

Dance and Music in Literature

“A Ball In the Mines,” an excerpt from *Three Years in California (1851-1854)*
by J.D. Borthwick

In the evening, a ball took place at the hotel I was staying at, where, though none of the fair sex were present, dancing was kept up with great spirit for several hours. For music the company were indebted to two amateurs, one of whom played the fiddle and the other the flute. It is customary in the mines for the fiddler to take the responsibility of keeping the dancers all right. He goes through the dance orally, and at the proper intervals his voice is heard above the music and the conversation, shouting loudly his directions to the dancers, “Lady’s chain,” “Set to your partner,” with other dancing school words of command; and after all the legitimate figures of the dance had been performed, out of consideration for the thirsty appetites of the dancers, and for the good of the house, he always announced, in a louder voice than usual, the supplementary finale of “Promenade to the bar, and treat your partners.” This injunction, as may be supposed, was most rigorously obeyed, and the “ladies,” after their fatigues, tossed off their cocktails and lighted their pipes just as in more polished circles they eat ice-creams and sip lemonade.

It was a strange sight to see a party of long-bearded men, in heavy boots and flannel shirts, going through all the steps and figures of the dance with so much spirit, and often with a great deal of grace, hearty enjoyment depicted on their dried-up sunburned faces, and revolvers and bowie-knives glancing in their belts; while a crowd of the same rough-looking customers stood around, cheering them on to greater efforts, and occasionally dancing a step or two quietly on their own account. Dancing parties such as these were very common, especially in small camps where there was no such general resort as the gambling-saloons of the larger towns. Wherever a fiddler could be found to play, a dance was got up. Waltzes and polkas were not so much in fashion as the “Lancers” which appeared to be very generally known, and, besides, gave plenty of exercise to the light fantastic toes of the dancers; for here men danced, as they did everything else, with all their might; and to go through the “Lancers” in such company was a very severe gymnastic exercise. The absence of ladies was a difficulty which was very easily overcome, by a simple arrangement whereby it was understood that every gentleman who had a patch on a certain part of his inexpressibles should be considered a lady for the time being. These patches were rather fashionable, and were usually

large squares of canvass, showing brightly on a dark ground, so that the “ladies” of the party were as conspicuous as if they had been surrounded by the usual quantity of white muslin.

A pas seul sometimes varied the entertainment. I was present on one occasion at a dance at Foster’s Bar, when, after several sets of the “Lancers” had been danced, a young Scotch boy, who was probably a runaway apprentice from a Scotch ship, for the sailor boy air was easily seen through the thick coating of flour which he had acquired in his present occupation in the employment of a French baker, was requested to dance the Highland Fling for the amusement of the company. The music was good, and he certainly did justice to it; dancing most vigorously for about a quarter of an hour, shouting and yelling as he was cheered by the crowd, and going into it with all the fury of a wild savage in a war-dance. The spectators were uproarious in their applause. I daresay many of them never saw such an exhibition before. The youngster was looked upon as a perfect prodigy, and if he had drank with all the men who then sought the honour of “treating” him, he would never have lived to tread another measure.

John David Borthwick (1824-1892) was a Scottish journalist, author and artist. He traveled in gold rush California from 1851 to 1854, observing and sketching every ethnic group he met; his travel paintings were exhibited in several galleries, including the Royal Academy.

In 1857, he published materials from his California travels in Harper’s Weekly; his book, Three Years in California (William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh) was published that same year. It offers descriptions on mining techniques, personal interactions, transportation, crime, holidays, hotels and restaurants, entertainment of the social life of the era, and the growth of California, focusing on his experiences and encounters in numerous gold camps. It is considered one of the most entertaining and accurate depictions of the early Gold Rush period, and remains one of the classic first-person accounts of the Age of Gold in America. His attention to detail and his engaging portrayals are considered one of the most realistic representations of the time. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_David_Borthwick)

This Dance and Music in Literature excerpt is from sections 320-322 of Chapter 21: “A Ball,” “The Lancers and the Ladies,” and “The Highland Fling.” (Source: https://archive.org/stream/threeyearsincali00bortrich/threeyearsincali00bortrich_djvu.txt. You can read the full text of the book there.)

Our thanks to CDSS member Allen Dodson, of Murphys, California who brought the dance description to our attention. Murphys began as a mining camp, in the middle of the Gold Country; the dance described in the excerpt was at Lake’s Hotel in nearby Angels Camp.