

The Nineteenth-Century Manuals



Our dance "cheat sheets" follow a long tradition. In the late eighteenth century, the perfectly equipped dancer could languidly glance at her dance fan, which carried miniature printed instructions for dances. An early nineteenth-century Master of Ceremonies might discreetly look down at a tiny set of cards in the palm of his hand, describing the different sets of the Quadrille. But as polkas, waltzes, galopades, ecossaises, Swedish dances and Spanish dances joined the country dance, the reel and the quadrille in the popular nineteenth-century ballroom, a need for handy, mass-produced dance instructions became apparent.

Dancing masters seized the opportunity, and the handy manual or ballroom guide was born. Clearly laid out, easy to read, and at most four inches high, it offered a key to fashionable dancing for everyone. As William Robertson of Brechin writes, "I have endeavoured in these pages to put before my pupils a book which can be carried in the Vest Pocket, or even inside Assembly Programmes." Simplicity of language was a selling point: one manual is subtitled "Dancing without the Use of French Terms," and D.G. Macmillan's *New Ball Room Guide* offers the reader "in a plain and intelligible form the figures of the most fashionable dances at present practised in London and Paris, the most distinguished cities of the world."

However, the writers of the manuals recognized that their readers might need more than the bare dance instructions to prepare them for the etiquette-driven world of the fashionable ballroom. So they also offered their readers "a few hints on etiquette," or as William Smyth of Edinburgh subtitled his manual, "A Selection of Observations and Maxims Necessary to be Attended to in Genteel Company." A raw youth of rural Perthshire could venture onto the polished floor of a ballroom in Dundee knowing in advance how to ask a lady to dance, how to escort her to her seat after the dance, and

how to show respect to other dancers by the careful giving of hands.

In fact, the dancing manuals catered to the mania for self-improvement which characterized an upwardly mobile society. They offer advice on polite behaviour outside the ballroom: the best way to walk in the street or to enter a room, the degree of pressure to be used when shaking hands, and the exact height to which the hat should be raised. Clearly, manners make the man (or the woman); as the Lowes of Edinburgh write, "Have a certain dignity of manner: it is absolutely necessary, to make one either respectable or respected in the world." But the manuals offer moral guidance too: Glasgow master D.M. Dutch writes, "Never be conceited over your own attainments, or jealous of those of other pupils. Remember that pride goeth before a fall, and that the greatest dancers the world has seen have all been conspicuous for their modesty."

The dances in the manuals range from quadrilles through circle dances to country dances and reels, presented in a standard order. The quadrille, that queen of the nineteenth-century ballroom, always has pride of place. Several writers insist on the importance of preserving Scotland's own dance traditions, and give precise instructions for traditional dances like the reel of four, but always near the end of their books.

Country dances have a place all in the manuals. No longer, however, did they monopolize the ballroom as they had done in the late eighteenth century. So no longer do we see hundreds of published dances which were fashionable for a week or a month and then disappeared, and successive sets of figures set to the same tune. Instead, a much smaller and more stable repertoire of country dances appears in the manuals. "Circassian Circle" (based on the first set of the quadrilles) first appears in John Smyth's manual (c.1820), "Petronella" and "Triumph"

in the Lowes' manual (2nd ed. 1822), and "Blue Bonnets" in William Smyth (1830). Together with others like "Flowers of Edinburgh," "Duke of Perth," "Mrs. MacLeod," "Meg Merrilees," and "The Merry Lads of Ayr," these dances appear, virtually unchanged, in most subsequent manuals. These manuals were published not only in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but in Stirling, Dundee, Aberdeen, Kirkcaldy, and Brechin. Details of style may have varied from region to region, but the basic figures stayed the same. So while dances like "Petronella" and "Triumph" were English in origin, they become traditional Scottish dances during the nineteenth century.

Many dances in the early RSCDS books are based on these manuals; a particular favourite is Boulogne's *The Ball-Room, or the Juvenile Pupil's Assistant* (Glasgow, 1827). But since the early RSCDS collectors used oral sources, they have sometimes preserved a local variant rather than the standard version of a dance. From Lowe (1822) to Anderson (c.1900) the same simple set of figures is set to the tune "De'il among the Tailors": the first woman and second man dance down the middle and up, the first man and second woman repeat, the first couple repeat, and both couples poussette. (The RSCDS source for the dance in Book 14 is the Davies Collection, not recorded elsewhere.) The "Corn Rigs" we know was "collected in the border country," according to Book 4. However, the standard manual version consisted of the first 16 bars of a "Flowers of Edinburgh" chase sequence followed by poussette and six hands round.

As the century progresses, the spirit behind the manuals becomes more entrepreneurial. In 1827, Boulogne writes modestly, "I have been induced to publish the following Selection of Dances, even at the hazard of encountering the criticism of the Public, by the earnest solicitation of my Pupils, for whose benefit principally it is intended." But Prof. J.B. McEwen puts his own photograph on the frontispiece of his *Ball Room Exponent* (c.1902), resplendent with starched white shirt and curled hair, and describes himself as "the only Teacher of Dancing in Scotland possessing the British, French, and American Badges of Proficiency." Dutch's manual (c.1900) carries a frontispiece showing Mr. and Mrs. Dutch performing their new dance

"Volunteer" before the Scottish Association of Teachers of Dancing (he is wearing a dark suit and hard-soled shoes). The manuals include ads for instruments, clothing, shoes, gloves, fans—there are profits to be made from dancing!

The entrepreneurial spirit colours the dances as well: writers like Dutch, McEwen, and David Anderson of Dundee publish "prize-winning" dances of their own composition. Anderson's manuals must have been hard to squeeze into a pocket, as they run to a couple of hundred pages. Anderson even puts his own stamp on some of the traditional solo dances, so that we have "D. Anderson's Sailor's Hornpipe" and "D. Anderson's Highland Fling for Gentlemen." The dancing masters used the solo dances as display dances at their end-of-year concerts, and they must have liked to add their own choreographic touches, explaining why so many versions of step dances like "Flowers of Edinburgh" and "Highland Laddie" have come down to us. The country dances were purely social dances, so they stayed in their traditional form. "Gaiety" and "simplicity," according to the manuals, characterized the style in which the country dances should be performed.

Many readers seem to have responded to the implied promise of social success and instant gentility: the manuals sold well. In about 1880, J.F. Wallace writes, "On introducing this the 26th thousand of my *Illustrated Ball Room Guide*, I have endeavoured to meet the wants of the many Students on this healthy and useful exercise by further simplifying the description of the various movements, introducing more fully *Illustrated Diagrams . . .*" The RSCDS Pocket Books and the Pillings Little Green Book continue an honourable tradition.

Rosemary Coupe
Editor, *The White Cockade*

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