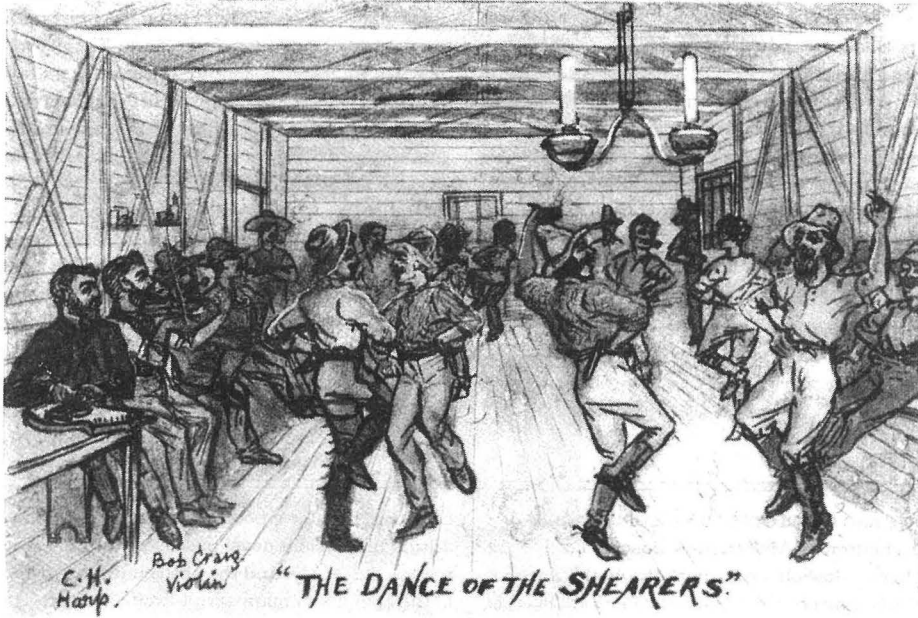


The indefatigable pursuit

Glimpses of the colonial ball in New Zealand



J.M. THOMSON

The ball, an invigorating phenomenon of 19th-century New Zealand colonial life, made and unmade matches, mixed society together in some kaleidoscopic whirl, gave isolated communities a sense of cohesion and purpose and kept unbroken the musical bonds with Britain and Europe. Its elements are beyond rational analysis: the clothes, the perfumes, the hairstyles, the lace, the flounces; the visits to the milliners and the perusal of the latest fashions from overseas; the programme card (the *carnet du bal*) originally silver or tortoiseshell, velvet or satin, and finally, paper, the gold pencil which became reduced to a mere wooden artefact with a tassel finish; the preparation of the supper, the ordering of wine, port, champagne and the best madeira, the putting up of the decorations, and above all – whom to invite and whom NOT.

Its heart lay in the dances and the music, in basic steps which scarcely changed from one end of New Zealand to the other. The polka, galop, schottische and Roger de Coverley could be learned on the spot. Balls had a regular pattern, usually opening with a quadrille, made up of five distinct parts, each with lively rhythmic themes mostly in 2/4 time, danced by four, six or eight couples. Surviving notations show how intricate it might become – ‘The Lancers’ was a simplified version. A waltz often

followed, to be succeeded by a galop or polka. In the galop, an uncomplicated dance in 2/4 time, couples moved with rapid springing steps down the room. It could bring a ball to an end, although sometimes a waltz fulfilled this function, or ‘Sir Roger de Coverley’, a surviving country dance. The polka, for couples, was made up of simple short heel and toe steps in 2/4 time. Occasionally a polonaise or a reel was danced, or differing versions of the waltz.

Balls soon came to play a central part in Australian life. Of particular interest is the account by Ensign Best, a young army officer later to serve in New Zealand, of a St Patrick’s Day ball in Sydney on 16 March 1838:

Behold me at nine o’clock stepping into a carriage...in full tog, new sash, and epaulettes which had only appeared before royalty.

Once inside, disaster struck:

I was soon introduced to a very pretty girl and just in the act of carrying her off when down came a cursed Jubilee lamp, oil and all on the top of my head emptying its contents all over me (who ever heard of hanging such a thing up in a ballroom) ... The company was in many cases of a very low description shopkeepers & their families, the dancing ill regulated, a decided want of an M.C. the supper execrable and the music also, both bands being beastly drunk ...I was heartily sick of and thoroughly disgusted with the first Australian ball I witnessed.¹

Class differences had to be preserved in the ballroom, as elsewhere, although in the colonies they proved hard to

Opposite: *Shearer's Ball* – at Otakapo Station, Rangitiki, 1894.

Below left: Sheet music cover, *The Original Schottisch*, composed by Jullien, sheet music cover, London, n.d., 19th century.

Below right: *Q for Quadrille*, George Cruikshank, A Comic Alphabet, (London 1836).

maintain. At Almack's, London's most famed dancing rooms, a committee of noblewomen had controlled the distribution of tickets on socially exclusive lines. Elsewhere, as at Cheltenham, when premises were opened in 1816, 'no clerk, hired or otherwise ...' was permitted to attend; separate rooms were opened for businessmen and another set for anyone who could pay a shilling and was properly dressed. The Australian dance historian Nell Challingsworth, records a Civic Fancy Dress Ball held in Sydney at the Victoria Theatre in 1844: the ball committee had allowed tradesmen ('common folks') and 'all the riff-raff of the city' to attend, to the ire of the 'Upper Class'.²

Balls took place on many diverse occasions. A fête held in May 1867 in the Melbourne Botanical Gardens included 'a grand procession of all the

trades' to mark the adoption of the eight-hour day. The Foresters celebrated New Year's Day in 1868 in a similar fashion in the Melbourne Zoological Garden. Miners danced in an orderly manner in a New South Wales goldfield hotel in the 1860s. Australian designed and printed dance sheet music soon appeared to meet the demands of amateur musicians with titles such as 'The Cricket Match Schottische', 'The Blue Mountain Polka' and 'The Cockatoo Waltz', in a fine flamboyant cover designed by Charles Turner.

Ensign Best was subsequently posted to Wellington where he became involved in organising the balls that celebrated the first anniversary of the settlement. As the working class and the gentry could only resolve their differences by having two separate events, the 'Select' gave a subscribers'



Q
Quadrille

ball on the evening of 22 January 1841 at Barrett's Hotel and on Monday the 25th the 'Popular' presented 'a much more extensive bill of fare', culminating in a ball in one of the large wooden stores erected on Te Aro beach. The weather having declared fine by ten o'clock flags waved over many of the houses and the masts of the shipping, and a spirited race between four whale-boats round the vessels at anchor started the proceedings', wrote Edward Jerningham Wakefield.³

On 20 January Ensign Best had taken part in a dance on board the ship *London* attended by thirty ladies and twice as many gentlemen: 'The arrangements were admirable, the poop and quarter deck being covered in with awnings and sails and decorated with flags. In the cuddy [saloon] was a really elegant cold dinner to which the ladies sat down about six o'clock the gentlemen waiting on them and when they retired taking their places. About nine dancing commenced on the quarter deck our music was a harp & violin we kept at it until past Twelve and then went to supper'.⁴

On 22 January he continues:

I was occupied all day making arrangements for our ball and most opportunely discovered a conveyance for the Ladies in the shape of an Amunition waggon with Tilt which we *horsed* with *four bullocks*. It rained all day and towards night blew again so that none of our sports could come off but our ball we determined not to be done out of. By Nine between seventy and eighty of the most respectable people in the place were assembled in Barretts large room. I was installed as on board the *London* M.C. & dancing commenced (Band, Piano violin flute) We kept it up until five & then the weather being moderate walked home. At one time we had seven couples waltzing and the show of Ladies was generally creditable.

On 25 January 1841 we find only a casual reference to the celebration by the 'Hoi polloi', or the rabble: 'I do not know how the popular ball went off'. Edward Jerningham Wakefield noted, however, that it was 'joined by most of the male aristocrats'.

In Auckland, Government House became the natural centre of music and dancing. On one occasion some of the Maori chiefs took their wives to the Queen's Ball. Most of the women wore white ball dresses:

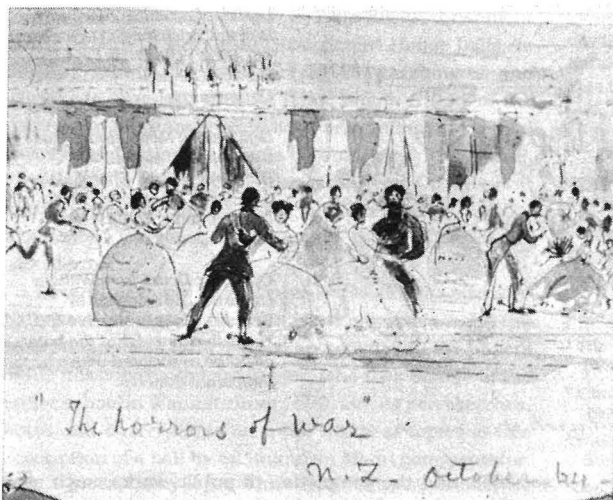
These were made after the latest fashion... They [the Maori women] enjoyed the dancing much, and with great animation commented, to some of the Pakeha gentlemen who understood Maori, on the principal features of the brilliant scene before them. They also enjoyed several promenades between the dances, and stood up in some of the quadrilles with European partners; so soon mastering the "figures" that we shall not be at all surprised at both the quadrille and the polka being soon naturalised amongst them. One or two of the chiefs also stood up in a quadrille, of which they approved more than the waltz or the polka.⁵

Government House in Wellington also became a principal venue for balls, especially in what was described as 'the season'. Charlotte Godley recorded many spirited occasions, such as a ball to celebrate the Queen's birthday in 1850:

We were asked for "Dancing at nine" on a magnificent *printed* card, and presented ourselves soon after 9.30, when we found everyone arrived and in superb ball-dresses, apparently just unpacked from London, specially Mrs Eyre [wife of the Lieutenant-Governor]. We were, I think, all surprised at the general effect of the ball, it was so very good... Beyond the verandah, a space was enclosed for the band of the 65th, and that from the *Meander*, which relieved each other, and played capitally.⁶

At Lyttelton she notices many such events, encapsulat-





ing the abundant energy of a predominantly young settlement whose members danced from early evening until morning and managed a day's work afterwards – but not always. The entire spirit of such occasions may be summed up in the English settler Edward Ward's description of a dance on board the ship *Travancore* in Lyttelton Harbour on 24 May 1851, just before she set sail for England: After dinner [we] danced in the 'tween decks in a frantic and uproarious state. Such a merry evening I certainly never passed. I shall never forget the whirlwind of animal spirits set loose at that dancing party. Thorough, genuine enjoyment was in everybody's face.⁷

Lady Barker, who came to New Zealand with her second husband, Frederick Napier Broome, to farm in North Canterbury, was shocked by her first Christchurch ball in January 1866 where the music was 'very bad and the decorations desolate'.⁸ But by December she is found festooning her own farmhouse, taking part enthusiastically and commenting on an 'unfortunate five ladies who had been nearly killed with incessant dancing'.⁹ Out visiting, she encounters an unlikely set of quadrilles:

... in a short time I heard something like music and stamping ... I stole softly down to see what was going on: when I opened the door of the general sitting room a most unusual sight presented itself – eight bearded men, none of them very young, were dancing a set of quadrilles with the utmost gravity and decorum to the tunes played by a large musical box, which was going at the most prodigious pace, consequently all the dancers were flying through the figures in silence and breathless haste. They could not stop or speak when I came in, and seemed quite surprised at my laughing at them; but you have no idea how ridiculous they looked, especially as their gravity and earnestness were profound ...¹⁰

But the strangest of such experiences occurred on a subsequent occasion as they sat on the verandah

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THE STEWARDS
OF THE
SUBSCRIPTION BALL.

TO BE GIVEN TO
LIEUT.-COL. WYNYARD & THE OFFICERS OF THE 58TH REGIMENT,
REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF
James Phillipson Company,
AT THE ODD FELLOWS' HALL,
ON TUESDAY, THE 3RD OF JANUARY, 1854.
8½ o'clock.

The favour of an answer is requested, addressed
to the Honorary Secretary, Masonic Hotel.

*Ball to His Excellency the Governor
and Lady Bowen.*

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 1868.

Stewards.

His Honor the Superintendent.	Judge Beckham.
H. Chamberlain, Esq.	J. A. Dargaville, Esq.
Major Haigh, V.C.	C. von der Heyde, Esq.
Owen Jones, Esq.	A. Kennedy, Esq.
Colonel Nelson.	G. B. Owen, Esq.
Dr. Pollen.	James Russell, Esq.
Chas. J. Taylor, Esq.	Heater Wood, Esq.

1152

Wm. Le. Isaac.

Government House.

NEW ZEALAND.

Thursday, the 28th of May, 1868.

Opposite: The traditional dances in the *Quadrille*, manuscript book, early 19th century, provenance unknown, collection of J.M. Thomson. Purchased in New Zealand.

Top: "The horrors of war", N.Z. October 64', the title of one of the few surviving dance cards. Private collection, photograph held by Alexander Turnbull Library.

Middle: Subscription Ball to be given to Lieut.-Col. Wynyard & the Officers of the 58th Regiment, 3 January 1854, Auckland Public Library, New Zealand and Pacific Department.

Below: "Ball to His Excellency the Governor And Lady Bowen", 29 April 1868, and a Government House Ball, 28 May, 1868. Auckland Public Library, New Zealand and Pacific Department.

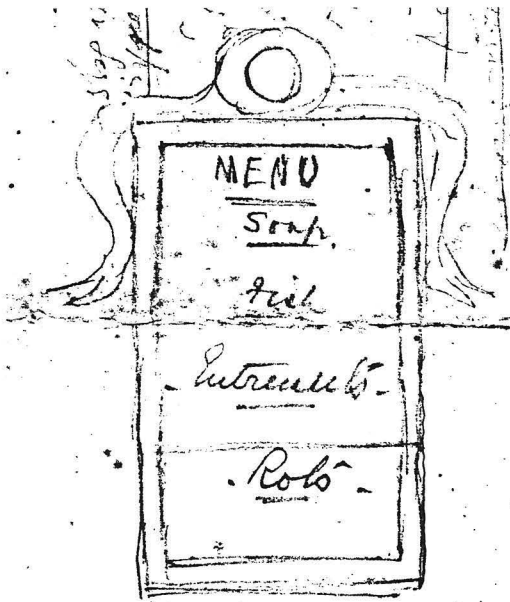


Left: *The Second Anniversary Ball in Christchurch December 16, 1852*, sketch by Dr A.C. Barker, Canterbury Museum, Christchurch.

Left, below: Menu sketch from the invitation to the *Batchelor's Ball*, Choral Hall, Auckland, 26 October 1876. OCM Ephemera, Auckland Public Library.

Opposite: Detail from William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, plate II, March 1753. Hogarth claimed that the hats could be associated with individual dancers.

The Second Anniversary Ball in Christchurch December 16, 1852



in the cool evening air while a full moon arose. The young men of the house decided to hold 'a servant's ball':

'And I was forced to gallopade up and down that verandah till I felt half dead with fatigue. The boards had a tremendous spring, and [it...] was very wide and roomy, so it made an excellent ball-room. As for the trifling difficulty about music, that was supplied by Captain George and Mr U— whistling in turn, time being kept by clapping the top and bottom of my silver butter dish together, cymbal-wise.¹¹

The delights and dilemmas of the ball similarly emerge from the pages of *The Richmond-Atkinson Papers*, a collection of diaries and letters by a cultivated middle-class English family, as they do from numerous other colonial testimonies. Balls marked the visits of royalty, state and national occasions, anniversaries of associations and

societies, and the completion of public works, such as railways. When the 8-mile line to the Hutt Valley was finished in 1873 Messrs Brogden, the contractors, gave a ball described here by the visiting Scottish singer David Kennedy:

All the élite of the town were gathered together...Of course there were Maorics present – fashionable Maorics, for none else could be admitted. One of them was worth £6000 a year...The native ladies when they come into town for a ball or party, get themselves up in really grand style, but do not feel one bit comfortable in such an unaccustomed dress.¹²

One of the most unusual events took place at Otakapo Station, Rangitiki, in 1894 when the shearers danced with each other in a woolshed to the sound of Bob Craig's violin and the artist Charlie Hammond's harp: 'They had never heard such music on the station before'.¹³ Dancing teachers practised throughout the country: a Mr Lewis, a professor of dancing, for instance, offered his services in Picton in 1863 for 'Fashionable Dancing and Calisthenic exercises', with private lessons in all the newest dances of the day – polka, mazurka, La Varsovienna Waltz, schottische, lancers etc, as did Joseph Lowe in Dunedin in 1867.¹⁴ Katherine Mansfield in 'Her first ball' testifies to the survival of the fashionable dance teacher well into the 20th century. Had she been in Christchurch her Miss Eccles might have been modelled on Miss Charlotte Lowe, grand-daughter of the dancing teacher of Queen Victoria's family:

Leila had learned to dance at boarding school. Every Saturday afternoon the boarders were hurried off to a little corrugated iron mission hall where Miss Eccles (of London) held her "select" classes. But the difference between that dusty-smelling hall – with calico texts on the walls, the poor terrified little woman in a brown velvet toque with rabbit's ears thumping the cold piano, Miss Eccles poking the girls' feet with her long white wand – and this, was so tremendous that Leila was sure if her partner didn't come and she had to listen to that marvellous music and to watch the others sliding, gliding over the golden floor, she would die at least, or faint, or lift her arms and fly out of one of those dark windows that showed the stars.¹⁵

We have now come full circle; from the establishment of the dances in Britain to Government House balls, to drawing rooms, theatres, hotels, to warehouses and woolsheds. The ball with its basic lingua franca of the patterns of the dance, revitalised and animated colonial society, celebrating the rituals of courtship and romance. This began to break down after World War One, as first ragtime, then the dances of the twenties and thirties, the charleston, foxtrot, quickstep, and tango replaced the older forms.

Several accounts by Europeans of Maori who attended balls have been given here but what impressions did the Maori themselves form of such an activity? In the papers of the missionary Richard Taylor, who took charge of the native school at Waimate from 1839, among pen sketches, notes and observations on a multitude of topics is this description of a ball by an unknown Maori commentator: When it got dark, they began to muster, it was a room of immense length – so long – (pointing to a distance of about 300 yards). In this bunch of candlesticks there were a hundred candles in the next bunch another hundred and so on so that it was just the same as daylight.

They were crammed full, there were 300 men and 100 women; – these women everyone of them – were girls. Then they began jumping: they had their playing things, the words of which they had no doubt before arranged, and these things seemed to regulate their movements.

There were a good number of old men there, and these old fellows endeavoured to make themselves look as young as they could.

One of them would take hold of a girl, and carry her off a great distance, spinning her around while her friends looked on quietly. This certainly much excited our astonishment. But what surprised us most of all was that there were no broken heads: they were continually bobbing to each other, and rushing to and fro in the greatest confusion, and yet we could see no collision and no blood. Then they cease, and begin eating; then more rings would sound and away they would rush as if they were mad, and go on with the same jumpings: then they would stop, and again to

go[sic] work eating; then again to their jumping and so on to daylight.

Katahi he hanga kino

This is the worst thing we have seen.¹⁶

This is a shorter version of the first Stout Centre seminar entitled 'The Select and the Popular: the role of the ball in 19th-century New Zealand', held on 1 August 1984, with demonstrations of 'The Lancers' Quadrille', 'The Velocipede Galop', the 'Valse Cotillon', schottische and polka, staged by Jennifer Shennan, and the music played on the piano by Colleen Rae-Gerrard.

Footnotes

¹ *The Journal of Ensign Best 1837-1843*, ed. Nancy M. Taylor, (Wellington, 1966), 166-7

² Challingsworth, Nell, *Dancing down the Years*, (Melbourne, 1978), 25-6

³ Wakefield, E. Jerningham, *Adventure in New Zealand*, ed. Joan Stevens, Wellington, 1955), 171-2

⁴ *Journal*, 275-6

⁵ Platts, Una, *The Lively Capital*, (Christchurch, 1971), 185. From a report (undated) in *The New Zealander*

⁶ Godley, Charlotte, *Letters from early New Zealand, 1850-1853*, ed. John R. Godley, (Christchurch, 1951). This spirited correspondence contains numerous references to balls.

⁷ Ward, Edward, *Journal*, 1850-51, (Christchurch, 1951), 185

⁸ Barker, Lady, *Station Life in New Zealand*, (London, 1871), 36

⁹ *ibid*, 98

¹⁰ *ibid*, 146

¹¹ Barker, *Station Amusements in New Zealand*, (Leipzig, 1874), 218-9

¹² Kennedy, David, junior, *Kennedy's Colonial Travel*, (London, [1876]), 215-6. David Kennedy was making a world tour as a member of a celebrated family of Scottish folk singers.

¹³ *Charlie Hammond's Sketch-Book*, introd. by Christopher Fry, (Oxford, 1980)

¹⁴ Kelly, Henry D., *As High as the Hills*, (Queen Charlotte Sound, 1976), 108-9

¹⁵ Mansfield, Katharine, *Collected Stories*, (London, 1945), 339-40

¹⁶ Taylor Collection, GNZ MSS 297/38, Auckland City Library, Auckland

