SOCIETY DANCING: FASHIONABLE BODIES IN ENGLAND, 1870-1920

By Theresa Jill Buckland. 2011. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 264 pp., 19 illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. $85.00 hardback.

As public fascination with televised ballroom dancing shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (UK) and *Dancing with the Stars* (US) show no signs of abating, Theresa Buckland's historical study of ballroom dancing in England provides a timely reminder of an earlier period when couple dancing attracted widespread public and media attention. Drawing on extensive archival research, Buckland traces the history of ballroom dancing in England from the regulated manners of the Victorian ballroom, to the 1920s dance floor transformed by war, American influences and modern conceptions of class, race, gender and nationality. In doing so, she raises questions about popularity and modernity that should prompt productive discussion amongst both historians and dance scholars.

Society Dancing is a distinctive contribution to historical research on ballroom dancing, much of which has focused on the United States (for example, Aldrich 1991; Malnig 1992), and, to a lesser extent, continental Europe (for example, Cordova 1999). However, as Buckland points out (3), it was the English style of ballroom dancing that was disseminated worldwide in the early twentieth century, producing the codified vocabulary that would form the core of the global competitive and social ballroom dancing industry in the later twentieth century. Nevertheless, the 'English style' did not develop in isolation, and Buckland considers the influence of African-American social dances in the early twentieth century, putting her text into dialogue with existing research on ragtime (Cook 1999; Robinson 2009, 2010), tango (Savigliano 1995) and jazz dance (Stearns and Stearns 1968).

The intersection of English ballroom dancing with these imported dance forms raises questions of race and nationality, as well as gender and sexuality, that Buckland addresses in depth. Yet the book is not primarily driven by theoretical concerns; rather, rich archival details are foregrounded. The excesses and the blind spots of archival dance collections are, therefore, sometimes reflected in the text. In the first four chapters, for example, I grew increasingly hungry for physical

dance description, notoriously absent from primary social dance sources. But as the book progressed, the discussion of repertoire (chapter 5) and the numerous illustrations lent the archived bodies flesh and movement.

Issues of class loom large in social dance history in this period, and the book addresses these throughout, drawing on both archival research and Norbert Elias' (1978) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) seminal theoretical works on bodily constructions of class. The book's focus on the social dance practices of elite British 'Society' raises provocative questions about the scope of popular dance research and the notion of the 'popular' itself. Research into popular culture, particularly that influenced by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, has been significantly shaped by the Marxist-inflected idea that popular culture is the culture of the working classes. Stuart Hall, for example, acknowledges that, "[t]he term 'popular has very complex relations to the term 'class'", but ultimately centres his definition of popular culture on "[t]he culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes: this is the area to which the term 'popular' refers us" (Hall 1998: 452). As Buckland points out (14), research into popular dance was redefined and catalysed in the 1980s and 1990s by the rapid growth of cultural studies, and although popular dance methodologies tend to be far less obviously influenced by Marxist ideas than those in cultural studies, nevertheless, the distinction between popular dance and 'high art' dance remains primarily defined by class. For example, Julie Malnig rightly states, "Popular dance…, like social dance, is generally seen as a counterpoint to what have typically been considered "high" culture or classical forms of dance aimed at privileged audiences" (Malnig 2009: 5). Buckland's book, therefore, implicitly raises the question: what about the social dance practices of the elites? Can they be defined as 'popular' dance?

As John Storey (2003) has clearly demonstrated in his categorisation of theories of popular culture, there are many definitions of the popular, only some of which are influenced by Marxist notions of class struggle. Indeed, classicist Holt N. Parker (2001) recommends that cultural theorists in search of a definition of the popular turn away from Marx, towards Weber and Bourdieu. The popular can then be detached from a particular class, defined by access to the mode of production, and

tethered instead to 'status groups' defined by Weber's 'styles of life' or Bourdieu's cultural capital. Popular culture then becomes defined not by who produces it, but by how it is consumed as a marker of identity. This distinction is strongly in evidence in Buckland's analysis:

> Princes and princesses, lords and ladies, the families of rich businessmen, bankers, lowly clerks, and tradespeople may have whirled round the ball room in the ubiquitous Waltz and also stepped through the figures of the long-established Quadrilles – but very rarely did they do so together: the recreational dance culture of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain was a socially segregated and hierarchical affair. (9)

Parker goes on to suggest that "popular culture is unauthorized culture" (2001: 165), in the sense of lacking both an identifiable author, and a stamp of official authorization. This aspect of Parker's definition maps less comfortably onto the popular culture Buckland describes. She argues that, in the late nineteenth century at least, ballroom dancing was regulated by a strict system of official authorization. The acceptable style was defined in Paris, and filtered down to dancers via dancing masters with French connections, or professional theatrical dancers-turned-teachers, who had danced at the European opera houses (75-76). This system of prestige was, according to Buckland, crucial in maintaining the process of civilizing bodies that produced gentlemanly men and ladylike ladies, and it was increasingly protected by institutions such as the British Association of Teachers of Dancing. As the British middle class swelled towards the end of the nineteenth century, demand for teachers grew, and the profession expanded, particularly amongst women. However, the distribution of authority amongst so many dancing masters and teachers inevitably threatened the strict control of bodies on which the system was based. Conservative elements within the profession seem to have been engaged in a constant battle against the forces of innovation, fashion, and the appeal of exotic foreign movements. While this trend became more evident in the early twentieth century, with the influence of tango and African-American dance styles, Buckland also identifies it in the late nineteenth century. To return to Parker's terminology, the official authorization of ballroom dances seems to have been in continual tension with their lack of a single author. Buckland comments in her conclusion that, "there

have emerged individuals in the course of this investigation who, despite their background and seeming set of circumstances, fly in the face of the emerging norm" (199). Reading Parker's and Buckland's arguments together may suggest that the popular status of this elite practice lies in the friction between codification and improvisation, containment and resistance.

Buckland reflects on this theme of the dialectic between retention of the old and embrace of the new in her conclusion. In considering various descriptions of ballroom dancing and dancers as 'modern', she cites Lynda Nead's argument that modernity has been "engaged in an urgent and inventive dialogue with [its] own historical conditions of existence" (Nead cited in Buckland 2011: 196). Buckland argues that dance historiography has tended to downplay this retrospective quality of modernity, in favour of change, radicalism and newness. Perhaps this bias has been influenced by a modernist glorification of progress, as Buckland suggests, as well as by an assumption that change requires interventions and processes that can be analysed, whereas continuity is a static, default mode. This assumption is being challenged, however, by recent shifts in cultural theory. Research in the humanities over the last twenty years has increasingly turned its attention to the powerful processes underlying historical continuity, or, more often, returns to the past. This is reflected in the explosion of interest in cultural memory and the politics of cultural heritage. However, dance historians have only recently begun to consider embodied forms of memory, in relation to theatrical rather than popular dance practices (for example, Burt 2009). Hence, Buckland's rallying call for dance historians to address continuity as well as change is particularly timely and important.

Buckland also calls for a return to the archives in dance research, an appeal with which I wholeheartedly concur. The book facilitates such a return by providing future historians and students with a guide to primary sources on social dance in the period in chapter 2. Indeed, the book's clearly written prose makes it refreshingly accessible to students at all levels. The appendix of key personnel in Society dancing in England from 1870-1920 is also a helpful starting point for future research in the field. The book will be of interest not just to dance historians, but to historians of the period more generally, as well as those interested in the historical construction of British national identity, and of

the masculinities and femininities with which it is inextricably intertwined. Were the book to be sold as a cross between *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Downton Abbey*, it may well have still broader appeal. But these shows, nevertheless, bear out Buckland's argument that historical continuity and returns to the past are popular phenomena that we cannot ignore.

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