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## **A Social History of Tennis in Britain by Robert J. Lake (review) Mike Huggins**

Top-flight competitive success in tennis has been a problematic and painful obsession in Britain for many decades. So, outside the Wimbledon championship and rare international success stories such as that of Scotland's Andy Murray, tennis has never been one of Britain's leading sports in terms of television viewing, attendance figures at games, club membership, or revenue generation. This in turn has meant that it has been a neglected area of study among British historians of sport. Good scholarly studies such as Heiner Gillmeister's *Tennis: A Cultural History* (1998) and, more recently, Elizabeth Wilson's, *Love Game: A History of Tennis from Victorian Pastime to Global Phenomenon* (2014) stand out as relatively rare.

But these studies are now joined by Rob Lake's empirically oriented sociocultural history of British tennis, which also picks up on Britain's role in tennis's global development. In seventeen chapters, it covers the period from its modern beginnings in the later nineteenth century to about 2008 and a final more speculative conclusion about its future. As such, Lake is able to describe and explain how tennis emerged, developed, and changed in the wider context of social, economic, political, and cultural developments in Britain and to explore the interrelationships between tennis and wider British society, drawing on readings in broader historiography, though François Bedarida's work is somewhat overused. He demonstrates clearly that tennis has been a site of contest and struggle in relation to issues such as gender inequality, racial intolerance, social class and social exclusion, religion, etiquette, age, children's involvement, imperialism, commercialism, corruption, power relationships, and amateurism and professionalism and has been riddled with subtle class distinctions. [End Page 429]

Lake's subtle study makes it very clear that "tennis developed unsteadily and moved through a number of key phases where its progress was threatened" (5). These included the late nineteenth century, the two world wars, post-World War II austerity, and the social unrest of the period from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Though the book's origins lie in Lake's PhD thesis at Brunel University, focusing on social exclusion in tennis, which was completed in 2008, it draws on much subsequent original research and secondary reading, most especially on social class and gender. Its sources range widely, and he draws well on key sources such as tennis magazines like *Lawn Tennis* and *Badminton*, as well as newspapers, club histories, autobiographies, official handbooks, and the incomparable library of the All-England Tennis Club.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the book is the series of paradoxes surrounding tennis that Lake is able to identify. For example, on the one hand, exclusive features of the sport were sometimes celebrated as a means of enhancing its prestige among the socially aspirational middle classes, yet exclusion was simultaneously criticized for much of the twentieth century for contributing to poor British performances. Tennis was cited for later twentieth-century success for issues of inclusion and equality, while also remaining administratively a white-male-dominated elitist sport. It has played a role in terms of shifting attitudes to women's sporting capabilities and afforded middle-class white women a context for greater social and spatial freedom, yet even recently has tended to marginalize, sexualize, and objectify top-level women's performances in terms of media coverage and product endorsement and still presents homosexuality as a taboo subject.

Coverage is well-balanced chronologically. Five chapters cover the period up to the First World War, covering themes such as representations of social class and gender, playing styles, etiquette and fashions, clubs, tournaments and competition, the Lawn Tennis Association's early struggles for legitimacy and its relations with the All-England Lawn Tennis Club in terms of tennis governance, and British tennis in its wider imperial context. A further six chapters cover the interwar period, with its growing demand at club and recreational levels, and advances for women and children. The growth in the number of tennis clubs created a rather more egalitarian and competitive approach than previously, though...