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Of Golf and Christian History

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March 18, 2011

Of Golf and Christian History

Can we learn any lessons for understanding history from the game of golf?



Early Golf in Scotland

The modern game of golf we understand today is generally considered to be a Scottish invention. A spokesman for the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, one of the oldest Scottish golf organisations, said "Stick and ball games have been around for many centuries, but golf as we know it today, played over 18 holes, clearly originated in Scotland." The word golf, or in Scots language gouf, is usually thought to be a Scots alteration of Dutch "colf" or "colve" meaning "stick, "club", "bat", itself related to the Proto-Germanic language *kulth- as found in Old Norse kolfr meaning "bell clapper", and the German Kolben meaning "mace or club". The Dutch term Kolven refers to a related sport.

The first documented mention of golf in Scotland appears in a 1457 Act of the Scottish Parliament, an edict issued by king James II of Scotland prohibiting the playing of the games of gowf and football as these were a distraction from archery practice for military purposes. Bans were again imposed in Acts of 1471 and 1491, with golf being described as "an unprofitable sport". Mary, Queen of Scots, was accused by her political enemies of playing golf, after her second husband Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, was murdered in 1567. George Buchanan subsequently wrote that she had been playing "sports that were clearly unsuitable to women". Golf was banned again by parliament under king James VI of Scotland, but golf clubs and balls were bought for him in 1502 when he was visiting Perth, and on subsequent occasions when he was in St Andrews and Edinburgh.

The account book of lawyer Sir John Foulis of Ravelston records that he played golf at Musselburgh Links on 2 March

1672, and this has been accepted as proving that The Old Links, Musselburgh, is the oldest playing golf course in the world. There is also a story that Mary, Queen of Scots, played there in 1567.

Instructions, golf club rules and competitions

The earliest known instructions for playing golf have been found in the diary of Thomas Kincaid, a medical student who played on the course at Bruntsfield Links, near Edinburgh University, and at Leith Links. His notes include his views on an early handicap system. In his entry for 20 January 1687 he noted how "After dinner I went out to the Golve", and described his Golf stroke:

I found that the only way of playing at the Golve is to stand as you do at fenceing with the small sword bending your legs a little and holding the muscles of your legs and back and armes exceeding bent or fixt or stiffe and not at all slackning them in the time you are bringing down the stroak (which you readily doe)

The oldest surviving rules of golf were written in 1744 for the Company of Gentlemen Golfers, later renamed The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, which played at Leith Links. Their "Articles and Laws in Playing at Golf, now preserved in the National Library of Scotland, became known as the Leith Rules and the document supports the club's claim to be the oldest golf club, though an almanac published about a century later is the first record of a rival claim that The Royal Burgess Golfing Society had been set up in 1735. The instructions in the Leith Rules formed the basis for all subsequent codes, for example requiring that "Your Tee must be upon the ground" and "You are not to change the Ball which you strike off the Tee".

The 1744 competition for the Gentlemen Golfers' Competition for the Silver Club, a trophy in the form of a silver golf club provided as sponsorship by Edinburgh Town Council, was won by surgeon John Rattray, who was required to attach to the trophy a silver ball engraved with his name, beginning a long tradition. Rattray joined the Jacobite Rising of 1745 and as a result was imprisoned in Inverness, but was saved from being hanged by the pleading of his fellow golfer Duncan Forbes of Culloden, Lord President of the Court of Session. Rattray was released in 1747, and won the Silver Club three times in total.

(Excerpted from "[History of Golf](#)" at Wikipedia.org)

OK. So the history of golf itself is not so informative about lessons from history per se, but that there are many claims to the shape and names of the beginnings of the game may point out an important lesson: When something is seen as popular or of value, everyone wants to claim its origins.

- Are there any similarities between the histories of the beginnings of golf and the beginnings of Christianity?

In my upcoming blog I will see another lesson for early Christian history from the game of golf.

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I'm feeling super glad right now that Christianity is both more interesting and more fun than golf :D

Posted by: [Kessia Reyne](#) | [March 18, 2011 at 06:09 PM](#)

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