



THE EVANGELIST OF GOLF

by GEORGE BAHTO

THE STORY of CHARLES BLAIR MACDONALD



FOREWORD

SOME MEN PREFER OLDER WOMEN; I prefer older golf courses. Aside from the obvious benefits of maturity in the landscape, classic courses generally have more personality than modern creations, the kind of subtleties and quirks that one can grow to love.

While I'm a fan of many different architects, and have consulted in restoring the work of several, I feel most at home on the courses of Charles Blair Macdonald and his more prolific associates, Seth Raynor and Charles Banks. Like Macdonald, who was a student at St. Andrews University, I grew to love the "old game" in my year overseas on a scholarship to study golf architecture, based largely on Macdonald's precedent, and I returned to America with many questions about how modern golf architecture had evolved.

While in St. Andrews, C. B. Macdonald had been a firsthand witness to another, more profound evolution—from featherie balls to gutta-percha to the Haskell ball. In the transition, some previously-admired golf holes were "found out" as their challenge for the better players diminished. But as Macdonald noted, others held their challenge for all comers, because they required thought as well as stout hitting to conquer. Macdonald developed a boundless respect for the great golf holes he found at St. Andrews, North Berwick, Sandwich, and Prestwick, which had stood the test of time; and he made no bones about imitating their best features in his own work. He defended his style in *Scotland's Gift—Golf*: "I believe in reverencing anything in the life of man which has the testimony of the ages as being unexcelled, whether it be literature, paintings, poetry, tombs—even a golf hole... Another great landscape architect, Prince Puckler [said] 'Time is not able to bring forth new truths but only an unfolding of timeless truths.'"

As a result, playing a course by Raynor or Macdonald is like visiting an old best friend—the familiarity returns almost instantly, even if you have never seen it before! There is sure to be a par 3 in imitation of the Redan at North Berwick, a

long shot to an angled, tilted green set above deep bunkers. Another of the short holes may have the vestige of a horse-shoe-shaped depression (or even a ridge) in the center of the green. A third will be vaguely reminiscent of the famous 11th at St. Andrews, with deep bunkers at the wings of the green and an open central approach. And the fourth will often be a very long shot (220) yards to a lengthy plateau with a deep swale just in front of the flagstick, tagged on the scorecard with the odd name of "Biarritz."

When modern golf architects repeat their own work (and they do, all too often), I find it distasteful, wondering why they can't think up a fresh idea for a hole. But when I play another of Raynor's versions of the Redan, I confess a fondness for it. Am I a hypocrite? Perhaps, but I believe there is a difference. Macdonald and Raynor were paying homage to a classic form, and at the same time, trying to devise improvements to it based on the local situation. Their fourth at National Golf Links is better than the 15th at North Berwick, because the slightly downhill shot and lower intervening ridge afford a better view of the strategy of the hole, leading your eye to the target, while it cradles the layup shot just as well as the original. I have learned much about the Redan, and about golf design in general, by comparing Raynor's different versions and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses.

In modern design, we have the earthmoving power to produce exact copies of famous holes if we so desire. But the power to copy has become a curse, as few designers take the time to consider improvements to their original design. And where copies have been built, few have succeeded in getting the last six inches right, the nuances of approach and green that make the original a world-class hole.

Macdonald was the kind of golfer who understood those nuances, and after several years of boredom with the dismally dull golf courses of turn-of-the-century America, he set out to build a course that would honor and even surpass the best

British links. He personally chose the land, adjacent to the fledgling Shinnecock Hills Golf Club on Long Island, and enlisted the help of the local surveyor, Seth Raynor, to find the right places on the site to imitate the Redan, the Alps at Prestwick, and other ideas he had culled from courses overseas. The product of their work is the National Golf Links of America—fortunately for us, among the best-preserved courses in America, and still today, along with perhaps Dr. Alister MacKenzie's Cypress Point, the closest realization of Macdonald's ideal of building a course with the strategic interest, playability, and charm of the Old Course at St. Andrews.

Spurred on by the success of both Chicago Golf Club and the National, Macdonald went on to design a handful of other classic layouts, including St. Louis Country Club, the Yale University course, Mid Ocean in Bermuda, and the lost Lido Golf Club on the south shore of Long Island, once spoken of in the same breath as the National and Pine Valley. On most of these projects, Macdonald was not only the designer of the course but a critical force in founding the club and getting his elite social and business contacts involved. Yet he never accepted a fee for his work, preferring to keep it on the level of a hobby and a "good deed" for American golf. For this, he was deservedly christened by Herbert Warren Wind as the "father of American golf course architecture," and we all owe him a tremendous debt.

After the National, though, Macdonald saw that the demand for his services far exceeded the time he was willing to spend at his hobby. In addition, he was so enamored with his masterpiece that he found it difficult to maintain his interest in less ambitious projects for other clients. So he referred most of the enquiries to his protégé, Raynor, who was a working man and had the engineering background and the organized mind to plan courses across the country—from Westhampton near his home in New York to Waialae in Hawaii.

Raynor didn't have the artistic flair, the magnetic personality, or the overdeveloped ego of his mentor, and as a result, until recently, his work was sadly neglected. A dozen years

ago, Pete Dye told me that Camargo and Fishers Island—both Raynor designs—were the best overlooked courses in America. Today, thankfully, they have both found their rightful place among lists of the elite. But wherever I have gone to search out another of Raynor's courses—from Yeamans Hall in the marshes of Charleston, to Lookout Mountain on top of a Georgia mountain—I have found solid and inspiring designs on sometimes magnificent properties. With Macdonald's social connections behind him, Raynor had first dibs on some of the most beautiful property in America between 1916 and 1926, when he suddenly died. He was then in the planning of a golf course at Cypress Point. Alister MacKenzie was chosen to replace him and he made the most of the opportunity.

I am unfortunately less familiar with the designs of former schoolmaster Charles Banks, who fell in with Raynor and Macdonald while they were working on the design of a course at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, not far from where I grew up. Banks was inspired enough by their work to quit his day job and join the firm, assisting with the Yale golf course and Mid Ocean, and building some truly dramatic holes on his own early efforts like Forsgate and Whippoorwill. But Raynor died and Macdonald became disinterested, and three years later the Depression put an abrupt halt to opportunities in the golf design business, leaving Banks understandably somewhat bitter about the whole thing.

I've been lucky to have had the chance to write a bit about golf architecture, but to call me an historian on golf architecture is certainly inaccurate, and the responsibility worries me. I seldom can find the time to do the research good history requires. Fortunately, George Bahto has made the time, and that makes his book worth reading. From now on I'll be content to read what he has discovered, and hope that my own work will be good enough to deserve the occasional reward of a game on a Macdonald, Raynor, or Banks course.

—TOM DOAK