

DANCE AND TEACHERS OF DANCE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BATH

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Compared with the instructor in music, drawing, languages, or any other fashionable accomplishment, the dancing master (and, in time, his female counterpart) enjoyed an oddly ambiguous status in 18th-century society. Seldom of genteel birth himself, and by education and fortune scarcely fit to rank even with the physician or the clergyman, he found himself the acknowledged expert and authority in those very social graces that were supposedly the mark and birthright of the polite world alone. Ostensibly he taught dance technique: the execution of the minuet and formal dances, the English country dances in all their variants, the modish cotillion, and the late-century favourites – the Scottish and Irish steps. But while for his pupils a mastery of these skills was indeed a necessary prelude to the ballroom, the fundamental importance of a dancing master lay in the coaching he provided in etiquette, in deportment, and in the cultivation of that air of relaxed assurance so much admired by contemporaries. There was general agreement with John Locke's view that what counted most in dancing was not learning the figures and 'the jiggling part' but acquiring an apparent total naturalness, freedom and ease in bodily movement. Clumsiness equated with boorishness, vulgarity, rusticity, bad manners, bad taste. On several occasions the influential, taste-forming *Spectator* saw fit to remind its readers about the value of dancing, 'at least, as belongs to the Behaviour and an handsom Carriage of the Body'. Graceful manners and agreeable address ranked among the most reliable indicators of good breeding, and it was 'the proper Business of a Dancing-Master to regulate these Matters'.¹ In theory, it might have been argued, only the more humbly born social aspirants

ought to have needed the services of 'those great polishers of our manners', the dancing masters. Yet even the urbane Lord Chesterfield felt obliged to nag his son about dancing lessons, and Pope's dictum that 'those move easiest who have learn'd to dance' applied in practice to courtier and citizen alike. People who had neglected dancing, Fielding observed in his novel *Amelia*, were 'apt to discover this Want in their Education in every Motion, nay, even when they stand or sit still. They seem indeed to be over-burthened with Limbs, which they know not how to use, as if when Nature had finished her Work, the Dancing-Master still is necessary to put it in Motion.' The handsome Sergeant Atkinson exemplifies the point precisely, for 'as he had never learnt to dance, he made so awkward an appearance in Mrs Ellison's Parlour, that the good Lady herself . . . could at first scarce refrain from Laughter at his Behaviour.'² Nevertheless, personal gaucheness might at least be thought preferable to the other extreme, the artificial poses and affected gait and gestures of the fops.

Appearances meant everything in a city like Bath whose public spaces were deliberately designed for display. The parades, assembly rooms and pleasure gardens in particular proved ideal arenas in which to exhibit the manners perfected in the dancing class. Treatises on 18th-century dance such as John Essex's *The Dancing Master* paid much attention to the management of the head and limbs, the five positions of the feet, curtsies and bows, the doffing and donning of the hat, the honours to be made on entering a room or assembly, graceful walking, and that 'just Carriage requiring nothing more than a natural, free, and easy Air, which is to be gained only by Dancing'. Poise, bearing, and elegant movement rivalled fine clothes and grooming in determining status, in specifying the lady and the gentleman among the crowd. Bath's frequent boast, that ceremony was quite 'exploded', referred only to the temporary fluidity of class relations that prevailed among the visiting company during the season. It did not imply any other relaxation of the usual proprieties – as the Cornish clergyman John Penrose realised in 1766: in Bath, he wrote home, no fashionable place could be approached 'without much Form'.³ And form, as we have seen, was the dancing master's province.

All this helps to explain why the most significant, though not

necessarily the most popular, 18th-century dances, were the various types of minuet and the rigaudon; for these strict French forms simply expressed in exaggerated style the approved demeanour of everyday polite life. Beyond the *chassé*, the *balance*, and other special steps they involved flowing sequences of movement, repeated turns and inclinations of the head and body, all framed by the partly uplifted arms. For Hogarth the smooth controlled actions of the minuet perfectly characterised the serpentine 'line of beauty'.

As the court dance *par excellence* the minuet took pride of place at dress balls in Bath throughout the century, though its symbolic value gradually declined as balls became less aristocratic. The succession of minuets during the first part of a ball had all the appearance of a highly personalised ritual in which single pairs of dancers, by order of rank and precedence, took the floor in turn before the assembled company, each male dancer having two female partners in succession. The ritual likewise demanded that minuet dancers be costumed to the most formal degree permitted by current fashion, which for women meant dressed hoops and long lappets. With the minutiae of attire and performance under such intense scrutiny it is no wonder that inexperienced dancers found the occasion something of an ordeal, or that contemporary comment could be sharply critical. Lord Chesterfield, for example, noted condescendingly in autumn 1769 that out of every twenty minuets danced that season in Bath there were 'at least nineteen ridiculous ones'.⁴ Accomplished dancers on the other hand were admired, and even the odd eccentric might win approval, such as the gentleman in brown and silver who at a ball in 1761 'danc'd a Minuet in so extraordinary and new a Taste, as gave universal entertainment to all the Company present'.⁵ The display purposes of the minuet are well conveyed in the *Humble Petition of the Young Ladies, Married or Single, to Mr G—r*, issued during the troubled contest for the position of Master of Ceremonies in 1769. The ladies were unwilling to be deprived of their 'favourite Diversion', the minuets, and therefore of 'the Pleasure we have of seeing and being seen, admiring our own Actions, and wishing to please in the Eyes of others'.⁶ The gentlemen were not always so forthcoming, however, so that the various Masters of Ceremonies, from Nash onwards, sometimes had to step in and perform on their behalf. This happened more

Abel Druggier.

Whole figure down, and up again, lead thro' the 2^d Cx. and cast up, Crofs over and half figure, Hands round at Bottom, Right and Left at top

The Chinese Festival.

Lead thro' the 2^d Cx. and cast up, 2^d Cx. lead thro' the 3^d Cx. and cast up, 1st Cx. crofs over and half figure, whole figure the Man at Bottom and Wo. at top, Foot across at Bottom and not turn the same at Top, hands round at Bottom, Right and Left at Top

Z From *Twenty Four Country Dances for the Year 1757 . . . as Performed at Court, Bath, and all Public Entertainments* (Courtesy Bath Reference Library).

and more often towards the end of the century, Betsy Sheridan recording of one dress ball in 1786 that 'several Ladies exhibited in minuets tho' the Men have so great an aversion to them that only one Gentleman except the Masters of the Ceremonies of both Rooms danced with them.'⁷ And a decade or so later it was being regretted that even female support for the minuets – 'which added much to the splendour of the Ball, and very highly contributed to the elegance of the evening's amusement' – seemed to be on the wane.⁸ In fact the minuet, in spite of innovations and variants, now looked decidedly old-fashioned, especially in view of the succession of novelties reaching Bath in the decades around 1800, cotillions, strathspeys and reels, Irish jigs, and eventually quadrilles and waltzes.

Yet the passion for traditional *English* dances continued unabated. 'Country dance, of all others, best pleases the fair', went the refrain in 1795 as it had throughout most of the century.⁹ Based on the 'progressive longways' and usually danced in parallel lines, country dances were far less ceremonious and altogether more sociable than the élitist minuet, and certainly more diverse. Fresh dances were invented each year and published in small pamphlets or ladies' pocket books which

described the steps and sometimes printed the appropriate tunes. *Twenty Four Country Dances for the Year 1757 . . . as Performed at Court, Bath, and all Public Entertainments*, a typical example, supplied violin/flute/oboe music and verbal explanations, for, among others, 'Lady Coventry's Delight', 'The Chinese Festival', 'The Partridge', 'Have at the French', 'Trip to Bath', 'Wildboars Maggot', 'The Devil on Two Sticks', and 'Plumb Pudding'. Annual sets of twenty four new dances long continued to be the norm, readily learnt once the manoeuvres of casting off, hands all round, hey contrary sides, setting corners, and the rest had been fathomed and practised. Most of them sound straightforward enough. Thus 'The Cherub' of 1790: 'Ballance three hands with the second lady, the same with the second gentleman, first and second couple chassee and back, cast down one couple rigadown, step and turn partner'. Or 'The Spirit of France' from the same post-Revolutionary year: 'Hey contrary sides, Hey on your own sides, lead down the middle, up again, and cast off, hands six quite round'.¹⁰

Because country dancing was a gregarious, fairly energetic activity and often required the dancers to make physical contact, it incurred the disapproval of prudes. A fictitious correspondent to the *Spectator* professed shocked amazement at seeing his daughter handled on the dance floor with so much familiarity: in one dance her partner locked his arm in hers and whisked her round, while the recurring figure of setting to partners seemed 'a most impudent and lascivious Step'.¹¹ Somewhat similar criticisms came in due course to be levelled at the Bath cotillion dancers – 'Off they go, and various movements and attitudes, the swing, the quivering feet, leg stuck out behind, remind us of the opera boards: the stage in truth it is in all points, but that of emolument.'¹² Country dances and cotillions were too popular and enjoyable, however, to be threatened by occasional censure.

The cotillion (or *cotillon*) – a Frenchified version of the English country dance performed in square sets of four couples – was being taught in Bath by 1767. First tried out publicly at morning entertainments and breakfastings at Spring Gardens (to wind band music), it invaded the assembly rooms during the winter season of 1770–71 and immediately became a craze. People seemed to have been bitten by the tarantula, complained one correspondent that January, admitting nonetheless that the cotill-

ion was a 'roguish' dance.¹³ Over the next two or three decades cotillion balls vied with, and some seasons outnumbered, traditional dress balls, occasionally to the point of satiety. As with country dances the formula of square sets could be varied endlessly. Small booklets containing the Bath interpretation of the latest Parisian steps went through many editions. A few have survived, including *A New Edition of the Sixth Book, Containing Fifty of the Newest Cotillions as Danced at the Lower Assembly Rooms, Bath* (1790): all the dances mentioned have French titles and the terminology is full of Gallicisms, a reminder that, apart from the native 'longways', English 18th-century dance was as much indebted to Paris and Versailles as fashion in dress. The only important non-Continental innovations arrived from the Celtic fringe in the 1790s with a grateful infusion of Highland reels and strathspeys with Irish jigs. These were first signalled in the dancing masters' classes and then by the addition of 'an Harp and a Pipe and Tabor' to the Upper Assembly Rooms orchestra on ball nights. Such novelties must surely have been welcomed by assembly rooms suffering from the fondness of later 18th-century Bath visitors for private parties, which kept them too often from the public balls or caused them to arrive late. Meanwhile the Masters of Ceremonies struggled to maintain decorum. In 1782 William Dawson at the Upper Rooms had to lay down the law about precedence in order to check 'the disorder and confusion which never fails to begin the moment the Company stand up to dance Country-Dances', with couples trying to insinuate their friends into the lines and sets above them; even ladies of rank arriving late on the scene must in future take their place at the bottom.¹⁴ It proved impossible though to insist on the former strict rules of dress, which in any case had needed to be repeatedly modified as fashions had changed. In late 1782 Dawson had to concede that 'the usual Restrictions on Dress are (from the alteration of fashions) become troublesome and inconvenient', even to the extent of deterring some people from subscribing to the balls. Henceforth no distinction of costume would be made between dress and cotillion balls except that long lappets must still be worn by ladies dancing minuets.¹⁵ A decade later and these regulations were further relaxed, especially for the fancy balls then in vogue. Together with the decline in the minuet's fortunes it is clear evidence that the public balls had

ceased to be patrician occasions, even if royalty and aristocracy did still appear. In fact the more glamorous events, such as the balls for the Masters of Ceremonies, towards the close of the century regularly attracted well over a thousand dancers and onlookers. By then too the leading citizens of Bath had established their own dance assemblies, with Master of Ceremonies and all, at the Guildhall, in a kind of municipal riposte to the fashionable balls of the visitors. The popularity of dancing was further attested by the facilities provided for it at the pleasure gardens. As the long history of country dancing and cotillions drew to its close at Spring Gardens, the mantle passed to the new Sydney Gardens, where a banqueting-cum-dancing room was built in 1797. A highly successful public breakfasting and ball there in April 1797 (at which the Prince of Wales had been expected) provoked the comment that as the summer came on 'these festive rural mornings will soon become one of the most engaging amusements of this delightful place'.¹⁶

The idea of dance as a natural, relatively unsophisticated, almost rustic activity coexisted with its other reputations – a school of conduct and elegance, or a mannered, even theatrical display. It harked back to Bath's earlier days as court holiday resort when impromptu *al fresco* dances were held on the bowling green and the only place for a rare dress ball was the old, somewhat tawdry Town Hall. This innocent, half-romantic appeal of country dancing is neatly vignettised in the image of the Saltford villagers tripping it before the then Prince and Princess of Wales at a summer picnic beside the Avon during the royal visit of 1750.¹⁷ But stage dancing also held a strong attraction. And while the cramped early and mid-Georgian theatres of Bath could hardly be expected to present the full splendour of *ballet en action* and *opéra-ballet*, certainly some show of virtuoso choreography was expected, at least in the intervals or between the main play and afterpiece. Where, enquired one theatre-goer in 1769, was the promised improvement in the dancing? The odd entr'acte song could not be reckoned an adequate substitute, 'for a dance has a much greater effect on an audience than the best single song or cantata in the universe'.¹⁸ Some of the Bath dancing teachers, as we shall see, had intimate links with the professional stage.

Little is known about the earlier 18th-century dancing masters, such as the eminent John Stagg who kept a profitable boarding

school in Kingsmead.¹⁹ At this period a couple of dancing/music instructors probably sufficed for local needs. With Bath only recently started on its dramatic expansion beyond the old city walls, the call for dancing lessons from residents must still have been limited, while the great majority of short-stay visitors would patronise instructors nearer home. Nor had Bath yet built its reputation for girls' boarding schools which in future years would bring so much employment to teachers of genteel accomplishments.

The first dancing teachers to be well documented are Francis Fleming and his wife, the former Mlle Roland, whose sister was a favourite theatrical dancer of the day. It was his marriage to a Frenchwoman 'as excellent in her *smooth* as the eldest sister was in her *high dancing*' that gave Fleming his second profession.²⁰ An Irish violinist, he had joined the Pump Room band about 1732, but his dancing career had to wait until the late 1740s when he began assisting his wife in her classes at girls' schools in and around Bath (providing the music perhaps more than teaching the steps). Together they initiated annual benefit concerts and balls at the assembly rooms – which presumably featured display pieces, for in 1747 Mrs Fleming performed a French peasant dance. After a dozen or so active years as the principal dancing teacher in the city, Fleming's wife died from a lingering illness at the Hotwells in 1759, leaving him to cater for all their dance pupils on top of his normal duties with the Bath orchestra and his guitar tuition. He then had three children to support, two of whom (the 13-year-old Anna Teresa and the 10-year-old Kitty) were already accustomed to performing in public on the harpsichord. For the next few years Fleming soldiered on by himself, periodically organising balls at Wiltshire's rooms to give his young scholars a chance of showing off their paces before the admiring parents and friends who liked to favour these polite occasions. He would have served a more exacting clientèle than Daniel Lewis (active from 1758),²¹ or Thomas De La Main (from 1757), or sundry intermittent rivals from the theatre companies, but the newcomer Deneuille must have looked a more menacing competitor.

Hailing from the Paris Opéra and the London theatres, Deneuille arrived in Bath early in 1763 to teach French and English dancing, the hornpipe included (still a patriotic favourite at the

end of the Seven Years' War, as it would be again in the 1790s). His real threat to Fleming may have taken several years to emerge, perhaps at the point when he became alerted to the changes overtaking French dance, notably the innovations in the minuet and the rise of the cotillions and the allemandes. In theory he might have picked these up sufficiently from choreographic notation, but instead he chose to study them at first hand in Paris during the summer of 1767.²² Deneuville's return to Bath with this expertise in the latest modes put Fleming at a disadvantage just when he was experiencing the insecurity of his musical position in Bath after a campaign to dislodge him from the orchestra. He did on the other hand have a decided asset in his talented daughter, Anna Teresa, now his dancing assistant. Next summer the two of them followed Deneuville's example in travelling to Paris, the fountainhead, in order to study minuets, cotillions, and allemandes under a 'capital' French dancing master, most likely Monsieur Lang, maître de l'Opéra, whose disciple Miss Fleming later claimed to be.²³ Two years later they descended on Paris for a second refresher course to enable Fleming's graceful daughter to attain that ease and proficiency in the French style for which Bath would henceforth admire her.

Meanwhile Deneuville had his own assets to exploit. Visiting Bristol Hotwells in summer 1769 he had shown off his 5-year-old son and 6-year-old pupil Miss Curtis in various comic and serious dances at a public breakfasting. Back in Bath his young entertainers were soon giving regular performances at his dance room in Horse Street, as many as six a week by December 1770; excellent publicity for Deneuville's teaching skills and an additional source of income from the shilling entrance charge. The process went a stage further in 1771 when the two children were engaged by the Theatre Royal. This arrangement continued for four seasons and attests to the popularity of juvenile dancers at this period. Miss Curtis, after a dozen years as star pupil, now began helping Deneuville with his teaching both in the city itself and at schools in the neighbourhood.

The late 1770s initiated a time of change among Bath's dance professionals. Francis Fleming died in March 1778, known to his contemporaries not only for his prowess as musician and dancer but for the lively character sketched in his autobiography, *The Life*



Y Portrait of the violinist and dancing master Francis Fleming from his autobiography, *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures . . . of Timothy Ginnadrake*, 1771. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library).

and Extraordinary Adventures . . . of Timothy Ginnadrake. Unable to manage otherwise, Miss Fleming took her sister Catherine (Kitty) into partnership, based at the same convenient John Street house as in her father's time.²⁴ They now faced additional competition from two other quarters – J. Hopley, who began advertising dance classes in October 1777, and the elderly Jean-Baptiste Froment, who arrived in mid-1778 with a well-founded reputation as a London dancing master and as a Paris-trained dancer, choreographer and ballet-master to the metropolitan theatres. Froment's repertoire included all the standard dances and new vogues: minuet de la cour, minuet de la reine, minuet dauphin, louvre, gavotte, allemandes, cotillions, and even an early form of quadrille. Soon he would be publishing two further sets of minuets and cotillions/quadrilles of his own composition. Whether he settled in Bath at once is uncertain, but by the early 1780s he had instituted a dancing school at 1 Rivers Street and had no lack of pupils to instruct privately. His objective sounded modest enough: 'to make his scholars dance gracefully and in time, which is in general very little observed – he is sorry to see so many grimaces taught for graces'. And to judge from his claim that he had 'as much business as any person in this city', his methods proved acceptable.²⁵ It may have been Froment's success that deterred Miss Curtis from long continuing on her own account after her old teacher Deneville died in 1782; instead she turned schoolmistress. As it happened though, Froment himself died in 1786, at the age of 70, and his widow appointed two successive London dancing masters, Astier and Second, in his place. Having recently built up an extensive practice in Wiltshire, Astier moved to Bath in the expectation of inheriting all Froment's pupils, but somehow fell out with the widow, who thereupon invited Second (assistant to Vestris senior at Drury Lane) to take over the Rivers Street establishment.

The arrival of Second seems to have persuaded Metralcourt, yet another French dancing master with theatrical connections, to retire from Bath for a period, after at last four years' residence. Since to all appearances his business had been brisk, this decision may well have been reached in some accommodation with Second, who was later to encourage him back. During his first period of residence Metralcourt courted publicity through pupils' balls at the Upper Rooms or at his premises in Hetling Court

where the shyer dancers might be introduced more gently into the public gaze. In fact his appeal was particularly to the resident professional and trading families in the city, to whom he offered lessons at concessionary rates. This hitherto little-tapped public had become more aware of the potential of dancing ever since the newly elected Members of Parliament, Moysey and Pratt, had rewarded the Corporation in 1780 with lavish banquets and balls at the recently finished Guildhall. It was now evident to the city's eminent drapers, apothecaries, property developers, and toymen that ballroom graces were no longer to be scorned, and that even if *they* might not shine at cotillions, their wives, sons and daughters might. And if this were true of the series of civic assemblies regulated by specially appointed masters of ceremonies, it applied with extra force to the status-laden occasions hosted by the Bath M.P.s (as in 1780, 1784 and 1790) or the Corporation's entertainment for the Prince of Wales, Duke of York and other royalty in 1797, when the mayor's daughter would be called on to open the minuets with Mr Moysey, Lord Weymouth, or the Prince of Orange.²⁶

In the autumn of 1786 Bath had five separate dancing establishments, run respectively by the Fleming sisters, the newcomer Second, Metralcourt (who last advertised in the November), Astier (who survived in Bath until at least early 1788), and the ageing De La Main (or Delmain) who combined his dancing career with a wine-merchant's business. Half-a-dozen years later the *New Bath Directory* also recorded five names, but in the meantime three of them had altered. The Flemings were still operating from John Street, attending exclusive schools and presenting their showcase balls once or twice a year at the assembly rooms. Second too found himself well patronised. He had married the outstandingly accomplished soprano Sarah Mahon (partner in a prestigious local girls' school) and had moved his dancing academy from Westgate Buildings to the more select Montpellier. Like the Flemings he largely concentrated on tuition for girls, to whom he promised every flattering attention 'which their rank in life so justly intitles them to'.²⁷ This ingratiating attitude was rewarded by so much custom that he had to hire the services of an assistant, a Mr Martin, especially for 'the Scotch steps, and Scotch high dances, so universally admired in polite assemblies'.²⁸ His juvenile balls added further to his



X Detail from H. Bunbury's engraving 'A Long Minuet as Danced at Bath', 1787. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath).

reputation (though the 'frequent bursts of theatrical applause' heard at his 1793 ball were regarded by some as a breach of Bath decorum). After nine seasons in Bath he claimed that the patronage of so many warm advocates had 'raised his reputation beyond expectation'.²⁹

The three fresh names listed in 1792 were Charles Mercie, Peter Michell (i.e. Pierre Bernard Michel) and Lucy De Rossi. Mercie had just returned from a professional visit to Paris, but though he had been teaching in Bath since October 1790 and now had the benefit of recent French experience, he had to rely for his custom on tedious journeys to schools in the outlying districts until Second's departure in 1795. After a return visit to Paris that spring, and equipped with a sound knowledge of Scottish

dancing, he angled for more pupils in Bath itself. It seems that with his cut-price family rates, and his emphasis on teaching according to basic principles, he managed to find his niche with the élite of the Bath Corporation, in due course becoming one of the joint Masters of Ceremonies at the Guildhall assemblies.

Michel came from a dynasty of French dancers. Between 1739 and 1772 he had performed in most major European cities, especially in Italy, and made his name as the finest grotesque dancer ever to come out of France. An engagement for his children at the Bath and Bristol theatres during the 1786–87 season having brought him to the area, he seized the opportunity of launching a new dancing school (in Kingsmead Square) in summer 1787. Like Mercie he taught both boys and girls, travelling as far afield as Wells, increasingly aided by his daughter Lucy. Together they put on a ball for the children of two Wells schools in 1790. A few months later, however, Lucy married Philip De Rossi, a Bath language teacher, and started her own dancing classes in Margaret Buildings. These actions apparently estranged her father, the rupture becoming public knowledge in July 1791 through a bitter exchange in the pages of the *Bath Chronicle* following her announcement that she had recently been under the instruction of the famous Vestris in London. Michel's sarcastic rejoinder was certainly taken by the De Rossis as a malicious attempt to sabotage his daughter's growing reputation.³⁰ Possibly it did have this effect, because nothing more is heard of the De Rossis after 1792. Michel himself, who presumably continued to give lessons for a time, died at Melksham in 1800.

In the mid-1790s the sisterly partnership of the Flemings was also unexpectedly riven by family dissension. For several years the rising star of their winter and spring balls had been the elegant young assistant, Elizabeth Randall (her surname variously spelt in the records). About the same time the Theatre Royal had a rising male star on its books, Robert William Elliston, who joined the company from the York circuit in 1793. Unwittingly he began to captivate the cultivated, still attractive but middle-aged Anna Fleming, while himself becoming equally fascinated by her charming assistant to whom he eventually proposed marriage.³¹ Out of the ensuing intrigue, in which the dance-minded Bathonians felt their own interests at stake, came a realignment.

Besides marrying Elliston in June 1796, Elizabeth Randall joined forces with Kitty, the younger Fleming sister, and with her established a successful dancing school in Chapel Row (and ultimately in Milsom Street on a prime site).³² Anna Fleming found herself a new assistant, but Mlle D'Orival, student of Gardel and Vestris, left after a year and opened a separate, short-lived dancing school in Fountain Buildings. With her next assistant she struck more fortunately and was able to resume her pupils' balls after a grave two-year hiatus; Miss Le Mercier would soon be endorsed as Miss Fleming's partner and ultimately her successor.

The Elliston episode had not seriously affected her reputation, founded as it was on an unrivalled aptitude with female pupils, especially young children and adolescents. In common with her professional colleagues she would naturally accept pupils of all ages (the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Bessborough prominent among them),³³ but quite as much of her attention was paid to the fashionable girls' boarding schools of Bath's upper town. The climax of her painstaking tuition came with the annual or semiannual balls, glamorous occasions for any dance teacher but in her hands developed into something approaching an art form; an art form, however, that proved at the same time an ideal vehicle for self-advertisement. The local press seemed happy to collude, often reporting in fulsome terms on the fairylike sight of the younger dancers, the grace of their elder sisters, the distinguished and numerous character of the spectators, and the affecting beauty of the whole. Whether judged by the pleasure given to 'the delighted parent, or the animated and exulting exertions of the children, or through the abstract medium of philosophic, benevolent admiration, a more beautiful spectacle can scarce be conceived'.³⁴ Each year Miss Fleming invented fresh figure dances, 'full of novelty, and *chastely operational*' for her well-drilled wards.³⁵ This was one of her fortes, the coaching of children in dances 'at once fashionable and classical, complicated and intelligible'.³⁶ Another was the staging of a spectacle of innocent purity (the girls often dressed uniformly in virgin white) that had immense sentimental appeal to the later Georgians. And finally she herself, 'the Priestess of Grace', personified that other ideal of perfect elegance, seen at the height of the ball when she performed her minuet.³⁷ It is little wonder

that contemporaries placed Miss Fleming's balls among Bath's finest (and chastest) attractions.

We have some inkling of what they felt like for the participants from the recollections of Susan Sibbald, a young boarder at the Belvedere school (run by the Lee sisters) at the very end of the century.³⁸ Every Wednesday the tall, erect, stoutish Miss Fleming would arrive at the school in her sedan chair to teach them minuets and figure dances, while Miss Le Mercier concentrated on the basic steps and positions. A violinist came with them to play the tunes. From time to time Miss Fleming would call out, 'Now ladies, do credit to Bath', and reward her best pupils with a bonbon from an amber box or a flower from her bouquet. A public day was held periodically at the school when the girls dressed up to perform before mothers and female friends. However in the spring of 1799 it was the turn of Belvedere school to appear at the Upper Assembly Rooms. There was much practising on the school terrace beforehand, and on the eve of the day itself a team of exclusive hairdressers turned up to style their heads '*à la Brutus*'. Late the next afternoon, in their muslin gowns and primrose sashes, the curling papers gone and replaced by wreaths of yellow roses, the girls were carried two at a time in chairs to the Rooms. The Prince of Wales waited among the crowd of onlookers as they moved to their benches under the orchestra recess in the ballroom. The order of dances was set out in a printed programme. This time Miss Fleming had chosen to open the ball. Wearing a pale blue satin gown and a black velvet hat appropriately trimmed with Prince-of-Wales feathers, she partnered one of her scholars in a minuet de la cour. This led into the cotillions, figure dances and group minuets; some of the 50-60 dancers were no more than five years of age. Susan Sibbald herself featured in a group minuet for eight girls. Eventually, after a 'Bath Curtsey', Miss Le Mercier raised her hand as a signal for tea, and when tea had been taken all but four of the senior girls were hustled away while the Master of Ceremonies took charge of the adult ball.

Knowing the Bath scene so well, Hannah More must have realised the displeasure she would cause locally when she published her fierce critique of feminine 'accomplishments' that same year, 1799. Her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* could not fail to address the topic of dancing, which she

felt had become so overinflated in importance that it required a whole series of masters to perfect it – the marching sergeant, the professor of French dancing, the specialist in Scottish dancing, and the finishing master. Girls appeared to step from the nursery to the ballroom, and instead of taking healthy country exercise they spent all morning shut up in their rooms practising new dance steps for the evening. How sad, she thought,

to behold lilliputian coquettes, projecting dresses, studying colours, assorting ribbands and feathers, their little hearts beating with hopes about partners and fears about rivals; and to see the fresh cheeks pale after the midnight supper, their aching heads and unbraced nerves, disqualifying the little languid beings for the next day's task, and to hear the grave apology, 'that it is owing to the wine, the crowd, the heated room of the last night's ball².

Hannah More and her evangelical friends spoke out in vain against the tide of dancing frenzy. The elderly musicologist Dr Charles Burney wrote her a letter of support (overlooking his own many years of playing for balls and the fact that his step-uncle had been a Norfolk dancing master), but mentioned another threat looming on the horizon: had she encountered any of the French or German waltzers yet?⁴⁰

Around 1800 several of the dancing professionals in Bath had enough support from the schools to risk the expense of children's balls at least occasionally: in addition to Misses Fleming and Le Mercier, the entrepreneurs included Mrs Elliston, the recently arrived Whale (who claimed to be expert in the new 'shantrose' and other Highland steps, and declared his technique unsurpassed for 'Ease, Elegance, and graceful Dancing'). Charles Metralcourt returned to Bath in 1795 specifically to take over from Second who had fallen ill and wanted to leave. A versatile dancer and a ballet-master at the London Opera house, his best selling point in the mid-1790s was, like Whale's, his knowledge of Scottish dancing and the 'much admired Irish steps', areas little trespassed on by Miss Fleming and other dancing mistresses. Metralcourt was therefore assiduous about keeping these skills up to the mark by direct contact with Edinburgh and Dublin dancers, though he also spent some of his free time practising with old colleagues at the Opera. Despite, or perhaps because of,

these efforts, his finances were precarious and at one point demanded the attention of his creditors. Towards the end of 1797, after occupying three different dancing rooms, he joined his apprentice, Pascal Baillieu, in taking newly-built, spacious premises near the Upper Rooms, between Alfred Street and Miles's Court. The partnership barely survived a year however, whereupon Baillieu struck out on his own, keeping on the large new room and eking out his income by letting it to the Cecilian Concert, a group of amateur musicians. Metralcourt may then temporarily have withdrawn from Bath, but not for long since he had good connections. Indeed he enjoyed royal favour. The Duchess of York and a large fashionable company honoured his ball in December 1796 for the girls of Mmes Habersham and Second's school.⁴¹

But every dancing master and mistress relied on patronage of some description, whether they focussed on the gentry, the tradespeople and professional classes, the boarding schools, or customers in the small towns around Bath. Although the bulk of their work concerned the teaching of young people, the stream of innovations in dance from the 1760s onwards resulted in a strong demand from private adult clients wanting to keep up with the latest trends. According to their reputation they could charge class pupils from 3 to 6 guineas a year plus an entrance fee of $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 guinea, and private pupils around half-a-guinea a lesson plus entrance. (Those unable to play the violin or dancing master's 'kit' would have to pay for a musician's attendance out of their fees.⁴²) Competition being keen, possession of a particular expertise or a current mode conferred an advantage over rivals that was worth publicising in handbills and newspapers. Having other members of the family to share the load, daughters especially, was another asset, for it increased the number of fee-paying pupils who could be accepted. In fact a host of variables, not the least of them being the dance teacher's health and stamina, dictated which of them would prosper most.

The resident professionals were challenged from time to time by hopeful interlopers. A list of dancers from 1750 onwards who unsuccessfully tried their luck would include Miss Heutte (1753, during her engagement with Simpson's theatre company); Pitt (1753–55, a performer at the Orchard Street theatre); Boyle Arthur (1775); Wood (1787); Colossi (1789); the famous D'Egville

(1793–94, accompanied by his son, also a dancer); Martin (1794–95, capitalising on his Scottish dancing – ‘the most fashionable in all polite assemblies’); Betterton (1797, from the Theatre Royal, offering military exercises to improve ‘manly deportment’ as well as jigs, reels, and hornpipes); and Barthelomy Le Gros (1799). Former Bath dancing masters also paid return visits. Not surprisingly Second was one such, as long as his wife remained a Bath schoolmistress. He reappeared briefly in December 1799 to wait on various visiting families, and again many years later hoping to establish his son in the profession. The ‘Mr Dineuville’ who advertised in 1794 was most likely the son of the earlier city dancing master. His venture of providing subscription cotillion evenings (at Nash’s old house in St John’s Place) seems to have failed, notwithstanding his assurances that ‘none but the most respectable Characters’ would be admitted, and that the events were solely for giving dancing practice ‘to those Ladies and Gentlemen who attend Public Assemblies, and who cannot conveniently be always under the direction of a Master’,⁴³ in other words people with business commitments, those who ‘by the established *etiquette*’ of Bath were barred from the assembly rooms but *could* frequent the Guildhall assemblies.⁴⁴ But even the rank and quality needed to practise, as the Master of Ceremonies James King appreciated: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen who wish to walk over the Figure of the Cotillons previous to the Ball, are respectfully informed, that a Room shall be prepared, and Musick attend, every Tuesday morning, from half past eleven until one o’clock.’⁴⁵

After the turn of the century Bath’s community of dancing teachers continued its evolution. In autumn 1805 Miss Fleming comfortably retired, leaving Miss Le Mercier to continue alone for another half dozen years. Mrs Elliston, having lost her partner Kitty Fleming, kept the Milsom Street establishment going until her final removal to London in 1812, at which point her sister, Miss D.C. Randall, took over control. Charles Mercie and Charles Metralcourt went on for another decade or so longer, the latter noted for enterprising ballets produced at his pupils’ balls (‘Le Divertissement des Nymphes’, for example, in 1806). Whale too continued into the new century, as did a new man, Webster, who had just settled in at Walcot House. Pascal Baillieu died in 1804, to be succeeded briefly by a relation of his, Pieltain, in partnership

with a former Bath bookseller and municipal Master of Ceremonies, James Marshall. Gradually the old names dropped out of the directories and newspapers until by 1819, time of the quadrilles craze, only Webster – once the pupil of celebrated 18th-century masters like Galleni and Vestris and Strange of Edinburgh – still survived.⁴⁶

Yet though in the hundred odd years since the *Spectator* had worked its subtle influence the social climate of dancing had much changed, its fundamental *raison d'être* had not. 'The object of learning to dance', wrote a dancing master from another city in 1815,

is not to acquire the most difficult movements of the feet . . . The object to be attained is an easy carriage of the body, and a graceful management of the arms and head: all outré movements ought to be avoided – the dancing is elegant when it is natural, unaffected, and easy . . . A person that dances well in this respect will be graceful in a room, and will be distinguished upon all occasions.⁴⁷

Notes

The evidence for this article has, in large part, been assembled from numerous references in eighteenth-century Bath newspapers. Since to document every statement would result in a plethora of footnotes, only the more essential are given below. The names of newspapers have been abbreviated as follows: BC – Bath Chronicle; BJ – Bath Journal; BA – Bath Advertiser; BH – Bath Herald. Information has also been derived from: Philip H. Highfill, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors . . . Musicians, Dancers, etc. in London, 1660–1800* (in progress), and Arnold Hare, *Theatre Royal Bath: a Calendar of Performances . . . 1750–1805* (Bath, 1977).

- 1 *The Spectator* No. 67, 17 May 1711.
- 2 Henry Fielding, *Amelia*, ed. M.C. Battestin (Oxford, 1983) pp. 199–200. For further comment see C.J. Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress* (London, 1972) esp. pp. 4 and 28.
- 3 John Penrose, *Letters from Bath, 1766–1767*, ed. B. Mitchell and H. Penrose (Gloucester, 1983) p. 29.
- 4 Lord Chesterfield, *The Letters of P.D. Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. B. Dobrée. 6 vols. (London, 1932) vol. 6 no. 2571.

- 5 BJ 30 November 1761.
- 6 *The Bath Contest: being a Collection . . . Published before and since the Death of Mr Derrick* (Bath, 1769) p. 62.
- 7 *Betsy Sheridan's Journal: Letters . . . 1784–1786 and 1788–90*, ed. W. LeFanu (repr. London, 1986) p. 82. The M.C.s were expected to be good dancers though the evidence on Nash is mixed. According to Dudley Ryder (*The Diary, 1715–1716*, ed. W. Matthews, London, 1939, pp. 245–6) 'Gnash' opened the King's birthday ball in 1716 with a minuet and then asked various other ladies to partner him, the gentlemen not caring for French dances. By 1723 Nash is said not to dance the minuet, rigaudon, etc., but still to perform country dances with grace: see *Characters at the Hot-Well, Bristol . . . and at Bath . . . 1723* [By Robert Whatley] (London, 1724) pp. xiv–xv.
- 8 BC 20 December 1798.
- 9 *Bath: an Adumbration in Rhyme*, by an Officer (Bath, 1795).
- 10 *English Ladies Pocket Book for 1790*.
- 11 *The Spectator* no. 67, 17 May 1711.
- 12 *Bath: a Glance at its Public Worship, Styles of Dress, Cotillions, Masquerades, &c.* &c, 2nd ed. (Bath, 1814) pp. 26–8.
- 13 BC 17 January 1771, Letter from 'Senex'.
- 14 BC 17 January 1782.
- 15 BC 24 October 1782.
- 16 BC 2 May 1799.
- 17 BJ 16 July 1750.
- 18 BC 23 March 1769, letter from 'Theatricus'.
- 19 Also a music master, Staggs died in 1757 having made an 'easy fortune': see BA 29 January 1757.
- 20 Francis Fleming, *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures . . . of Timothy Ginndrake*. 3 vols. (Bath, 1771) vol. 2 pp. 139–41.
- 21 Daniel Lewis, who also served as sergeant-at-mace to the Bath Corporation, may well have been the son of the skilled dancing master referred to in John Weaver's *Essay towards the History of Dancing* (1712).
- 22 BC 24 September 1767. Feuillet's choreographic notation had been available since 1700.
- 23 BC 23 May and 3 November 1768, 19 October 1769. Anna Fleming is said to have studied also under Le Pique and Vestris.
- 24 BC 2 April 1778.
- 25 BC 19 February 1784.
- 26 BC 12 October and 2 November 1780, 29 April 1784, 25 November 1790; BH 7 January 1797.
- 27 BC 24 October 1790.
- 28 BC 13 January 1791. His next assistant was a Mr Lefler.
- 29 BH 23 March 1793; BC 30 April 1795.
- 30 BC 21 and 28 July 1791.
- 31 George Raymond, *The Life and Enterprises of Robert William Elliston, Comedian* (London, 1857), pp. 24–7 (somewhat inaccurate in detail).
- 32 BC 2 June and 21 July 1796. In addition Mrs Elliston began to teach dance privately at her house in Gt Pulteney Street.

- 33 BC 13 February 1823, her obituary notice.
- 34 BC 26 April 1792.
- 35 BC 26 April 1798. Operatic dancing was often considered a far from modest spectacle: see for example Thomas Gisburne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London, 1797) pp. 175–6.
- 36 BC 1 May 1800.
- 37 BC 21 April 1798. Even foreigners are supposed to have conceded that her minuet was a 'chef d'oeuvre': BC 13 February 1823.
- 38 Susan Sibbald, *The Memoirs . . . 1783–1812*, ed. F. Paget Hett (London, 1926) pp. 44–64 passim. Also BH 6 April 1799. I am grateful to Dr Ken James for drawing my attention to the Sibbald memoirs. For further accounts of Miss Fleming's balls by 'insiders' (Elizabeth Canning in January 1793; Sarah Whittaker in December 1804) see *The Catalogue of Music in Bath Reference Library to 1985. Vol. 1, MSS, Letters, Indexes*, ed. Jon A. Gillaspie (London, 1986) pp. 228, 350–1.
- 39 Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. (London, 1799) vol. 1 pp. 78–9, 95–6, 98–9.
- 40 William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*. 4 vols. (London, 1834) vol 3 pp. 69–74.
- 41 BC 22 December 1796. Baillieu's name sometimes appears as Bailleux and Baillieux.
- 42 Examples of musicians willing to play for dancing include a French gentlewoman violinist (BC 1 January 1784), and a J. Cellars who, *inter alia*, could play the 'Walths' in the Germanic manner (BC 2 January 1800).
- 43 BH 25 October 1794.
- 44 BC 20 November 1800.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Gye's *Bath Directory Corrected to January 1819* (Bath, 1819?) p. 13.
- 47 Francis Lambert, *Treatise on Dancing* (Norwich, 1815), cited in Trevor Fawcett, 'Provincial Dancing Masters', *Norfolk Archaeology* vol. 25 pt. 1 (1970) 135–41.

Acknowledgement

Much of the foregoing account has been based inevitably on the local history collections of the Bath Reference Library. I am greatly indebted to the unstinted assistance I have had from staff there.