

Richard Naughton, **Gentleman Jack, the Jack Crawford Story**, Slattery Books, 2022, pp. 207, paperback, \$29.95

Book Review, Michael Sexton, Independent Scholar, Sporting Traditions, Journal of Australian Sports History, Vol 40, no 1, May 2023, p 112.

In the two decades after World War II, Australian tennis was so successful that subsequent generations were measured against almost unachievable standards. Lleyton Hewitt, Pat Rafter and Ash Barty were all ranked world number one and collected major titles and Davis Cups, yet their returns seem modest when compared to those of Rod Laver, Lew Hoad, Margaret Court, John Newcombe, Roy Emerson and Ken Rosewall.

The achievements of that modern trio will be remembered and recalled though, given they took place in the age of video and digital replays. No such luck for those whose success on the court came prior to the golden age when their moment in the sun was captured by a few black and white photographs and possibly some jerky old film now uploaded on YouTube.

Richard Naughton, a legal academic, has sought to shine a light back on the achievements of some of those pre-war figures with two books: *The Wizard, the Story of Sir Norman Brookes* (2011) and *Daphne Akhurst, the Woman Behind the Trophy* (2021). Now Naughton's attention has turned to Jack Crawford in *Gentleman Jack, The Jack Crawford Story*.

There was nothing ironic about his nickname (as opposed to 'Muscles' Rosewall or 'Rocket' Laver), Crawford played the game as a gentleman, turning out in immaculate flannels and using his square-topped wooden racquet to play sweeping shots, in particular an effortless forehand. At a time when serving required one foot to be planted, he controlled the game from the baseline although could come to net with devastating effect when needed. Adding to his mystique was his disinclination to practice and that he was both a heavy smoker and an asthmatic. He was a Depression-era hero in the way of Don Bradman, Walter Lindrum and Phar Lap. Crowds were drawn to him including Queen Mary, who is said to have nominated Crawford as her favourite player. There seems little explanation of how Crawford developed his majestic style.

His trajectory follows the Bradmanesque mythology of learning to play alone in the country, hitting against a wall on the family farm at Urangeline in the New South Wales Riverina, before moving to Sydney and emerging as a complete player in his teens. Crawford's performance against Jean Borotra (one of the four fabled French Musketeers) in the Australian Championships at Sydney's White City Stadium in 1928 gave notice of his ability. His golden year was 1933 when Crawford came within striking distance of being the first man to claim the grand slam — winning the Australian, French and Wimbledon crowns before falling in five sets to Fred Perry in New York. This single-season achievement puts Crawford in the same category as Lew Hoad and Novak Djokovic and a shade behind the only two men to achieve the feat: Laver (twice) and Don Budge.

Crawford's extraordinary collapse after leading two-sets to one in the final at Forest Hills is investigated from many angles but ultimately remains unresolved.

Naughton resists the temptation to embroider Crawford with the hyperbolic language of the day, presenting his achievements in measured detail. A list of rivalries shows Crawford had the better of Wilmer Allison, Sidney Wood, 'Bunny' Austin and Jiri Satoh but was in the shadow of Perry, Ellsworth Vines, Budge, Bill Tilden and Gottfried von Cramm. Crawford's greatest ambition was to play Davis Cup and Australia built a team around him for a decade without claiming the trophy. When the breakthrough came in 1939, Crawford was in the team but only as a hitting partner for Adrian Quist and John Bromwich.

After the War, Crawford drifted into selling sports equipment and trophies, going to the races and occasionally writing about tennis. Although now his name is rarely spoken about as one of the greats — his era was consequential. According to the tennis writer Paul Metzler in *Great Players of Australian Tennis* (1979) 'Crawford's style of play attracted such interest and support that within those years [1928–32] Australian tennis changed from a minor to a major sport.' Crawford's great doubles partner and mate Harry Hopman led the post-war golden era which put everything in the shade. Yet in a reflective interview with the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1978, Hopman was asked about his time and said in deep respect, 'Crawford was the boy.'

Nothing happens in a vacuum and Gentleman Jack restores Crawford's significant place in Australian tennis history.