

Alex. Ross of Dornoch— the quiet champion

FIFTY-SEVEN years ago I spent three summer months as assistant to the minister of Barry Church, two miles from Carnoustie. Occasionally, there, I met a member of that notable group of Rogart men who brought distinction to Sutherland county, Colonel Gilbert Gunn; he was then a major in the Camerons at Barry-Buddon.

One day as I walked eagerly to the first tee at Carnoustie I met another man; he accosted me, "Would you like a game?" Being a Dornoch golfer, I was quietly ready to play anybody; so we agreed, and off we went. Quickly I realised that I had fallen in with a real golfer; at Carnoustie this brought me no surprise. He turned out to be Alick Smith, one of the three famous Carnoustie brothers — Willie, Alick and Macdonald Smith. Both Willie and Alick had won the American Open, Alick indeed twice, 1906 and 1910. As for Mac Smith, he was "the finest golfer who never won a championship."

A stylist like Eric Brown, a smooth swinger, Mac — if I remember rightly, and there is one student of golf in Dornoch who can confirm or correct me — was leading the field after three rounds in the Open at Prestwick in 1925. Then the attention and keen support of the eager Scottish crowd, many of them townspeople out for a day, so interfered with their favourite that he needed 82 for that final round. Jim Barnes won with a total of 300.

Played with Donald

Back there in Carnoustie, so long ago, Smith and I talked about Dornoch. He had never played there, but he knew Dornoch men in America, the Ross brothers. Only four years before that I had played with Donald Ross when he visited Dornoch. But Smith said, "Don't you know his brother, Alec?" I knew that Alec Ross had won the U.S. Open in 1907, but Donald had become so well and widely known on both sides of the ocean that, even in Dornoch, Alec's name had faded.

Harry Vardon won the American Open in 1900; Vardon and Ray, in the Open of 1913, at Brookline, Boston, had tied at 304 with the young amateur, Francis Ouimet, and the American stripling won the spectacular play-off. All this is golfing history and well known; so are the names and the achievements of the Smith Brothers, of Tommy Armour, Jim Barnes and Bob Macdonald. But the distinguished record of Alec Ross is not known. I call him "The Forgotten Scot".

In his teens, at Dornoch, Alec Ross played soccer as well as golf. In 1900, following Donald's example, Alec went to America. For two or three years he was a teaching professional with Boston clubs; in 1903 he was invited to the Braeburn Golf Club—it was at Braeburn that Walter Hagen won his second Open

(1919). I think, too, that Johnny Farrell was pro. there soon after Alec left to go to Detroit.

At Pinehurst

In all of these North American clubs there is no winter golf; most of the teaching professionals go to the South, and today, mostly to Florida, where there is endless golf. Alec spent the winter months as assistant to Donald in Pinehurst. Rich men, from many northern cities, loved to sojourn in Pinehurst during the severe northern winters; and it was there that a Detroit millionaire, Horace Rackham, persuaded Alec to join the Detroit Golf Club as professional.

Already Alec, in 1907, had won the U.S. Open; he won the Massachusetts Open six years in succession; also the North-South Open, at Pinehurst, still one of the leading winter events, no fewer than five times. He was established now as one of the best teachers and best golfers in the country.

It was Alec who gave Mr Rackham his first golf lesson. A fine friendship grew around this golfing beginning and the generous American to show his appreciation of golf and of his golf teacher financed a number of developments serving the interests of golf and golfers in the Detroit region, including the extension of the Detroit club course to a 36-hole layout. When Mr Rackham died he left an adequate amount as a trust fund to provide Alec with a lifelong income.

Detroit tributes

Some time ago after Alec had served for 20 years with the Detroit Club, 230 of his friends in the club, representatives of business, industry and professional life, paid tribute to him, his work, play and his friendship. Banquetted and toasted, this Dornoch-American listened to brief speech tributes by club presidents, past and present, all of them mentioning not only his professional career but also his personality as a man among men.

At the conclusion of the evening a poem to Ross written for the occasion by Edgar A. Guest, well-known author of "Spoon River Anthology," was read out as the fitting culmination to the happy evening. The poem appears as the frontispiece in the presentation volume, containing letters from members thanking the Highland Scot for teaching them the game of golf and expressing their appreciation of him as a friend. The volume is bound in Ross tartan which the committee had to import from Montreal. Along with the volume a handsome cheque was handed to the quiet Scot.

"Great as his influence has been as a golf professional, he has meant even more to Detroit Golf Club as a friend of the members."

DONALD GRANT.