

Real Tennis and Ireland

Introduction

History has shaped modern Irish sport in ways that are many and complex. There are aspects of Ireland's sporting history that are uniquely Irish. However, the Irish sporting world is unique only in parts; there is much of the history of Irish sport that is a shared history with that of other societies. This is partly a reflection of the universal instincts that draw humans to the idea of play, partly a reflection of the history of Ireland within what was once the British Empire, and partly, also, a reflection of an international cultural exchange where political and geographic borders are permeable. It is within this context that the extended history of Real Tennis in Ireland – and its place in Irish culture and society – should be considered.

Documentary evidence indicates that Real Tennis is one of Ireland's oldest surviving organised sports, second only to horseracing and hurling. Unlike these latter sports, which have an extensive physical infrastructure on the island, the future of Real Tennis in Ireland is at risk for lack of playing facilities. Although lacking the breadth of impact of sports like soccer or rugby, Real Tennis is as important and relevant to its players and supporters as these mainstream games are to their communities. That the Real Tennis Court in Earlsfort Terrace was not used for its intended purpose on presentation to the State in 1939 is a shame; a failure to take this opportunity to return it to this use, and return the game of Real Tennis to its rightful place on this island, would compound this.

Origins of Real Tennis

The roots of our modern sporting world lie deep in the Middle Ages. Those roots began to bear fruit before 1800 and then the nineteenth century wrought a transformation in the way people played sport. This transformation amounted to a revolution in play. The story of this process is perfectly encapsulated in the extraordinary history of Real Tennis.¹ This is a story that is superbly told in Heiner Gillmeister's extraordinary book, *Tennis: A Cultural History*, which records the place of Real Tennis in European cultural life from the twelfth century onwards. On one level this was the game of Kings, played by royalty as diverse as King Louis X of France in the fourteenth century and King Henry VIII of England in the sixteenth century. But as Gillmeister has revealed, it was also played by the religious orders, in schools and by members of the public in towns around Europe.

Spread of Real Tennis to Ireland

The spread of this sport into Ireland extends back to the fourteenth century, with the apparent construction of a tennis court in Dublin Castle. There is evidence that the game was played more widely by the sixteenth century and the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* series reveals the existence of Real Tennis courts across Ireland in the eighteenth century. There were, for example, Real Tennis courts in Cork, Kilkenny, Limerick and Dublin (Winetavern Street, Lazer's Hill, St. John's Lane, Dame Street, etc.). These courts were not the preserve of an elite (although there were, indeed, elite courts), but

¹ The term Real Tennis comes from the 1870s and was coined in response to the growth of the newly-invented sport of Lawn Tennis. Previously, the sport was usually just known as Tennis, but the Real was now added to signify both its antiquity and its distinction.

were also available to the public to hire. They would have been out of reach of those mired in poverty, but were frequented by those known to history as ‘the middlin’ sort’. To this end the game was popular with apprentices in Galway in the seventeenth century, and the court in Kilkenny was in use until the 1840s, at least.

Put simply, the evidence of the existence of Real Tennis in Ireland affords it an antiquity in historical documentation that is second only to hurling and horseracing as organised sport.

Nineteenth Century Revolution in Play

The modern sporting world is the product of the accretion of change and the deepening of traditions over time. The transformation of sport in the nineteenth century with the decline of long-practised sports such as cockfighting and bullbaiting and the emergence of a new sporting culture centred on dedicated sporting clubs and organizations is, more than anything, a reminder of the manner in which sport reflects broader trends in society. Commercialization, growth in disposable income, and revolutions in education and health served to create the conditions for sport to develop new characteristics in the years after the Great Famine.

By 1880 this modernisation of Irish sport was in full bloom. During these years sporting enthusiasms broke in waves across Irish towns and its countryside. These sometimes endured, changing the social life of the inhabitants; on other occasions they disappeared leaving little or no trace (bicycle polo, for example, was invented in Wicklow in 1891, but has since disappeared without trace). But those sports that established clubs and laid down an infrastructure usually thrived. Cricket, athletics, and rugby clubs were by

then well established, while soccer clubs were expanding at a phenomenal rate. Hunting and horse racing remained a central feature of the island's sporting experience, while rowing and boxing also had a steady following. All of these new clubs bonded together in dedicated governing bodies and organisations. They also began to construct a physical playing infrastructure which remade the Irish landscape. This infrastructure made possible the spread of organised sports and evidenced a democracy of play in which all could take part.

Tennis and the Revolution in Play

In terms of tennis, the newly-invented sport of lawn tennis exploded into popularity in the mid-1870s. It swept first England and then Ireland like wildfire, equally popular in the estates of big houses and the new suburbs of the middle classes. It quickly developed a competitive championship structure centred on Wimbledon and, later, on major competitions such as the US Open, the French Open and the Australian Open. The Irish championships were established just two years after Wimbledon and were an international sporting event of great importance, while Irish men and women won Wimbledon and US Open championships. This change did not obliterate the old tradition of Real Tennis, however. The sport retained its old traditions, and refashioned those traditions for a new age. New Real Tennis courts were built and the sport sought to rejuvenate itself. Courts were built in the late nineteenth century in England (London, Manchester, Newcastle, Dorset and elsewhere), America, Australia and France. It is striking that quite a number of Real Tennis courts have been renovated and made available for play in recent years.

A Place to Play

It was within the context of this Victorian sporting revolution that Sir Edward Cecil Guinness built the Real Tennis Court that stands on Earlsfort Terrace. The court is a striking manifestation of how past and present routinely unite in sport. The traditions of the game of Real Tennis were remade in a new structure that is acknowledged as unique. The history of the court lends it a significance that elevates it beyond the normal. In the first instance, it stood – and stands – as the only Real Tennis court on the island. And in the second instance, it staged a world championship in 1890. That the court subsequently fell into disuse as a Tennis Court and that it has subsequently been used for other purposes is a singular shame that cannot disguise what it is has been and what it should be.

Conclusion: Past and Present

Sport is an essential part of modern life, a vital presence. People's passion to play is at the heart of what attracts them to sport and goes a considerable distance to explaining the ubiquity of sport in modern Ireland. A seismic shift in sporting culture has obviously occurred through the centuries and this reflects the changes from pre-industrial to postmodern society in Ireland. Nonetheless, the human emotions that continue to drive sport remain essentially the same. This love of sport is not a simple matter of escapism. Sport, instead, is utterly real, a normal part of everyday life for millions of Irish people.

Tradition matters in the modern world of sport – and no tradition matters more than the idea of 'the day out'. Communal gatherings around sports events are a vital part of modern society. The role of the sports club is readily apparent. The connections that

people make in sport can sustain them through life: for some people sport is what makes school bearable and work possible. For mainstream sporting events, the evidence for this is everywhere to be found. For example, travel to and from sports events involves the almost ritualistic stop at particular sites, for picnics or pints. The diversity of this endeavour spans helicopter trips to the Galway Races and ferry rides to support English soccer clubs, as well as the annual cross-country pilgrimages undertaken by GAA supporters.

What makes this possible and what emphasises the centrality of sport to life in modern Ireland is the great necklace of sporting facilities – from floodlit grounds to climbing walls and swimming pools – that now bejewel the Irish landscape. Some are entirely new, built as interest in particular sports has spread and the capital to develop facilities became available around the turn of the new millennium. Other modern sports facilities are built on sites where sport has long been played, often dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when modern sport enjoyed its most dramatic period of expansion. Others extend still further back into history: to stand on The Curragh in County Kildare and watch racehorses gallop in silhouette against the morning sun is to bear witness to something timeless and majestic where past and present stand as one. These sporting facilities are the bedrock which allows people engage in the sports that they love – they are the fundamental on which everything else rests.

For mainstream sports, their future seems to stretch out beyond a foreseeable future. What guarantees that future is the extensive physical infrastructure that underpins everything that they do. Without a place to play, any sport will ultimately wither and die. And that is, ultimately, what is at issue here. The traditions of the people who play Real Tennis, the importance of the sport to their lives, their passion to play is as

relevant, as just, as real and as clear as those of any other sport. That an Irish Real Tennis Association exists and that its members travel out of Ireland to play emphasises both their commitment to their sport and the challenges they face to live that commitment. Their sporting world is one that does not make the newspapers or does not drive content and advertising on websites – but this is an irrelevance. Indeed, it underlines the critical issue at hand here. The antiquity of their sport is obvious, its place in Irish society is genuine and established, and their need for a place to play is undeniable. Their rights should be vindicated.

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