

A note on the Silver Ball of Rattray

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ABSTRACT

The Silver Ball of Rattray (c 1600) was the trophy for a game which had features similar to real tennis. Its origins are in France.

INTRODUCTION

The Silver Ball of Rattray in Perthshire is distinguished for being one of the oldest Scottish sporting trophies and also the earliest known piece of Perth silver. It was made by Thomas Ramsay, who is known to have been active between 1597 and 1614, and it has been recently described in these *Proceedings* (Rodger 1992).

Folk football, in which dozens of men and boys played a game without rules across miles of country, was probably played in every parish in Lowland Scotland from the Middle Ages onwards. A particularly well-known match took place at Scone on Fastern's E'en (Shrove Tuesday). Given the short distance from Rattray to Scone — some 22 km — some historians have assumed that the Rattray ball was a trophy for this kind of game (for example Fittis 1891, 148). Rodger, however, suggests that the Rattray game may also have been related to the great and various European tradition of the *jeu de paume*, and the purpose of the present note is to show that this is indeed the case. Rodger mentions a description of the Rattray game by William Herdman (1760–1838), who became minister of Rattray in 1813: this has not yet emerged, but a later one by the Perth antiquary Peter Baxter, perhaps derived from Herdman's account, will be quoted. First, however, we need to say something about the development of the *jeu de paume*.

JEU DE PAUME

In the late Middle Ages there were two basic forms of the game, one in which the ball was struck backwards and forwards as in modern lawn tennis — this was known in France as *la longue paume* — and the other in which the ball was struck against a wall: squash is its most common modern derivative. The latter form of the *jeu de paume* was known in Scotland as *caich* and in the 19th century as *handball*. *Caich* was devised in the cloisters of abbeys in Picardy about 1375 where it was called *cache*, and from there spread all over Europe (Gillmeister 1981). The first reference to the word *caich* in Scotland dates from a little more than a hundred years later, when it appears in the anonymous poem *Ratis Raving* (c 1480) and in the Lord Treasurer's accounts for 1496 (*DOST*, sv *caich*). However, it was probably the game which James I had been playing at the

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Dominican friary in Perth in the days before his assassination in 1437. He attempted to escape from his murderers by descending into a sewer:

bot he maid to stop hit well iij dayes afore hand with stone, bicause that whane he playd there at the paume the ballis that he plaid withe oft ranne yn at that fowle hole (Shirley 1837, 56).

Later evidence suggests that *caich* was widely played in Lowland Scotland, but no descriptions of the way in which it was played survive from before the 19th century (Burnett 1999, ch 4). As we will see, this causes difficulties in clarifying the origin of the Rattray game.

In the decades around 1500 the *jeu de paume* was evolving in France into the more sophisticated *tennis*, played with rackets and a more elaborate court. Thus when James V returned from Paris to Scotland and built the ‘real tennis’ court at Falkland Palace in 1539–41 (Puttfarcken & Crichton-Stuart 1989), he was introducing a new sport to Scotland. Its costly rackets and purpose-built court meant that it was a game for royalty and the aristocracy, and before the 20th century only two courts were built in Scotland, the second being in Edinburgh beside Holyroodhouse.

The rules of real tennis are complex and a lucid account for laymen is available (Arlott 1975, 821–6). Of particular importance in the present context is the way in which the service is performed. The court is rectangular and defined by high walls on all sides. Along the full length of one of the long sides is the *penthouse*, a covered gallery whose sloping roof is vital to the play, for every service must strike it before hitting the ground.

THE RATTRAY GAME

The Rattray game was played on the plot of ground immediately north of the kirk: the present church, built in 1820, occupies the site. The north wall of the kirk thus defined one side of the playing area. The teams consisted of four players:

The playing ball was thrown on the roof by the party at the east end; but as it fell, or after the first rebound from the ground, it was struck by the western combatants, not upon the church again, but as far east as possible, the eastern party hitting it back again; and so on, backward and forward, the object of each side being to make the ball come to rest on the ground as far within their enemies’ country as possible, a mark being placed on the spot where it rested. Then the sides changed places, and a new ‘bout’ commenced by the ball being again ‘given up’ by the new eastern party (Baxter 1898, 150).

The use of the church roof was copied from the penthouse in real tennis: because it was the team on the east who served, they always did so with the roof on their left, just as the penthouse is on the server’s left in tennis.

Before we examine the way in which the remainder of the game was played, we need to understand another aspect of real tennis — the *chase*. If a player fails to strike the ball before its second bounce, he does not lose a point as he would in modern lawn tennis. Rather, he concedes a *chase*, which he has to defend. The chase is defined by the distance of the second bounce from the back wall of the court. The chase is decided in a separate *rest* or rally. If, for example, it is of

three yards and the first player manages to land the ball so that its second bounce falls within three yards of the back wall, and his opponent fails to return it, then the chase is off. There are thus two elements in the chase: the second bounce and the occupying or defending of one's territory.

In the Rattray game the ball was struck backwards and forwards until one side was unable to return it. Where Baxter refers to one side making 'the ball come to rest on the ground' this does not mean that players allowed it to roll on its own, but rather that the opposition, having failed to return the ball, still had to stop it: the point which they did so defined the next phase of the play.

The Rattray game thus involves gaining ground in a manner similar to laying chases in real tennis. However, this does not mean that tennis was the source, for it may have come from a different game. *La longue paume* survives today in parts of the *plateau picard*, the high ground above the River Somme to the east of Amiens, played by teams of one to six players. It is played on an open court with neither walls nor a net, merely a line across the court to define the areas defended by the two teams. The aim is to strike the ball as far as possible into the opposition's half of the court, the distance struck being measured to the point of the second bounce of a ball which has not been returned: the word *chasse* is used to describe it (Lazure 1981, 21).

An almost identical feature is found in a Scots game, *haun-an-hail*, which the lexicographer John Jamieson recorded in Dumfriesshire in 1825:

Two goals calld *hails*, or *dules*, are fixed on, at about the distance of four hundred yards from each other. The two parties then place themselves in the middle between the goals, or *dules*, and one of the persons, taking a soft elastic ball about the size of a man's fist, tosses it into the air, and as it falls, strikes it with his palm towards his antagonists. The object of the game is for either party to drive the ball beyond the goal which lies before them, while their opponents do all in their power to prevent this. As soon as the ball is *gowf't*, that is, struck away, the opposite party endeavour to intercept it in its fall. This is called *keppan' the ba'*. If they succeed in this attempt, the player who does so is entitled to throw the ball with all his might towards his antagonists; if he *kep* it in the first bounce which it makes off the ground, called a *stot*, he is allowed *to haunch*, that is to throw the ball by bringing his hand with a sweep past his thigh, to which he gives a stroke as his hand passes, and discharging the ball at the moment when the stroke is given. If the ball be caught second bounce, the catcher may *hoch the ball*, that is, throw it through below one of his houghs (Jamieson, sv *Han'-an'-hail*).

The relevance of this quotation is twofold. First, it shows that *haun-an-hail* was very similar to *la longue paume*. It probably came to Scotland directly from France, most likely during the period in the 16th century when the Auld Alliance was at its closest. It is less likely that it was transmitted through England for none of the various kinds of *fives* played there involves the idea of territory: where handball games derived from the *jeu de paume* are played on the Continent, the concept of gaining and losing ground is common (Morgan 1989). Second, in the unusually detailed description of the play, it reveals that rules — conventions might be a better word, for they were unwritten — were complex and that several kinds of skill were involved. *Haun-an-hail* was a sophisticated game and there is no reason to suppose that other games which sound similar were not equally sophisticated, even though the details of their play were not recorded. In particular, we must be aware that the Rattray ball game must have relied on more conventions than Baxter stated.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the Rattray game is thought to be derived from the general tradition of the *jeu de paume* because it is based on the idea of gaining territory. The use of the kirk roof in place of the penthouse shows that the Rattray game was at least partly based on real tennis. However, because the idea of winning territory is found both in real tennis and in *haun-an-hail*, we cannot be certain that real tennis is the sole source. Nevertheless, by one means or another, the ancestors of the Rattray game were French. Given the limited evidence for the ways in which popular sports were played it is unlikely that historians will ever be able to say more than this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This note could not have been compiled without the help of librarians in the National Library of Scotland, the National Museums of Scotland and the library of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Paris.

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