

Chris Ronaldson, *Tennis. A Cut above the Rest*. Ronaldson Publications, Oxford, 1985. Illus., pp.172.

First, one must realise that tennis is (Royal) tennis (the London *Times* tennis results assume that from the outset) and that lawn tennis is another and much more jejeune game. Then, in savouring the full flavour of Chris Ronaldson's title, it is handy to know that most strokes in tennis (the Regal game, that is) are out to impart spin. And once one learns that a 'rest' in tennis is the equivalent of a rally on the grass, asphalt, porous, clay, Plexi-pave, Modgrass, Truflex, Astra Turf, etc. etc., then the whole subject begins to settle into its comfortable perspective as part of the long story of ball games, the story of the French jeu de paume (later Royal Tennis) which began in the twelfth century, and the story of that precocious upstart, lawn tennis, which can be made to fit between televisions commercial breaks.

Chris Ronaldson, the present world tennis champion, presents us with a very valuable summary of the resurgence of the game of tennis in the mid 1980s. In the period 1550 - 1700, as he points out, the game was so popular that there were hundreds of courts in Paris alone, most owned by 'maitre paumiers' and varying considerably one to another in size, construction, lighting, court surfaces and court services - the apres-jeu wine and food, Ronaldson is probably right, also, in his general assessment 'that now the tennis court bears a strong resemblance to the dinosaur: too large and inflexible to thrive in today's climate of cheaper and simpler alternatives, such as lawn tennis - its own descendant - the demand for quick returns in sport participation, huge and luxurious spectator facilities, television and big money sponsorship'. Nevertheless, in its own terms, tennis is undergoing a revival and the Australian connection in the current fillip in the game is strong. Australia clearly is at the forefront of tennis court construction.

At the same time a group of Australian-born professionals, Wayne Davies, Colin Lumley, Graham Hyland and Lachlan Deuchar, together with Chris Ronaldson, and his fellow British professional, Barry Toates, make up the world's top men players in 1985, while Tasmanian-born Judy Clarke is the present Ladies World Tennis Champion, based in Melbourne. Unfortunately, she and the general history of ladies tennis fail unaccountably to come under Ronaldson's scrutiny in this male dominated handbook about what has generally been a male-dominated game.

Ronaldson's account is written in three sections. Part I alludes briefly to the history of Royal tennis and then to the essentials of the game: the court and player's equipment; the grip of the racquet; positioning on the court; elementary coaching advice that might assist the novice; and a general working account of the game's considerably complex rules and scoring. Part II and the most valuable, perhaps, in the book, is an intelligent guide to acquiring an armoury of strokes that can exploit the court's tambour, grille, winning gallery, its looping net, its dedans and penthouses, - or which are effective counter-punches to an opponent's special skills. This section, again in an intelligently graded way, introduces the newcomer, or the reasonably experienced amateur to the court tactics to be used in both singles and doubles. The photographs and diagrams excellently complement the text.

Ronaldson in part III is sometimes self-indulgent, sometimes a touch patronising to his colleagues in his account of his experience on the way to the World Championship, first at Oxford, then Melbourne, then Troon and presently at Hampton Court where he has been the professional since late 1979. Nevertheless, the section is full of anecdote, humour, and pen sketches of fellow players and opponents both on and off the court, in a sport which can still afford the luxury of an intermixing of social life, drinking, high jinks, bizarre challenges, wagers and improvised contests which run beside the game striven for at its most serious. The wording in Part III has certain effete assumption of leisure and eccentricity that goes with the English upper class, with Oxford, with *Brideshead Revisited*. It is part of the milieu of tennis. With one eye fixed critically on lawn tennis Ronaldson, in discussing the advent of

sponsorship for the sport, states: 'Tennis in Britain is now being sponsored by George Wimpey. They are pleased to be associated with a game that has maintained its standards of honour and sportsmanship. For all its faults, such as introversion and lingering snobbishness, tennis is still a game wherein officials are respected, behaviour is courteous, good shots are acknowledged by the opposition and traditions are observed. In Melbourne, Hobart and Ballarat, as Ronaldson reveals, the marker (umpire or referee) of tennis matches sits in the dedans and still relies on the receiver to call the hazard chases at the far end of the court. Imagine leaving such decisions to the players in today's professional lawn tennis! Ronaldson, adducing the steady control that officials hold over boxing, soccer and rugby, continues: 'It should not be within the rights of the players to question an official. Look at the mess lawn tennis has got itself into by tolerating the remonstrations of players'.

Tennis: A Cut Above the Rest is a book valuable for its advice, instruction and detail at many levels, but particularly, I should imagine, for those who are able to play with reasonable regularity and who wish to rise to a satisfying amateur competence. But it is also an elucidation of the game for those for whom Royal Tennis is a mere name and who might understand it only by imperfect reference to the more familiar lawn tennis. Should they then be privileged to witness, let's say, matches of the calibre of the Ladies' World Championship and Australian Men's Doubles Championship, both recently held in Melbourne, they would readily see that tennis, which will probably, in its resurgence, not reach any more than a privileged few as participants, is nevertheless a fascinatingly complex, physically demanding and lightning fast game - tennis's chess to lawn tennis's draughts, as one long - experienced Hobart player put it to me. Ronaldson's book celebrates that fact. It is also a timely guide for those who might take up the game as more courts become available. It is also at its best an unassuming repository of cogitations about the long-standing fascination of human beings with balls, walls and floors and the bounce thereof.

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