

## **The Quadrille**

**by Ellis Rogers**

**334 pages, case bound, 2004**

The Quadrille, written and published by Ellis Rogers, is the most comprehensive survey of the most popular of all nineteenth century social dances. 'Survey' does not really capture the true essence of this book. This book is the culmination of a lifetime's research and teaching. It is a work of academic importance, but it is also a practical teaching guide. It is serious, but at the same time it amuses and entertains the reader. It describes broad movements in society and dance, but also pays attention to the finest of details.

Today the quadrille is a shadow of its original self, walked – rather than danced – in a late Victorian fashion rather than danced in true Regency style to lively springy music, remembered by a decreasing number as the years go by, a relic more than a living tradition. Except that is, for Ellis Rogers and his wife Chris. Together they have done their best to revive interest in the history of the quadrille and to encourage dancers to dance the sets in an authentic style.

The Quadrille developed in Revolutionary France towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. It came to Britain in earnest with the peace of 1815. Ellis charts its beginnings, and traces its development throughout the nineteenth century right up to the present day. It is difficult to understand the mania that swept the country in the early 1820s - a new dance, with new and more interesting formations, and new music. Those who remember the introduction of Jive and the Twist may perhaps have some idea of the phenomenon! Ellis describes quadrille balls, the explosion in quadrille devising, and the growth of music publishing for quadrille dancing.

The book is divided into three historical sections: 1800 - 1835; 1836 - 1875; and 1876 to the present. In addition there are two appendices: one describing couple dances used in quadrilles and the other giving 25 facsimile pages of original music.

It is obvious that the author's favoured period is the first, when dancing was 'high' and physically demanding, and the tradition was being handed down by teachers with first-hand experience of the French dancing masters. It was during this period when French dance manuals were translated into English. The first seven chapters of this first section contain valuable background information and a fascinating amount of detail on the background to this period. The author quotes widely from documentary evidence on topics such as the dance repertoire, the influence of fashion, the size of dance halls, whether dances were called, descriptions of balls at the London ballroom, Allmack's – even down to the cost of dance instructions and lessons. It is difficult to take in that Wilson's 1816 Companion to the Ballroom, costing eight shillings, translates into more than £50 in today's money. A private lesson in your own home cost half a guinea (just over 50p), or almost £70 in 2004 terms – the cost of two whole terms of country dance classes in Edinburgh today!

However, chapter 8 of the first section is by far and away the most important of the whole book. This is where Ellis describes Regency dance style with a comprehensive description of steps and figures. This chapter alone will prove invaluable to all teachers, present and future, of dance of this period. Chapter 9 then gives the instructions for 7 sets of the more popular quadrilles: Paine's First Set, The Lancers (Hart's, Duval's and Strathy's), The Caledonians, La Polonaise, Wilson's Royal Scotch Quadrilles, Waltz Quadrilles and the Sixdrille. Extremely useful at the end of this section is the inclusion of no fewer than 30 pages of diagrams. One thing I personally found very interesting is Ellis's comments on tempo. The French teacher Gourdoux-Daux wanted the musicians to play at 40 bars per minute. This is somewhere between a modern Strathspey (30 bars) and a modern Scottish jig or reel (around 55 bars). At 40 bars per minute the demands on the dancer's calf muscles and achilles are fairly intense, but as the author points out, people walked more in those days! Modern country dancers would be happier with a speed nearer to 52 bars per minute.

Section 2 charts the decline in dance style throughout the mid-Victorian period. As ladies frocks got wider and longer, so the dancing also went down to the floor. Quadrilles were taken up by all classes of society. Dance halls got bigger, and the quadrille repertoire started to shrink. By the end of the century only a few sets were being danced. One of the interesting features of this section is the worldwide spread of quadrilles. Ellis describes how they were introduced to Japan as part of the government policy of westernization. As in the previous section, the instructions for many sets of quadrilles are given. Throughout this section, Ellis constantly drops in interesting facts about changes in society which affected dance style and attitudes.

Section 3 brings the quadrille up to date, again with the instructions for many complete sets. Ellis states that "if the quadrille is danced today it is nearly always as the result of a revival by a small group of dance enthusiasts." In Scotland the Lancers and Quadrilles are still in evidence in quite a number of places - usually as part of the old-time repertoire and danced with a lilting walking step, except in Shetland where they are danced in reel time with much birling.

In conversation some years ago with the author, he bemoaned the fact that when quadrilles are used as part of some period film or costume drama, the dancing is seldom historically accurate. He writes, "in the world of professional drama the accurate reproduction of the 19th century dance form has little importance." There is no question that producers do not pay the same attention to authenticity in the dance, compared to, for example, costume or set design. I feel that this was one of Ellis's motivations for writing this book - so that future generations of dancers, dance teachers, and film and TV producers would have a comprehensive and accurate reference book to turn to. In this aim, he has succeeded admirably.

This book is a work of amazing detail. The bibliography alone is worth paying for. There is simply no other place where you can find so many instructions for quadrilles. The author has done us all a service by debunking many of the myths about quadrilles through his solid research informed by his practical teaching. It is entertainingly written and anyone who has

been taught by Ellis and Chris will recognise many of the quotes and anecdotes which make their teaching so motivating. It is also beautifully produced with carefully chosen colour and black and white illustrations. Ellis Rogers has done historical dance a great service by this personal initiative. The last word, however, goes to a character in Mr Facey Romford's Hounds, by R. S. Surtees:

*“These sort of boobies think that people come to balls to do nothing but dance, whereas everybody knows that the real business of a ball is either to look out for a wife, to look after a wife, or to look after somebody else's wife.”*

**The Quadrille by Ellis Rogers costs £40 and is available direct from the author at 24 Laxay Road, Orpington, BR6 6BL. Add on £6 postage in the UK, £9 in Europe, and £18 elsewhere. E-mail [quadrille@ellisrogers.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:quadrille@ellisrogers.freeserve.co.uk)**

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