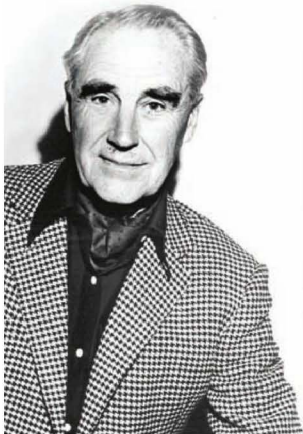


# The forgotten MASTER



His budgets tighter, his canvas typically less inspiring, Robbie Robinson exists in the shadow of his mentor, Stanley Thompson. His body of work, however, merits serious attention **BY RICK YOUNG**

**C**ertain phone calls you never forget. You remember what you were doing, where you were, the date, the weather, even what you were wearing. Unanticipated communiqués are much like unforeseen circumstances. We deal with them every day, partly as a measure of bad news and annoyance but also as unanticipated breaks of good fortune.

Put this particular instance in the latter category. When someone of repute—in this case one of Canadian golf's most underrated golf course architects—calls seeking an audience with you, that's one you put an asterisk beside.

"There's a gentleman in the pro shop wondering if you will escort him around this afternoon," said Greg, associate professional at Craigowan Golf & Country Club in Woodstock, my long-time home club. "He says he designed the golf course."

Flushed from yardwork in the heat of a scorching Sunday in July 1986, a repeat of the message was required.

"Did you get his name?" I asked.

"It's Robinson," Greg said. "Robbie Robinson."

Stanley Thompson is an icon of Canadian golf. His legacy is nurtured not only in the body of his design work across this country (and worldwide) but in the high profile courses that bear his signature. Revered Thompson layouts such as Highlands Links in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia; Alberta's dynamic duo of Jasper and Banff; Capilano in B.C. and St. George's in Toronto are all distinguished by the Torontonian's artistic imprint, a mark of prominence as marketable as the courses themselves.

Thompson was gregarious, an extrovert, a

larger-than-life figure who has had multiple books devoted to him and a society named after him. His was a design genius timeless in composition. But was he the best under all possible circumstances?

"Stanley came along at a very fortunate point in history where he was the pioneer—he was *the man*," says Canadian architect Tom McBroom. "The design business was in its infancy and it was booming in the '20s. Stanley got the sites. He got Cape Breton. He got Capilano. He got St. George's. Those are wonderful properties. All of us would die and shoot and kill for those kinds of properties. Stanley was great when he had a budget, but I've been quoted as saying that I don't think Stanley was great when he didn't have a budget. I think he did some very mediocre work under those conditions. And even though I don't put him in the same league with Thompson in terms of being a creative genius or being a maverick, you could say this: Robbie Robinson did better."

Clinton E. "Robbie" Robinson is widely regarded as one of Stanley Thompson's protégés, a title which hardly should be construed with any negative connotation. A number of renowned designers—Robert Trent Jones Sr., Howard Watson, Geoffrey Cornish, Bob Moote, Rene Muylaert, Ken Welton, Norman Woods and Robinson were all second fiddle to the great conductor whose lineage of associates factors into more than a thousand golf courses around the globe.

Trent Jones Sr., of course, went on to become arguably the world's most recognized course architect. Watson and Cornish each has a stellar reputation within the design fraternity. Moote, Muylaert, Welton and Woods all share lesser status but contributed region-

ally with admirable, albeit less regarded work.

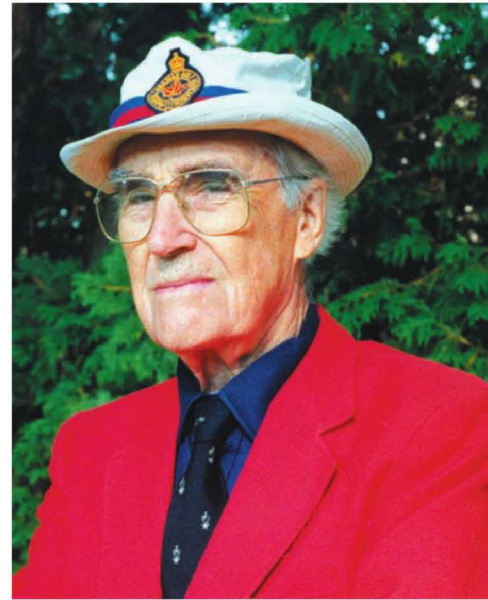
Then there is Robinson. Something of an X-factor in Canadian course design, he remains a mystery to many, a man who some say enjoys status in the Canadian Hall of Fame as much for his turfgrass researching efforts and directorship of the Royal Canadian Golf Association's Green Section than his overall course content. But the St. Amédée, Quebec native's design resumé would appear to refute such a theory. According to Cornish and Ron Whitten's vast architectural resource book, *The Golf Course*, Robinson is responsible for 76 full courses and additions across Canada. He built two in the United States (Lemontree Golf Club in Michigan and Warren Golf Club in Warren, Pennsylvania), remodelled 43 more and consulted on courses in Greece, Mexico, South America and the Caribbean.

Notable in the Robinson design portfolio are the original nine at Terra Nova National Park in Newfoundland; Northumberland





At Credit Valley G&CC in Mississauga, Robinson reworked a sleepy Stanley Thompson design into one of the GTA's best courses. Above right, circa 1953 in Ottawa, Robinson dines with Isobet Mootie (left), his wife Thelma and Bob Mootie (right), the latter of whom he worked with at length. Pictured below is Robinson during his 1986 visit with the author at Woodstock's Craigowan G&CC.



Links in Pugwash, N.S.; Gowan Brae in Bathurst, N.B.; Brudenell River on Prince Edward Island; Twenty Valley in Beamsville; Beverly in Copetown; Craigowan in Woodstock; the West Course at Sunningdale in London; Dalewood in Port Hope; Windermere in Edmonton; a third nine at the Hamilton Golf & Country Club in Ancaster and a second nine at the St. Thomas Golf & Country Club.

Robinson renovations are equally impressive. Calgary Country Club, Vancouver Golf Club in Coquitlam, Pine Ridge in Winnipeg, Riverside in Saint John, N.B., St. George's (which he did for the 1968 Canadian Open); another Toronto classic, Rosedale; Credit Valley in Mississauga, St. Catharines G&CC, Sarnia G&CC, Brantford G&CC, Westmount G&CC in Kitchener, Whirlpool in Niagara Falls, Quebec's Kanawaki GC, Beaconsfield in Pointe Claire near Montreal and Royal Ottawa in Aylmer, Quebec, all were retooled under his watchful eye.

Despite Robinson's inclusion in the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame and his course-related accomplishments, though, this much is apparent: Stanley Thompson, Doug Carrick, Tom McBroom, Graham Cooke and Les Furber all are more universally recognized as Canadian golf designers.

"I find that disconcerting," attests Doug Carrick, who along with McBroom apprenticed and worked for Robinson as an associate. "Robbie, to me, is underrated. His courses don't tend to get a lot of recognition because so many new courses have been built in Canada the past 25 years and maybe because the style of his courses—the big greens and the emphasis at that time on affordable golf, not just from the standpoint of building courses but maintaining them as well—has fallen out of vogue a little bit. Features from Robbie's era tended to be softer and less dramatic than what you see today and what you were seeing

back in Thompson's era. I honestly believe it was that time period more than anything else."

*Robinson was already waiting in a golf cart when I arrived to escort him around Craigowan. Despite the day's heat he wore a Canadian Senior Golf Association red blazer and a bucket hat monogrammed with the insignia of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, an association he would serve as president in 1961 and 1971.*

*"I was working on the London Hunt Club when I was first brought here," he told me as we went down the first fairway. "The club had outgrown their old nine-hole location in town and had three sites picked out. I fell in love with the land here right away. It had beautiful trees, rich soil and a meandering creek that went right through it. Your club didn't have a lot to spend back then, but I was confident I could make it work. The land here was ideal for a championship golf course."*

Robbie Robinson was an exceptional course designer. He was also extremely good with money—his own and other people's as well. Having grown up in the Depression he understood the value of a buck. He invested wisely, paid attention to the markets and would have appreciated the modern axiom of "having your broker on speed dial."

"Uncle Clinton had a knack for making money," says his nephew, Robbie Robinson, head greens superintendent at Hidden Lake Golf Club. "After World War II he worked for the government in Central Mortgage and Housing before he started his own architectural firm in 1961. Had he decided to be a stockbroker instead of a course architect, I think he would have been excellent."

Money—or a lack thereof—helps explain a good deal about Robinson's career in design. A glance over his work reveals that the majority of it was built in smaller towns across

Canada and under the confines of limited budgets. More of a grassroots approach and seemingly with a special kinship for Canada's public golf domain, Robinson's image relates better to centres such as Port Hope, Beamsville, Woodstock and Copetown than it does to larger cities like Toronto, Montreal or Calgary.

"Dalewood is a great example," says McBroom. "I don't think for a minute they had a big budget there and it's not a terrific site. But he carved out a pretty good golf course that's very enjoyable to play. It's fun."

If monetary challenges defined Robinson's talents as a designer, they also likely limited his potential. Course designer Ian Andrew, the nation's best-known restoration specialist and a former Carrick associate, suggests Robinson's frugal nature, even when the money wasn't his, may have hurt some of his final products.

"Robbie was the best of all of Stanley's (Thompson) protégés, but he was notoriously cheap and he built golf courses with that same kind of mindset," Andrew says. "He did get a lot of modest budgets to work with, but he would still try and find ways to cut corners. I think some of his best work was what he did at Westmount and St. Thomas. It was excellent. I think when he stepped up he did great golf holes. But he was cost-conscious to a fault."

Stopping at the tee of Craigowan's par-3 third hole, Robinson spoke about his course design philosophy. "I always tried to think



A dapper C.E. "Robbie" Robinson (left) with Catarauqui G&CC professional Dick Green, likely in the early-1930s.

**"Stanley Thompson was like the Ernest Hemingway of golf architecture. You know—the drinker, the ladies' man. Robinson was more culturally and socially refined. He'd be like F. Scott Fitzgerald—the respectable country club type guy." —Tom McBroom**

about the average golfer first," he said. "Challenge is important to everyone, but you have to strike a balance for good players. I love how big the greens are here. That's why I love this golf course. It never gets old. When you have big greens and big tees a golf course always can play different. It can test everyone from the casual golfer to the best amateurs. That's a good golf course."

Robinson was Stanley Thompson's right-hand man. He did a healthy amount of finishing and aesthetic work for the legendary designer and learned various aspects of the business from him. But his courses never were built exclusively from the Thompson mould.

"Robbie's style was a combination of some of the philosophies of Stanley in terms of strategic character but was also reminiscent of the style of the day, which was probably influenced most by Robert Trent Jones," Carrick says. "Large greens were one of the most distinguishing features about Robbie's courses. He tended to like to use angles to make the course challenging for championship play or easier for regular golfer play."

Carrick and McBroom, as young apprentices under Robinson, were taught a great deal about course maintenance and traffic patterns on a golf course, especially golfers' exit and entry points based on bunkering and drainage. Both admit to being in awe of Robinson. Each suggests, too, that they were highly influenced—not only by his experience, but by how he conducted himself personally and professionally.

"Stanley (Thompson) was like the Ernest Hemingway of golf architecture," McBroom says. "You know—the drinker, the ladies' man, the party guy. Of course, Hemingway was a writing genius and Thompson was cer-

tainly a design genius. Robinson was more culturally and socially refined. He'd be like F. Scott Fitzgerald—the respectable country club type guy—but still a great writer."

First influenced by Robinson as a young junior golfer at Credit Valley, McBroom gained his first exposure to big-time course design by watching Robinson transform Credit Valley into one of the GTA's finest. It left a considerable impression.

"He took this sleepy little 18-hole course with a bunch of quirky holes Stanley did back in the 1930s and made it into a major league golf course in the 1970s," McBroom says. "Thirty years later it's still one of the best private clubs in Toronto. I was duly impressed by what he did there."

Robinson's nephew insists that while his uncle deserves more credit for his design prowess, he should also be credited for the kinds of players his courses produced and continue to produce today, such as Jon Drewery (Craigowan).

"To me, that's the measuring stick of a great golf course," says Robinson. "You go through Uncle Clinton's courses, and over and over you see they turned out good golfers, because you have to use every club in your bag."

*As we slowly moved about Craigowan, Robinson pointed out various things he liked and other things he didn't about the design as it related to the modern game—1986 in this instance. He mentioned how on his original blueprint of the course the bunkering and green size had changed over time. I asked him if he kept a lot of drawings and notes about the club.*

*"I was more intent to design with my eyes," he said. "Good design is never done on paper."*

*He was exceedingly proud of his greens and mentioned more than once how it was important to him at each hole to leave a "mouth"—a place golfers could run up the golf ball. "Playing golf on the ground," he said, "is a big part of golf to me."*

Written information about Robbie Robinson is in short supply.

In Jim Barclay's seminal book, *Golf in Canada—A History*, Robinson is mentioned only briefly in four sections, including a short description of his joining Thompson's firm in 1929 along with Howard Watson. Nearly

18 years after his passing on December 29, 1989, it can be a frustrating exercise to secure details or even generalizations about Robinson and his lengthy career. *Hamilton Spectator* golf writer Garry McKay can relate.

"I'm doing a story on Beverly Country Club and I asked if they had any notes, letters or quotes from Robinson about the golf course," says McKay. "They have nothing. Not even a drawing. Finding anything out about him is very difficult."

Perhaps it adds to his mystique.

"When I worked with him for a few years down at his office, he had very few files," says Carrick, who, along with McBroom, Dick Kirkpatrick, Geoff Cornish and nephew Robbie Robinson, comprise the few and best sources of information on the great architect. "His filing cabinet was one or two drawers where he kept some of his typical specifications for jobs. He did have some old greens drawings and a few articles that were written about him, but not much else. Even now I only have one very small file of his in my office."

Self-promotion was also not a Robinson strong suit. He did have an ego—something which came out on more than one occasion, but rarely was put on public display.

"He heard something about Howard Watson being up for a job he thought he had at Upper Canada Golf Club in Morrisburg," laughs his nephew. "Well, he drove there right away to protect his interests. Uncle Clinton never came across as being self-centred or egotistical in any way. He just never talked about himself that much."

*After a couple hours of inspecting Craigowan, Robinson motioned me back to the clubhouse. He seemed tired but content in what he saw in the holes he created back in 1958. I thanked him for allowing me the pleasure of escorting him around for what would turn out to be his final visit to the course.*

*As he got into a car waiting to drive him back to his home in Paris, Ontario, I asked Robinson if he would return.*

*"Don't worry," he said not really answering. "Craigowan will be a fine golf course long after I'm gone."*

To his credit, it is. ●