

"CHASE BETTER THAN A YARD AND WORSE THAN LAST GALLERY":
ROYAL TENNIS IN THE ANTIPODES

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Michael P. Garnett, *A History of Royal Tennis in Australia*. Historical Publications, Melbourne, 1983, pp.224.\$29 (\$65 deluxe edd.) Available from the author, 4 Herbert Street, Mount Waverley, Victoria, 3149.

"...Hill won the toss, and took the service, but Box, starting off strongly, scored 40 love and made chase worse than a yard. This he successfully defended, and thus won the first, a love game. In the second game the score was 40-30 in Hill's favour with hazard side 2 chase to win, which he took and the game. Third game Box made a clever return by a back handed boast from under the grille. His racquet twisted out of his hand, but Hill feebly placed the ball in the net..."

Thus wrote 'Bandeau' of the *Australasian*, describing a Royal Tennis Match between H.J. Hill and John Burnett Box (then a young Melbourne lawyer, later Judge Box of the Victorian County Court) at the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club in 1898. The words have a ring of mystery, even sophistry, in the ears of today's lawn tennis devotees. And yet this game, never widely played but again on a relative upswing of popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, is more than any other the one in which lawn tennis is grounded.

Michael Garnett's *A History of Royal Tennis in Australia* is timely at more than one level. First, as with a number of other sports, including lawn tennis Australia has played an inordinately prominent role in the more recent annals of the very ancient game of Royal Tennis. The game's history in the British Isles dates back

as far as 1436, and in France, its country of origin, to the twelfth century.

Yet, as Garnett points out, by 1875, the year of the game's inception in the Australian colonies it was played actively elsewhere only in Britain and France. Now in the 1980s, Australia can still be considered not merely to be among the few countries which see the sport played, but to be in the vanguard - in 1982 Australia won the international Bathurst Cup, and in 1983 the Australian Wayne Davies challenged for the crown of the world champion in the sport, and will challenge again probably early in 1985. At the time of writing of Garnett's history Australia owned 4 of the first 10 players in Men's world rankings. In 1974, two of the finest Royal tennis courts in the world were built at East Richmond, Melbourne. A new court has just come into use at Old Ballarat Village, Ballarat, Victoria, and another court is projected in the Cannons Sports Club, expected to be completed in Collins Street, Melbourne by the end of 1985.

All this must be seen in the context of a minority and elitist sport - not surprising in consideration of its Royal Lineage, and of the cost of building additional courts (current price anything from \$A250,000 to \$A350,000, per court) and of upkeep of old ones. There are at present nineteen courts in use in the United Kingdom, a mere two in France, only nine in the U.S.A., and four in Australia. In Australia the history of the sport is a tale of two cities - Hobart and Melbourne - and that is how Garnett tells it. At the outset he chronicles the more distant history of the game on the Continent and in Britain in an account notable for its conciseness, then proceeds in Part I to the story of the court in Davey Street, Hobart, and in Part II, to the history of the Melbourne Royal Tennis Club, domiciled for 92 years at 345 Exhibition Street, and since moved to Sherwood Street, Richmond. Then follows Part III, a collection of explanatory chapters on things that defy a chronological approach - 'Some Rules of Royal Tennis in Australia'; 'The Professional and His Duties'; 'Some Hints on Building a Tennis Court'; 'Significance of Court Markings in Australia'; 'Biographies of Amateurs and Professionals', etc., etc. The book is liberally illustrated with line-drawings, black and white photographs, and colour plates.

To the modern lawn tennis player, his game's precursor seems to go to considerable lengths to keep its mysteries clutched about it like a cloak seasoned by the centuries. It has done this by refusing to pay too much regard to standardisation of equipment - colour and size of balls, lighting, colour of walls (quite important in an indoor sport played under lights), the size and surround of the court, and so on. Royal tennis has also preserved a rough and ready innovation that lawn tennis has long since denied itself as it moves towards electrical control of line-calls in a competition as fierce as the battles over a 0.05 of a second in national and international swimming races. Royal tennis still allows for the World Champion to nominate the time and place at which he will next be challenged. In a game traditionally associated with wagers on skill, Royal Tennis professionals have sometimes challenged amateurs fully accoutred with rackets and guaranteed to beat them using only bootjack or a bottle. As Garnett reminds us, Melbourne professional, Woolner Stone, once played Gerald Patterson, Davis Cup player of great power, Woolner using a Royal tennis racket and Patterson a lawn tennis racket. Little wonder that there is scope in Garnett's account for a chapter entitled 'Some Unusual Feats'.

The advent of the sport in Australia depended on the passion for the game of one Samuel Smith Travers, retired English merchant who had played Royal Tennis at Oxford and at James Street in the Haymarket, London. He arrived in Hobart with his servants and family of eight children at the age of 44 in 1870 to amass a pastoral empire on the mainland and with plans to lure one of the English professionals in the game to Tasmania to be his family's private tutor. This he did.

Thomas Stone, professional at James Street and Oxford followed him to Tasmania in 1874, only to suggest rebuilding of parts of the sandstone and plaster-render court to bring it into line with its original model, the James Street court in London's Haymarket. Used at first to entertain Travers' friends, the court soon became the home of Hobart Royal Tennis Club when Travers, in financial straits, sold it to a group of interested players,

Thus began the social and economic pattern of Royal tennis in Australia, to be discerned in both Hobart and Melbourne to the

resent day. Both clubs came very close to closing in the face of insolvency more than once, only to be saved by members' debentures or straight donations. Both show a profile of wealth and the highest social acceptability in their membership. It was considered almost essential to be a member of the Tasmanian Club before applying to join the Hobart Royal Tennis Club. When an initial meeting of 33 gentlemen in J.B. Box's Chambers at Temple Court, Melbourne elected a committee to establish a Royal Tennis club on the mainland, some 14 of those present gave as their address the august Melbourne Club while those remaining came largely from Toorak, Temple Court, Collins Street, Queens Street, the lawyers' section of Williams Street, the Supreme Court, the Australian Club, the Atheneum Club, Caulfield, Brighton and the pastoral property 'Rippon Vale' at Birregurra. As with the earliest lawn tennis clubs, male-dominated, pastoral and business-oriented in membership, it was not until 1935 that lady associate members were admitted in Hobart. Melbourne made a similar move in the early 1930s to allow ladies membership, but gave them no rights within the club. Fortunately by 1973, however, things were considerably more open. In that year Judy Clarke began playing at the Hobart Club, and within a decade had established herself as the best woman player of the game in the world.

There have been traditional associations with vice-regal society, more particularly at the Melbourne Royal Tennis Club than in Hobart. The ten-year-old Woolner Stone, son of Thomas Stone, the Melbourne professional and later to supplant his father, used to cross from Kings College in Nicholson Street to the Exhibition Street Courts to play against the Victorian Governor, Sir Henry Loch. Little wonder that four years earlier the club received news from the Secretary of State for the Colonies that it had been granted Royal patronage and became the Royal Melbourne Tennis Club. By 1912, the Governor-General Lord Denman won the club's Silver Racket competition, and Woolner Stone was coaching the new Victorian Governor Sir John Fuller. In the 1920s another Victorian Governor, The Earl of Stradbroke, was often to be seen on the court in the mornings. Later Lord Somers played and swam at the R.M.T.C. And often, at both the Hobart and Melbourne courts, members of the touring English cricket teams were to be seen as visiting members, Colin Cowdrey one of the most accomplished of them. There is ample

evidence in Garnett's account that seeds of Empire, a roseate fondness for The Old Country, a close bond with military and naval men (officers were made honorary members while in Hobart and Melbourne on a visit), and with the professions (particularly the law) and Melbourne Club life have been endemic to Royal Tennis.

The book makes fascinating reading, even if sometimes the reader is stayed by literals or infelicities in wording that a more careful sub-editing might have eliminated. Chapter 16 seems to double back on itself in chronology at some points, indicating perhaps an unintended interchange in pagination. Again, although it carries good colour plates of most of the prominent present-day players of the sport, the lack of one of Wayne Davies, the leading Australian exponent of the sport at present, is a notable omission. But these are minor criticisms of an account which in general is inclusive and alive to detail that sets the sport in a social, temporal, economic and political context. It leaves us with the flavour of the sport, and not least in two or three telling accounts of the time-honoured role of the Royal tennis professional who for centuries has risen through on apprenticeship, often as a boy, through an associateship, and finally to be master, in charge of marking the court, playing with members who wish for a game, coaching aspirants in the sport and repairing of rackets and making or repairing of balls. Akin to the tennis or golf professional, yes, but with a lineage centuries deeper. Garnett quotes from the informal diary of Jeffrey Milburne, aged 15, then assistant to the famous professional Percy Finch of Hobart. It recounts a typical day's work in the Year of Our Lord 1963 - but could easily have been penned (except perhaps for a seemly regard for personal cleanliness after a day's exertion) in the thirteenth or the fourteenth century:

"Swept and cleaned Club room and foyer. Had practice. Chopped wood and lit fire. Tied more balls. Dusted ledges in court. Cut cloth for barring-up. Went out to get lunch. Had it. Played Mr. Walch at 1.00. Barred up more balls and sewed 5. Tied 2 more. Had practice. Shower and left about 5.30."