

The Tennis Court: A Country Woman's Window to the Modern World

June Senyard

When Maria Lee sat down at the dining table on a farm in the Victorian Mallee to write in her diary in 1931, her thoughts immediately turned to the tennis court. It was not that tennis was a novelty for, by this time, many women played tennis in country Victoria. Nor did Maria use her diary to vent her irritations at the bias of the sport in favour of the male player. Rather, Maria through her daily entries centred on playing tennis, opening a window to a world quite different from the trees and paddocks which stretched to the horizon. Maria was a unremarkable young woman. She did not seek a public profile nor did she desire to express herself as a country belle. She played an average game of tennis. Yet in writing up her diary, Maria compressed into a few lines each day a passion for tennis and its culture which absorbed her endlessly. Through tennis, Maria lived an exciting life, which engaged her in the mainstream of twentieth-century society.

It was the intellectual framework of tennis as an organised sport that excited Maria's interest. To Maria, the rationality of tennis was liberating. The structure of the game enabled Maria to relate her activity in an isolated rural community to tennis events staged at Kooyong in Melbourne or Wimbledon and even to dream of playing there. Also, success in the game satisfied her understanding of meritocracy as the most desirable form of authority in a free enterprise society. For Maria, the tennis court was a window to the contemporary world, to the life of the city and to a style of thinking which produced success in heroic form. Tennis, introduced as an amusement for the wealthy, became an agent of change as it became organised and popularised. Often it was the only access for women to the dynamics of contemporary thinking.

For all these reasons Maria Lee developed a great enthusiasm for tennis and its culture. She constructed the tennis court as a site which gave greater meaning to her experience; it was a secular venue, where

there was a measure of equality and a place where skills were promoted, activity measured and achievement rewarded. To her, 'Anyone for tennis?', soon sorted out the fit from the unfit and, in the process, guaranteed an exciting but structured contest. In a farming community dominated by routine though troubled by drought and depression in 1931, tennis was a positive element in the life of Maria. It provided the hope that her life could be organised along the similar structured lines.

Tennis as a Popular Sport

In England in 1874, when Major Walter Clopton Wingfield patented the game of tennis and began producing tennis kits consisting of equipment to make a court and play the game, lawn tennis was given a definite form. When these kits were imported to the Australian colonies, they were marketed to the affluent and were incorporated into the social life of the middle class.¹ In the cities and in the country, tennis courts were established in private gardens and, in the public arena, were laid out to complement cricket grounds. Playing tennis offered 'conspicuous recreation' to middle-class women, an occasion where they met with each other and with the men of their social circle.²

By the 1880s, however, the organisation of competitive tennis was a significant development. In Victoria, a men's pennant competition was formed in Melbourne in 1884 and inter-town matches were held in the country by then. Championships in each of the colonies began and, in 1900, the initiation of the Davis Cup for international competition for men was the impetus for the formation of the Australasian Lawn Tennis Association in 1904. In 1905 An Australian and New Zealand team entered the Davis Cup competition in 1905, winning the Cup in 1907. Australian tennis in the following decades continued to be successful. At a domestic level, tennis was a major summer sport around Australia by the 1920s, played on a range of surfaces, from lawn to asphalt to clay, and in a variety of venues, from public courts to courts established at churches or schools.³

Various explanations for the expansion of tennis from its affluent middle-class origins to its status as a popular summer sport have been offered. Generally, tennis in Australia has been seen as one of the obvious beneficiaries of the mild climate and abundant space. Settlers from Europe laid down cricket pitches, cleared football grounds, levelled tennis courts, set out golf courses and commenced becoming proficient players. In 1912, George Reid, the High Commissioner for the

Commonwealth of Australia, opened his preface to Gordon Inglis's *Sport and Pastime in Australia*:

Strenuous out-of-doors amusements have always been characteristic of the English people. It is not unnatural, therefore, that in Australia, where 96 per cent of the people are British by birth or descent, sports and pastimes should be followed by thousands, especially as the climate and conditions of life are even more favourable for public amusements than those of the Mother Country.⁴

To Reid, sport in Australia was to be celebrated as another form of British civilisation, spreading its wings in a more expansive setting. Decades later, Robert Menzies echoed Reid's analysis when writing about Australian tennis success in the 1950s:

The varying climates of the six states have this in common: they favour outdoor sport and outdoor living. Material standards of life are high; leisure is abundant ... Most dwelling houses stand in their own grounds and gardens. For all these reasons our inbred love of sport finds opportunity and expression.⁵

Certainly, climate and space offered sympathetic conditions for the adoption of tennis in the colonies but the expansion of tennis to become a popular sport did not happen spontaneously.

The transition from tennis as a game played by the social elite, and in particular women, to a competitive, international and popular sport, was both part of the changing social and economic context and of changes in tennis itself. Virginia O'Farrell has noted the importance of the context, of the growth of an egalitarian spirit, as a significant factor in the expansion of tennis. The barriers to sustaining tennis as an activity only for the upper classes could not be maintained in the Australian colonies.⁶ Alternatively, Graeme Kinross-Smith pointed to the impact of a single event, the 1908 Davis Cup challenge round, as the catalyst for the expansion of tennis. The impact of this event on the public imagination changed tennis from a minor sport one of national interest. Thereafter, tennis was a major Australian sport! These views are not necessarily contradictory for if we examine the development of tennis in the Australian context, it is clear that, like other sports, tennis was taking shape both as an Australian sport and as a modern sport and the two aspects contribute distinctive attributes to its development.

Tennis as a Modern Sport

Various writers have examined the role of sport as an agent of modernity. For instance, Richard Mandell argued that participants in sport as it became organised learned lessons in democracy, meritocracy and rationality which equipped them to understand the demands of the modern world.⁸ Allen Guttmann, in his influential book, *From Ritual to Record*, designated seven attributes of modern sport—secularism, equality of opportunity to compete and in the conditions of competition, specialisation of roles, rationalisation, bureaucratic organisation, quantification, and the quest for records.⁹ According to Guttmann's schema, late-nineteenth Australian century tennis was transformed into a modern sport. The outward signs were clear. Associations were formed to devise local, national and international competitions for players, male and female. Results were accumulated and tennis became part of mass culture through the reporting of events in daily and local newspapers. However, the social and cultural values arising from the past were not easily obliterated. In continuing debates over women's competition, professional and amateur players, codes of dress and conduct, the antecedents of tennis as a garden-party recreation for the European upper classes remained influential.¹⁰

Observers at the time, such as Gordon Inglis in *Sport and Pastime in Australia*, acted as propagandists for the new developments. Until the 1908 Davis Cup challenge round, Inglis contended that lawn tennis had been hopelessly misunderstood.¹¹ Tennis had been associated with afternoon teas and women's pastimes; with mixed doubles and romance rather than serious competition; with the domestic round rather than the outside world. Now, in structure and in content, tennis was raised to a modern and, therefore, masculine, sport. Inglis constructed his description of tennis in Australia around the Davis Cup results from 1900 until 1911. Competition tennis presented a site where human enterprise could be quantified and the Davis Cup, played for by men who were amateurs representing their countries, expressed this at the highest level. In addition, in his portraits of the expert tennis players and their winning skills, Inglis constructed tennis as a sport for men, defining winning skills in terms of masculine qualities. Writing about the 1908 Davis Cup, Inglis admired the matches as trials of physical strength, concluding 'that not only science, but also physique, was essential to the making of a champion'.¹² For Inglis, such a characteristic made the best

tennis a man's game which, in his thinking, satisfied the desire to relegate women to a lesser place in the sport. Women, despite their initial advantage of familiarity with the game, were pushed aside.¹³

Women, Tennis and Modern Life

Histories of tennis have largely passed over this transition of tennis from a polite game played in particular by upper-class women to a popular sport where men played the dominant role.¹⁴ However, women continued to play tennis and were keen players in the expansion of tennis after World War I.¹⁵ Major Clubs and elite tennis competition may have remained enclaves of male privilege but in innumerable country and suburban clubs, women began playing tennis in weekly competitions. For many women, not just the social elite, playing sport was an essential part of their lives and by the 1930s, it was estimated that one million women played competitive sport.¹⁶ A survey taken at the beginning of World War II of wheat farms in north-western Victoria found that 20 per cent of women, as compared to 7 per cent of men, played tennis regularly during the summer.¹⁷ Yet, when the lives of women who played sport in the twentieth century have been discussed, it has been their achievements at the elite level that has attracted attention.¹⁸ The role of tennis in the lives of women who played sport as part of their leisure activities has rarely been examined.

For many women, securing a place on the re-constructed tennis court was another aspect of modern life between the wars. After school, they moved into a wider range of work, bought a larger variety of mass-produced items, from cosmetics to illustrated magazines with their enticing advertising, and enjoyed various recreations, such as sport or the cinema. On marriage, they discarded the heavy Victorian style of their mothers, installed gas stoves and indoor plumbing and, without paid help, organised the day rationally and efficiently to sustain a clean and orderly home. Although producing fewer children, the demands of child-rearing were extended by the pressure to institute scientific methods of nurturing. Women, as producers and consumers, were in the forefront of changes taking place in Australian society.¹⁹

A Woman's Record: The Diary of Maria Lee

One of the ways in which we can reach into the world of these countless women is through their diaries.²⁰ Personal diaries, long neglected as too

fragmentary in style and too feminine in focus, have been increasingly published and examined for the insights they offer into patterns of female existence.²¹ Katie Holmes, in her analysis of Australian women's diaries between the wars, has examined women's experience of modernity. Through the diary entries, Holmes traces women acting as agents of modernisation in implementing hygiene, efficiency and household management, and of women as constructing their own modern subjectivity.²² In doing so, Holmes makes a plea for the role of diaries as uncovering significant links between more public forms of representation of modernity and the subjectivity of the personal.²³

An important example of a woman's diary which reflects on the concerns of women confronting modern life is that of Maria Lee, born in 1909, in north-western Victoria. Maria did not use her diary to provide a commentary on the major events of the day such as the precarious state of wheat farming in the area as a result of drought and depression. Neither did she use it to investigate her inner self nor to reflect candidly on her family. Indeed, her self was consciously repressed; at times she referred to herself in the third person. Her diary was a chronicle of herself as an observer of her world.²⁴ Nevertheless, Maria Lee's diary offers a revealing insight into the life of an ordinary woman between the wars. In detailing what was of consequence to her each day and the patterns of significance that accumulated as the year progressed, her personal concerns emerged. The world which the diary constructs is that of a rural community—practical, sufficient but limited in its scope.²⁵ However, it is Maria's enthusiasm for tennis that is the dominant motif of her personal record. More than anything else, Maria enjoyed tennis because it was a modern sport, in the sense defined by Guttman in *From Ritual to Record*. It was through tennis, that Maria recognised herself as a modern woman.

Four diaries from the 1930s survive.²⁶ They are pocket diaries, allowing only a brief entry for each day, although the tiny writing fitted much information when required. At 'Homelea', the women were the main keepers of the record. The brothers kept farming diaries but the two sisters chronicled family life. Queenie, the older sister (born 2 January of Queen Victoria's Jubilee year and so earning a patriotic name), found expression through a constant correspondence with relatives while Maria, in her diary entries, fashioned her own perception of existence.²⁷

Within the farming community, the Lee family was relatively comfortable, a successful realisation of the yeoman ideal. They upheld the sanctity of property, approved of education as a means to the end of material advancement and supported the Presbyterian church as giving spiritual validation to their lives.²⁸ Maria was a capable student but her mother died in 1925 and, while her female cousins proceeded to teaching or other vocational training, Maria and her older sister, Queenie, were awarded careers as managers of the household. By then, her five brothers were all farming with their father directing from the armchair.

Housework, Relations and Tennis

Maria's obsession with tennis takes place against a backdrop of life on a farm in north-western Victoria. For Maria, the year was shaped by the seasons. Rarely a day passed without a comment on the weather. Some days that was a sufficient entry:

Feb 9th Hot again today. Feb 10th Hot today. Feb 11th Very hot.

While the men worked in the paddocks, Maria and Queenie worked to the same rhythm, catering for up to five or six meals a day in periods of heavy labour for them, even morning and afternoon tea and supper could be quite substantial. But the demands of the household were taken for granted in Maria's entries in her diary. Only when the requirements of self-sufficiency exceeded the expected were they noted as in killing a pig or in transforming the garden produce to the pantry:

Monday 30th March I picked 12 lbs ripe tomatoes this evening. Tuesday 31st March I made the chutney. It turned out fairly good.

Thrift, too, excited attention—on 14 April Maria spent the day fixing her wine flannel dress.

In drawing her world, Maria did not question its patriarchal form. Her father appeared in the diary as enjoying the best of all possible worlds. He was never mentioned as actually involved in the work of the farm. Rather, he acted as the public face of the company. Every Friday was his day out in town. As well, he was the one who went further afield, attending the public meetings, going to the sheep sales in nearby towns and travelling to the regional centre of Ballarat every couple of months. To Maria, her father's rights were unremarkable. Her father

had defined her world so that to remain as a housekeeper was unquestioned and were he to drink himself to an early death, one of her older brothers would take over his role.

Within this framework, Maria was able to construct a social life. It was convivial but limited in its horizons. Trips to the township were infrequent. Over February and March, Maria only once went into town with her father, and that was to go to the dentist.²⁹ Family associations formed the bulk of the visiting: of twenty-two visits from early February to early April, only seven were with neighbours who were not relations. Cousins of the same age formed a close social circle, both male and female visiting of a Sunday but female cousins often stayed over weekdays. The only interloper into this world occasioned the comment:

Thursday 5th March We had a funny swaggie here this morning. A bit soft.

Religion was largely a social extension of the family and farm.³⁰ Church services were held fortnightly but attendance was not obligatory: Maria's father never went to church, one brother, Percy, rarely attended while the others were fairly regular. The service vied for importance with the social chat at its conclusion and the organisation of some recreation for the rest of the day.

However, if this was all Maria's diary detailed, her life could readily be fitted to the stereotypes of rural simplicity portrayed in *On Our Selection* dominated by the traditional mores of family and religion.³¹ But those who entered into farming in the late-nineteenth century and formed Australian rural communities in the twentieth century were very much part of the modern age. Farming, itself, was successful because it was implemented as a modern industry.³² The extension of State bureaucracies, education and communications incorporated the locality into the wider world. On farms, although diminished by poverty, the technological innovations—the motor car, the telephone and the wireless—appeared side-by-side the horse and buggy, the letter and newspaper.³³ Such attributes of modern life were accepted as part of the material conditions of living. It was, however, in Maria's relationship to sport that she displayed the most consistent and enthusiastic interest, that she was prepared to articulate in her diary. Maria identified her experience of playing tennis as modern (in the sense as later defined by Guttman) and in doing so placed a dynamic construction on her life, otherwise determined and confined by family obligations.

The Organisation of Tennis in the District

Tennis had been introduced into the township in the 1890s by the town's professionals and leading businessmen and their wives and matches were played with teams from nearby towns. Over the next decade, tennis became organised and by 1912 the Birchip Methodist and St Patrick teams were playing teams from surrounding districts. As districts were largely composed of family networks there were some teams which were predominantly Protestant while others were predominantly Catholic. Membership of the district, however, took precedence over membership of a denomination. Tennis was most attractive to women and women were its strongest members,³⁴ though it also attracted some men who did not play another sport. Not a body contact game like football, and more flexible than cricket, tennis attracted young men who usually went as spectators to the football in winter or consigned summer over to the harvest. At Narraport, a tennis court was formed near the local school and, after the interruption of World War I, tennis resumed in the 1920s when it was particularly strong in Birchip. There were two local competitions composed of teams that were based on the churches and districts and one team that played in the Northern Association against teams from other towns. After 1925, when Country Week began in Melbourne, Birchip players were prominent in the composite Northern Association team that was consistently successful in the succeeding year.³⁵

Interest in tennis at Narraport was sufficient in 1926 for a meeting at the school to form a Tennis Club. They elected Donald McFarlane and Joe Dunn, farmers in their twenties, as president and secretary and treasurer, respectively. Two courts were cleared and fenced and a wire-netting net was erected. The enthusiasm for tennis was also sufficient to prompt changes to the domestic space. At Maria's home and that of her cousin's, space was cleared and courts marked. These courts did not rival the district courts in scale but were a source of pleasure, primarily for the young women of the house who were the most constant players on them. A team was entered in the district competition which extended over a twelve kilometre radius and included teams from the nearby township of Wycheproof.

To Maria, in the late summer and early autumn of 1931, tennis absorbed as much of her time as possible. However, the observance of Sunday as a day of rest, a particular convention of the Methodist and

Presbyterian families in the district, precluded tennis. As with the demands of her father, Maria accepted the prohibition as a condition of her life. On other days, she either speeded up her household duties or skimped on them to play tennis: 40 per cent of entries between 4 February (when the diary began) and 6 April (Easter Monday) refer to playing tennis and given that there was no tennis on Sunday, it was more like 45 per cent. Saturday was the competition day but when the harvest was finished, they played Wednesday as well. In winter, Maria attended the monthly meetings of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union, but in the tennis season she preferred the sociability of the tennis court.

A Passion for Tennis

On the tennis court, Maria achieved a degree of freedom denied her in other aspects of her life. As other young women in the inter-war years negotiated new representations of femininity, heavily influenced by advertising and cinema, Maria was isolated from these concerns. Instead, it was sport that helped construct Maria as a person. Apart from observing that some days were 'bonza' or 'really good', it was tennis that affirmed her being:

Feb 23rd Monday Warming up again today. Janet came over this evening for a game of tennis. We had a great game.

On the home court, too, she ceased to be the domestic and competed with her brothers or male cousins on an equal footing:

Wednesday April 1st Janet came over for a game of tennis today. Roy had a bit of a game too. A little bit windy.

It was only cleared ground and where the clay broke up or the weeds grew, the ball bounced irregularly but for Maria, playing tennis produced a self-confidence not evident in other areas of her life.

However, things were less equal in the district competition which designated that on competition days, men played three sets, the women two and that there was no mixed doubles. Yet, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, Maria recognised that both the men and the women were equally responsible for the result in terms of the sets won or lost and she recorded these dispassionately and with painstaking regularity:

Feb 14th Saturday Good day, not too hot. We played tennis in the competition over at Narraport today. We played the

Wyche Presbyterians. Our team was: Jim Matheson and Gus Currie, Ron Murdoch and Ted Bailey, Will Foley and Mr Billingham (Teacher Whirily), Miss Gillies and Janet, Miss Robinson and Maria. We won 9 sets to 4 sets. Our ladies won 4 sets and our men won 5 sets.

Maria never flinched at a poor result but each competition day and set down the relative degrees of complicity of each player in the result:

Wednesday March 18th We were beaten 12 sets to 1. Our team was Alex and Roy none. Molly Wheeler and I one. Pete and Jack none. Elsie and Madge Ellis none. Donald and Harold none. Their team was Mr Hales and Mr Curnow 3 sets. Mr Hine and Mr Pim 3 sets. Hosking and McCall 3 sets. Mrs Curnow and Mrs Hosking 1 set. Miss Joyce Fisher and Miss McLellan 2 sets. It came up very stormy looking before we came home but it passed over. It rained nearly all night.

To her, the conditions of the competition made everyone equal in terms of the outcome.

Tennis as a Rational Experience

Playing tennis was a rational enterprise. During the harvest, the tennis competition went into recess and the women organised informal days. Saturday 7 February opened with a visit from the next door neighbour whose dog had appeared at 'Homelea' the day before. But by early afternoon, Maria was at the courts. There the women were supplemented by the local school teachers, all being referred to as 'Miss', the conventional title for the unmarried but here used to mark the outsider.³⁶ To make up the numbers, two of the older boys of the numerous children playing around the courts were conscripted:

Feb 7th Nice day. Mrs McFarlane was over this morning to get Spot. He came over yesterday. We held a ladies doubles open tournament over at the Narraport courts. There were 13 ladies there. Myra, Elvie, Elma, Miss Nihill, Miss Gillies, Elsie, Janet, Bridge, Miss Robinson, Ida, Mrs G Currie, Miss Ellis and myself. Elvie was without a partner so Gus and Ron took turns to play with her. We played it off in two sections, e.g.

These played 8 game sets.

Myra and Ida 8.3.5

Miss Nihill and Elma 8.7.8

Janet and Bridge 4.3.7

Elvie and partner 8.8.8.

These played 10 game sets.

9.8 Mrs Currie and Miss Robinson

9.10 Miss Gillies and Elsie

10.10 Miss Ellis and Maria

Miss Ellis and I had to play Elvie and partner in the final but it was too late so we tossed and we won the toss.

Such days demanded ingenious solutions but structuring the competition to produce a winner determined the way forward.

Tennis was part of a bureaucratic world. Maria distinguished between competition tennis and social tennis. A game was on the home courts:

Feb 24th Very hot today. Harold and I went over to Uncle George's to play tennis early this morning. Evelyn, Os, Ted, Bess and Uncle Tom arrived out here this afternoon. Uncle Tom came up on the early morning train. Bess and I had a game of tennis. Roy and I had a game this evening.

Competition tennis was different and was closely associated with the site, the district courts, which were used both for competition and training:

Mar 5th Thur Nice warm day. PWMU [Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union] meeting today. Miss Gillies, Miss Robinson, Janet, Elsie and I went over for a practice at tennis this afternoon. Queenie went to the PWMU.

Once the season ended, however, it was back to a game at the district courts:

March 28th I went over to the courts and had a game with Miss Gillies. The courts are in great order since the rain.

In this entry, too, the importance of the site was expressed. Evaluating the landscape—observing the condition of crops and of feed for stock—was an important skill in a rural community yet the only time Maria ventured an appraisal of the landscape was this comment on the state of the tennis courts. To her, the space had ceased to be a corner of Alec Bryce's paddock exposed to the blistering northerly winds sweeping

across the plains. Instead, they were ‘courts’ where tennis was played just as it was in the town or the city.

Maria enjoyed the quantification of human endeavour that tennis afforded. She never recorded the results of her informal games but once competing, the accurate listing of the results was immensely satisfying, even obsessive. Results were one way to represent difference. Evaluation of results so as to handicap the better performer was an added dimension. Maria’s record of performance was taken to new heights with her description of the handicapping system at the Easter Tournament held at Corack:

Saturday April 4th Roy, Janet and I went down to Corack to play in the tennis tournament. Janet beat Kit Stawell in the 1st round. I beat Miss Curtis in 1st round. Janet and I beat two Miss Perry in 1st round. Nicholls and Miss Curtis beat Roy and Janet in 1st in mixed. Bonza day. Janet was on scratch in singles. Her and Roy, scr in mixed. Me and Her on owe (*sic*, 0) 15 in doubles and me on owe 15-3 in singles. Miss Nihill is on owe 30 in singles and her and Myra on owe 30 in doubles.³⁷

The attention to detail, and the accuracy required to make a satisfactory diary entry, fascinated Maria. Making sense of the difference between players, who ranged from the competent to the awkward, from the graceful to the graceless, by reducing them to numbers on a page was an appealing abstraction and she applied herself to it with enthusiasm.

At the end of the season, Maria noted that the semi-finals had been played but the grand final was between teams outside the immediate locality and without her personal involvement it passed by without comment. Nevertheless, Maria was interested in achievement and admired the winner. On Easter Monday, she returned to Corack to play in the mixed doubles and to complete the singles and doubles:

Miss Nihill beat Janet in the ladies singles in the final 8-3. Miss Nihill beat me in the semi-final 8-2. Miss Nihill and Myra beat Rita Storey and Miss Thompson in the ladies doubles final. Rita and Miss Thompson Beat Janet and I in the semi-final.

The apotheosis was the trophy:

Janet got a cut glass salad bowl. Miss Nihill got the silver cup.

Respect pervades the use of the definite article—the silver cup. One of the aspects of tennis that Maria valued was that it provided a framework which produced an undisputed winner. Envy never coloured her diary entries. To her, winners were meritorious. Indeed, Maria constructed the tennis court as a site where meritocracy ruled. In Australian society and in her own home, entrepreneurial activity was valued, but it was often seen to be corrupted. For Maria, tennis as a competition offered a satisfying metaphor for the rules of life: an equitably-regulated contest where the most skilled person was victorious.

Conclusions

When Maria wrote of playing tennis, she engaged in a particular form of immortality. By recording the sets, she was equating the game of tennis played in the corner of a paddock in north-western Victoria by men and women of differing abilities and with varying forms of equipment with the results of tennis played on the lawn courts of Kooyong. In her experience of the game, there was a chasm of difference separating tennis played on the courts at Narraport and at Kooyong. Yet, in her diary entries she transcended this knowledge and without deception or hypocrisy, entered into the modern world through the rules and structures of tennis.

Consumerism and romance have been seen as keys to women's sensibilities in approaching modern life.³⁸ These were hardly part of Maria's life. The main thrust of consumerism passed her by. The household subscribed to the *Argus*, the local newspaper, a book club with titles such as *When Fascism Comes* and later *Capricornia* and owned a wireless. But the cinema and shopping as a modern pastime were quite alien to her. Similarly, her exposure to advertising directed specifically to a female audience was limited. She and her sister bought women's magazines irregularly but their role as housekeepers, dependent on a farm experiencing severe financial duress, kept any inclinations towards fantasy and desire well repressed. As for romance, when she began a courtship with one of the young men of the district over 1931, she merely listed him with the others who were at church or visiting. Romance was fitted into an existing social circle where five brothers and numerous male cousins already had a large claim on her affections and were considered in sexually neutral terms.

Rather, it was her enthusiasm for tennis and its culture that linked Maria to the modern world. Tennis appealed as a way of giving meaning

to experience: it was secular, it offered a form of equality, it promoted skills, it was organised, it measured activity and it rewarded achievement. If Maria was aware that tennis had once been primarily a feminine domain, her experience of the sport as it was now organised in her community was positive. Tennis was a recognised activity for women and, regardless of harvest or other demands of the farming calendar, Maria expected to take up her racquet and play. Even after marriage and a family, women still expected to participate in tennis. Moreover, if Maria notionally accepted the prevailing definition that physical force was the finest skill in the game, her experience denied this constantly. She looked to women rather than to men as the achievers in the sport.

Taking tennis to heart allied Maria to the dominant thinking of her society and the ideas of rational, scientific management, progress and efficiency reverberate through her understanding of tennis. In tennis, too, achievement reflected a form of meritocracy. It was a meritocracy different from the sources of authority powerful in the community and it included women. For Maria, the role of tennis in her understanding of her situation was significant. It served as an expression of modernity which both transcended rural isolation and provided relief from the prevailing patriarchal demands of her world.

NOTES:

- 1 V O'Farrell, 'The Unasked Questions in Australian Tennis', *Sporting Traditions*, May 1985. See also R Yallop, *Royal Yarra Lawn Tennis Club 100 Years in Australian Tennis*, Curry O'Neil, 1984 and G Kinross-Smith, *The Sweet Spot: One Hundred Years of Life and Tennis in Geelong*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1982.
- 2 Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 52-5; J E Senyard, *Birchip: Essays on a Shire*, Maryborough, 1973; and '1944 and all that' in *Fitzroy Melbourne's First Suburb*, Hyland House, 1989 for the appearance of tennis in rural and urban Victoria.
- 3 'Lawn tennis' in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport (OCAS)*, OUP, 1992; Kinross-Smith, *The Sweet Spot; Senyard, Birchip*.
- 4 Gordon Inglis, *Sport and Pastime in Australia*, Methuen, London, 1912, p. vii.
- 5 R G Menzies, 'The Great Game of Tennis' in Allison Danzig and Peter Schwed, eds, *The Fireside Book of Tennis*, New York, 1972, quoted in G Kinross-Smith, 'Lawn Tennis' in W Vampiew and B Stoddart, eds, *Sport in Australia A Social History*, CUP, 1994, p. 145.
- 6 O'Farrell, 'The Unasked Questions', p. 69.
- 7 'Lawn Tennis', OCAS, p. 213.
- 8 Richard Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, pp. 151-2.
- 9 Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1978, ch. 2.

- 10 Inglis, *Sport and Pastime*, p. 166; Marion Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport*, Angus & Robertson, 1991, pp. 62-4, 161, 213.
- 11 Inglis, *Sport and Pastime*, p. 159.
- 12 Inglis, *Sport and Pastime*, p. 159.
- 13 Yallop, *Royal Yarra Lawn Tennis Club*, pp. 113-8.
- 14 'Lawn Tennis', OCAS, Kintoss-Smith, *The Sweet Spot*.
- 15 Yallop, *Royal Yarra Lawn Tennis Club*, p. 114. The numbers of men and women at the Club were roughly equal from its creation in 1884. Rivett, Nan, 'Nell Hopman: Upgrading Women's Tennis', in M Lake and F Kelly, eds, *Double Time Women in Victoria—150 Years*, Penguin, 1985 asserts that 'before World War II tennis remained a game of the privileged' (p. 391) but her focus is on elite women's competition.
- 16 Stell, *Half the Race*, p. 72.
- 17 A J Holt, *Wheat Farms of Victoria: A Sociological Survey*, University of Melbourne, Parkville, 1947.
- 18 For instance, E Gooloong and B Collins, *Evonne*, Granada, London, 1975; Ron McLean, *Country Cracks: The Story of NSW Country Tennis*, Gunedah, 1984 or Tanya Tarnogursky, *South Australian Women in Sport*, Gillingham Printers, Adelaide, 1992. In some instances, women playing sport have been placed in a wider social context and their experience as victims of systemic discrimination detailed as in Stell, *Half the Race*, chs. 15, 16.
- 19 K Holmes, "Diamonds of the Dustheap"? Women's Diary Writing between the Wars', in M Dever, ed., *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1970-1945*, UQP, 1994, pp. 40-1.
- 20 Holmes, 'Diamonds of the Dustheap'?, pp. 39, 47.
- 21 H Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days: Englishwomen's Private Diaries*, Rutgers Uni. Press, New Brunswick, 1988, p. 3.
- 22 Holmes, p. 39.
- 23 Holmes, pp. 40, 47.
- 24 Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days*, Introduction.
- 25 J E Senyard. *A County Album: A Photographic History of the Shire of Birchip*, Hyland House, 1995, part 2.
- 26 Maria Lee Diaries (private collection). For a discussion of tennis in Maria's life, I have used the 1931 diary as the other diaries are similar in content and style.
- 27 Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days*, Introduction on the genre of the diary.
- 28 Duncan Waterson, *Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper: A History of the Darling Downs 1859-93*, Sydney University Press, 1968, ch. 5, for a discussion of the agrarian myth.
- 29 'Wednesday Mar 25th Dad and I went to Birchip. I got three teeth out.'
- 30 Senyard, *A County Album*, ch. 2.
- 31 Most pervasive of images of rural life have been those originating from the stories of 'Steele Rudd' which first appeared in *the Bulletin* in 1895 and then, in 1899, were collected into a book, *On Our Selection*. In 1912, these stories were translated to the stage and in 1920 to film. In 1932, the sound film, *On Our Selection*, appeared and in the late 1930s, the long-running radio serial *Dad and Dave* began. Throughout these and their many derivations, the interpretation of farming alternated between the farmer as the rustic buffoon and the resilient battler. Both were characters at one with nature, simple but honest in their struggle against the elements, hardly the impetus for modernity in the Australian environment..
- 32 Bruce Davidson, *European Farming in Australia: An Economic History of Australian Farming*, Elsevier, 1981.
- 33 By 1931, talking with neighbours on the phone excited no comment, it was only when the call was to or from relatives farther afield that it was noted. Similarly, the

- wireless was accepted as part of the household although something as exotic as the 'Call of the Lyrebird' broadcast one Sunday attracted an entry in the diary.
- 34 Later in 1931, basketball was added to the list of organised sport when women in the district formed a basketball club and became affiliated to an expanded competition originally based in the township but then developed to complement the football competition.
- 35 Senyard, *Birchip*, pp. 182-6.
- 36 Miss Robinson was to become Maria's sister-in-law but this was insufficient to break down the formalities afforded the newcomer. Similarly, Mrs G was an abbreviation for Mrs Gus Currie who was called Annie. Annie earned the title Mrs G as an indicator of her arrival twelve years earlier as an English war bride. By comparison, Bridge, who was also married but was born in the area was not so formally recorded.
- 37 Handicapping was a feature of tennis tournaments, designed to improve competition. See Kinross-Smith, 'Lawn Tennis', p. 137. In this instance, Maria and Janet had to win five rather than four points to win the game.
- 38 Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', in D Feldman and G Stedman Jones, eds, *Metropolis London Histories and Representations since 1800*, Routledge, London, 1989.