inburgh, and is thought to represent the culmination of an evolutionary process that began in the 1100s when the Scots first applied stick to ball.

Curators at the British Museum in St. Andrews proudly display evidence of Scotland's claim. Though other countries played varieties of stick and ball games (the Dutch, for example, played *kolf*), curator Sam Groves says the Scottish game was different and that there is ample written proof of that—starting with a resolution passed by Scotland's King James II on March 6, 1457, banning "ye golf." The king apparently worried that golf was distracting the population from practicing archery while war was imminent. The ban was finally lifted in 1502, when, it is written, James I of England became a convert to the game. He soon afterward lost 14 shillings in a match with the Earl of Bothwell. A half-century later, the first round was recorded at St. Andrews, and subsequent rulers were frequently spotted on those early links. Among them, Mary Queen of Scots learned the game and—according to Scottish lore—exported it to France. She, in turn, brought back the term "caddie" to Scotland, a reference to the French military cadets who carried her clubs. The game became so popular that in 1641, England's Charles I (who soon after was beheaded) was on the golf course when aides informed him of a major Irish rebellion.

Now comes *Golf Through the Ages* and its fantastic claim that the game was invented by the French. The book is a lavish limited edition aimed at collectors, with prices for different editions ranging from $750 to $5,500. Authors Michael Flannery and Richard Leech say they have unearthed illustrations showing French nobles playing golf as early as 1450—seven years before King James's ban—in a rarely seen book of prayers called *Les Heures de la Duchesse de Bourgogne*. In this book, written for a festival to celebrate the virgin birth (games were often played on religious holidays), men are depicted playing in foursomes using clubs to strike balls toward a stick on a smooth putting surface. Other illustrations clearly show a hole as the target. What's more, Flannery and Leech say they unearthed evidence in tax records from 1292 in which a toll was levied on clubmakers and ballmakers who sold equipment to nobles outside Paris.

Leech, who at 69 is a well-regarded publisher of collectible books, and Flannery, 68, an American antiques dealer who married a Frenchwoman and now lives in Germany, are not shy about their claim. The key is the pictures. While Scotland's written record of the game starts with the King James ban, illustrations of the game in Scotland date back only to 1740. What Scots were doing with stick and ball in preceding centuries is open to debate. Leech and Flannery argue that the game played in Scotland in the 15th century was a rudimentary form of hockey—"violent, marked by injury and death, and nothing like modern golf," as Flannery puts it.

For years Scots have argued that what distinguishes their game from other stick-and-ball games played elsewhere was that the object was to drop the ball into a hole. On this point, the authors argue that they have found the equivalent of a smoking gun: Another illustration, from 1480, shows that a hole was used in the French game. Other Europeans have jumped on the point to oppose Scotland's claim. "I do not think the Scots can argue any further that they invented the game," Heiner Gillmeister, a German sports historian, declared in a Scottish newspaper.

So how did golf get from France to Scotland? By the exact opposite route that tradition holds it went from Scotland to France: Mary Queen of Scots. Leech and Flannery suggest that Scottish royals, who kept their court for many years in France, learned the game there and took it home to places like St. Andrews. These nobles were spotted swatting wooden balls with clubs they often carried with them on their travels, much as a vacationer going to a resort might do today. Golf was a way for the nobility to fill up dull hours when there was no war to wage. The site of the Old Course—which might very well have been used for playing hockey—eventually became devoted to the new game imported from the Continent. At length, it became a sport for the middle and lower classes as well. "Way down the ladder, poor slobs like you and me saw the nobles playing golf," says Flannery. "They couldn't afford the special balls and clubs, so they made their own balls out of sheepskin and made clubs too. That is what has become golf as we know it today. I know what the Scottish say about this but the evidence we found is pretty clear." F

FEEDBACK *drynecki@fortunemail.com*