THE GOOD DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTIONS

The Writings of Dr Alister MacKenzie



AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY

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FOREWORD BY
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by Tom Doak

It is said that you should never meet your heroes, and that's probably good advice. No-one can compare to the idealized version of themselves imagined by their fans.

So, I suppose it's fortunate that I never got to meet Alister MacKenzie. My hero died in 1934, twenty-seven years before I was born. The first of his work I saw with my own eyes was his masterpiece, Cypress Point, at the impressionable age of fifteen. Ever since I have been following in his footsteps, to Leeds and St Andrews and Australia and Michigan, where I live today largely because MacKenzie came here, with his midwestern associate, Perry Maxwell, to lay out Crystal Downs in the fall of 1928.

The golf world's first encounter with MacKenzie is related by the golf architect Harry Colt, who reminisced about their first meeting in 1907, in his own Introduction to MacKenzie's 1920 book:

"I had been asked to go to Leeds to advise about the design of the Alwoodley Golf Course, and stayed at his house. After dinner he took me into his consulting room, where, instead of finding myself surrounded by the weapons of his profession as a Doctor of Medicine, I sat in the midst of a collection of photographs of sand bunkers, putting greens, and golf courses, and many plans and designs of the Alwoodley Course. I found that I was staying with a real enthusiast, and one who had already given close attention to a subject in which I have always been interested."

Straight away, MacKenzie proceeded to take the lead in the design of Alwoodley over the vastly more experienced Colt. His houseguest was apparently not overly offended by this, and the two men became partners for a time (along with C.H. Alison) after the end of the Great War.

It's hard to know for sure if I would have liked the man, yet I have always imagined so, not because of his golf courses, but because of his writing. He was a man of strong opinions, and wasn't afraid to put them into print, and even engage in back-and-forth argument in public.

Indeed, he seemed to love a good argument. He disagreed so much with his friend Joshua Crane's mathematical analyses of golf courses that he and Max Behr spent two weeks at St Andrews playing The Old Course with Crane, just for the purpose of refuting every point of his analyses.

Sometimes, though, it got the better of him, when dealing with clients and criticism. Included in this volume are several Letters to the Editor regarding his famously severe greens at Sitwell Park. Simultaneously, he was arguing with his client for the course, Sir George Sitwell, in private correspondence. Sir George did not appreciate that golf professionals were dragging his name through the mud over Dr MacKenzie's greens, and demanded changes. In the end, those famous greens were neutered, one of the rare times when the Doctor did not get his way.

Similarly, his foray into the use of camouflage by the Royal Engineers during the Great War was hampered by conflicts with his superior officers, who found his ideas too unorthodox. Having witnessed the massacre of the British army at the Battle of Colenso in the Boer War, MacKenzie adamantly believed that his practical knowledge of the field would save lives, and tried to take his ideas higher up the chain of command, only to be rebuffed. But the last chapter of this anthology makes clear how deeply he had thought about the topic, and how his ideas on camouflage informed his design work.

None of these incidents had much effect on Alister MacKenzie. He stuck to his guns on all topics of interest, whether golf architecture or camouflage or politics, because he thoroughly studied the questions himself. Those of us who love golf courses are lucky that MacKenzie was not afraid to risk criticism in the pursuit of a great design.

Though his strident beliefs could sometimes cause conflict with others of similar disposition, he also had a fine sense of humor, as evidenced by the many little stories sprinkled through his two books, and there are many more nuggets contained herein.

The one that never fails to elicit a laugh on a golf course construction site was his story of a contractor admiring how natural looking the undulating greens were on a course built by a rival. The other contractor replied, "It was easy, we simply employed the biggest fool in the village and told him to make them flat."

Dr MacKenzie was a man of many facets and it's delightful to see all of them gathered into one volume. Kudos to Neil Crafter for such a lovely presentation of MacKenzie and his works.

The Doctor in his own words is more compelling than anything one could write about him!

Tom Doak January 2024



Tom Doak (right) with the Editor, Neil Crafter, in 2012 at the Sebonack course that Tom co-designed with Jack Nicklaus on Long Island, New York.