceilidh dance, something I suspect he already had prior to his move from Edinburgh, but found the perfect vehicle for in Ceilidh dance. After retiring, and what I have inferred to be the death of his wife, his Ceilidh dance schedule seems to have taken a dramatic increase, as he goes to as many as four Ceilidhs a week, traveling extensively to events and festivals.

David: "My son got married last year, and he did have a Ceilidh. He's Scots, born and bred in Edinburgh. He got married to a girl from Liverpool, and she had done the odd little Ceilidh. They're both doctors. Let me just check this..."

The oven buzzer goes off loudly, and he gets up to take an apple strudel out of the oven. The small kitchen is filled with an aroma of warm pie as plates clatter. He continues the story as he serves me a heaping portion of pie:

David: "The Ceilidh, that was fun. It was in middle England, you see, so the Scots half of the family, we get in full winter day dress, so tweed jackets, tweed waistcoats, kilts, all matching kilts, in my, in our, other family tartan, so that worked well. They had booked a Ceilidh band in Liverpool. The Ceilidh band had come from the south coast somewhere. I don't know why they chose a Ceilidh from the south coast.... but it was fine. The night before the wedding, they were discussing what to do as bride and groom, so I taught them the Rosa waltz. I don't know if you know it."

Kirby: "Hmm, can you talk me through how it goes again?"

David scoots off his stool, comes over to me, and we stand up, palms together. He takes me through the dance, holding my hands as we rock from side to side, then ushering me under his arm for an admittedly less than graceful twirl. I am very aware of the space in the small kitchen, and try to avoid knocking over the framed picture of what looks like his son's wedding. He does not seem to be concerned. Rock, rock, twirl. Rock, rock, twirl. I suddenly remember and exclaim, "Oh yes! I believe we danced this one a few weeks ago!"

David: "I would have probably forced it upon you! So the bride was very concerned that the band wouldn't be able to play the appropriate music, so I said "Don't worry, it's a waltz. The band will have waltzes coming out their ears", but to calm her nerves, I went up to the band, to the caller, and the first thing he said, bear in mind he's from the south coast, "I know you!""

Kirby: "So you knew him?"

David: "No, no, but he knew me. So we went round, and found that the common factor was that we had both been, for a couple of years, to the Whitby Folk and Dance Festival that happens every year!"

Kirby: "It's such a small world!"

David: "Yes, the Ceilidh world, to some extent, and the Scottish country-dance world...well, that's very small. He had recognized me. I'm recognizable, for looking like Santa Claus, and a red kilt that sticks out."

After hearing this, I couldn't help but laugh and confess that at my first Ceilidh, my friends and I had referred to him as 'Father Christmas', and it had stuck as far as him being called 'FC' in our fieldnotes.

An enquiry into the most recent Ceilidh he attended led to a half hour animated rant about the virtues of scouting, as David is an avid scout leader, and had recently attended a Sea Scouts event in Poland where he organized a Ceilidh for the troops. I eventually manage to veer him back to my neatly typed and printed questions, of which I had asked almost none...

Kirby: "Before I have to run, is there anything I didn't ask, that you think I should have asked?"

David: "Why do I go? My reason for dancing started off as fitness, and then became social. And I particularly enjoy taking up novices onto the dance floor, having a good time, because then they'll come back to Scotland, if they're on holiday, or whatever.

Kirby: "So you're kind of like a Scottish ambassador?"

David: "It seems so! A number of times, it seems, in the last year, a girl came up to me and said "Hey Dave, can I have this dance?" and turns out she was my dance partner five years earlier, when she was fresh to Edinburgh... Probably every couple of weeks, I get a message saying "Dave! I've got so-and-so coming over, and I can't find a Ceilidh!" So I've become a kind of Ceilidh consultant."

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