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## **Dwight Davis and the Foundation of the Davis Cup in Tennis: Just Another Doubleday Myth?**

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Dwight F. Davis is widely credited with having invented, or at least conceived, the original idea for the international tennis competition that bears his name, the Davis Cup. This paper aims to debunk this myth through comprehensive critical analysis of the period preceding Davis's apparent epiphany in 1899. Previous national-team-based competitions are investigated, alongside key figures in American and British/Irish tennis, to demonstrate that numerous others had proposed the idea for an international team-based competition long before Davis and that Davis may have appropriated his idea from others with whom he came into contact. Davis's wealthy background, political ambitions, and model-American image arguably helped smooth the process of his idea being officially accepted by the United States National Lawn Tennis Association, which likely saw in Davis a perfect "front-man" for American tennis at a time when the nation used sporting prowess to promote its identity, particularly in relation to the British, in international sporting competition.

**Keywords:** Anglo-American relations, Lawn Tennis Association, origin myth, reconstructionist history

The story goes that, in the summer of 1899, three Harvard undergraduates, Dwight F. Davis, Holcombe Ward, and Malcolm Whitman, alongside their friend Beals Wright and his father, set off across America to challenge the Pacific Coast's top lawn tennis talent. On his way home, inspired by the tour's success and the excitement generated by the upcoming America's Cup, it apparently occurred to Davis that "if team matches between different parts of the same country arose such great interest . . . would not similar international contest have even wider and far-reaching consequences?" According to Davis, "[T]he idea came to me . . . that an international competition would be of the greatest possible benefit to the game throughout the whole United States and abroad." Upon returning to Boston, Davis met with Dr. James Dwight, president of the United States National Lawn Tennis Association (USNLTA), to present his idea for the International Lawn Tennis Challenge. The idea "was approved," according to Davis, "and consequently I offered the International Lawn Tennis Challenge Cup."<sup>i</sup> At a meeting of the USNLTA Executive Committee in February 1900, the cup--a 217-ounce gold-plated silver punchbowl from the Boston silversmiths Shreve, Crump, and Low--was accepted. Subsequently, Britain's Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) was contacted, and the first competition was arranged at Boston's Longwood Cricket Club that summer.

This was the summary of Davis's first written reflection of events, published in 1907 in *American Lawn Tennis*, about how he, supposedly, devised the original idea for what became known as the "Davis Cup." The magazine's editor, none other than James Dwight himself, reaffirmed this viewpoint: "To Dwight F. Davis . . . belongs the honour of conceiving and putting into execution the plan of giving the lawn tennis world an international trophy."<sup>ii</sup> In a further reflection published in 1931 to celebrate the USNLTA's golden jubilee, Davis reiterated his claims.<sup>iii</sup> This story, continually regurgitated and

reproduced over the years, has become the dominant narrative, presenting Davis as not only the event's architect but also its mastermind. As stories go, it has much to be applauded, as does the man himself.

According to American tennis historian E. Digby Baltzell, Davis came from “one of St. Louis’s most prominent and wealthy families.” Attending Harvard, he attained membership at the exclusive Fly Club, which later included the future president Franklin D. Roosevelt. After graduation, Davis developed a distinguished career as a philanthropist. He was “endowed from youth with a strong sense of *noblesse oblige* and an itch for public service,” and, later in life, he “served on the boards of almost every cultural institution of importance in St. Louis.” He also fought in France during the Great War with the Missouri National Guard, winning the Distinguished Service Cross for “extraordinary heroism in action,” and later served as secretary of war in Calvin Coolidge’s cabinet, before Herbert Hoover made him governor-general of the Philippines.<sup>iv</sup>

Davis’s prominent family and lineage positioned him within the nouveau riche, which, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, were merging increasingly, through marriage and education, with “old money” families from prominent northeastern cities, especially New York.<sup>v</sup> Despite America itself enjoying its global rise in political/military and economic/industrial domains, particularly in relation to Britain, the unequivocal dominance of this amalgamated national upper class was shaken by sustained waves of European immigration and then, throughout the twentieth century, burgeoning class conflict and first-wave feminism. The established white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) gentlemen, who had held a firm grip on the nation’s political and economic reigns--not to mention its numerous voluntary sporting associations--for over a century naturally clung to positive representations of their own class, and Davis played that role perfectly.

Davis was, in the eyes of his wealthy, white countrymen, a model American. As a

child of America's great "Gilded Age," he was seen to represent the generation from whom so much was both hoped and expected, as the country surged forth to become the world's great superpower, amid widespread changes within American society at large. He was an ideal face of how the American elites--and the USNLTA, of which its founding and most prominent members were represented among--sought to present itself through the burgeoning nationalistic discourse at the time: outward-looking, generous, morally unyielding, courageous, and brilliant. Indeed, on top of Davis's achievements and accolades, he was well connected within the establishment and extremely wealthy. If American tennis officials wished to invent a human being on whom they could credit the responsibility of devising the original idea for the International Lawn Tennis Challenge, they could not have dreamt up anyone more perfect than Dwight F. Davis.

The trouble is that this story does not stand up to critical analysis, presenting it effectively as another one of sport's great "origin myths," of which a number have been popularized over the years. Most notable were the alleged invention of American baseball that was attributed to Abner Doubleday, who was said to have devised the game on a cow pasture in Cooperstown, New York in 1839, and the alleged creation of rugby, when Rugby schoolboy William Webb Ellis supposedly picked up the ball during a football game in 1823 and ran with it.<sup>vi</sup> Both origin myths were devised and received "official" approval many decades after the respective incidents supposedly occurred and so correspond to "invented traditions." According to Eric Hobsbawm, the aim of invented traditions, for the institutions that propagate them, is "to establish continuity with a suitable historic past," whereby "history" is essentially rewritten and constructed subjectively around new formalities and rituals that emphasize key historical aspects, themes, or developments to the exclusion of those that do not fit their preferable narrative.<sup>vii</sup> For Hobsbawm, invented traditions serve several functions: to bond individuals together into "imagined communities"; to establish or

legitimize institutions, status, or relations of authority; or to socialize or inculcate beliefs, value systems, and behavioral conventions.<sup>viii</sup> As seen in these two examples--alongside other notable origin myths, in the sports of swimming, Australian Rules football, and surfing--their promulgation was fueled by the subjective interests of the responsible party(ies), to fulfill some, if not all, of these functions; various economic, social, cultural, and political ends were secured either for themselves, personally, or for their respective sport, their social class, race, or nation.<sup>ix</sup>

In 1907, Albert G. Spalding established a committee to investigate baseballs' origins--thought, originally, to have derived from the English children's game of rounders--and chose Abraham Mills, his friend and president of baseball's National League, as its chair. Relying solely on the testimony of an elderly gentleman who was later diagnosed as criminally insane, Mills dutifully repeated the Doubleday account. The following year, Spalding published the material in his *Official Baseball Guide*, and it became, forevermore, an enduring myth. Essentially an American chauvinist, Spalding was "eager to establish American origins for what had become America's national game," and, given his business interests in sporting goods, "his 'American theory' was a useful marketing tool."<sup>x</sup> For Bloyce, Spalding's efforts should be considered indicative of burgeoning nationalistic sentiments, as America attempted to "reject any lingering feelings of inferiority in relation to their former mother country"; indeed, from the Mills report, "increasing numbers of Americans were happy to accept baseball was . . . American in origin."<sup>xi</sup>

Similarly, the Webb Ellis story was promulgated for quasi-political reasons. First proposed by Matthew Bloxam in the Rugby School magazine *Meteor* in 1880--fifty-seven years after the alleged event--the Webb Ellis story gained attention in 1895 when the Old Rugbeian Society produced a report to claim the school's proprietorship over the sport's origins. The timing was significant, as, in that same year, the twin forces of

commercialization and professionalization caused a split between union and league forms of rugby, as the rogue northern association, which welcomed professionalism, threatened to undermine southern (union) leadership, of which Rugby School was part. Thus, the Webb Ellis story “brought comfort to those concerned at the direction rugby had taken” and also “[provided] legitimacy to [southern, amateur] claims to have authority over the administration of the game.”<sup>xii</sup>

According to Dunning and Sheard, reductionist origin myths such as these are fairly common in contemporary societies, “[reflecting] the currently predominant atomistic image of social structure and the notion of the historical process as a structureless sequence of events.” Contrary to simplistic “great man” theories, underpinned by “individualistic values,” they argue that an understanding of complex historical developments provide more adequate and plausible accounts, as they involve the interweaving actions of many interdependent people with numerous unintended consequences.<sup>xiii</sup> Those promulgating reductionist origin myths, however, have tended to overlook the requisite societal preconditions within which the particular development took place and “[boil] historical complexities down to the innovation of a single individual.”<sup>xiv</sup>

In the frame of reconstructionist historiography, as outlined by Booth, this paper aims to expose and debunk the “Davis Cup myth” by offering the first major critique of Davis’s self-attributed role in the process of instigating the Davis Cup.<sup>xv</sup> While it is undisputed that Davis proffered the cup itself as a winner’s trophy to the USNLTA in 1900, it is argued that, by and large, this is where his involvement ended. Davis’s input has been exaggerated, and mention of other contributory factors and individuals has been eschewed. Compelling evidence is presented to suggest that Davis did not conceive the original idea for a lawn tennis tournament organized around national teams, either generally or specifically between Britain and America; nor was he involved in cultivating the prerequisite international

relations in lawn tennis. Championed by numerous others from the 1880s, such relations had, by the mid-1890s, formalized to the extent that highly ranked British and American players were making arrangements to compete, either individually or collectively as a “team,” in tournaments abroad. The USNLTA also involved itself, proffering to institute “official” challenge matches and pay the travel expenses of British players. Even before then, challenge matches organized around national teams were played between England and Ireland and between England and France.

Throughout these embryonic developments that preceded the Davis Cup’s emergence, Davis’s role was negligible. Even in early discussions to formulate the competition’s format and regulations, evidence suggests his involvement was minimal, preferring to delegate to those more experienced. Therefore, his claims to playing a leading role in either its conception or institution are ignorant and misinformed at best and at worst arrogant and audacious, if not deceitful. Not only did others conceive of, propose, and stage international challenge matches/tournaments before Davis supposedly devised *his* idea, but it is posited that he must have known of their existence and, therefore, possibly appropriated the idea before claiming it as his own. Regardless, to credit him with the “creation” or “conception” of this event as a consequence of his marginal involvement ignores the crucial efforts of others who played key roles in the augmentation of international relations, underpinned by mutual agreement between players and a culture of reciprocity between clubs/associations, and in the actual facilitation of the event. This unplanned process developed over several years, and credit should not be given to just one man, especially one so young and inexperienced. Indeed, in the summer of 1899, when Davis set off to California where he was famously to formulate his idea, he had only just celebrated his twentieth birthday.

Despite a swath of evidence to the contrary, not only have tennis officials stood by Davis’s story, but many of the most well-respected tennis writers and historians



internationally have, by and large, also uncritically accepted this account.<sup>xvi</sup> In an early historical piece from 1936, the lawn tennis writer and former player, E. C. Potter wrote, “[N]o such thing as a contest of teams representing different nations had been thought of,” before Davis did in 1899.<sup>xvii</sup> Sometime later, renowned Italian tennis journalist Gianni Clerici agreed that the international lawn tennis challenge was “an idea set forth by the young American Dwight Davis,” who toured out west in order to “get on the move, to invent something new to regain the public’s enthusiasm.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Baltzell concurs, claiming “Davis envisioned the idea of a trophy to stimulate international competition.” Similarly, Bud Collins, possibly the most trusted voice in American tennis, repeats Davis’s claims. While stating that “for several years, [James] “Doc” Dwight had been trying to stir up the Anglo-American rivalry into a team event,” Collins still suggests that the idea came from Davis, after having been “inspired” by his Pacific Coast tour. In like vein, Davis’s biographer Nancy Kriplen also recounts his story uncritically, exaggerating his central role. John Haylett and Richard Evans even claim that Davis wrote to the LTA himself inviting the British to compete. This is entirely inaccurate, as it was Dwight, representing the USNLTA, who sent the official invitation. More recently, Elizabeth Wilson neglects to position Davis’s contributions within a broader context and, instead, claims Davis, simply, the “brainchild” of the Davis Cup. Robert J. Lake also overplays Davis’s role and claims him the “chief instigator for staging the first international match between [the British and Americans] in 1900.”<sup>xix</sup>

Other tennis historians have offered more balanced viewpoints but still do not provide a full account of proceedings. Independently, Max Robertson, George Alexander, and Alan Trengove have documented some of the earlier international contests between Britain and the United States that helped formalize relations, but none of them ventures actually to discredit Davis with conceiving the idea.<sup>xx</sup> Heiner Gillmeister comes closest to offering an alternative

perspective but does not actively reject Davis's assertions. While repeating Alexander's claims that the groundwork had been laid by Dwight, he recounts at length Davis's version of events from his 1931 reflection and offers little in critique, except to suggest a failure to acknowledge the role supposedly played by Charles Voigt--a story that shall be returned to later--in devising the idea. Regardless, Davis is still credited as the cup's "originator."<sup>xxi</sup>

The dominant narrative of events relating to the Davis Cup's emergence has become accepted as immutable fact, which has ensured that a full and more balanced account has yet to be provided. Through a critical reading of key sources at the time and an examination of the international lawn tennis scene and relations between key figures within it, in the context of broader societal developments, this paper aims to consider the extent that Davis can be credited as the event's mastermind, to assess the role of others who may rightly claim to have played a more significant role in the competition's creation, and to account for the general sustained enthusiasm, if not blind loyalty, to Davis's story.

### **The 1880s to 1890s: The Emergence of International Lawn Tennis**

Throughout the 1880s and '90s, the desire for international competition in lawn tennis became increasingly apparent. Opinion from both sides of the Atlantic suggested the British were superior to the Americans until at least the mid-1890s, and, of all the nations keen to test themselves against the British, the United States made the most effort.<sup>xxii</sup> James Dwight, often heralded as the "Father of American Tennis," championed the process of establishing relations between the two nations.<sup>xxiii</sup> As USNLTA president from 1882-84 and 1894-1911, he worked tirelessly to enhance American playing standards and recognized that competition against players abroad was key. In 1878, Dwight incepted what he believed was the first known international competition, in Newport, Rhode Island: Dwight and another Bostonian, Arthur Hunnewell, played singles matches, respectively, against two Oxford University

graduates--a Canadian, Thomas Plumb, and an Englishman, Mr. Thornton, and were then joined by Richard Sears for doubles against Plumb and Mr. Harter.<sup>xxiv</sup> Interestingly, Gillmeister agrees with Alexander that the “scheme” instituted here by Dwight pre-empted the initial Davis Cup format of mixing singles/doubles matches between international teams, though only three--and not five--matches were reported.<sup>xxv</sup> This initial foray into international competition likely provided the impetus for Dwight for the inception of more official international challenges.

The first unofficial American national championship, hosted by the Staten Island Baseball Club in September 1880, was won easily by an Englishman, O. E. Woodhouse, though his relative ranking among English players was revealed at the following Wimbledon Championships when he was soundly defeated by Herbert Lawford, who lost in the Challenge Round that year.<sup>xxvi</sup> Back home, brothers Ernest and William Renshaw became the standard-setters. In 1883, they entertained the American brothers, C. M. and J. S. Clark, in exhibitions at Wimbledon, which they won convincingly; the Clarks won only one set in two matches. Differing with Gillmeister, Clerici describes *this* contest as “the first international competition in history.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Depending on the definition of “international competition,” both make valid claims.

The following year, Dwight and Sears trained with the Renshaws in Cannes, before venturing to compete in several British tournaments including Wimbledon, alongside another American, A. L. Rives. Of their stopover, the British sporting weekly, *Pastime*, wrote condescendingly, “Our visitors are here on a pleasure trip, and do not pretend to be equal to the Renshaw’s, Lawford and others. They play to learn, not teach.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Indeed, of the three Americans, only Dwight won a match, but, in the doubles, Dwight and Sears reached the Wimbledon semi-final before being thrashed 6-0, 6-1, 6-2 by the Renshaws. Dwight admitted that year that English players were “class for class better than ours.”<sup>xxix</sup> In 1885, Dwight

returned to Wimbledon and won three singles matches before a straight-sets loss to Lawford, ending the season ranked only “tenth amongst the British players.”<sup>xxx</sup>

The following year, Dwight played at Dublin’s prestigious Fitzwilliam LTC in singles and doubles, which further underlined his efforts to foster Anglo-American relations. Indeed, when several leading Irish players considered a reciprocal visit to the United States in 1890, they contacted Dwight personally--despite his not being USNLTA president at the time--though the trip never materialized.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Despite the narrowing gap, English superiority remained an assumption, as admitted by an American in 1886 when describing the situation “back home”: “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.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Such pessimism was shared among other American athletes at the time and reflected a broader “anxiety that [they] were physically inferior to their English contemporaries.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Tennis writer Percy Vaile concurred: “[T]he Englishman knows his own unassailable supremacy in everything from the Navy to Free trade,” adding tongue-in-cheek, “accepting always, of course, cricket.” These American perceptions were reinforced, arguably, by Britain’s misplaced converse view. Vaile highlighted the condescension of British players at this time: they “seem to breathe the sentiment, ‘we are the tennis players. Run away, little boy. We have nothing to learn.’”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The Americans, nevertheless, continued to entice the British “cracks” to their shores, as Dwight alluded to in 1894, the first year of his second term as USNLTA president: “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.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Tennis writer and former player Jahial Parmly Paret opined similarly on American advancement, suggesting the need for foreign imports into their tournaments. “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.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> For Dwight, the inception of more formal and regular international competition against the British would “put players on their mettle as nothing else possibly could” and, perhaps more pertinently, allow comparisons to “be drawn between the different styles of play, which would be beneficial to both, but particularly to the American game.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The notion of cooperative competition was wishful thinking as far as the LTA was concerned. The British, according to Llewellyn, “believed that sports were their sole property and displayed limited interest in playing against foreign rivals, except their own white dominions.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> In lawn tennis, believing they had no true rivalry with the United States, the British defiantly opposed the determined American enticements to compete. After a sustained but ultimately failed campaign driven by Dwight throughout 1889 and 1890, *Pastime* questioned, dismissively, 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.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Not only was the American Championships considered unworthy of British interest, but there was little support from the LTA for an official “tour” or challenge match there.<sup>xl</sup> Also, despite improved communication and transportation links--the Liverpool-New York route took only seven days by the mid-1880s--depictions of American lawn tennis remained tainted by hyperbole.<sup>xli</sup> According to Lake, “[S]ensationalist reports exaggerated American deficiencies; they were described as inferior players, who used sub-standard rackets, balls, nets and posts, played on poorly-maintained courts and according to inferior rules.”<sup>xlii</sup>

These combined factors conspired to keep the best British players away until the mid-1890s, though a number of lesser-known Brits had previously ventured to compete in America.<sup>xliii</sup> Six different British men competed in the U.S. Nationals from 1888 to 1890, but it was probably the visit of Irishman Manliffe F. Goodbody in 1894 that was the greatest

catalyst for further British incursions.<sup>xliv</sup> Goodbody was known to American lawn tennis enthusiasts from previous visits in 1888 and 1892 and as one of the four prospective Irish visitors for the failed 1890 tour, so when he set foot on American soil in 1894, the press welcomed him warmly. His stay culminated in a challenge round loss to Bob Wrenn in the U.S. Nationals, whereupon *The New York Times* reported, “Goodbody deserves a vote of thanks, according to lovers of tennis. His appearance at Newport imparted a kind of international flavor to the proceedings and roused interest in the game to the highest pitch.” His ventures were expected to lead to “international contests” being staged “on both sides of the water.”<sup>xlv</sup>

Some years later, Paret referred back to Goodbody’s sojourn when discussing a proposed visit by other leading Irishmen, Joshua Pim and Frank Stoker, for the upcoming West Newton tournament, expressing hope that it “would be an international event like that of 1894.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Equally of interest, the editor of *Golf and Lawn Tennis* claimed that Goodbody proposed the idea of an “international competition between say six of the leading players of each country, on a perfectly neutral soil, and under neutral conditions,” though the LTA remained unresponsive to such proposals.<sup>xlvii</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps Goodbody deserves some credit for helping to ignite American-British/Irish rivalry, and especially for involving Pim, who had just won the Wimbledon Singles Championship for the second straight year, in 1894.

### **1892 onward: Early International Matches and the Irish Incursion in America**

In the 1890s, Irishmen were highly regarded players, with four of the seven Wimbledon Singles Championships from 1890 to 1896 won by three Irishmen (Willoby Hamilton, 1890; Joshua Pim, 1893 and ’94; Harold Mahony, 1896). Understandably, therefore, if the leading English players were likely to arrange a properly representative international match with any

nation, the Irish--and not the Americans--were the obvious choice. First mention of this prospect came in 1886, when *Pastime* reported a movement to create an Irish lawn tennis association primarily “for the purpose of providing a committee for the selection of the players”:

An international match would give the Irish players the best possible opportunity of testing their powers against the English cracks, and it is certain that a properly selected team would not fail to make a good fight with the best combination that England could put into the field.<sup>xlvi</sup>

While reluctant to entertain American pleas of a challenge match at this juncture, the LTA was nevertheless sufficiently roused to consider an England-versus-Ireland contest. Members of the Fitzwilliam LTC were equally keen, though conflict over “diplomatic etiquette” regarding which club/association should propose the invitation proved a stumbling block.<sup>xlix</sup> As protocol went, the more prestigious and higher-status club should have the right of first refusal, but both considered themselves senior to the other. The Fitzwilliam, founded in 1877, was second only to the All England Lawn Tennis Club in its international prestige, while the LTA, despite being just four years old, had, by this point, become the de facto international association. It was only when a group of “well-known Irish players” approached the LTA directly in 1892 that arrangements for the match could be made; and, in the spirit of diplomatic back-slapping, the LTA only proceeded when it had assurance “that the enterprise had received the sanction of the Fitzwilliam, Lansdowne and Dublin University Clubs,” which naturally it did.<sup>l</sup> After this successful inaugural match on the Friday before the Irish Championships in May 1892, won by the Irish 5 to 4, it was reported that “Ireland is now so devoted to lawn tennis that it must continue to produce champions. There is little to choose between the best men of the two countries.”<sup>li</sup> The England-versus-Ireland contest was repeated annually until 1897, when interest dwindled. Reasons for its demise are unclear,

although the lack of high-quality “new blood” was an expressed concern.<sup>lii</sup>

These early England-versus-Ireland matches were different in important ways from the earlier “international competitions” mentioned by Gillmeister and Clerici, in that they were organized events composed of national teams specially selected by a governing body/club, and repeated annually. It was not the case, simply, of leading players organizing themselves for a one-off tournament/exhibition. Therefore, these exchanges suggest that the idea for staging international challenge matches between national teams was not Davis’s own. Nor was a Britain-versus-America match the first “international competition” to be staged. Moreover, according to Potter, there was also a France-versus-England team match staged in Paris (Ile de Puteaux) in May/June 1895, which developed from a challenge made by London’s Winchester Club to the French Athletic Union.<sup>liii</sup>

After the successful staging of the first two England-versus-Ireland contests, in which both Goodbody and Pim competed, the latter was inspired to pursue competition in the United States, and the Americans, eager to build on Goodbody’s venture in 1894, were delighted when he announced plans to return with Pim the following summer. The possibility that “English [meaning: Wimbledon] and American champions may be opposed next year” was a mouth-watering prospect, proclaimed *The New York Times*.<sup>liv</sup> Ultimately, Goodbody could not keep his word, but James Dwight still managed to secure Pim’s appearance, convincing his associate Harry L. Ayer, chairman of the Neighborhood Club in West Newton, Massachusetts, to invite the Irish two-time Wimbledon champion to compete at his tournament—a major coup, as Pim actually “announced his intention of abandoning lawn tennis” some months earlier.<sup>lv</sup> Unlike others who had preceded him to America, Pim was “a recognized English champion,” opined the *Roanoke Times*, adding, “Pim is unquestionably the greatest player in the world today, and his visit will stir up tennis players even more than Goodbody’s did last year.”<sup>lvi</sup>



While Pim was the tour's star attraction, his accompanying compatriot, Harold Mahony, was equally expert. Mahony lost in the Wimbledon All-Comers' Final to Pim in 1893 but would become singles champion in 1896, defeating Wilfred Baddeley in five sets. This American venture represented the first time that a British lawn tennis "team"--albeit entirely Irish--had crossed the Atlantic, which made this, arguably, the first real British-American challenge match. In a round-robin tournament, Pim and Mahony were crowned victors against William "Bill" Larned, Fred Hovey, Malcolm Chace, and Clarence Hobart; the Irish pair lost just one match each, winning the other four.

While the trip caused the Irishmen to skip Wimbledon, which generated some disquiet in England,<sup>lvii</sup> the self-funded tour was an exciting proposition for the pair who had never ventured to the United States before, and it was viewed generally as vital to the development of Anglo-American sporting relations.<sup>lviii</sup> The presence of Pim and Mahony gave Americans a benchmark to measure themselves against, and, despite the Irishmen's victories, Paret noted, "[T]o the Americans, the results of this tournament lessened the gap between our best and theirs."<sup>lix</sup>

Contextualized within America's Gilded Age, international sporting prowess was of symbolic importance, particularly represented in its rivalry with the British in economic and industrial spheres. In lawn tennis, a game invented in Britain, the Americans recognized an opportunity to "defeat their masters," and these early competitions fueled the flames of sporting nationalism. It is noteworthy that this 1895 meeting was significant not only in stimulating international rivalry, but it was also--records suggest--the first meeting of Mahony and Larned, whose ensuing friendship would have a profound impact on Anglo-American relations.

## 1896: Charles Voigt's "Hidden" Story

It was at this time that another key figure in American lawn tennis was influencing the trajectory of Anglo-American relations. Charles Voigt, or "The Baron" as he was familiarly known, was a much-admired American-born devotee of the sport. Described as "more cosmopolitan than a Yankee," Voigt was instrumental in developing lawn tennis across continental Europe, working tirelessly in France and Germany, and most specifically in building the international tournament in Homburg.<sup>lx</sup> Praising Voigt, *American Lawn Tennis* editor William D. Orcutt wrote, "No one, perhaps, has figured more prominently, or has accomplished more in the direction of international tennis."<sup>lxi</sup>

Concerned with the general opinion about American players on the Continent, Voigt was particularly encouraged by "the respect more recently shown in England for American skill at the game."<sup>lxii</sup> Upon reflection in 1912, he considered Pim and Mahony's visit to Boston in 1895 as "a tremendous fillip . . . to lawn tennis in the States; everybody on the other side was talking of the possibility of further international matches." For Voigt, their visit fostered a friendly rivalry, which was "one of the chief points which led to the donation of the Davis Cup."<sup>lxiii</sup> Voigt offered little support for the idea that Dwight Davis should be credited for the event's incipient development; in his view, the framework for the international challenge was already in place by 1899 and merely required a symbol -that is, Davis's donation -that would emblemize the event.

Most interestingly, Voigt admitted that he had actually discussed the idea of an international challenge trophy with friends at Ontario's prestigious Niagara-on-the-Lake tournament in July/August 1896, several years prior to Davis's apparent "epiphany." Intriguingly, he recollected first seeing Davis at that tournament, and, when he inquired of fellow players, J. Parmly Paret and E. P. Fischer, as to his identity, was told, "Why, that's our young multi-millionaire, Dwight Davis, of St. Louis." Sensing an opportunity, Voigt then

suggested, rather auspiciously it would seem, “Why don’t you people get him to do something for the game? Put up some big prize or cup?” Voigt had in mind a series of international exchanges and was sure that, if put correctly to the LTA and USNLTA, “the affair would in no doubt soon become a *fait accompli*.”<sup>lxiv</sup>

The Niagara-on-the-Lake tournament was relatively unique in the late-Victorian lawn tennis calendar. Hosted in the exclusive resort town on the Lake Ontario shore, popular for Canada’s nouveau riche and wealthy American tourists, the week-long international event was reported as more of a social occasion than a competitive tournament, with descriptions of “routs and dances” and “merrimakings.”<sup>lxv</sup> Reports by Paret suggest “tomfoolery” and “dark deeds” were associated with the tournaments’ social events, the rumors, dialogue, and “topical matter” of which were reported in the tournament’s daily newspaper, *The Lark*.<sup>lxvi</sup> Of the 1896 editions, specifically, Voigt recalled, “Every occurrence was chronicled next day in ‘The Lark,’ no matter how trivial. . . . [It] also frequently had occasion to refer to the ‘evening strolls in the shrubberies’ of Dwight F. Davis with the belle of the place.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Apparently, Davis’s reputation preceded him: Wright and Ditson labeled him the “summer-girl crusher”!<sup>lxviii</sup>

Alongside such gossip appeared discussion of Voigt’s conversation with Paret and Fischer relating to the donation of a cup for an international tournament—not surprisingly included, given the former was one of *The Lark*’s editors. For Gillmeister, the public reporting of Davis’s romantic pursuits means “it was therefore almost inevitable that the young man from St. Louis, who naturally had a very personal interest in the bulletin’s stories, also became acquainted with what Voigt had said about the Cup.”<sup>lxix</sup> Voigt’s discussion also highlights that two of Davis’s three companions on his 1899 Pacific Coast trip were present at that Niagara tournament (Malcolm Whitman and Beals Wright). Whitman even partnered with Fischer in doubles.<sup>lxx</sup> Therefore, while difficult to prove, it would be plausible if not

actually quite likely that news of Voigt's idea for the inception of an international trophy/cup in lawn tennis found its way to Davis, directly or otherwise.

In the years that followed, Voigt continued to champion the development of Anglo-American relations, writing occasionally in *American Lawn Tennis* but repeatedly to the editor James Dwight in *Golf and Lawn Tennis*, about the successes of Americans abroad and pressing for greater commitment from top American/British players to facilitate international challenge matches.<sup>lxxi</sup>

### **1896 to 1898: Mahony and Larned Lead Reciprocal Tours**

In 1896, Paret wrote, "Ever since Goodbody's visit in 1894, the American lawn tennis appetite for English skill has been growing stronger."<sup>lxxii</sup> Dwight and the USNLTA had made repeated attempts during the mid/late-1890s to tempt the LTA to send an official team to the States, but, as the 1892 LTA-Fitzwilliam stand-off demonstrated, British officials were in no mood to accommodate requests from what it considered "lesser" associations. Consequently, British impetus for transatlantic crossings came from the players themselves, in an "unofficial" capacity; they were self-funded, and arrangements were made through personal invitation.

Boston's West Newton Club made the arrangements for Pim and Mahony to venture west in the spring of 1895. Not only did their visit suggest American progress, but it also stimulated, the following year, some American players venturing east to test their mettle. *Outing* reported that "Larned, [Samuel] Chase and [Arthur] Foote may play in England this summer . . . [and] it is also within the possibility that ex-Champion Wrenn may accompany [them]."<sup>lxxiii</sup> Ultimately, of the first-ranked American players, only Larned crossed, but he stayed for several months. This reciprocal visit was a crucial stepping-stone to the development of formal international challenges, as evidence suggests that Larned was not

merely a “tourist” with a tennis racket but on a semi-official mission to recruit top British players for international competitions in 1897. That he was essentially “sent” -albeit, unofficially -by the USNLTA is conceivable, as just months after his return he was elected to its executive committee—an election likely smoothed by his successful expedition and the fact of his shared passion, with President Dwight, for international competition. From the 1896 visit onward, Larned became, in effect, the USNLTA’s “point man,” with Mahony as his British counterpart.

Fittingly, Larned’s first stopover was in Ireland, where he reportedly stayed with Mahony at his Dublin home during the Irish Championships.<sup>lxxiv</sup> During the tournament’s first two days, the best English and Irish players also met for the annual challenge match, with Larned an honored guest. The 1896 match was the strongest assembly of English/Irish players yet, so the world-class play and the great public excitement it stirred undoubtedly stimulated further Larned’s imagination for an international match with America.<sup>lxxv</sup>

At the Irish Championships themselves, Larned and Mahony were joined by Goodbody and two other notable British players, Wilberforce Eaves and Harold Nisbet. Larned reached the second round of the singles before losing to Eaves and, playing with Goodbody in doubles, lost against the Baddeley brothers.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Mahony and Larned competed in five further tournaments together over the following two months--the Middlesex Championships (Chiswick Park, London), Northern Championships (Aigburth Cricket Ground, Liverpool), London Lawn Tennis Championships (Queen’s Club), West of England Championships (Bristol Cricket Ground), and the Wimbledon Championships. Of these six tournaments, Nisbet also competed in four and Eaves in three. Given their compatible schedules, it is entirely possible that Larned and Mahony traveled together for the entire trip, whereupon they would have had ample opportunities to converse about further transatlantic exchanges. Such arrangements were common for lawn tennis players at the time, according to

Paret, being “distinctly gregarious; they travel in groups from place to place, from tournament to tournament.”<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Interestingly, given the dates of these trips, it is possible that discussions about the creation of an international challenge match were happening almost simultaneously on two different continents, among Voigt, Paret, and Fischer in Niagara-on-the-Lake in July/August 1896 and among Larned, Mahony, and possibly Eaves, Nisbet, and Goodbody in Britain, in the period May-July 1896. Of even greater significance was the fact that Larned and Fischer met several times in the subsequent weeks/months, competing as opponents at both Norwood Park and Newport in August and as teammates in the East-versus-West Challenge at Chicago’s Kenwood Country Club in September.<sup>lxxviii</sup> There, they were reported to have conversed with James Gardner, secretary and treasurer of the Western LTA, about the prospect of an “international tournament” to be held there the following summer, which would pit six of the best British players against six of the best Americans—three from the East and three from the West.<sup>lxxix</sup>

This was actually the second proposed “international tournament” reported by the *Chicago Tribune* that month. Several weeks before, the newspaper had proposed the possibility of “the greatest tennis tournament that has ever been held, not only in America, but in the world”:

It is to be one more of the great international contests between America and England, and it will be one of the most interesting. As these are the two principal tennis-playing countries, the tournament will practically be for the world’s championship.

The “team championship,” to be held at Norwood Park, New Jersey, would be organized by the wealthy Harper family, of Harper publishing, and be *officially* recognized by Dwight’s USNLTA and “held under its auspices.” The article suggested that discussions of this tournament had been ongoing since 1893 but that Pim and Mahony’s visit in 1895 was an

important impetus, especially given Mahony's and Larned's first meeting.<sup>lxxx</sup>

In both articles, Larned's trip in 1896 was reported, essentially, as a recruiting mission. He talked "the plan" over with the leading British players, who "fell right in with the idea."<sup>lxxx</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* repeated that Larned's trip was to "secure the consents of half a dozen of the best of the English tennis-players" to compete in the United States, and, after returning home with news of British "enthusiasm . . . for an international tournament," there was, apparently, "no other topic of conversation."<sup>lxxxii</sup>

A few weeks later, news of Bob Wrenn's phenomenal play to win the U.S. Nationals had reached British shores, pushing *Lawn Tennis* correspondent George F. Abraham to comment:

The particulars given . . . of the recent competitions for the US Championship encourage the belief that America now possesses five or six (if not more) players of the highest skill. Might it not, then, be worthwhile for the LTA to invite a representative American team to try conclusions next year with the six best English players? In the event of the invitation being sent and accepted, an International Match -American v. Ireland--might possibly be arranged also, say, for the Irish Championship week.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

It seems, therefore, that discussions of international tours, competitions, and challenge matches between the United States and Britain/Ireland were occurring between numerous individuals on both sides of the Atlantic some years before Davis's supposedly conceived his "original" idea.

In the light of Harper's proposal, which the USNLTA strongly supported, Dwight sent notice in early 1897 to his friend and former LTA secretary Herbert Chipp requesting a team be sent to America, including an offer to pay players' expenses. To give the event longterm stability, he suggested a reciprocal arrangement for 1898. However, Dwight made a "serious error of judgement" in writing directly to Chipp, who had since withdrawn as secretary; his

replacement, W. H. Collins, was unimpressed by Dwight's "high-handed tactics" and, moreover, considered paying expenses a breach of amateur ideals.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Dwight's idea had been agreed, in principle, but the LTA decided to decline "on financial grounds," following its July council meeting.<sup>lxxxv</sup> The LTA was not unlike other British sporting organizations that considered their position of global authority unshakeable if not ordained as an extension of Britain's imperial prowess. To sanction an "official" American tour, under Dwight's suggested conditions, the LTA would be contravening its own rigid amateur code and, perhaps more importantly, accepting the Americans as equals—effectively ceding its own seemingly unassailable position of leadership. Indeed, the LTA's lack of support and enthusiasm for British players' ventures to America can be seen as indicative of British parochialism and ethnocentrism, which was underpinned by a sustained and unquestioned belief in their own superiority.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Arguably, the LTA lacked foresight. While the organization was enjoying its position of global authority, acting as the de facto international federation, the game's popularity in Britain was declining, British coaching-professionals were departing en masse for better working conditions overseas, and foreign players were developing at pace, soon to dominate at the Wimbledon Championships.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Meanwhile, the more staid "British approach" mirrored the LTA's pragmatism to its development at home and abroad, which verged on almost total inertia. While the Americans sought international competition to expand their horizons, the LTA adopted a *laissez faire* approach.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Nevertheless, Anglo-American rivalry continued to develop, as in other sports.

Despite Dwight's setback, he would have been pleased to receive news that three of the best British players--Mahony, Eaves, and Nisbet--were planning on venturing to America that summer on their own accord. While this was another "unofficial" tour, the USNLTA, for its part, certainly had a presence. Not only did the association offer official sanction, but



Richard Stevens, elected to its executive committee the following year, hosted the trio on his Hoboken estate.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

The three players were highly ranked in Britain and, in Eaves and Mahony, seasoned and successful players. From their perspective, however, the tour ended disappointingly: Larned and Wrenn had the better of them on numerous occasions, with the only achievement of note being Eaves's progression to the U.S. Nationals Challenge Round, where he suffered a five-set loss to Wrenn. For the Americans, in contrast, the defeat of the "Britishers" was evidence of their arrival as a world power. Paret summarized this triumph as unparalleled in lawn tennis history: "American players have won the greatest international victory in the annals of the sport."<sup>xc</sup> In the context of shifting Anglo-American relations in this period, sport--in this case, tennis -was used to demonstrate international prestige and promote what the two countries regarded as positive stereotypes of national character.<sup>xc1</sup>

The organized visit of this British "team" in itself was a hugely significant development. This, argued by Eaves and Lake to be "the first truly international challenge between top players on both sides of the Atlantic," not only reinforced for the Americans "a growing belief of equality on the lawn courts" but also "laid much of the groundwork for solidifying the prerequisite Anglo-American relations that undoubtedly laid the foundations for the emergence of the Davis Cup three years later."<sup>xcii</sup>

The results of the 1897 tour, contextualized within the growing enthusiasm for further international competition, should have resulted in a formalized international challenge. However, the tour received little fanfare in Britain, with the LTA's mouthpiece, *Lawn Tennis*, reporting in a way that reflected its continued condescension toward the Americans: "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."<sup>xciii</sup> On returning to Britain, both Mahony and Eaves urged Larned and Wrenn to

visit in 1898, where they would likely find themselves near equal to Britain's best. It seemed arrangements were well under way by April that year, when *Lawn Tennis* reported a proposed international challenge match—the United Kingdom versus America—at Newcastle in July.<sup>xciv</sup> Five other tournaments were also scheduled “for the entertainment of a team of four representative American players”: the Irish Championships, Beckenham, the Northern Championships, Wimbledon, and the Northumberland County Tournament. However, by June, *American Lawn Tennis* reproduced an article presented in *Lawn Tennis*, which reported,

Mr W. A. Larned writes that the above programme suits their ideas exactly, and that the tournaments named are those in which their players would like to take part, but owing to business engagements, neither he nor Mr. R. D. Wrenn (the American champion) would be able to come over this season; in addition to which some of their best players being in the National Guard would in all probability not be allowed to leave the country.<sup>xcv</sup>

Given that *American Lawn Tennis* claimed itself the “official bulletin” of the USNLTA and was edited by James Dwight, it appears that such arrangements had official support in America. Ultimately, Clarence Hobart, J. Parmly Paret, and Wylie Grant made their way to Britain and competed at Wimbledon--Hobart lost in the semi-finals to Lawrence Doherty but won the All-Comers Doubles with Nisbet—but, given the Americans could not field their strongest team, the proposed challenge match was scrapped.

Subsequently, broader economic, political, and social developments worked against this particular contest taking place. Wars in Cuba and the Philippines intervened for both Larned and Wrenn, as both volunteered with Roosevelt's “Rough Riders” and were unavailable, as was Eaves the following year due to his engagement in the Boer War. With Larned predisposed, the transatlantic passage of tennis travelers dwindled. Hobart returned to Britain in 1899, repeating his Wimbledon doubles performance, but there was no reciprocal British tour to America. At this juncture, Dwight Davis conceived *his* idea for an

international competition before approaching James Dwight a month later to proffer his cup.

## **Conclusion**

After years of enticing the LTA to officially sanction an international contest with the USNLTA, when Dwight's letter came in early 1900, there was now a handsome trophy to compete for. Ultimately, after the embarrassments of 1897 and the gradual insurgence of Americans at Wimbledon, the British could no longer denounce American players outright, so, in the spirit of Anglo-American solidarity, the LTA duly sanctioned a British "Davis Cup" team. Ultimately, the trio of Arthur Gore, Ernest Black, and Herbert Roper Barrett was comprehensively outplayed, but they excused their defeat through complaints of poor playing conditions and suggestions of its "inconsequentiality."<sup>xvii</sup> Nevertheless, the Davis Cup had arrived, yet the myth surrounding its creator was conveniently overlooked.

The main aim of this paper was to expose and debunk the myth that Dwight Davis conceived the original idea for the International Lawn Tennis Challenge. Evidence was presented of international contests that took place long before Davis approached Dwight with *his* idea. Alongside several one-off contests, most compelling were the England-versus-Ireland challenge matches played annually from 1892 to 1897, which included many of the world's best players. Evidence was presented to suggest that numerous other men envisioned and openly discussed ideas for international team-based competitions, including James Dwight, Manliffe Goodbody, Charles Voigt, Harold Mahony, Bill Larned, and possibly also E. P. Fischer, well before 1899 and that Davis might have appropriated the idea for such a competition from those with whom he came into contact.

Dwight was the first top American to play at Wimbledon, in 1884, and spent much of his career working to develop friendly Anglo-American relations. He organized "international" competitions that, in their mix of singles/doubles matches between national

teams of, typically, three players, “laid the ground work” for the Davis Cup; he worked with clubs to arrange American tours for British players; and he administered invitations to/from the British.<sup>xcvii</sup> While not reciprocated “officially” due to the LTA’s intransigence, numerous British players ventured west to compete, but the self-funded trips by Goodbody, Pim, and Mahony in 1894/95 were of greatest significance. The blossoming friendship between Larned and Mahony was particularly important in arranging reciprocal tours—for Larned to Britain in 1896; for Mahony, Eaves, and Nisbet to America in 1897; and for the proposed trip of Larned and Wrenn to Britain in 1898 that never materialized. Larned’s role throughout this story is particularly noteworthy, given his close relationship with Dwight that was solidified upon his election to the USNLTA executive. Combining forces, Dwight and Larned “pulled strings” on the American side, while Mahony did the same from Britain. At the very foundation of these international competitions were trust, mutual respect, and friendship between the players and officials striving to work together, and evidence was presented to show how these were being formed over the previous fifteen years by these key individuals. Crucially, Davis was *not* one of them.

Voigt’s role in this development is harder to pin down, but it is possible that his conversation with Paret and Fischer in Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1896 had two effects: i) it may have facilitated communication about international competitions between Fischer and Larned when they met in subsequent tournaments, and ii) it may have planted a seed of thought into Davis’s mind of an international competition. If the latter is true, then it would have behooved Davis to reference Voigt in his 1899 discussions with Dwight and in his subsequent published accounts from 1907 and 1931. He made no such references, however, which Gillmeister believes, admittedly rather cynically, to be because of political expedience; Davis, the future politician, would likely have wanted to hide any possible scandal related to his evening trysts in Canada.<sup>xcviii</sup>

Most perplexing in Davis's accounts is the lack of any recognition given for Dwight's efforts, though it is possible that the modest USNLTA president preferred it that way, especially after being "burned" from his previous attempts to engage LTA support. The omission of any information about previous international competitions and transatlantic ventures is also odd. The England-versus-Ireland competitions were contested annually for six years by the world's best players, held during the prestigious Irish Championships, and the numerous reciprocal Anglo-American tours during the period 1894-97 included the leading Americans at the time. Indeed, his friend and Pacific Coast-tour travel companion, Malcolm Whitman, competed against both Mahony and Nisbet in the 1897 tour and appeared in several photographs with the British team that were featured in American magazines and newspapers. These competitions received wide press coverage, and *American Lawn Tennis* opined, "[E]nthusiasm among both players and spectators seemed to reach the utmost limit."<sup>xcix</sup> It is simply implausible that the bright and well-connected Davis remained unaware of their existence, particularly given he also played in the 1897 U.S. Nationals alongside the star attractions -Eaves, Mahony, and Nisbit -losing in the second round.

Instead, perhaps Davis's great ego combined with political expedience and a sense of entitlement to prevent him from giving due credit to others' ideas and efforts. A brief look into the details of Davis's role in his cup being accepted by the USNLTA in 1900 might shed light on his personality and underlying motives in this regard, which raise suspicions, to say the least.

On February 9, 1900, the USNLTA executive committee that comprised four members--James Dwight, Richard Stevens, O. S. Campbell, and Palmer Presbury--met at New York's prestigious Hotel Waldorf-Astoria. A proposal was made to amend the constitution by providing a "nominating committee" for the election of officers, to enable a more transparent and fair election process. The committee considered this but decided against

any immediate action and forwarded the discussion to the wider association for consideration.<sup>c</sup> Immediately following this meeting, the Annual General Meeting commenced, and here we had the instant election of Davis to the Executive Committee, which occurred, crucially, *before* the discussion to create a more transparent election process. Davis, in effect, slipped in to the executive “through the back door.”

Toward the meeting’s conclusion, the association voted to leave the decision about accepting Davis’s donated trophy to the executive, on which, conveniently, Davis was now seated. This discussion occurred on February 21, when Davis among the four others voted to accept his own trophy. Amusingly, “it was also voted that the appreciation of the Association be expressed to the donor,” which means Davis possibly voted on thanking himself!<sup>ci</sup> Davis’s votes were accepted because, as Dwight stated, the cup’s donor “desired his name withheld.”<sup>cii</sup> Superficially, this presented Davis as both philanthropic and self-effacing but conveniently ensured that the vote on Davis’s trophy would have an extra supporter. This was an obvious conflict of interest, especially when considering how crucial his vote was on a committee of five, but it is suspected that Dwight was in cahoots with Davis on this matter. The former had desired an official international competition with Britain for over fifteen years and must have felt confident that a handsome trophy would finally “do the trick.” Certainly, Davis may have been elected simply because he was a leading player, which was not uncommon at the time, but it is equally plausible that Davis donated the trophy to convince Dwight to grandfather him into the executive, which certainly would have benefitted from his connections, status, and supreme wealth. In other words, he may have “bought” his position.

Adding to the suspicion, once the proposal was ratified, the cup’s donor immediately became known and was reported in *The New York Times* the following day; and, in *Golf and Lawn Tennis*, the trophy itself quickly assumed the unofficial name: “The Davis International

Tennis Cup.”<sup>ciii</sup> Arguably, had Davis been truly determined to remain anonymous, he could have insisted that the trophy not bear his name and/or that his own authority on matters pertaining to the competition would be equal to that of his USNLTA colleagues, but he did neither. Not only did he make no attempt to modestly downplay his own involvement, credit the efforts of others, or even acknowledge that the establishment of Anglo-American relations was a long-term process outside his own actions, he also demanded that he, personally, retain authority over any proposed changes to the competition. This is seen in the USNLTA regulations sent to the LTA that suggested the agreed conditions “can be changed by a two-thirds vote of the committee of the ruling Association of the country where the Cup is held” *and*, crucially, “with the consent of the Donor.”<sup>civ</sup> It would be safe to assume that, had Davis intended to remain anonymous, he would not have demanded this power of veto. Moreover, he stipulated that, if no challenge was made for five years, the trophy must be returned to the donor. His philanthropy had caveats, but, with this in mind, his subsequent comment from 1907 that “we had no idea that this competition would excite the interest which it has” can only be interpreted as a combination of false modesty and blithe ignorance to the huge public excitement stirred by the Anglo-American tours from 1894 to 1897.

In later life, Davis went into politics, so, along with being well-connected and wealthy, he certainly had the necessary “talent” to manipulate the conditions to suit his own ambitions. His actions depict a man of tremendous ambition, of sufficient self-regard, and with considerable political capital. He was smart not to publish a personal reflection of his idea for the international challenge until 1907, when any rumblings of discontent from others would have died down. He had an opportunity in 1931, as a man in his fifties, to “come clean” but chose instead to reiterate his original account. This is important in itself, as, by this time, alternative accounts had come out--for example, from Charles Voigt -that Davis chose to ignore. By 1931, however, all of the main actors who might have refuted Davis’s claims

were dead or incapacitated. Dwight died in 1917, Larned committed suicide in 1926, Mahony died from a bicycling accident in 1905, Eaves passed away in 1920 and Voigt in 1929; Fischer survived but was sectioned in a mental asylum in 1920, after being embroiled in a Wall Street bombing scandal. Davis was “home free.”

Overall, it could be argued that Dwight F. Davis’s role in the initiation of an international lawn tennis challenge can be counted, if generous, on two fingers: he offered a valuable cup for an international team-based competition and had a marginal say in establishing the competition’s initial regulations. Davis entrusted Dwight to champion this process, and he enlisted Presbury, Holcombe Ward, and his friend Richard Olney, the former Boston lawyer and secretary of state under Grover Cleveland, to draft the conditions, which included devising the five-match format of four singles and one doubles match.<sup>cv</sup> Crucially, however, Davis did *not* help establish relations with the British or invite them to compete for his trophy; nor did he conceive the original idea for international team-based competitions. Credit for these prerequisite achievements should go to the combined efforts of several men, notably Dwight and Larned, but also Voigt, Goodbody, Mahony, and Fischer.

Not only does Davis appear egotistical and audacious in his claims to playing a leading role in this story, thereby ignoring other’s efforts, but leading officials and tennis historians have continued to exaggerate the importance of his meagre actions, as if by simply donating the cup the event was instantaneously “born.” This oversimplifies the complex, longterm processes involved in instituting an international sporting event of this magnitude. “The social memory” of many sports, suggests Gary Osmond, “is unkind to such slow, experimental, background developments, preferring instead a ‘eureka!’ moment.”<sup>cvi</sup> The promotion of origin myths in such simplistic but ultimately fallacious ways is indicative of the common tendency to reduce complex historical processes to a single incident or event or the actions of a single individual, according to sociologist, Norbert Elias:



We have been reared in a tradition, which leads us to expect to find an explanation for every apparent inexplicable event in a single cause. This habit of thought is not in fact properly suited to helping us comprehend the forms of organization found at the level of integration of human societies.<sup>cvi</sup>

While the perpetuation of the Davis Cup myth over the last century certainly has much to do with the widespread ignorance of historical fact, it is also likely that it stems from a simple desire among the American tennis establishment, and the wider tennis community in general, for the myth to be true. During the early twentieth century, the American republic was progressing through a period of economic and political insurgence, staking its claim as a great superpower. The promotion of the Davis Cup as a product of broadly American, but specifically WASP, ingenuity likely played a similar role that both the Doubleday and Webb Ellis myths did, helping positively to promote, and assuage fears of the decline of, a combined national and class ideology. Davis's wealth and lineage lent the sport credibility in America, at a time when its officials still felt in the shadows of British imperialism. The press and public saw in Davis a model American and lauded his achievements, helping to spin the story as much as Davis and the USNLTA did themselves.

Other men were no match for the charming multimillionaire: Dwight was too modest to claim ownership; Larned was not "front-man" material either, as perhaps indicated later in life when he committed suicide; Voigt and Fischer were not sufficiently part of the "establishment"; and Goodbody and Mahony were British. The competition needed an American figurehead of Davis's class and status to draw public attention and British interest to it. From a prominent St. Louis family, Harvard-educated, a prolific sportsman, a decorated war hero, philanthropist, and later politician, he was the very image of what the elite American establishment wanted to express as quintessentially "American." However, the well-trod story of Dwight Davis, and the origins of the tennis competition that bears his

name, is as charming as it is untrue. Davis neither invented the Davis Cup nor conceived the original idea for it. Underneath the all-American facade, his actions and political maneuverings demonstrate ethically questionable personal motives and traits that defy his positive image.

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<sup>i</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from “The Quest for the International Cup,” American Lawn Tennis, 18 April 1907, 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Dwight F. Davis, “Establishment of an International Trophy,” in Fifty Years of Lawn Tennis in the United States (Boston: Plimpton, 1931), 69-72.

<sup>iv</sup> Quotations in this paragraph are from E. Digby Baltzell, Sporting Gentlemen: Men’s Tennis from the Age of Honor to the Cult of the Superstar (New York: Free Press, 1995), 66 and 67.

<sup>v</sup> E. Digby Baltzell, The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964); Sven Beckert, The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> Regarding baseball, see Daniel Bloyce, “Baseball: Myths and Modernization,” in Sport Histories: Figurational Studies of the Development of Modern Sport, ed. Eric Dunning, Dominic Malcolm, and Ivan Waddington (London: Routledge, 2004), 88-103; Gerald Gems, “Baseball, Invented Tradition, and Nationalistic Spirit,” in Sport Histories, 161-76; and George Kirsch, The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989). Regarding rugby, see William J. Baker, “William Webb Ellis and the Origins of Rugby Football: The Life and Death of a Victorian Myth,” Albion 13.2 (1981): 117-30; Tony Collins, A Social History of English Rugby Union (London: Routledge, 2009); and Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, Barbarians, Gentlemen,

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Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>vii</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in The Invention of Tradition, by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; see also Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>ix</sup> See Gary Osmond and Murray Phillips, “‘Look at That Kid Crawling!’ Race, Myth and the ‘Crawl’ Stroke,” Australian Historical Studies 37 (2006): 43-62; Tony Collins, “The Invention of Sporting Tradition: National Myths, Imperial Pasts and the Origins of Australian Rules Football,” in Myths and Milestones in the History of Sport, ed. Stephen Wagg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8-31; and Gary Osmond, “Myth-making in Australian Sport History: Re-evaluating Duke Kahanamoku’s Contribution to Surfing,” Australian Historical Studies 42.2 (2011): 260-76.

<sup>x</sup> Dominic Malcolm, The SAGE Dictionary of Sports Studies (London: SAGE, 2009), 71.

<sup>xi</sup> Bloyce, “Baseball,” 100-101.

<sup>xii</sup> Collins, A Social History, 3; Malcolm, SAGE Dictionary, 274.

<sup>xiii</sup> Dunning and Sheard, Barbarians, 53.

<sup>xiv</sup> Baker, “William Webb Ellis,” 126.

<sup>xv</sup> See Douglas Booth, The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>xvi</sup> See <http://www.daviscup.com/en/organisation/davis-cup-history.aspx> [accessed 8 November 2017].

<sup>xvii</sup> E. C. Potter, Kings of the Court: The Story of Lawn Tennis (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1963), 71.

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