

MARTIN NELSON

**VICTORY BELONGS TO THE
MOST TENACIOUS**



Saint-Morel--mémorial Roland Garros

La Victoire Appartient Au Plus Opiniatre

The Life of Eugene Adrian Roland Georges Garros
1885-1918

Martin Nelson

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Prologue

Although the pilot Roland Garros and the author Arthur Koestler never met, their lives were intricately linked to a tennis stadium in Paris during WW2

Introduction

The men's Tennis singles' final was concluding at the Roland Garros Stadium in Paris.

Suddenly, the winning shot is played. A smile appears on the victor's face as he raises his racket in victory. The crowd jumps to its feet, cheering in delight. The two men walk towards the net and shake hands.

A boy sitting with his mother high up in the stand is watching enthralled. He claps furiously at every shot. Then his eye catches some words written on the front of the Stand. Looking at them he reads the saying on the wall.

He turns to his mother,

'Mummy, who was Roland Garros?'

Chapter One

It's late afternoon and the sun is just setting on the island of Saint-Denis de la Reunion, a tropical paradise in the Indian Ocean. A small boy is running on the beach, towards the water's edge.

Ever since he could remember, the beach has fascinated him. Every day after school, he would rush to it, drawn by the long stretch of pale yellow sand that stretched as far as his eyes could see.

Why was it there, and where had it come from? He struggled to make sense of it . There were so many things he didn't understand, so many questions and so few answers.

Tired from running, he flopped down on the sand, breathless. He lies on his back, and looks up. Above him, the deep blue sky and the sea birds, circling. He follows their movements as they glide, slowly and gracefully. They fascinate him as they dive effortlessly.

'Roland,' calls his mother. *'Where are you, what are you doing? Lunch will be ready soon.'*

Her reply is lost in the wind and she calls again. This time she hears him.

'Mum, I'm coming, I'm watching the seagulls. How do they do it?'

'Do what?'

'Fly?'

Chapter Two

Unknown to him, it was that experience in his youth; that unanswered question, that he returned to again and again, that would later decide the direction of his life and lead tragically to his premature death.

Roland Garros was born on October 6, 1888, the son of Antoine George Garros (1860-1919) and Marie Therese Sumeire (1868- 1918).

He was not a robust child and suffered from pneumonia in his teens. Despite that, he enjoyed a wide range of sports including football.

Writing about him in *Resonant Recoveries*, Claire Buchanan records that his musician parents wanted him to pursue a music career but he had other ideas.

Chapter Three - La Belle Epoque

The period in France between 1871 and 1941, called *La Belle Epoque*, saw enormous changes and striking transformations taking place in Paris at the beginning of the Third Republic just before the Second World War.

Begun in 1875, the Basilica of the Sacre Coeur on Montmartre, Paul Abadie's design of a Neo-Byzantine-Romanesque building, was chosen from over seventy proposals.

It was completed in 1914, forty years later, under five different architects. It was finally consecrated in 1919, after the end of WW1.

In 1889 the Eiffel Tower was constructed, a monumental achievement to celebrate the centenary of the French Revolution.

It would change the skyline of Paris forever, and become an unforgettable sight to the Parisians and tourists.

It was at the time of its completion, the tallest structure in the world. That is until 1929 when the Chrysler Building was constructed in New York.

In July 1900 The Paris Metro: (*Metro de Paris*)
A rapid transit system serving the Metropolitan Area of Paris opened.

Roland Moves to Paris

In 1906, during that time of enormous change, Roland, at the age of eighteen and at his father's insistence, moved to Paris to further his education.

He enrolled at the prestigious HEC, a business school and Grande Ecole in Jouy-en-Josas, a southwestern outer suburb of Paris.

It was there that he met Emile Lesieur.

Emile records the day.

'We met by chance, finding ourselves sitting at the same table in the refectory during a break from class. Despite our widely different backgrounds, me from Paris and he from a small tropical island, we shared the excitement of the new and the love of innovation.

Ours was a friendship that would later make his name known worldwide. At the time I was an athlete playing rugby.'

Roland Garros writes,

'I remember the day we met. It was at HEC. After the introductory lecture, I saw Emile sitting alone in the cafe. I am friendly. It was my first visit to Paris. We were both young and optimistic, part of a new and vibrant France. There was something different about him- an intensity- we had an instant connection.

The two young men were living in the era of the birth of the aeroplane, an invention that would change the whole world.'

One year later, Roland and Emile graduated from the HEC Business School. By then Roland was a close friend of Ettore Bugatti of automobile fame who in 1908 at the age of 21, had founded his own company, a car dealership in Paris.'

Chapter Four - Roland's Aviation Career

The Paris Air Show opened In 1909, running from October 13 to 19th, in the esteemed Grand Palais in Paris It showcased the latest cutting-edge advancements in aviation technology.

Roland had seen a notice advertising the show and couldn't wait to tell Emile. At break one day he cornered him.

'Have you seen what is showing at The Grand Palais in Paris?'

'No! What?'

'Its an air show'

'What's that?'

'The latest aeroplanes are on show to the public for the first time. We must go.'

A few days later the two young men arranged to take a day off college and go together,

Arriving at the entrance of the building, they with hundreds of others entered the huge hall in which Aeroplanes from many different manufacturers were on display.

The sight was awe-inspiring. Roland and Emile moved from machine to machine, unable to believe what they were seeing and incredulous that they could fly.

Finally they arrived at the Louis Bleriot's type X1, the star of the show, a heavier-than-air machine.

A huge crowd was standing in front of it. Pointing and marvelling. It had just made aviation history by successfully crossing the English Channel.

Roland pushed his way to the front and stood overwhelmed, staring at it, his face aglow. He walked around it several times examining details of its construction.

'Emile, I must have a plane and learn to fly,' he suddenly shouted.

He immediately made arrangements to buy a Demoiselle Dragon monoplane- a single-pilot plane and within a short while, had learned to fly. In 1910 obtained his Aero Club de France pilot's licence No147.

Ambitious to learn more, he began flying Bleriot X1 monoplanes.

Once he had started to fly, there was no stopping him. Always competitive, he entered the Circuit D'Europe held in 1911 that included stages such as Paris-Liege-, Liege Spavenio and others.

1911 Paris to Madrid air race

Almost 300,000 spectators had arrived on Sunday 21st May French airfield at Issy-les-Moulineaux to watch this spectacular race

The planes were scheduled to take off at five minute intervals starting at 5 am.

Roland completed the race but it was overshadowed by a terrible fatal crash that involved onlookers on the ground.

The Minister of War Henri Maurice Bertearx was killed while Prime Minister Ernest Morris, his son Morris, and Aviation patron Henri Deutsch de la

Meurine were injured when a plane crashed after take off.

Later Roland completed the Circuit de Europe (Paris-London-Paris race)

In September of the same year, he flew to a height of 3950 metres - setting a new altitude record, and then increasing it to 5610 metres the following year.

By 1913, he had progressed to the faster Morane-Saulnier monoplane.

Then on the 23rd of September, he made the first non-stop crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, flying from Frejus-Saint Raphael to Bizente in Tunisia (a flight of almost eight hours).

But his life changed in 1914 when the First World War broke out. By then he was an experienced pilot and promptly joined the French Army air corps.

Chapter Five - Development of the Interrupter gear

One of the problems facing the early fighter pilots was the position of their guns. They wanted to fire straight ahead as they engaged the enemy but that was then impossible because of the position of the front-end engine and propeller.

As a result, they had to resort to shooting with a hand-held weapon with the inevitable inaccuracy.

Raymond Saulnier, a French aeronautical engineer was at the time struggling with the problem.

He had begun work on a Synchroniser, a device designed to time the flight of the bullets in sequence with the position of the propeller.

Unfortunately, his design failed as he had tested it on a machine gun that did not shoot consistently,

Undeterred, Garros then engaged the help of Jules Hue, an engineer with the Moraine Saunier aeroplane manufacturers. They were unable to design a gun that could fire at prearranged times, so they approached the problem from a different direction.

They fitted protective metal wedges onto narrower propeller blades. These were strong enough to be able to deflect the occasional rogue round.

Using this device, Garros achieved the first-ever downing of an aircraft by shooting through the propeller. Further successes followed.

But his secret weapon was not to remain secret for long. On the 18th of April 1918, while flying over enemy territory, Garros was forced to land when a fuel line locked.

He was immediately arrested. An inquisitive German Officer examining his downed aircraft was puzzled by the configuration of the propeller.

He took it to an engineer at the Royal Dutch Aircraft Company founded by Dutch Aviator Anthony Fokker, Fokker soon realized what had been altered and with an innovation, improved on the idea.

He eventually designed the Stangensteuerung's system, a more practical, Interrupter Gear.

By 1915, as a result of this successful innovation, the German Fokker again ruled the skies

Roland is captured and Imprisoned.

Roland's career was not without its drama. In April 1915, he was flying a single seater Moane Saunier Type on a mission over Flanders and flew too low.

His plane was hit by a hail of bullets, one of which penetrated his petrol tank. He quickly ran out of fuel, was forced to land and was captured by the Germans.

He spent three years in a German POW camp until Feb 14th 1918 when he escaped.

On his return, he joined Escadrille 26- the elite French air command.

Chapter Six - WW1-the Final Dogfight

On October 15th, 1918, Roland left the safety of an airfield in Northern France, leading a formation of aeroplanes towards the Ardennes.

Climbing high into a clear blue sky, they approached the German lines. Suddenly, Roland could see and feel the bursts of shells around him. Undeterred, he recognised his target, dived, and released his bombs.

But as he pulled up, he heard the sound of gunfire from an approaching German plane and felt the thump of bullets ripping through his fuselage.

His engine was hit and he struggled to keep his plane level, stringing the rudder back and forth. But to no avail. The plane didn't respond.

He felt a sudden fear.

'What if? No, I can,' he insisted, continuing to struggle with the controls. But the plane didn't respond; it was too damaged to fly.

Despite all his efforts, the plane went into a spin. The air rushed past his face as he struggled to control it.

It faltered, lost height, and began to dive towards the ground.

Then, silence - time slowed down- the wind in his face- images of his parents, his childhood -running on the beach, then college .. .a new world- flashes through his mindthen pain and blackness.

It was five weeks before his thirtieth birthday.

Later his body was recovered and he was buried in the Vouziers Communal Cemetery at Champagne-Ardenne.

Chapter Seven - The Story of French Tennis- the Davis Cup

In 1900 two Americans, Dwight F Davis (1879-1945) and his partner Holcombe Ward ,(1878-1967) won the US doubles championship for three consecutive years.

To celebrate their success, Dwight donated a cup and proposed that it be competed yearly by Tennis Teams from different countries.

It was a silver bowl that was named the Davis Cup, (later to be called the International Lawn Tennis College Trophy).

Dwight subsequently captained the US teams that won the first two Davis competitions in 1902 and 1903.

Roland Garros Tennis Centre is born

But 1927 was the year when the course of World Tennis took an unexpected turn. By that time the Davis Cup had gained worldwide recognition being held to be equivalent to the Soccer World Cup

In September 1927, the United States, winners of seven consecutive Davis Cup Championships faced the French Team at the Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia.

Known as the Four Tennis Musketeers and consisting of Henri Cochet, René Lacoste, Jean Borotra and Jacques Brugnon, they caused an upset by beating the Americans to win the Davis Cup.

In recognition of their achievements, the Directors of the Racing Club and the Stade Francais, proposed that a new Tennis Centre be built in Paris.

Within a short while, they had raised sufficient funds from public and personal donations to purchase a piece of land at the Porte d' Auteuil in the West of Paris, to be its site

In 1928 at the inaugural ceremony, Tennis President Emile Lesieur, a tall, upright figure now in his forty-third year, gave an impassioned speech tracing the history of French tennis from its inception to its recent successes.

Towards the end of his talk, he referred to his boyhood friend no longer with them.

'Like everyone here, Roland would have been overwhelmed by the promise of so much to come. But sadly for him, it was not to be.

Willingly, in 1918, he gave his life , his greatest sacrifice, for his country. His name must never be forgotten.

I would like your support to name the new complex the Roland Garros Tennis Center (later to be called the Roland Garros)'

There was a moment of silence and then, all present jumped to their feet and shouted,

'Oui. Oui. 'Roland Garros, Roland Garros'.

In 1927 the new Roland Garros opened and hosted International tennis players until 1940 when France was invaded and fell to the Nazis.

Chapter Eight - WW2

Arthur Koestler, an internationally renowned author, was born in Budapest Hungary in 1905. He became a Journalist, critic and Novelist. In 1931 he joined the German Communist Party.

His work was strongly political, arguing the case for those caught up in War and dealing with the evils of a morality that condones a system that sacrifices means to an end.

At the outbreak of WW2, Koestler found himself in the South of France. Returning to Paris, he hoped to be allowed to leave the country and return to England but instead was arrested and imprisoned in the basement of Roland Garros.

There he was detained with French Jews about to be sent to the concentration camps. It was that experience that later formed the basis of his novel, 'Scum of the Earth', published in 1941

'Dripping water and the distant sounds of traffic were our only distractions from the damp cold surrounding us, as we struggled to keep warm.

In many ways, we thought we were the lucky ones having managed to escape the initial round-up of Jews following the fall of Paris in June 1940.

But it was only a matter of time before most of us also would be sent to the concentration camps.'

By 1942 over 13,000 Parisian Jews had been rounded up by their Police force, under the orders of the Germans and sent to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp

'At Roland Garros, we called ourselves the cave dwellers, about 600 of us who lived beneath the stairways of the stadium,'

Koestler wrote,

'We slept on straw -- wet straw because the place leaked. We were so crammed in, we felt like sardines ... It smells of filth and excrement, and only slits of light could find their way inside.'

Few of us knew anything about tennis, but when we were allowed to take our walk in the stadium, we could see the names (Jean) Borotra and (Jacques) Brugnon on the scoreboard.'

Chapter Nine - Paris 1945

The roar from the crowd could be heard for miles as the audience at the Roland Garros Stadium in Paris leapt to its feet. They watched in awe at the German's winning shot. The Dutchman bravely tried to get to it but it was beyond his reach and he bowed his head in submission.

He had come so close but strength and experience had beaten him. He walked towards the net and the two men shook hands.

In celebration, the German raised his hands and turned to the crowd who responded with cheers and loud clapping.

High up in the stand an old man smiled cynically as he watched the tennis drama unfold.

He remembered another world when the Germans occupied France during WW2. Life was very different then; it was so unpredictable he had learned.

He looked around the excited crowd. All had been born much later so few around him knew why it was called the Roland Garros stadium or when it was built. Nor what it was used for in the Second World War.

Garros was a man that the French Public once revered, someone whose achievements in another field made his name a household word.

Addendum

Eiffel Tower

In preparation, Architects and designers were invited to submit proposals for a suitable building to enhance the Event. Over 100 entries were received.

After a long discussion and many disagreements, the Centennial Committee finally selected a design proposed by Gustave Eiffel, a bridge designer. He envisaged a tower built almost entirely of open-lattice wrought iron. It would act as the entrance gateway to the exposition.

Taking just over two years to build, the final structure dwarfed St Peter's in Rome and the Great Pyramid of Giza.

When completed, it consisted of vertical steel girders connected by cross trusses rising, from a square base five meters high and 125 meters wide to a pinnacle at 300 metres.

The Paris Metro

By 1920, the main system was completed with further additions being added after WW2. Further extensions are planned.

The Paris Opera

The Opera opened in 1671 with a performance of Pomone, a countryside creation by the composer Robert Cambert and the poet Pierre Perrin. By 1672 the Royal Academies of Dance and Music had amalgamated.

Buchanan Claire, Resonant Recoveries- Roland Garros (1888-1918) pp 62,98,133,135,277,316, Oxford University Press

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Garros_\(aviator\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Garros_(aviator))

The story is told by Arthur Koestler first person

- 1 How he found himself in the dungeons below Roland Garros*
- 2 his story- Why was he in Paris in 1940?*
- 3 the conditions*
- 4 - hearing tennis being played above with the players and the audience unaware of the prisoners below*