

IS GOLF'S HISTORY FULL OF HOLES?

A new book roils the tradition-bound sport with the claim that it was invented not in Scotland but in (gulp) France. *By David Rynecki*

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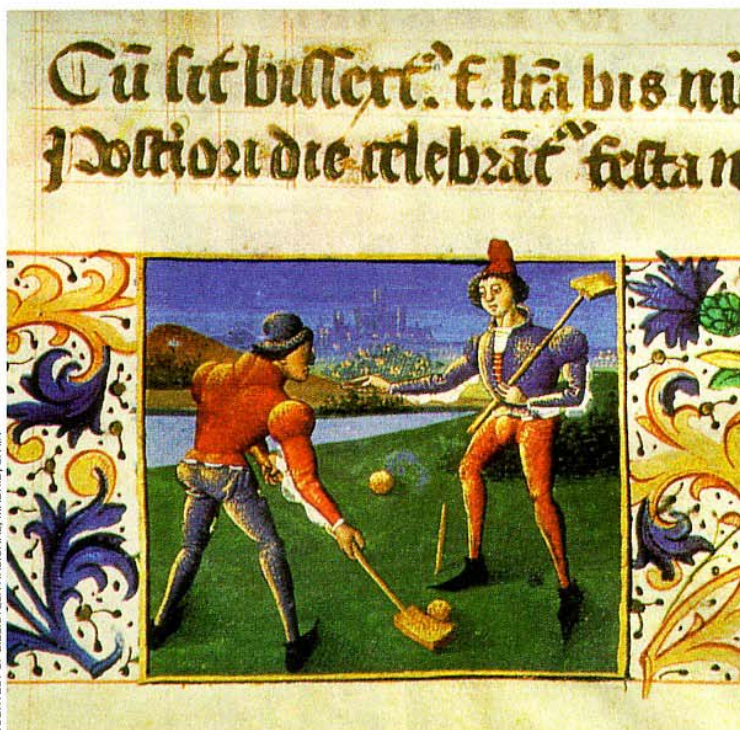
THE FRENCH ARE CRITICIZED for a lot of things—nasty museum clerks, the Maginot Line, Gérard Depardieu movies. Golf might not rank high on your list of reasons to dislike the French, unless you happen

to be Scottish. It seems that France—not Scotland—is the true “home of golf.”

This claim, made in the recently published book *Golf Through the Ages*, has rocked the golf world. The very notion that someplace other than Scotland should get credit for originating the sport has raised the hackles of columnists across the country. For most golfers, France's entire contribution to the sport can be summarized in a single name: Jean van de Velde. The suave, affable Frenchman was best known as the touring professional for EuroDisney. At the British Open in 1999, van de Velde held a three-stroke lead on the final hole. He proceeded to make a series of blunders that not only cost him the title but made him something of an international joke. At one point, after hitting a ball into a water hazard, van de Velde prepared to take off his shoes and socks to hit the ball, which prompted the sportscaster Curtis Strange to utter the now famous comment that the chance of his succeeding was slim to none, “and slim just left town.”

It is hard to imagine that golf could be the invention of van de Velde's country. Brie, yes. The guillotine, yes. But this is golf—a game so sacred that when filmmakers set out to cast the part of legendary amateur Bobby Jones, they chose the same actor who played Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. The connection might have been lost on general audiences, but not on faithful golfers, who see the amateur Jones as the sport's own Christ-like figure for the way he swept across America and Britain winning trophies in the 1920s, and was then stricken by a debilitating illness when still a relatively young man.

So while there are other golf wars underway in the world (see “One Town, Two Rivals”), none has the fervor of this one. Scottish editorialists and commentators have denounced the mere suggestion that the game originated elsewhere. Such a claim is more than academic volleying—golf is woven into Scotland's history and economy. Dozens of villages from the Leith to Dornoch have erected monuments commemorating the country's leadership in the formation of the game. Tourists spend tens of mil-



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lions of dollars a year in the country, largely for the chance to walk links such as St. Andrews and nearby Carnoustie, where golf has been played since the 16th century. Many books have been written in the past 50 years about Scotland's role in golf, including a fair number of melodramatic yarns such as James Dodson's *Final Rounds*, in which a son and his dying father travel to St. Andrews for a last match together. Unable to secure a tee time, they sneak out in the dark of night, without clubs or balls, and play an imaginary game across the hallowed fairways.

Though it has been years since a Scot dominated the game, Scotland's importance in the modern sport is unquestioned. Every decision involving sportsmanship, for example, still must pass muster with the governing body known as the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. This month, as the best professional golfers in the world once again play the British Open, TV viewers numbering more than one billion will be fed a continuing commentary about Scotland's golfing heritage. The tournament itself, held this year at Royal Troon, was first played in 1860 as a 12-hole match at nearby Prestwick, outside Ed-

An illustration from a mid-15th century French prayer book showing medieval golfers at play.

The early Scottish game, the authors argue, was really a violent form of hockey.