

Donald Ross, Giant In Golf

Scotland's gift to American golf has been credited with building more courses here than two lifetimes could handle, but the massive monuments he left grow in stature. A series on the man and his work. By MIKE DANN

• For the greater part of golfing America, the links between that pastime and its past are a matter for golf historians. Indeed, golf—modern golf—seems to exist for the moment. It is played, viewed, quickly reviewed and forgotten. Who won the U.S. Open last year? Johnny Miller, right? But five years ago? Who won the first?

It takes almost all of one's imagination to keep pace with today's international golf scenario. Someone won somewhere around the world yesterday. It is difficult to relive the past when there is so much happening today.

Modern, ever-improving equipment is but a vestige of the tools used by our golfing forefathers. Rarely are links between modern golf and its evolutionary origins to be seen or regarded except in a few volumes or out-of-the-way museums.

And yet there still stand today: the

greatest moments to our Scottish heritage in the spirit of the old links courses, monuments to the origins of golf in this country and of its lineage with golf's own genesis in Scotland.

Standing head above the influx of Scottish professionals to America was Donald Ross, who although being very special among these immigrants was also typical of the spirit of the Scot. With the intention of finding his life as a golf professional in the land of opportunity at the turn of the century, Ross found his calling in course design and ranks among the very best through the years:

Pinehurst No. 2 in the Carolina resort, Seminole near Palm Beach, Toledo's Inverness and Oak Hill in Rochester, Old Oakland Hills outside Detroit, The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Interlachen in Minneapolis and Scioto where Jack Nicklaus grew up. Several handfuls more where the

professional tours have stopped. The list of Donald Ross courses is long and outstanding. It was estimated recently that more than 45 national championships have been decided on Ross courses, more than 30 have been USGA events, which are played on only the choicest of courses.

Counts of his architectural output range from 400 to 600, and the Ross trademark can be found from California to Cohasset, Mass., and from Havana to Canada, all accomplished in a 45-year span that at the same time witnessed the birth and growth of golf in the U.S.

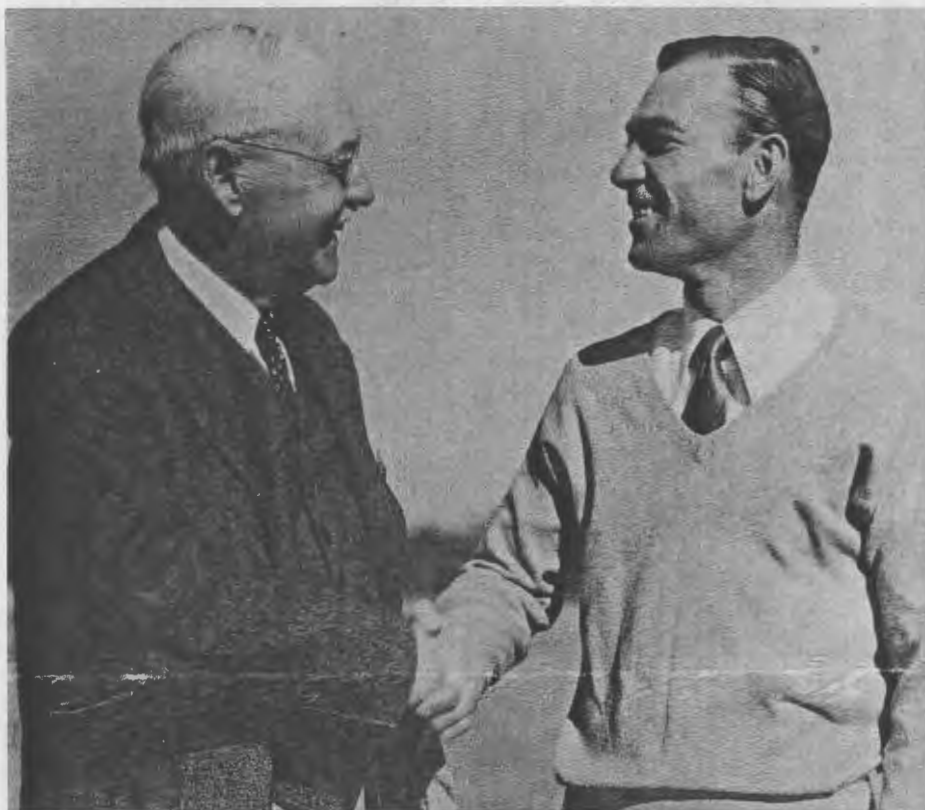
It is fortunate that Ross, bound to America as an aspiring, young professional, arrived when he did, during what Richard S. Tufts of the founding Pinehurst family, and perhaps Ross' best personal friend, calls the Scottish Invasion (in his book by the same name, by Pinehurst Publishers, 1962).

An influx of Scots into the Great Melting Pot around the turn of the century meant a great deal to the direction of golf in the U.S., and these immigrants carried the seeds of the game across the Atlantic and watched them flower into something barely imaginable 75 years ago.

Donald James Ross, a bright man of 27 years from Dornoch, a town along the eastern shore of northern Scotland, a student of golf weaned on the thoughts of Old Tom Morris and a player of fine caliber, was a one in a million shot. He took his instruction from among the sages of golf. He used it with perhaps the most fertile of imaginations.

Nicklaus was asked recently to pick his favorite courses in the U.S., and two of his three were Ross designs, Pinehurst No. 2 and Seminole. Jack, a designer himself, also named Pebble Beach.

Other contemporary architects are equally as flattering. Pete Dye of Harbour Town Links and Dominican Republic La Romana fame called Ross the greatest of overall strategists of course designers. "Look at his courses and you see a lot of shots not found on modern courses. He is one of the very few designers who were or are able to put a real purpose into each shot on every hole."



Maestros from two fields; Architect Donald Ross and golfer supreme Ben Hogan. A John Hemmer photo taken during 1940 North and South Open contest at Pinehurst, where Ross built his first jewel, No. 2 course, and Hogan won his first title.

George Fazio, whose Jupiter Hills Club in Florida and Butler National course near Chicago are of particular prominence, took a more macrocosmic view to say the same thing. "He was a complete architect—a rounded and all around architect who is very hard to find fault with. He did everything so that it would look totally natural and yet his designs were complete."

Ross died in 1948 at the age of 75 in Pinehurst, N.C., his home for 47 years. Besides his architectural work, he served many years in the Pinehurst Co., including terms as president. Until his death he was honorary president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects.

He was born in his Scottish home on St. Gilbert St., a humble but well kept two-story stone structure on a crowded, wide-laned avenue. His father, Murdo, was a mason and hewer, and Donald, one of six children, seemed destined to a trade, starting as an apprentice to a local carpenter. He had a reasonable singing voice and also joined the town brass band as a youth.

But as many youngsters did in Dornoch, he developed an early interest in golf. Royal Dornoch, one of the finer seaside courses in the Highlands, attracted Donald, and he was a caddie and a golfer by the age of 14. Eventually his curiosity and interest in the game got the better of him, and an understanding club secretary helped convince his parents that young Donald could make a career in clubmaking. Already an aspiring player, Ross had developed a strong concern for a lifework in golf.

He was sent south to St. Andrews, where he learned the work of his trade. He was taught clubmaking at Forgan's Shop, where Robert Forgan founded one of the top club producing firms in 1819. Donald apprenticed for \$1.50 a week, grasping the techniques quickly. He studied golf under Old Tom at St. Andrews and returned to Royal Dornoch, at age 20, as professional and greenkeeper. Taking a \$500 loan for equipment, with only his character as collateral, he opened shop. Within a year he repaid the loan.

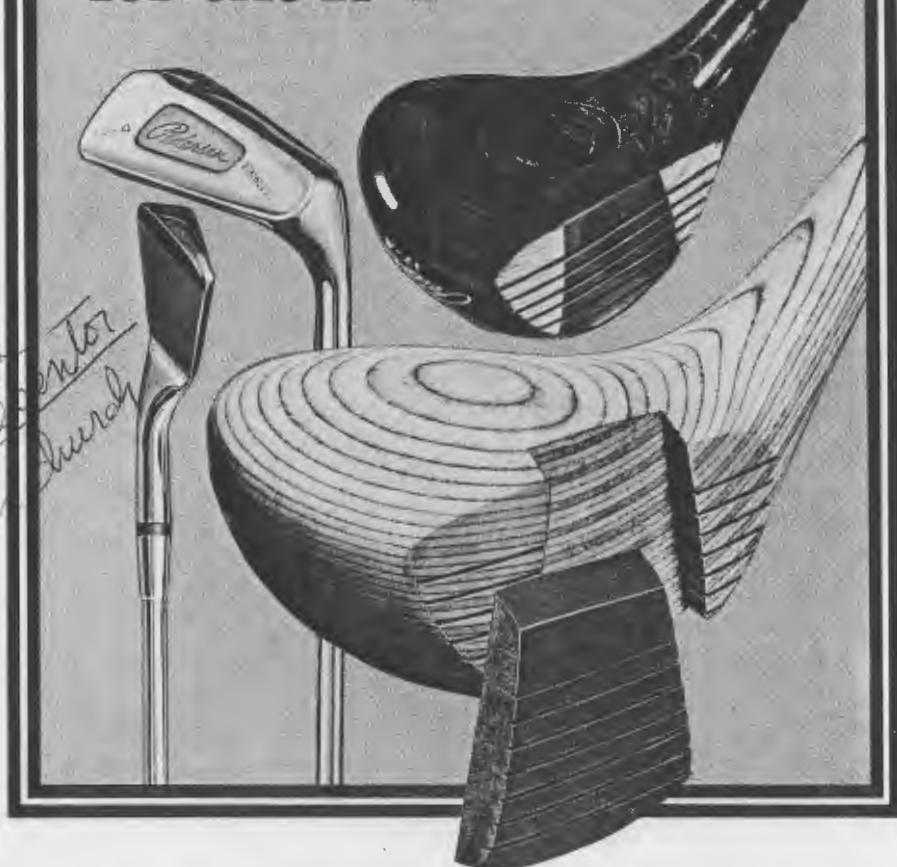
The next seven years under the red-roofed shop at Royal Dornoch were quite important in Ross' development as an architect. Many professionals in those days took an interest in golf course design, and Donald had learned a rudimentary beginning under Old Tom.

The Royal Dornoch secretary who had given Donald his start in golf was John Sutherland, a businessman and

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"old John Sutherland"

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also a golf writer for the London Daily Mail. And writes Donald Grant, a long-time member of Royal Dornoch and author of "Donald Ross of Pinehurst and Royal Dornoch" (Sutherland Press, 1973), "Sutherland was already a committed student of greenkeeping, of golf course maintenance and of golf architecture. He and Ross, essentially belonging to the Royal Borough and proud of it, had much in common. And one further interest kept them together in talk and in experiment on the course—what constitutes a good golf

course? Moreover this early study and experimentation in the improvement of green and golf course went on in Dornoch at a time when elsewhere very little thought was given to these matters."

Together they made improvements on the Morris design of Royal Dornoch, a prototype that would leave a great impact on Ross' later designs. His home course overlooks the North Sea on flatlands by the shore that are common to links courses. Bereft of trees, Dornoch offers plenty of brush off the fairways and is characterized by gentle swells and

knolls. The naturalness of these rolls became the chief features Ross tried to give his American courses, and generally agreed, he was successful.

The work of a club professional—giving lessons, selling equipment, handling club repairs and meeting visitors—took less than half of Ross' time through a year, and despite his added duties as caddy-master and greenkeeper, he had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time in clubmaking, a craft which he maintained through his life. The young Scot was secure in his work, and yet when the chance came for him to risk an adventure to America, he was barely hesitant.

A Harvard professor, Robert Wilson, spent his summers away from the classroom in Scotland to learn the history of his favorite hobby, golf. It was on one of these voyages that Wilson, an astronomer, met with Ross in Dornoch. The professor talked of the opportunity for a bright professional in America, and Donald was convinced. His parents were hesitant about such an undertaking and he thought often of the simple but secure and satisfying life he would be leaving behind. But that was behind him and he was off across the Atlantic in 1899.

He landed in New York harbor and hired a Pullman room on the train to Boston. Prof. Wilson had offered Donald a room in his home upon his arrival, and with the money from his shop and business, Ross had just enough to get to Wilson's Cambridge home, he thought. But the Pullman charge was more than he expected, and the last seven miles of his trip from the Boston depot to Wilson's Cambridge home, with his set of clubs on his shoulder and a large suitcase in hand, were traveled on foot.

He found his first job that year, through Wilson, at Oakley CC in Watertown, Mass. The following year, Ross met James W. Tufts and was asked to his summer home in Medford. The latter was looking for a professional for his new course in the North Carolina Sandhills, Pinehurst. Ross, in an oral agreement, accepted his invitation to start there in the winter of 1901. In the beginning, Donald's contract with Pinehurst covered only the winter months when the resort was open, and he returned each summer to Massachusetts, first to Watertown and later to Essex.

It was at Pinehurst, where the rolling, sandy hills reminded him of Royal Dornoch, that Ross began his architectural work, guided at first by Frank Maples, the Pinehurst superintendent. Ross built and eventually remodeled the first 72 holes of the present 90-hole complex.

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And it was the well-to-do clientele of the resort who noticed his work. He began receiving offers to build courses for these people. The first two decades of the 1900s saw the first jolts in American golf, and its great expansion would follow in the 1920s. Clubs were founded throughout the country and many sought Ross to do the design.

It was not difficult to understand. There were many American "architects" who could lay out a course, cheaply, in one day. Their methods were simple. One would mark an area designated for the teeing ground, and there a flat earthen deck was to be built. Then he would pace off 100 yards and mark the ground for a cross bunker, one that would extend across the entire fairway. Then another 100 yards and another bunker, and finally another 100 yards and the green, usually small and in some rectangular form.

Early American architects had no training for their work, and Ross had learned a degree's worth in his training with Morris and his experimenting at Royal Dornoch. Most of his initial U.S. designs were built in the north, and with each, his fame spread. His own first attempts were severe by his own standards, and some early Ross courses have been criticized for an overuse of sand which often penalized even good shots. *(bunkers)*

But his work was a far cry better than the other offerings available, and he developed very, very quickly. By 1910, his architectural concerns had flourished to the extent that he finished all his professional connections except with Pinehurst, where he had come to make his home.

Working with the Tufts family through three generations, Ross exhibited the business know-how to work his way to a directorship of the company and served as president. "He was a man of real ability," said Richard S. Tufts, grandson of the man who hired Ross. "He was successful in everything he did and would have done as well in anything he would want to try. He had a good mind, was popular with people, firm and positive. All his employees loved him."

Donald also gave up a budding playing career for his architectural work. He won the inaugural North and South Open at Pinehurst in 1903 and again in 1905 and 1906. His brother Alec, who followed him into the pro shop first at Royal Dornoch and later at Pinehurst, won the tournament in 1904, 1907, 1908, 1910 and 1915, making a family dynasty of the event in the early years.

Donald Ross played in his first U.S. Open in 1901 and took 21st. In six more tries he finished in the top 10

four times, placing fifth in 1903. His younger brother won the U.S. Open in 1910 and went on to a more famous playing career.

But his tutelage under Old Tom Morris left Donald with a remarkably simple, natural and rhythmic swing, very compact and one that remained with him through the years. It required little practice and he could play a game close to par even in his later years. His style was often compared to Bobby Jones' and with more time and effort might have given him a comparable playing reputation. Donald, with two victories, and Alec, with several more, also dominated the Massachusetts Open for several years.

But Donald's abiding interest was in the design and building of golf courses. He would work on up to eight courses at a time in the months away from the Pinehurst pro shop and continued to work on course designs into his 70s.

He married twice. He returned to Scotland in 1904 to marry Janet Conchie, a nurse from Dumfriesshire he met one summer at Dornoch. They were engaged for seven years before he could return for her. They had one daughter, Lillian, who lives today in New Hampshire. His first wife died in 1922, and Ross remarried two years

late to Mrs. Florence Blackinton, a widow. She survived him until 1954.

He died in Pinehurst, April 26, 1948, and was buried in Newton Center, Mass., next to his first wife.

"I believe his architect design ideas stand up to the most modern ideas of strategic and intelligent golf architecture, in distinction to those of his contemporaries," wrote Henry Longhurst of The (London) Sunday Times and celebrated television golf commentator. He was comparing Ross not to his American contemporaries but to those in Britain. And the point is well taken. Ross is as renowned in his home nation, the cradle of golf, as he is in golf circles in the U.S.

Herbert Warren Wind also gets around to lauding Ross in a critical sense. "His initial attempts were crude as he tried to mimic as best he could the linksland of the Scottish seaside. He improved through trial and error, and his complete revision of the Pinehurst No. 2 course in the mid-1930s left Ross a masterpiece. Before that time he had good bunkering and reasonable strategy, but not all together." (Both quotes from The Complete Golfer, edited by Wind.)

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competency Ross attained after his last major revamping of No. 2, the bulk of his most praiseworthy designs were done before that time, though he continued to work for another decade. The plum of his years of work remained, however, including in his own estimation, Pinehurst No. 2. He began work on the layout within a year of his start there and finished the first nine in 1901. The second nine was completed in 1907 and the course measured 5,860 yards. With his own development as an architect and as

equipment improvements required longer tests, Ross extensively changed the course four times. His last major tinkering was prior to the 1936 PGA Championship, for which he penned an article of his thoughts about designing a championship test.

"It is obviously the function of such a course to present competitors with a variety of problems that will test every type of shot which a golfer of championship ability should be qualified to play," he wrote.

"I consider the ability to play the longer iron shots as the supreme test of a great golfer. A championship test

should call for long and accurate tee shots, accurate iron play, precise handling of the short game and consistent putting. These abilities should be called for in a proportion that will not permit excellence in any one department of the game to too largely offset deficiencies in another."

Ross said that the tee shot, as the longest of shots, must be allowed the most room for error and his courses are characterized by often wide fairways, but deceptively wide. "A tee shot may be penalized either by narrowing the area in which the longer player is hitting or by giving him an advantage for the second shot, according to the placing of the tee shot."

He required a great deal of thinking and planning from the expert golfer. Often one would find a tee shot in the fairway, while in a good lie, out of position for the approach shot. As outstanding as he was in strategy and bunker design, he was a genius around the green.

"Only in the sandy soil (like Pinehurst's) will the drainage permit construction of the rolling contours and hollows natural to the Scottish seaside courses where golf was born. This contouring around the green makes requirements for short shots that no other form of hazard can call for.

"Contours and slopes have been used to break up greens which are so designed as to always give the player near the cup an opportunity for one putt but have minimized the opportunity to get down in less than the regulation number for the golfer whose play to the green has been less accurate."

Ross thought of No. 2 as essentially a fair test, where good shots are rewarded and poor shots penalized, a seemingly basic concept, but one sometimes difficult to apply and one which some modern architects seem to prefer to ignore.

Robert Trent Jones, probably the best known of the modern designers throughout the world, puts golf course design into three categories, each developed historically—heroic, strategic and penal. "Ross," he said, "fits best into the second group."

"Other architects may lead a player to negative thinking on a course," said Nicklaus the player. "Donald Ross courses lead to positive thinking."

"Everything looks natural. His courses are not designed such that the natural terrain has to undergo changes to get the stamp of the architect. He used what was available and did it naturally."

(Next: Donald Ross' philosophy on golf.)



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