

The Lowe family

Five generations of dance teachers in New Zealand, Australia and Scotland

ALLAN THOMAS

The history of the Lowe family spans nearly 200 years of dance teaching. In this remarkable chronicle more than 20 named individuals (often assisted by wives and children) were active, first in many centres in Scotland, later moving to Melbourne, Australia, and Canada – where their work has not yet been documented – and New Zealand, settling in Dunedin, Christchurch, and finally Wellington.

In the first years of the 19th century, the family were influential in establishing Scottish dance in the modern form in which it would be carried around the world. Four brothers taught in different parts of Scotland: John in Perth, Arbroath and Elgin, Robert in Glasgow, Montrose and Brechin, James in Dundee and Fifeshire, and Joseph in Edinburgh and Inverness. In their book, *Lowes' Ball-Conductor and Assembly Guide*¹ the requirements of good etiquette and instructions for dances are given, including a definition of the ideal of the participatory nature of Scottish country dancing: 'all are alike partakers of the pleasure; there are no silent envious gazers, no sullen critics to mar the amusement, or intimidate its votaries; joyous gaiety animates every countenance; and while pleasure beams in every eye, the young and old are equally employed in forming the mazy circles of the dance'.² Joseph Lowe's work with the family of Queen Victoria – the subject of his *Journal*³ – was part of the ultimate accolade for Scottish dance, the approbation of royalty, which was to ensure its popularity world wide.

The Lowe brothers' teaching encompassed instruction in deportment and etiquette as well as the steps and figures of dances. But they were not simply the holders of an unchanging tradition. In the first half of the 19th century Joseph Lowe and his brothers were associated with a number of dance innova-

tions – the inclusion of calisthenics in training, the publishing of dance music with pianoforte accompaniment, new choreography, and changes in the style for men and women. Similarly the subsequent generations of the family have adapted to fashion and economic circumstances in their teaching.

The first of the family known to have been a dance master was John (who spelt his surname Low) of Brechin, Scotland, admitted in 1785 as a Master Shoemaker to the Incorporated Craft of Shoemaking. As was usual at that period, he probably provided the music for his instruction by playing the fiddle. According to his son, Joseph Lowe, he was the composer of the well known dance tune, 'Rachel Rae'. The dancing masters of succeeding generations of the family continued to use a fiddle well into the 20th century when Charlotte Lowe teaching in Christchurch is remembered as disciplining her pupils with a smart tap of the violin



The Royal Family in 1854 when Joseph Lowe taught dancing at Balmoral and Windsor. From left: Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales; Victoria, the Princess Royal; Princess Alice; Queen Victoria; Prince Alfred. Photographer Roger Fenton. Copyright: Windsor Castle. Royal Archives. © 1991. Her Majesty the Queen.

bow. The Lowe history traces the survival of the ideal of the 18th-century dancing master – a complete musician as well as dancer – to a hitherto unimagined extent.

THE LOWE FAMILY IN NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIA

The emigration of one dance teacher, Joseph Eager Lowe, to New Zealand and Australia established the family here; he settled briefly in Dunedin before moving to Melbourne and was the first of three generations of the family to teach dance in New Zealand. The antipodean family particularly held onto the memory of Edinburgh Joseph Lowe's Royal appointment: they had his *Journal* and extended this into a book and dance memorabilia collection containing certificates, exercise equipment, dresses, shoes and fans, etc. The history of dance in the Lowe family could be told as the travels of this collection, and the additions made to it by each succeeding generation, though details of how it moved from place to place are largely unknown.

JOSEPH EAGER LOWE (MELBOURNE)

The *Journal* came to Joseph Eager Lowe in Melbourne and it probably gave him the confidence in 1869 to seek a recommendation from the Duke of Edinburgh, whose childhood violin and dancing lessons are mentioned in the *Journal* (see illustration). During this visit to the antipodes the Duke played the violin in Auckland, leading the orchestra for a performance by the choral society, 'creating quite a furore among the local musicians',⁴ and a ball was held in his honour in Wellington.

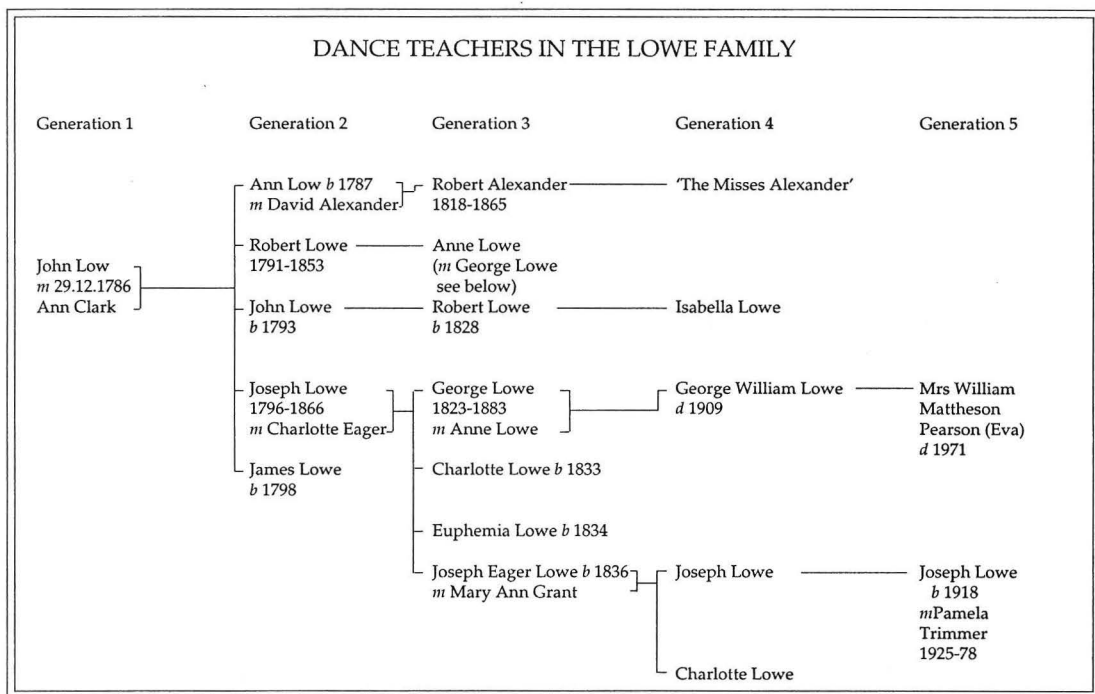
The other British manuscripts of the Lowe collection must have come from Scotland with the *Journal* and the letter of recommendation that his sister Charlotte had obtained from Queen Victoria. Joseph Eager Lowe probably added several books published in Australia and his own small publication, an *aide-memoire* with the address of his academy – Lowe's Rooms, Darling Street, South Yarra, Melbourne.



Prince Alfred, 1854, had been a favourite pupil of Joseph Lowe in Edinburgh who records in the Journal that he began fiddle lessons in 1853: 'I was surprised how well the child understood what he was about. He played God Save the Queen by heart and several other simple airs. He promises to be a first rate player, his musical ear is very good.'

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DANCE TEACHERS IN THE LOWE FAMILY



JOSEPH LOWE AND CHARLOTTE LOWE (CHRISTCHURCH)

Two of the children of Melbourne's Joseph Lowe were dance teachers : Joseph and Charlotte, both of whom taught in Christchurch, New Zealand. Charlotte lived at Rangiora, never married, and taught both at her home and for many years at Rangiruru Girls School. Joseph, her brother, came to New Zealand first as a visiting teacher; he travelled from Melbourne every year for 10 years before settling in Christchurch. With the Depression of the 1930s, and the difficulties of making a living from dance, Joseph moved to Otago and worked in Dunedin and Invercargill. He attempted to set up in roller skating which was popular at the time. The family collection of dance books was held by Joseph and passed to his son Joseph Matthew Lowe who had married Pamela Trimmer.

PAMELA LOWE

Pamela had been an outstanding dancer, winning ballet competitions as a child, and performing with touring companies as a young adult. She established a teaching studio in the Hutt Valley, Wellington. Joseph Lowe assisted her with the stage props for her ballet students' performances. In this generation the Lowe activities changed from Scottish ballroom dancing to ballet - both forms of dance, particularly as they involved the teaching of children, being concerned with deportment and grace of movement which extended to refinement in social intercourse.

Among the pupils of Pamela Lowe were her younger brothers and sisters, including Jon Trimmer, now principal dancer of The Royal New Zealand Ballet, who remem-

bers that the Lowe book collection was often consulted during his student days; passages from the *Journal* were read to the family, and the 18th century dance-notations of the Tomlinson manuscript excited interest.

Footnotes

- ¹ Lowe, Messrs.[J., R., J. and J.S.], *Lowes' Ball-Conductor and Assembly Guide*, (Edinburgh, circa 1830, 3rd edition).
- ² *ibid*, 92,93
- ³ Thomas, Allan (ed), *A New Most Excellent Dancing Master ...*, (New York, 1992)
- ⁴ Hurst, Maurice, *Music and the Stage in New Zealand*, (Dunedin, 1944), 14

Acknowledgement :

Dr Alastair MacFadyen, formerly Honorary Archivist of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society has generously made his researches on the Lowe family in Scotland available. The history of the Lowe family dance activities in Scotland, England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are the subject of ongoing work. I wish also to thank the Lowe and Trimmer families for their valued assistance.