"Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance". -
Dances of the Regency, early days of Australia's Settlement, Part 1

Peter Ellis

Some sayings that survive, such as 'I've been led on a merry dance', or 'I'll call the tune on this one', or I must 'to set to and do such and such' (from set to and turn partners) are surviving expressions of almost two hundred years ago. It's taken extensive research into the dances of the Regency Period correlating with the dances brought out during the early period of settlement in Australia for me to realise those sayings sum it up. It illustrates the reason we don't find the dances named, (contrasting with the earlier period going back to Playford), because generally they weren't (there are exceptions of course).

I say this because in the main, things we believe are the names of the dances are simply the tunes to which the leading lady in the top set has nominated a combination of figures to be danced. So a compilation of simple figures to say Speed the Plough could next time around be a different set of figures to Speed the Plough, or conversely the same figures to the Bugle Horn or Rakes of Mallow. I've just found on the compilation of disks of dance manuals I purchased from the American Library of Congress, 'the royal ball-room guide and etiquette of the drawing room containing the most elegant dances and a short history of dancing' by Rudolph Radestock, London 1877. In this all the usual quadrilles and couple dances of the period are described, but also some earlier 'country dances'. No names, just the figures which are the usual or common repertoire of decades earlier. These figures would be chosen or coined on the night to the tune the leading lady selects, or the figures that she likes to her favourite tune. Alternatively she'd seek advice from the MC who would make an experienced recommendation so there's no 'stuff ups', which apparently by the Regency happened all too often. A reason ultimately everything went out the window and change or 'moving forward' meant 'it was time' for something new.

An excerpt from Thomas Hardy's novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, contains an interesting description of a country dance at a party, 'Tranters Party' where you'll find a wonderful description of a country dance in action. It is well worth reading this and it can be sourced by googling 'Strathspey Server' and following the 'history' link. The first dance mentioned is the Triumph or 'Follow my Lover', but the account goes on to say, '*that delightful country dance followed*', but it's not named. One would have expected if it was well known the name would be given, but it isn't, simply a description of the figure in action:-

"*Dick had at length secured Fancy for that most delightful of country-dances, opening with six-hands-round*"

"Again and again did Dick share his Love's hand with another man, and wheel round; then, more delightfully, promenade in a circle with her all to himself, his arm holding her waist more firmly each time, and his elbow getting further and further behind her back, till the distance reached was rather noticeable; and, most blissful, swinging to places shoulder to shoulder"

"Threading the couples one by one they reached the bottom, when there arose in Dick's mind a minor misery lest the tune should end before they could work their way to the top again"

Caricature of a longways country dance by Rowlandson, second half of 1790s

With respect to the ad hoc selection of figures there are a few consistencies of course and White Cockade and Money Musk for example seem to have more or less the same respective figure combinations over some decades. Sir Roger de Coverley and the Triumph were distinct unalterable dances. Eventually there was a settling out of well known figures to particular tunes by the end of the Regency, but by then the quadrilles, waltz and galop had eclipsed them in popularity and the polka was to arrive in the following decade.

Most of the country-dance references are from society and it is difficult to ascertain what the lower classes were really doing and it was generally beneath the concept of the literate to describe events below their station. Diary accounts remain the best but rare source of information. I am grateful to the National Library of Australia's compilation of online newspapers from which most of my references have been obtained and to Margot Hitchcock for alerting me to the link.

The late Joan Martin told me that her grandmother (Queensland) in leading Sir Roger de Coverley, one of the few reasonably standard country dances with an unalterable figure, would innovate her own fancy step in the centre of the set and that the rest in turn would copy this step. This seems to be a survivor of following the leading lady from the earlier English country dance period. Sir Roger of cause could vary a little as some older versions included a Serpentine figure, a forerunner of the Strip the Willow, while simpler less formal versions as the Haymaker were popular with the lower classes.

In my opening article of the Australian Dance Series Trad & Now April 2010 pg 45, I mentioned briefly that the main dances at the time of first settlement of Australia were the English Country Dances and the Scotch Reel. There is one diary account that certainly verifies the fact. On visiting the new colony (Sydney) in 1819 Rose de Freycinet makes the point of being extremely astonished at the elegance of the colony, three balls were held during her visit.

'Although I was not familiar with English dances, I was unable to avoid them. I did rather poorly'.

Obviously if you were thrown into the unknown with the countless selections of figures described in Dance Companions of the day such as that by Thomas Wilson you would do poorly. The Country Dance is certainly English and any reference to it as contra-dance is coincidental in the longways formation of 'opposites' because the English expression is definitely older referring to native village green or 'rustic' origins. Also according to Scottish Country Dance historian Marjorie McLaughlin whilst 'contra' does mean opposites (longways sets of dancers facing each other) the original French usage of the term contredanse from the French word '**contre**' is an adaptation of 'country'. Towards the close of the 17th Century they had taken up the longways 'country dance' from the introduction of 'le contredanse – la danse Anglais'. I.e. from the English Country Dance. The French may have used

the term *contredanse* earlier with regard to some of their own native styles, but it appears the Contredanse Anglais introduced or consolidated the longways form which later changed to shorter and square types as Contredanse Français and probably some form of grafting between their own contredanses and the English figures. According to Shirley Andrews it was because the French ballrooms were square forcing a modification to the shorter longways sets, squares and the Cotillons. These were to give rise to the Quadrille. Contredanse and Cotillion could sometimes be interchangeable terms particularly in England, but England's expert on the dances of the Regency Period, Ellis Rogers makes the point the use of the term requires qualification because:-

'*In France contredanse just means any dance where you have a partner. It could, and was, applied to couple dances, Cotillions, Quadrilles and longways dances*.'

English Origins

The English dance *Sir Roger de Coverley* in its present form can be traced back to the days of Charles II. In Scotland it was known as the Haymaker or 'the Maltman' and Shirley Andrews references older Haymaker connections danced by the Irish nobility in the 5th Century and earlier. The English name is thought to be a corruption of Roger the Cavalier. Henry VIII loved dancing but it was mainly the French court dances such as the Pavane, the Gavotte and the Branle at court in his time. However Elizabeth in a nationalistic sense veered away from the French dances (except for her favourite 'La Volta') and took an interest in the *folk dances* she observed in the *countryside* and *villages* of her own people as well as favouring the *Italian Balleti* dances from which the *longways form for as many as will* was thought to be derived.

Gene Murrow in '*Introduction to the Country Dance*' explains this as follows:-

The "English country dance" emerged as a distinct genre during the reign of Elizabeth I in the 16th century. While evidence provides no definitive answer as to its origins, it appears to have been an amalgamation of the Continental courtly dances brought to the Elizabethan court by Italian and other dancing masters known to have been present, and the vernacular dances done by the English country "folk." In her periodic "progresses" by which she travelled throughout her realm, Elizabeth had opportunity to observe these indigenous folk dances, and manuscripts of the time document her pleasure at seeing them:

"Her Majesty that Saturday night was lodgid again in the Castell of Warwick, where she rested all Sonday, where it pleased her to have the country people, resorting to see her, daunce in the court of the Castell, her Majesty beholding them out of the chamber window, which thing, as it pleased well the country people, so it seemed her Majesty was much delighted, and made very myrry." [from Nichol's Progresses, ed. 1823, I, 319].

As dancing was held in high esteem at court, it seems likely that dancing masters would attempt to create new dances that would garner approval from the monarch and her courtiers. Interest in the new form of country dancing spread from the royal court to other aristocratic and cultured venues, including grand country houses and the Inns of Court in London, wherein young law students were housed and schooled. In 1651, the noted London publisher John Playford produced the first printed collection of country dances for sale, titled "The English Dancing Master," which contained the music and instructions for 105 dances. It sold well, and a second edition was produced the following year. In all, Playford and later his son Henry Playford and others, produced 18 editions until 1728, adding or deleting dances as fads and fashions changed.

Marjorie McLaughlin says further that the dances originally described by Playford seemed to be a selection of various rural folk dances in *circles, rounds and squares*. It's likely as these had been taken up from the time of the Elizabethan court including hybridisation with Italian dances that they developed over the generations spreading out amongst the landed gentry and further aided by the invention and 'choreography' of the dancing masters. The overall predominance now was the more

challenging and complicated 'longways for as many as will' in the respective duple and triple minor form and the latter gradually becoming the major type. By 1695 in the 9th edition of Playford is a notation '*24 additional dances devised by eminent dancing masters Mr. Beveridge and Mr Isaac*'.

It was common for 24 new dances to be published each season and this mushroomed as more and more publishers followed Playford. By the time of the Regency some 2,500 country dances had come and gone (Marjorie McLaughlin states 10,000) and over 90% were longways for as many as will in the triple minor arrangement. Also according to Thomas Wilson (Danciad 1824)

"Some by garbling old dances and giving them a foreign or strange name pass them off as their own compositions:"

This also an example of Wilson calling the kettle black. But by 1800 the Country Dance had reached its peak and was waning, few new ones were published except by Wilson attempting to uphold their importance.

In the '*The Felicities of Rapid Motion: Jane Austen in the Ballroom*' by Allison Thompson some interesting information is provided and note she puts the total tally of dances as over 27,000 :-

At more formal or more public balls, the ladies could "draw for numbers" upon entering the ballroom. As each dance began, the Master of Ceremonies would then call out the numbers and assign the ladies and their partners to places. The topmost lady in the first set would choose the dance. This meant that a couple could ask for the specific figures associated with a specific tune, such as Bath Assembly, Trip to Tunbridge or The Duke of Kent's Waltz. It also meant that a lady could announce a group of figures that she devised herself and ask for a tune of a certain length to accompany them. At the conclusion of the dance, the Master of Ceremonies would reshuffle the sets, and a new lady would request or "call" a dance.

While this procedure may sound daunting, in any given evening, dances were probably chosen from a fairly small pool of what were considered to be the most fashionable dances for any

given year. This practice was facilitated, or perhaps fostered, by the custom of music publishers to produce slim annual collections of dances, such as "Twenty Four Country Dances for the Year 17--."

These volumes all promised to include only the latest and most fashionable dances, though many of them did include reprints of earlier dances. These popular books were in fact a necessity: starting in about 1730 or so, country dances became less and less original and were attached or devised to go with a specific and easily recognizable tune. From 1730 to 1830 over twenty-seven thousand country dances with their tunes were published in England alone (Keller 8). The dances had increasingly become combinations and recombinations of a small number of figures so that the dances were not very easily differentiated from each other. Although easy to learn just by watching the top couple (a characteristic which added to their popularity), they were hard to remember. Indeed, some dancing masters found it necessary to request participants not to dance the same dance more than once in an evening - a sure sign that this proscribed behavior must have occurred frequently enough to be noticed and criticized. This very popularity of the country dance eventually contributed to its demise. Towards the end of George III's life, even the country dances were finally going out of fashion among the "smart set"; there were too many dull dances set to dull tunes and people were ready for something innovative.

In Scotland the drawing of numbers for a Country Dance was particularly strict as outlined in 'Scotland's Most Various Life' Chapter Six p 104 and is from a quote cited on the strict assignment of places in the Country Dance (late 1770s) described in 'Memorials of His Time' by Cockburn:-

"No couple could dance unless each party was provided with a ticket prescribing the precise place in the precise dance. If there was no ticket, the gentleman, or the lady, was dealt with as an intruder, and turned out of the dance. If the ticket had marked upon it – say for a Country Dance, the figures 3.5, this meant the holder was to place himself in the third dance, and fifth from the top; and if he was anywhere else, he was set right, or excluded. And the partner's ticket must correspond. Woe on the poor girl, who with ticket 2.7, was found opposite a youth marked 5.9! It was flirting without licence, and looked very ill, and would probably be reported by the ticket director of that dance to the mother. Of course, parties, or parents, who wished to secure dancing for themselves or those they had charge of, provided themselves with correct and corresponding vouchers before the ball day arrived. This could be accomplished through a director; and the election of a pope sometimes required less jobbing. When parties chose to take their chance, they might do so; but still, though only obtained in the room, the written permission was necessary; and such a thing as a compact to dance, by a couple, without official authority, would have been an outrage that could scarcely be contemplated."