

ENTERING THE BALLROOM: A HISTORY OF BALLROOM DANCING IN SOUTH AFRICA TO THE MID TWENTIETH CENTURY.¹

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Die geskiedenis van baldanse in Suid-Afrika tot die middel van die twintigste eeu

Baldanse is 'n gewilde tydverdryf in die een-en-twintigste eeu. Hoewel baldanse na die veertiende eeu terugdateer, is die huidige baldanstegniek eers kort voor die Tweede Wêreldoorlog (1939-1945) gestandaardiseer. Baldanse het in die vroeë twintigste eeu 'n bloeitydperk beleef toe meer mense as ooit tevore dit beoefen het. Ook in Suid-Afrika het dié “ingevoerde danse” 'n populêre tydverdryf geword. Hierdie artikel gee 'n kort oorsig oor die vroeë geskiedenis van baldanse in Suid-Afrika van die konloniale tydperk tot en met die eerste helfte van die twintigste eeu. Inleidend word kortliks gekyk na die beperkte aandag wat baldanse in Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur geniet. Die artikel fokus op diegene wat by baldanse in Suid-Afrika betrokke was en die redes waarom hulle so graag wou dans; asook die oorsake wat uitheemse baldanse so 'n gewilde plaaslike aktiwiteit gemaak het. Aandag word ook gegee aan daardie mense wat – as gevolg van klas, danstegniek of die wet – nie toegang tot die formele dansvloer gehad het nie. Die artikel poog om bewys te lewer dat die belangrikheid van baldanse en die gewildheid daarvan rasse- en kulturele skeidings in Suid-Afrika kon oorbrug, in so 'n mate dat dit 'n integrale tydverdryf vir party klasse van verskeie groepe kon word.

Sleuteltermes: Baldanse, goeweneur-generaals, tydverdryf, klubs

Ballroom dancing remains a popular cultural pastime in the twenty first century. Although it originated way back in fourteenth century Europe, the current techniques were standardized only shortly before the Second World War (1939-1945). The early twentieth century became thus the heyday of ballroom with more people participating than ever before. This was also the case in South Africa where these imported dances became a very popular pastime. This article will present an overview of the early history of ballroom in South Africa from the colonial period to the mid twentieth century. By way of introduction it will consider the

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the *Jubilee Conference of the Historical Association of South Africa* at the University of Pretoria on 28 June 2006. I am indebted to Prof Karen Harris of the University of Pretoria for her critical input.

limited attention given to ballroom dancing in South African literature. It will focus on who was involved in ballroom, why they wanted to dance and what were the various factors that made these foreign dances such a popular local activity. Attention will also be given to those people that did ballroom dancing even though they did not have access to the formal dance floor for reasons related to the law, class or technique. It will show how the social importance and appeal of ballroom dancing transcended the cultural and racial divides in South African society becoming integral to certain classes in various groups.

Keywords: Ballroom dancing, governor-general, recreational activities, clubs

Introduction

Ballroom dancing is a popular cultural pastime of the twenty-first century. The recent success of the movie *Shall we dance* sparked a revival in interest as did the British and South African dance lesson celebrity series, *Strictly come dancing*. This is evident in the increased media coverage in popular newspapers and magazines like the *Sarie*² and the *Sunday Times*³ as well as a sudden growth in enrolment lists at dancing schools like *Fred Astaire* in South Africa.⁴ As the movie and dance lesson series suggest, ballroom dancing is a somewhat exotic cultural activity characterised by formal couple training, extravagant costumes, and usually attracts the middle classes. Although ballroom dancing has a history that dates back roughly to the fourteenth century, the technique that one sees popularised today was standardised only shortly before the start of the Second World War.⁵ The early twentieth century was without a doubt the heyday of ballroom dancing and British newspaper reports and instruction manuals testify to the fact that far more people danced ballroom then than at any other time.⁶ Archival research and newspaper reports suggest that ballroom dancing was also a popular pastime of South Africans during this same period.⁷

The present article will present an overview of the early history of ballroom dancing in South Africa. It will consider who was involved in ballroom dancing and will focus on those who danced and why they wanted to dance these imported dances. Attention will also be given to those people that did ballroom dancing, even though they did not have access to the formal dance floor for reasons related to the law, race, class or technique. It will focus on the

² M. van Wyk, Kom dans die tango, *Sarie*, 2005-09-03, pp. 42-45.

³ D. Chang, The poetry of pose, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 2001-01-29, pp. 11-12.

⁴ S. Coetzer, Dis die rumba, die samba, die foxtrot, *Rooi Rose* 58(19), 1998-09-16, pp. 18-19.

⁵ M. Schild, *Social dance* (Dubuque, 1985), pp. 3-4.

⁶ V. Castle & I. Castle, *Modern dancing with many illustrations from photographs and moving pictures of the newest dances for which the authors posed* (New York, 1914), p. 43.

⁷ National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA): Gov 46, GEN 690/03, n.a.: H. Bertram Cox -The Crown agents for the colonies, 1903-06-24; Caledonian Society dance, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1934-03-05, p. 5.

various factors that made these foreign dances such a popular local activity in South Africa, for the descendants from Britain as well as the Afrikaner, blacks and coloureds.

Literature survey

Despite its interesting position within the various sections of the increasingly divided South African society, ballroom dancing has received virtually no academic or historical attention in South Africa. In recent decades there has however been an emerging need to write “new kinds of history ... the histories of families, of sport or music...”⁸ Where South African revisionist history, for example, focused mainly on “resistance politics, racial consciousness and class formation” two decades ago, historians are now diversifying, “turning their attention to the history of sport... culture, education ...”⁹ It makes a lot of sense thus to include histories of dance under this new paradigm, yet ballroom dancing has not featured much.

A few general South African histories do mention dancing, but then just as a social activity of a certain group. In his commentary on the early leisure activities of South Africa the cultural historian Victor de Kock briefly mentions the informal but popular nature of seventeenth century travellers’ dances in the Cape. He states that the “... Dutch sailors who came ashore visiting inns where they could pass away the time in merrymaking, and dancing their own boisterous measures...”¹⁰ Both A.F. Hattersley¹¹ and C.G. Botha¹² emphasise its popularity, describing dancing in the eighteenth century South African ballroom as adding to the “colour of life”¹³ and that “amongst the wealthy who had young folks in the house a dance was a regular pastime ...”¹⁴ In the 1970s South Africanists Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson mention how “the Bantu” danced and also show how the social activities (including dancing) separated the various races in South Africa.¹⁵ A decade later, in his popular pictorial history of South Africa, journalist Peter Joyce discusses dancing mainly as a form of white recreation. In this work he mentions the first national ballroom dance competition held in 1928 and explains how heats were danced throughout South Africa with the final taking place in Johannesburg.¹⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s passing reference is also made to specific ballroom dances, like the Tango and the Waltz, in texts such as *Cape Town*

⁸ M. Morris, *Every step of the way. The journey to freedom in South Africa* (Cape Town, 2004), p. 321.

⁹ G. Vahed, “Review: Vahed on Murray & Merrett, caught behind: Race & politics in Springbok Cricket”, <jmartens@ARTS.UWA.EDU.AU>, 2005-05-21, archive at H-SAAFRICA@H-NET.MSU.EDU.

¹⁰ V. De Kock, *The fun they had! The pastimes of our forefathers* (Cape Town, 1955), p. 47.

¹¹ A.F. Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1969), p. 17.

¹² C.G. Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony with social customs in South Africa in the 18th century* (Cape Town, 1973), pp. 51, 85.

¹³ A.F. Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa*, p. 17.

¹⁴ C.G. Botha, *Social life in the Cape Colony*, pp. 51, 85.

¹⁵ M. Wilson & L. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford history of South Africa* (Clarendon, 1971), pp. 145, 162, 266.

¹⁶ P. Joyce, *Reader’s Digest: South Africa’s yesterdays* (Cape Town, 1981), pp. 102-103.

*the making of a city*¹⁷ and *South Africa in the 20th century: chronicles of an era*.¹⁸ A short, but very specific overview of ballroom (social) dancing appeared in the 1971 *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*. Dorothy Dymond, who was a life member of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Ballroom Dancing as well as an examiner of the South African Association of Teachers of Dancing in Cape Town, was the author of this contribution. She claims that “in South Africa, like overseas ... festive occasions were seen as an opportunity for a social ball” where “musicians played the accompanying music.”¹⁹ She, however, presents an overview that is entirely white and colonial with only a single concluding sentence referring to “coloured” and “bantu” participation.²⁰

Besides the above, there are a few articles that have been published in journals concerning the presence of music and dance in South Africa,²¹ as well as the biographical stories of South African dancers and their passion for ballroom.²² David Rycroft’s article on African music in Johannesburg and Peter Alegi’s work on sport and cultural performance are examples of the former.

As regards the latter biographical trend, leading South African ballroom dancers, Bill and Bobby Irvine produced a book in 1970 which traces the story of their dancing career. Both Bill and his wife, Bobby Irvine, were leading South African ballroom dancers and had taught ballroom in South Africa. Bobby Irvine was born and bred in South Africa and in teaching ballroom they visited dancing studios throughout South Africa. The book is a biography tracing the escalation of the Irvines’ dancing career mainly between the 1950s and 1960s. The book refers to the state of dancing in the world and more particularly in South Africa during these years. Irvine also describes and compares the state and standard of white and coloured dancing in South Africa. The Irvines’ travels also take the reader to Japan, America and other prominent European ballroom dancing competitions (e.g. Blackpool) and reveals the difficulty of both surviving as a dancer and dancing as South Africans in the mid-twentieth century. Being a biography, the book mainly focuses on their personal dancing, their perspectives and their problems. Yet, in its very intimate and subjective nature lies the enormous cultural historical value of this text. Although the book

¹⁷ N. Worden *et al.*, *Cape Town the making of a city: An illustrated social history* (Cape Town, 1998), pp. 139, 148-149.

¹⁸ P. Joyce, *South Africa in the 20th century, chronicles of an era* (Cape Town, 2000), pp. 31, 141, 176, 103.

¹⁹ D. Dymond, Dancing Ballroom, in D. J. Potgieter (ed.), *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa III* (Cape Town, 1971), p. 558.

²⁰ D. Dymond, Dancing Ballroom, in D. J. Potgieter (ed.), *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa III*, p. 558.

²¹ D. Rycroft, African music in Johannesburg: African and non-African features, *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 11, 1959, pp. 25-30; P. Alegi, Playing to the gallery? Sport, cultural performance and social identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35(1), 2005, pp. 17-38.

²² B. Irvine & B. Irvine, *The dancing years* (London, 1970).

is primarily autobiographical, it does provide comment on the “coloured dancers,” which they encountered in their dancing careers.²³

Even though most of these studies emphasise the European (white) influence and the popularity of ballroom dancing in South Africa,²⁴ they fail to explore why ballroom was so easily accepted in a diversified South Africa, both in terms of white and black South Africans. The present article seeks to address these issues, but also forms part of a wider study which focuses on the broader history of ballroom dancing in South Africa.²⁵

Initial phase: ballroom dancing from the mid seventeenth century until the nineteenth century

Ballroom dancing has a long history in South Africa. When Europeans first set foot on South African soil, the diverse South African society (including Vereenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie (V.O.C.) officials, Free burghers, slaves and blacks) imitated the ballroom dances of their colonial forefathers or “masters”. Being an important part of European social life and prestige, ballroom dancing soon featured in the Cape Colony at most social gatherings of the Dutch settlement. From travellers’ accounts by individuals such as Lady Anne Barnard²⁶ and W. Bird²⁷ it becomes apparent that ballroom dances were formally danced from at least the beginning of the eighteenth century at the Colony. Both Barnard and Bird emphasise the popularity of these social dances and comment on the variety of people that danced ballroom in the colonial Cape.²⁸ While Barnard for example states that “all” of the Dutch ladies loved dancing²⁹ Bird describes dancing as a favourite amusement of the Cape ladies because, according to him, “... all prefer to do that in which they most excel ...”³⁰ The most popular pre-twentieth century ballroom dances that are mentioned by Barnard and Bird would have included the *minuet* (a couple dance in a S or Z that was characterised by its exact choreography and small or minute steps, that was usually performed by one couple at a time and started and ended

²³ B. Irvine & B. Irvine, *The dancing years* (London, 1970).

²⁴ Exceptions to this include: L. Callinicos, *A people’s history of South Africa 2; Working life 1886-1940: Factories, township, and popular culture on the Rand* (Johannesburg, 1987), pp. 216-217; M. Perham, *African apprenticeship: an autobiographical journey in Southern Africa 1929* (London, 1974); and D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre* (Johannesburg, 1985).

²⁵ A.M. Green, *Dancing in borrowed shoes: the history of ballroom dancing in South Africa* (MA dissertation in progress, University of Pretoria)

²⁶ A.M. Robinson (ed.), *The letters of Lady Anne Barnard to Henry Dundas from the Cape and elsewhere 1793-1803* (Cape Town, 1973), pp. 43, 73, 213, 216.

²⁷ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (Cape Town, facsimile reprint, 1966), pp. 164-165.

²⁸ P.J.S. Richardson, *The social dances of the nineteenth century in England* (London, 1960); A. McMahon Cree, *Handbook of ball-room dancing with an introduction by George Grossmith, illustrated with diagrams* (London, 1920); Imperial Society of Teachers of dancing, *Teach yourself ballroom dancing* (London, 1992), pp. vii-viii, 23-24.

²⁹ A.M.L. Robinson, *The letters of Lady Anne Barnard to Henry Dundas*, p. 43.

³⁰ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822*, p. 165.

with a series of bows);³¹ as well as the *quadrille* (usually danced by an equal number of couples in a square formation and consisted of various figures or sets usually known by their French names. The *quadrille* was basically characterised by men and women dancing facing each other, taking hands, turning and changing partners and was followed by a bow or pause before and after each partner was changed);³² *cotillions* (characterised by couples facing one another in a square formation and dancing to a waltz tune under one another arms or around a central point);³³ and the *contredanse* (a French variation of an English line dance that was danced in a square formation).³⁴ As is evident in Hattersley's work where he describes "an epidemic of quadrille fever" in early eighteenth century South Africa, short periods in South African history saw certain dances being more fashionable than others.³⁵

Between 1830 and 1870 there appears to be a significant lull in the writing and reporting on South African ballroom dancing. This however, did not mean that people stopped dancing or that balls were less popular than in previous centuries. On the contrary, in Europe, this period saw the growing popularity of the waltz, *polka*, *mazurka*, *cotillion*, *minuet* and the *quadrille*. However, authors writing about South Africa during this time generally focused on "other" topics and recreational activities receive little or no attention. Ballroom dancing still formed part of everyday events, and writers seem to either barely mention it or ignore it altogether. Travel journals, a major source of information on the social events of pre-twentieth century South Africa, became a less common occurrence in South Africa's historiography and consequently it is relatively difficult to determine what the attitude of South Africans was towards ballroom dancing during this time.

Relics of dance activity, like invitation cards and dancing programs of the late nineteenth century,³⁶ however, testify to the fact that ballroom dances continued to be a popular pastime as the colony expanded and became established in the interior [Figure 1]. Furthermore, memoirs referring to the 1870s and 1890s reveal that ballroom was not only danced by the upper middle classes like the Heys family of Pretoria,³⁷ but these borrowed dances also formed part of the lives of people of lesser affluence.³⁸ Charl Jeppe, for example, describes in his early twentieth century memoirs of the Transvaal, how the

... young people had a gay time indeed, by a bucksail spread over ground cleared from grass provided each evening a good floor to the beautiful and magnificently ventilated

³¹ C. Sachs, *World history of dance* (London, 1938), pp. 396-397; R. Astier, Francos Marcel and the art of teaching in the eighteenth century, *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 2(2), Summer 1984, p. 18.

³² P.J.S. Richardson, *The social dances of the nineteenth century in England*, pp. 134-141.

³³ C. Sachs, *World history of dance*, p. 421.

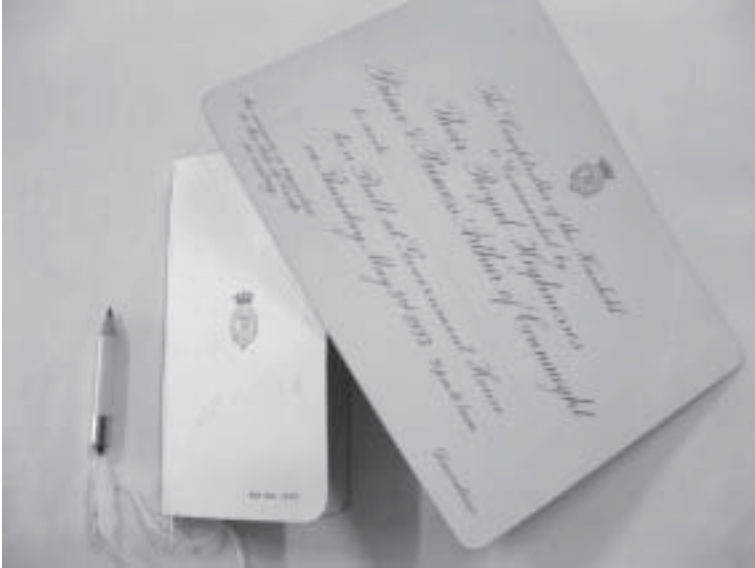
³⁴ C. J. Sharp, English folk dance: The country dance, *The Musical Times*, 1915-11-01, p. 659.

³⁵ A.F Hattersley, *An illustrated social history of South Africa*, p. 154.

³⁶ B. Theron, George Jesse Heys (1852-1939) in Pretoria, *Historia* 50(2), November 2005, pp. 119-148.

³⁷ B. Theron, George Jesse Heys (1852-1939) in Pretoria, pp. 119-148.

³⁸ C. Jeppe, *The kaleidoscopic Transvaal* (Cape Town, 1906), p. 89.



**Figure 1. Example of an invitation card with attached pencil
(NASA: GG 2251, 11/3, 1923-05-03)**

*hall, domed by the blue sky and lit by the stars, while the notes of a fiddle or concertina was as much appreciated as the strains of the Blue Hungarian band in a London ball-room.*³⁹

Modern phase, 1900-1940s

At the beginning of the twentieth century, rapid global changes altered both the manner and style of dancing. Industrialisation and urbanisation created a large middle class that had both disposable income and leisure time. The political, economic and social changes also influenced the availability of commodities, like ballroom gowns; restaurants; transport; electricity; gramophones and telephones, which made ballroom dancing a viable and special social event [Figure 2]. These changed circumstances also served to spread the mainly European and American new style of dances throughout the world and South Africa was no exception.

Influenced by the syncopated rhythm of ragtime music, the modern Waltz or *Boston*, the One-Step or Two-Step, Foxtrot and Tango (along with their different variations) became the ballroom dances of the early twentieth century. The modern Waltz, or *Boston* as it was called, had its inception in the late 1890s and was danced to Waltz music but incorporated

³⁹ C. Jeppe, *The kaleidoscopic Transvaal*, p. 89.



Figure 2. Advertisement in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-15

dips and rises that accentuated the offbeat of Jazz music.⁴⁰ Both the *One-Step* and *Two-Step* were danced to 4/4 time in an embraced hold. However, while the *One-Step* consisted of one step per beat, the *Two-Step* consisted of two steps per beat. The *Two-Step* was further danced to syncopated and livelier music and included various hops, skips and arm movements.⁴¹ The Foxtrot was, according to the twentieth century dance instructor, Victor Silvester, the favourite dance amongst men in war training camps as it was danced to upbeat music and easier to learn than the Waltz or Tango.⁴² Danced to a slower piece of music than the *One-Step*, the Foxtrot was and is especially renowned for its gliding and swinging movements. Between 1914 and 1920 there were no definite prescribed figures and dancers interpreted the music at their own free will. This early Foxtrot basically consisted of a slow walk and a quick run in time to music⁴³ and was a “combination of movements – walking, running, gliding and two-stepping – and not a distinct set of movements.”⁴⁴ After the First World War (1914-1918) the Foxtrot retained its popularity in both Europe and America. By 1920 it was either danced as a slow Foxtrot or a quick

Foxtrot (renamed the *Quickstep*), depending on the pace of the music.⁴⁵ These developments were to be reflected in South Africa in due course.

British influence on South African ballroom dancing in the early twentieth century

Because of her continuous connection and reliance on Britain since the first and the second British occupations (1795-1803, 1806-1961), South Africa was particularly susceptible to the influence of British ballroom dancing. The British victory after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) placed a “foreigner” as figurehead on state level, through assigning a governor-general to the country. This ushered in an era, particularly during the early twentieth century,

⁴⁰ A. Dodworth, *Assistant for A. Dodworth's pupils* (New York, 1873), p. 35.

⁴¹ V. Silvester, *Modern ballroom dancing: history and practice*, p. 29.

⁴² V. Silvester, *Modern ballroom dancing: history and practice*, pp. 31-33.

⁴³ V. Silvester, *Modern ballroom dancing: history and practice*, pp. 31-32; S. Sadie, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians* 6 (London, 1980), p. 738.

⁴⁴ A. McMahon Cree, *Handbook of ball-room dancing with an introduction by George Grossmith illustrated with diagrams*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ S. Sadie, *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians* 6, p. 738; V. Silvester, *Modern ballroom dancing: history and practice* (London, 1977), pp. 31-32.

in which British influence was more than apparent in South African society. According to the new post-war dispensation, the British governors-general acted as official British representatives as well as symbolic heads of state. This situation lasted until 1937 when a union national was appointed governor-general and thereafter local South Africans filled the position. Amongst other administrative duties the governors-general were legally required to: appoint ministers, choose members of the executive council and recommend taxing bills.⁴⁶ In reality, however, governors-general had little power, and it appears as if their social influence far outweighed their political relevance or significance.⁴⁷

However, the prominent social position and royal inclination of the governors-general and their wives undoubtedly served to reinforce ballroom dances in South Africa. The governors-general were at the top of society's social ladder and their attendance at functions validated social activities (e.g. clubs, garden parties, and leisure activities associated with the British middle class). These functions, along with the new style of ballroom dances, would otherwise not have been that easily accepted in either the realm of the "conservative" Afrikaner or "tribal" black culture. In a sense, the governors-general association with the ballroom component of much of this social scene made it a more prominent and desirable feature within society at large. As in Europe, for both the Afrikaner of European descent and the blacks influenced by the European colonist, the pre-twentieth century style ballroom dancing was familiar. The "new" Waltz (*Boston*), *One-Step*, Foxtrot and Tango were however radically different from the *minuets* and *quadrilles* of the previous centuries. Not only was this new style of dancing matched to livelier music, it also required much closer contact and faster movements between partners. It can consequently be argued that without the inadvertent support of the new styles of dancing by the governors-general, these dances might not have had the wide appeal they gained in South Africa.

From the very outset of the early twentieth century, the social importance of ballroom dancing is evident. Although it was generally regarded more as an adult leisure activity, it became increasingly more fashionable to educate children in ballroom dancing. This reveals how it was becoming a social necessity in South African society. As was the custom in Britain, teachers were appointed⁴⁸ and festivals arranged⁴⁹ to promote ballroom dancing amongst children. The military also stressed the social importance that ballroom dances had both for their members of the Transvaal Volunteer Corps and the public in general.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ E. Kahn, Governor-General, in D. J. Potgieter (ed.), *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa* V, p. 288.

⁴⁷ Personal interview: Prof. J. Lambert, UNISA, Pretoria, 2006-04-20.

⁴⁸ National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA), Pretoria: Gov 46, GEN 690/03, n.a.: H.Bertram Cox – The Crown agents for the colonies, 1903-06-24.

⁴⁹ NASA: Governor-General 2351, 6/171, G.W. Klerck – Miss F. Moorcroft Lamb, 1938-04-19.

⁵⁰ NASA: TVO 18, 563, n.a.: Minutes of a meeting held in the officers club on the 17th March 1911 in connection with the Transvaal volunteer-officers' ball, 1911-03-18.

It was however under governors-general like Herbert John Gladstone (1914-1920),⁵¹ Prince Arthur of Conought (1920-1923),⁵² and the Earl of Athlone(1924-1930),⁵³ that ballroom dancing became an increasingly familiar pastime. The white middle class regarded ballroom dancing as an acceptable and respectable social activity which had connotations of royal behaviour. The governors-general were a living example of what this respectability entailed. A letter of 1911 from the governmental secretary in Maseru concerning Governor-General Gladstone's visit to the city, for example, indicates that the Europeans in the country would like to meet Governor-General Gladstone and his wife at social dance functions.⁵⁴ A study of the social calendar of Governor-General Conought and his wife further reveals that governors-general had access to the infrastructure for hosting as well as attending various dance parties throughout a year.⁵⁵

During this time a distinction was made between a garden party and a ball, both of which were popular social dance functions. Balls and garden parties were generally organised for a Saturday (less often on Mondays or Fridays). Although Sunday dances did take place, they were frowned upon, as Sundays were upheld as a day for family and religion. While a garden party was usually organised in the afternoon from around 2 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.,⁵⁶ balls were reserved for the late evenings, commonly starting at about 8 p.m. and going on until the early morning.

A typical example of a garden party was organised by Conought on the 15th November 1921.⁵⁷ As was the case with most other garden parties organised by the governors-general, it was a lavish affair. The party was held at government house in Pretoria and local firms were hired to provide the necessary requirements. This included for example T.W Beckett⁵⁸ who supplied the cutlery and Clark & Adlers orchestras⁵⁹ that provided the music. Arrangements were also made with the South African railways to schedule special trains that would pick up the guests. The Government Printer was in charge of creating the 600 menus as well as the dance programs with a pencil attached on a white silk string [Figure 1].⁶⁰ Invitations were also

⁵¹ Gladstone was the first governor-general in South Africa. See for example South Africa Information Service, *Our first half-century 1910-1960: Golden Jubilee of the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1960), p. 12.

⁵² Governor-general Conought was the grandson of Queen Victoria and was subsequently well versed in social etiquette, South Africa Information Service, *Our first half-century 1910-1960*, p. 12.

⁵³ Governor-general Athlone was the brother of Queen Mary, South Africa Information Service, *Our first half-century 1910-1960*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ NASA: GG 1412 45/13: Government secretary's office, Maseru – Garraway, 1911-04-15

⁵⁵ NASA: GG 2351, 6/183: G.W. Klerck – The Town Clerk Durban, 1940-05-27; NASA, LD 1575, AG 614/08: Jewish Club Concert: A splendid success, *Pretoria News* (clipping), February 1908.

⁵⁶ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Col. Theo T. Truter – Captain Annesley, 1923-09-25; NASA, SAB: GG 2251, 11/2: C. Annesley – A. Cameron & Co, 1922-03-08.

⁵⁷ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: T.C. Gurney – Sirs, 1921-10-05.

⁵⁸ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: T.W. Beckett – Col. Gurney, 1921-11-09.

⁵⁹ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Col. Gurney – Clark & Adler's Orchestras, 1921-10-05.

⁶⁰ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Col. Gurney – The Government Printer, 1921-11-08.



Figure 3. Advertisement in the Rand Daily Mail, 1921-01-06.

sent out in the press, such as the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Times* [Figure 3].⁶¹ The detail that was required to arrange these balls was impressive. One could not simply decide to have a dance, these balls required a substantial amount of money, adequate space and a lot of pre-planning – all elements that were readily available to the office of the governor-general.

The prominent social role that both the governors-general and ballroom dancing had in South Africa is evident in the growing number of dance invitations that the governors-general received as the years progressed.⁶² Indeed, ballroom dancing became an extremely popular way to raise money because of its social appeal. Organisations and clubs used balls to raise money for what they viewed to be a worthy cause, but also because it was, at least for the middle

class, the customary social event of the year. This could explain why clubs, like those for rugby, that one would presume would stay clear of ballroom dancing, used balls to establish themselves as socially acceptable clubs.⁶³ This is evident in a letter addressed to the Governor-General in 1938 in which the West Rand Memorial Order of Tin Hats commit themselves to using the proceeds of the military ball for their Cottesloe house fund to build homes for “old and disabled ex-service men and their wives,” while other dance events were used to raise money for War victims.⁶⁴ Hospitals as well as children’s homes also benefited from ballroom dancing, as is evident in a mayor’s wife’s promise to provide “extra necessities and comforts throughout the Peninsula hospitals”⁶⁵ from the money raised at the various annual balls. It is also clear that the blind and disabled as well as charities supporting a particular group in society found the funds raised by dancing functions particularly helpful.⁶⁶ This can, for example, be seen in the Johannesburg municipality grant during the 1940s of £30 to the Chinese community ball in aid of the Liberty Calvacade and also the municipality’s £28 grant to the *Owners’ and Trainers’ Association’s* Christmas Race ball in aid of war

⁶¹ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Sunday Times syndicate limited – Colonel Gurney, 1921-11-09.

⁶² NASA: GG 2351, 6/183: G.W. Klerck – The Town Clerk Durban, 1940-05-27.

⁶³ NASA: GG 2352, 6/195: G.W. Klerck – The Mayor of Boksburg, 1938-06-13.

⁶⁴ NASA: GG 2343, 2/9, 2: W. Smillie – The secretary of His excellency the Governor General, 1937-04-07; GG 2343, 2/9, 2 : P. Margetts – H.E. the Governor General of South Africa, 1938-02-23.

⁶⁵ NASA: GG 2339, 1/59: M.L. Foster – Mr. Klerck, 1939-03-12.

⁶⁶ NASA: GG 2255, 1/92: Letters asking for support from various Jewish charities, 1925-05-02; TPB 2329, TA 122/5734: Johannesburg municipality grants in aid, 1940-1941.

funds. The governors-general of South Africa received various invitations both to attend these dance parties, but also to be the patron of a certain event and thus validate the social importance of the function. Lending patronage to a certain function was of extreme importance for people that wanted to make their event a noteworthy experience and was closely linked with the social position of the governor-general in South Africa. The governor-general was, according to Prof. John Lambert, at the top of the social hierarchy and could be compared to the Queen's social position in Britain. Thus, even if there was no direct monetary gain from the patronage, it validated the importance of a certain event or group.⁶⁷

Popularity and moral dangers of ballroom dancing in South Africa, 1920-1930s

The question however remains as to how many people in South Africa could actually dance ballroom and who danced on the ballroom dancing floors. The majority of records concerning ballroom dancing in the early twentieth century emphasise the strong European ("white") and especially English presence at the dances in South Africa and the importance that status played in organising and attending these balls.⁶⁸ As Robert Ross has pointed out "You are what you have"⁶⁹ and no where was this more visible than on the dance floor. "Belonging" at a ball or garden party inevitably meant dressing and acting the part. In his memoirs of early twentieth century Johannesburg, John Wentzel gives an exposé of the extravagant costumes that the ladies wore to dance at the Johannesburg Country Club and the trials and tribulations of fitting into a dress.⁷⁰ A popular Afrikaans magazine also provided advice on attending a dance, recommending readers wear "no. 4711 *Eu de Cologne*". Advertisements, found in newspapers like the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Pretoria News* emphasised the popularity of the new syncopated rhythm dances like the *Boston*, One- and Two-Step and Tango as can be seen in an advertisement of the *Astoria Palais de danse* in Noord Street, Johannesburg, inviting dancers to an evening of dancing.⁷¹

It is however not to say that these dances were readily accepted immediately throughout the ballroom dancing fraternity. It took a while for some of the nineteenth century hard-liners to adopt and indulge in the new style as can be seen in a 1920s university publication showing a diagram where dancing couples struggle to find the correct ballroom

⁶⁷ Personal interview: Prof. J. Lambert, UNISA, Pretoria, 2006-04-20.

⁶⁸ Garden Party, brilliant scene at Arcadia, smart toilette in spite of rain, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-11; NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Sunday Times syndicate limited – Colonel Gurney, 1921-11-09.

⁶⁹ R. Ross, *Belonging and belongings: on the material superstructure of identity*, Unpublished paper presented at the Historical Association of South Africa Conference (abstract), University of Pretoria, June 2006.

⁷⁰ J. Wentzel, *A view from the ridge: Johannesburg retrospect* (Cape Town, 1975), pp. 95-96.

⁷¹ Astoria Palais, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1934-02-17, p. 8.



Figure 4. Students struggling to dance. (*Vocator*, Transvaal University College, 1908-1928, opposite p. 8)

hold [Figure 4].⁷² It was especially the Afrikaans media, with its emphasis on family values and religion, that published articles warning against the moral dangers of dances. A popular Afrikaans magazine published an article entitled, *As mama (sic.) in die danssaal is* (When mother is in the dancing hall). This was a fictional tale describing a mother that spent all her time dancing and warns that dancing can destroy families and leads to suicide.⁷³ The magazine was also concerned about the youth who's "...wêreld bestaan nou vir hulle uit 'n danssaal, en hulle het selfs hulle gevoel van vaderlandsliefde verloor" (whole world revolves around the dancing hall and they have even lost their patriotism).⁷⁴ In an article entitled *Dans, gemengde baaier, kaart-speel en wyn-drink* (Dancing, mixed bathing, card playing and wine drinking) P.J. Pienaar further warns Afrikaans readers against the moral dangers that dancing can have on the church. He describes dancing as "verfoeilik" (detestable) and "verpestend" (noxious) and criticizes it for contributing to the "onsedelikheid onder ons volk" (promiscuity of our nation).⁷⁵ Interestingly enough this echoes the commentary of Bird on the eighteenth century Cape regarding the "morals" reflected in dance.⁷⁶

⁷² *Vocator*, 1928, opposite p. 8.

⁷³ Hermanus, *As mama (sic.) in die danssaal is*, *Die Huisgenoot*, Januarie 1922, pp. 378-388.

⁷⁴ P. van Braam, *Die modemense*, *Die Huisgenoot*, Maart 1922, p. 444.

⁷⁵ P.J. Pienaar, *Dans, gemengde baaier, kaart-speel en wyn-drink*, *Die Huisgenoot*, April 1920, p. 378.

⁷⁶ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822*, p. 166.

The social prestige that was associated with dancing was reflected in detail in reports in the *Rand Daily Mail*. The popularity of ballroom dancing was evident in the various advertisements inviting the public to attend dance events for an admission fee.⁷⁷ This daily newspaper also gave detailed descriptions of the extravagant appearances and who's who on the people attending the various balls and garden parties that were hosted by the governors-general, mayors and clubs during the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁸ An example of one of these events was a garden party on 10 January 1921 held in Arcadia, Parktown, Johannesburg.⁷⁹ Despite a sudden downpour the party was a great success and the *Rand Daily Mail* describes the 800 "honoured guests" as dressed in clothes that were "exceptionally smart". According to the report "Lady Dalrymple came in an elegant toilette of gold charmense allied with black charmeuse, with craped skirt, the corsage having [a] loose panel back, edged black silk fringe, and her black lace hat was trimmed osprey fronds." The attire of numerous other guests including Lady Carl Meyer, Mrs Raleigh and Mrs Gordon are also described in detail. Failure to live up to the dress code and required style of the balls was met with social dismay and criticism. The Commanding Officer of the Transvaal Cycle and Motor Corps was, for example, ordered to reprimand a certain Lieutenant Douglas because he attended a private dance in mess dress (a formal evening uniform for military occasions).⁸⁰ In a letter to the members of the Johannesburg Country Club, that listed the date of functions and rules of the club, members and their guests were "earnestly requested to wear either light boots or shoes when attending dances at the Club."⁸¹ Although the *Rand Daily Mail* supported the "new jazz dances"⁸² it also sternly warned against "shed[ding] all notions of common decency and throw[ing] off the hampering restraints of maidenly reserve".⁸³

"Belonging" of course did not only entail wearing fashionable clothes but also required enough social status to fit in. Throughout the early twentieth century the name and social status of influential guests, like mayors and governors-general, featured prominently on invitation cards.⁸⁴ Usually attendance at especially the more lavish balls and garden parties was by invitation only. A personal invite from the governor-general or mayor, or "belonging" to a club, ensured an invitation card and thereby recognition of a particular standing in society.

⁷⁷ Dancing, Main Street Rink to-night, 8 to 11:30 admission, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-26, p. 6; Victorian League Ball, tonight, town hall, 9 p.m., *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-06, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Dancing, Main street Rink to-night, 8 to 11:30 admission, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-26, p. 6; Caledonian Society dance, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1934-03-05, p. 5; Pleasant dance at Wanderers: S.A. General Electric staff, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1934-03-03, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Garden Party, brilliant scene at Arcadia, smart toilette in spite of rain, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-11.

⁸⁰ NASA: TVO 18, 570: Lieutenant-Colonel Staff Officer Transvaal Volunteers – Officer Commanding Transvaal Cycle & Motor Corps, 1911-02-16.

⁸¹ NASA: GG 2337, 1/27: R.B. Store – s.a., 1941-03-27.

⁸² With the dancers, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-04, p. 3; To correspondence, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-22, p. 3.

⁸³ W. Harris, Jazz dances: New pastime of the long evenings, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1921-01-10, p. 2.

⁸⁴ NASA: GG 2251, 11/3: Invitation card, 1921-10-17.

Beyond the European ballroom

It is however important to note that ballroom was not only danced by white middle class South Africans, but has a distinct history of black and especially coloured participation. Records reveal that ballroom dancing was by no means an exclusive European pastime, and that Black dancers “belonged”, if not by law, then by passion and technique on the dance floor. In his travelling accounts of the early colonial Cape, Bird mentions the “rainbow balls” that were danced by the “coloureds” and “blacks” on the “outskirts of town” while the upper (white) classes were having public and private balls.⁸⁵ The coloured community also sent, for example, various invitations to the governor-general’s office in the early twentieth century asking both his patronage and attendance at their ballroom dancing events.⁸⁶ However, “non-European” ballroom dancing appears to be mentioned more by accident than intention in early twentieth century documents. Moreover, these occasions were not discussed in as much detail or given as much attention in the early twentieth century as the Europeans’ balls and dance functions. Far more attention is given to the so-called “tribal dances” and various documents can be found listing the place and time of mine and tribal dancing competitions. This can be seen in the correspondence between various mining houses that promoted “tribal competition dances” amongst the black workers, as it was a “cheap and effective leisure activity for the miners.”⁸⁷

It is interesting to note that, as with so many other aspects related to social history, black ballroom dances are often mentioned because they involved the “transgression” or “disobeying” of social rules. As can be seen in official concerns about the growing number of “brandy parties” and misuse of dance “privileges” granted to blacks, dancing became very much associated with the use of alcohol and breaking of laws.⁸⁸ Being a leisure activity practised late at night, dancing sometimes even became synonymous with explicit sexual activity because of the nature of dances such as the Tango.⁸⁹ Of course, not all of black society supported ballroom dancing. In comparison to other popular leisure activities like football,⁹⁰ ballroom dancing was an expensive pastime that required extravagant clothes, an equal (or as

⁸⁵ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822*, pp. 165-166.

⁸⁶ NASA: GG 2306, 1/396: Lt. Col. N. Hoy – Admiral Halifax, 1937-02-20; GG 2355, 6/316: J. Fataar – The Controller, 1939-06-21.

⁸⁷ NASA: BN 25/4/1928, Native sub commissioner Benoni – The Director of Native labour, 1928-05-18.

⁸⁸ D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, pp. 76, 128; P.C. Alegi, Playing to the gallery? Sport, cultural performance, and social identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35(1), 2002, p 25; NASA: MBP 2/2/1192, 20/3/143: Town Clerk – Messrs. Gross and Gross, 1962-11-06; NASA: MGP 124, 12968/01: Louis Wertheim – Major Therson, 1901-10-01.

⁸⁹ See for example the early twenty century comment and picture of two apes dancing the Tango in the *South African Musical Times* cited in Peter Joyce (ed.), *Reader’s Digest: South Africa’s yesterdays*, p. 103.

⁹⁰ P.C. Alegi, Playing to the gallery, pp. 17-38; L. Callinicos, *A people’s history of South Africa* 2, pp. 216-217.

close as possible) number of both sexes, ballroom music, space and training. The generally poor economic and social condition of black society consequently made ballroom dancing an improbable leisure choice. Missionaries further argued that ballroom dancing did “not belong” in black society because it was “too” European.⁹¹ Like the white newspapers of the time, missionaries also warned against the explicit nature and “moral dangers” of dancing. At first, they were against ballroom dancing because it apparently took black society even further away from its “traditional” life style. As the century progressed, however it is interesting to note that the missionaries tended to start promoting ballroom dancing as a counter to the more “traditional heathen dances.”⁹²

The evolving race legislation, that was becoming more restrictive in nature from the 1920s onwards, also served to reinforce the presence of ballroom dances within the black community. It was, for example, “illegal” for blacks to be outside during a certain time of the night (due to the various curfew laws), and so dance parties became all night affairs creating ample time to practise and learn from one another within a confined space. Economic restraints and other everyday problems, like the lack of sufficient transport, also served to keep ballroom dancing within black society as can be seen in articles published in magazines like *Drum*.⁹³

David Coplan argues however that ballroom dancing was used by elite black clubs to make them “look and feel” more European.⁹⁴ It may not have been the most accessible or popular black leisure activity, but there is evidence in letters written to the governors-general asking “permission” to dance and to create social clubs for ballroom dancing. This can for example be seen in a request to the governor-general asking permission to open *The African Social Centre or Club* for the “cooks, waiters, messengers and clerks employed in the town of Pretoria,”⁹⁵ as well as a special request to the Native Commissioner to “... conduct a social club at which members of this club will be allowed dancing for 4 nights of the week.”⁹⁶ Articles published in both the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*⁹⁷ and *Journal of Southern African Studies*⁹⁸ as well as studies published in secondary sources like *A people’s history of South Africa*⁹⁹ and *In township tonight!*¹⁰⁰ further testify to the popularity of

⁹¹ D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, pp. 76-79.

⁹² D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, pp. 76-79, 128. Also see for example D. Rycroft, African music in Johannesburg: African and non-African features, *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 11, 1959, p. 25.

⁹³ A better understanding of our culture, *Drum: Drum woman*, April 1989, pp. 84, 86; D. B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, p. 77.

⁹⁴ D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, pp. 129-131.

⁹⁵ NASA: GG 1570, 50/1517: R.I. Chake – Governor-General, 1934-11-14.

⁹⁶ NASA: KJB N9/10/3: L.N. Rosencrown – Native Commissioner, 1941-02-11.

⁹⁷ P.C. Alegi, *Playing to the gallery?*, p. 34.

⁹⁸ C. Ballantine, Music and emancipation: the social role of black Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa between the 1920s and early 1940s, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17(1), March 1991, p. 7

⁹⁹ L. Callinicos, *A people’s history of South Africa* 2, p. 216.

¹⁰⁰ D.B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*, pp. 129-131.

ballroom dancing clubs in the townships. This shows that the extravagant balls were not as exclusive a property as the white, English middle class might have thought. In contrast to the European balls, black South African balls were truly “rainbow balls.” It generally consisted of “Coloured” musicians playing European and American style Jazz music that was danced to by black men and women from a variety of language groups and judged by white adjudicators!¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The political, economic and social situation up until the 1930s thus served to facilitate ballroom dancing in South Africa. Although ballroom dancing was mainly practised by the white middle class, its social importance made it appealing to other cultures. Fuelled by the support of the governors-general, ballroom dancing became a sought-after social activity between 1910 and the 1920s. Supported by whites, and inconspicuously by blacks, ballroom dancing became increasingly more popular among most of the South African urban population. The years leading up to the 1930s laid the foundation for the acceptance of ballroom dancing in a country seemingly endlessly far removed from its creators in the London ballrooms.

¹⁰¹ C. Ballantine, *Music and emancipation: the social role of black Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa between the 1920s and early 1940s*, p. 7; D. B. Coplan, *In township tonight! South Africa's Black city music and theatre*, pp. 128-131; NASA: KJB N9/10/3: L.N. Rosencrown – Native Commissioner, 1941-02-11.