

Introduction

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'The Great Divide' was a phrase often on the lips of the late Belinda Quirey. It was re-used in the title of the conference whose papers are published in this volume quite consciously and with affection. The organisers of the conference saw fit to add a question mark, but this is not to be construed as a challenge to Quirey's view that the French Revolution marked a major turning point in dance history: not only did it bring to an end the elaborate social order of the Versailles court of Louis XVI; it also coincided with a fundamental change in the technique of theatrical dancing [Quirey and Holmes 1969 (1993)]. There is, nevertheless, much to be said for revisiting the Revolution and looking at it in the light of more recent historical analysis, and especially for paying closer attention to developments in social dance at about this time.

The period of study is from the collapse of the Ancien Régime in 1789 to inauguration of the Empire with the coronation of Napoleon in 1804. For many of us, our knowledge of this period comes mainly from novels and films, not from engagement with historical sources or the writings of historians. To give us a better informed and more judicious perspective, the conference was opened by Clarissa Campbell Orr, speaking on 'The French Revolution as a cultural event'. Ms Campbell Orr is Senior Lecturer in History at Anglia Polytechnic University in Cambridge; she has made a particular study of the cultural history of France and England at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries.

Her starting-point was that, although a popular uprising certainly took place, this was not now seen as the essential cause of the collapse of the Ancien Régime. This was in any case already doomed by its failure to govern effectively and by financial incompetence, both of which related to the extravagance and self-obsession of the Versailles court.

The Revolution, when it came, was not a single event, but a constantly evolving political situation, whose more extreme manifestations were radical and for many oppressive, but in the event not all that long-lasting. It was no more than eleven years from the execution of Louis XVI to the coronation of Napoleon.

We are unfortunately not able to print the full text of Ms Campbell Orr's paper in these proceedings, and we are certainly the losers thereby.

We therefore begin with Ellis Rogers's review of changes in the ballroom repertoire over a period that extended from the death of Louis XIV in 1715 to the

middle of the 19th century, though concentrating on the fifteen years with which the conference was especially concerned (Chapter 1). Ellis has long studied 19th-century dancing and its antecedents, and these studies recently bore fruit in a magnum opus, *The Quadrille*, whose publication was happily celebrated at the conference itself. Where he excels is in relating the currency of particular styles of dancing to the social circumstances in which they were performed. The years from Louis XVI to Napoleon afford the ideal context for this kind of analysis. Social change was profound and rapid, swinging from one extreme to another and then back again. The modes of dancing responded to these pressures, while also developing according to a momentum of their own.

A very specific case was taken by Sarah Dixon Gasyna, who examined the *Bals des victimes*, a phenomenon of the winter of 1494-95 (Chapter 2). This forms part of a larger study being undertaken at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama at the University of Toronto, and it combines all the individual topics to which the conference was devoted – dance, costume and culture – all extended by a psychological critique of their meanings. The *bals des victimes* were attended solely by those with relatives executed during the Terror and there, behind closed doors, the survivors could exult in their own survival. These special circumstances bred extravagant modes of dress that spilled out into the outside world and scandalised sober opinion.

This development found a place also in Frances Tucker's review of French and English fashions in the period from 1780 to 1810 (Chapter 3). Frances became a professional costume historian to support her enthusiasm for historical dance, and her account of the development of dress over this period was enlivened with much comment from contemporary sources. Those who attended the conference had the benefit of numerous well-chosen illustrations, which are not included in this volume. Now, however, they can go over the words again at leisure on the printed page, where they will still find much of value and interest.

The final paper came from Elspeth Reed on dancing with Jane Austen (Chapter 4). Elspeth is director of the Jane Austen Dancers (to whom we shall return) and in that capacity has constantly to ask herself if they should be dressing and dancing as if in the 1790s, in the first decade of the 19th century, or in the Regency, and are there any defining differences? While Austen's novels were published between 1811

and 1817, three of them were originally written in the 1790s, while her personal experience of Public Assemblies ceased in 1809.

Descriptions of dancing in her letters and in the novels were carefully collated and combined to give a detailed and illuminating picture of how these things were managed in Hampshire society, where events on the Continent tended to remain somewhat remote.

We should not conclude these introductory remarks without taking note of the contribution made by the Jane Austen Dancers themselves to both the enjoyment and the understanding of those attending the conference, by means of two short programmes of actual dances. The first of these was designed to illustrate the development from cotillons to quadrilles described by Ellis Rogers. The second was more closely related to the repertoire that Jane Austen would

herself have experienced. Since the detailed sources for the dances of this period and their music are not widely known (some dances, for example, being known solely from fans in museum collections), it seemed useful to give details of the dances performed in an appendix.

References

- QUIREY, Belinda, & HOLMES, Michael (1969), 'Apology for History' (eight articles in the *Dancing Times*, reprinted by the Dance Research Committee of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, London, 1993).
- ROGERS, Ellis A. (2004), *The Quadrille* (Orpington: C & E Rogers).

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