

AGAINST ALL ODDS

The 29th MFS Colonial Ball, 1930-2009, Saturday 25 July 2009

It was bitterly cold. But that didn't dissuade the enthusiasts from rolling up in their numbers, cloaked and hatted against the elements, to be in and of the



29th annual ball presented by the Monaro Folk Society. It was a joy to see how many people took the opportunity to use the cloak and hood, and doing so, looking good. Although it doesn't snow in Canberra any more, the urban heat-bank prevents that, it came close that last weekend in July. But! - weren't those cloaks and period overcoats so great!!

The Ball Committee made a brave decision to move the event, for the first time, from Spring to Winter. (The inaugural Ball in 1981 was part of the Autumn Festival of Canberra, but after two years and forever since, until this year, it was a Spring Ball, and has sometimes been deliberately associated with Canberra's springtime Floriade Festival, taking the opportunity to pick up visitors from out-of-town... "but we're only here for the flowers....")



Against all odds, the 29th Ball was a grand success.

It was a very friendly and personal Ball, with some 80 or so dancers, who wore out their little feet dance after dance, and kept on coming back for more. Many of the attendees were first-timers, and a lot of credit for their participation should go to the organizers of the MFS' Monday dance classes.

The musicians who gave us the lead were *Stringfiddle*, comprising Bob McInnes, Polly Garland, Lachlan Green,

and Lins Vellen, with Polly on keyboard and all the others on the fiddle, working so well with Judy Baker calling and MC'ing. *Stringfiddle* and Baker have a long association with MFS. *Stringfiddle* played for the Colonial Balls of 1992, 1993, (and sort-of in 1994, with Bob in the guise of *Coalbrook*), and 2006, then at Albert Hall's 80th Birthday last year, and over the years at many bush dances. *Stringfiddle* proved once again that it is a first-class dancers' band - technically and musically excellent, with a very wide repertoire, responsive to dancers' mood and ability, and throwing in the odd quirky musical joke just to keep us interested. (*Lara's Theme*?? I ask you....) And let's not forget that Judy Baker was the initiator of that first Colonial Ball in 1981, and the driving force behind it for many years after.

Judy must be complimented on the dance programme she designed. It was ideal for a formal Ball, as it recognised not only that many dancers would be relatively inexperienced or unpracticed, "coming out" only annually for this event; and also that many of the ladies would be wearing big skirts - the crinoline is of course from the Australian Colonial period, although the period also embraced post-Regency



fashions such as sometimes seen (but not this year), and Empire-line such as Jeanette Mill's white gown, and late-Victorian styles such as the illustration below from the first publication, about 1870, of the *The Eightsome Reel*[§] - no hoops, and only a small bustle. All but two (*La Varsovienna*, *Postie's Jig*) of the dances were easy to learn from scratch, and it was a delight to have a programme that required only minimal walk-throughs.

Now, talking about *The Eightsome Reel* - that was a grand choice for a formal Ball. Although it might look really complicated, it isn't, but it is extremely rewarding for every one of its eight dancers, and although it is full-on for the musicians (464 bars!!) the dancers all take time out during its eight minutes of run-time. This dance was on the inaugural 1981 programme, but it appeared only four times in the following 27 years, and was last done in 2003. *The Heilanman's Umbrell*

another easy-to-learn dance in the quadrille style (possibly named for the bridge over Glasgow's Central Railway Station), also made a welcome return (it was on the programme four times between 1989-2002).



Ironically, this Colonial Ball had few dances from the colonial era!! In my book, this is not a problem - after all, what we are really celebrating at our Balls is our entire Australian dance heritage, and Australia has been a free country almost as long (108 years) as it was a colony (113 years). So, the inclusion of some post-Edwardian and New Vogue[#] dances (*Maxina*, *Gypsy Tap*, *Anniversary Two-Step*, *Valetta*, *Postie's Jig* etc) is completely appropriate.

The Ball Committee (none of whom, I understand, has previous experience in running a Ball of this type) is to be particularly complimented on several levels: taking the opportunity to return the Ball to our Albert Hall; the choice of band and caller (and thereby the programme); and the choice of caterer. *Mad Cow Catering* did a sterling job, giving us a scrumptious and occasionally healthy lineup of sweets and savouries. And the pre-Ball bubbly was a nice touch, not seen, I think, since 1991.

Well done all. You've really raised the bar for the big 30th in 2010!!

[§] <http://abdn.ac.uk/scottskinner/> - "Dance entries", p6

[#] *Australian New Vogue* is a dance style for couples that was developed in the 1930s, possibly in Brisbane, apparently as a reaction against the perceived excessive formality of "ballroom" dancing. It has sometimes been called "old-time" - but think about this, ever since the time of Socrates, most things and styles have been called "old-time" by the next generation. New Voguers used "old-time" to describe dances of the colonial period. Swing dancers in the 1940s used "old-time" to describe New Vogue. And so it goes.

Story: John Carroll Photos:
Marianne Pietersen, John Carroll &
Mark Hohmuth