



# Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution

*Eve Golden*

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Vernon and Irene Castle popularized ragtime dancing in the years just before World War I and made dancing a respectable pastime in America. The whisper-thin, elegant Castles were trendsetters in many ways: they traveled with a black orchestra, had an openly lesbian manager, and were animal-rights advocates decades before it became a public issue. Irene was also a fashion innovator, bobbing her hair ten years before the flapper look of the 1920s became popular. From their marriage in 1911 until 1916, the Castles were the most famous and influential dance team in the world. Their dancing schools and nightclubs were packed with society figures and white-collar workers alike. After their peak of white-hot fame, Vernon enlisted in the Royal Canadian Flying Corps, served at the front lines, and was killed in a 1918 airplane crash. Irene became a movie star and appeared in more than a dozen films between 1917 and 1922. The Castles were depicted in the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movie *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution* (1939), but the film omitted most of the interesting and controversial aspects of their lives. They were more complex than posterity would have it: Vernon was charming but irresponsible, Irene was strong-minded but self-centered, and the couple had filed for divorce before Vernon's death (information that has never before been made public). *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution* is the fascinating story of a couple who reinvented dance and its place in twentieth-century culture.

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