On Common Ground 3: John Playford and the English Dancing Master, 1651
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LONG DIVISION AND THE CIRCLE SQUARED

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In this short talk I shall suggest reasons for the failure of the longways country dance to maintain its predominant position in the dance repertoire after 1800. In addition, I will suggest why the Quadrille was ideally suited to replace it. My argument is confined solely to the sequence of events in the United Kingdom.

I suggest that to become generally popular throughout a society a dance has to have two essential qualities. First, it has to reward its participants in some way and secondly, and more importantly, it has to reflect the society around it and satisfy the, possibly unconscious, needs of that society. Let us consider whether the country dance had these two qualities at the beginning of the 19th century.

First, did it reward the dancer? The answer is, no it did not. In the ballroom there was a pressing need for relief from the tedious and incredibly boring country dance. Nowadays you may experience the joy of attending a Playford Ball with a competent master of ceremonies who has arranged a programme of interesting dances of varied character and tempo, accompanied by suitable music. You may not realise how very different your experience would have been, had you attended a public ball in London in 1800. By that time it had become a well established custom for each dance during the evening to be chosen by the couple, or more often the lady, at the head of the set. Now, at any public ball many would have attended for social reasons unconnected with their knowledge of dancing and at any ball, bad dancers with poor memories will always outnumber good dancers with excellent memories. So, the custom of allowing the lady at the top to choose the figure and the music inevitably led to far too many simple and uninteresting figures being set to hackneyed tunes. As the other dancers in the set would have no prior knowledge of the figure chosen and no opportunity to practise it, the longer, complicated – and more interesting – figures were regarded with disfavour.

The full horror to the experienced dancer at such a ball is described vividly by Thomas Wilson, the London dancing master, writing in 1809:

> "In our modern assemblies a dance composed of more than two parts, or what is called a single figure [that is to say, one only 16 bars long] generally gains the reception of a bad play, or rather worse, it is damned at the announcement; and the lady who has the temerity to call for it is instantly pronounced the wife or daughter of a cheesemonger or oil-man – no member of the Ton – a jackdaw among pigeons. It indeed appears now, in fashionable life, a crime to attempt anything that requires a capacity behond what the more sagacious brutes are endowed with; for bad dancing is now considered as strong a proof of good breeding as bad writing, good driving or boxing."

It might be supposed that some variety would be provided by the musicians occasionally changing to analternative tune but this was rarely, if ever, done. To avoid confusing or annoying the lady who had called for a particular air, the musicians often played the same tune for the whole dance. In the worst case, if long sets were formed and the dance continued until every couple had 'gone down the set', this could be, according to Wilson, for as long as two hours. Possibly Wilson exaggerates but certainly it could often by played for half an hour at a time.

Could the tedium of such dances have been enlivened by the use of varied and interesting steps? Well, it seems unlikely.

Many steps had been used in the country dance in the past. We have the evidence of André Lorin, the French dancing master who visited England in 1685. Lorin remarks on the great variety of steps used, though he does qualify this statement by saying that the English had laid down no rules for the order of their use and it was quite usual for one dancer to perform leaps and capers while others were making chassés or coupés.

Other European dancing masters described the steps used in English Country dances. An anonymous Bohemian writing in Vienna in 1777 said that the most common step for figures in the dance was the chassé. We know from his detailed description that this 'chassé' was similar to the EFDSS's 'skip-change-step' or the progressive Scottish reel step.

Kattfuss, the German dancing master writing about the English country dance in 1800, describes how even this simple chassé step had deteriorated by that time. Wilson, in 1816, says that attempts by those who lacked proper dance instruction to simplify the steps even further had led to most country dances being walked.

It is possible that the tendency to simplify or walk the steps was encouraged by a tendency at that time to play the music for a country dance at a somewhat brisk tempo. John Cherry, who published his 'Treatise on the Art of Dancing in the Ball-Room' in London around this time, said that the average speed for country dancing was 60 bars a minute. At this speed the graceful performance of a complicated step may have proved too difficult for the average dancer. One must, of course, consider the alternative theory: that the use of simpler steps encouraged the musicians to play the music faster.

Here is an example of a well known dance tune at 60 bars per minute.

[TAPE 1 – FANDANGO was played]

For all the reasons I have given, I suggest that at the beginning of the 19th century the English country dance, as performed at that time, was not fulfilling the first of the requirements for success. It was not sufficiently rewarding the dancer. It consisted of simple and uninteresting figures, repeated every 16 bars, danced to over-familiar tunes played without variation for inordinately long lengths of time and using boringly simple steps. As Wilson himself said:

> "What beauty can we possibly perceive in a Country Dance if deprived of variety of figure, the ornament of steps, and accordance of movement with the music?"

Let us now consider our second requirement for the popularity of a dance form: that it must in some way reflect and satisfy the general requirements of the society that surrounds it. I suggest that the country dance did not fulfil this requirement either. It was not a reflection of the rapidly changing society around it. It was a dance out of touch and out of its time.

The beginning of the 19th century was a period of great change throughout Europe. Change not only in government, as exemplified by the French revolution, but also change in the fashion in clothes and musical tastes and in the attitude of young people to the mores and morals of the society around them. In addition, in England the government's fear of a domestic revolution inspired by the example in France, led to such a severe censorship of the press and brutal repression of any expression of discontent by the general populace, that we would consider it today as a police state.

The revolution in France, and the war with France had, as I have said, made the upper classes of society in England somewhat apprehensive and in this atmosphere a feeling grew among the young that one should enjoy life while one was still able to do so, for who could say what the future would bring. This "play now, pay later" attitude was much to be seen among the young people who made up the "Fast Set" in high society and set the fashion for others to emulate.

- They wanted to be different from their parents; a desire to adopt new styles of dress, new manners, new standards of morality, new dances.
- They wanted to be seen as members of an exclusive set where new ideas could be exchanged freely between the sexes without the restrictions imposed by chaperones.
- They wanted to be seen as individuals, personalities – resulting in a flamboyance of dress and individuality.

The rebellion against old ideas and manners was no doubt reinforced by the return to society of officers from the army. Young men who had withstood and overcome the rigours and dangers of the campaign against Napoleon were not likely to be easily subdued by the restrictions their elders sought to impose upon them.

The Quadrille was made for this situation. It had new tunes and figures, banishing the boredom of the old country dances. In the country dances those at the bottom of the set might wait for ten minutes before the dance reached them, and conversation was not encouraged as you and your partner, and those around you, would be trying to learn the figures of the dance, from observation. In the Quadrille the figures were known and practised in advanced and young men had more opportunity to talk to their partners. In the Quadrille you never had to wait for more than three repetitions of the tune before it was your turn to dance. The Quadrille was exclusive: only eight people to a set, which meant that one could dance in a set entirely made up of people of one's own social standing and age, people of like mind and manners. In addition, there were certain figures where one danced alone, exhibiting to the others in the set one's expertise in the latest difficult, elaborate steps from France.

Such opportunities for exhibitionism were eagerly sought by both men and women – perhaps particularly by women, for there was a shortage of men of marriagable age, caused by their deployment abroad in the army and by the numerous casualties incurred during the fighting. This had led inevitably to a great deal of rivalry and competition among young women for those eligible men left. Might not the exposure of a trim ankle in an entrechat or coupé tip the balance in one's favour? Many young ladies thought so and were assiduous in their dance practice. Captain Gronow, in his 'Recollections', relates of Lady Harriet Butler that the graceful ease with which she performed her entrechats was so highly regarded that a circle was formed to admire her dancing.

On a somewhat more mundane note, Elizabeth Grant, in her 'Memoires of a Highland Lady', mentions the economic advantages of dancing quadrilles: she said that three or four sociable gatherings for quadrille dancing could be given for much less cost than one ball, as one needed fewer musicians and less refreshments.

Finally, the Quadrille was French and everything French was in fashion, despite the war with France. The everyday speech of the upper classes in England at that time contained many French phrases and words. To use them was a sign of one's breeding and education.

And so, because it reflected the social scene around it and contained just those characteristics most desired by the young, fashion-conscious society leaders of the day, the Quadrille began its long career as the most important set dance of the 19th century.

In the high society of London, Edinburgh and Dublin, the Quadrille prospered. By 1818 it had completely ousted the country dances from the programmes at Almacks, the most exclusive ballroom in London. The mainly Scottish dance bands that had played there hitherto were replaced by a band more familiar with the new music and led by the French cornet player Colinet.

Here is an example of the new type of music played by Collinet at Almack's in 1819, on an occasion when the Prince Regent himself was present.

[TAPE 2 – FINALE, QUADRILLE B was played]

You will have noticed the great difference between this and the jigs and reels of the country dances. Traditional tunes could, of course, be pressed into service for Quadrilles but they would – or should have been – arranged and played in a style more suited to the new dance.

Here is a tune well known to my English audience as 'Trelawney' or 'The Grand Old Duke of York' but here played for a Quadrille in 1818.

[TAPE 3 – PAIN'S 12TH QUADRILLE was played]

The Quadrille was to maintain its popularity in the dance repertoire for the major part of the 19th century by continually adapting its form to suit the changes in the society around it. The three major changes it had to survive were:

- Changes in the fashionable clothes worn by women;
- Changes brought about by the industrial revolution; and
- Changes in musical taste.

Initially the Quadrille was a high-stepping and vigorous dance and this style was to continue until 1837. In this year, changes in women's fashion lowered the hem of dresses to the floor and this, together with the use of many petticoats to spread the fuller dress and later, the introduction of the crinoline, made the use of intricate and high steps very difficult for the ladies. Steps were modified by bringing them closer to the floor and gliding them rather than stepping them. Steps that could not be performed in this way, such as entrechats, ballonnés, brizés, and so on, were discarded. You might suppose that this limitation of individual display would reduce the satisfaction and pleasure of the individual dancer especially, as I said earlier, as the opportunity to show off was one of the Quadrille's main attractions when it was first introduced. In fact, the change was to act to the Quadrille's advantage for those same young people who had encouraged the introduction of the Quadrille were now approaching the age of 60 and were not so keen or even able to show their individual skills. A new generation of young dancers was drawn mainly from the ranks of the growing middle class and this class had been brought up to value conformity.

The reduction in the number and complexity of steps had other advantages: as the industrial revolution developed, more and more of the population moved from the countryside into the towns. This concentration of people in towns provided a whole new public for the Quadrille as its practice spread from the upper classes down the social scale. The new public had less time and less money to spend on expensive dance tuitition and thus the simplification and reduction in the number of steps required for the Quadrille acted in its favour.

Those who composed the music for the Quadrille were also sensitive to the requirements of their public. As the dance's popularity moved down the social scale, so themusic for it changed to suit their tastes. In 1820 it had used melodies from Italian opera:

[TAPE 4 – MUSIC SELECTION was played]

In 1840, the melodies of Strauss; In the 1850s Offenbach was favoured and by 1880 it was danced to Sullivan's music from the Savoy operas. At the end of the century, when its greatest appeal was to the working classes, it was danced to favourite songs from the music halls.

By conforming to the requirements of the changing society around it, while maintaining its ability to please the individual dancer, the Quadrille was able to maintain its prominent place in the dance repertoire into the 1870s.

The eventual decline in the popularity of the Quadrille in many ways mirrors the decline of the country dance. As the century progressed, the steps were progressively simplified until they became mere walking steps; the figures were progressively reduced in their variety and interest in order that they might be memorised more easily. The absence of electrical amplification made it impossible to introduce new figures in the crowded ballrooms of the new industrial towns – quite simply, no-one could hear.

As the country dance had given way to the quadrille, so the quadrille in its turn began to give way to the couple dances. In changing its form to comply with the requirements of the society around it, the pleasure which the committed dance enthusiast gained from the Quadrille was reduced. There was no longer any advantage for young people in dancing the quadrille. One could have a young lady all to oneself for much longer in a couple dance and have one's arm around her waist at the same time. Any particular skill in steps could be shown to not just one set but to the whole room and thus the couple dances gradually replaced the quadrille in the ballroom programmes.

As a final thought, let me suggest that if the decline and eventual fall from favour of both the country dance and the quadrille was, as I have said, indicated by a similar sequence of changes, might we not be able to predict the fall from popularity of some contemporary forms of dance. The signs to look for would be:

- A reduction in the use of steps and the variety of figures in an attempt to provide simpler and standard versions of the dance for the newcomer;
- An increase in the tempo of the music.

Are not some of these trends already appearing in the contemporary folk dance scene? We should take heed now. Young people may be initially attracted to a dance form because of its simplicity and speed but to inspire lasting interest and commitment we must retain and present ingenious and intricate figures, or movement, and exhibit them with grace and style to the accompaniment of rhythmic and appropriate music, beautifully played.

[TAPE 5 – FINALE, SCHUTZEN QUADRILLE was played]

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