



BOOK REVIEW

The Life & Times of Donald Ross

By Chris Buie

2016, Classics of Golf, 293 pages, \$75

ISBN 978-0-940889-74-3 www.classicsofgolf.com

REVIEW BY JIM DAVIS

“Donald Ross... came here to lay out the eighteen hole course... Ross has been going over the course, mapping out the places where the holes will be put.”

Such was a portion of the report in the Topeka State Journal on Sept. 3, 1915, about the inchoate Shawnee G.C. Those few lines were repeated in similar fashion many hundreds of times in newspapers and journals as Donald J. Ross worked his magic across the landscape of American golf in the early 20th century.

From mighty clubs to the “everyman” public courses for communities across the country, Ross was the epitome of reliability, expertise, and artistry. Author Chris Buie has teamed with the Classics of Golf group to create what may be the last word on this quietly efficient, hard working architect.

Much has been written about Ross and his association with James Tufts and the Pinehurst Resorts. Discerning golfers everywhere have at least a glimmer of what it means to be playing a “Ross course.” Indeed, the anticipation of any round is enhanced with this knowledge. But few actually know much about the man, his background, or the nature of his long career in the U.S.

Buie, the literary architect, has supplied golf historians and Ross fans with an absorbing “round of Ross” that encompasses for its golfing landscape no less than *The Life and Times* of the man many consider the best golf course architect. Period.

From the first tee, if you will, and Ross’s beginnings in Dornoch and training with Old Tom Morris and Robert Simpson of Carnoustie, Buie skillfully routes us through Ross’s subsequent journey to America for a tentative bit of work at the Oakley CC in Watertown, Mass. and on through his gentleman’s agreement with James Tufts to begin his legendary Pinehurst career.

Buie has enlivened the text with many dozens of images from important and private archives that range from early and rare photographs to post cards, architectural drawings, aerial photos, even advertisements. As well, he has researched early inter-

views with Ross, private letters, and published accounts to fully portray his man in all his facets. And there were many.

As a golfer who knew his game, Ross was no slouch and might have chosen the professional tournament route had that offered itself as a promising career for himself and his young wife, Janet. At age 62, for example, Ross turned in a 66 on Pinehurst No. 3.

Ross the architect is presented not only in light of the extraordinary body of his work (at its height, several hundred Ross-designed courses were opening every year), but in the particular care he brought to each course and the confidence he inspired in each client. His importance in the “Pinehurst School” of golf architecture is of interest for the collaborations with such as A.W. Tillinghast, Henry Fownes, George Crump, and Hugh Wilson.

As a businessman, Ross recognized talent and rewarded expertise, hiring assistants who were extraordinarily loyal to the man who expected both a high standard of performance and personal conduct. His assistants, some of whom would go on to long careers as architects or club professionals, would often make course visits when Ross could not, to complete routings that Ross had done from detailed topographical maps.

A man who was at ease in all levels of society, Ross knew the importance of balance as a consummate professional, and a private individual who cherished his private life. Buie’s thorough research shares innumerable stories of his relationships with everyone from presidents to professional golfers to golf architects, associates and family – even the eager citizens of smaller communities who were anxious to have Ross construct a course for their town, especially in an age when to have a golf course was considered an “arrival” of sorts on the cultural scene of the day.

Through the many fairways and doglegs of Ross’s life, we come to gain a better insight into a man of immense talent and “a natural nobility” of mind and temperament.

The main body of his book completed, Buie realized he had compiled dozens of stories and background information on important courses and other topics that “...exceeded what was needed for a biographical narrative.” Rather than filing them away, he decided to supplement the larger book with these vignettes. We are fortunate that he did so.

The latter half of *Life & Times* contains a masterly appendix that begins with “Stories of Note,” – the “vignettes” – with headings from Seminole and Augusta National through Pitch and Putt Courses, and Canada., which serve to further our understanding of these important accomplishments of Ross.

Having negotiated this colorful section, we come upon the headings of Major Courses and Uncredited Works, for a closer examination of Ross masterpieces and unheralded, but nonetheless characteristically well-crafted, courses.

Two other important appendices include a welcome and de-

tailed Timeline of Ross’s life and works and a current list of his courses.

The Life and Times of Donald Ross has been hailed by important authors and reviewers from the Wall Street Journal, to James Dodson, and Ran Morrisett of Golf Club Atlas. Such back-cover superlatives are often quite effusive in their praise. In this case, you may believe them. 🌐

