



Australian Tradition

By Peter Ellis, OAM

At the recent VFMC Annual Meeting I raised some issues about maintaining and restoring a core of Australian tradition in keeping with the Club's aims. My reason for bringing this to the fore is twofold, i.e.,

- (1) to describe the content of the **traditional repertoire**, and
- (2) **to question the naming of a special dance to cater for the admitted needs of skilled dancers** who chafe at having to walk through dance figures before getting into the action.

1. The traditional repertoire. In researching the history of the evolution of the Bush Band & Bush Dance for my recent series of articles in Trad & Now, **it became very obvious how staunchly Australian the original movement was for focusing on national folklore, bush songs, dance tunes, recitations and particularly the aural tradition. The entire movement was a result and reaction against domination of overseas culture, particularly from America, together with the perceived loss of our own heritage.**

The magnitude of this can be seen with the original Bushwhackers Band of Sydney from 1952, the massive crowds attracted to the Sydney showgrounds for example for their performance, the launch of the highly successful play Reedy River and the ultimate formation of the Bush Music Club in 1954. This would be unlikely to work in today's society, which has become so materialistic and dominated by canned entertainment. So has overseas culture finally won through? I don't think the style of the original Bushwhackers would work today but if something like Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band¹ were around, it would still be very successful.

In the early days Melbourne was a key player in the revival of Australian tradition. Much of the early history has been related to Rob Willis in an interview with the late Jim Buchanan who was active in the first production of Reedy River in Melbourne in 1953 as well as in playing in various bush-bands in the scene which also included dance. The Folklore Society of Victoria formed in 1955 at the time of the return of Reedy River to Melbourne and a bush band styled on the Sydney Bushwhackers formed with Frank Nickels and Joy Durst at the helm and in collaboration with the Sydney Bushwhackers. This band took the name Billabong in 1956 and became the club band of the Victorian Bush Music Club (VBMC) when it formed in 1959. Interaction with Nariel after contact with the 'collectors' in 1962-63 resulted in enormous success with the establishment of the first folk festival in Victoria and the longest continual running folk festival in Australia. These exchanges with the country folk of the Upper Murray and from other parts of Victoria consolidated the revival of 'bush themed' Australian folklore. The VBMC changed its name to the Victorian Folk Music Club (VFMC) later in 1963 after a strong campaign by Joy Durst who felt folk was a trendier word at the time and would attract

increased membership (personal communication from Shirley Andrews). Bert Gibson actually moved the motion and he told me the reason was because it was considered the urban and city traditions were also important, it shouldn't be just 'bush'. The intention of this name change was in fact to consolidate and improve the fostering of Australian folk tradition including that of the cities. This is confirmed in the tenth anniversary report of the history of the VFMC in the Australian Tradition August 1969. But Shirley told me the VFMC received considerable criticism and flak from the Bush Music Club in Sydney who have retained their original name to this day and with 60 year celebrations planned for 2014.

The Bush Music Club, the VFMC and the Folklore Society of Victoria were very active in publishing songs, dance, and recitation in their various publications, Singabout, Gumsucker's Gazette and The Australian Tradition and so on.

However the Australian side has fallen well behind in recent decades. Shirley Andrews says in her paper '*Our Dancing Is Different*', in "Folklore in Australia" - proceedings of the 1st National Folklore Conference, Melbourne, November 1984: -

Although our folk revival arose mainly as a reaction against the domination of the Australian scene by overseas music and culture, we also made the mistake of following overseas models too closely, especially those of Great Britain...

Certainly our early attempts within the folk scene to revive an interest in Australian social dancing suffered considerably from this general prejudice against dancing as well as from a reluctance to accept that the style of this dancing was different from that of the folk dancing of Great Britain...

There is no real evidence of English folk dance for example in the Australian tradition until ...; it was revived in Britain at the turn of the previous century by the likes of Cecil Sharp. Apart from one isolated English folk dance club in Adelaide in the 1920s, there was little other than the introduction of Maypole dancing in the early 1900s.

Likewise the enormous repertoire of Irish tunes that were introduced by the 1970s bush bands and aided with the production of Begged Borrowed and Stolen in 1979 was not evidenced as being in our aural tradition in any Australian collections. The Irish were of course a major immigrant population in the 19th century, but the differences between Ireland and the rest of the British Isles, particularly Scotland, were not so marked as today. Records of dances learnt by 18 year old Kate Hughes of Dunbalk in 1867 show a massive listing of the country dances and quadrilles known throughout the then United Kingdom and Ireland (this handwritten notation can be found online).

It was not until the Gaelic League attempted creating an 'Irish Ireland' in the early 20th century that dances were invented for them by teachers in London – the likes of the Siege of Ennis by introducing Irish steps into the old ballroom La Tempête, appearance of the Walls of Limerick, Sweets of May etc. is when these traditions emerged, they could never have been brought out to Australia by the Irish in the nineteenth century including the most of the Irish tunes of the 1970s revival.

Proinsias de Roiste in his "Note on Irish Dancing" Nodlag 1927 in the Roche Collection of Traditional Irish Music wrote:

It was unfortunate that in the general scheme to recreate an Irish Ireland, the work of preserving or reviving our old national dances should have largely fallen to the lot of those who were but poorly equipped for the task. For the most part they were lacking in insight and a due appreciation of the pure old style, and had as it appears, but a slender knowledge of the old repertoire

The musicians were, apparently as slack in tunes as most others proved to have been in dances

The spectacular and difficult dances for the few were cultivated to the neglect of the simple ones for the many, leaving the social side untouched except to criticise or condemn

The ballroom dances in vogue at the time were the quadrilles or sets, lancers, valse, polka, schottische or barn dance, two step and mazurka. These were all banned and nothing put in their place but for a couple of long dances....

An exception should have been made, one would imagine, in favour of the popular old Sets (that had become Irishised), if only on account of the fine old tunes with which they were associated; but they were all decried amongst the rest.

The Irish were indeed dancing their Irish jig and step dance and various four hand reels derived from the Scottish reel and all the quadrilles and couple dances of the day. They had many good Irish tunes for these and many of the dance teachers in Australia were Irish and could fiddle the tune for the dance as well. This is the tradition that was handed on and represented in the collections such as by John Meredith.

Begged Borrowed and Stolen contains only a handful of tunes known to our pioneers and it was never intended as a resource for tunes for bush bands and clubs; it was simply the repertoire of the Celtic Club in Adelaide. Well yes, we all like to play these tunes, but one must wonder how they ever became the core for a somewhat faked Australian tradition.

The magnitude of collected Australian tunes that have now been put together is far more representative of our tradition and Folksongs of Australia vol 1 & 2 is the original base resource. My own Collector's Choice volume 1 of 1986 is possibly next and then followed the Pioneer Performers series that Rob Willis and Dave de Santi produced using John Meredith's Folksongs of Australia as a source. Music Makes Me Smile by myself and Harry Gardner not only re-enforces the traditional Australian repertoire, but includes some twenty contemporary tunes in the traditional style. More recently in his Settlers series Ray Mulligan has produced volumes of collected tunes from various sources including from the above and newer ones from Tasmania. In conjunction with the BMC and David Johnson the 'Bush Traditions' at Goulburn and the Settlers' Session series at the National Folk Festival have been a tremendous resource. Incidentally the session by that name at the NFF is now attracting over 120 musicians and is growing. Also the Irish slow session that pre-cedes the Settlers Session has been including several of these Australian tunes.

2. The Proposed Dancers' Dance. In the acting Secretary's report was the mention of establishing a 'dancers' dance' in lieu of the 2nd Woolshed Ball in October. I personally don't see anything wrong in establishing something different for the second big public dance event of the year. Indeed why would you continue conducting two annual balls a year if one is no longer successful? **However maintaining Australian heritage dances should be the focus in accordance with the aims of the VFMC and to put it plainly, a 'dancers' dance (as an entire programme) is very un-Australian, it can be seen as elitist, snobbish and exclusive. That is distinct from an 'advanced dance' as these have always been programmed in balance with simpler more inclusive dances so that everyone gets a go.** It's merely the name that is a problem, but again in a club situation, regular skilled dancers should be entitled a special night a year.

Maintaining the Australian side is a major concern for me; our tradition is being lost at an enormous rate of knots. With the passing of Shirley and then Lucy the dance programmes have changed radically and do not foster the Australian side previously maintained. But Shirley and Lucy were not pragmatic, they included a smaller balance of other popular dances and the VFMC has these programmes for reference.

If you look at the National Folk Festival Colonial balls and the programmes of many dance clubs across Australia nominated as being Australian, Colonial, Traditional or Heritage, you'll generally find a token minor representation of Australian dances in contrast to a massive domination of dance from other cultures and from dance competition sources that are hardly folk. But folk is another issue for separate consideration. Thus Irish, Scottish, American Contra, Welsh, English, and the 'choreographed' dances have completely eclipsed the Australian side.

I have recently finished an extensive history of our dancing heritage in a series of articles in Trad & Now from the days of early settlement - the Regency period and the Country Dances, the extended Colonial period with the quadrilles and couple dances, the Old Time Dance revival and the New Vogue extension of Old Time. It is very clear from the first hand references from the digitised newspaper resource via National Library of Australia's Trove site as to what dances were the mainstream dances of the people throughout our entire history. As soon as we get a chance, these articles will be installed online on the VFMC site.

Australia differed as a frontier country in that everything from 'home' was eagerly sought; people queued at the wharves awaiting news of the latest dances and music. It was these dances and music that were adopted across all levels of Australian society, and within months of any launch in England. We followed English social and fashionable dancing closely, but the folk process kicks in quickly with mutation. Of course some country dances did survive in less formal circumstances well into the 19th century. Australia was preoccupied with the ball-room dances of the day that predominated. The Quadrille, Waltz, Galop, Polka, Mazurka etc were all here within months of any debut in the home country and they spread like wildfire.

We changed probably more quickly than the homeland in terms of class consciousness. In their article 'A lifetime' Colin and Ila Silk make the following comment, referring to growing up in a country district near Geelong: -

“Ila’s dad (Stan Warren) started a cricket club of a Tuesday night in the paddock for twenty to thirty local lads and then ran a social in the Temperance Hall to raise money for pads etc. At first it was only games, but in 1934 changed to 50/50 games and dance and this was Ila’s introduction. The games-dance combination helped introduce non-dancers to ballroom dancing; also catering for all classes in the 1930s as Australia was still very class orientated.

‘Social dancing enabled businessmen , professionals, workers, different religious denominations, upper social crust, and the farmers who were well down on the class list, to meet on a level playing field’.

Around 1938 a group of eight or so including three cousins (all girls) used to dance in the school ground during lunch hour. My cousins could call the Alberts, Cotillions and First Set and we could do all the popular couples dances of the time. However I wasn’t allowed to go to tap dance lessons as Mum feared I may get the stage craft bug and that career wasn’t for ‘nice girls’ in those days.”

During the revival of old time dances there had been a folk style process that had come into action. The Lancers for example as a ballroom dance of the nineteenth century was performed with military precision, elegance and grace and danced to composed scores by the quadrille and military bands. By the twentieth century at least in rural areas and danced to aural tunes on squeezebox and fiddle it had become a very vigorous dance with lively swinging replacing the old 'set and turn partners' and the new basket figure introduced in which sometimes the women lifted off the ground 'merry go round' fashion. This was extremely popular, but later became dangerous and the First Set and Lancers by the 1950s had been banned in many city ballrooms, but they survived longer in the bush. Also in some country districts such as rural NSW and Qld as well as in the Apple Sheds of Tasmania it became one large community set with equal and opposite numbers of couples around the four sides of the walls. The Bellbrook Lancers is the classic example of this and the Tas. Alberts another. As with many other 'collected' dances deriving from the late Colonial period they had not only become folk style, but could be regarded as the folk dances of Australia. Western Australia from the 1890s to the 1910s more so than in the other states had many ‘club sets’; these were arranged by making up a potted selection of favourite figures from the First Set, Lancers, Alberts & Waltz Cotillion and naming them after their organisation. The Metropolitan Quadrille is just one of several examples. At Hepburn in Victoria the quadrilles were so well known, they just danced their potted version on the run, the MC calling out ‘Fig 3 First Set’ next, and so on.

But the Bellbrook Lancers and these other fascinating sets rarely get an airing in Australian folk dance circles, yet they are very much part of our folk heritage, are interesting and great fun and with good tunes to accompany them. The music is gaining momentum, but what’s happened to the dances to which the tunes were so intrinsically attached?

A major problem with the loss of many of our dances including the quadrilles, waltzes and polkas, is the lack of understanding of how they were conducted, particularly in country areas.

Across Australia within the folk dance scene it is rife that quadrilles be walked through figure by figure and for the multi figure varieties, which are the main ones, this absolutely kills them and they become boring. An ageing following with arthritis etc. is another problem in maintaining our lively heritage, yet lively dances is the domain of young people, and always has been. There lies a conundrum. The older people were chaperones or sat around and played Euchre.

But nobody seems to have noticed how well revived Colonial and Old Time dances can be - the annual Nariel dances demonstrate it can be enormously successful with all age groups, and at Bendigo we endeavour to do likewise through our monthly dances and the annual Dinki Di ball. Why can't the folk movement do it?

To be or not to be, that is the question! Peter Ellis July 2013.

References

(1) see The Evolution of 'Bush Dance' series, No. 5,
<http://www.vfmc.org.au/FiresideFiddlers/BushDanceEvolutionPt5.pdf>