

Mary Cox and the Scandalous Dance



I was watching PBS the other night with Andre Rieu playing iconic Strauss waltzes in the square in Maastricht, Netherlands with the graceful, swirling dancers, and the women in long full skirts. It was fortuitous, because I was writing the script for the 1864 scene in our Christmas candlelight tours. In the scene, Mary Cox tells her story about growing up in LeRoy House. Mary's father was the Reverend Samuel Cox, who was the first Chancellor of Ingham University. The family came to LeRoy in 1856, and lived in LeRoy House until 1864, when Mary's mother died. During that time, Mary attended Ingham University across the street. Many years later, Mary, who was in her 80s, reminisced about those Ingham days. One of the funniest stories takes place one day when the Ingham faculty is uptown for a lecture. The students decide to have a dance. They are upstairs in the dormitory, and the dancing brings down the ceiling. Madam Staunton, head of

the University insists that Mary's father call all the students together and to lecture them on their bad behavior. Mary's father talked with his daughter and she admits that they had a "grand time." Apparently her father wasn't as upset as Madam Staunton thought he should be. However, he does call all the girls together and asks the girls who had been standing, to stand up. Mary was the first to stand, and she said her father had a hard time concealing a smile. He admonished the girls, and apparently didn't dole out any punishment.

Mary doesn't say what type of dancing the girls enjoyed. In the mid-Victorian era, most of the dancing was done with couples standing side-by-side in what was called the "open position." Dances were done in formations of circles, squares, or lines. Dances like the waltz and the polka were done in the "closed position" with partners holding each other. The man would place his hand on his partner's waist.

This was quite scandalous. It apparently was more acceptable by upper class young people in urban areas. Johann Sebastian Strauss' music was popular in Germany and Austria, but he did not tour the United States until the 1870s.

So perhaps, Mary and her girl friends were practicing the waltz, but we will never know for sure. However, the December 1864 LeRoy Gazette News reprinted an article exposing the scandalous nature of the waltz, especially if performed in the middle of the day. It suggests that the waltz should only be done in the evening, when the lights were low and the "repulsive" and "coarse" "gyrations" were not as exposed. And further, the author was critical of those who danced the waltz in the fashionable hoop skirt, which exposed the ankle and leg:

"Waltzing is a profane and vicious dance . . . always. When it is prosecuted in the center of a great crowd in a dusty hall, on a

warm, mild summers day, it is a disgusting dance. Night is its only appropriate time. The blinding, dazzling gaslight throws a graceful glare over the salient points of its indecency and blends the whole into a wild whirl that dizzies and dazes one; but the uncompromising afternoon light, pouring in through the manifold windows, tears away every illusion and reveals the whole coarseness and all the repulsive details of this most alien and unmaidenly revel. The very pose of the dance is profanity. Attitudes which are the instinctive expression of intimate emotions. This is a guilty and wanton waste of delicacy. That it is practiced by good girls and tolerated by good mothers does not prove that it is good. There is another thing girls and their mothers do not seem to consider. The present mode of dress renders waltzing almost as objectionable in a large ballroom as the boldest feats of a French ballet dancer*. Not to put too fine a point on it, I mean that these gyrations in the center, of their gyrating and centrifugal hoops, makes a most operatic drapery display. I saw scores and scores of public waltzing girls last summer and among them, all I saw, but one who understood the art, or at any rate, who practiced the art of indecent exposure. Do I shock you? I hope so if the saying of shocking things might prevent the doing of shocking things, I shall be well content. "

*The French ballet was considered extremely scandalous. Scanty costumes, and exposed legs were not considered proper in Victorian England.