



POLO'S GHOST LAWNS by Ann Barr, Editor Emeritus | www.intrepidsloane.com | © Ann Barr 2008

You will notice that a history of polo is always slippery, frisky and sly, with no claim about what happened treated as gospel by the next burrower into ancient facts. This is very lucky for an ignoramus like me who has never played that game but whose family was in it for two generations, over two wars. After World War II Lord Cowdray used to give polo parties in London but he did not know enough girls, so because of being acquainted with my father, my sister Deirdre and I got invited, though we were completely out of our depth, a couple of damp squibs amongst a bunch of burly mallet-crazy middle-aged men.

Polo, the Balti word for ball, similar to the Tibetan bolo, is a very old game, starting in Persia, where it was the national game. There is written proof of it in 600 BC, when the Persian poet Firdausi described a match between the Turkomans and the Persians. Concrete evidence is a 500 yard-long polo ground in Ispahan, the Persian capital, from Shakespeare's time in the 16th century, with stone goal posts eight yards apart – the same width as today.

Polo spread to China, Japan and India, the sport of young warriors who could afford the ponies. It has always been a very Sloany, Army sort of game, fun and flashy. The news that polo is about to be in the Olympics is not true. The Olympics are overcrowded (baseball and softball will go after Beijing) and incoming sports must be possible for the youth of today's world. Polo fell out of fashion in the Far East by the 19th century but was still played by the local warriors in the mountains of the north-west and the north-east frontiers of India. It was exported again when British Army officers saw it. They set up polo clubs in India, the first, the Calcutta Club, in 1862. Horses were a staple of life then, but the cavalry regiments shaped the fast-moving craze for the sport of polo.

In 1868 the Malta polo club was founded to cater for the British officers stopping off on their journey back from India. Recommended reading is Kipling's story about a polo pony, 'The Maltese Cat', who was acquired there. In 1869 the first polo match was played in England, called 'hockey on horseback', organised by Edward Hartopp of the 10th Hussars, who had read about the game in *The Field* and arranged for a team of his brother officers to play the 9th Lancers on Hounslow Heath.

In the 1870s John Watson of the 13th Hussars drew up the rules for polo, when serving in India. He was later a star of the All Ireland Polo Club. In 1872 the first polo club in Wales and England was founded by Captain Francis Herbert, of the 7th Hussars, at his brother's estate at Clytha Park, Monmouthshire. In 1874 the Hurlingham Club in south-west London (founded in 1861 for pigeon shooting) started its polo (although it is no longer played there) with a Life Guards vs. Royal Horse Guards match, watched by the Prince and Princess of Wales.

In 1875 the first official match was played in Argentina, after polo was introduced by the English and Irish there. In 1876 Lt. Col. St Quintin, 10th Hussars, took polo to Australia and James Gordon Bennett Junior took it to the USA after having seen it at Hurlingham. In 1883 the Calgary Polo Club, the oldest in Canada, was started, and in 1899 the Montreal Polo Club. See also the Ascot Park Polo Club: (<http://www.polo.co.uk/polo.history>.)

The best polo teams and individuals were welcomed all over the world, as pop groups are now, not by audiences but by the home teams, who craved improving their game while having no expectations of winning. In September 1910, Arthur Grenfell Esquire donated the Grenfell Cup to promote polo in Canada. His younger brothers were the famous twins R. and F. Grenfell, who had been playing a series of matches in the United States with their team-mates F.A. Gill and Lord Rocksavage, and were the first English polo team to visit Canada. As Iris Clendenning writes in her *History of the Montreal Polo Club*: 'The play of the Grenfell twins was the feature of the matches. Having played together in positions one and two for years, they had perfected a system of team play, which was magnificent to watch. Each one seemed to know just what the other would do with the ball when he had possession and placed himself accordingly. Between them they scored almost all of their team's goals, and it was done by system and not simply by single-handed attacks... It was a tremendous loss when both brothers were killed in action in World War I, Captain R.N. Grenfell falling in the opening days of the war, when he died on September 16th, 1914, while leading the 9th Lancers to capture a German battery and was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously.'

Canada sent 619,636 troops to the first World War and they fought at Second Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele and the Hundred Days in 1918 that led to the Armistice, in which they were part of the vanguard. 60,000 Canadians were sacrificed for these battles. Several of Canada's polo players were in the hellish icy mud of the trenches. When they got home they plunged into the pleasures they had been cut off from – travel, the Jazz Age, fun and polo, and the

Montreal Polo Club was revitalised. The members of this club came from British, mostly Scottish, families, including the Acers, Dobells, Hamilton Gaults, Gordons, Col. George Hooper, the MacDougalls, McMasters, Molsons, Ogilvies, Philip Oslers, Pitfields and Patersons. Most of them had originally taken up residence around Cartierville for the hunting, the Montreal Hunt being the oldest in North America (1829), and my mother was a keen follower to hounds between the wars. The older men, who were all close friends or related and had been active in the first World War, now restocked their stables near the Ottawa River and resumed their favourite sport, teaching the game to the younger men, the sons who had been too young to fight. The Gordons, however, our cousins, a generation later chose to build their establishment away from the river, because my aunt was afraid of children drowning. Instead, they built a swimming pool near the woods, ensuring a tremendous hatchery for mosquitoes, which tortured the humans.

Each polo house had a copy of Kipling's 'The Maltese Cat', as Lord Birkenhead put it, 'the finest description of a game [polo] in the English language.' The club had proper polo ponies, mostly from the States or Argentina, though the three Gordon brothers, our uncles, began with cheap mustangs from the Wild West. The wives and girlfriends didn't know the difference and our future aunt Meg, who later became engaged to Howard Gordon, commented on the ugliness of one steed and was sharply corrected by a MacDougall daughter: 'Meg! That is my father's best pony!' (It was, in fact, one of a brilliant pair from Argentina, Poquito and Son of Honour.) This could have come straight out of 'The Maltese Cat', for 'The Cat' was a small grey pony with 'flea-bitten withers' who, as Kipling writes, 'had drifted into India on a troopship, taken, with an old rifle, as part payment for a racing debt.'

illustration from *The Maltese Cat*

No women played polo in those days, but Meg Gordon, who rode side-saddle through the woods on her horse March Cloud, watched every game and kept the memory alive by commissioning, with H.C. 'Tommy' MacDougall and his wife, the history of the Montreal Polo Club from the writer Iris Clendenning. Between the two wars the Montreal Club won the Grenfell Cup more times than any of the other competing teams, and also competed in international tournaments. One of their favourite venues was Aiken in South Carolina, the winter headquarters for polo in North America, where they could play against some of the best polo players in the States. In the winter Aiken's population was swollen by a large colony of Northern visitors. Horse shows, parties, luncheons, dinners, picnics and concerts were all part of the season at Aiken. But in 1939 all this came to an end as World War II took over everyone's existence, and polo was halted for the duration.

In 1940 the polo field was sold, and by 1941, when my mother and us three children left England to stay with our Gordon cousins, we knew that our father's regiment would be serving in the Far East. The Japanese wanted to swallow the outposts of the British and Dutch empires as Hitler was swallowing Europe. When we got to Cartierville it seemed like a polo ghost village. Our aunt tried to dwell on the happy past. Three of the relations and friends of the polo men were in Hong Kong with the Royal Rifles of Canada, founded by Brigadier Jack Price, who was out there with his brother and brother-in-law Peter MacDougall. But the Japanese were a formidable enemy, bombing the American fleet in Pearl Harbour on December 7th and capturing Hong Kong on Christmas Day, then proceeding south to take Singapore, where our father's regiment was, on February 15th, 1942. It took over a year to find out if our men were alive, and where. The Canadians were prisoners in Hong Kong and our father's regiment, including him, were slave labour in Burma, building the 'death railway' for the Japanese, immortalised in the film 'The Bridge Over the River Kwai.'

Back in Canada we imagined we were also in a jungle as we played in the woods among the mosquitoes, the frogs, the overgrown vegetation and the big crested woodpeckers. There was a great sense of the end of an era, for the abandoned path that went towards the old polo field was reminiscent of Kipling's 'Way Through the Woods.' I loved it, it was so wild and extreme, in the winter we trudged through the snow in our navy blue Red River suits, which all Canadian children wore in those days. The suits were modelled on the early Habitants' clothes – winter coats with a long scarlet woollen scarf wound round the waist, scarlet woollen leggings and a matching *tuque* cap with a bobble. White winter turned suddenly to brown swamps and streams floored by dead leaves. The spring flowers did not last or smell but were larger than British woodland flowers – purple striped Jack-in-the-Pulpit, dogtooth violets, bloodroot, false Solomon's Seal, hepaticas (wood anemones) and trilliums. The bark of the sugar maples was tapped for the sap that was boiled on an outdoor fire until it turned into syrup, or hardened. Sugar, coffee, petrol and meat were rationed. The spring was a time when you could look down into the melted snow water and see mosquitoes wriggling and waiting to burst out of their larvae. Especially audible in the sultry nights were the frogs croaking their raucous mating songs. There were a few racoons and many grey squirrels and chipmunks.

We sailed home to England in 1945, our baby brother Greig now a schoolboy, in time for the end of the war in Europe. After the Japanese surrendered in August our father appeared, extremely thin and his skin yellow. He joined the Control Commission for Germany and we moved to Kiel. Germany was swarming with Allied soldiers and my sister Deirdre had several suitors. She married the one from the 17th/21st Lancers and soon we were watching real polo and mixing with people living uncomplainingly in Married Quarters in North Rhine-Westphalia, joking, cooking spaghetti and always handy with the Elastoplast. Deirdre and her pukka muckers were the original Sloane Rangers, and the inspiration for the articles and books. What a pity she isn't with us, saving money, soothing horses and children and fighting global warming.

Today, more than 77 countries play polo. Until recently seen as elitist and sexist, polo has received little coverage unless related to Royal carryings-on, and has not had the audience it deserves. However, this year youth has discovered it and more women are being involved on the field of combat: the International Women's Polo Association was formally launched in 1997 and the universities are waking up to polo; 35 new polo clubs have recently opened. Tessa Johnson 21, studying Business and Psychology at the University of Edinburgh, has taken over from her parents the Offchurch Bury Polo Club on her father's land. The club will have residential polo courses (members staying at the yard or local b & b) and day or weekend clinics for specialists or students. Tessa learnt the game at 15, (her mother is Diana Jack) and is the youngest person to run a polo club in Britain – and probably the world. On the 10-11th May she opened with a low-goal tournament, followed by the University Summer National Championships on Junes 13th-15th with 65 or more Universities taking part – accommodation is in tents. For bookings ring: Glen Percy (Polo Manager) 07785 223383

Polo is such a good game because the talented animals, horses or elephants, understand it and enjoy using the gift they have, despite how underbred they seem, and the bonding between horse and rider is almost spiritual. As Kipling writes, 'a polo-pony is like a poet. If he is born with a love for the game he can be made.'