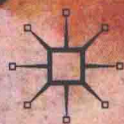


# SOCIETY DANCING

FASHIONABLE BODIES IN ENGLAND, 1870-1920

THERESA JILL BUCKLAND



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Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870–1920

Theresa Jill Buckland

*Professor of Performing Arts, De Montfort University, UK*



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First published 2011 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-230-27714-4      hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Buckland, Theresa.

Society dancing : fashionable bodies in England, 1870-1920 / Theresa Jill Buckland.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-230-27714-4 (hardback)

1. Dance—England—London—History—19th century. 2. Dance—England—London—History—20th century. 3. Dance—Social aspects—England—London—History—19th century. 4. Dance—Social aspects—England—London—History—20th century. 5. London (England)—Social life and customs—19th century. 6. London (England)—Social life and customs—20th century. I. Title.

GV1646.E6B84 2011

793.310904212—dc22

2011003117

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

## Society Dancing

*Also by THERESA JILL BUCKLAND*

DANCE IN THE FIELD: Theory, Methods and Issues

DANCING FROM PAST TO PRESENT: Nation, Culture, Identities

*For Tony*

# Acknowledgements

As a fortunate recipient of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Research Leave scheme and Small Grants awards, I would like to thank the Council and De Montfort University for their facilitation of this research. I would also like to thank the British Academy for its support through the Small Grants scheme.

My inquiries at a number of libraries in the course of this research were always met with pleasant and helpful responses and my thanks go to staff at the British Library (St Pancras and Colindale); the Bodleian Library, Oxford; The Royal Academy of Dancing, London; The Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; London Metropolitan Archives; Family Records Centre, London; City of Westminster Archives Centre; Sussex Record Office; Cambridge University Library; Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library; Brighton History Centre; Hove Library; and De Montfort University Library Services. Particular thanks go to Mollie Webb, librarian of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, London and to Sean Goddard of Sussex University Library for their support and interest in this project. Andre Gailani of Punch Cartoon Library also deserves mention for his assistance well beyond the call of duty.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Mary Clarke and her staff of *The Dancing Times* for generously allowing me unlimited access to the first series of *The Dancing Times*. I would also like to thank the present editor, Jonathan Gray, for his help with illustrations from the journal.

Opportunities to share my findings and receive valuable advice and insight from audience members were afforded by the Centre for Dance Research, Roehampton University; Department of Dance, Film and Theatre, University of Surrey; Department of Drama, University of Exeter; Congress on Research in Dance; Society for Dance History Scholars; Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society, and my colleagues in Dance and History at De Montfort University.

For permission to reproduce copyright images, I would like to thank The Mary Evans Picture Library (cover illustration, Figures 3.1, 3.2, 8.1, 15.1); The British Library (Figures 4.1, 6.1, 7.1, 9.1); The Punch Cartoon Library (Figures 6.2, 12.1, 13.1, 16.1, 16.2); The Hulton Picture Library (Figure 5.2); Getty Images (Figures 14.1, 15.2) and *The Dancing Times* (Figure 17.1).

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Many friends, family, and colleagues have encouraged me throughout the long period of the book's gestation, in particular, Linda and Mick Jasper, Richard Ralph, Alexandra Carter, and my colleagues in Dance at De Montfort University. I particularly wish to express my gratitude to Margaret McGowan for her guidance.

The happy chance of sharing an office with Jane A. Adams revitalized this book project. With gentle persuasion, professional insight, and sympathetic understanding, she held my hand throughout its unfolding. My debt to her is enormous and I warmly thank her for her friendship and support.

A number of colleagues gave most generously of their time and expertise to read specific chapters and I would like especially to thank Richard Holt, Egil Bakka, and Georgiana Gore. Any errors, either of fact or interpretation, however, remain mine alone. Chris Jones has supplied counsel, a professional eye, and unwavering interest in the project, even in those early days when her valuable recommendations often fell on stony ground. In addition, my grateful thanks go to Chris for her expertise in compiling the book's index. At Palgrave Macmillan, Benjamin Doyle and Paula Kennedy have been a source of ready advice, while the team at Macmillan Publishing Solutions has patiently guided me through the production process. I wish to thank my father for valiantly reading chapters when his tastes lie more in science and engineering; and to express my appreciation to Poppy whose walks were neglected as I typed and read out huge chunks of my draft text. Above all, my most profound thanks go to my husband, Tony. He has been the best of partners dancing alongside me throughout the research and writing of this book; always ready to listen, ever willing to provide practical help, to check on my progress and to return me to the track. This book is for him.

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# **Part I**

## **Society Dances**



# 1

## Fashionable Bodies and Society Dancing

Dancing always reflects the manners of the age.

*The Times*, 23 May 1913

Prior to the twentieth century, dancing and deportment in European high society were designed to signal social distinction and were integral to many social rituals of royalty, aristocracy, and the upper-middle class. This was particularly so in the hierarchically conscious world of nineteenth-century England. During the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, however, this tradition irreversibly changed. The period between 1870 and 1920 saw a revolution in social dancing in Britain. The strict deportment and codified etiquette of the Victorian ball room were rejected in favour of the more relaxed and socially inclusive dance floor of the *palais de danse*. In the process, the social construction of the body changed from the 'artificial' body of the aristocratic past to that of the 'natural' body of a democratizing present.

By the end of the First World War, the European system of bodily conduct, dance, and music was moribund. Dance styles no longer arrived in London having been exclusively validated by Paris, once the undisputed centre of fashion. Instead, an increasingly mobile society looked towards New York for the latest novelties. The age of the Waltz and Quadrille had given way to ragtime dances and the Tango. Yet by the 1920s, a distinctively English style of ballroom dancing was being fashioned that was to be exported worldwide. It was to be spearheaded – not by the aristocracy who had once led dance fashion – but by the new urban middle class. If the primary aim of this book is to understand the decline of dancing as a constituent feature of royal and aristocratic socio-political life, the accompanying narrative is that of the rise of middle-class stewardship of

fashion in social dancing and the ideological context for the emergence of a distinctly national style of ball room dancing.

In the Victorian and Edwardian periods, each social class of dancer may have appeared to the contemporary eye to be distinguishable from each other, the upper, middle, and lower classes of society each identifiable by their own styles and places of performance. Yet in practice, the dancing of each class was not entirely exclusive. The borders of the British class system were permeable, allowing the cultural traits of those further down the social scale to figure at times on the dance floors of their social superiors, and the traffic was never completely one way. Between the middle and upper classes, in particular, cultural assimilation of each others' mores was a characteristic of nineteenth-century England. This process was largely facilitated through individual commercial success, marriage, imitation, and increased social levelling through parliamentary means.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than a general survey of dancing in British society, the initial spotlight is on how dancing was fashioned and made fashionable for the cultural leaders of British society during the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Necessarily drawn into the analytical frame are the multiple and many layered issues relating to societal change that caused or resulted in the decline of dancing as a widespread and valued leisure activity and social ritual among the rich and powerful. In the process of investigating how people moved on the dance floor, I hope that new light may be shed on questions of movement and modernity that may then reverberate across other genres of dance, as well as illuminating further the social and emotional lives of those who danced.

By the 1870s, Britain was the most industrialized and powerful imperial nation in the world. Following the collapse of Paris as the leading money market after the Franco-Prussian War, London became pre-eminent as the capital of the international stock exchange. Its centrifugal force on finance had a corresponding impact on the social and cultural life of the nation and empire, as well as attracting international financiers to the rapidly expanding city (Harris, 1994). Set in motion too during this decade were a number of democratizing political transformations such as the Education Act, and civil service reforms of 1870, and the Factory Act of 1874. Such developments were to facilitate opportunities for participation in gentrified and other leisure activities further down the social scale and to assist in developing a newly moneyed urban upper-middle class whose understanding that they were living in a *modern* age became ever more conscious and articulated.

The period leading up to the First World War has been characterized by social, political, and dance historians alike as one of unprecedented

change, and is often construed as a crucible of modernity whose brew of social and cultural novelties would create a turbulent impact across most aspects of life in Britain.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, transformations in cultural leadership and preferred movement codes from 1870 to 1920 coincide with shifting attitudes towards embodied concepts of masculinity, femininity, race, and class. If the 50 years before the First World War saw rapid change, they also witnessed deep-seated, often less vociferously articulated continuities. The beginning of the period did not herald the dawn of a new dance age: rather, it bore witness to continuing lament that the fashionable dance repertoire was stale, the conventions in the ball room ossified and largely unattractive to the younger generation. If the late Victorian ball room appeared as an outmoded and unnecessary social duty to many of its contemporaries, underneath its seemingly unchanging surface pulled many cross currents that often arose in what were regarded by the mainstream of fashionable society as cultural backwaters. In bringing some of this flotsam and jetsam to the surface of late Victorian and Edwardian dance culture, I hope to throw light on often complex and interrelated factors that are each deserving of more sustained treatment in separate study. When examining a large tract of time and the historical processes that play across it, the historian needs to give credence to the ongoing dynamic between individual effort and event, and to the less immediately visible but deeply shaping currents of longer-term factors, such as demographic change, ideological formation, and societal structure.

The focus of attention here is on those pre-First World War decades at the end of which a decisive transformation in social dancing had occurred. The manifestations of social dancing had shifted from the world of the Victorians to that of modern Britain. Dancing was no longer tied to the seasonal patterns and social segregation that had earlier distinguished the British people at play. Any attempt to comprehend that transition must necessarily engage with the wider historical debate. Late twentieth-century historians have often refuted the earlier argument of sudden rupture in favour of an analysis that interprets the various social, economic, and political developments as the inevitable advance of the intertwined processes of late capitalism and modernization.<sup>3</sup>

If, following the tenets of cultural history, cultural practices are inextricably linked to the domains of the social, economic, and political, then there should be a clear correspondence between social dancing and this wider evolutionary, historical context.<sup>4</sup> Such steady progress, however, cannot be traced in the history of social dancing in Britain; much less can its opposite – the thesis that the First World War was

the primary agent in generating changes in the ball room – be upheld. The history of social dancing in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain is one neither of slow evolution nor radical change; it is altogether more complex, the sources often paradoxical and elusive.

A more illuminating interpretive framework than that of contrasting alternatives is offered by the historian Jose Harris whose characterization of the period as ‘immensely varied, contradictory, and fissiparous’ and in which ‘social norms and expectations were widely varying’ (1994, pp. 2, 3) accords with the diverse and often challenging sources that underpin this present study. Below the seemingly intractable class structure of Victorian Britain and its associated culture, divergent dance practices often broke through the class barriers, contesting accepted norms, sometimes disappearing altogether, then re-emerging much later in new guises.

### **Social distinction and fashionable dancing**

In examining fashionable dancing in England during that period, I concentrate on activities that centred on London, then the largest and premier trading capital of the world.<sup>5</sup> Its cultural leaders were the cream of the English aristocracy, envied at home and abroad as ‘the most wealthy, the most powerful, and the most glamorous people’ (Cannadine, 1996, p. 2) in Britain. Their cosmopolitan lifestyle of conspicuous consumption was displayed at its most extravagant in the frequent and large private balls that were hosted and attended every year by this socially restricted community, during the ritual known as the London Season.<sup>6</sup> This customary gathering in the capital took place in the spring and early summer months, and was a vibrant, if conservative, institution from the eighteenth century that brought together the most important families of the land. These privileged few, together with the royal family at the helm, constituted the social group known as Society, a group set apart in the writing of outsiders by the convention of the initial capital ‘S’. Additionally referred to as polite society, the best circles, the Upper Ten Thousand, or simply the Upper Ten, Society was an exclusive group that sought to preserve its social, political, and economic superiority during the rapidly changing world of Queen Victoria’s final years. As one of their many pleasures, dancing was almost a daily occurrence during the London Season and was frequently practised during the rest of the year as a pastime and social ceremony.

The 1870s proved to be ‘the last decade of apparently undisputed patriotic pre-eminence’ (Cannadine, 1996, p. 8), a time when this small social elite that owned and led an extensive empire, might claim adherence

from the majority of its members to the corporeal rituals established over several centuries. During the following decades, retention of Society's once seemingly stable and royally focused culture became a pressing concern for its members, many of whom perceived a number of threats to their lifestyle. Among their anxieties were the declining wealth of many aristocratic families, the seeming invasion of the newly moneyed into their once select community, the increasing profile of rich trans-Atlantic brides among their noble kin, and popular antagonism towards the profligacy of the alternative court of the Prince of Wales.<sup>7</sup> In the 1870s, the political, economic, and cultural ascendancy of the aristocracy and its social rituals appeared unassailable. By the 1920s, the prominence of the Season and the significance of its dance events were in marked decline. Increasing social mobility, changes in patterns of public and private entertainment, shifts in gender expectations, and the popular influence of African-American music and dance, were contributory factors whose deleterious impact on this ritualized behaviour were consolidated by the First World War. The Upper Ten Thousand who had once determined fashion in Britain and its empire now followed rather than led. After the First World War, Society's continuity as 'high society', much expanded in numbers and diluted in aristocratic composition, was testimony to the progressive diminution in power of its royal leaders. With Society's slow decline went the significance of dancing in socio-political life in Britain.

For much of the nineteenth century, Society had been a dominant force, composed of a tightly knit social elite, loosely based on aristocratic kinship, and whose borders were keenly patrolled by its women-folk. Beyond the criterion of family, further measures of fashion and etiquette operated as visible and interconnected means of regulating entry to Society's ranks. The Upper Ten's display of fashionable attire as a measure of social station looked to Paris, a city that from the seventeenth century had governed tastes in dancing and in dress, particularly for aristocratic women. The Upper Ten's rehearsal of etiquette was based upon conservative modes of conduct that hailed from the British royal court and which were sanctioned in practices outside its inner circles by courtiers and followers-on.

Exemplary performances of fashion and etiquette reached their apotheosis in the London ball room. There, the gathering of Society, which was reckoned to represent the most civilized and cultured element of British society at large was 'on its very best behaviour', its activities 'regulated according to the strict code of good breeding.'<sup>8</sup> In the 1870s, London Society ball rooms were filled with well-bred dancers of aristocratic