

Lovelight in the Starlight – A Night at a Ball

Colleen O'Sullivan January 2013

Among my mother's papers I found a program for the Rylstone-Kandos Third Annual Show Ball, held at the Rylstone Memorial Hall on 22nd February 1939. The "Programme of Dances" lists sixteen medleys. The theme song "There's Lovelight in the Starlight" begins and rounds off the evening.

I recognise some of the songs on that program: the slow and steamy "Night and Day", the lively "Pack up your Troubles", the romantic "Blue Danube", the nostalgic "Stardust", the bouncy "Alexander's Ragtime Band", the tender "Aloha". Altogether there are forty-eight melodies listed. In addition the Carl Thomas Club Band spent one and half hours playing request numbers. That's a lot of dancing!

I imagine my mother was still there when the ball ended at 3.15am with "Auld Acquaintance" and "God Save the King" but I don't think she slept-in next morning. The 22nd was a Wednesday so most people had to get up for work. It wasn't unusual I have discovered. Balls were rarely held on a Friday or Saturday. They were held mainly on a Monday or Tuesday, in cooler months, and as close as possible to a full moon (for ease of travelling on dark roads).

People travelled in those days for a good ball. For example at the Kandos Catholic ball in 1937 there were visitors from Bathurst, Turondale, Sally's Flat, Sofala, Capertee, Bylong, Mudgee, Lue, Sydney and Newcastle, though of course most were from Kandos and Rylstone.

The 1930s was my mother's "ball period" – after she left school and before she married my father. Balls were about youth and gaiety and expectation. They were about handsome men wooing pretty girls; for at a ball they were all handsome and pretty; and they were hoping to meet the love of their life. That is not to say that only the young attended. All ages are enthralled by romance.

My mother and her sisters had plenty of balls to choose from in Kandos and Rylstone. Most institutions had an annual ball including the Masons, the Catholics (some years they had three), the Anglicans, the Methodists and the Hospital. There were plenty of dance venues as well: the Angus and Rylstone Memorial Halls, Truswell's Palais de Dance, the Blue Mill Dance Hall and the Crystal Palais.

It was no small feat to organise a ball. Months of preparation and numerous willing workers went into it. We can imagine the list: book the band and venue (most often the Memorial Halls), invite special guests (Bishops and Parliamentarians were popular), select, type and print programs and tickets, and promote the event. Closer to the date: organise the food, prepare the floor, hang the decorations, set up tables. No different from today you might think until you read some of the descriptions in the Mudgee Guardian.

"Tables fairly groaned under the load of poultry and ham, salads, sweets and confections" at St Malachi's Ball in 1933 while at the St Dominic's ball in 1931, "The whole of the catering arrangements were in the capable hands of Mesdames J J Francis and A R Goodacre assisted by a handsome bevy of lady assistants", 28 of them, all named in the article. "One could rhapsodise over the excellence of the supper" at the Bachelor's Ball in Kandos in 1935. At that ball the hall was

decorated with arum lilies, dyed red, and the supper tables were decked with Iceland poppies. It is obvious balls were a wonderful opportunity for creativity and self-expression.

In 1929 the reporter gave readers some idea of the work entailed in decorating the hall for the St Dominic's Ball, "11,520 feet of Denison crepe streamers were used and 95 packets of pins, as well as timber for frames, wire and many other things...too much praise cannot be given to Mrs Hoare and Mrs Christopher assisted by a willing band of helpers."

Decorations got people into a festive mood as soon as they walked through the door. "Guests always look for something special," the Mudgee Guardian wrote. At the Anglican ball in 1933 "huge festoons of orange leaves reached down the hall and from these were suspended brilliant coloured oranges and huge orange coloured balloons...real oranges graced the setting of the stage replete with luscious fruit and sweet-smelling blossom...a floral posy was presented to Miss Cashman for the wonderful decorative scheme." At the Hospital Ball in 1936 "a very pretty colour scheme of streamers with Chinese lanterns shedding a soft diffused light through the tinted streamers and bowls of bloom...and a quintette of players that discoursed music of such perfectly timed syncopation that dancers demanded encore after encore".

That last description referred to Keith Goodacres's Majestic Orchestra. There were a number of popular local bands including Mrs Muller's Jazz, Junge's Orchestra, Johnson's Jazz Band and Baistow's Melody Makers, though occasionally orchestras were brought in from Bathurst, Mudgee or Sydney. Music naturally was important.

So too was a well-prepared floor and a capable Master of Ceremonies. Truswell's Palais de Dance earned special praise in 1938: "The floor which had been specially dressed was like glass and was in excellent order for dancing." Highly polished floors don't have the same appeal in our risk-averse society.

For many years T Spencer-Brown and W Keenan were the most popular MCs in Kandos. One of the MCs tasks was to liaise with the orchestra and supper ladies to ensure the program ran smoothly, and to encourage the dancers. They had to be, according to the Mudgee Guardian, capable and efficient and keep the festivities moving along without a dull moment. Often the MCs introduced competition or novelty dances like the chocolate waltz, the spot waltz, the mystery man and one intriguingly called "one for nothing". Sometimes they arranged exhibition dances.

Supper, usually served around mid-night, was an important part of every ball, and with all that dancing we can understand why. The Angus Memorial Hall, early on, proved inadequate for seating 250 to 350 guests for supper, so for a few years a marquee was erected beside the hall and in later years, patrons walked to the Catholic Club for supper (in the next block, also known as the Blue Mill Dance Hall). Even then there were up to four sittings on the night.

Balls gave women, in particular, a place in the sun: celebrity status for a night and their names in print the following week. "Gwen Jones black faille faconne, blue velvet coat...Alice Howe (Rylstone) blue matelasse...Rosemary Grieve apricot net over taffeta...Mrs Rex Tarrant (Olinda) floral pebble crepe...". That was the type of list that trailed down the pages of the Mudgee Guardian after every ball. Imagine the work of the journalist in collecting each name and description and the

disappointment of any young woman whose name was missing. No wonder the lists began, "Among the many present we noticed...".

In the new age of electric lighting the aim of young women was to shimmer and rustle, so silk, satin, taffeta, organza, crepe and lamé were popular. Fabrics were cut on the bias to drape and cling, emphasising women's natural shape. Backs were low, hems were ankle-length, hair was short and wavy and often women carried a posy or wore a spray.

The annual ball served many purposes. For everyone it was an escape from the daily grind. For the young it was an opportunity to show themselves off at their best and perhaps meet the person of their dreams. It was the biggest fund-raiser in a small community, especially for the Catholics. Fund-raising for a ball often started months before with card nights, socials and popular men and girl competitions. The annual ball was also a way of grounding the community, bringing people together, working for a common purpose and then partying together. There weren't that many speeches at a ball but there was always one to honour and thank the workers.

You might get the impression from the Mudgee Guardian that the whole world loved a ball but the truth is the decade when balls were most popular was the decade of the Depression. There were many who couldn't afford a ticket, let alone a dress, hairstyle and accessories.

I know there was lovelight in the starlight that night of the Rylstone-Kandos Third Annual Show Ball because in the "Engagement" column of my mother's program, where young men booked themselves in for a dance, Bruce (my father) appears four times, including for the last medley. I dare say that was the night they fell in love. Why else would my mother have treasured this program?

Jean Walsh, the author's mother at a Kandos ball in the 1930s. Beau unknown.

