

Jeremy Barlow. *A Dance Through Time: Images of Western Social Dancing from the Middle Ages to Modern Times*. Bodleian Library, Oxford, 2012. ISBN, 96 pp, 15 black & white illustrations, 34 colour illustrations, paperback, £16.99

This beautifully produced small book draws on the rich collections of Oxford's Bodleian Library. It cannot be described as a serious history of dancing, but it is certainly rather more than a popular picture book. The sub-title explains its scope – social dancing in western Europe from the medieval period right up to date. In his introduction, Jeremy Barlow explains some of the themes he intends to pursue, including the 'tension between decorum and licence on the dance floor' and the problems faced by artists trying to convey movement through a static image. Throughout his seven chapters he addresses these through the analysis and contextualisation of a series of repellent as well as seductive portrayals of dancers. He also repeatedly questions the conventions through which those dancers are depicted. Are the images true to life or do they simply perpetuate myths and prejudices?

Each chapter has its own chronological sequence. The book opens its debate with 'Poised in Performance' which begins with a thirteenth-century manuscript and ends with present-day Latin American dancing, taking in noble and rustic dancers from the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries on the way as it follows the relationship between decorum and rank. In each chapter, Barlow looks at individual images in greater depth. For example in 'Symbolic Circles' he examines a pen and watercolour sketch by the artist Thomas Stothard (p. 30), which shows young women dancing in a circle while a young man tries to embrace one of them. Neither the picture nor the artist are well-known and Barlow enriches our understanding by relating the sketch to the prints that Stothard designed for an 1825 edition of Boccaccio's Decameron. Similarly, in 'Decorous Dance' he provides a wider context for a scene in a ballroom drawn by Charles Eisen, an artist who worked at the court of Louis XV (p. 45). Although he identifies the dance performed by the central couple as a minuet, which becomes the starting point for his discussion, Barlow says little about the depiction of dancing in this elegant drawing.

The minuet is one of the dances to merit mention in more than one chapter. It comes up again in 'Illustrations for Instruction', this time in a plate from Kellom Tomlinson's 1735 treatise *The Art of Dancing*. Barlow declares that the engravings from this work 'are among the few instructional illustrations that convey a sense of movement' (p. 56). Interestingly, Eisen's drawing of the same dance also does its best to show the couple in motion. This chapter, on

illustrations in dance manuals, also looks at the waltz - another dance to feature in more than one chapter, for it turns up again (as the object of satire) in 'Burlesqueing the Bourgeois'. Barlow rounds off his survey with Victor Sylvester, in particular his booklet *This is Jive* which tried to domesticate the Jitterbug. He describes Sylvester as 'the last of the musician dancing masters who had controlled ballroom decorum and etiquette for the previous five hundred years' (p. 60).

'Dance and Desire' addresses class as well as morals with another attractive drawing (p. 69), this time by Isaac Cruickshank (father of the more famous George), which provides an unusually sympathetic and graceful view of dancing by the lower orders. The following chapter 'Rustic Revels' includes, alongside several determinedly vulgar and downright ugly images, a lively little drawing of a dancing peasant couple from an album amicorum. Barlow uses this to interrogate the supposed realism of such images, demonstrating the conventions which underpin illustrations of dancing by country folk as well as by courtiers. He makes deliberate reference to skilled rustic dancers, thereby challenging modern received ideas of 'country' dancing. The final chapter 'Burlesquing the Bourgeois' runs from the 'Inconveniences of Quadrille dancing', recognisable to anyone who has tried to master 'Les Graces', to the Cake-Walk, which developed from black mockery of white affectation in dancing. The book thus ends by calling into question the whole concept of decorum in dancing. Last of all, there is a useful bibliography, which lists primary sources as well as more recent books and articles, and an index.

This volume contains a whole series of mini-histories of western social dancing, with some familiar as well as many unfamiliar dance images. The author's informal style masks some serious intentions, not least the wish to counter some of the perennial myths that bedevil dance history. The book provides an easy introduction to the minefield of dance illustrations, and the juxtaposition of images from different periods is instructive as well as eyebrow-raising. The illustrations are well-produced, although I wish it had been possible to avoid printing some over two pages with the inevitable distortion and loss in the gutter fold. This is a volume to pore over and enjoy, but also to use as a source of reference. *A Dance Through Time* is surely guaranteed to set any dance enthusiast thinking.

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