

# Royal Dornoch's Ten out of Ten

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Reprinted from  
***Through the Green,***  
the magazine of the British Golf Collectors' Society  
September 2025



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**I**n September 1899 Aberdeen Golf Club secretary, Macbeth Moir Duncan, sent a circular to all clubs in the north of Scotland proposing the establishment of a tournament among clubs from 'Aberdeenshire, Banffshire, Caithness, Elgin, Inverness, Kincardine, Nairn, Orkney, Ross and Cromarty' to be called The Northern Counties Cup.<sup>1</sup> The competition would consist of club-sponsored four-man teams playing double foursomes. The first competition was held at Aberdeen's Balgownie Links in August 1900 and is still played annually.

1. *Glasgow Herald* Monday July 9, 1900



*Macbeth Moir Duncan (1867 - 1942)<sup>4</sup>  
 Courtesy Royal Aberdeen Golf Club*

Strangely, Sutherland, the largest county in the north and home of its most prominent golf club in Dornoch, was not included in Duncan's circular.<sup>2</sup> However, by the time of the first competition, Dornoch's Secretary John Sutherland was included in the rules circular, and the Club had subscribed to the tournament. Despite Sutherland and Duncan being well acquainted, Dornoch would not field a team until the fourth competition in August 1903, largely due to scheduling conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Aberdeen's Duncan was an intimidating figure, having been a mathematics scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, where he also earned his rugby blue. After Cambridge, he secured a law degree at Aberdeen University and became an intensely competitive golfer, winning virtually every competition held on Aberdeen's links, and was appointed Secretary in 1893. Sutherland, three years Duncan's senior, had dominated competitions at virtually every club north of Inverness, and, despite profoundly different pedigrees, the secretaries managed their respective clubs with a similar authoritative style. Sutherland was appointed in 1883 and, after Old Tom Morris's visit in June 1886, Dornoch's links received universal praise from the British golfing press.

By 1903, the foundation had been laid for an epic rivalry between Duncan and Sutherland. Not only had Duncan left Dornoch off the original circular and not coordinated schedules with Sutherland for the first three competitions, but his frustration grew as his Club was unable to win the tournament he had founded. Starting in 1903, Dornoch would dominate the competition, winning it 10 consecutive times before the outbreak of World War I. During this run, Duncan and the other member clubs mentally struggled as Dornoch were repeatedly victorious in the most remarkable of circumstances.

2. *Banffshire Advertiser*, September 21, 1899

3. *Golf Illustrated*, Volume V, August 17, 1900

4. Portrait by John A Aitken commissioned in 1921 by the members of Royal Aberdeen Golf Club upon Duncan's retirement, after which he served as Captain until his death.

Sutherland had developed Dornoch's links steadily since his appointment as Secretary at age 18 in 1883. And, since Morris's visit to extend the course, he had devoted every ounce of his prodigious energies and the Club's capital to advance the design. Sutherland's passion was driven by a 'Vision of Prosperity' after concluding the golfing links were the only salvation for a town that was struggling economically. By 1900, every notable golfer of the era began the pilgrimage north to see the expanded course. So, too, Sutherland had become the region's most accomplished golfer, winning the Club's Silver Medal 10 consecutive times in addition to setting course records everywhere. He had also become a profound mentor of young players and his latest cadre of protégés were beginning to make headlines. Donald Ross and his brother Alec had departed for America with great expectations. And right behind them, Sutherland had four young men in which he had invested a great deal of effort: Walter Matheson, Alec Morrison, Donald Grant and Thomas Grant. Together they would dominate golf in the north of Scotland, particularly in the Northern Counties Cup competitions, until the outbreak of war. And remarkably, it was Matheson, not Sutherland, who would be primarily responsible for virtually all the victories.

#### *Victory 1: Tain, Ross-shire, August 19-20, 1903*

The 1903 Northern Counties Cup opened on August 19<sup>th</sup> at St Dulthus Links, Tain with 10 teams competing. St Dulthus was a course Sutherland knew intimately as he had assisted Old Tom Morris in designing it in 1890. After finally coordinating calendars with Duncan, Sutherland would field a team, pairing himself with Dornoch's second best player, Constable Malcolm *The Chief* MacDonald. His second pair was two young protégés he had mentored since childhood: 23-year-old Morrison and 17-year-old Matheson. Reigning champions Nairn were favourites while Aberdeen's Duncan came with more than his usual swagger. He had just won Aberdeen's Gold Medal (first scratch prize), and his club had recently received a Royal patronage from King Edward VII.

Dornoch secured a bye in the first round but in the second and third semi-final rounds, they prevented Moray's two teams from winning a single point, winning 15-0 and 14-0. Royal Aberdeen meanwhile defeated Nairn, Inverness 1, and Aberdeen Victoria 2 to set up a final against Dornoch. Having been stymied at Nairn in the 1902 final and his club yet to win his own tournament, Duncan was particularly hungry for victory. Furthermore, his confidence was high due to personally carrying his team to victories in the second and third rounds.

The final started with Sutherland and *The Chief* facing WL Davidson and P Smith with all four playing poorly and finishing all square. Thus, the outcome rested on the Matheson and Morrison, versus Duncan and TL Adam match. And, as if scripted, it ended in the strangest of fashions.

Dornoch were three-up after the eighth but lost the ninth when Matheson's ball 'struck a fence and rebounded back

upon him'. Dornoch maintained their lead until the 17<sup>th</sup> when another strange and this time fatal 'mishap took place, when Duncan's caddie lifted the ball by accident', causing him to lose the hole, the match and the competition. Duncan was furious and, as can be expected, the unfortunate circumstances added fuel to his emerging rivalry with Sutherland.

The *Northern Times* wrote of the Dornoch victory:

Messrs John Sutherland and Malcolm McDonald – is a combination of golfers which is well known throughout the country, and nothing requires to be said about them beyond that a good game is always looked for. However Mr Morrison and Matheson are two of the youngest and most brilliant players ever turned out by Dornoch, and they are both well known in the North. <sup>5</sup>

#### *Victory 2: Royal Aberdeen, August 24-25, 1904*

Although there were 16 teams registered for the fourth annual Northern Counties Cup competition, Duncan was so frustrated by having been defeated in the last two finals, Royal Aberdeen fielded five of them. Cleverly, perhaps to fuel further press coverage and pressure, Sutherland entered just one which included John Low, the highly respected amateur player and chair of the R&A's Rules Committee as his partner. Low had spent much of the summer in Dornoch refining his game and winning the club's Silver Medal. Again, Sutherland placed his young protégés Matheson and Morrison in the second pairing.

Surprises emerged early in the opening round as Royal Aberdeen 1 was humiliatingly knocked out by its fifth team and Low and Sutherland were well beaten by Royal Aberdeen 2. Thus, great interest followed Matheson and Morrison who won their match and, like the previous year, were responsible for Dornoch's advance.

#### *6. Golf Illustrated September 2, 1904*



*John Low had recently (1901) lost the final of the Amateur Championship at St Andrews, against Harold Hilton*



Thankfully, on the final day Dornoch's players 'were all in a winning vein' and, like their 1903 start, did not allow their opponents a single point.<sup>6</sup> In the semi-final against Bon Accord, Low and Sutherland struggled but won 2-0 while Matheson and Morrison won convincingly 9-0. Then in the final against Caledonian, both pairs won their matches solidly 9-0 to retain the trophy. Perhaps reflecting Royal Aberdeen's frustration, Club Captain WD Davidson, who had lost in the opening round with Duncan, refused to attend the prizegiving.<sup>7</sup>

### *Victory 3: Dornoch Golf Club, August 22-23, 1905*

As the summer of 1905 progressed, the golfing prowess of Sutherland and his protégés went from strength to strength. Sutherland had set a new Dornoch competition record of 76 and the Club was excited to host the Northern Counties Cup for the first time. Sutherland was also aware Royal Aberdeen and the other clubs' patience was running thin, yet his Club's reign would continue in the most exciting of circumstances.

This year, instead of Low, Sutherland had recruited 33-year-old Reymond de Montmorency to join his pairing alongside Matheson and Morrison. Montmorency, who was runner-up for Dornoch's Silver Medal just weeks before, was an extraordinary athlete and intellectual, who came under Sutherland's early tutelage while on summer breaks. Educated at St Paul's School and Keble College, Oxford, where he played both cricket and golf, Montmorency secured a golfing blue and was Captain in 1898. After Oxford, he served as master of modern languages at Eton College from 1900 to 1927, often returning to Dornoch in summer.

Given the home crowd and a large portfolio of strong players, Sutherland fielded three teams. Dornoch 2 was led by two more young protégés: 21-year-old Thomas Grant paired with 16-year-old Donald Grant with the second pair AS Weir with W Cameron; his third team comprised WW Thomson paired with EG Robson and D McQueen with Dr Burdon Cox. A total of 11 teams registered including Duncan fielding two from Royal Aberdeen.

Dornoch 1 benefitted from a bye in round one while its second and third teams defeated Brora 1 and Aberdeen 2 respectively. In round two, Dornoch 3 lost to Victoria and Dornoch 2 defeated Brora 2. And in the most anticipated match, Sutherland and Montmorency dominated Royal Aberdeen's Duncan and Mr Crombie, winning by seven, while Matheson and Morrison crushed P Smith and JH Irvin by 11.<sup>8</sup> With another loss, despite five years of effort, tournament founder Duncan still had not brought home the Northern Counties Cup and his rivalry with Sutherland took on even greater proportions.

The semi-finals were played in ideal weather. Playing first, Dornoch 2's Tommy and Donald Grant had a 'tough tussle'

against Victoria's A Cooper and T Prentice, prevailing two-up, while its second pairing of Weir and Cameron ensured qualification for the final thanks to finishing all-square against Victoria's Robb and Cruickshank. In the second semi-final, Dornoch 1 defeated Tain 1 by 17 to set up an all-Dornoch final that inevitably attracted an enormous crowd. The *Aberdeen Daily Journal* reported:

When the two local teams met to play off the final, popular feeling was undisguisedly favourable to the younger and less experienced players, constituting the second team.<sup>9</sup>

In the first pairing, Sutherland and Montmorency were up three-up at the 9<sup>th</sup> then faltered, allowing the Grants to claw their way back. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, T Grant 'by aid of a splendid recovery from the road' reduced the deficit to one. The 17<sup>th</sup> hole was halved and on the 18<sup>th</sup> T Grant holed a remarkable approach to tie the match. Returning to the first tee for a play-off, Sutherland and D Grant hit formidable drives to the green's edge. Montmorency hit his approach dead and assured a three. Then, T Grant holed his pitch for two to great applause to win the match for Dornoch 2.

Hence, for the third straight year Morrison and Matheson were called upon to secure victory and did so comfortably, winning five-up to ensure the Northern Counties Cup remained in Dornoch's hands. Undoubtedly this time victory was a little sweeter – on their home links, against their closest mates and in front of adoring crowds of family and friends.

### *Victory 4: Lossiemouth, September 7-8, 1906*

Fourteen teams entered the seventh Northern Counties Cup, including four from Moray, and two from the newly crowned Royal Dornoch, as King Edward VII had confirmed the title on June 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>10</sup> Sutherland's confidence was also strengthened by his protégés' play during his recent annual tournament. Although J Gordon Simpson had won the Silver Medal, Sutherland's men (Matheson, Morrison and the Grants) were next on the leaderboard.

Unfortunately, Morrison had moved to Aberdeen to attend university and was unavailable, yet Sutherland knew the Grants were ready for promotion. He paired himself with T Grant and Matheson with D Grant on his first team. The second team comprised WW Thomson and a trio from the prominent London-based Tindal Atkinson family who had become committed Royal Dornoch members.

In the opening rounds, Royal Dornoch 1 beat Moray 1 by five, and that afternoon Moray 4 by seven.<sup>11</sup> Royal Dornoch 2 escaped Nairn in the forenoon and that afternoon defeated Cullen by 18, winning every hole. Despite playing the best golf of his life winning his club's 1906 Leopold Cup, Silver Cross and Gold Medal, Duncan still sought his first Northern Counties

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7. *Ibid.*

8. *Aberdeen Press and Journal* August 23, 1905

9. *Aberdeen Daily Journal* August 24, 1905

10. *The Scotsman* January 19, 1907

11. *Aberdeen Daily Journal* September 8, 1906

victory. And to everyone's surprise, he lost humiliatingly by two to Moray 2 in the opening round. Hence, for the second year in a row, the two Royal Dornoch teams faced each other in the semi-final.

The lead off match was Sutherland and T Grant against brothers A and J Tindal Atkinson. Sutherland and Grant were three-up at the turn and won by five. The *Aberdeen Daily Journal* wrote: 'The spectators greatly admired T Grant's driving and his partner was at his best on the greens.'<sup>12</sup> In the second match, Matheson and D Grant overpowered Thomson and WP Tindal Atkinson going six-up at the turn before winning by three and advancing Royal Dornoch 1 to the final.

In the final round against Victoria, Sutherland and Grant were one-down at the turn, let down by a series of weak approach shots. However, their game improved on the home nine and they halved the match on the final hole. Hence, for the fourth consecutive year, Royal Dornoch's fate fell squarely on Matheson's shoulders. Teamed this time with D Grant, the pair were three-up at the turn and won by two, in delivering Royal Dornoch's fourth successive triumph.

Sutherland was presented with the trophy by Mrs HH Asquith, wife of Chancellor of the Exchequer and accepting it, he expressed his great interest in the success of golf in the Highlands and his modest disdain for the Moray links, saying: 'The greens were far better than expected, and hoped they could be improved further.'

#### *Victory 5: Nairn Golf Club, September 6-7, 1907*

Several clubs, deeply frustrated by Royal Dornoch's dominance and determined to topple their reign, fielded multiple teams in the seventh staging of the competition. Nairn entered four, Moray and Inverness three, and Royal Aberdeen and Nairn (Dunbar) two. Sutherland knew patience was growing thin and concluded it best to bring just one. Remarkably, Matheson with D Grant, would again play the critical role in what proved to be the most extraordinary series of matches in the tournament's history that would have long term implications for club relations.

Sutherland sensed a special magic to his team of T Grant, Matheson, and D Grant. In fact, two weeks earlier, Matheson had won Royal Dornoch's Silver Medal and T Grant its handicapped Gold Medal. And Sutherland would stay with this line-up for the next five consecutive Cups, winning all of them.

The opening rounds were played under 'the stormiest weather the players had ever engaged in the competition'.<sup>13</sup> Unsteady play delivered a surprising two-point victory for Deeside Golf Club over Sutherland and T Grant. However, Matheson and D Grant, 'despite being young players, have considerable experience in important matches' won by

two points, thus causing an unusual play-off in which both foursomes replayed the first hole.<sup>14</sup> Thankfully, Royal Dornoch won to join Nairn and Royal Aberdeen's teams in the next round.

Drawn against Inverness 3, Sutherland and T Grant struggled mightily in gale force winds and were three-down as they approached the 18<sup>th</sup>. From the tee, they were informed that behind them Matheson and D Grant were all square on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Hence 'it was absolutely necessary for Messrs. Sutherland and Grant to win the last hole to give a chance of getting a tie'. After a fine drive 'the feature of the round was Grant's second, a driver purposely sliced into the gailing wind that stopped 15 feet from the hole. Sutherland sunk the putt securing the essential result.

Meanwhile, Matheson and D Grant won the 17<sup>th</sup> to go one-up and had to win the 18<sup>th</sup> to force another play-off. Matheson drove well, and D Grant took inspiration from his friend Tommy and hit his driver which 'carried by the wind, dropped off the roof of the clubhouse and just got to the edge of the green'. Royal Dornoch won the hole and 'squeezed a tie which was immediately played off amidst great excitement'. In the play-off, T Grant and Sutherland secured a half and, in winning the hole, Matheson and D Grant were responsible for advancing Royal Dornoch to the semi-final.

In the semi-final, Sutherland and T Grant faced a formidable Nairn 1 team that had recruited two prominent university players, HJ Ross (Oxford) and AC Lawrence (Cambridge) in their bid to unseat Royal Dornoch. All square at the 14<sup>th</sup>, T Grant took control with exceptional driving. Hitting a 'very long ball' on the 15<sup>th</sup> and a 'screamer' on the 17<sup>th</sup>, Royal Dornoch approached the 18<sup>th</sup> tee one-up. Sutherland's excellent drive found the middle of the fairway; his partner again played his driver off the fairway, repeating his extraordinary shot of the previous day, and hit the ball within four feet of the pin. Sutherland sank the putt to 'great applause', to win two-up.<sup>15</sup> The second pairing of Matheson and D Grant 'gave evidence of their superiority, winning a very one-sided match, by eight'. Royal Aberdeen overcame Moray 3 easily to advance to the final against Royal Dornoch 1 and set up the rematch Duncan had been waiting for since losing the 1903 final. But his efforts would fall short, Sutherland and T Grant securing victory by two. Duncan was furious, still having never won the tournament he had founded. In fact, he had reached the final three times in seven years only to lose all of them, two to Sutherland. But he was not the only one somewhat frustrated.

In the second pairing, Matheson and D Grant also played well and made easy prey of their Aberdonian opponents, winning by six and to secure Royal Dornoch's fifth consecutive Northern Counties Cup. Not only was Royal Aberdeen's

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12. *Aberdeen Press and Journal* September 10, 1906

13. *Evening Telegraph and Post* September 8, 1907

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14. *Aberdeen Press and Journal* September 7, 1907

15. *Aberdeen Press and Journal* Sept 9, 1907

Duncan angry, likewise Nairn who had also had about enough of Royal Dornoch's dominance. As tempers flared, and the crowds disappeared quickly, Nairn's President simply could not bring himself to conduct the prizegiving and instead simply handed the trophy to Sutherland and departed.

The press covered Royal Dornoch's continued dominance thoroughly, but it was Sutherland himself who would brilliantly distil the situation in his *Golf Causerie* article without ever suggesting he had been present or, in fact, the victim of the slight, writing:

The disappointment amongst some of the local sportsmen at the holders of the Cup squeezing another win was painfully evident. The customary courtesy of a formal presentation of the trophy by the club on whose green and under whose auspices the competition took place, was even denied the visitors ...<sup>16</sup>

Many believe this unfortunate circumstance was the beginning of the rivalry between Nairn and Royal Dornoch that exists to this day.

#### *Victory 6: Tain, Ross-shire, September 11-12, 1907*

After the dominance of the Royal Dornoch team for the previous five years and the bruised egos at Aberdeen and Nairn, the word went out 'a desperate attempt was to be made to remove the Championship from Dornoch'.<sup>17</sup> Eleven clubs entered the tournament with Royal Dornoch, Inverness, Nairn, and Tain fielding two and Deeside, Royal Aberdeen, Victoria one.

Royal Dornoch's annual tournament three weeks prior had demonstrated the exceptional young golfers coming to the fore. Nineteen-year-old Donald Grant had fought off Tommy Grant to win the Carnegie Shield, while 18-year-old Ernest Holderness had won the Silver Medal. Holderness, on a summer break from Oxford, would become an accomplished player, winning the Amateur Championship in 1922 and 1924. Hence, Sutherland fielded two teams. Royal Dornoch 1 remained unchanged with him paired with T Grant and Matheson with D Grant. Royal Dornoch 2 comprised WW Thomson and EJ Robertson, and Holderness with EW Thomson.

Both teams negotiated the first round successfully, Royal Dornoch 1 defeated Victoria and Royal Dornoch 2 had a bye. By luck of the draw, the two Royal Dornoch teams faced each other in the second round. In the first pairing, Sutherland and T Grant defeated Robertson and Thomson by six, while Matheson and D Grant suffered their first Northern Counties defeat in six years, falling to Holderness and Thomson by two. Prevailing by four, Royal Dornoch 1 advanced to the semi-final where they defeated Tain 1 by 14 holes. Nairn 2 fell in the early rounds while Royal Aberdeen defeated both Inverness teams to set up another final against Royal Dornoch 1.

Remarkably, this was the fourth time the two teams had met in the final but, for reasons unknown, Duncan was unable to participate; perhaps his stress levels had become unbearable after having tried every conceivable method to unseat Royal Dornoch. Regardless, in the first pairing, Sutherland and T Grant brought their usual exceptional putting and driving skills, downing Aberdeen Captain WF Lumsden and his son HB Lumsden by four. Next Matheson and D Grant finished two-up, thus securing a sixth Northern Counties Cup for Royal Dornoch by six. In contrast to the Nairn experience the previous year, Tain Captain J MacDonald presented the Cup with grace to Royal Dornoch's Captain Arthur Ryle who had travelled over to watch his men.

#### *Victory 7: Royal Aberdeen, September 3-4, 1909*

This year proved to be the finest in Royal Dornoch's competition history. Sutherland and his protégés were dominating golf in the North and it was time to compete on the national stage. In May, he brought his cadre to Muirfield for the 25<sup>th</sup> Amateur Championship in which they delivered a performance for the record books. Tommy Grant's opening round defeat of John Ball and Sutherland's victory against Harold Hilton dominated the press. Later that summer, Grant finally won Royal Dornoch's Silver Medal, having been runner-up twice, in 1908 and 1902.

Despite the accolades in the press, they knew the golfing year was not complete until they secured another victory in the Northern Counties Cup. Given the focus, Sutherland made sure T Grant, Matheson, and D Grant were available. Thoroughly stymied by the Royal Dornoch run, 16 teams entered the tournament including two each from Inverness, Royal Aberdeen and Victoria.

In the opening rounds, Royal Dornoch won against Victoria by nine, while both Nairn and Royal Aberdeen teams also advanced. In the second round, Royal Aberdeen 1 led by Club Captain WF Lumsden and his son HB Lumsden sought revenge against Sutherland and T Grant for their defeat in the previous year's final. The local *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported: 'The game was stubbornly contested, the work of northern country men being especially admired.'<sup>18</sup> 'Captain Lumsden was playing a deadly game', but Sutherland and T Grant held their own. All square 'going to the 17<sup>th</sup>, both sides had capital drives. Royal Aberdeen's second strike rested short of the green, while Sutherland, who played flawlessly throughout, got perfectly on, and the hole fell to the North country men.' The match finished Royal Dornoch two-up. Matheson and D Grant also prevailed two-up.

In the semi-final Royal Dornoch again faced Duncan and Royal Aberdeen 2. Sutherland's putting was uncharacteristically

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16. 'Most Unpopular Victory'. 'Golf Causerie' in *London Daily News* January 11, 1908

17. *Northern Times*, Sept 10, 1908

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18. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 4, 1909

poor, and he and T Grant were two-down at the turn. However, they quickly recovered, winning the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, squaring the match largely because of Royal Aberdeen's poor play. Still level as they approached the 18<sup>th</sup> tee, both Grant and Lumsden drove inaccurately, yet finally playing to form, Sutherland played a beautiful chip, and Grant made no mistake with his putter to win the match one-up.

Royal Dornoch's fortunes again rested on Matheson and D Grant at least halving their match if not expanding the score. However, like Sutherland, Matheson putted terribly, losing three consecutive holes but remained two-up at the turn. 'On the return journey, Aberdeen played with greater accuracy and precision,'<sup>19</sup> and when Grant missed a two-foot putt on the 16<sup>th</sup> to lose the hole, Aberdeen led by one. Royal Dornoch squared the match on the 17<sup>th</sup> thus requiring Matheson and T Grant to at least halve the 18<sup>th</sup> hole to continue the winning streak for a seventh straight year. Both teams drove well. Duncan played first and sadly duffed his brassie while Matheson showed steely resolve, pitching to within a couple of yards of the hole. Grant closed out the affair with a sterling putt. Duncan was devastated, having been the closest he had ever come to victory.

In the final against Inverness, as usual 'Sutherland and Grant attracted much attention', standing four-up at the turn. Sutherland displayed exceptional chipping all day, securing a solid victory at six-up. Matheson and D Grant 'had an almost equally handsome victory at five-up', thus securing Royal Dornoch's seventh consecutive Northern Counties Cup.

Royal Aberdeen President WR Macdonell, taking a more cordial approach than the Nairn captain in 1907, presented the Cup saying: 'Dornoch's play combined extraordinary steadiness with extraordinary brilliance such as seldom seen among amateurs.' Further, he praised Sutherland and his young trio of players saying: 'Besides covering themselves with glory, the Dornoch Club has done an immense service to golf in the North by fostering and maintaining the game at these annual tournaments.'<sup>20</sup> Sutherland, clearly pleased, brought tremendous laughter and applause by replying:

It must be coming painfully monotonous, having to carry away year after year this somewhat heavy plate, but I will relieve the mind of the Dornoch team by stating that Royal Aberdeen will send a team next year to Dornoch more determined than ever to relieve us of the trouble and responsibility of the Cup's custody.

But Sutherland would also state with curious prescience, he was 'pleased to know golf was developing on the right lines in the North, but he was getting old and would likely have to give way to others by and by.' Strangely, almost as if he knew, Sutherland would fall ill the following year.

The next week Sutherland wrote in *Golf Causerie*:

For six consecutive years the team of the Royal Dornoch Golf Club claimed possession of the Cup, a rather remarkable record, and naturally in Aberdeen, whose club sent forward no fewer than 10 teams, expectation ran high that the northerners would be relieved of possession. It was not to be, however and after two days' play the trophy, for the seventh year, was carried back to Dornoch, whose team in the final comfortably beat that of Inverness. The best match was between Royal Aberdeen and Royal Dornoch in the semi-final. Both teams were equal with but a hole to play, and amid some excitement Dornoch won by two holes.<sup>21</sup>

On his triumphant return from Aberdeen's Balgownie Links, a confident Donald Grant stopped off at Moray Golf Club, Lossiemouth, for the annual Scottish Amateur Championship which consisted of a stroke play competition followed by a match play event. He won both and the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* followed his progress reporting:

The winner is an art student at Edinburgh University, and a well-known young player of the Royal Dornoch club. He won the Carnegie Shield at Royal Dornoch last year, and this year he secured the scratch medal of the Edinburgh University Club. He has played for several years in the Royal Dornoch foursome, entered for the Northern Counties Cup. And was one of the quartet who won that Cup for the seventh time last week.

### *Victory 8: Royal Dornoch, August 27-28, 1910*

By summer 1910, Sutherland and his cadre were energised by their 1909 successes and excited by the prospect of staging the Northern Counties Cup. Newspapers began to refer to 'The Dornoch School' of players, most often citing Tommy Grant's remarkable defeat of 'the champion of champions' John Ball as well as the seven consecutive Northern Counties victories.<sup>22</sup>

Royal Dornoch's 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Tournament directly preceded the Northern Counties Cup and Sutherland's protégés dominated. T Grant repeated his 1909 Silver Medal victory with a record competition score while Morrison defeated D Grant in a riveting play-off for the Carnegie Shield. The 1910 Northern Counties Cup opened with great local excitement given the intense rivalry between Royal Dornoch and the Nairn and Royal Aberdeen clubs. Royal Aberdeen's Duncan lowered expectations by stating:<sup>23</sup>

The venue is rather far away for the city clubs, and this year Aberdeen's team will be weakened by the absence of Messrs. JH Cochran and HB Lumsden who left some time ago for Sumatra.<sup>24</sup>

Despite publicly lowering expectations, Duncan came north early to stake out the links, playing well in the annual

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19. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 6, 1909

20. *Northern Times*, September 9, 1909

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21. 'Golf Causerie' in the *London Daily News*, September 11, 1909

22. *Dundee Courier*, May 2, 1910

23. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, August 29, 1910

24. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, August 11, 1910



tournament. Meanwhile Nairn, still smarting, chose to pass on the tournament altogether.<sup>25</sup>

Nine teams entered the competition which, beginning in horrendous weather, was notable for two unexpected events. First, Sutherland scratched due to illness, although he ensured Morrison was available and paired him with T Grant. He would not alter his second pair of Matheson and D Grant. And secondly, the draw surprisingly pitted Royal Dornoch 1 and 2 against each other in the opening round. Sutherland had selected EW Holderness, J Tindal Atkinson, DG McCullouch and Colin Grant for Royal Dornoch 2. Sutherland's men proved unstoppable, winning the match by nine.

In the semi-final rounds, Royal Dornoch 1 advanced comfortably over Tain and Royal Aberdeen was expected to have little trouble from a perceived weak Moray team. Royal Aberdeen's first foursome proved as much, winning by four but, in a 'striking result', Duncan and his partner stumbled badly losing 6-0 and were sent home.<sup>26</sup>

On Saturday, the final round proved extraordinary. In the first pairing, Morrison's and T Grant's play was 'sadly disappointing'. Moray was six-up at the 16<sup>th</sup> hole, and by a capital putt on the 16<sup>th</sup> and birdie on the 18<sup>th</sup>, their defeat was limited to four. Immediately the massive crowd rushed to

... the 16<sup>th</sup> green where the other foursome were holing out, and when it became known that the local players Matheson and D Grant led by four, excitement ran high.

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25. *The Scotsman*, August 27, 1910

26. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, August 29, 1910.



*Ninth consecutive win at Lossiemouth 1911:  
Donald Grant and Walter Matheson (back);  
John Sutherland and Tommy Grant.(front)  
Image courtesy of Historylinks archive*

The Royal Dornoch pair would have won with three on the 17<sup>th</sup> but for a stymie laid by Moray on the lip and an extraordinary bunker shot on the 18<sup>th</sup> kept Dornoch at four-up. Hence,

... a tie accordingly resulted, and a nineteenth hole, Royal Dornoch's first hole, was played in the presence of a large and excited gallery.

Morrison pulled his tee shot badly, while Moray hit a fine drive. Then, as if to make amends for his indifferent play during the previous round, T Grant

... played the shot of the day and greatly delighted the spectators. From behind a knoll at a distance of 120 yards he laid the ball dead from a lovely pitch.<sup>27</sup>

Moray's Christie replied with a similar shot but missing the putt, the first play-off match went to Royal Dornoch. Then came the second foursome and both balls lay 12 feet from the pin when the second strokes had been played. The balls being equidistant, the toss of a coin decided in favour of Moray who would play first. But sadly, the ball stopped just short of the lip. Again, the Northern Counties Cup trophy lay in the capable hands of Royal Dornoch's Matheson who 'ran down his 12-foot putt for a three amidst loud victorious applause.' Royal Dornoch had won again for the eighth consecutive year and perhaps more remarkably Matheson had been singularly responsible for virtually all of them.

### *Victory 9: Lossiemouth, September 8-9, 1911*

The 12<sup>th</sup> Northern Counties Cup was contested by sixteen teams, including two each from Nairn, Royal Aberdeen and Royal Dornoch. After his stunning defeat at Dornoch the previous year, Aberdeen's Duncan chose to take a year off. Seeking to maintain momentum, Sutherland again paired himself with T Grant and Matheson with D Grant. Royal Dornoch 2 comprised the Internationalist from Hoylake, CE Dick, paired with J Tindal-Atkinson and EW Holderness partnered with FMM Carlisle.

Royal Dornoch 1 destroyed Victoria 13-0 in the first round; in fact, both pairs walked in on account of heavy rain after winning 7&6 and 6&5, respectively. Royal Dornoch 2 defeated Royal Aberdeen 2, 10-0.<sup>28</sup> In the second round, Royal Dornoch 1 overcame Murcar 7-0 and Royal Dornoch 2 won solidly 12-0 over Deeside. Interestingly, the draw placed Royal Dornoch's 1 against its second team in the semi-final, the victor to face the winner of Moray 1 versus Nairn 1.<sup>29</sup>

Fortunately, the weather improved to bright windless sunshine for the semi-final and final rounds. The first match of the morning was Moray 1 versus Nairn 1. The first pair ended in a draw and Moray's second pair lost their match by a point. The second match, the all-Royal Dornoch affair, attracted a very large following. In the first pairing, Sutherland and T

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27. *The Scotsman*, August 29, 1910.

28. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 11, 1911

29. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, August 14, 1912



Grant faced Dick and Tindal Atkinson. Sadly, Dick duffed his opening drive and it proved prescient. Sutherland and Grant would yield little, winning three-up with 'the feature of the match being straight long driving by both players'.<sup>30</sup> The second pair Matheson and D Grant played truly extraordinary golf against Holderness and Carlisle standing five-up at the turn 'having played eight holes in 30' and won by six. Remarkably, they had played '17 holes in one over fours'.

The final round pitted Royal Dornoch 1 against Nairn 1 in a match with historic undertones on account of the poor sportsmanship exhibited at Nairn in 1907. Given the proximity of Lossiemouth to Nairn, the large crowd had a distinct bias against the invaders from the North. In the first pairing, Sutherland and T Grant started strongly but then found the whins three times, making the turn all square. Homeward, the teams were level as they came to the 17<sup>th</sup>. Nairn first buckled under pressure missing a three-foot putt, then Royal Dornoch found the bunker on the 18<sup>th</sup> and the match ended all square.

Yet again, Matheson and D Grant held the Club's fate in their hands. On the outward nine, both played solidly and when Matheson holed a pitch on the ninth, they turned three-up. Starting homeward, Grant replied with another holed pitch on the 10<sup>th</sup>, but Nairn rallied and by the 17<sup>th</sup>, Royal Dornoch's lead had been trimmed to one. On the final hole, Nairn hit two poor shots, followed by a wonderful approach to just over 10-feet. Struggling, Royal Dornoch took three shots then a poor putt and still had 10 feet to the hole. Nairn putted first and failed to get down, securing a disappointing five. And yet again, Matheson rose to the occasion and drained the 10-footer to halve the hole and secure the ninth consecutive Northern Counties Cup.

Club President JH Hair, in presenting the Cup to Sutherland complimented Royal Dornoch on their extraordinary string of victories. He highlighted the fact that Matheson, who had sunk the winning putt, had played in all nine for their victories. In being handed the Cup by Lady Helen Lennox-Gordon, Sutherland made brief remarks stating, some people had suggested it was not in the best interest of golf that they should win so often, but he doubted that, stating:

Every year the teams come forward as enthusiastically as the year before, and judging from the display of golf their opponents gave, I am sure they will make a good impression next year.

#### *Victory 10: Nairn Golf Club, August 16-17, 1912*

Moray, Nairn, Royal Aberdeen and Tain each entered two teams for the 13<sup>th</sup> Northern Counties Cup while Royal Dornoch fielded just one that had a new look. Sutherland and Matheson were unavailable while Tommy Grant had turned pro and moved to Tenby Golf Club in Wales. Donald Grant was a familiar figure, however, and he was partnered with Donald G McCulloch while Alec Morrison and Reverend J Mackay formed the other pair.

30. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 11, 1911

Tensions were high given the dramatic Royal Dornoch victory over Nairn the prior year as well as the memory of the cold reception received from that club's Captain in 1907. Moreover, Royal Aberdeen's Duncan remained frustrated given he had still not won the event. There was a glimmer of hope when the draw was reported as

rather favourable to Royal Aberdeen as both its teams are in the lower division, whilst Royal Dornoch, Nairn and Moray are in the upper division.

In the forenoon first round, Royal Dornoch defeated Tain 1 by seven. But in the afternoon, they barely escaped Deeside with Morrison and Mackay winning by six and then Grant and McCulloch losing by five. As expected, Nairn 1 and Royal Aberdeen advanced over weaker opponents.

The semi-final attracted large crowds as Royal Dornoch was pitted against the local favourite Nairn 1, still stinging from their 1907 defeat. In the first pairing, Morrison and Mackay failed to navigate a stymie on the ninth to go two-down and the best they could do homeward was claw back to square. Hence, their second pair, facing J Ross and Captain Green who, in a 'most excellent match put up a good fight but ultimately had to give way to their more formidable rivals'.<sup>31</sup> All square at the turn, Royal Dornoch secured victory by three, with only 35 shots on the home nine. In the other semi-final Duncan played brilliantly, inspiring Royal Aberdeen 1 to an eight point victory over Inverness.

The final round under fine weather pitted Royal Dornoch against Duncan's Royal Aberdeen 1, thirsting for victory. With alternating wins, the first pairing was all square after nine. Rev. Mackay hit a prodigious drive to the 10<sup>th</sup> green, and Morrison

31. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, August 19, 1912



1913 Northern Counties team:  
John Sutherland and Alec Morrison (back)  
Walter Matheson and Donald Grant. (front)  
Image courtesy Northern Counties Cup Archive

The second pairing brought a great pressure on Grant and McCulloch. Needing to win by three to defend Royal Dornoch's run, Sutherland's men also noted an overt crowd preference of Nairn and Aberdonian spectators. On the outward nine, Royal Dornoch played well and drove beautifully, McCulloch pitched in on the third and, with confident putting, were five-up at the turn. And as Royal Dornoch's performance continued, Duncan saw his chances fade away. Despite McCulloch being deemed to have inappropriately moved an obstacle on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the defending champions' pair won by seven, yet again dashing Duncan's hopes and securing a 10<sup>th</sup> consecutive Northern Counties Cup.

In January 1913, the seven founding Northern Counties Cup clubs announced they had commissioned a replica trophy 'Commemorating the winning of the cup for ten years in succession'.<sup>32</sup> There was a general belief 'the Cup has been in the Dornoch clubhouse for ten years, and the Club, if they got their own way, would retain it as a permanent memento'.<sup>33</sup> A ceremony was scheduled for May, but reflecting perhaps the frustrations, there is no record of it having been held. Regardless, the trophy rests proudly in the clubhouse to this day.

By early Spring, planning was underway for the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Northern Counties Cup to be held at Tain Golf Club in August. The week prior Royal Dornoch held its 37<sup>th</sup> Annual

A large silver trophy cup with two ornate handles. The cup is inscribed with "NORTHERN COUNTRY CUP" and lists the following: "INSTITUTED BY THE FOLLOWING CLUBS: DORNOCH INVERNESS, DUNDEE, GLASGOW, HULL, LONDON, LIVERPOOL, MANCHESTER, NEWCASTLE, SHEFFIELD, ST. PAUL, ST. PETERSBURG, TOTTENHAM, WALSLEY, WOLVERHAMPTON, YORK." The year "1900" is also visible on the cup.

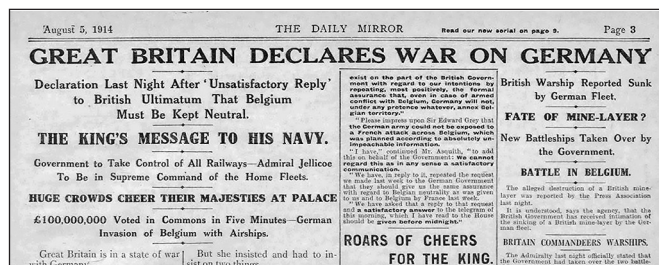
Tournament and in what would prove tragically prescient, WA Henderson won the Silver Medal and Matheson, his first Carnegie Shield. Henderson was a close friend of Sutherland and prominent R&A member who had defeated reigning US Open Champion Jerome Travers in the 1909 Muirfield Invasion alongside Sutherland's defeat of Harold Hilton. He had also won the 1912 Carnegie Shield.

Given the number of excellent golfers visiting Dornoch, Sutherland fielded two teams for the Cup in a total field of 15. For reasons unknown, he chose to alter his line-up slightly, pairing himself with D Grant, and Matheson with returning star Morrison. Royal Dornoch 2 team consisted of Internationalist Dick paired with Rev. Mackay, and McCulloch with Tommy's brother, George Grant.

Yet winds of change were in the air and were felt almost immediately. In the opening morning, to everyone's surprise, Duncan's Royal Aberdeen team scratched and against Deeside, Sutherland and D Grant faltered badly, losing by five. Matheson and Morrison fought valiantly, but winning by two was not enough. In the afternoon, Royal Dornoch 2 defeated Tain 1 by five, but surprisingly lost to Moray by three on the following morning. Royal Dornoch's extraordinary 10-year reign had come to an end. Nairn and Royal Aberdeen would also fall. In the final, Deeside defeated Moray.

As the 1914 golfing season opened, despite the loss, the town and links at Royal Dornoch had never been more prosperous. Sutherland had particular pride as his young protégés were showing excellent success in both Britain and the United States; the Ross brothers were gaining acclaim across the Atlantic, Holderness registered for the Amateur Championship, club professional TD Currie registered for the Open Championship, T Grant had prevailed in an exhibition match over James Braid at Tenby, Morrison and D Grant were captains of Aberdeen and Edinburgh Universities teams respectively and Matheson was reigning Carnegie Shield winner. The Ladies Golf Union had even voted to admit Royal Dornoch.

As Sutherland focused on Royal Dornoch's 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Tournament and a hopeful comeback in the Northern Counties Cup to be held at Aberdeen's Balgownie links, clouds gathered on the horizon. As if a harbinger of impending doom, on the last Saturday of July, Matheson appeared the victor in a bogey competition at Royal Dornoch when high handicapper George Manson finished late and stole victory. Although no



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one was aware of it, it would not only be Royal Dornoch's final competition of the pre-World War I era, but even more tragically Matheson's last match ever. Even more foreboding, one week later TD Currie's 15-year-old son George died unexpectedly after 'a fortnight of serious illness'. In retrospect, Royal Dornoch's 1913 defeat was stunning but, with war on the horizon, one notes certain serendipities and tragedies clearly marking the end of an era.

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister AA Asquith and Foreign Minister Edward Grey acquiesced to calls to enter the conflict and at 11pm London time, as their ultimatum to Germany lapsed, King George V declared war on Germany.

Despite Duncan calling for entries in late July, there would be no 1914 Northern Counties Cup, nor Royal Dornoch Annual Meeting. A mere week after the draw, the world had changed. Dornoch became the recruiting centre for the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders and two of the earliest men to enlist were 26-year-old Matheson and Sutherland's only son, 15-year-old Willie. He was deemed too young for service, but given his enthusiasm, was granted a drumming corps position having never played the instrument.

Dornoch felt the pain almost immediately. Just days after the outbreak of hostilities, word arrived that Royal Dornoch's caddie master Corporal Smith was terribly injured in the first major battle of the war. And one month later, Sutherland was deeply shaken by the loss of WA Henderson at the battle of Aisne, France, in which British forces suffered a staggering 13,541 dead or wounded.

As the war dragged on, things got worse. In August 1915, perhaps distracted by the total collapse of his life's work in Dornoch, Sutherland sustained terrible injuries in a motorcycle accident. He would never play competitive golf again. But no date brought greater sadness to Dornoch than November 16, 1916, when the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Seaforth Highlanders lost eight men, five from Dornoch including Private Matheson. Sutherland was overwhelmed with grief.

Matheson had been his prized protégé and other than him, the most accomplished golfer in Royal Dornoch history. He had won the Club's Silver Medal and Leslie Medal in 1907, and fittingly was the reigning Carnegie Shield champion when he died. Playing in nine of the 10 consecutive Royal Dornoch Northern Counties Cup victories, he was singularly responsible for seven. And of his 29 matches in the competition from 1903 to 1912, he lost only two.

Tentacles of death reached every home including Sutherland's. On Friday March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1918, officials brought the devastating news, his only son Willie had died of injuries at Amiens, France.

After the war, Duncan and Sutherland gathered themselves and resurrected the Northern Counties Cup competition in 1919. Given their age and Sutherland's accident, neither ever played in the tournament again. Duncan was particularly saddened; he had never won the tournament he worked so hard to found.

Tommy Grant served briefly in the war and returned to Tenby for the balance of his days. Donald Grant became a conscientious objector and spent time lecturing on world history, serving as a global ambassador for Royal Dornoch and writing two small books on the Club's history. In a twist of fate, Alec Morrison became an accomplished golfer at Royal Aberdeen yet returned often to compete on the Royal Dornoch links. In 1944, he earned an OBE for services as Chief Inspector for the Department of Health for Scotland.

Yet Royal Dornoch's early dominance of the Northern Counties Cup endured. Of the 108 competitions held through 2024, Royal Dornoch has won 20 times. The next closest winner is Nairn with 14.



*Corporal William Sutherland August 5, 1917, age 19*  
Image courtesy of Historylinks Dornoch Roll of Honour



