

## Dancing Heritage in Parramatta: A Review Article

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Of all the places of colonial dancing in Australia, Parramatta has one of the longest stories. This year's Heritage Ball held by the Bush Music Club at the Parramatta Town Hall added a new dimension to this chronicle.



*Figure 1. The Ballroom, Parramatta Town Hall. Image <http://arc.parracity.nsw.gov.au/blog/2014/09/03/the-parramatta-town-hall-centenary-square/>*



*Figure 2. Dancing the Maxina. Image courtesy of Maryrose Clarke.*

In 1792 the first public house was granted a license in Parramatta, though from its settlement in 1788, the popular culture of music, dancing, singing and drinking was manifest in the area. The pub offered a meeting place a ‘rallying post of gaiety’,<sup>1</sup> where the common folk could find companionship, a sense of community, and relaxation from the drudgery of everyday life. Dancing was reported as being one of the chief pastimes in the early colony for convicts, tradesmen, farmers, and poor settlers.<sup>2</sup> As the local population increased, so did the number of pubs, with names

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- 1 Domestic Intelligence. (1827, February 3). *The Monitor* (Sydney, NSW: 1826-1828). Retrieved from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article31758184>
  - 2 Jordan, R. (2003). *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840*: University of Hertfordshire Press.

reminiscent of the old country: The Red Cow Inn, Bird in Hand, Thatched House, Rose and Crown, and the Freemason's Arms.<sup>3</sup> Accounts show that convict women housed in the Parramatta Female Factory, as well as convict men in the broader community, enjoyed dancing and socialising in these establishments.

Throughout the 19th century Parramatta was the at the heart of social life for the surrounding region and the Woolpack Inn became a leading venue: 'it was known throughout the length and breadth of the land. Many a social function was held within its walls, and the reigning beauties of many a year tripped the light fantastic within its ballroom'.<sup>4</sup> For the elite of colonial society, Government House in Parramatta,<sup>5</sup> now the oldest surviving public building in Australia, provided rooms for the privileged and influential to dance

Although the site for the Parramatta Town Hall<sup>6</sup> was set out by Governor Phillip in 1790, work on the hall did not commence for another 89 years. Opened in 1881, it was built at a time when dancing was a key element of community life; the beautiful wooden floor, lofty ornamented ceilings and spacious interior of the great hall reflect this significance. Today few events would realise original purpose of the hall more than the Bush Music Club's Heritage Ball.

The Bush Music Club,<sup>7</sup> established in Sydney in 1954, has been instrumental in promoting Australian folk traditions by collecting, teaching, and aiming to popularise Australia's traditional songs, dances, music, yarns, recitations and folklore. A strong component in the club's agenda is the gathering and preservation of dances, and this has been successfully accomplished by providing regular classes, dances and balls. This aspect is efficiently and keenly supported by the Club's musicians, and the popular *Heritage Ensemble* has provided music for their dances for over 30 years. The annual Heritage and Subscription Balls have been highlights of the club's activities each year.

The 2017 Heritage Ball was co-ordinated by Wendy Richmond with musical direction by David Johnson, both stalwarts of the club and highly experienced in the art of providing top quality music and dance. This year the programme was expanded to include a number of recently researched dances from the early colonial period. Until recently the majority of colonial dances presented at heritage balls have drawn from the late

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3 Parramatta During The Macquarie Period (1931, December 17). *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate (Parramatta, NSW : 1888 - 1950)*, p. 7. Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106843510>

4 *Ibid.*

5 Old Government House. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/old-government-house/>

6 Parramatta Heritage Centre. <http://arc.parracity.nsw.gov.au/blog/2015/05/26/parramatta-timeline-1788-present/>

7 The Sydney Bush Music Club. <http://bushmusic.org.au/index.shtml>

colonial period and early 20th century. This focus was due to the resources which were readily available: when dance collectors began their work in 1960s, the generation with distant memories of dances from the early 1900s came to the fore, and this, coupled with an abundance of records from the second half of the colonial era led to an emphasis on this period. Until recently information about dancing in the early settlement has been extremely difficult to locate, however, with the advent of internet, research in this area has flourished.<sup>8</sup> This year's ball programme included a spectrum of dances ranging from the earliest in the colony (Silly Old Man, Swab the Decks, Nancy Dawson, Lord Castlereagh's Waltz), through the 19th century (Royal Irish Quadrille, Lancers, Prince of Wales Schottische, Tempest, La Galopade, Circassian Circle, Barn Dance), early 20th century couples dances (Palma Waltz, Maxina), and into modern times with a selection of newly devised dances (Jubilee Jig, Victory Waltz, Blackwattle Reel, Banner Waltz, Woyley Waltz, New Cumberland Town, Silver City Reel, Love 'em and Leave 'em). Supper was provided with the assistance of a fine group of volunteers aided by the Blacktown Boys Brigade.



*Figure 3. In position for a group dance at Parramatta Town Hall.*

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, H.B. (2017). *The History of Music and Dance in Australia, 1788-1840*. Retrieved from <http://www.colonialdance.com.au/>

Despite the immense enjoyment these dances bring to the participants, and ongoing research which demonstrates the extensive physical and psychological benefits of this form of dance, the number of supporters seem to be gradually waning. This is the first year the Club has not held their Subscription Ball due to rising costs and decline in numbers. Fortunately, this year's ball saw a group of enthusiastic young people in attendance which augers well for a continuation of Australian dance heritage.

The Bush Music Club's 2017 Heritage Ball traced the culture of dance in Parramatta from its earliest white settlement, through to the ongoing, living tradition which the club champions. An elegant and dynamic evening in a grand and historically significant site.

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#### References

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