

Aldrich, Elizabeth. *From the Ballroom to Hell: Grace and Folly in Nineteenth-Century Dance*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991. Pp. vii, 225. Illustrations, musical examples, foreword, preface, notes, select bibliography, annotated bibliography, index. \$17.95 paperback.

In her book *From the Ballroom to Hell*, Elizabeth Aldrich has combined her insights as a scholar, reconstructor, and choreographer to create a valuable and entertaining study of American cultural history during the nineteenth century. With social dancing as her central focus, she delineates a world of endless social aspirations in which strict codes of conduct ruled the ballrooms, dining rooms, and parlors of America's middle class. The rules of behavior were not quite as elaborate as those of more decorous times, but they could hold their own in the records of extremely contrived human behavior.

In the foreword of the book, Mina Mulvey, editor of *Good Housekeeping*, reminds us that during the nineteenth century it was the *intricacy* of correct social behavior that protected society's upper classes from intrusions from below. Social territory was guarded by making the rules of conduct too complicated to be easily learned by upstarts. Aldrich's book makes it clear, however, that nineteenth-century American society had an ambivalent view toward social self-improvement: though good manners and etiquette were the proper domain of a select few, they could be acquired by just about anybody for the price of a manual.

As Aldrich informs us in her introductory essay, nineteenth-century dance manuals, etiquette books, and fashion magazines became a growing business as the American middle class expanded. She clearly identifies the underlying factors which caused Americans to be obsessed with proper behavior as set forth in these popular publications. These factors ranged from the historical circumstances that left people yearning for a noble class to pattern their behavior after; to the changing role of women which left them

confined—more or less—to their homes with little else to do but oversee the details of their social microcosms.

As mentioned earlier, Aldrich's central point of reference is the social dance arena; but, she also underscores the fact that the daily social interactions of upwardly mobile Americans was just as meticulously patterned as the steps and figures of their dances. Through the delightful collection of short excerpts from dance manuals and other publications, she provides us with glimpses of the cotillions, quadrilles, and waltzes which reflected changing tastes in dance from decade to decade, and she reminds us how often dance becomes the quintessential marker of a people's ideals and aspirations. By showing us how fashion, etiquette, and dance were seamlessly woven together in the nineteenth-century mind, she also reminds us of our own misleading tendency to try to divide elements of culture into distinct categories which can be examined independently of each other.

For those who wish to further explore the primary resources drawn upon by the author, a detailed and lengthy Annotated Bibliography makes for interesting reading in itself.

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