**Castle, Vernon (b. 2 May, 1887, Norwich, England; d. 15 February, 1918, Fort Benbrook, Texas, U. S. A.) and Castle, Irene Foote (b. 17 April, 1893, New Rochelle, New York, U.S.A.; d. 29 January, 1969, Eureka Springs, Arkansas, U. S. A.)**

**SUMMARY**

During the years 1911-1917, Irene Foote Castle (1893-1969) and her husband Vernon Castle (1887-1918) explicitly marketed ragtime dancing as ‘modern’ to their upper class and increasingly middle class audiences eager to partake in new kinesthetic forms of popular culture. Dancers, who previously skipped to the 6/8 marching meter of the two step, began to trot, strut and glide, taking a step on each beat of syncopated 2/4 meter music long associated with African-American culture. Easily learned, these new one-step dances invited improvisation and individual response. Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, as they called themselves, became the most public proponents of new trotting dances and distinguished their style from those previously associated with working-class consumers, through discursive and embodied associations of modernity, whiteness, class prestige, and restraint. Irene Castle presented new modes of modern femininity through her corset-less fashions, short hair cut, and active lifestyle. With the assistance of their agent Elisabeth Marbury, the Castles collaborated with noted African-American composer and bandleader James Reese Europe, who composed works for them and whose ensemble accompanied their live performances. Thus while drawing on the ‘primitive’ yet energizing power of syncopated music, the Castles and their self-proclaimed ‘refined’ dance style offered a modernity that promised new found vitality while maintaining racial hierarchies.

**Career**

The Castles’s transatlantic career can be amply documented in mass media sources, including promotional materials, sheet music, recordings, silent films, and advertisements. The sheer amount of material attests to the highly visible nature of their career and its connection to twentieth-century celebrity culture and the emergence of modern technologies. This media coverage exposes as well the highly charged nature of popular dance culture with its ardent enthusiasts and vehement detractors. As early as 1906, social reformers voiced concerns about the informal and commercialized circumstances under which urban popular dancing took place and the sexual threat it held for working-class women. Observers soon described ragtime dance’s growing popularity as ‘dance madness’ and ‘dance mania’, terms that reflected the often contradictory dichotomies associated with the longstanding mind-body split complicated further by the U.S. history of slavery and institutionalized racism. Anxieties about industrialization, emigration, ethnic and racial identities, social class, popular culture, and the increasingly unstable nature of gender in the wake of Progressive reforms surfaced as consumers debated the meanings and values of the ‘primitive’ and the civilized, passion and control, the quotidian and the eternal.

Vernon Castle, born Blythe in Norwich, England, emigrated to the U.S. in 1906. In his earliest stage appearances he played comic roles that traded on well-worn stereotypes of the British eccentric. Raised in the New York City suburb of New Rochelle, Irene Foote, uncharacteristically for her professional class background, found work as a chorus girl while still in her teens. The couple met in 1910, were married the following year when Irene turned eighteen and left for Paris where they began their joint dancing career. In Parisian restaurants and clubs, the Castles demonstrated the new American trotting dances to ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band’ and other popular songs that extolled ragtime’s power. Returning to New York City in the fall of 1912, they appeared with success in *The Sunshine Girl*, a show transported from the London stage. In the role of Lord Bicester, Vernon Castle performed ‘The Argentine Tango’, a Parisian-derived dance, and together the Castles performed a trotting one step.

Assisted by knowledgeable theatrical agent Elisabeth Marbury, the Castles marketed themselves as entertainers, instructors and role models. Marbury capitalized on her friendships among New York City’s high society and opened Castle House in late 1913. Its society chaperones and afternoon hours ensured its identity as a venue set apart from the commercial dance halls that so troubled Progressive reformers. In their live performances here and elsewhere, the Castles taught ‘modernized’ versions of the tango, waltz, polka, and gavotte as well as their eponymous Castle Walk, a variation of the one step that bounced up, and other creations such as the ‘Half and Half’ danced to music in 5/4 meter.

In 1914, the couple undertook a number of ventures that further identified them as arbiters of class-based modernity. They became spokespersons for the Victor Talking Machine Company, toured the northern U.S., published dance instructions, notably *Modern Dancing*, and in early December, opened on Broadway in *Watch Your Step*, a musical vehicle written for them by Irving Berlin, which featured the foxtrot, a dance they taught via the mainstream *Ladies Home Journal*. Retaining the simplicity of the One Step, the foxtrot combined two slow and four quick steps, a pattern that embraced a greater range of tempi and a return to slow, even bluesy, 4/4 meter.

*Modern Dancing,* as was true of their tour, unambiguously identified their dancing as ‘modern’ through bodily restraint. With chapters like ‘Dancing as a Beautifier’, and ‘Dancing and Health’, the Castles countered criticism of ragtime dance’s danger with claims to its health benefits when properly controlled. Marbury’s introduction likewise adopted the language of Progressive reformers like Jane Addams in her call for dance hall supervision. *Modern Dancing* appeared almost synchronously with the Castles’s position as spokespersons for Victor and its line of dance records. Victor’s own marketing reliance on a discourse of uplift and ‘good music’, further solidified the Castles and their claims to evolutionary class privilege.

In 1916, following the tour of *Watch Your Step*, which had opened just months after the onset of the First World War, Vernon returned to England and enlisted in the Royal Flying Corp. After two aerial accidents, he returned to the U. S. as a flight instructor for Canadian pilots training in Texas. He was killed in 1918 when his plane crashed while dodging one flown by a young recruit. His service in the Royal Flying Corps carried enormous gender cachet with its combination of new wartime technology and heroic daring; his death was front-page news.

**Syncopated Music and New Movement**

Ragtime, a term that came into common use in the mid-1890s with the cakewalk and publication of piano works by composer Scott Joplin, retained its racialized associations in the twentieth century. Popular music composers like Irving Berlin, created songs such as his 1911 hit ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band’ whose self-referential text emphasized that syncopated music demanded bodily response. The Castles owed much of their success to African-American composer and bandleader James Reese Europe (1881-1919) and his ‘Superior Colored Musicians’. Well established in New York City, Europe became the music director at Castle House and kept the Castles abreast of new movement vocabularies, such as the foxtrot, circulating within black popular culture by performers who had little access to the racially segregated entertainment market. Europe and his ensemble also accompanied the Castles on tour where his original music was regularly commented upon. Europe published a number of works written for the Castles, and his Society Orchestra appears to have been the first African-American ensemble to record, releasing eight sides on the Victor label from December 1913 to February 1914, including his ‘The Castle House Rag’ and ‘The Castle Walk’ and other popular one-steps like ‘Too Much Mustard’. Like Vernon Castle, Europe joined the war effort and helped create the all-black 369th Infantry Regiment Hellfighters Band, which entertained troops and French natives alike. The ‘Hellfighters’ Band, which made recordings on the Pathé label following the Armistice, provided French audiences with exposure to the American popular music that would become even more influential in the 1920s.

**Aftermath**

Following Vernon’s death, Irene Castle continued to perform with new partners, and acted in additional silent films; together the pair had made a silent film *Whirl of Life* in 1915. Following her divorce from second husband Robert E. Tremain and a third marriage to Frederic McLaughlin, she relocated to Chicago and devoted herself to animal rights work. She continued to dance in special exhibitions as a means to raise money for her charities. In 1939 the New York World’s Fair and the Ginger Rogers/Fred Astaire vehicle ‘The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle’ provided an opportunity for Irene to come out of retirement; her signature syncopated dances like her bobbed hair and flowing dance dresses, once controversial, now spoke nostalgically to a seemingly simpler pre-war time.

**Susan C. Cook**

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**Paratexts**

Cover of Castles’ *Modern Dancing*, (held at NYPL Dance Collection and in LOC online holdings)

“Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle’s New Dances for This Winter, III. The Fox Trot,” *Ladies Home Journal*, December 1914. (in nypl dance collection clippings file)

Cover image: J. R. Europe and Ford T. Dabney, *The Castle Doggy Fox-Trot*, 1915. (held at NYPL Schomburg)

James Reese Europe recordings of Castle’s music (probably NYPL Music, not certain)