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Eaves, SJ and Lake, RJ (2017) The 'Ubiquitous Apostle of International Play', Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves: The Forgotten Internationalist of Lawn Tennis. *International Journal of the History of Sport*. ISSN 0952-3367

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1295957>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Version: Accepted Version

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The 'Ubiquitous Apostle of International Play', Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves: The Forgotten Internationalist of Lawn Tennis

Simon J. Eaves and Robert J. Lake

Submitted - International Journal of History of Sport

Abstract

In the context of sustained imperial dominance during the late Victorian era, foreigners perceived British playing styles, methods and approaches to lawn tennis as 'blueprints' for aspiring players. Those seeking to learn the game were largely dependent on observing skilled performers, however before the mid-1890s, most of the best British players declined to venture to Australasia and America, perceiving the opposition as inferior and their championships unworthy of their participation. Moreover, while British-trained coaching-professionals – widely considered the world's best – offered instruction in a small number of clubs, they also rarely ventured outside of Europe. Alongside these barriers, the parochial and ethnocentric Lawn Tennis Association was less than proactive in their approaches to fostering international relations. One man, however, Dr Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves, did more for the internationalization of the sport than anyone else during this period, travelling extensively in America, South Africa and Australasia, demonstrating his skills, offering instruction and advising officials. Consequently, he helped develop the sport's international character, laying the foundations for the Davis Cup, helping to foster Anglo-Australasian and Anglo-American relations, and hastening the development of foreign players, particularly in Australasia. This paper assesses the notable contributions of a player, coach and diplomat who has been largely ignored.

Keywords: International relations; America; Australasia; Davis Cup; talent development

Introduction

As six-thousand excited Sydney spectators eagerly anticipated the commencement of the Great Britain versus Australasia tennis challenge of 1913 – what became known as the Davis Cup – the assorted masses would have expected nothing other than a home victory. Ever since the antipodeans defeated Britain in 1907, they had dominated the event, winning a further four times in the next six years against the best that Britain and America could muster. Moreover, Norman Brookes and Anthony Wilding, the greatest of the Australasian players, had annexed the Wimbledon Championships, winning six singles and four doubles titles between them – including two with Wilding partnering the Englishman Josiah Ritchie in 1908 and 1910 – from 1907-14. Few could argue against the insurgence of Australasian tennis, which represented, alongside developments in America and across Continental Europe, the sport's incipient globalization, progressing away from the parochial British pastime it once was.

A correspondent for the *Sydney Mail* reported the attendance of many prominent guests; however, the most notable of all was not part of Sydney society, but a diminutive middle-aged man who sat in eager anticipation, almost anonymously, having travelled thousands of miles for his beloved game of lawn tennis.¹ A few in the crowd would have recognized the smartly dressed, moustached spectator, a man later described as the

‘ubiquitous apostle of international play’.² Fewer still would have appreciated his important contribution to the internationalization of the game, and to raising Australasian tennis from its humble beginnings to its zenith in the years before the Great War. In an article written in the *New York Herald*, later reproduced in the *Referee* in 1919, the author states:

For the last decade, students of lawn tennis have been busy theorising on the great success of the Australians, and various but illusive problems have been advanced as the secret. ... It is curious that one never hears of any particular individual being the cause of the progress, and yet the Australasians owe their foremost place today to one man, and he is Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves’.³

W.V. Eaves, the second son of William and Eunice (née Vaughan), was born on December 10th, 1867, at Carlow House, St. Kilda, Australia. While he maintained close ties to Australia throughout his life, his family immigrated to England when he was just two years old. Eaves was privately educated in Folkestone – not at Eton as his father claimed – and became a surgeon; he served in the Boer War, and received the Queen’s and King’s medals with three clasps. Later in the Great War, he rose to the rank of Captain and received an MBE.⁴ Residing for most of his life at his ‘club’ – the Junior Athenaeum, in Piccadilly – Eaves developed values indicative of his British Victorian upper-middle-class background; he was generous and philanthropic, believed in voluntary service, and had a thirst for games.⁵ Indeed, despite Eaves’s prominence in medicine, it was lawn tennis that would profit most from his efforts and expertise. ‘The Doctor’, as he was known to his close friends/family, became, according to *Lawn Tennis & Badminton*, ‘one of the most popular men not only in lawn tennis, but in the domain of sport generally, and [he] had friends all over the world’.⁶ *The Times*, reporting his death in 1920, proclaimed him, ‘a familiar figure on lawn tennis courts, where his enterprising tactics made him a great favourite with the gallery’.⁷

In a career spanning nearly three decades, from Eaves’ first tournament in Brighton as a 21-year-old, he reached the sport’s highest echelon, becoming the first Australian-born player to compete at Wimbledon in 1890, before going on to contest the final of three straight All-Comers Championships there, from 1895-97. In 1895, in a match effectively for the Wimbledon title, given the previous year’s champion, Joshua Pim, would not defend in the Challenge Round, Eaves held match point against Wilfred Baddeley before losing in five sets, while in the doubles, with Ernest Lewis, they lost in the Challenge Round to the dominant Baddeley brothers. Two years later, Eaves reached the Challenge Round of the US Nationals but was defeated in five close sets to R.D. ‘Bob’ Wrenn.⁸ Across Europe, during his prime, Eaves secured tournament wins in dozens of other championships, and also competed in Australia, representing Victoria – the state/territory of his birth – in various intercolonial championships. He remained sufficiently accomplished in his forties to have been chosen to play Davis Cup in 1907 – though he did not actually play – and compete at the 1908 London Olympic Games, winning a bronze medal in lawn tennis. In both these events he represented the British team, however, which reveals something about how he came to identify himself and determine where his loyalties laid.

In his insightful analysis of the constructions of Australia’s sporting identity in the late-18th/early-19th centuries, Jared van Duinen contends that it was not uncommon for Australian athletes to adopt a dual identity, Australian *and* British. Combining British pride with Australian patriotic feeling, this expression represented a kind of ‘localized Britishness’.⁹ Richard Cashman, in his study of Anglo-Australian cricket in the late-Victorian era, uncovered numerous English cricketers who ventured to coach Australia’s rising talent, alongside, conversely, a half dozen Australian cricketers who immigrated to England to compete for its national team.¹⁰ The complexities inherent to this fluid cultural exchange between ‘metropolitan’ Britain and the Australian ‘hinterland’ during this period are a common theme within the discourse of dominion sport, according to van Duinen, and it is

possible to locate Eaves within this context.¹¹ He became a quintessential internationalist, seeking to enhance the standards of all players he came across, not for the benefit of any one nation over another but for the benefit of lawn tennis as a burgeoning international sport.

Eaves' extensive travels led him to become a kind of international ambassador for lawn tennis. After having left as a toddler, he returned to Australia several times to compete and coach young talent; he toured America in 1897 as part of a British team to compete in several tournaments; he became the New Zealand Lawn Tennis Association's (NZLTA) London-based delegate in 1908, thereby establishing a formal relationship with Australasian tennis; and, that same year, was part of an English team that extensively toured South Africa.¹² Given the subsequent prediction that South Africa would 'carry off' the Davis Cup as a consequence of the 'beneficial result' of Eaves' tour, it was evident that his impact and public admiration stretched far and wide.¹³ Some years after his death, the *London Illustrated News* recalled of Eaves' subtle but permanent impact upon the Wimbledon Championships in particular:

One of the greatest changes, which the passing years have seen, is the development of the international character of the meeting, and for this we owe a great debt to that sterling player W. V. Eaves. [He] travelled all over the world in the pursuit of his favourite game, and did more than anyone else to raise the standard of lawn tennis in the many countries he visited.¹⁴

Despite being a first-class player and the earliest and most prominent internationalist in his day, hitherto the name Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves remains largely forgotten within the sport's historiography. Most lawn tennis historians have neglected to mention his achievements or give Eaves but a passing mention. Bud Collins wrote a short paragraph in his voluminous encyclopaedia and record book in which he described Eaves as 'an Aussie that got around ... first of his country to play for major titles abroad'.¹⁵ In truth, he should be remembered for much more than this, though at least Alan Trengove, in his history of the Davis Cup, credits the 'ubiquitous' Eaves in his coaching of the Australian and four-time Davis Cup champion Norman Brookes.¹⁶ However, judging by Eaves' conspicuous absence within other historical accounts, one might naturally assume that this was where his involvement in lawn tennis ended, but the reluctance to credit him appropriately does both him and the sport a major disservice. The chief aim of this paper is to redress the absence of Eaves within the historiography of lawn tennis and to critically assess his various but significant contributions to the sport's internationalization within broader societal contexts.

Eaves's Contributions to the Internationalization of Lawn Tennis

Eaves embarked on his lawn tennis career in the late-1870s/early-1880s, when the sport was in its infancy and British players dominated the game. Racket sports, notably real tennis and racquets, were well-established among the upper-middle-class and gave British players a head-start in developing reliable techniques and consistent skills.¹⁷ However, beyond these island shores, geographical isolation and the subsequent lack of reliable information about, and first-hand demonstrations of, correct play limited players' respective developments. Indeed, while the first marketed box-set of lawn tennis equipment – patented as 'Sphairistike' by Major Walter Clopton Wingfield – was portable to the far reaches of the globe, expertise in terms of instruction was harder to transport. Skill acquisition was difficult without proper instruction, as Dr James Dwight, widely considered the 'Father of American Tennis', testified. After receiving a lawn tennis set from England, the future five-time US Nationals doubles champion and United States National Lawn Tennis Association (USNLTA) president recalled his first attempt to play was 'more in jest than earnest'.¹⁸ The prevailing view was

that self-instruction – a ‘trial and error’ approach – was the most appropriate method of acquiring proficiency, and seeking external advice was thought both unnecessary and tantamount to adopting a ‘professional’ approach.¹⁹ In the context of widespread amateur ideals pervading lawn tennis among other sports during this period, the denigration of coaching and training among middle-class practitioners was a powerful force.²⁰

This conservative view was not necessarily wholly accepted among the sport’s growing playing contingent, but while professional coaches did emerge in the British Isles in the late-1880s, their migration beyond Europe was rare. They established themselves along the French Riviera and other holiday destinations, especially those where the British vacationed, alongside leading clubs in major cities such as Paris, Berlin, Vienna and Stockholm.²¹ However, it was not until the early-20th century when British coaching-professionals, typically trained at Queen’s Club and widely believed as the world’s best, ventured to Australasia and America. As historian Geoffrey Blainey commented, Australia was cursed by the ‘tyranny of distance’, and this influenced the flow of ‘cultural traffic’ between it and other nations, of which sport was significant.²² Geographical isolation hampered lawn tennis development there for some time, but Eaves made a significant impact both in Australia/New Zealand *and* America. He provided advice to authorities; gave instruction, taught new strokes and techniques and set targets for the attainment of playing standards; and, demonstrated his own tactics and playing styles by competing against local players.

When tournament tennis emerged in Australia in the 1880s, the country’s vastness meant that New South Wales (NSW) commonly played against Queensland and Victoria against South Australia.²³ Internal player movement between territories was limited by an incomprehensive travel infrastructure, which hindered the diffusion of tactical and technical knowledge and innovation. Moreover, outside ‘role models’ from the northern hemisphere were limited, which meant that training manuals and books – authored often by former players in Britain – became the standard means by which expert instruction was imparted. The obvious inadequacies of this approach were soon realized, but the challenge of attracting British players and coaching-professionals was significant, and one that Australian authorities arguably did little, initially at least, to manage.

Sport was an important way for Australia to remain connected with Britain, and, as Adair noted, it was ‘of particular note when sports teams and competitors from Britain toured the colonies’.²⁴ However, at that time, travel by ship from Britain took from four to six weeks and was expensive, which therefore limited the opportunities of visiting tennis players, who would not have come under any official sanction, to those with the requisite time, finances, work flexibility and personal motivation. Eaves was exceptional in this regard. His familial wealth, flexible career and strong family ties in Australia were enabling factors, and this set of conditions ensured Australasian tennis would benefit immensely after 1891, the year of Eaves’ initial foray down under.

In January 1890, Eaves’s father died, precipitating his mother and brother to relocate closer to the Vaughan family in Melbourne. Wilberforce, although not intending to stay, accompanied the family, leaving Britain on November 12th aboard the SS Massilia. Upon arriving in Australia, he wasted no time in seeking out tennis opportunities and set out to assist local administrators to develop the game in ways that he felt would be of upmost benefit to Australian players.²⁵

One of his first efforts was to urge Victorian officials to change from a non-covered to a covered ball, arguing that English players would not compete using the former.²⁶ The Victorians were reluctant to change, however, viewing their use of non-covered balls as illustrating, somewhat haughtily it would appear, their ‘accustomed place, at the “head of affairs”’.²⁷ ‘Bisque’ argued, however, ‘you can search the wide world over and not in a single

place where tennis has got beyond its infancy will you find the game played with uncovered balls'.²⁸ Not wanting to risk the prospect of further isolation from the rest of the lawn-tennis-playing world, which by this time had universally adopted the cloth-covered ball, Victorian officials finally heeded Eaves' advice, and the *Illustrated Sydney News* reported in December 1891 that, hereafter, 'all matches in Victoria will be played with ... covered balls'.²⁹

Eaves also recommended a more streamlined tournament structure to encourage more foreign entries, aligning Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney tournaments within a single block of time in February/March; few first-rate English players, he believed, would travel such a distance to play in a single tournament.³⁰ Yet again, however, the stubborn Australian authorities were slow to heed his advice, and their reluctance to alter the tournament schedule in the main cities to better accommodate the wishes of visiting foreigners, on top of the initial disinclination to adopt the standardized ball, resulted in a period of stagnation in terms of player development, partly as an outcome of their continued isolation.

Despite the intransigence of Australian officials, upon departing for Britain Eaves promised them he would return with an accompanying ensemble. In particular, he made significant efforts to convince arguably the greatest British players of the early-20th century, R.F. and H.L. Doherty, to venture to Australia, but on this score he was unsuccessful.³¹ Nonetheless, his visit to Australia made a lasting impact according to Australian journalist, Robert Kidson (under the pseudonym 'Austral'), who remarked: 'To the Australians, in 1891, he gave the first insight into the full wonders of lawn tennis. ... Up to that time, we had marvelled at the play' of Australia's best players, Dudley Webb and Ben Green; 'we thought them invincible. Better play we could not imagine. Eaves's play was a revelation; he singlehandedly changed the game in Australasia'.³² Others were similarly impressed. A *Sydney Mail* correspondent opined, 'his all round play is far ahead of that of any player here'.³³ For 'Backhand', of the *Dominion*, Eaves demonstrated to Australian players that 'success was to be achieved by a persistent attack, the aim of which was to gain the net at some risk, if need be ... and there to press home without cessation'.³⁴ Additionally, for a correspondent in the *Australasian*, Eaves' play showed 'how far behind the English cracks our best men are'.³⁵

This view of British/English superiority in sport was held in many of Britain's former colonies, but while the Australians overtook the English in cricket in the 1870s, the changing of the guard in lawn tennis did not occur until the mid-Edwardian period, around the time when the English rugby teams were suffering at the hands of the All Blacks and Springboks.³⁶ Similarly, while the Americans made great strides in rowing and sailing before the turn of the century, and in lawn tennis achieved some success against the British in early Davis Cup contests, their undisputed dominance here was not properly assured until the inter-war period. Thus, throughout the 1880s and 90s, the US remained largely in awe, seeking as many opportunities as possible to test themselves against the British 'cracks', both at home and abroad.

Between 1883 and 1885, C.M. and J.S. Clark, Sears and Dwight all competed against top English talent, but returned home heavily defeated. The Clark brothers played in two exhibitions in 1883 at Wimbledon against the Renshaw brothers, Ernest and William, but won only one set.³⁷ Sears and Dwight were also easily defeated by the Renshaws in Cannes the following summer,³⁸ before venturing to compete in several British tournaments, to which *Pastime* reported, condescendingly, 'our visitors are here on a pleasure trip, and do not pretend to be equal to the Renshaws, Lawford and others. They play to learn, not teach'.³⁹ Dwight was led to agree, admitting: 'The English players are class for class better than ours'.⁴⁰ Continuing to compete in Britain over the next few years, Dwight fared slightly better, but ended the 1885 season still ranked only 'tenth amongst the British players'.⁴¹ The following year, another American correspondent confirmed the current state of tennis in

America: 'The number of good players is continually increasing. When I say good players, I mean good for us. We have only two American players [Dwight and Sears] who compare well with the better class of English players'.⁴²

Such views of unquestionable British superiority at this time reflected, according to Park, a broader 'anxiety that Americans were physically inferior to their English contemporaries'.⁴³ In the broader imperial context, where Britain's global dominance was assumed and buttressed by decades of ideological constructions of supposedly innate moral, racial and cultural superiority, this corresponding view is unsurprising.⁴⁴ And while pessimistic from an American perspective, such views were certainly backed up by on-court results. With an apparent lack of success, fewer American players felt compelled to venture from their own shores, although O.S. Campbell travelled in 1892, but could only beat second-class English players.⁴⁵

Naturally, the British did their best to reinforce the widespread view of their own 'natural' superiority in sport, as in other domains. Lawn tennis writer Percy Vaile saw little change in this attitude when writing in 1917: the Englishman 'knows his own unassailable supremacy in everything from the Navy to Free trade', adding the jibe, 'accepting always, of course, cricket'.⁴⁶ He added that some British players, when speaking of foreigners, 'seem to breathe the sentiment, "we are the tennis players. Run away, little boy. We have nothing to learn"'.⁴⁷ Such notions of unassailable superiority, coupled with 'sensationalist reports [exaggerating] American deficiencies' in play alongside sub-standard equipment, courts and rules, likely lessened the motivation of British players to compete abroad.⁴⁸ This profoundly impacted the game's development and, in time, as in other sports, set the British up to be overtaken.

In the context of developing Anglo-American relations in the late-Victorian era, the interplay between national tennis officials reflected the relative but shifting political, economic and cultural positions of both nations. At the height of its Empire, the British deferred to no one, but the Americans were developing rapidly in industry and commerce, not to mention through the exportation of their culture.⁴⁹ Their efforts to dominate in sport were widespread and increasingly invested with social significance within a nationalist discourse. Indeed, as Park commented: 'By the 1890s ... Americans were asserting that they were the world's foremost nation, and ... sport – male sport – was frequently used in an effort to establish this presumption of authority'.⁵⁰ American officials were keen to invite the British to their east-coast tournaments, but the best British men did not reciprocate the earlier visits of Dwight, Sears and the Clarks until the mid-1890s, considering the American Championships unworthy of British interest and an unnecessary expense.⁵¹ In 1894, Dwight wrote enthusiastically: 'There is nothing that I should like better than to see some of the best English players here'; such visits would 'excite more interest or stimulate our players more'.⁵² Former player and tennis writer, Jahial Parmly Paret, expressed in 1899 the importance of overseas competition for American players: 'At present', he lamented, 'the great dearth of first-class material has been one of the greatest drawbacks from which the game has suffered during the last three or four years'.⁵³

American efforts to institute trans-Atlantic competition were not matched with equal enthusiasm in Britain. While Dwight sought to develop a healthy rivalry, he admitted that the contests between 'different styles of play' would be 'beneficial to both, but particularly to the American game'.⁵⁴ His efforts to develop relations were complemented by comments in a leading American newspaper designed to rile the British; they declared that no player could claim 'world's best' unless they had won the US National Championships. *Pastime*, the mouthpiece of Britain's Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), responded dismissively, questioning why 'the holder of the oldest established championship should have to travel to a comparatively new district to prove himself the best player in the world'.⁵⁵

The LTA's intransigence reflected Britain's 'robustly parochial and ethnocentric view of sport', according to Llewellyn; 'they believed that sports were their sole property and displayed limited interest in playing against foreign rivals'.⁵⁶ Even with the process of fostering a tennis match against Ireland, a nation on England's doorstep that had produced a number of Wimbledon champions, the insular LTA was reluctant to initiate proceedings.⁵⁷ Indeed, a handful of Irish players had to circumvent the standoff between the Fitzwilliam Club and the LTA to progress.⁵⁸ Similarly, when on the rare occasions British players ventured to tour America, the LTA repeatedly refused to accord them 'official' status.

The 1879 runner-up in the all-comers at Wimbledon, O.E. Woodhouse, became in 1880 the first known British player to compete in an American tournament, winning the first unofficial American national championship, hosted by the Staten Island Baseball Club. Over the coming decade, at least nine other British players competed in either the US Nationals or another major American tournament, though none of these exponents were considered front-rank.⁵⁹ Manliffe F. Goodbody became the first player of merit to compete in the US, in 1894, and despite being 'badly out of practice and easily beaten by inferior American players' in early tournaments, he ended up reaching the Challenge Round of the US Nationals.⁶⁰ The following year, even stronger British opposition arrived in the form of Joshua Pim, the 1893 and '94 Wimbledon Singles Champion, and compatriot Harold Mahony, who would go on to win Wimbledon in 1896. They competed in a round-robin tournament organised by Harry L. Ayer at the Neighborhood Club in West Newton, Massachusetts.⁶¹ The Irishmen won four out of five matches each against American opposition, though naturally the latter were keen to engage in more of these encounters.⁶²

James Dwight was a particularly strong advocate and, during his frequent trips to Britain, befriended Herbert Chipp, the then Secretary of the LTA. In 1897, as USNLTA President, he proposed through a private letter to Chipp an annual international challenge-match with Britain. The Americans offered to pay their travel expenses that year, if the British would reciprocate the following year. Acting in an official capacity, however, Dwight had made a serious error of judgement in writing directly to Chipp, who had since left his Secretary post. In discussion with Chipp's predecessor, W.H. Collins, the LTA agreed to the proposal in principal, but were unimpressed by Dwight's high-handed tactics and considered the offer to pay expenses a breach of amateur ideals, and so declined the challenge 'on financial grounds'.⁶³ The decision of the July Council meeting was that no official British team should be sent to compete on American soil, though this did not prevent an "unofficial" tour taking place.

The 'Unofficial' Tour of America in 1897

Despite the lack of LTA support, three players took up the challenge at their own expense, albeit with American subsidies. Harold Mahony, Harold Nisbet and Wilberforce Eaves sailed from Southampton, for what would be the first truly international challenge between the two countries, proving a prototype for the International Lawn Tennis Challenge (Davis Cup) initiated in 1900. Tennis writer, A. Wallis Myers, unkindly considered these three British representatives below Britain's best, but others disagreed, citing their respective records. *Outing* proclaimed that Eaves,

has been the "uncrowned king" of the British tennis world for some time. He holds the famous Irish championship, only a shade less important than that of All England, and is considered over there to be fully equal to the best of his rivals.⁶⁴

Earlier in the year, Eaves narrowly lost in the final round of Wimbledon to his teammate, Mahony, and had won the prestigious British Covered Courts Championships.⁶⁵ Moreover,

both he and Mahony had defeated the reigning Wimbledon singles champion, R.F. Doherty, just prior to leaving for America, and in the previous year were ranked second and third respectively.

In custom with British exaggerations of American culture, *Lawn Tennis* reported the imminent tour, stating: 'everyone on this side will wish them good luck, although they will have a strong opponent in the climate... to say nothing of the strange conditions and... the proverbial hospitality of the natives'.⁶⁶ In contrast, the Americans revelled at the prospect of the arrival of the British 'team', with the matches being widely reported in the media. Eaves, Mahony and Nisbet played in four tournaments throughout August and early September: Boston, Hoboken (New York), Chicago, and Newport. The trio had limited success in Boston, with the American William Larned defeating all three challengers, and in Hoboken, the trio fared little better, losing a series of matches 5 to 4, with only Eaves defeating an American 'crack', Bob Wrenn. Larned again defeated all three challengers, but with all three Britons outclassing Bob's brother, G. L. Wrenn, the overall defeat looked a little closer than it probably was. Writing later, Bob Wrenn recalled Eaves's 'deadly half-volley', a stroke that was 'entirely new to this country'.⁶⁸ He was determined to avenge the loss, and his opportunity came at the US Nationals held in Newport, Rhode Island. Here, Eaves was the most successful of the trio, winning the All-Comers competition, before narrowly losing in the challenge round to R.D. Wrenn. According to *American Lawn Tennis*, it was, 'unquestionably the most superb exhibition of tennis we have yet seen in America'.⁶⁷ A *New York Times* correspondent reported that in 'one of the finest matches ever seen on the Casino courts... Eaves played by far the better tennis'.⁶⁸ The match statistics reinforced that view; Eaves had made fewer errors, winning 46% of his points compared to Wrenn's 38%,⁶⁹ and according to Wright and Ditson, 'many good judges felt as if the better player had lost'.⁷⁰ *American Lawn Tennis* concurred: 'Eaves outplaced him, outvolleyed [*sic*] him, and outlobbed [*sic*] him', yet Wrenn wrested 'a magnificent victory from his more brilliant antagonist'.⁷¹

What is interesting in analysing the correspondence around the 1897 tour is that Eaves is depicted as unmistakably British, which corresponds to the common trend at the time – especially prior to Australia gaining independence in 1901 – to conflate Australian and British identities. For Eaves, indeed, it seemed his loyalties were as fluid as his strokes.

Rise and Demise: the changing of the guard?

The 1897 tour was an undoubted success, but especially so for the Americans. Dwight's prophecy in 1894 proved insightful; the inception of the first truly international competition would benefit both parties, or at least it should have. The defeat of the British was the fillip the Americans required to shake off the shackles of their inferiority complex. Paret, writing in *Outing* shortly after the tour, summarized the American feeling: 'During the lawn-tennis season just ended, American players have won the greatest international victory in the annals of the sport'.⁷² The *New York Times* added: 'There is added pleasure, also, of beating clever Englishmen at a game which came to this country from England'.⁷³ From these comments, it is evident that the Americans invested the tour with greater cultural, if not nationalistic, significance, and also viewed the series of contests as an international competition in itself, rather than just a handful of tournaments that included some British players.

Back in England, the benefit of the tour to the players or the nation was harder to appreciate. Somewhat surprised by their mediocre performances, commentary soon followed that gave the initial impression of the British making excuses. What is clear is that, in the absence of a truly international federation to standardize rules and regulations – the LTA was

widely considered the de facto international body before the International Lawn Tennis Federation was formed in 1913 – ‘home advantage’ with all its implicit ‘tactical adjustments’ to playing conditions remained a significant factor in success. According to the American magazine *Outing*, the British players ‘complained constantly that our grass courts were too soft for them’.⁷⁴ Mahony and Eaves both commented on the ‘unfamiliar climatic conditions’, which led the USLTA’s own *Lawn Tennis Bulletin* to suggest the British were demonstrating poor sportsmanship:

We all on both sides of the water expected the Englishmen to win ... but when ... it was demonstrated beyond a doubt that our two best American players are at least equal to the three English visitors, it comes with exceedingly bad grace ... to claim that the three players were ... ill all the time from the effects of [the climate].⁷⁵

Eaves, in fairness, also made a number of practical considerations; for example, the seven-minute breaks between sets, which were ‘further extended by one’s opponent claiming the services of a shoe-cleaner’ in between games, was not particularly sporting. He added, ‘it seems to me that a decided encroachment on one’s good nature is made. I say absolutely so without *arrière pensée* [transl. ‘ulterior motive’]’.⁷⁶ The courts were quite different than in England, and unusual heavy rain softened them further, making conditions for the British more challenging. Eaves preferred ‘the court as hard as nails... so the ball will jump up in front of [him]’.⁷⁷

While Americans considered these comments as excuses, it is possible the British were merely making pragmatic observations. Indeed, while both Eaves and Mahony acknowledged the different court conditions and the bound of the ball in 1897, Dwight himself made these same points three years earlier: ‘The differences in the balls and courts from those in England must be considered, and this places another point in favour of our own players’.⁷⁸ The *New York Times* concurred on this perspective, seeing no fault with Eaves’s comments that were made with ‘apparently no desire to excuse himself’; he ‘said the conditions were unfavourable to him. He is probably quite right in his opinion’.⁷⁹ Three years later in the inaugural Davis Cup match at Longwood Cricket Club in Boston, the lack of standardization was again brought up as a factor. British player Herbert Roper Barrett described the playing conditions that factored into his team’s comprehensive 3-0 defeat: ‘The grounds were abominable. The grass was long. ... The net was a disgrace to civilized lawn tennis, held up by guy ropes that were continually sagging. ... [The balls] were awful – soft and motherly’.⁸⁰

Regardless of how the players reacted to the court conditions, the 1897 tour provided the Americans with valuable information about the British style of play, which in crucial areas was quite different from the American style. In some regards, it reinforced popular stereotypes about national character in the 1890s, whereby ‘Americans were depicted as carefree, enthusiastic, well-trained and business-like but over-confident and temperamental’.⁸¹ Joshua Pim remarked of the American style:

It is said to be more brilliant and aggressive than that of our own champions, but less certain. ... It may also be immature in other respects. ... The temperament of the average American athlete is more suited to flashes of superb effort than to steady effective excellence.⁸²

As if to reinforce these stereotypes, Paret described Eaves’s play in the 1897 tour as ‘typically British’; his was the ‘most deadly accurate of any ever seen on American courts’.⁸³

Eaves showed marvellous command of the ball and steadiness of play. His position in the court and his great agility and quickness of anticipation made it most difficult to get the ball out of his reach, and he won heavily by keeping the ball coming back to his opponent until the latter lost by error.⁸⁴

Outside of an implicit nationalistic discourse, these descriptions also underlined crucial differences in how the amateur ethos was interpreted in Britain and America. While both nations competed according to the highest possible amateur standards, the British placed seemingly greater emphasis on behavioural components that subtly reflected class – emphasising self restraint, foresight in decision-making, emotional self-control and apparent effortlessness – whereas the Americans considered appropriate a more openly competitive and performance-oriented, rather than purely aesthetic, style of amateur play.⁸⁵ Such distinctions remained for some time. In 1903, R.F. Doherty, who encapsulated the British approach, remarked: ‘when skill has reached its certain point, the man who can keep returning the ball most steadily will win’.⁸⁶ For John Tyler Bailey, writing in *Outing*, this method was ‘not the execution of perfect strokes, but certainty of return’. It was important, he ventured, to ‘keep the ball going until by clever headwork’; i.e. not by a brilliant smash or reckless drive, the point is won.⁸⁷

The Americans accepted the stereotype of their technical brilliance but impatience, and similarly characterized the English by their endurance and self-restraint:

Broadly stated, the English principle seems to be to let your opponent beat himself by his errors, whereas the American system is to force the play and endeavour to score off the enemy all the time. The former is a waiting game, which commends itself to the temperament of the visitors, and is profitable not alone in tennis, but in the world at large. ... We are more impatient here and cannot well control ourselves sufficiently to wait for things to fall into our laps. The consequence is that our tennis is incomparably more brilliant, but less profitable.⁸⁸

Apparent effortlessness was a quality highly admired by the British. A *Lawn Tennis & Badminton* correspondent remarked: ‘The Americans are all for business and for getting the set over’; they play with ‘no grace and no finesse, only business-like hard hitting, and hurry’. By contrast, ‘Englishmen will generally try to do a stroke gracefully’.⁸⁹

Witnessing their play, and seemingly feeling no inherent obligation to blindly follow the English, Eaves came to favour the American approach. His extensive travels made him acutely aware of different playing styles and the requirements of success through stroke-play and tactics. In fact, he suspected that America’s geographical isolation from Britain may have benefitted their development rather than hindered it, as it led to innovation, instead of attempting to mimic British play.

Engineering Australasia’s Ascendancy

After the 1897 tour, both Eaves and Mahony strongly suggested that Wrenn and Larned compete in England, where they would likely find themselves near equal to the best British players. However, despite several attempts to stage further British tours to the US, and American tours to Britain, in some cases wider developments, including the engagement of Wrenn and Larned in the American-Spanish War, prevented such opportunities from materializing. Eaves, though, remained committed to the sport’s internationalization over the coming years, and found opportunities to utilize the education he received from the Americans to develop players from other nations. Seemingly not fuelled by an obligation to any particular nation, he keenly imparted his wisdom on any players willing to listen.

Returning home, Eaves was eager to offer his views to the LTA, but they were less than receptive, as up to that point no ‘foreigner’ had come close to winning at Wimbledon, and British dominance seemed secure for years to come. At the start of the 1898 tennis season, in an interview with *Lawn Tennis*, Eaves foreshadowed the coming tide of criticism

that would soon wash over British tennis. He spoke of his admiration for the American talent development methods, opining:

Where I think the Americans hold an advantage over us is the promising young material they possess. I watched several of these players in the Boys' Championship at Newport... and greatly admired the form shown. These youngsters... form the nucleus the like of which is wanting here.⁹⁰

Like numerous others after him, he lamented the lack of tennis played in the public schools.⁹¹

By contrast, the Americans adopted tennis in their best schools and adopted a more 'professional' approach overall; physical training and preparation were not terms of disparagement as they were in Britain, given their strict amateur approach. Indeed, in defeating Eaves in the Chicago tournament, Wrenn proudly described his careful pre-game preparations; being 'particularly keen to beat Eaves', he allowed himself 'none of the entertainments of the hospitable Chicago clubs to interfere with strict training'.⁹² The evening before their encounter, Wrenn retired early, but his opponent, in contrast, played the role of a relaxed British amateur; he was heard entertaining guests in his hotel room until 3am. 'With that handicap', Wrenn recalled, 'I managed to beat him the next day'.⁹³

The American approach clearly influenced Eaves's thinking, reporting in 1902: [British] players have slightly retrograded of recent years, due to a regrettable tendency on the part of many leading players to act on the defensive. While the Americans – who adopt more forcing tactics – have shown steady improvement, they are, too, unlike the players of the Old Country, trained to the hour. Success is, for the time being, the aim and object of their lives.⁹⁴

This determined and more serious and systematic approach was the antithesis of Britain's amateur ethos, but it struck Eaves that he was looking into the future. While *he* had demonstrated to the Americans his unerring accuracy and the marvels of the attacking half-volley, this tour, for Eaves, confirmed his views of how the game needed to develop in line with an American approach.

Firstly, the games in America had crystallized his view of the merits of the volley-style game, as opposed to a more defensive baseline approach, typical of the British. Later, A. Wallis Myers wrote: 'Eaves could see, as others declined to, that the days of the long baseline rallies were gone'.⁹⁵ Secondly, he recognized the importance of physical conditioning, and the merits of a more forceful, attacking style of game. This was an approach not fully recognized in Britain at the time; given the 'British style' requiring reserve and self-restraint on the court, the need for excessive physical training was unwarranted.⁹⁶ Indeed, after visiting England in 1902, the Australian player, L.O.S. Poidevin, observed: 'The English player ... [adopts] 'a "game-not-worth-the-candle" attitude. ... [he] strives more after conservation of energy'.⁹⁷ Thirdly, Eaves had seen and experienced the American 'twist' service; a shot not aimed simply at re-starting play, but as an attacking weapon. The Americans, notably Holcombe Ward and Dwight Davis, did not unleash the 'wizardry' of this peculiar but effective shot until Wimbledon of 1902, but Eaves had a five-year head-start, being on the receiving end in 1897. Regarding Eaves' 1897 tour, Mitchell reported:

The doctor did more than make a bold bid for the American crown, as he took back with him to his native heath an exact copy of the American service, which was then rapidly finding worshippers on the other side of the Atlantic.⁹⁸

In subsequent years he sought to master its intricacies, not only improving his game in the process but also teaching it to the best Australasian players on his next visit 'down under'. This would have an immense impact on their development and the character of international tennis in the early 20th century.

Since his initial visit in 1891, the Australian game had failed to progress significantly, an observation the *Adelaide Chronicle* attributed to the fact that 'since Eaves was here in

1891, we have had no talent from the old country'; he urged 'lawn tennis players in Australia should combine and make a great effort to get the English players to come over'.⁹⁹ For other leading British players, these requests were fruitless, but Eaves remained an exception in this regard and returned to Australia in 1902 after a gap of eleven years. Upon arrival, he immediately annexed the NSW Championship, with 'Bisque' remarking that the tournament 'had demonstrated that at present there is no player in Australia who can beat Eaves, and at last we have an object-lesson as to the relative merits of English and Australian tennis'. Further to this he added: 'We should all be delighted to have the genial doctor here, for... tennis has received the fillip it needed, and to-day Dunlop and Brookes are playing better than ever'.¹⁰⁰ As was customary when top British sportsmen ventured to compete in Australia at this time, Eaves's arrival was widely celebrated and even reported in Tasmania. One *Daily Telegraph* correspondent opined that Eaves had 'excited the greatest attention on the mainland'.¹⁰¹

As in 1891, Eaves volunteered his coaching services, and urged the Australians to 'incline to the American methods, and regard lawn tennis as a game requiring incessant practice and physical fitness, and not as a pastime'. If this is achieved, he argued, 'the day cannot be far distant when they may hope for success, on level terms, against the chosen representatives of Great Britain'.¹⁰² However, Eaves was equally aware of the constraints imposed upon them by both their approach to the game and their geographical isolation, lamenting:

One cannot fail to be struck by the comparatively little practice indulged in by the Colonial players. What they have missed, too, is the opportunity of meeting regularly players of greater talent than themselves, and deriving hints from the best models.¹⁰³

While Eaves was critical of Australia's players, he was particularly impressed by fellow Victorian, Norman Brookes. On his route to the NSW Championship, he had defeated Brookes in a close five-set match, after being two sets down. At this time, Brookes's game was naïve; he was a powerful baseline hitter, and had 'one of the most severe forehand drives the game had ever seen'.¹⁰⁴ However, the Australian left-hander was technically lacking, and he paid scant attention to tactical aspects in his training, becoming a bit 'one-dimensional'.

Brookes's power game had worked for two sets, but, as the *Sydney Mail* reported, Eaves: then turned round and showed Brookes that mere speed of stroke was not the only thing to seek—that delicacy, accurate placing, the use of spin, and the advance to the net behind the best strokes were the best way to success.¹⁰⁵

Eaves immediately recognized Brookes's raw talent, but urged him, and also later the New Zealander Anthony Wilding, to adopt a more volley style game, '[coming] up at all times'; it was, according to Eaves, 'the only way forward' under modern conditions.¹⁰⁶ *The Daily Advertiser* remarked:

Few attempted to get in on the service, till Eaves demonstrated it was the thing to do. His methods in singles and doubles... were emulated by many players with benefit to their game and, to the standard of play in Australia.¹⁰⁷

Alongside the volleying style, he advised and taught Brookes the American 'twist' service. If Brookes had eyes on the Wimbledon crown, this stroke had to become fundamental to his game. Over the next few years, Eaves not only taught Brookes the intricacies of the serve, but also 'further modified and adapted this service, by adding more pace with a lessened kick'.¹⁰⁸ Eaves's work paid dividends as Brookes became the first overseas player to reach the Wimbledon singles Challenge Round, in 1905. Despite losing in straight sets to H.L. Doherty, he received several notable accolades. Percy Vaile remarked that Brookes's success was the outstanding feature of that year's tournament, marvelling: 'his progress through the week was a wonderful object lesson to the English players on the futility of the English game when opposed to a first class man with modern methods'.¹⁰⁹ While the

British served poorly, moved too slowly to the net and lacked clear tactics, the modern methods demonstrated by Brookes – principally, the American twist service and the rapid net approach – were celebrated. To A. Wallis Myers, Brookes was unique: ‘His service, his methods of volleying and his general court craft were opposed to the ideal’. Yet, his arrival in Britain meant a ‘revolution’ in play that was to be ‘deep and permanent’.¹¹⁰ Myers ventured further, suggesting that Brookes’s securing of the 1905 All-Comers title had proved to the world that the colonial nursery could produce a champion, hitherto thought highly unlikely.

Eaves had, in a short space of time, taken the American invention, mastered and modified it, imparted it on Brookes, and taken his protégé to the highest pedestal. The Australian’s success, culminating in winning the Singles Championship outright in 1907, represented arguably the ‘changing of the guard’.¹¹¹ In the following years, Brookes and later Wilding dominated Wimbledon and took control of the Davis Cup.¹¹²

Despite the British losing their grip on world tennis dominance, many of the LTA’s officials remained unwilling to support adopting American or Australasian tactics, or venture to learn from their eventual successors or from Eaves, the man who brought them to the top of their game. Myers, Wilding’s biographer, was clear in his assessment of Eaves’s influence on the Australasian game. ‘It is no secret’, he wrote, ‘that Eaves virtually “produced” Norman Brookes... and that he was largely instrumental in inducing Anthony Wilding to reconstruct his backhand drive’, which had been considered a weakness.¹¹³ Myers wrote that even by 1905, Wilding had ‘not acquired such an ace-winning backhand as he has today’.¹¹⁴ Eaves was also instrumental in developing Wilding’s tactical approach, as he had for Brookes, advising him to prioritize the volley. ‘Get up to the net, and stay there’ he urged; ‘don’t let the other man enjoy the view of your court while you can see next to nothing of his’.¹¹⁵ It was sound advice. Myers was clear that Eaves’s work ‘did much to mature Anthony Wilding’s skill’.¹¹⁶ While Brookes and Wilding were the headliners, Eaves was more than the supporting act; his travels across the world, his astute observations, and his unselfish mentorship, coaching and advice had helped bring Australasia to the zenith of world tennis and fostered the sport’s internationalization.

Conclusion

In contrast to the lukewarm media reception and lack of LTA support for the ‘unofficial’ 1897 tour, Britain was seemingly in patriotic euphoria as its team departed for America in 1900, *Lawn Tennis* reported:

Tens of thousands of spectators lined the route. ... The police with their jubilee medals pinned to their chest directed the enormous vehicular and pedestrian traffic. ... When it was seen that the players were really off the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds. ... The mob yelled itself hoarse with delight, the massed bands playing “God save the Queen” and “Yankee Doodle” at the same time with brilliant effect’.¹¹⁷

This was the inaugural International Lawn Tennis Challenge (later renamed the Davis Cup) match, and while Dwight Davis later claimed to have had the idea for the competition whilst visiting California in 1899, it is almost certain that the 1897 tour that Eaves participated in laid much of the groundwork for solidifying the prerequisite Anglo-American relations.

The visit of Eaves, Mahony and Nisbet in 1897 was the first truly international challenge between top players on both sides of the Atlantic, which had bolstered the Americans and reinforced a growing belief of equality on the lawn courts. The geographical isolation of America from Britain had initially hampered their lawn tennis development, but

in response they developing a more aggressive, fast and less patient style of play than the English, and a unique 'twist' service.

Eaves returned to Britain full of praise for America's talent development programme in its schools – which was something clearly lacking in England – and their aggressive playing styles and tactics. While other British players remained oblivious to the ensuing foreign threat to their supremacy, Eaves' extensive travels not only brought insight to his own game, but also had a major impact on the games of others, particularly in his birthplace, Australia. While Eaves' first visit to Australia, in 1891, had been a revelation to the emerging players of the dominion, his return in 1902 was most significant. Such was his influence, it was reported in the *Illustrated London News* in 1933, that: 'Australians in particular would be the first to acknowledge the debt [to Eaves] who discovered and coached Norman Brookes, the first great Australian champion'.¹¹⁸

Eaves's influence on Australasian lawn tennis, and to the internationalization of the sport more generally, cannot be understated. As a top player in 1891, his demonstrably superior play provided the necessary target for Australian players to aim at, and with his advice and guidance, he established formal relations between British and Australasian tennis authorities. He was elected to the NZLTA as their official delegate to the LTA in 1908, a position he maintained until his death in 1920.¹¹⁹ As a resident in London and with strong links to Australasia, Eaves was an ideal man for the NZLTA, with responsibility to facilitate communications between the Australasian and British tennis authorities. He likely developed some early experience for this role in 1905, when the Australian association proposed a 'test match' between England and Australasia 'on the same lines as inter-state fixtures'.¹²⁰ The *New Zealand Herald*, covering the event, considered it favourable that Eaves 'will be in England', and while it is unclear what role Eaves played in this development, his mention here suggests that his personal involvement was of some importance.¹²¹ Alongside these roles, both formal and informal, he also set about encouraging British players to venture 'down under'. Later, he helped reconstruct the games of the two best players, Norman Brookes and Anthony Wilding, who went on to win multiple Wimbledon titles and Davis Cups between them. Interestingly, Australasia's only Challenge Round defeat between 1907 and 1914 was against the British in 1912, where it was claimed Eaves 'gave invaluable training tips to the English team ... and to everybody's surprise, brought home the Davis Cup'.¹²²

That he was willing to offer advice to any player willing to listen, irrespective of expected loyalties or allegiances to any particular nation, speaks to the precedence he gave to developing the sport first and foremost. It is this selfless devotion and commitment to fostering international relations through the medium of lawn tennis that marks him out as a true and quintessential internationalist; his generosity of spirit and wisdom knew no bounds. In both America and Australasia, he urged top players to compete at Wimbledon, and was equally vociferous in promoting the first-rank British players to compete further afield.

Wilberforce Eaves died on February 10, 1920 in a Marylebone nursing home, having undergone a series of operations for an intra-abdominal abscess. His passing was mourned throughout the sporting world. *American Lawn Tennis* reported, 'Few men prominent in lawn tennis have had a more versatile career, or were more liked and respected than Dr Eaves'.¹²³ Former adversary, Bob Wrenn recalled Eaves as 'a rare sportsman, who could win or lose with unfailing courtesy to his opponent. ... [He was] loved by all'.¹²⁴ In Australia, Robert Kidson wrote:

He was a most pleasant gentle man and a cheery sportsman, always ready to help on a rising player with kindly advice, and then just as ready to beat him by still better play if he could, and if not to take defeat smilingly. ... He is the greatest traveller the game has seen... and at his best knew few superiors in the game's history.¹²⁵

In Britain, *Lawn Tennis and Badminton* reported that Eaves was ‘possessed of a thorough knowledge of the world. ... A sportsman in every sense of the term, ... a man of mark in the game to which he was so devoted, and for which he did so much’.¹²⁶ Myers added:

Few men knew foreign cities more intimately, his Australian birth is almost forgotten. Not to Australians whose players owe to his unrivalled experience and warm encouragement much of their present supremacy. For the “Doctor” was nothing if not a sound judge, a discerning critic, and a judicious coach. ... [He] was as welcome at Dinard, Cannes, Cape Town, Homburg, Paris or Newport, Long Island, as he was at Wimbledon, or Melbourne... that in short he was the friend and mentor to every player, young or old.¹²⁷

Eaves was truly the first, great internationalist of lawn tennis; a man who devoted his life to both the surgeon’s table and the game he loved. His reach across, and positive influence upon, so many aspects of lawn tennis was quite astounding, but what is perhaps even more remarkable is that his name is almost forgotten today. In an age when winning championships is seen to take precedence as a marker of impact upon a sport, his relative absence from the historiography of lawn tennis – likely in part because he never won a major championship – is perhaps something to be regretted. Yet, as a true amateur – modest, generous in spirit and loyal only to his sport – his relative obscurity would not trouble him, and nor would the fact that as of 2017, the name Wilberforce Vaughan Eaves will not be found on the list of inductees to the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

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³ J. S. Mitchell, ‘Secret of Australia’s Success in Tennis is Dr. W. V. Eaves’ Early and Scientific Coaching’, *Referee*, 26 November 1919, 13.

⁴ ‘Obituary’, *British Medical Journal*, 21 February 1920, 276; Army Medical Services Museum, letter to author, 29 April 2009; *Lawn Tennis*, 8 May 1901, 39; Supplement to the *London Gazette*, 20 August 1914, 6580.

⁵ *Medical Register*, 1913, 465.

⁶ ‘The Late Captain Wilberforce V. Eaves’, *Lawn Tennis and Badminton*, 19 February 1920, 542.

⁷ ‘Death of Dr. W. V. Eaves’, *The Times*, 12 February 1920, 6.

⁸ ‘A Chat with the Covered Court and Irish Champion’, *Lawn Tennis*, 11 May 1898.

⁹ See: Jared van Duinen, ‘Playing to the “Imaginary Grandstand”: Sport, the “British World”, and an Australian Colonial Identity’. *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 2 (2013), 342-64.

¹⁰ Richard Cashman, ‘Symbols of Unity: Anglo-Australian Cricketers, 1877-1900’, in J.A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London, Frank Cass, 1992), 130.

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¹³ *Taranaki Herald*, 20 March 1909.

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- ²⁷ Bisque, 'Lawn Tennis Jottings', *Australasian*, 9 May 1891, 19.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 19.
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- ¹⁰⁹ P. A. Vaile, *The Strokes and Science of Lawn Tennis* (New York: The American Sports Publishing Co., 1906), 206.
- ¹¹⁰ A. Wallis Myers, *Leaders of Lawn Tennis*, (London: Amateur Sports Publishing Co. Ltd., 1912), 17.
- ¹¹¹ For a thorough account of Brookes' career, and the role of Eaves, see: Richard Naughton, *The Wizard: The Story of Norman Brookes, Australia's First Wimbledon Champion* (Docklands, Victoria: The Slattery Media Group, 2011).
- ¹¹² For a thorough treatment of Australasia's Davis Cup successes before the Great War, see: Trengove, *The Story of the Davis Cup*, 38-61;
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- ¹¹⁴ A. Wallis Myers, *The Complete Lawn Tennis Player* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs and Co., 1908), 166.
- ¹¹⁵ Myers, *Twenty Years*, 23.
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- ¹¹⁹ 'New Zealand Lawn Tennis Association', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 4 November 1908, 7; 'Personal Notes from London', *Otago Daily Times*, 22 May 1920, 10.
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- ¹²³ *Ibid.*, 577.
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