

Awa' ye go, ma Bonny Bird

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IF people know anything about Douglas Rolland it is usually that he was a prodigious striker of a gutty ball, and that he played in the Open Championship on four occasions, twice finishing second (1884 and 1894).

Dig deeper and you will find that he did not enter the Championship in the ten-year gap between his two second place finishes. This is usually attributed to 'an affair of gallantry' which caused him to leave Scotland in a hurry. His re-appearance at the Championship (at St George's in 1894) was the first time it was played outside Scotland, and he never played in a Championship held in Scotland again.

His earnings from golf up to 1884 and his subsequent application for the first Amateur Championship the following year reveals it was Douglas that caused the rules differentiating an amateur and a professional to be written the way they were and that having been exiled from the amateur game, he became known throughout England for playing anyone who could raise a suitable purse. His performances in 1893 and 1894, immediately before the rise of the great triumvirate, clearly demonstrate that he was the best player in the world at the time.

Earlsferry

John Erskine Douglas Stewart Rolland was born on the 4th of January 1861, not only into a golfing family, but into a golfing town. Earlsferry was a hotbed of golf in the second half of the nineteenth century. When his cousin, James Braid, himself Earlsferry born and bred, said that 'Earlsferry Thistle could field a team that could hold its own against the rest of the world' he was not entirely joking.

Leaving school around the age of thirteen, Douglas worked as a mason's labourer and grew into a fine figure of a man, described by JH Taylor as

over six feet tall, broad, muscular, good looking, his face all the more attractive by the perpetual smile which played about it with boyish eagerness, characteristics so endearing that compelled attention and friendliness of approach made a beckoning signal.¹

An article in *The Golfing Annual* added 'in fact, so far as physique is concerned, he looks the beau ideal of a Rugby football forward.'²

Rolland joined the Earlsferry Thistle Golf Club and

quickly established himself as the pre-eminent player at the Club. Between 1877 and 1884 he won the Club's oldest trophy (the Burgh Medal) five times, and only the power of the Simpson brothers (David and Archie) stopped him from adding to this total.



Douglas Rolland

Prominence

1883 was the year that Douglas would first come to the attention of the wider golfing world. John Ball (Tertius) from Royal Liverpool had remained unbeaten for a season or more and had issued a challenge announced in *The Field* to any golfer in the kingdom, to play home and away; Douglas Rolland, as he would many more times, met this challenge head on. The match would be played home and away over 36 holes on each course.³ It would be considered as a single match, with the winner determined by the aggregate number of holes up over the 72 to be played.

Unsurprisingly each opted to play their home course; the first match would take place over the Earlsferry Links on the 29th of November 1883, the second over Hoylake a week later. This was not a money match, although there would be sufficient funding to ensure that neither player was out of pocket. However, betting was a different matter and significant sums were wagered. The weather on the morning of the Earlsferry leg was exceptional for the time of year, but with a stiff breeze blowing from the south-west. The challenge drew a

large crowd – amongst them Old Tom Morris – with spectators coming from all over Fife and Edinburgh. Ball won the first hole, but that was his only success of the first round of twelve holes. He broke his cleek at the Third, played badly and lost the next six holes. Rolland showed little sympathy and ended the first round 7 up. He had played the first round of twelve in 54 strokes, eight better than Ball.⁴

After a short break Rolland's putting deteriorated from an already indifferent standard and he failed to press home the advantage his exceptional long game was giving him. Ball recovered slightly, won the Eleventh and Twelfth and lunched 9 down, but it could and should have been worse.

After lunch, the third circuit continued in a similar vein with Rolland continuing to strike the ball brilliantly and putt poorly and Ball hanging on by doing the reverse. Despite Ball winning two of the last three holes, Rolland took a substantial lead of 9 up to Liverpool the following week.⁵

The following week, the *Liverpool Mercury* noted that some in the crowd that day had come from London, Edinburgh, St Andrews and Alnmouth. Old Tom was again in attendance. There was a biting wind, and this was partly responsible for the poor play in the morning round. Eleven of the first thirteen holes were halved. Ball clawed a single hole back to lead the Hoylake match – something that was important to those who had backed him heavily to win at home – but he lunched 8 down and clearly needed a miracle in the afternoon round. In fact the opposite happened; Rolland found his form and covered the back nine in 40 shots to win the Liverpool leg of the challenge 4/2, making the overall score 11/10.⁶

Jack Simpson had travelled to Hoylake and the two celebrated his victory 'in a right royal manner' well into the early hours, in the course of which Douglas lost his clubs. Returning to their rooms, they found a message that Robert Chambers Junior had arranged another match with Ball for the following morning, asking that Rolland be there promptly.

After a few hours' sleep, much the worse for wear and playing with a few borrowed clubs, Douglas was 5 down after thirteen holes. But as Rolland himself later recalled, 'refreshing breezes from across the Dee began to clear my head of the Liverpool jollification' and he won the remaining six holes to beat Ball again on his home green.

This is the first instance of what became a well-worn story. His golfing excellence vied with his exuberance off the course, and no one could be sure which would triumph on any given day.

Stonemasons

Immediately after the R&A Autumn Medal in October 1884 and in the company of Jack Simpson, Douglas made an indelible impression at the home of golf. Horace Hutchinson takes up the story:

And then immediately after the (Autumn) medal, came a message from Elie and Earlsferry – 'Would any pair at St Andrews give a match in a foursomes to a couple of stonemasons from Elie?' Leslie Balfour asked me if I would



Douglas won the Earlsferry Thistle Burgh Medal five times

Image courtesy Earlsferry Thistle GC

play with him against them. I knew I was not in good form, and I do not think he was either, but we still said we would play them. They came over and seemed very nice young fellows indeed. The name of one was Douglas Rolland, and that of the other Jack Simpson. We had never heard of them before. We continued to think of them as very nice fellows until the ninth hole, at which point we were two up. The truth is that the masons had not got their hammers going at all. But we did not know that. On the way home we began to doubt whether they were as nice as we had thought. Rolland began hitting the ball to places where we had never seen it hit before, and Simpson so followed up that they were reaching with a drive and an iron holes that it was at that date scarcely decent to approach in this metallic way. They were gutty balls mind, which did not fly away off the irons like the rubber-cores. They finished that round to the good of us and in the afternoon made us look very foolish indeed. I do not think that Leslie or I ever got over that match till we read the result of the open championship, played very shortly afterwards at Prestwick. It went 'Jack Simpson first, Douglas Rolland second'. After that we could make a better reply when we had to listen to the very pointed enquiries of friends as to 'What sort of golfers are the stonemasons of Elie? Are they any good?'

Soon after their triumph over Hutchinson and Balfour at St Andrews Douglas and Jack travelled to Prestwick for the 1884 Championship. There were 28 entries, few by modern standards but above the norm for Prestwick in this period. Staying in a rented house, they had a 'merry evening' before the Championship, at the end of which Rolland drew a circle on the floor and announced that the Championship medal must be placed there the following evening.

The weather was poor, with a strong gale blowing. Paired with an amateur from Prestwick St Nicholas, Rolland dealt well with the conditions and finished with a creditable score of 164 (81, 83); one of his drives was measured at 240 yards. Jack played even better to win with 160 (78, 82) and the championship medal was ceremoniously placed in the circle at their house. Douglas received £3 prize money for his second place. It was a great triumph for Earlsferry golf.⁸

An affair of gallantry?

In modern language, Rolland is reported to have failed to appear at Cupar Sheriff Court to face a paternity suit. With a charge of contempt of court hanging over him, it is commonly assumed that he was not able to return to Scotland and was therefore unable to contest the Open until it was played for the first time in England ten years later.

The date of this summons is uncertain, but in his book *James Braid*, Bernard Darwin states:

I believe that on the day on which he had to play the second half of his match against John Ball, he ought to have attended a summons in a local Court in Scotland, due to an affair of gallantry. Since he could not be in two places at once he went to Hoylake and thought it prudent thereafter to stay in England.⁹

That fixes the date of the missed summons on or immediately after the 24th of October, 1884.

The often-repeated story is that having missed his

court case, he travelled to England, thereby preventing his punishment being exacted, and that he lived out the remainder of his life south of the border, explaining his absence from the Championship for many years.

This bears closer examination. No filiation and aliment case against JE Douglas S Rolland has ever been noted at any sheriff court in Scotland.

If we accept Darwin's view of the dates, then Douglas was in England at the time of the summons and would have surely stayed on. However, he played at Leith Links in a Leith GC competition on New Year's Day 1885 and attended the first meeting of the year at Earlsferry Thistle on the 14th of February 1885. This is inconsistent with someone attempting to avoid an outstanding summons from a Sheriff Court. He was, however, in England by the end of April 1885 as he is recorded as winning £1 at Royal Liverpool on the 25th of that month.

Not attending a Sheriff Court in a matter of this nature would result automatically in the case being found in the plaintiff's favour. Further, crossing the border to England would not prevent English courts enforcing the judgement of a Scottish Court.

The rumour of him not being able to return to Scotland was regularly hinted at, but when *Golf* stated that 'Rolland, for reasons which need not be stated here, cannot go to Scotland' (3rd August 1894 p506) it drew a forceful response from Rolland: 'I now write to inform you that there is no truth in this statement and that I am able and willing with the sanction of my employer, to go to Scotland at any time.' (17th August 1894 p 543).

It was proving difficult to reconcile these snippets of evidence, until BGCS member Richard Williams suggested I looked out for a 'Louisa Campbell'. Eventually isolating the relevant person, the story quickly unfolded.

Louisa was a domestic servant who lived in Portobello, working for the Jupp family in Albany Street. She had an illegitimate daughter born on 3rd August 1884, named Louisa Rolland Campbell. As was usual the rank or profession of the father was blank. The Court of Session in Edinburgh heard a case brought by Louisa Campbell against Douglas Rolland in November 1884. It has not yet been possible to examine this case due to lockdown restrictions, but this will be followed up as soon as possible.

If Douglas Rolland had responsibilities under a deed of payment, then taking a well-paid job as a stonemason in the Mersey Tunnel (which he did) would be a reasonable course of action.

Louisa Rolland Campbell lived all her life in Edinburgh, married George Harry Campbell and had a daughter named Georgina Campbell. I had the pleasure of meeting Georgina's daughter Louisa Oliver at her home in Fife and she provided some wonderful detail. First, the family thought that Louisa Rolland Campbell's father was a famous golfer and James Braid was the favoured candidate. Second, that her mother – Georgina Campbell – had memory of visiting an old lady called 'Granny Rolland' in Earlsferry. Georgina had no idea

that this was her real grandmother and thought it was a friend of the family.

Economics

In his obituary of Douglas for *Golf Illustrated*, Harold Hilton noted that ‘He was following his occupation as a stone mason and was employed for some time in connection with the excavation of the tunnel under the Mersey’.¹⁰ Indeed, the first tunnel under the Mersey – the Railway Tunnel – was opened in early 1886, and it is more than likely that there was work which extended past that date. This may support a theory that he had sought work to repay a debt, or simply that the Mersey Tunnel offered well-paid regular employment.

If there was no case for him to answer, why did he move to England and absent himself from his family and friends and the Open Championship for ten years? He was not close to his family. Due to womanising, drinking and generally raucous behaviour, and the rate he spent his earnings, it was likely that he was seen as the black sheep of the family. More than once a similarity to Robert Burns has come to mind. There is no record of him visiting his mother (who outlived him) a sharp contrast with his cousin James Braid who visited Earlsferry regularly.

There is little evidence to demonstrate that Braid and Rolland were close on or off the course. There are few references to Rolland in Braid’s writing, and it is plausible that Braid was all too aware of the heartache Rolland was causing his family, (Rolland’s and Braid’s mothers were sisters), colouring his view of Rolland. Braid did write of Rolland to the *East of Fife Record* in very complimentary terms in June 1908 but this was the exception.¹¹

An alternative explanation of why Rolland missed the Open for ten years was put forward in the 1998 article *The Man who didn’t care about the Open* by Bob Grant and Michael Hobbs.¹² They noted that the Open Championship had not achieved the stature it reached in later years and that ‘it was not an essential item on the golfing calendar for the great amateurs and professionals’. They cite the fact that John Ball first played in the Championship in 1878 but that it would be eleven years before he entered again.

Rolland was a prolific challenge match player, and there was scarcely a worthy opponent – amateur or professional – that he didn’t face in the early 1890s. This was considerably more profitable than travelling back to Scotland to play in the Open, which continued its three-yearly rotation of Prestwick, St Andrews and Musselburgh (replaced by Muirfield in 1892).

Travel from Worcestershire or Surrey to these three locations was a long and costly business – with trips taking close to a full day to complete and with a return ticket costing in the region of £7. The additional cost of accommodation and meals brought the total expense close to the winner’s purse (in 1890) of £13 (from a total prize fund of £30). It could be that it was an economic argument that kept Douglas away from the Championship for ten years.

One thing is certain, Douglas never again played in an Open Championship held in Scotland. However, although absent, he was not forgotten. One of his biggest supporters was Tom Morris, who was always ready with the latest ‘Duggie Story’. At the Open prizegiving in 1885 Old Tom was heard to say: ‘they should all thank the Lord that Duggie Rolland is holed out in England.’

The Amateur

The announcement of this new event was carried in *The Field* and stated that it was to be held during the Spring Meeting of The Royal Liverpool Golf Club and was ‘open to all amateur golfers, members of recognised clubs’.¹³

Twenty-four clubs were approached to contribute to the purchase of the trophy (which was not completed until 1886). They were: Alnmouth, Bruntsfield Links, The Burgess, Dalhousie, Formby, Gullane, Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, Innerleven, Kilspindie, King James VI, New North Berwick, Panmure, Prestwick, West Lancashire, Aberdeen, Royal Albert (Montrose), R&A, Royal Blackheath, Royal Liverpool, Royal North Devon, Royal Wimbledon, St George’s, Tantallon and Troon.¹⁴

Douglas Rolland forwarded his application, which left the committee at Hoylake with the problem of defining exactly what was meant by an amateur. The Royal Liverpool Captain, James Cullen, pressed that ‘the tournament be restricted to members of invited clubs’. The organising committee took a different approach that attempted to blur the social standing of a player by relying upon a definition based on whether someone had earned money through golf. The rule that they decided upon excluded:

any player who has accepted a money prize in a competition open to all comers: at the same time if it is many years since a player has done that, there seems no reason why he should not by lapse of time be held to have regained his status as an amateur.¹⁵

Their ruling disqualified Rolland but allowed John Ball to play. Both had won money from open tournaments, for example Rolland £6 and Ball £1, but Ball had done so at an early age and the committee carefully drafted the rule so that any monies won when under the age of sixteen were disregarded. This became an accepted basis of rulings on professionalism in other sports. Ball had also won prizes in amateur competitions, but these were excluded as they were not open to all comers.

Rolland made the point that although he had won prize money, he was making his living as a stonemason and not as a professional golfer, but to no avail; the committee had shaped the entry conditions to produce the field they desired.

This was not the first time golf had dealt with this question. Ronald Ross was refused entry to the Grand National Tournament of 1858, (a tournament run by the R&A).¹⁶ Ross was a member of the Bruntsfield Allied Club. He was prevented from playing on the grounds that he was a venetian blind maker, and therefore as an artisan, he was not eligible. He had

his entrance monies refunded just before he was due to play. There is little doubt Rolland's exclusion from the first Amateur Championship, nearly 30 years later, was made for a similar reason. Horace Hutchinson sat on that Hoylake committee but could not come to terms with this decision and resigned:

So that was settled, and Rolland's entry was disallowed. It passed off with less trouble than I had expected, perhaps just because Rolland was such a thoroughly good fellow, whether he be professional or amateur, and not at all of that small spirit which is apt to take offence where none is meant.¹⁷

It may simply have been that Rolland had anticipated RLGC's decision; it may also have been that he genuinely didn't care but being now classified as a professional golfer he made up his mind to make a living from the game.

It is also possible that the decision not to accept his entry to the 1885 Amateur Championship affected his view of the golfing establishment to the extent that he had little interest in playing in the Open. It would have been easy for him to see the R&A and RLGC as 'the toffs' of golf, and to decide that he wanted little more to do with them. Douglas was, after all closer in attitude and demeanour to the caddies of the day than to the members of these elite clubs.

Any such resentment mirrored that of Young Tom Morris twenty years previously and many people, including Old Tom, saw something of Tommy in Douglas both on and off the course. The Amateur was played at Hoylake in the third week in April and the Open was played at St Andrews on the 3rd of October 1885, so he had six months to consider his position. He chose not to play on a course he knew well and against a field where he would have been one of the favourites.

Douglas was approaching the prime of his life; he was 23 years old, and he had moved on from Earlsferry into the wider golfing world. Good showings at successive annual open events at Earlsferry; taking up John Ball's country-wide challenge and beating him home and away; beating the best the R&A had to offer in tandem with Jack Simpson; a second place in the Open Championship. He was certainly being noticed.

His manner of play was also attracting admiration. His length and accuracy with the driver was better than any other in the game. His ability to consistently carry bunkers 200 yards from the teeing area was exceptional and put the competition at a severe disadvantage. His distinctive cry – 'Awa' ye go, ma bonny bird' uttered as he made contact with another stupendous tee shot was now feared. Rolland's long game was peerless, his approach play top class and, on the occasions he putted well, he was unmatched.

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Part II of this article will examine Douglas Rolland's career as a professional golfer in England