A Social History of TENNIS IN BRITAIN

Robert J. Lake

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN SPORTS HISTORY

A Social History of Tennis in Britain

From its advent in the mid to late nineteenth century as a garden-party pastime to its development into a highly commercialised and professionalised high-performance sport, the history of tennis in Britain reflects important themes in Britain's social history. In the first comprehensive and critical account of the history of tennis in Britain, Robert J. Lake explains how the game's historical roots have shaped its contemporary structure, and how the history of tennis can tell us much about the history of wider British society.

Since its emergence as a spare-time diversion for landed elites, the dominant culture in British tennis has been one of amateurism and exclusion, with tennis sitting alongside cricket and golf as a vehicle for the reproduction of middle-class values throughout wider British society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Consequently, the Lawn Tennis Association has been accused of a failure to promote inclusion or widen participation, despite steadfast efforts to develop talent and improve coaching practices and structures. Robert J. Lake examines these themes in the context of the global development of tennis and important processes of commercialisation and professional and social development that have shaped both tennis and wider society.

The social history of tennis in Britain is a microcosm of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century British social history: sustained class power and class conflict; struggles for female emancipation and racial integration; the decline of empire; and Britain's shifting relationship with America, continental Europe and the Commonwealth nations. This book is important and fascinating reading for anybody with an interest in the history of sport or British social history.

Robert J. Lake is a faculty member in the Department of Sport Science at Douglas College, Canada. His research centres on the history and sociology of tennis, particularly related to social class, gender, nationalism, social exclusion, coaching and talent development.

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At the elite level, tennis is essentially a team sport. It is played by individuals, more often than not one-on-one, but, like boxing, in every corner are handfuls of people working alongside a competitor to ensure he or she has all the resources necessary to do their best. In many ways, this has been my experience writing this book, which, naturally, would not have progressed so smoothly or been such a wonderful experience had it not been for the dozens of individuals assisting me at key moments along the way, whether that be for material, intellectual, or moral support.

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Abbreviations

AELTC	All England Lawn Tennis Club
AELTCC	All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club
AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
ALT	*American Lawn Tennis* (magazine)
ASI	*Amateur Sport Illustrated* (magazine)
ATA	American Tennis Association
ATP	Association of Tennis Professionals
BOA	British Olympic Association
CCPR	Central Council for Physical Recreation
CPC	Coaching Professional Committee
FA	Football Association
FFT	Fédération Française du Tennis
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
ILTF	International Lawn Tennis Federation
IMG	International Management Group
IOC	International Olympic Committee
ITF	International Tennis Federation
LT&B	*Lawn Tennis & Badminton* (magazine)
LT&C	*Lawn Tennis & Croquet* (magazine)
LTA	Lawn Tennis Association
LTAA	Lawn Tennis Association of Australia
LTF	Lawn Tennis Foundation
MIPTC	Men's International Professional Tennis Council
NTL	National Tennis League
PCC	Professional Contact Committee
SI	*Sports Illustrated* (magazine)
TPI	*Tennis Pictorial International* (magazine)
USLTA	United States Lawn Tennis Association
USNLTA	United States National Lawn Tennis Association
VS	Virginia Slims

WCT	World Championship Tennis
WITF	Women's International Tennis Foundation
WT	*World Tennis* (magazine)
WTA	Women's Tennis Association
WTT	World Team Tennis

Introduction

At 5.24pm on the 7th of July 2013, as the world's number-one tennis player Novak Djokovic watched his forehand crash into the net, the Scotsman Andy Murray and millions around the world celebrated. Commentators, journalists and fans alike were unable to restrain themselves from noting the historic importance of this moment; the ghost of Fred Perry had been laid, as Murray became the first British male to win the Wimbledon singles title since 1936. Oliver Holt from the *Daily Mirror*, in a Special Champion Souvenir entitled *Magnificent Murray: History Maker* perhaps captured it best:

> When Murray brought closure to the 77-year quest … it was a time for farewells. Farewell to those agonised cries of 'C'mon Tim' that were the shrill accompaniment to Tim Henman's quartet of near misses. Farewell to the doomed annual lionisation of also-rans like Jeremy Bates, Buster Mottram and John Lloyd. Farewell to the memories of Roger Taylor's three semi-final defeats in the late 60s and early 70s and Mike Sangster's in 1961. Farewell to the sensation of hearing the name Perry, who won the men's title three times between 1934 and 1936, and feeling its stinging reproach. And, best of all, farewell to the idea that British tennis is for losers and spoiled little rich kids.
>
> (Holt 2013:9)

The BBC reported record-setting figures that attested to the great significance of Murray's victory: an estimated 17.3 million viewers in Britain watched the televised final; in the match's closing stages, eight out of ten UK top trending topics on Twitter were Murray-related, which equated to 120,000 "tweets" per minute. Congratulatory messages from Ewan McGregor, Gary Lineker, Boris Johnson, Kenny Dalglish, Jessica Ennis and Lennox Lewis, among countless other celebrities, attested to the national significance of his achievement. Throughout the Championship fortnight, Murray's popularity had soared; during the second week alone, more than 230,000 new Facebook fans were added to Murray's page. By the end of the year, he was able to add BBC's coveted Sports Personality of the Year award to his 2012 US Open and 2013 Wimbledon trophies and 2012 London Olympic Gold medal, garnering 56 per cent of the nation's vote.

The huge amount of attention his achievement received was evidence enough of how far Murray himself had progressed throughout his career. In 2005, the esteemed Wimbledon referee, Alan Mills, mentioned Murray alongside another talented upstart, Miles Kasiri, as two young British players to watch for the future. Like seemingly so many of his contemporaries, however, Kasiri's early successes, which included reaching the 2004 Junior Wimbledon final, were not repeated on the senior tour. Murray, conversely, proved any cynics wrong by building on his 2004 Junior US Open title by climbing into the world's top 100 within just 15 months, and into the world's top 20 by August 2006. His successes at the highest competitive levels in 2012 and 13 were a reminder of just how many home-grown players had succeeded in disappointing British tennis fans, who were arguably some of the most expectant of home success in the world. For many, Murray's victory spelled redemption, satisfying that crippling and perhaps unrealistic but nonetheless ever-pervasive belief of entitlement. The immutable thought is: 'Tennis was created in Britain and we should lead the world at it'.

It is an indisputable fact that tennis matters to the British public, and the Wimbledon Championships provide an annual reminder. The fascination with tennis, and Wimbledon most specifically, is not so much about the possibility of witnessing home success as about relishing the occasion itself. Wimbledon is a quintessential British institution, and as a sporting venue, the All England Lawn Tennis Club (AELTC) ranks alongside Lords, Wembley and Twickenham as a bastion of British historical sporting significance. Through the stylish design of its physical environment and deep-rooted cultural connection to the Victorian-era garden party, it has managed to sustain public interest and its privileged social position in Britain for decades. Wimbledon's cachet stretches right back to the first men's Championships in 1877, and though the event and club itself has changed markedly to the point of it being almost unrecognisable from its embryonic form – indeed, the actual site of Wimbledon was relocated in 1922 – key aspects of its culture, which have also shaped British tennis as a whole, have been retained.

Within the various contexts of social change and continuity, one can read the social history of tennis in Britain as a historical case-study analysis of the rise and fall of British sporting prowess. In this respect, tennis shares a history with countless other sports played extensively in Britain, particularly those with a broadly middle-class following, like cricket, rugby union, athletics and golf. Periods of British success in tennis have often corresponded to eras of dominance in other sports, and at times they have also reflected British supremacy on a global-political scale. At times, the reverse was also true. The late Edwardian era and after, for example, witnessed a transfer of sporting dominance from Britain to the United States, which also corresponded with trends in athletics and rowing. Interwar austerity and melancholy transferred to sporting mediocrity, yet challenges to the British-inspired amateur ethos were evident in new playing styles and the increasing seriousness afforded to playing practices and overall success. Cricket's "bodyline bowling" incident in 1932–33 highlighted controversial advances in British training methods and tactics, while professionalising developments in tennis arrived at that time in the form of Fred Perry, who benefitted undoubtedly from the new opportunities for general participation and advancement that arrived as tennis underwent a process of democratisation after the war. The decline of Britain's fortunes in the post-war period, for both male and female players, was matched also by challenges to English supremacy in football. Moreover, it appears the historic 1966 World Cup win helped inspire British tennis administrators to "go it alone" and defy international sanctions by staging an "open" Wimbledon in 1968, accessible to both amateurs and professionals for the first time. Concurrent global developments in civil rights for ethnic minorities and equal rights for women around this time were also brought to bear upon tennis in Britain, as Wimbledon remained a key site for the manifestation of such power struggles in sport, and numerous British players were implicated to various extents in the proceedings. The largest demonstration of any kind occurred in 1973 as a consequence of a conflict between the embryonic players union and the beleaguered international governing body, which resulted in an almost comprehensive boycott by the biggest male stars. The strength of Wimbledon's aura and cultural significance as an institution in itself was revealed by the huge crowds and vast profits that were experienced nevertheless.

Global socio-political movements were also brought to bear upon developments throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, which transformed tennis into a hugely popular, revenue-generating business, where jet-setting, globetrotting players became millionaires alongside the swelling host of "partners" that influenced the sport during this period, including corporate sponsors, television networks, players' agencies and management groups. The numerous power struggles that emerged between various factions each competing for profits or administrative control suggests the great significance that such power wielded. Quite simply, if the rewards had not been so great, the sport's administrative and financial structures would have remained far more rudimentary. In a British context, the 1990s and 2000s represented a sharp turnaround in terms of overall administrative objectives. The outcomes of the mass-participation movement, though it would have contributed notably to the strength of club tennis and to the general population's health and wellbeing, had produced little of ostensible returnable value to the elite level. Growing Wimbledon profits throughout this period afforded the undertaking of increasingly comprehensive talent-development initiatives, which also included the construction of an impressively grand and expensive national training centre, which was finally opened in 2007.

This book concerns itself with the social history of tennis in Britain, which stretches far beyond Wimbledon and into the clubs and tournaments that constitute and have always constituted the "bread and butter" of British tennis, and the millions of people who play, teach, watch, administrate, invest in, write about, study or simply follow the sport. A key objective is to attempt to articulate how this history can be read as a social history of Britain more generally from around the 1870s to the present day. It seeks to investigate what makes events and developments in British tennis a matter of importance around the world, what makes the sport globally important to people in Britain, and why achieving success at it has become a (sometimes painful) national obsession. In what areas and to what extent have developments in the social history of tennis in Britain played a significant, though likely surreptitious, hidden or taken-for-granted, role in broader social movements or historical processes? What key socio-cultural aspects of tennis that characterised its earliest forms have remained today? At first glance, one can point to its middle or upper-middle-class following; its ostensible gender parity, but with masked deeper-lying inequalities between the sexes; its predominant white British playing demographic; its superficial connections with British nobility and royalty; its development driven by the manpower of the voluntary sector, manifested through clubs; its cultural connections with imperialism and nationalism, and ostensible links with cultural ideals of "Britishness" or "Englishness"; and its rule structure that presupposes the voluntary adherence to sportsmanship ideals, "fair play" and behavioural etiquette.[1]

The social history of tennis in Britain represents more than a story of the leading players or key events that made newspaper headlines, but also what went on behind the scenes. Outside of the AELTC's gates, in the thousands of clubs where tennis is less an industry or a commercial enterprise and more a summer recreation, a means to develop business contacts, maintain fitness levels, spend time with friends, find a suitable marriage partner, or simply while away an afternoon in the sunshine, the story of its historical development is equally compelling. Moreover, the challenges and opportunities ordinary people faced with regard to access, education and talent development in the sport, alongside seemingly mundane but telling considerations like how to dress for an afternoon's play; how to join a local club; how to adjust performance according to an opponents' age or ability to ensure everyone's enjoyment; or how to converse with and impress established club members, did often reveal deep-rooted structures of social class, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion or national identity. Understanding these complex connections and demonstrating an ability to critically analyse rather than merely celebrate the subject is arguably the key to writing good social history and remains the underlying objective of this text. While tennis is honoured and praised, it is also challenged and critiqued, and so too are the people who have run and played the sport throughout its existence and their overall attitudes, beliefs, values and actions.

The early period of tennis history, in the mid to late Victorian era, has often been written as though the security and future prosperity of the game itself was assured, in the sense that it was bound to "take on" and "take off" like we know it eventually did. One might also assume the sport's historical development was a simple one-directional narrative of fairly *constant* progress: from its humble beginning, its rules were standardised, players were recruited, clubs were formed, tournaments were organised, and the sport spread to all corners of the globe. The reality, however, was that tennis developed unsteadily and moved through a number of key phases where its progress was threatened. Until the early 1900s, the conflicting newspaper and magazine reports from leading lawn tennis literary commentators demonstrated how precarious the sport's position was among a discerning and ruthless upper-middle class, who could choose to indulge in a growing plethora of other leisure activities.

Tennis progressed through several other dark phases, including the first and second world wars, the economic crisis of the early 1930s, post-war austerity in the late-1940s/early-1950s era, the social, cultural and political unrest of the 1960s and 70s, and the subsequent economic downturn into the 1980s. Throughout such phases of societal instability, the sports' administrators fought to sustain a positive image despite the fairly constant emergence of issues related to or reflected by these broader social developments, such as gender inequity, racial intolerance, corruption and hypocrisy, and economic insolvency. Throughout history, for the millions of people that played tennis recreationally, millions more were denied these opportunities; for the handfuls of top British players fulfilling their dreams of playing at Wimbledon, countless others never had the chance to develop their talents. For the thousands of clubs that opened their doors with renewed enthusiasm each spring, some of them with improved facilities or more members than the previous one, many others were forced to keep theirs closed because their land was usurped by the council or an unforgiving landlord, they were forced to sell up because of falling membership numbers, or they moved or merged with another club or changed their emphasis away from tennis, perhaps as a distant outcome of some wider societal development.

For sure, the endless possibilities of play, stroke production and tactics, alongside the seemingly interminable production of interesting on-court "personalities" in the major tournaments, meant tennis from its humble beginnings seemed to attract considerable attention wherever and whenever it was played. With the advent of new media in the interwar years, its social position was cemented as a quick and exciting sport that demanded a high level of skill mastery and tactical acumen, while simultaneously providing for even the most advanced players limitless opportunities for improvement. Into the twenty-first century, players and their coaches continue to experiment with new strokes, shots and tactics, with outcomes assisted in part by technological developments in racket production alongside racket-string, tennis ball and playing surface composition. Thus, the sports' dynamic practical features have ensured its survival over the years but, undeniably and very importantly, often to a fairly narrow demographic. In this book, key themes of gender, social class, race/ethnicity and national identity are investigated, to present the changing social composition of tennis players, administrators and fans over time and to explore changes to key features of its play, rule structure, behavioural etiquette, and overall approaches toward coaching, talent identification and development, commercialism, amateurism/professionalism and political involvement.

Note

1. Where appropriate, reasonable efforts have been made to use the correct terms, either England/English or Britain/British, but it was evident that in many cases where the terms were used in published materials, particularly prior to WWII, the term England/English was taken to mean Britain/British.

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1 'A highly Christian and beneficent pastime'

The emergence of lawn tennis in late nineteenth century Britain

The Victorian and Edwardian eras in Britain represented a period regarded commonly as a tumultuous turning point in class relations. The deep-rooted, secure and widely accepted political and social dominance of the aristocracy gave way to increasing status competition between themselves and the insurgent middle classes (Huggins 2008). The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Corn Laws repeal of 1846 set in motion the decline in aristocratic authority and brought what many believed was the 'zenith of middle-class political power' throughout the mid-Victorian period, ushering in a period of relative peace, stable class relations and political consensus during the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Cannadine 1999:121). Further Parliamentary Reform Acts in 1867 and 1884/5, which expanded the electorate from 1.3 to 5.6 million men, however, forced the landed aristocracy, and the Conservatives, to loosen their unequivocal grip on political power. Particularly from around 1885 onwards, peerages were offered in far greater numbers to the bourgeoisie; 'some people looked on their arrival as new blood; others maintained that it was a prostitution of honours', argued Bédarida (1979:129). The House of Lords nevertheless remained chiefly hereditarily empowered and Tory-dominated, while the House of Commons underwent a far quicker and more notable change. After the 1906 General Election loss to the Liberals and, with 29 seats, the insurgence of Labour as the 'second party in the state' (Cannadine 1999:131), aristocratic power was weakened still further to the extent that by 1910, they constituted just one in seven Members of Parliament (Bédarida 1979). Moreover, the 1911 Parliament Act facilitated the transfer of decision-making power away from the House of Lords to the House of Commons, and removed the power of veto from the former.

These developments that represented the decline in traditional hierarchies of political power were the culmination of decades of shifting class relations, which began toward the end of the Industrial Revolution, when urbanisation and the damaging effects of an agricultural depression left land ownership, once the basis of aristocratic wealth and 'the prime source of authority, prestige and influence', now increasingly a mere status symbol (Bédarida 1979:25). The potential for wealth to be accrued through whitecollar jobs in business, commerce and industry had become more lucrative and dynamic and those who exploited it best, the expanding and socially aspirational upper-middle class of bankers, city merchants, successful industrialists, factory, railway and public works owners and magnates, alongside some of the most successful professionals in law and medicine, had the keys to become Britain's new ruling class. This position they assumed with enthusiasm, confidence, assertiveness and a fresh sense of entitlement, yet their quest for supreme authority remained incomplete, because they often deferred to the established aristocracy in matters of lifestyle, tastes and cultural values. Bédarida (1979:46) elaborated:

> Grand or not, the nobility constituted the natural elite in the eyes of the vast majority. Everything encouraged this reverence – social pressure, education, institutions and the many networks that encouraged a sense of dependence among both the humblest and most sophisticated. This applies as much to the spontaneous respect shown by servants … to the vanity of bourgeois parvenus who were proud to consort with titled people.

While the middle class grew to dominate in key political and economic institutions, the upper class remained invariably the cultural reference group against which the former measured themselves.

> The more [the old landed society] lost on the political plane, the more it sought to shine on the social plane. … Its gift for display continued unrivalled, and its splendour, supported by its ancient lineage, easily excelled the vulgar luxury of the new-rich.
>
> (Bédarida 1979:131)

Undoubtedly, some distinctions between the classes had blurred. The prosperous upper-middle class were invariably welcomed into "society" life. Despite lacking the foundations of aristocratic heritage, familial inheritance or a public school or Oxbridge education of their own, many were able to gain peerages, purchase country estates with servants, send their sons to public school and marry their daughters into the aristocracy (Bédarida 1979). The upper class also adopted middle-class employment; some aristocrats departed their idle lifestyles and became successful businessmen and company directors or trustees (Holt 1989). In time, the parameters of what constituted being a "gentleman" were redefined 'more in terms of conduct than heredity' (Bailey 1978:86), wherein the adoption of behaviour demanding greater self-restraint and discipline as well as leadership, intellectual foresight and chivalry toward women was recognised alongside more inveterate, hereditary determinants of class (Baker 2004; Dunning and Sheard 2000). The public schools, celebrated in the literary work of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* and recognised as principal breeding grounds for the education of 'Muscular Christians' and future elites in government, economics, law, business and diplomatic matters of empire, became key locations where sons of aristocracy mixed openly and with increasing frequency with boys of less noble means (Bédarida 1979). As they grew into adulthood, argued Eisenberg (1990:268), 'gentlemen of right saw themselves continually accompanied by gentlemen of honour or of education, by so-called merchants and gentlemen, by officers and gentlemen, by Christian gentlemen'. What resulted gradually from the "gentlemen" of public schools was what became known as the 'Mid-Victorian compromise': a fusion of value systems necessitating the mutual accommodation of interests of, and the sharing of power between, the middle and upper classes. Bédarida (1979:79) described it as 'an alliance between the aristocracy of land and birth and the aristocracy of money and ability'.

Team sports like cricket and rugby, as they came to develop in the public schools, were charged with instilling values of this new social elite: toughness, self-reliance, intellectual ability, gentlemanly conduct, morality, diligence, discipline, a sense of British superiority, an expectation of servility from lower social orders, and a competitive spirit as the engine for Britain's global economic expansion (Collins 2009). Over time, the boys came to establish a set of beliefs for how *all* sports should be played, moulded on middle-class ideas of Protestant self-help (Gruneau 2006) and stressing fundamental "Corinthian" amateur principles: strict behavioural constraints; sportsmanship and the values of honesty, fair play, integrity and playing the game 'as an end in itself'; distinct codes of deferential conduct and rituals of status distinction to differentiate amateurs from professionals; a deeply rooted abhorrence to physical training, preparation and specialisation; and the concomitant celebration of natural aptitude, the display of effortless style and grace, and celebration of the 'all-rounder' (Allison 1980; Holt 1989; Williams 2006). These characteristics marked the quintessential British gentleman-amateur sportsman, whose sporting mastery ably demonstrated and promoted ideas of innate national and racial superiority (Mangan 1981, 1992; Polley 2011). Such inveterate and widely held ideas were reinforced by numerous factors, argued Bédarida (1979:93–4), most notably: 'the quiet conviction of being the centre of the world'; the fact that Britain embodied the 'three great forces of the age', industrialism, Protestantism and liberalism; and the 'striking demonstration of naval and diplomatic supremacy'. The *Illustrated London News* claimed: 'We are a rich people, powerful, intelligent, religious. … Our spirit governs the universe' (22 July 1848); later, they were celebrated as 'the harbingers of civilization' before claiming: 'All the regions of the globe feel our physical, moral and intellectual presence. … They could not live without us' (13 October 1849). Their sporting practices as they developed throughout the nineteenth century were a direct reflection of this.

F.B. Malim (1917:152), headmaster of five public schools throughout his career, wrote in 1917:

> As we desire our games to foster the spirit that faces danger, so we shall wish them to foster the spirit that faces hardship, the spirit of endurance. That is why I think that golf and lawn tennis are not fit school games; they are not painful enough.

Indeed, lawn tennis was excluded from Eton, Harrow and other elite public schools until well into the interwar years, mostly because of its public perception of effeteness and lack of potential to develop mental and physical toughness. This did not stop the sport being infused with public-school values, however; such was the power and pervasiveness of this code generally that even sports not played in public schools were conditioned by its behavioural norms, ethics and values. Many early enthusiasts of tennis were old boys from the leading schools and universities, particularly Harrow and Cambridge, respectively. The first three Wimbledon champions, Spencer Gore, Frank Hadow and Rev. John Hartley, were old Harrovians. The Renshaw brothers, William and Ernest, who dominated in the 1880s, both attended Westminster and later Cambridge University. They and the host of other young men similarly socially positioned took to lawn tennis with a clear sense of how and according to what values and rules it should be played; blending the upper-class ostentatious want to display elegance, luxury and artistic refinement with the middle-class spirit of enterprise, competition and individualism. Thus, the exclusion of tennis from the public schools did not necessarily prevent the inculcation of amateur values or the need for its male players to behave as “gentlemen” should; it merely defined a particular type of gentleman for participation and ensured the game began and remained for a long time principally a sport for adults. This was crucial.

While the fact of its omission from the leading schools might have hindered Britain’s long-term ambitions to develop talent, given that most males did not seriously take up the game until early adulthood, it likely had little effect on the sport’s popularity among the status-conscious upper-middle classes. In fact, it is suggested that its initial exclusivity, for the most part, ensured that the comfortable and relaxed air that characterised occasions for play in country-house gardens and clubs remained a central feature. Moreover, sports like lawn tennis would have played a significant role in separating the various middle-class factions from one another, at a time when, in Hobsbawm’s (1983:291) words, ‘the fluidity of [class] borders made clear criteria of social distinction unusually difficult’. The problem was, according to him, ‘how to define and separate the genuine national elite of an upper-middle class once the relatively firm criteria … [of] descent, kinship, intermarriage, the local networks of business, private sociability and politics no longer provided firm guidance’. The key lay in the preservation of “hierarchy” as a notion and an ideal, which, according to Cannadine (1999:125), was successfully accomplished by the middle classes, who ‘refurbished, reconstructed and reinvented’ it.

The various factions of the middle class had two things in common: they each sought to distinguish themselves from social inferiors, while also simultaneously aspiring upwards and seeking pathways toward social mobility for themselves. Certainly, differences in employment, income, standards of living, land ownership, culture and even religion and politics belied claims to a common middle-class identity. Crudely speaking, below the upper-middle class were the "middle-middle" class, which included owners of industrial firms and large businesses, professionals like civil engineers, professors, doctors, barristers and solicitors, alongside wealthy merchants, accountants and most government civil servants (Bédarida 1979). Their lives were not entirely uncomfortable, and despite adopting a defensive position on matters of materialism, as evident in their "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1899/1994), they continued to denigrate those whose prime objective in work was making money, namely the lower-middle class, who were thought collectively 'contaminated … by direct contact with merchandise and cash … [and] sick with ambition' (Bédarida 1979:52). This latter group consisted of small employers, shopkeepers, salesmen, office workers, bank clerks, low-ranked civil servants and teachers, who as a collective group were concerned to 'show one's respectability and distinguish oneself from the common herd, to the point of aping without discrimination the life and habits of the superior classes' (Bédarida 1979:52).

Alongside institutions of employment and other areas of society, class rivalry and competition was played out culturally and within seemingly innocuous social institutions like tennis clubs. At a time when class barriers were eroding and education, line of work and the conspicuous consumption of expensive goods were failing to demarcate the classes as categorically and effectively as they once had, tennis clubs allowed unashamedly hierarchical constructions of social interaction to manifest under the guise of polite civility. Where, when, how and by whom the game was played had a strong impact on its associated values and general "social character".

The aims of this chapter are to describe the earliest versions of lawn tennis played in Britain and discuss the various men responsible for "reinventing" them and bringing them to prominence. Majors Harry Gem and Walter Clopton Wingfield, in particular, have been credited with playing key but independent roles in this process and a critical assessment of their relative inputs in the context of the game's growth is conducted. This is not in any way intended to clear up "once and for all" who the actual inventor of lawn tennis was, as the answer to this question is and likely always will be not a question of facts about who made what impact, but rather more a question of defining what "reinvention" means and then making arbitrary assessments about whose relative input merits the title of being the most significant. Instead, the aim here is to consider the various aspects of the sport that each "inventor" had a hand in developing and then assessing the extents to which these aspects constituted something not only unique but enduring. Inevitably, the social aspects of the sport as they developed were initially the key features that drew participants in. The actual features of its play as defined by the rules, equipment and court layout defined by the "inventors" played a far less important role early on. Thus the question of "Who invented the sport?" is a moot one in any case.

From its conception, lawn tennis was a major feature of garden parties, which afforded its hosts, from old and new money alike, excellent opportunities to convey wealth. For the young adults in attendance, tennis garden parties invited possibilities for romance and ensured the enhancement of status. It was said that to avoid tennis garden parties wholly

> is impossible to any man of social pretensions. … A man with no reputation to keep up, or with a reputation strong enough to stand alone, might even admit that he enjoyed them, but comparatively few players can afford to be thus candid.
>
> (*Pastime* 27 August 1890:162)

Garden parties sometimes lasted an entire weekend and combined lawn tennis with a host of other forms of entertainment, such as a "flower show" or "bazaar". In its earliest years, evidence suggests numerous royal and titled members of society were attracted to the sport, holding their own garden parties or attending others where lawn tennis was the chief attraction. *The Fifeshire Journal* from 1877 (27 September) reported a "tennis party" held at Balcarres House, home of Sir Coutts Lindsay, founder of the Grosvenor Art Gallery in London. Queen Victoria's youngest son, Prince Leopold, was in attendance with sixty or seventy other eminent invited guests, and it was recorded: 'The distinguished party remained for nearly two hours on the lawn engaged at tennis'. Elks (2004:20) suggested that tennis parties filled an important social role in helping to 'attract the eligible bachelors of the area' whereupon the young single ladies and gentlemen could frolic and flirt with one another in what was assumed a safe environment. Thus, tennis garden parties became part of the social "season". Alongside the private residences of local elites, vicarage gardens were also suitably respectable locations for tennis parties, with such relaxed, adult-centred and largely non-competitive social occasions run by the local clergy (Elks 2004). Such settings differed markedly from the more aggressive, male-dominated, competitive sporting environments associated with football, rugby and also, to a lesser extent, cricket. For a start, they would have attracted a different sort of "gentleman", and the partial inclusion of women in tennis settings was a key element of their unique characterisation.

From the earliest days, the presence of women was hugely significant. Garden parties were extensions of home life, so naturally women took charge of culinary efforts and refreshments, while men demanded the lion's share of court-time. Some clubs were known to have denied access to women but found very quickly the necessity of their inclusion, if only for economic reasons. The Northern LTA (Lawn Tennis Association) lifted its initial ban on female members in 1893, and Queen's Club waited until 1906 to follow suit, but McKelvie (1986:22) recalled that women were still 'not allowed to propose men candidates or book the covered courts [and were] … barred from playing on the east court on Saturdays and Sundays and the west after 12.30 pm'. Often, clubs created certain conditions that privileged males, such as "men's only nights" or "gentlemen's rooms". Men ensured their authority by denying women any part in the formation of rules or decision-making processes, and the restrictive dress and strict behavioural conventions ensured that women's play was weak and featureless for many years. Nevertheless, their inclusion both on and off the court fulfilled an important social function, because women at this time were crying out for a game more physical and challenging than croquet that could be played in a similar private, outdoor setting. Before any of this could happen, however, someone needed to recognise the game's "social" potential and market it to the right audience. Enter Major Walter Clopton Wingfield.

There is a great degree of debate about precisely who should be credited with the (re)invention of lawn tennis, but one thing is certain: the societal preconditions into which the game fit were more important than any one person. Common myths surrounding the origins of both baseball and rugby, which have given primacy to Arben Doubleday and William Webb Ellis, respectively, have either ignored conflicting evidence in an effort to reinforce a particular glorified past, or have underestimated the importance of wider societal developments that played a part in facilitating the sport's emergence (Collins 2009; Guttmann 2004). Popular lawn tennis history has also tended to lean toward a particular inventor or reinventor without sufficient evidence, which has been to the neglect of a more critical analysis that uncovers a host of important individuals and wider societal developments that played a part in the sport's incipient creation, not to mention the earlier games from which the various individuals borrowed features and equipment.

Initially, badminton emerged around the mid-nineteenth century and, after some experimentation in England and India, had become recognised as a game suitable for ladies and gentleman, and more enjoyable than croquet (Hutchinson 1996). Throughout mid–late 1873, *The Field* published numerous articles to this effect, which player-turned-historian A.E. Crawley posited 'formed the seed that germinated the following month in Major Wingfield's brain' (*LT&B* 10 April 1913:176). What is popularly recorded is the fact that, after experimenting throughout the spring and summer of 1873, the retired army major Walter Clopton Wingfield formally introduced his outdoor ball game called 'Sphairistiké' to a fashionable audience at Nantclwyd Hall on 16th December, before returning to London to secure its patent in February of 1874. Sphairistiké (translated Greek for 'playing ball') was an outdoor game amalgamating several features of badminton with Real Tennis and racquets. Wingfield borrowed from badminton the six-foot-high drooping net and possibly the hourglass-shaped court, from Real Tennis the rackets with wooden handles and bent heads, and from racquets the scoring system with 15-point sets (Alexander 1986). It followed that Wingfield would market his game to the same clientele as these others and also adopt their social features, namely ritualised behavioural etiquette and high-class fashions (Lake 2009). Like its predecessors, the new game was also to be significant as a means of conspicuous consumption for the upper and upper-middle classes.

Wingfield's version of lawn tennis was, from its outset, imbued with the elite Victorian spirit of social aspiration. The price of his box-set alone determined its target audience. Five guineas – the cost of a net, two net-posts, four rackets, six balls and a set of instructions – was a price only reasonably affordable for the aristocracy or late-Victorian *nouveau riche*. Only the most prestigious magazines like *The Field*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Army and Navy Gazette* and the *Court Journal* carried notices and advertisements; readers of the latter, for example, were 'mostly members of the court, and those who strove to become members' (Alexander 1986:89). In his 5th edition of *Book of the Game*, published in 1875, he provided the full names of every titled aristocrat who purchased a set, which included: 11 princes and princesses, 7 dukes, 17 marquis and marchionesses, 54 earls, 12 countesses, 10 viscounts, 41 lords, 44 ladies, 46 honourables, 5 right honourables and 55 knights. The lucidity of his marketing campaign ensured its commercial success; he sold over a thousand box-sets between the summers of 1874 and 1875 alone, and more than a third of them to the aristocracy (Hutchinson 1996). The upper class not only comprised a large and significant proportion of the game's first players but an even larger proportion of club presidents or patrons.

In many respects, Wingfield did not actually invent anything new. The idea of playing tennis outdoors was not unique either. The memoirs of the London bank-merchant William Hickey from 1767 mentioned the outdoor game of 'field tennis' played during the summer in Battersea fields:

> This club consisted of some very respectable persons. … The game we played … afforded noble exercise. The situation of the house … rendered it as private as if it had been exclusively our own. … At four our sport commenced, continuing until dark; during the exercise we refreshed ourselves with draughts of cool tankard, and other pleasant beverages. The field, which was of sixteen acres in extent was kept in as high order and smooth as a bowling green.
>
> (Hickey 1767:72)

Nothing is known about how the game was played or with what equipment, but its clientele and the particular occasions on which it was played suggest a close affinity with other established racket games.

Other similar games were said to have been played in the century or so before Wingfield designed his version, but technological advances in the mid-nineteenth century proved crucial in sustaining interest. The lawnmower and garden-roller helped cultivate smooth grass courts, and the invention of vulcanised rubber in 1839 by Charles Goodyear was of even greater significance (Gillmeister 1997; Todd 1979).

Shortly after Wingfield's advertisements were published in *The Field*, a swathe of other gentleman wrote in to claim they had been playing similar games for years. From the basic descriptions offered, they all bore numerous similarities in rules, rackets, shape of court and the hollow rubber balls being propelled, but most strikingly, and most importantly, they were almost identical in their social features. These were upper-middle-class gentlemen playing outdoor versions of established aristocratic racket games on private lawns, among social equals and usually as part of grand social occasions. Like established Real Tennis and racquets players, it seems likely that for these men, their respective games served a similar conspicuous, status-enhancing social function.

This feature was particularly important to Harry Gem, another retired British army major, and his Spanish friend Juan Batista Augurio Perera, who claimed they had played a game called "pelota" in Edgbaston for 15 years prior to Wingfield's advertisement (*The Field* 21 November 1874). Unlike Wingfield, however, they kept their game secret, played exclusively among a select group of friends and, even after forming the world's first tennis club, Leamington LTC, in 1872, they made no efforts to expand the game or raise the club's profile (Holland 2011). Gem was modest and by all accounts indifferent to sharing Wingfield's fortune (Gibbons 1986), but still he and the Birmingham public sought recognition. *Edgbastonia* (December 1881) proclaimed as 'an unquestionable fact' in Gem's obituary in 1881, that he was 'the first to bring [lawn-tennis] before the public'. This was incorrect, of course, unless one classes a small and specially selected group of friends as "the public". Nevertheless, by the time Gem wrote in to *The Field*, the game had enjoyed nine months of publicity and correspondence, and players were experimenting with

> the shape and dimensions of the court, the height of the net, the position of the service line, the conditions of service, the mode of scoring and many other details, with the object of constituting and settling the game on the best possible basis.
>
> (*LT&B* 7 August 1913:690)

In an effort to clean up the mess brought about by the different rules and court dimensions that made play difficult between separate factions, the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) held a meeting on 8th March 1875 for the purpose of agreeing common rules. Several versions of lawn tennis were experimented with and votes were taken. Three weeks later, *The Field* published the "agreed-upon" rules that tended to favour Wingfield's features over others, but correspondence over the next two years, while respectful to the MCC's efforts, still exposed an unsatisfied public. When, in 1877, the All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club (AELTCC) sought to formulate rules for its first Championships, the sub-committee of Henry Jones, Julian Marshall and C.G. Heathcote agreed wisely to alter or scrap altogether several of Wingfield's most unpopular features. They dropped the racquets scoring method of 15-point games for the Real Tennis method of 15, 30, 40 and game; they introduced the double-fault; and they proposed a rectangular court instead of Wingfield's hourglass shape. Despite going against the MCC's rules, the AELTCC recognised the importance of their support, so joint authority over lawn tennis rested temporarily in the hands of both clubs.

The incipient development of lawn tennis was a long and complex process, drafting opinions and suggested alterations from many different men and amalgamating features of numerous games. Though the debate as to who invented the game is moot, futile and ultimately subjective, it can reasonably be claimed that the timing of Wingfield's public launch of Sphairistiké, within the specific socio-historical context of mid-Victorian Britain, was the most significant condition that determined its rise to fame. Thus, crucially, the sport's rapid growth owes more to Wingfield than anyone else, for he was alone in venturing to expand the game outside of an exclusive circle. For over a decade, Gem and Perera made no efforts toward greater inclusivity, and likely the game would have remained hidden from popular consciousness had Wingfield not seized its commercial potential through his clever and 'energetic campaign of publicity and promotion' (Barrett 1986:19). It was into an environment of upper-class status insecurity, middle-class social aspiration and within a broadened framework of appropriate gentlemanly conduct and budding female emancipation that lawn tennis emerged, developed, expanded and found its niche.

The success of rule standardisation that lawn tennis enjoyed demanded, first, a sufficiently large body of players motivated to experiment and discover the most favourable conditions for play, and, second, the means by which to communicate and debate openly such alterations. Thus, the influence of J.H. Walsh, the editor of *The Field* since 1857, should not be overlooked; given his enthusiasm for the game, he welcomed rather than restricted discussion about lawn tennis, despite the magazine's traditional emphasis on field sports. Walsh also played a pivotal role in the formation of the All England Croquet Club in 1868, chaired the inaugural meeting that took place in his office and donated the 25-guinea Silver Challenge Cup for the 1877 Championships. He was just one of the many gentlemen responsible for the sport's initial development.

The first Wimbledon Championships was a quiet affair. Spencer Gore won from a field of 22 gentlemen, all British, who each paid a guinea entrance fee. Descriptions of the playing styles suggest a form of "pat-ball", as most players adapted strokes and tactics specific to Real Tennis or racquets that incorporated massive amounts of cut and slice; the high net prevented them from hitting with pace (Barrett 1986; Birley 1993; Chalmers 2004). Not until the Renshaw brothers emerged four years later did the first "proper" lawn tennis style uncorrupted by other racket games reveal itself. Their arrival brought an increased popularity to Wimbledon, with challenge-rounds in the early 1880s engaging upwards of 3,500 spectators. This gave the AELTC added impetus to take matters into their own hands with regard the formulation of playing rules. The MCC gradually relinquished their authority throughout the early 1880s, but still for some time longer and even after the formation of the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) in 1888, players continued to experiment with new types of scoring in an effort to find potentially more interesting alternatives; such was the creative spirit and resourcefulness of the Victorian elite.[1]

It was an amalgamation of aristocratic and bourgeois elites that formed the first generation of lawn tennis players who fostered the game's incipient creation. The dominance of the former, with which Wingfield had so successfully galvanised early support, lasted only a few years. The process of their desertion of lawn tennis began in the 1880s as they sought out more exclusive pursuits like golf and polo (Walker 1989). By the 1890s, this process was almost entirely complete, bar a scattering of noble patrons of clubs and associations and a handful of isolated clubs that sought seclusion from the growing number populated with ladies and gentlemen of "new money". Nevertheless, the cultural expressions of upper-class taste sought by the most aspirational upper-middle-class players had a lasting impression upon the sport. From its very beginnings, principally because of its noble heritage as a game derived from Real Tennis and racquets and also due to its earliest upper-class enthusiasts, lawn tennis attracted those seeking to improve their social positions. All the features that characterised the sport, including the general atmosphere and tone of its clubs and parties, its associated fashions and cultural accoutrements, its rules and etiquette and a sense of how lawn tennis should be played, reflected the general motivations of social mobility for the upper-middle classes.

Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Osborn (1881:11–12) described ideal conditions for lawn tennis:

> The scene should be laid on a well-kept garden lawn. There should be bright warm sun overhead, and just sufficient breeze whispering through the trees … to prevent the day from being sultry. Near at hand, under the cool shadow of a tree, there should be strawberries and cream, and iced claret mug, and a few spectators who do not want to play, but are lovers of the game, intelligent and appreciative. If all these conditions are present, an afternoon spent at lawn tennis is a highly Christian and beneficent pastime.

This account reveals that even though the game had been formally organised less than a decade earlier and was still in its infancy, its clientele, associated settings, paraphernalia, and underlying values were already firmly set. Osborn could have easily been describing the ideal conditions for a host of other outdoor games, like croquet, polo or cricket. The 'well-kept' lawn suggests a private residence; the need for 'warm sun' and 'sufficient breeze' suggests a summer game; the addition of refreshments denotes sociability and emphasises the importance of the occasion itself; the inclusion of 'intelligent and appreciative' spectators implies some form of exclusivity; its 'Christian' ethos connotes "respectable" behaviour and restrained play. The omission of detail about the quality of play indicates its lack of importance at this time. It is precisely because the game's earliest players cared more about who they were with and in what social setting they played than who won or lost that class distinctions were considered so essential for the mid-Victorian elite.

Reports from matches and competitions from this early period reveal a strikingly similar emphasis on external features rather than on the actual play or results. The first two sentences from the Buxton tournament report from 1888 read:

> The wet season showed but little improvement last week, when the favourite Derbyshire tournament suffered, as most others have done, from the inclement weather. On the Monday play was impracticable, on Thursday a heavy thunder-shower marred an otherwise delightful day, and prevented play taking place on the grass during the afternoon, and on Saturday, after two of the finals had been decided – partly during the showers – rain fell in torrents, and rendered inevitable a postponement of the other events until Monday.
>
> (*Pastime* 8 August 1888:108)

Far from innocuous, such comments were subtle yet clever ways to convey affluence. Given that so few were able to experience outdoor leisure so abundantly, it was a mark of class distinction to complain that one's lawn tennis plans were spoiled by inclement weather. Thus, tournament secretaries made every effort, in writing their reports, to bring such matters to attention.

Before the turn of the century, particularly as a long-term outcome of the Enclosure movement that withdrew open spaces from public recreational use, the opportunity to pursue outdoor leisure activities in rural settings was a privilege for those with sufficient time and money (Baker 1979; Vamplew 1988b). The middle classes came to associate urban centres with working-class poverty and poor hygiene, but found excitement in outdoor recreational pursuits, born in earlier generations from the rise of fishing, hunting and field sports, developed through the increasing popularity of seaside excursions, fostered in the publicised exploits of adventure conquests by Alpine mountaineers, and cemented in the public schools (Baker 1979; Holt 1989; Hutchinson 1996). In addition, as a counter to the harmful effects of industrial, urban Victorian life, afternoons spent in the fresh country air, playing mildly strenuous games like lawn tennis or golf, were endorsed through medical discourse that stressed their physiological and psychological benefits (Holt 2006; Lowerson 1993; Polley 2011). Seaside resorts were particularly fond of allocating provisions for such sports, given their transient but affluent middle-class clientele that demanded 'gentle athleticism' and 'social exclusivity' (Durie and Huggins 2007:177). Giving its readers some ideas for pleasant sojourns, *Pastime* (25 July 1888:67) highlighted its five-week end-of-summer 'Western tour' as the 'most attractive', taking in tournaments at Exmouth, Teignmouth, Torquay, Bournemouth and Eastbourne. Outdoor features of lawn tennis appealed also to certain romanticised notions of "Old England", here depicted in *Pastime* (23 September 1885:210): 'The mere fact of a game being conducted in the open air enhances its enjoyment, to say nothing of the pleasure of a warm summer afternoon spent on a well-kept lawn in one of our old English gardens'. This testimony to the quintessential British love of "nature" and "the outdoors" is a product of the changing definitions of both concepts during the 1880s. From being defined in terms of the products of nature (i.e. leaves, trees, grass, fresh air, etc.), it took on social meaning and moral significance; in essence, "nature and the outdoors" changed from being something tangible to something cultural, which could be found, obtained and used for personal benefit, most likely as 'an antidote to the urban environment' (Bédarida 1979:26).

The outdoor social features of lawn tennis were popularised in large part thanks to the proliferation of artwork in the late-Victorian era. Belfast-born but Glasgow-bred, John Lavery, in particular, produced numerous paintings that glorified and celebrated the sport's traditional rural setting; *A Rally* (1885), *Played!!* (1885), *The Tennis Party* (1885) and *Paisley Lawn Tennis Club* (1889), in particular, reinforced culturally defined notions of the English garden-party pastime (McConkey 2011). Alongside similar impressions by other artists like George Kilburne, Mary Hayllar, Arthur Melville, James Guthrie and Charles March Gere, these prime occasions for upper-middle-class mixed-gender sociability were forever immortalised on canvas (Sumner 2011).

The extent to which tennis garden parties, and in particular games of mixed doubles, provided opportunities for men to make modest sexual advances toward women is clearly highlighted in several pieces; Charles March Gere's, *The Tennis Party* (1900) is perhaps the best example. In the mildly satirical *Love's Labor Lost* (1897) by George Du Maurier, three unmarried daughters are shown thanking their father for providing facilities for lawn tennis, where apparently the game is so enjoyable that the need to find husbands is negated; the accompanying description reads: 'Papa has taken this beautiful house and garden solely with the view of tempting eligible young men to come and play lawn-tennis, etc.' (McConkey 2011:59). Eligible bachelors are more lucky but nevertheless rebuffed by the female subjects of their respective attentions in Lavery's *The Tennis Match* (1885)