
GILLMEISTER, HEINER. *Tennis: A Cultural History*. London: Leicester University Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 452. Notes, black-and-white and color illustrations, bibliography, index. £60 cb.

The literature of tennis has been without a truly authoritative history. With primary sources scattered and access often difficult, scholars have relied primarily on Malcolm Whitman's *Tennis: Origins and Mysteries* (Derrydale Press, 1932), Terry Todd's *The Tennis Players: From Pagan Rites to Strawberries and Cream* (Vallency Press, 1979), and *Tennis: Its History, People, and Events* by Will Grimsley (Prentice-Hall, 1971) for broad historical coverage. Heiner Gillmeister, who has published extensively on ball games in general and tennis in particular, including the well-received *Olympisches Tennis: Die Geschichte der Olympischen Tennisturniere 1896-1992* (Akademia Verlag, 1993), has filled the void, contributing a meticulously researched history of the game from its medieval origins to World War I. He notes in the preface that he, like the "ball boy" in an early painting pictured clambering around a gallery retrieving tennis balls, has collected "the stray tennis balls of more than eight hundred years of tennis history, this in order to secure for the reader. . . a game that is both instructive and enjoyable" (p. xi). The work, originally published in German in 1990 as *Kulturgeschichte des Tennis*, has been ably translated by the author into English. The sheer depth of documentation makes the going a bit slow at times, but the text is spiced with amusing tongue-in-cheek comments and a superb collection of 105 black-and-white and 16 color illustrations.

Gillmeister follows the development of the game of *jeu de paume*, its siblings, and its successors in nine chapters: The Origins of Tennis: The Monks' Racket; The Tennis Games of the Middle Ages; The Language of Tennis; Tennis in Renaissance Literature; Tennis in the German Ballhouse; Lawn Tennis: The Sturdy Bastard; Lawn Tennis in America; Continental Colonies: Lawn Tennis in France; and Lawn Tennis under the Kaiser. He examines a number of claims for the origin of tennis, discarding theories of Roman and Egyptian genesis. He traces the game to the middle of the twelfth century and offers the reader the choice of godly or devilish circumstances. There is the story of a student's bargain with the devil. When the student forfeited the agreement, he was delivered into a sulphurous valley and became the ball in a game between two teams of demons who hit him back and forth between them. The student and later tellers of the tale have been authenticated as real persons. A more earthly explanation features human players. In *summa de Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, written in 1165, John Belath asks why some French bishops and archbishops are stooping to the level of playing ball games in the cloisters. It seems that tennis had its origins not among the ruling elite, but among bored monks looking for a way to pass the time pleasurably after being barred from "the public riots called football" (p. 7).

The physical configuration of the cloisters determined much of the game's strategy, with its arches providing the framework for the passage of arms, or defense of the castle gate, which early versions appropriated from medieval

tournaments. The game centered on the medieval chase (*chasse*) rule. Lines, or nets, came later, as did scoring uniformity. Gillmeister believes that counting by fifteens probably derived from the practice of betting with the *gros denier tournois*, or Great Penny of Tours, which at the beginning of the fifteenth century was worth fifteen pence.

In tracing the development of the game, Gillmeister examines a number of similar ball games that still survive, including *pelota de mano* (Colombia and Ecuador), *pelota mixteca* (Mexico), *pelotamano* (Lanzarote), *keatsen* (Friesland), and *palla* (Tuscany). This section should prove useful to students of comparative studies of ball games.

A renowned linguist, Gillmeister has lavished considerable attention on the language of tennis. He traces the likely origin of most words central to the game, demolishing some widely held beliefs. Cat gut was never used to string racquets; Dutch manufacturers in the early sixteenth century strung them with specially twisted sheep gut that they called *caetsdarm*, or tennis gut. *Love* is not derived from the French *oeuf* or egg; it likely comes from the Flemish *lof* as used in the phrase *omme lof spelen*, “to play for the honour.”

Gillmeister finds many instances of the appearance of tennis in Renaissance literature. It was used as a symbol for various types of conflicts, some of them quite pleasurable. Theophile de Viau published in 1622 a poem called *Parnasse Satyrique*, which used tennis symbolism much too effectively for the moral arbiters of the time. His verse was banned, and he was forced to leave Paris. The delicious translation:

If you kiss her, count fifteen,
If you touch the buds, thirty,
If you capture the hill,
Forty-five comes up.
But if you enter the breach
With what the lady needs,
Remember well what I sing to you,
You will win the game outright. (p. 132)

Several chapters are devoted to the development of lawn tennis, from its appearance in 1874 as Major Walter Clopton Wingfield's game of *sphairistike*. Soon corrupted into “stickey,” the game featured an hourglass-shaped court divided in half by a net. The boxed set patented and sold by Wingfield was accompanied by a pamphlet of the rules of the game. Gillmeister defends Wingfield against detractors such as tennis historian Terry Todd, who accused him of dubious actions in the name of profit.

The game quickly grew in popularity. English travelers carried it with them to the Continent and to India, and visitors to Britain were introduced to it. The desire for competition led to the establishment of lawn tennis associations and clubs, and when the All England Croquet Club added the words “lawn tennis” to its name and began planning a large tennis tournament, the need for court and

rules changes became apparent. Very shortly the rectangular court became standard and the net was lowered to its current height.

Brief chapters cover lawn tennis in America and France, and greater attention is given to its development in Germany. Gillmeister presents evidence that Carl August von der Meden, “the father of lawn tennis in Germany,” may have played a key role in Dwight Davis’ founding of the Davis Cup.

Women are not slighted. Female players are occasionally mentioned, and several of the illustrations feature women participants. In commenting on the tremendous handicap imposed on women through the corsets, heeled boots, and voluminous skirts mandated by male mavens of fashion, Lottie Dod excoriated men who “rather than conceding to the hated rival a glance at her ankle . . . would have much preferred seeing their bride or wife collapse under the burden of her tennis attire” (p. 205).

Gillmeister has produced an admirable history of tennis, painstakingly documented, beautifully illustrated, and enriched with detailed notes and a lengthy bibliography. *Tennis: A Cultural History* is a valuable resource and should become the standard work in the field.

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