A People's History of Tennis: Feminists

© **David Berry**
Writer and documentary film-maker
Author contact <davidberrydocumentaries@gmail.com>

Published on idrottsforum.org 2020-12-02,
with kind permission by the publisher, Pluto Press

"Feminists", an extract from my book, *A People's History of Tennis* (Pluto Press, 2020) deals with the development of lawn tennis as a sport for women, albeit – at least initially – upper middle-class women, on the lawns of vicarages and country houses in Britain during the last three decades of the 19th Century. It is the second chapter in a book which is aimed at a general and not an academic readership and it is appropriate that it is published here because its central contention, that the first female players had to fight to keep women's tennis from not being separated off from men's tennis with a softer ball, lighter racket and smaller court, was first outlined during the 'The Development of Women's Sport: Separate but not Equal' conference held in Malmö in 2010. Like all the other chapters in the book, "Feminists" emphasises the playing and watching of the sport by 'ordinary' people. But it also develops an argument running through the book that tennis is a much more radical activity than its conventional image implies. In this chapter, for example, it makes links between tennis playing and suffrage and argues that the early female lawn tennis players were, in many ways, the first sporting feminists.

DAVID BERRY is a writer and journalist. Educated at Oxford (PPE) and City University (Creative Writing), he has written on health, leisure, and social policy for many newspapers and magazines including *The Guardian*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *Prospect*, *The New Humanist* and *The New Statesman*. For 25 years, he was a staff producer/director at BBC TV, making award-winning documentaries for all the major BBC channels on subjects as diverse as child development, Early Christian Art and 20th Century Mathematics. As well as *A People's History of Tennis* (Pluto Press, 2020), he has written two books about consumer rights. David has been playing tennis since he was 12 years old in clubs and public courts all over Britain and even squeezed in games in France, Spain, Italy, America and the only court in The Gambia.

In July 1877, the American novelist Henry James visited the county of Warwickshire, the 'grassy centre and core of the English world'. Walking in the lanes near Kenilworth Castle, he came across the village of Berkswell, only a few miles from industrial Coventry but seemingly from an older, agrarian time. James stopped for a while at the local rectory, an 'ancient, gabled building of pale red brick, white stone facings and clambering vines'. It was the 'model of a quiet, spacious English home', but what he admired most was the rectory's garden or rather the activity taking place in it. In an article, published a few months later in the New York literary magazine, *The Galaxy*, he praised 'the cushiony lawn [that] stretched away to the edge of a brook and affording a number of very amiable people an opportunity for playing lawn-tennis'.[1]

Only three years after Walter Wingfield had advertised his tennis sets in London magazines, lawn tennis had become a popular part of the summer for the leisured classes, not just across Britain but overseas as well. Among the first foreign purchasers of Wingfield's sets were three Americans, one based in a fort in the territory of Arizona, another from Staten Island, New York, and another from Nahant, Massachusetts. The game quickly spread along the east and west coasts, inland to Chicago and south to New Orleans. In his article in 1877, then, James felt no need to explain 'lawn-tennis' to his American readers since many would know about it already. 'There were half a dozen games going forward at once', James continued, 'and at each of them a great many "nice girls," as they say in England, were distinguishing themselves'. These 'nice girls' clearly made a strong impression on the unmarried novelist. They 'kept the ball going and gave me a chance to admire their flexibility of figure and their freedom of action. When they came back to the house, after the games, flushed a little and a little dishevelled, they might have passed for the attendant nymphs of Diana.'

Henry James does not identify any of these dishevelled nymphs of Diana for *Galaxy* readers, which was a pity because seven years later in July 1884,

1 Henry James, 'In Warwickshire', The Galaxy, July 1877, pp. 672–5.

one of them, Maud Watson, would keep the ball going so well she became Wimbledon's first Women's Singles champion.[2] At the All England Club that July afternoon, Maud defeated her older sister Lilian in a fierce final which went to three sets. James, flush from the success of his latest novel, *Portrait of a Lady*, does not seem to have made it to Wimbledon that day to see his 'nymphs of Diana' play, but 400 spectators did and each paid 10s 6d to watch Maud and Lilian Watson become the first female tennis stars. They were not, though, the first women to pick up tennis rackets.

In 1427, Lady Margot from Hainault was a regular player at the tennis court in the Louvre in Paris where she beat most of her male opponents. Other women followed her over the next centuries including, in 1760, a Madame Masson who had a 'vigorous wrist' and was able to 'cut the ball well' and a Madame Bunuel in France who was then 60 years old and 'frequently played with the Prince de Condé'.[3] The game these women played, though, was not lawn but real tennis played indoors with a hard ball on a stone floor.

By the start of the nineteenth century, respectable women in Britain had retreated from real tennis and other sports to take on the role of 'perfect wife' in the new Victorian family. While their domestic duties did not exclude them from exercise, strenuous effort in public was now considered inappropriate and the only sports regarded as fully acceptable for women were horse riding and archery since they required little obvious physical movement. In the 1850s, these sports were joined by croquet, a new game introduced into Britain from Ireland. Croquet clubs sprung up across the country in the next decade and the croquet lawn became the fashionable location for upper-middle-class women and men to be seen together as the role of these women began to change from 'perfect wife' at home to 'perfect lady' who accompanied her husband on social occasions.[4] Many of the women turned out to be better at the sport than men. In Berkswell, it was not the Reverend Henry Watson who was the croquet champion but his wife Emily. By the start of the 1870s, however, the fascination with croquet was coming to an end.[5] For a while, it seemed that badminton might take its place but that game was too easily disrupted by wind. The more solid lawn tennis had no

2 See Susan Elks, 'Tennis Fashions in the Frame', in Ann Sumner (ed.) Court on Canvas (London: Phillip Wilson, 2011), pp. 125, 130.

3 Julian Marshall, Annals of Tennis (London: The Field, 1878), p. 42.

4 See John Tosh, 'Middle-class Masculinities', in Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds) Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1900 (London: Routledge, 1991); and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850 (London: Routledge, 2018).

5 This was partly due to the influence of the women's exercise movement of the time, particularly in schools like Cheltenham Ladies College where the formidable headmis-

such problem and on country house and vicarage lawns throughout Britain in the summers of the mid and late 1870s, tennis nets replaced croquet hoops and rubber balls took the place of shuttlecocks. It was a small step for women to shift from croquet to tennis. It turned out to be a giant leap for womankind.

In Berkswell Rectory, the Watsons started playing tennis in the garden sometime around 1875. They were encouraged by male students staying there for maths tuition with the Reverend Henry Watson who once taught the subject at Harrow. Tennis would have come as a welcome diversion for the young men after advanced algebra or geometry with the rector, especially if it gave them a chance to be introduced to his 18-year-old daughter, Lilian. Her 13-year-old sister, Maud, fell in love not with any student but with the new game. She would spend hours practising on her own against the wall in the garden. Soon she was good enough to beat Lilian. Soon she was good enough to beat anyone.

Why did young women like the Watson sisters take up this new summer pastime with such passionate enthusiasm? One reason was the sport was aimed at them. When Walter Wingfield marketed his game in the spring of 1874, he saw the equal participation of women as essential for lawn tennis's success. In *The Major's Game of Lawn Tennis* he made sure there were illustrations showing women playing as well as men. He subsequently included advertisements for 'ladies bats' and gave his female customers a discount of a guinea a set. One customer who called herself a 'Tennisonian' wrote in to praise him as having the 'good sense to see that games are not to be despised because women can join in them and occasionally distinguish themselves'.[6] This inclusion of women by Major Wingfield ensured that tennis had a very different beginning from other Victorian sports which started out as male-only activities and allowed women in only decades later. With tennis, women were there from the start and so were able to have a crucial influence on its culture, etiquette and style. All this, though, did not come in isolation.

Wingfield's tennis sets came onto the market at a time when there was a shifting set of standards for what the daughters of the upper and upper middle class were permitted to do. Emancipation for women was on the political agenda. The 1860s saw the start of a women's movement, and the feminist cause was supported by the popular philosopher and MP John Stuart Mill,

---

tress, Dorothea Beale, abolished croquet because it encouraged 'physical deformity and idleness'. See Jennifer Hargraves, Sporting Females (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 63.

6 Quoted in Everitt and Hillway, The Birth of Lawn Tennis, p. 69.

who argued in the second reform bill of 1866 for the right of women to vote. Day schools for girls like Cheltenham Ladies' College and North London Collegiate opened, and they were modelled on the boys' public schools, especially their attachment to games. A political campaign to ensure higher education for women resulted in the founding of Bedford College in London in 1849 and, twenty years later, Girton College in Cambridge, the first female residential college. After they completed their education, many women started looking for employment opportunities outside the home in professions such as journalism, teaching and nursing.

The definitions, then, of what women could and could not do had begun to change as some of the cultural and economic spaces that had been all male opened up. Once more, lawn tennis came at exactly the right time. It had no defining masculine codes, it was played with a soft ball that relied as much on guile as on strength and it fitted in well to the roster of sports and pastimes the girls' schools and colleges were keen to offer potential students. Lawn tennis offered an opportunity in an acceptable social setting for young women to develop more physical freedom than croquet and archery allowed. There was another benefit as well. Tennis allowed them to display their talents as 'cultured ladies' while also providing a marriage market in a 'seemingly innocent and acceptable way'.[7]

As with any marriage market, though, there was little that was truly innocent about this one. Older girls like Lilian and their mothers or aunts who acted as chaperones were aware of the sexual tensions that swirled around the first tennis parties. What nobody noticed was how the imagination of their younger sisters was being captured by the sport itself. It is difficult to overestimate the excitement that the game evoked in eleven-, twelve- and thirteen-year-old Mauds, Charlottes, Blanches and Dorotheas as their parents queued up to buy Wingfield's tennis sets. Their mothers saw the game as a new social fad, their older sisters as a possible way to meet a husband. But for the younger girls, tennis itself was the passion, the one sport they could play alongside their brothers. The energy that had been swallowed up in previous generations by needlework, novels and the pianoforte – and gymnastics if you were lucky – was unleashed and, once set free, would not be deterred.

In the early summer of 1881, Maud and Lilian Watson decided that if their tennis was going to improve, they needed to enter the tournaments that were sprouting up around the country. It must have taken considerable courage for the two young women to leave the safety of Berkswell Rectory and

7 Hargraves, Sporting Females, p. 54.

compete in competitions far from home. But they may well have been encouraged by an editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* in May 1881. 'Lawn Tennis', the newspaper noted with approval, 'is exactly seven years old. That which can now be fairly called a national pastime has withstood the test of temper, taste and criticism. Ladies are not banished in this case but have proved themselves in many instances no mean antagonists for the stronger sex.'[8]

The first recorded ladies' tennis championships took place at the Fitzwilliam Club in Dublin in 1879. By the time the *Daily Telegraph* gave its approval two years later, there was a fledgling circuit of sorts with open competitions for women as well as men in Bath, Exmouth, Cheltenham and in Edgbaston 20 miles from the Watsons' home. The sisters entered the 1881 Edgbaston tournament which was held in the middle of May. Maud, then 16 years old with dark curly hair and intense, expressive eyes, won. All her practice against the rectory wall had produced a game 'with no apparent weaknesses', 'excellent judgment' and 'cool concentration'.[9] For her next 55 matches Maud was undefeated, culminating in that first Wimbledon ladies final against Lilian three years later in 1884. She wasn't, though, the only female player that attracted the early tennis crowds.

The Watson sisters joined a group of elite women tennis players who travelled from tournament to tournament to be tested (but rarely beaten) by local women. Lillian and Maud Watson, Charlotte 'Chattie' Cooper, May 'Toupie' Lowther and Blanche Hillyard (their names alone conjure up a different age) inspired a generation of young women to take up tennis and make the sport their own. The facilities provided for women at most of these early tennis tournaments were often rudimentary. 'Ladies are catered for very badly', wrote Dorothea 'Dolly' Douglas, 'I am sure if men had to experience the changing room accommodation afforded for our use there would not be many of them competing.'[10]

Changing rooms aside, though, these women loved their tennis experience. They travelled by rail with their mothers or aunts: by the turn of the century, every significant town and city in Britain was connected by train and fares were inexpensive, particularly to the new seaside resorts which competed with each other for visitors by putting on lawn tennis competitions. 'My mother', wrote Charlotte Cooper, 'turned a deaf ear to anyone who advised her not to allow my sister and myself to travel about'. Cooper, known for her happy demeanour and enjoyment of the game, entered the Fitzwilliam in

8 Daily Telegraph, 12 May 1881.
9 Alan Little, Maud Watson (London: Kenneth Ritchie Wimbledon Library, 2002), p. 3.
10 Dorothea Lambert Chambers, Lawn Tennis for Ladies (London: Methuen, 1910), p. 39.

Dublin and the Northern in Manchester most years in the 1890s. She also played in Newcastle and the seaside tournaments, and ended the summer with a 'wind-up of the season at Brighton and Eastbourne. Most enjoyable.' When asked to give advice to other women players, she said they must develop 'pluck'. 'Ladies make these tournaments much more attractive!', she exhorted, 'the chief qualities you need are judgement and pluck'.[11]

Toupie Lowther agreed. 'Ladies unlike men do not break down in matches. Is it that they have more pluck?' Lowther never won Wimbledon partly because of her temperament – which ironically could break down in a tense match – and partly because of the many other activities to which she devoted her life. She took a degree in science from the Sorbonne and was an expert fencer. Stephen, the central character in Radclyffe Hall's masterpiece of lesbian literature, *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928, is modelled partly on her.

Charlotte Cooper and Blanche Hillyard, as well as bringing up children, played championship tennis well into their forties. In 1907, when she was 37, Cooper became the oldest woman to win Wimbledon, a record that still stands today. Hillyard was a semi-finalist in 1912 when she was 49 and always saw women's tennis on a par with men's. It was 'the one game in which a girl can to some extent hold her own', and she was sure that if 'more ladies would take it up and play regularly they would be far more healthy and strong'.[12] Just as male tennis players were redefining masculinity in sport, so these tennis-playing women performed femininity in ways very different from their mothers. They played like gentlemen but behaved like ladies. They were the first sporting feminists.

One of the ways this feminism was expressed was challenging acceptable forms of female dress. When women first started playing tennis they wore the social uniform of mid-Victorian Britain. Their arms and legs were fully covered and their bodies held in by whalebone corsets. Tennis aprons, petticoats and ankle-high, black leather boots completed an outfit more suited to discouraging desire than encouraging movement around court.

In 1881 Walter Wingfield proposed shorter skirts for women after playing a game against a female friend who was 'younger and quicker' than he was. 'How then did I win? I was dressed for lawn tennis and she was not.'[13] By this time, though, his influence on the game he invented had passed and in

11 Charlotte (Cooper) Sterry, 'Lawn Tennis for Ladies', in Arthur Wallis Myers, Lawn Tennis at Home and Abroad (London: George Newnes, 1903), pp. 120–4.

12 Blanche Hillyard, 'Chapter for the Ladies', in Herbert Wilberforce Lawn Tennis (London: George Bell, 1889), p. 53.

13 Theatre, 1 August 1881 quoted in Everitt and Hillway, The Birth of Lawn Tennis, p. 67.

the next two decades women played in the restricted garb captured by the Irish painter John Lavery. His *Tennis Party* and *A Rally*, both from 1885, show female players desperately trying to stretch down for tennis balls but being held back by white voluminous dresses. The men, dressed more appropriately in slim cricketers' outfits, look on with amusement.

As Lavery's paintings demonstrated, the older women who started playing tennis as a substitute for croquet were handicapped by wearing clothes not designed for physical exertion. Younger players inspired by the Rational Dress Society, founded in London in 1881, discovered ways around the Victorian dress rules. Maud Watson recalled that the ladies she played against wore 'long skirts and coloured dresses, veils and high heels'. She and her sister Lilian were the 'first to wear light wool skirts with a little bustle as it was the style'.[14] Her skirt was still down to her ankles and she stillhad to show an hourglass waist on court (corsets were worn well into the 1920s) but on her feet were not boots but India rubber shoes and on her head was not a bonnet but a jaunty lightweight sailor hat to keep out the sun.

Maud Watson could enjoy this freedom because she started playing tennis when she was an adolescent and her original tennis dress resembled school uniform. Another adolescent in the mid-1880s also found ways around the restricted dress codes. 'As the skirt must be endured', she later wrote, 'it is important to have it made somewhat short, cut half an inch or an inch shorter at the back than the front. It will then appear uniform in length and will not trip you up when you run backwards in volleying.'[15] The words are those of Charlotte 'Lottie' Dod who turned out to be an even more formidable player than Maud Watson. Many consider her to have been the greatest British sportswoman of all time.

Like the Watsons, Dod grew up in a village on the edge of an industrial city. Her father, Joseph, made his fortune as a cotton merchant in Liverpool and the family moved out to Bebington which was then in rural Cheshire but is now swallowed up by Birkenhead. They lived in Edgeworth House, a substantial Victorian villa. On the back lawn, Joseph Dod marked out two of the first tennis courts in the north-west. In the summer holidays, his teenage sons played tennis with their friends, and nine-year-old Lottie and her older sister Anne were occasionally allowed to join in. Soon the girls were good. Soon they started beating their brothers.

14 Quoted in Helen Wills, Fifteen Thirty (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 285.

15 Lottie Dod, 'Ladies Lawn Tennis', in J.M. and C.G. Heathcote, Tennis, Lawn Tennis, Rackets, Fives (London: Longmans Green, 1890), pp. 307–15.

In 1883 the Dod sisters entered the Northern Championships held that year in Manchester. Annie was 16, Lottie was 11. They did not win but the younger girl was entranced by the 19-year-old Maud Watson who did, and Watson became her role model. Two years later, when she was 13, Dod almost beat Watson in the 1885 Northern final. The press called her 'the little wonder'. Two years after that, at Wimbledon in 1887, she triumphed to become Ladies Champion. She was just 15 years old, the youngest champion ever, male or female. A century later, she still is.

From the time of this first Wimbledon victory until she gave up tennis at 21 to pursue other challenges, Lottie Dod dominated the game. She lost only five matches in her entire tennis career. She would go on to represent England at hockey, become a British Ladies Champion in golf, win a silver medal for archery at the 1908 Olympics, and toboggan down the Cresta Run. But it is for her tennis she is most remembered today. While Maud Watson was known for her consistency and temperament, Dod was feared because of her aggression. She hit every shot with venom and smashed and volleyed as hard as any man. She looked a little terrifying too. One tennis commentator of the time noted her 'close cropped hair, her unusual height and strength, and determined smile'. Another commentator praised her 'great quality of anticipating her opponents reply. She hits her forehand stroke with the pace of a man's.'[16] Wherever she played, Dod was news. She was the first player to attract her own fan club, young girls who followed her from tournament to tournament. Many of these girls went back to their tennis clubs and copied Dod's forthright manner and loose, flexible dress as well as her strokes. They brought about a quiet revolution. The trouble was that it was not quite quiet enough.

As women like Watson and Dod proved they could hold their own on court, some prominent male players tried to marginalise the women's game. This had first been tried in the mid-1870s. Just a few weeks after Major Wingfield advertised his lawn tennis sets in March 1874 as a new game for men *and* women, doubts started creeping in. One man wrote to *The Field* claiming that the new tennis rackets are 'too heavy for their small wrists'.[17] Another wondered whether 'any lady can or ever will be able to play the game as it is very hard work for a man'.[18] The debate spread to the letter pages of *The Times* where a correspondent warned, 'anyone playing in partnership

16 A Wallis Myers quoted in Jeffrey Pearson, Lottie Dod (Birkenhead: Countrywise, 1988), p. 27.
17 The Field, 28 March 1874.
18 The Field, 25 July 1874.

with a lady needs to be ready for certain eventualities. A lady will be invariably nonplussed by the drop shot.'[19]

These bad-tempered clamourings could be dismissed as tittle-tattle if they had not been taken up by other men who had power in the new game. The first real setback for women came at the All England Club. After the success of the Men's Singles at Wimbledon in 1877 and 1878, a Mr Hora on the club committee proposed a ladies event as well. Apart from Henry Jones, he received no support. The minutes of the committee meeting record that it was 'not desirable to have a ladies tennis cup under any circumstances'. What they suggested instead was that women should use a smaller court, lighter racket and a lighter ball which would be allowed to bounce twice. If this suggestion had been taken up, men's and women's tennis would have separated. The men's game would have continued to develop as a public sport, with the resources, money and power that entailed, while the new softer women's game would have remained a private pastime. There were one or two things, though, that the male proponents of an easier game for women had not properly considered.

The most obvious one was that it would destroy the game of mixed doubles which men and women played together. From the very first tennis parties organised in the summer of 1874 on country house lawns, mixed doubles had been a defining feature of the new pastime. Many of the men who had played in all-male sports like cricket and rackets discovered they liked playing with women. One early Wimbledon champion commented that 'a game in which two gentlemen are partnered by two good ladies is almost as enjoyable and almost as difficult to play well as a men's singles'.[20] It was almost as profitable too, since mixed doubles competitions were popular at the first tennis tournaments with spectators as well as competitors. So were the matches between women.

In 1884, over 6,000 people watched the women's final at the Fitzwilliam Club in Dublin. *Pastime* noted that those 'dear old gentlemen who so firmly believe in the superiority of men and the inability of women to participate in any so-called masculine pastime have received a huge shock at Dublin. The most interesting topic of conversation was the ladies' championship.'[21]

The 'dear old gentlemen' *Pastime* had in mind were the men from the All England Club at Wimbledon. The club might not like the idea of a ladies' championship but it could not fail to notice that tournaments that catered

19 The Times, quoted in Alistair Revie, Wonderful Wimbledon (London: Pelham, 1972), p. 11.

20 Wilfred Baddeley, Lawn Tennis (London: George Routledge, 1903), p. 62.

21 Pastime, 14 January 1885.

for men *and* women were the most popular. For a club like the All England, always aware of the need to cover its costs, this was a windfall that could not be ignored. When a rival club, London Athletic, announced it was going ahead with the first British women's tennis championship in the summer of 1884, the All England Club Committee changed its mind. Seven years after it had held the first open tennis tournament for men in 1877, Wimbledon introduced a Ladies' Singles with a first prize of a silver flower-basket valued at 20 guineas.

A battle for women's tennis was won but the war was by no means over. As the historian of women's sport, Kathleen McCrone, has argued, the first generation of ordinary female players were no great threat to the male ego because they hit the ball softly and were restricted in their movements. But as women players became better and their dress more flexible, more was at stake.[22] A correspondent to *Pastime* in 1885 reported that it is now 'several summers since ladies appeared at a club we know of and successfully defeated all the crack players including one who fancied himself for the championship. He then said ladies shouldn't play because they did not look pretty and were ungraceful just like a cow. The reason why some men object is because they are smarting from defeat.'[23] This was not an uncommon occurrence. Some of the first women players were better than many men and this was difficult for men to deal with. One male player decided he did not like it at all.

Herbert Chipp was a tall, forbidding man with a moustache almost as long as his tennis racket. He had an unorthodox playing style – he was one of the first players to use a double-handed backhand – but managed to reach the semi-finals of Wimbledon in 1884 when he was defeated by Herbert Lawford. That defeat, the closest Chipp came to winning a major championship, seems to have left him permanently disgruntled and he focussed his displeasure on the women's game which he felt was holding men's tennis back. In 1886, he publicly derided that year's Wimbledon champion, Blanche Hillyard, because she volleyed only 'when she found the ball on her racket' with a service, he carried on with malicious delight, which 'possesses no great virtue' and a smash which was 'absolutely deficient'.[24]

Chipp's views found sympathy with some of his regular tennis partners at the Hyde Park Tennis Club, one of the first indoor clubs built on top of

22 See Kathleen McCrone, Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women, 1870–1914 (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 154–92.

23 Pastime, 14 January 1885.

24 Herbert Chipp, Lawn Tennis Recollection (London: Merritt & Hatcher, 1898), pp. 119–21.

a disused skating rink. One complained that women players 'need to make up their mind to run about'.[25] Another said that they play 'for the sake of costume. They are troubled with fears lest they should be growing too red in the face.'[26] The problem for these male separatists was that their barbs clearly did not apply to one player who ran around court as well as they did. All the disparaging remarks about women's tennis keeping men's tennis back were clearly not true of Lottie Dod who wasn't worried about her appearance, moved as fast as any man and hit the ball just as hard.

In August 1888, the seaside town of Exmouth advertised a 'battle of the sexes' charity match. Representing the men was Dod's regular mixed doubles partner, Ernest Renshaw, a tall, dapper 27 year old who went on to win Wimbledon the following year. Representing the women was Dod herself, ten years younger, four inches shorter with jet black hair. They played in front of a capacity crowd who cheered every shot. Renshaw gave Dod two points each game but then he didn't have to wear the restrictive dress that even the rebellious Dod had to put up with. He won but only just. 'Our woman champion', *Pastime* reported, 'played so well that Renshaw had to run about as much as against a first-rate player of his own sex'.[27]

As powerful female players like Dod took centre stage, the arguments for separating out the women's and the men's game started to shift. Separation was now important not for men but for women. Playing tennis regularly might lead to strained muscles, blows to the eye and exhaustion. Tennis was seen by some doctors as acceptable exercise for women only if it was done in moderation and did not endanger their ability to reproduce. In 1894 the *British Medical Journal* recommended that women avoid 'violent physical exertion' on the tennis court because it might be damaging for future motherhood.[28] There was no evidence that running around vigorously on court had any effect on the ability to reproduce, but the arguments about the damage women could do to themselves and their unborn children were not about this but about what the female body was allowed to experience.

In late Victorian Britain, this body was a focus for the battle of power between men and women. Women who wanted to play tennis had to contest the stereotype of the 'frail middle-class lady' which was used to uphold Victorian patriarchy. It was not only women's frailty on the tennis court that was of concern but also their moral development. Chipp classified the young

25 Baddeley, Lawn Tennis, p. 62.
26 Quoted in Osborn, Lawn Tennis, Its Players and How to Play, p. 30.
27 Pearson, Lottie Dod, p. 28.
28 See Duncan Grant On Sterility in Women (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1884).

female tennis players of the 1880s as 'joining in pursuits' which have been once regarded as 'unalloyed heathenism'.[29]

His words had weight. In January 1888, Chipp had been appointed secretary of the new Lawn Tennis Association and he refused to do anything to help the female game. Women tennis players would be given no encouragement or resources and had to fend for themselves. One woman fought back.

In the late 1880s, Lottie Dod was asked by the Heathcote brothers to write a chapter on women's tennis in their popular anthology, *Tennis, Lawn Tennis, Rackets and Fives*, which would stay in print for several editions well into the next decade. Dod used the opportunity to lay down a direct challenge to Chipp and his supporters. She argued that the reason tennis was successful was because it was the first sport where men and women played together. Male players stopped any tendency for the women to pat the ball back, and women demonstrated they could cope with the weight of the racket since the game did not depend on strength alone. Dod then delivered her *coup de grâce*. Reviewing the attempts a decade before to introduce an easier game for women, she argued that there was still a danger men's and women's tennis could be 'entirely separated with different grounds, balls and laws'. This would be disastrous for the women's game – and also for the men's. The men who wanted to treat women's tennis differently were 'invested with the prerogative of an irresponsible despot'.[30]

It was a crucial blow, not least for Chipp, who did not appreciate the implication that he might be an 'irresponsible despot'. Nobody could dispute Dod's authority, a young woman who was admired both by women and men for her game. In 1898, the Lawn Tennis Association finally agreed to assume responsibility for women's tennis as Chipp conceded that women would remain central to the sport. Although the 'athleticism of the fin-de-siècle women', he wrote in his memoirs, 'would appear sometimes too pronounced, still it cannot be denied that on the whole the changes which have been brought about must ultimately prove beneficial to the race at large, at all events physically'. He couldn't, however, resist a final barb. 'Whether the benefit will be as great morally is a question which only time can settle.'[31]

Whatever Chipp's caveats, it was a remarkable victory. Without the courage of Dod and many of the early female champions to stand up to attempts to marginalise their game, women's tennis might well have been sidelined. Their strength in dealing with powerful men came partly from their up-

29 Chipp, Lawn Tennis Recollections, p. 113.
30 Dod, 'Ladies Lawn Tennis', pp. 307–15.
31 Chipp, Lawn Tennis Recollections, p. 114.

bringing. The first female players were a 'privileged group of affluent white middle-class women' who were not radical by nature but became radical in practice because they mounted a 'resistance to the prevailing idea that their primary roles were … wives and mothers'.[32] At the heart of this resistance was the remarkable Lottie Dod, and she had another source of inner power as well.

Dod lived a life that was not dependent on men. She never married and never had children. Instead, her time, like Toupie Lowther's, was given over to sport and to the many voluntary projects to which she was committed. During the First World War, Dod worked for the Red Cross and was subsequently awarded a gold medal for nursing. In the Spanish Civil War, she was a volunteer for the Republicans and then assisted in a girls' club in east London before moving to Hampshire where she died in 1960 listening to the coverage of Wimbledon on a radio next to her bed.

Lottie Dod saw the game of lawn tennis not simply as a challenging pastime for women as well as men, but as a liberating force which gave opportunities for women to free themselves from the constraints of Victorian femininity. With Blanche Hillyard, Toupie Lowther, Charlotte Cooper, Dorothea Lambert Chambers and Maud Watson she helped shift the definitions of legitimate female physical activity, which was significant not just for sport but for suffrage and freedom.

Bibliography[33]

Sources

This book was researched mainly in the British Library and the Kenneth Ritchie Memorial Library at the All England Club in Wimbledon. I am grateful to the British Library staff in Humanities 1 reading room and especially to Robert McNicol at Wimbledon. I am also grateful to the librarians in the Birmingham Reference Library and the London School of Economics, and Tom Hercock at the BBC Archives in Caversham.

For permission to quote from the diaries of Judy Haines I would like to thank Pamela Hendicott (and the help of David Kynaston) and to the BBC

32 Suzanne Rowland, 'Fashioning Competitive Lawn Tennis', in Robert Lake (ed.) Routledge Handbook of Tennis (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 173–83.

33 This is the full bibliography in the book, published here as a service to readers for further studies.

for allowing me to quote from their written archives. An earlier version of Chapter 6 appeared in *Prospect* in June 2017.

I was very pleased to find people prepared to be interviewed on the record about their tennis experiences. Thanks to Caroline Bhaguandas, Esther Bhaguandas, Nigel Billen, Norman Dale, Paul French, Boye Ifederu, Yemisi Ifederu, Albert Lester, Stuart Hancock, Leah Hartshorne, Raph Harvey, John Marcus, Vivienne McNaughton, Paul Monaghan, Jessica O Connell, David Obodechina-Joseph, Eric van der Palen, Nat Pithaida, Peter Saake and Anne Tyler. It was a pity I did not have the space to use more of their interviews, and in a few cases not use them at all. I trust I have represented them properly and I hope they think the experience was worth it.

Essential Books and Articles

Alexander, George, *Lawn Tennis* (Lynn, MA: H.O. Zimman, 1974).
Alexander, George, *Wingfield* (Lynn, MA: H.O. Zimman, 1988).
Baltzell, E. Digby, *Sporting Gentlemen* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
Cleather, Norah, *Wimbledon Story* (London: Sporting Handbooks, 1947).
Evans, Richard, *Open Tennis* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).
Everitt, Robert and Richard Hillway, *The Birth of Lawn Tennis* (Kingston Upon Thames: Vision Sports Publishing Ltd, 2018).
Forbes, Gordon, *A Handful of Summers* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
Foster Wallace, David, *Consider the Lobster* (London: Abacus, 2005).
Gillmeister, Heiner, *Tennis: A Cultural History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997).
Hargreaves, Jennifer, *Sporting Females* (London: Routledge, 1994).
Holt, Richard, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
Holt, Richard and Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain 1945–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
Jeffreys, Kevin, 'The Triumph of Professionalism in Lawn Tennis', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26(15), 2009, pp. 2253–69.
Kay, Joyce, 'Grass Roots: The Development of Tennis in Britain 1918–1978', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 29(18), 2012, pp. 2532–50.
King, Billie Jean with Cynthia Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988).
Lake, Robert, *A Social History of Tennis in Britain* (London: Routledge 2015).
Lake, Robert (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Tennis* (London: Routledge 2019).
Lowerson, John, *Sport and the English Middle Classes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
Lusis, Andy, *Tennis in Robin Hood's Country* (Nottingham: Andy Lusis, 1998).
McCauley, Joe, *A History of Professional Tennis* (Windsor: Short Run Books, 2000).
McKibbin, Ross, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

McPhee, John, *Levels of the Game*.(New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1969).
Robertson, Max, *Wimbledon 1877–1977* (Old Woking: Gresham Books 1977).
Robertson, Max (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Tennis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974).
Schoenfield, Bruce, *The Match* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
Sumner, Ann (ed.), *Court on Canvas* (London: Phillip Wilson, 2011), particularly the essays by Sumner and Susan Elks.
Tinling, Ted with Rod Humphries, *Love and Faults* (New York: Crown, 1979).
Todd, Tom, *The Tennis Players* (Guernsey: Vallency Press, 1979).
Tosh, John, *Manliness and Masculinities in 19th Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016).
Walker, Helen, 'Lawn Tennis', in Tony Mason (ed.) *Sport in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
Wilson, Elizabeth, *Love Game* (London: Profile, 2014).

Additional Reading

Aberdare, Bruce, *The Story of Tennis* (London: Stanley Paul, 1959).
Adams, Tim, *On Being John McEnroe* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2003).
Agassi, Andre, *Open* (London: HarperCollins, 2008).
Aitken, A.J., *Lawn Tennis for Public Court Players* (London: Methuen 1924).
Allaby, David, *Wimbledon of the North* (Didsbury: E.J. Morton, 1981).
Amis, Martin, 'The Women's Game', in *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).
Atkin, Ronald (ed.), *For the Love of Tennis* (London: Stanley Paul, 1985).
Austin, Bunny and Phyllis Konstam, *A Mixed Double* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969).
Baddeley, Wilfred, *Lawn Tennis* (London: George Routledge 1903).
Barker, Paul, *The Freedoms of Suburbia* (London: Francis Wilkinson, 2009).
Barrett, John, *Wimbledon, the Official History* (London: Collins Willow, 2001).
Beamish, A.E. and W.G. Beamish, *Lawn Tennis for Ladies* (London: Mills & Boon, 1924).
Beauchampe, Steve and Simon Inglis, *Played in Birmingham* (Birmingham: English Heritage, 2006).
Birley, Derek, *Sport and the Making of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
Brady, Sean, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain 1861–1913* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).
Brenner, Michael and Gideon Reuveni (eds), *Emancipation Through Muscles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
Brownlee, William, *Lawn Tennis its Rise and Progress* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1889).
Burrow, F.R., *Lawn Tennis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922).
Cavendish, *The Games of Lawn Tennis and Badminton* (London: Thos de la Rue, 1876).
Chipp, Herbert, *Lawn Tennis Recollection* (London: Merritt & Hatcher, 1898).

Clerici, Gianni, *Tennis* (London: Octopus, 1976).
Cutler, Norman, *Inside Tennis* (London: Evans Bros, 1954).
Davies, Mike, *Tennis Rebel* (London: Stanley Paul, 1962).
Dee, David, *Sport and British Jewry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
Doherty, R.F. and H.L. Doherty, *On Lawn Tennis* (London: Lawn Tennis Office, 1903).
Engelman, Larry, *The Goddess and the American Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988).
Fish, Cas, *British Tennis, the Scandal* (Caernarfon: R.A. Fish, 1996).
Fisher, Marshall Jon, *A Terrible Splendour* (New York: Crown, 2007).
Gallwey, W. Timothy, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Random House, 1975).
Gibbons, W.G., *The Seeds of Lawn Tennis* (Coventry: Jones-Sands, 1986).
Harris, Cecil and Larryette Kyle DeBose, *Charging the Net* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2007).
Heathcote, J.M. and C.G. Heathcote, *Tennis, Lawn Tennis, Rackets, Fives* (London: Longmans Green, 1890).
Henderson, John, *The Last Champion* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2009).
Hillyard, George, *40 Years of 1st Class Lawn Tennis* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1924).
Huggins, Mike and Jack Williams, *Sport and the English 1918–1939* (London: Routledge, 2006).
Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens* (London: Temple Smith, 1949).
Jeffreys, Kevin, *British Tennis* (Worthing: Pitch, 2019).
Jennings, Jay (ed.), *Tennis and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Harvest, 1995).
Jones, Stephen, *Workers at Play* (London: Routledge, 1986).
Lake, Robert, 'They Treat Me Like Scum', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 4(2), 2011, pp. 1–11.
Lambert Chambers, Dorothea, *Lawn Tennis for Ladies* (London: Methuen, 1910).
Lerry, Ronald, *Cradle of Lawn Tennis* (Birmingham: Stanford & Mann, 1949).
Little, Alan, *The Golden Days of Tennis on the French Riviera* (Wimbledon: Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, 2014).
Little, Alan, *Lottie Dod* (Wimbledon: Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, 2014).
Little, Alan, *Maud Watson* (Wimbledon: Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, 2014).
Macauley, Duncan, *Behind the Scenes at Wimbledon* (London: Collins, 1965).
McCrone, Kathleen, *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women, 1870–1914* (London: Routledge, 2014).
Marshall, Julian, *Annals of Tennis* (London: The Field, 1878).
Marshall, Julian, *Tennis Quips and Cuts* (London: Field & Tuer, 1884).
Maskell, Dan with John Barrett, *Oh I Say* (London: Willow Books 1988).
Mewshaw, Michael, *Ladies of the Court* (New York: Random House, 1992).
Millman, Ted, *A History of Professional Tennis* (London: Professional Coaches Association 1984).
Mills, Alan, *Lifting the Covers* (London: Headline, 2005).

Mitchell, Kevin, *Break Point* (London: John Murray, 2014).
Muir, Donal, 'Club Tennis: A Case Study in Taking Leisure Very Seriously', in *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8(1), 1991, pp. 70–8.
Murray, Andy, *Coming of Age* (London: Century, 2008).
Myers, A. Wallis, *Lawn Tennis at Home and Abroad* (London: George Newnes, 1903).
Osborn, Robert D., *Lawn Tennis, Its Players and How to Play* (London: Strahan & Co., 1881).
Oyler, Thomas, *50 Years of Lawn Tennis* (Maidstone: S.E. Gazette, 1925).
Payn, F.W., *Secrets of Lawn Tennis* (London: L. Upton Gill, 1906).
Pearson, Jeffrey, *Lottie Dod* (Birkenhead: Countrywise, 1988).
Perry, Fred, *Autobiography* (London: Stanley Paul, 1984).
Phillips, Caryl (ed.), *The Right Set* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).
Phillips, Rowan Ricardo, *The Circuit* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2018).
Piele, S.C.F., *Lawn tennis as a Game of Skill* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1884).
Pronger, Brian, *The Arena of Masculinity* (London: GMP, 1990).
Revie, Alistair, *Wonderful Wimbledon* (London: Pelham, 1972).
Robertson, George, *Tennis in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish LTA, 1995).
Seddon, Peter, *Tennis's Strangest Matches* (London: Robson, 2001).
Sexton, Adam (ed.), *Love Stories – A Literary Companion to Tennis* (New York: Citadel, 2003).
Shriver, Lionel, 'My Tennis Obsession', *Prospect*, May 2011.
Simpson, Brian, *Winners in Action* (Fakenham: JJG, 2005).
Smythe, Jasper, *Lawn Tennis* (London: George Routledge, 1878).
Steen, Rob, *Floodlights and Touchlines* (London: Bloomsbury 2014).
Tarran, Bruce, *George Hillyard* (Kipworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2013).
Tignor, Stephen, *High Strung* (New York: Harper, 2011).
Tilden, Bill, *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball* (London: Methuen, 1925).
Tingay, Lance, *100 Years of Wimbledon* (London: Guinness Superlatives, 1977).
Vaile, Percy, *Modern Lawn Tennis* (London: William Heinemann, 1904).
Verghese, Abraham, *The Tennis Partner* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).
Wade, Virginia with Jean Rafferty, *Ladies of the Court* (London: Pavilion Books, 1984).
Ware, Susan, *Game, Set, Match* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
Wilberforce, H.W.W., *Lawn Tennis* (London: George Bell, 1889).
Wills, Helen, *Fifteen-Thirty* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).