

When Australian Folk Danced so Expertly and Energetically

Shirley Andrews

Human beings have always been equipped with the basic instruments of dance and music — their muscles and vocal chords — and have used them since very early times. There were also plenty of handy objects around that could be banged together to help with rhythm.

Australia's earth has been danced on by many Aboriginal feet for at least 40,000 years. The settlers who started arriving from the British Isles in 1788 came from places with long-established traditions of both music and dance. During the 19th century the folk here developed their own traditions. It seems strange, therefore, that the people who pioneered our folk revival in the 1950s and 60s concentrated so much on music and have never given the same serious attention to dance.

Those pioneers were strongly influenced by the English folklorists whose studies had been centred on earlier times when most people lived in isolated villages. The term, 'folk dance' tended to be associated with their style of dancing, mainly regional in nature, and common to most European countries. It was this style of dancing that was featured in the folk revivals started earlier this century in the British Isles.

Some people had very rigid ideas of the nature of folk dance, seeing it as pure and uncontaminated by any influences from upper class, theatrical or other styles. But any researcher who pays attention to historical details can show that there has been considerable interchange of dances between social classes, as well as between regions and even between countries. In the days when most of the ordinary people didn't travel far from their own villages, the movement of armies and armies of occupation were found to be a good means of exchange of dance and its music for these people. The travelling aristocracy were also important in the passage of a social dance from one country to another. Philip Richardson¹ referred to a new dance as a social climber in its country of origin where it climbed up the social ladder. Then when transferred by the aristocracy to their social circle in another country, it reversed the process and travelled down the social scale back to the ordinary folk.

The influence of dancing teachers, especially travelling ones, has also been overlooked by folklorists. Their influence on Irish dancing in rural areas was

1 Philip J.S. Richardson, *Social Dances of the 19th Century*, London, Herbert Jenkins, 1960.

emphasised by J.G. O’Keefe and Art O’Brien,² and on Scottish dancing by George Emmerson.³ An Englishman, Arthur Young, travelling widely in Ireland in the 1770s, was very impressed with the dancing there. He wrote⁴ ‘Dancing is so universal among them that there are everywhere itinerant dancing-masters, to whom the cotters pay six-pence a quarter for teaching their families.’

Our first settlers from the British Isles left for Australia in that period which was a time of great change, especially in England. An agricultural revolution, with its extensive closures of the common land, and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution led to great disruption of rural life with whole populations displaced from their villages. English writers of the late 18th and the 19th centuries and later social historians give a depressing picture of village life with the steady decline in ceremonies and customs associated with holidays and with rural work such as sheep shearing and harvest time.

Actually, very few of our earliest migrants came here direct from village life.⁵ The convicts came mainly from big towns, although some of them would have previously been displaced from their rural life into the worst sort of urban poverty. Up until the 1830s the only free settlers, other than the military, were of middle class origin. But some of the English country dances were danced here in that period, often those that had become fashionable in English upper class circles in the late 18th century. Our early newspapers record their being danced at balls held within the small circles of those who considered themselves as gentry, with the music often provided by a regimental band. Some dances were known throughout the British Isles. Three of these are mentioned on May 11th, 1803 in the *Sydney Gazette* as being danced at a wedding party to the music of a fiddler.

Overseas the big social changes were beginning to influence social customs such as dancing where the regional style was no longer suitable. A new style was to be provided by dancing teachers adapting folk dances, mainly European, for dancing on smooth floors instead of on village greens. The two main forms were the square sets or quadrilles and the closed couple dances with partners face to face. As the teachers usually claimed to have made up the dances, tracing their origins later has been difficult. But this folk dance origin was very important. Philip Richardson states that ‘A careful study of the history of our social dances during the past two or three hundred years reveals the fact that a new dance, if it is to have worldwide appeal, must come from a folk dance.’

French folk dance not only provided the basic form of many of the steps adopted in classical ballet but also the basic steps of the Quadrille (known here

2 J.G. O’Keefe and Art O’Brien, *A Handbook of Irish Dances*, Dublin, O’Donoghue, 1903.

3 George Emmerson, *A Social History of Scottish Dance*, Montreal, Queen’s U.P., 1972.

4 Arthur Young, *A Tour of Ireland*, Dublin, 1780, reprinted in *Arthur Young’s Tour of Ireland*, ed. A.W.Hutton, London, Bell & Sons, 1892.

5 R.B. Madgwick, *Immigration into Eastern Australia, 1788-1850*, reprinted Sydney, University Press, 1969.

later as the First Set), the first of these square sets, and its music as well. It was made up by combining four of the most popular Contradanses (square dances for two or four couples) with a fifth one added later. It was believed to have arrived in London in 1815, brought by aristocrats who had visited Paris. It didn't take long for it to travel here and the *Sydney Gazette* on July 1st, 1824 reported that the program of a recent ball consisted of country dances, quadrilles and Spanish waltzes.

The Waltz, first of the closed couple dances to progress to a ballroom floor, had arrived here even earlier. Historian Marjorie Barnard was said to have found evidence of it in Sydney in 1815.⁶ This was probably at private functions as Governor Macquarie insisted that Government House balls feature his favourite Scottish reels. In Europe its transition from village green to dance hall had already taken most of the second half of the 18th century. It was then danced vigorously in the suburban dance halls of Vienna. Upper class circles were shocked by the close face to face position of the couple. However, it was not nearly as close as the bear-like hug common in the Landler and the Dreher, the Austrian and Bavarian dances believed to be the ancestors of the waltz. It provoked a very stern editorial in the *Times* when first danced at the English court.

The exiles in Australia (as many saw themselves) took up these new dances that arrived from 'home' with amazing speed and enthusiasm. The arrival of the Polka with its attractive and unusual rhythm in the 1840s caused the most excitement. Music written in this rhythm by Jacques Offenbach was published in the *Illustrated London News* on March 23rd, 1844 and the full instructions for the dance (which they called the Drawing-room Polka) followed on May 11th. This paper had many subscribers in Australia, and personal reminiscences from that period record the enthusiasm with which this latest fashion was taken up to start what was known as the 'polka craze.'

These new dances gradually pushed out the country dances, reels, etc. from the social dance scene until by the 1850s they had taken this over in all levels of society. In 1851, an upper class visitor from Tasmania, Louisa Ann Meredith visited what she described as a 'shilling ball' and was impressed by the working class dancers there. She described this scene:

The room was filled with men and women of the working class in their everyday dresses, men in fustian coats, blue and red, and serge shirts; the commonest cord or fustian trousers, trade-grimed or mud-bespattered... The women, young and older, in dowdy common gowns, shawls, bonnets, and walking shoes. These people in the most orderly and correct manner imaginable, were dancing quadrilles, polkas, waltzes, etc., generally with great precision, sobriety, and good manners.⁷

6 C.W. Cumes, *Their Chastity Was Not Too Rigid. Leisure Times in Early Australia*, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1979.

7 Louisa Ann Meredith, *Over the Straits. A Visit to Victoria*, London, Chapman, 1861.

The settlers, clinging tightly to any link with their homeland, adopted each new dance with enthusiasm. Many more quadrilles and couples dances arrived to be quickly added to our dance programs. Many version of these developed here and other dances in similiar styles were created. The folk style dances were danced only in limited circles and survived mainly as competition dances at Caledonian and Hibernian fairs and the popular eisteddfods.

Overseas visitors were fulsome in their praise of Australian dancers. Visiting Melbourne in the 1860s, Clara Aspinall⁸ considered that 'the ladies and gentlemen are the most imdefatigable. and I believe the most accomplished, in the world. Dancing is the accomplishment which is most cultivated in the colony', A later visitor,⁹ obviously a bachelor, wrote 'Most of the women dance divinely. All through Australia, it seems to come as naturally to girls as walking'.

The discovery of gold brought people from many countries. A run through the newspapers of the times, especially in Ballarat, shows a multicultural entertainment scene, with many European names among the musicians playing for the new 19th century social dances. This was a very lively period everywhere for these dances with most well-known composers producing dance music and leading dancers performing stage versions of the new dances. This style of social dancing was unique in that it was a fully integrated multicultural style which featured adaptations of European folk dances accompanied by music in their original rhythms.

As well as being so popular as entertainment, dancing was very much a part of everyday life with activities such as new businesses being launched with a dance, the procession in 1856 celebrating the granting of an eight hour working day finished with dancing in the park¹⁰; even Ned Kelly danced the Quadrille with Mrs Jones, proprietor of the Glenrowan Hotel during the siege.¹¹ A few traditions from earlier days did continue here. The Woolshed Ball at the end of the shearing flourished, adapting effortlessly to the new dance style. Also individual step dance developed its own style and was often featured as a solo item at balls. This general popularity of dancing was emphasised by historian, Margaret Kiddle,

Balls of all kinds remained one of the favourite entertainments of all classes from the squatters to the town larrikins. Those given by the publicans were open to all, and held in their hotels if there was sufficient space... At all balls, whether under the auspices of the bachelors, or the publicans, dancing was vigorous and lasted till daylight.¹²

8 Clara Aspinall, *Three Years in Melbourne*, London, L. Booth, 1862.

9 Hon Harold Finch-Hatton, *Advance Australia!* London, W.H. Allen & Co., 1885.

10 Shirley Andrews, *Take Your Partners*, Melbourne, Hyland House, 1979.

11 Nell Challingsworth, *Australia's Dancing Heritage*, Melbourne, Go Dancing Publications, 1994.

12 Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*, Melbourne U.P., 1961.

There was a great deal of dance music published in Australia, and this sheet music was widely distributed. Many of the tunes now collected from traditional musicians were likely to have been passed down to them from earlier ear players who may have heard them played by others who had learnt them from this sheet music. The long period of popularity enjoyed by these dances was assisted by the fact that so much of popular music could always be adapted for the quadrilles and other dances.

As in village life, children learnt to dance as a normal part of growing up, some taught by family members or friends, some by dance teachers. This sort of dancing continued to be popular with the folk until the new ragtime and jazz rhythms introduced a new dance style.

Even then the Saturday night dance held its central position in social life, and Matthew Williams¹³ wrote that in the 1920s 'you were in a untenable social position if unable to dance'

By the time of the folk revival, this situation had been changed by the advent of films, radio and TV. The universal skill as well as the knowledge of our main dance traditions had disappeared, at least among the city dwellers who started this revival. There were, of course, knowledgeable people in country areas where that dancing had survived longer. It took a long time for some of these valuable sources to be contacted and information collected^{14,15} and even longer for their information to be reluctantly accepted in the folk scene.^{16,17} Some folk dances from the British Isles done here by the first settlers had been revived by the bush music clubs in Sydney and Melbourne. Unfortunately, through this association, this style became incorrectly known as 'bush dance'. In fact, the folk in the bush continued to dance in the style made popular in the 19th century for much longer than city folk. This style is now known as Colonial or Heritage Dance; the latter name is better in that it indicates that it is worth preserving. Its importance as our main dance tradition has not yet been fully appreciated by folk enthusiasts. Those talented ancestors, who danced so well, must be sadly disappointed.

* * *

-
- 13 Matthew Williams, *Australia in the 1920s*, Sydney, Trocadero Publishing Co., 1984.
 14 Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal, (eds.), 'Dance', 'Quadrilles', *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 93-104, 335-336.
 15 Shirley Andrews and Peter Ellis, *Two Hundred Dancing Years*, Australian Bicentennial Authority, Melbourne, 1988.
 16 Shirley Andrews and Lucy Stockdale, 'Doing Has Always Been More Fun than Watching', *Conference Proceedings, 2nd National Folklore Conference*, Sydney, 1986, pp. 471-484.
 17 Shirley Andrews, 'Why Not Appreciate Australian Folklore as It Really Was Rather than How You Think It Should Have Been?' *Proceedings of the 3rd National Folklore Conference*, Canberra, 1988, pp. 31-36.