

The Life & Times Of Donald Ross: Selected Excerpts

The core of the book is, of course, an examination of the man and his works. However, to provide as full a portrayal as possible, the general ambiance of the key environments he passed through are an integral part of the narrative, as well.

Since his life story moved through a wide variety of places and eras we thought we'd present a few brief vignettes, rather than one longish excerpt, for your consideration.

Confidentially, I had a couple of vague suspicions when undertaking the biography. I suspected I'd end up liking the guy a bit less (tough taskmaster, etc.) and thought it possible his talent was, to some degree, overrated.

I was well off the mark on both accounts.

He had no grand design for the future. In the early years there was only a keenness to pursue his trade with vigor and precision. But when the man deliberately moved to the States, he found a world that opened up possibilities which ranged far beyond what anyone would have anticipated.

The opportunities were not only broad, but encouraged the development of latent talent to its fullest measure. Although he viewed himself as a capable young man, there was no way he could have envisioned the lofty position he would come to inhabit.

Ultimately, the elements of the Ross story came together to create one of the brilliant points along the American timeline.

He has been properly honored by succeeding generations. However, the dynamics which gave rise to the legend have not been fully understood.

The Life & Times of Donald Ross will take you through the winding series of roads he forged in a way that will reconfigure your views of the iconic figure.

The book will be printed shortly. There has been no haste on that account because presenting the best possible edition is far more important than other considerations. Nevertheless, in this brief interlude, we thought you might enjoy a few samples.

We'll be back shortly with the entire publication.

Excerpt 1

Along the lines of latitude, Edinburgh is actually north of Moscow. As the crow flies, Donald Ross's hometown is about 135 miles north of Edinburgh.

Nobody is entirely sure when the village began, but it is known that Dornoch Cathedral was built in the 1200's. Suffice to say that the little town on the North Sea reaches back into antiquity.

Of the more distant years, one can find vague tales of the native Celtic/Pict inhabitants being visited regularly by the Vikings. Knowing the nature of these visits, the villagers would take to the hills upon arrival. Ultimately, as with other parts of Scotland, there was an intermingling of populations. In fact, many of the names of various towns bear the imprint of the land a few hundred miles to the Northeast.

Dornoch continues to receive a steady stream of travelers to this day. However, the modern visitors arrive with a different sort of gear (and decidedly different intents) than the Norse marauders.

In the summer months when the winds aren't quite so fierce, Dornoch continues to exist largely as a tourist town. With its understated buildings and its seat upon the scenic firth (a Scottish term for bay or inlet), it retains a classical charm which has not been sullied by the modern world.

For well more than a century, what has drawn the lion's share of visitors has been the golf course. It is not just an authentic links course on the land which links the town to the sea. Dornoch is considered by knowledgeable people to be one of the world's top five courses.

Although golf had been played there long before, the course was not formalized into Dornoch Golf Club until 1877. Due to the efforts of Her Grace the Duchess of Sutherland, Duchess Millicent, the club acquired the title "Royal Dornoch" in 1906. To the golfing cognoscenti, it is simply known as Dornoch. There's nothing simple about the allure of the course though.

It is the epitome of authentic golf.

Among a more general golfing population, Dornoch is known largely for its association with one of its native sons.

Excerpt 2

As indicated, except for the golfing, it was an austere life which revolved around church and work. In the 1840's, a group had broken away from the government oriented Church of Scotland to establish the Free Presbyterian Church. The Ross family were pillars of the newer church.

Each Sunday they would walk from their home at 3 Gilbert Street past the imposing cathedral to their chapel. Organs were not allowed in the Free Church. Led by a "precentor", the congregation *"would slowly sing the melancholy, melodious Scottish psalm tunes. These haunting melodies of his boyhood stayed in his memory all his life."*



Ross home on 3 Gilbert Street - Courtesy of the Dornoch Historical Society

Donald's interest in music lasted a lifetime. He was known for having a good voice and later became a precentor himself. He was also a member of the Dornoch brass band which played on special occasions – the highlight being the annual Dornoch Highland Games.

The parishioners of the Free Church were instilled with a view of life being a difficult proposition which one grappled with continually. A clear sense of 'right and wrong' was another core belief that guided Donald's journey. If there was little in the way of nuance to the message imparted by the Free Presbyterian, it was also one which served Ross well.

So pious was the population that even golf was viewed as improper on the Sabbath. But, with Dornoch being populated by many strongly drawn to the game, there was a bit of playing along the edges of decorum. Sundays would find some of the church goers attending service with the assistance of distinctive looking walking canes. These “canes” were actually cleverly disguised golf clubs. A few of the less devout clubmakers supplemented their income through the fashioning of what became known as “Sabbath sticks”.



Examples of vintage “Sabbath sticks” – Image courtesy of PBA Auctions

On the way home from worship, they were known to disappear into the dunes and quietly play down a fairway or two.

Despite their discretion, most of the villagers knew exactly what the ‘Sabbath breakers’ were up to. As with any small town, little happened without being known by everyone in short order.

This particular form of mischief was hardly limited to Dornoch. It was a failing which could be found in any number of towns across the country. A well-known painting immortalized such activities at a similar Scottish course in 1592.



“The Sabbath Breakers” by John C. Dollman

The violators depicted in the painting “The Sabbath Breakers” showed two well-known golfers of Leith who were subsequently prosecuted.

Regarding prosecutions with which the modern world is not familiar, there was a notable case that occurred in Dornoch that subsequently became one of the more familiar tales of its history.

In 1727, Dornoch hosted Scotland's last execution for witchcraft. A woman named Janet Horne was accused of transforming her daughter into a pony at night and riding her through the village. Her case was not helped by testimony that the Devil himself would shoe the horse for these evening jaunts. Janet's gruesome demise is memorialized by the “Witch’s stone”. This stone is adjacent to the 18th tee of the Struie golf course.



Excerpt 3

The rise of Prestwick led the Royal and Ancient golf society of St. Andrews to the realization that the sport was becoming centralized around Morris. Accordingly, they went to some lengths to lure him back to his hometown. In the fall of 1864, he returned as “Custodier of the Links”.

This label belies the role he actually played for the next several decades. While directing the program at St. Andrews, Old Tom grew into the most influential figure in the history of the game. From equipment to course design to the ways tournaments were run, virtually all aspects of the game bore his imprimatur. It was in this manner that, over the years, he shaped the game into the form it has essentially followed ever since.

The key to such an extraordinary accomplishment was not entirely found in the comprehensive technical mastery.

There is something about the old man's quiet, dignified bearing, always the same, whether brought face to face with a laird, a humble-born caddie or in dealing with his own workmen which commands respect and calls forth personal attachment.

New York Herald – 1898

There are numerous accounts of the large personalities of the age paying homage to this rumpled and unassuming figure. Although he did not solicit the reverence, it was a key to what was achieved by his life's work.

"As St. Andrews became increasingly a mecca of golfers, so, too, did the sturdy patriarchal figure and bearing of Old Tom come to symbolize all that was finest in the Scottish character and in the ancient Scottish game. His kindly, yet capable and gentle nature, enshrined him a good many years before his death as the authentic Grand Old Man of Golf. To generations of people all over the world his name and his picture epitomized the game."

- James K. Robertson, author of St. Andrews, Home of Golf

Old Tom's blend of practical expertise with irreproachable character was not lost on Ross when he arrived, circa 1892, for his apprenticeship. Although he undoubtedly acquired a great deal of golfing knowledge while interning with

Old Tom and Forgan's clubmaking shop, the less tangible elements came to play an equally important role in Ross's future.

What Ross absorbed (and later emulated) was the way Morris generally presided over both St. Andrews as well as the game of golf itself. It was, in fact, the template Ross used in his approach to Pinehurst and the development of American golf.



Forgan's clubmaking shop in 1900 – Courtesy of Wikipedia

Along with to their working relationship, Donald got to spend a substantial amount of time with Morris off the course.

“In St. Andrews, Donald met old Tom Morris, a patriarch of the game. Mr. Morris took a liking to Donald and invited him to attend his kirk, especially the Saturday night entertainment, where for a penny, he could enjoy a social time and a good dinner. As Donald's salary at the time was seven and six (about \$1.50) per week, the penny fee was attractive. Mr. Ross states that later he was able to contribute thruppence to the kirk, when he went to the Saturday night parties.”

– Ross Interview with Robert E. Harlow (1945)

More than a half-century on, Ross could recall his time there in detail. For the rest of his life, the occasional Old Tom anecdote would make its way into Donald's conversation. It was clear his personal and professional esteem for the golfing sage never left him. The old man possessed an inviolable belief in the sport, and was the *de facto* guardian of its integrity.

Ross and a number of others carried that principled spirit to the New World. The expertise they brought to their practical duties revolved around the strident belief that the game be conducted in the right and honorable way. Guided by Morris's example, these professionals rooted the early American game in the Scottish traditions.