

June Senyard, *Harry Williams. An Australian golfing tragedy*, Ryan Publishing, Melbourne, 1998, p/b. 193pp. RRP \$24.95.

Someone recently complained that too many histories of sport were either 'poorly researched and reasonably written [or] well researched and badly crafted'.¹ June Senyard's imminently readable *Harry Williams. An Australian golfing tragedy* is neither. While strictly speaking more in the category of sports history than history of sport, this book is solidly researched, well crafted and equally well written. Even better, it is written in an easy style accessible to a wide audience, the subject matter is interesting and relevant, and the work professionally presented in a fashion that showcases to advantage the author's skills as social and sports historian. The multiple levels at which the book can be read according to personal interest and background adds significantly to its appeal.

Senyard deftly combines a celebration of Harry Williams' sporting prowess and stellar golfing career of the 1930s with the more cautionary tale of his progressively more troubled personal life, culminating in his apparent suicide in 1961. A long time player and golf *afficionado* herself, Senyard's personal knowledge of the sport and the Melbourne golfing scene is evident in her easy familiarity with the customs, terminology and sometimes arcane nuances of the game. She is equally as adept at handling the subtleties of Melbourne's social structures and institutions.

The book is not over-burdened with theory or analysis, but certainly has much to offer. A major strength is the way in which the rise and fall of Harry Williams — as both golfer and man — is smoothly contextualised into a richly textured, multi-layered socio-economic history of Melbourne spanning the better part of a century. While the main focus foregrounds Williams and his golfing career, Senyard deftly combines sports history with history of sport to explore and develop a number of other topics as well. Behind her immediate focus on Harry and his sporting career the writer also covers the growth of golf as a 'modern' sport; the amateur ethos; the cultural clash between amateurism and rapidly growing professionalism in the sport; class and gender issues, especially in club milieux; the emergence of golf as popular sport, and some of the history of Melbourne's elite sand-belt clubs. Another thread running throughout the book traces the relationship between Williams and his parents, particularly the long-term influence of his doting mother, Doll.

The first four chapters of the book background Williams' privileged upbringing and family life in genteel suburban Melbourne during the nineteen-twenties and 'thirties. Senyard's intimate knowledge of Melbourne's social history adds a richness and depth too often lacking in sporting studies of this kind. She sets the scene by brushing in a background of Victorian history from the goldrushes to the emergence of full-blown modern consumerism in the

aftermath of World War Two. The focus then shifts to golf and golf club culture of the interwar period, although broader historical concerns never leave the stage.

Williams' social background and financial independence fitted him well for a golfing career. Professionalism was still in its infancy in the 'twenties, commercialism in golf was socially unacceptable, and the gentleman amateur reigned supreme. By the end of the 'thirties this hierarchy was being challenged in top level golf by a new style of professionalism based on ability rather than patronage. But within the conservative Anglophile world of the well-to-do, golf still equated to (men's amateur) club golf. The book captures this atmosphere particularly well. Drawing on contemporary press reports of matches couched in the metaphor of 'manly arts', or even as a 'morality play' (p. 91), golf was said to be '... not just about hitting the ball, but tenacity, composure and perseverance, [which were supposedly] the properties of the mature male only,' (p. 47) Women, even the highly talented Helen Hicks who toured with Gene Sarazen in the mid-'thirties, struggled for recognition in this rarified male environment.

There is plenty of nourishment for readers who enjoy detailed accounts of who won what when, blow by blow descriptions of gripping matches, and tales of contemporary golfing personalities like Jim Ferrier, Mick Ryan and Sarazen. But there is much more meat too. Senyard's juxtaposition of Williams' sporting career and private life with elements of Australia's interwar socio-economic history is very effective in highlighting broader social issues and themes. This technique is skillfully used to show how wealth and privilege insulated Williams and his ilk from the harsher economic realities affecting much of Australia's population during the crippling interwar depression.

Secure in his sanctum, Harry was completely oblivious to the political turmoil, unemployment, and personal hardships surrounding him. His life revolved around golf and its congenial lifestyle. While 30% of the male workforce was unemployed, and '... as Ted Theodore, the federal treasurer, was finally acquitted of charges of corruption on the national stage, Harry prepared to meet Mick Ryan ... in a different trial.' (p. 59). After winning the 1931 Victorian title, the family travelled to Sydney for the national championships. For them, '[e]ven if the New South Wales Savings Bank had closed its doors and the demagogue Jack Lang was a menace to decent Australia, Sydney was a pleasant destination.' (p. 61)

A prodigy blessed with both aplomb and an outstanding swing, Williams was, without doubt, one of the best golfers Australia has ever produced. At the tender age of sixteen he burst into public prominence by winning both the Victorian and Australian amateur championships of 1931. A string of titles

followed before the decade ended. In 1936 he turned down Gene Sarazen's offer to join the lucrative US professional circuit. But by 1940 his star was fading, never to rise again.

His on-course achievements ensured Harry's place in Australia's sporting history, but his personal life became more troubled as an unfortunate predilection for drinking and gambling steadily grew to unhealthy levels. After his father Eric died in 1933 Harry and Doll gradually frittered away the family wealth. By 1938 his 'ungentlemanly' behaviour had reached the point where the Australian Golf Union omitted him from the team to tour Britain 'because his private life was not considered appropriate for an amateur.' (p. 151).

By 1950 Williams had abandoned serious golf in favour of gambling. He was not notably successful as a punter and by December 1961 Harry and his mother Doll had neither money nor prospects. Far from their earlier comfortable affluence, the pair were living on credit, and dodging debt collectors. Shortly after doing a 'moonlight flit' to a small flat in East Kew, they departed this world leaving only a strong smell of gas, 'a lettuce and some butter in the refrigerator and ... three crates of belongings still unpacked' (p.1) in their 'temporary' lodgings.

The epilogue draws some interesting parallels between Williams and Russel Ward's 'typical Australian' male. Then, gathering the threads together, Senyard briefly overviews the life of Harry Williams — golfer and man — within its historical context. In conclusion she suggests that many of his problems were due more to the timing and sequence of events than inherent character defects. Of the talented sportsman she declares that '... Harry Williams deserves his legendary status.' (p. 185) But sadly, like the champions Phar Lap and Les D'arcy before him, memories of Williams' tragic death probably rank in public consciousness equally with his legendary sporting career.

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Note

- 1 D. Booth & C. Tatz, *One-eyed: a view of Australian sport*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonard's, 2000, pp. xi – xii.