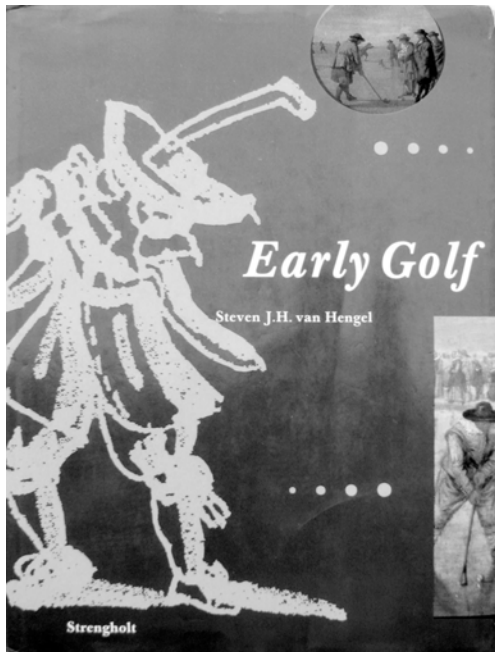

THE YEAR 1297: FACTS OR FAIRY TALES?

By Geert & Sara Nijs

THE YEAR 1297

No other book has had such an impact on the historiography of Scottish golf as 'Early Golf' from the Netherlandish golf historian Steven J.H. van Hengel. From its publication in 1982, this book, dealing with the history of Netherlandish colf and kolf, received much attention in books, articles and websites about the history of Scottish golf. It is surprising that before nor after the publication of this book, no additional research has been done about the game of colf that showed so much likeness to Scottish golf, a game that was more popular in the Low Countries in the Middle Ages than football is today.



The book 'Early Golf' from the Netherlandish amateur historian Steven van Hengel, published in 1982, in which he told the story about colf in Loenen aan de Vecht

One of the subjects discussed in 'Early Golf' received tremendous attention in the endless series of publications about Scottish golf. Most of the attention was focussed on the year 1297. In that year, on Boxing day, a colf match was played in the village of Loenen aan de Vecht in the Netherlands. This game was played in that village till 1830 to commemorate the murder on Floris V, count of Holland, and to celebrate the capture of his murderer Gerard van Velsen and his death in 1296. This all according to Steven van Hengel, the first Netherlandish golf historian.

Many (pseudo) historians concluded from this sporting event, that golf was played in the Netherlands already 200 years before the Scots made their first swing and so, that golf originates from the Netherlands and that it was exported from there to the links of Scotland. This to the displeasure and unbelief of many Scots.

In the last few years several authors, mainly from the continent, are questioning if this 'Loenen match' ever took place. Some of these sceptics have already made up their minds and call Steven van Hengel a fantast, an impostor and a disgrace to the historical golf society, a man who did not double check his sources, who invented the story himself and gulled so many naive readers.

What is the Loenen match story?

Floris V was the count of Holland, a small but rather important county in the Low Countries.



Floris V, the count of Holland, who changed partners from the King of England to the King of France. It meant his death.

It was this count who claimed the Scottish crown, on the flimsy grounds that his grand-grandmother was the sister of King William I, the grandfather of the deceased King Alexander III. Floris was one of thirteen claimants.

Although he did not get any support for his claim from the English King Edward I, he remained an ally to the English king.

When for political reasons King Edward moved the total wool trade from Holland to Flanders in order to gain support from the Flemish count against France, Floris, in his anger, switched sides to France. Because Edward did not want to have disloyal 'neighbours', he conspired to eliminate the count. A nobleman called Gerard van Velsen killed Floris in December 1296. He in turn was killed by an angry peasant mob when his castle in Loenen aan de Vecht to which he had fled, was captured. Legend has it that Gerard was put in a 'spiky' barrel and rolled through the streets of Loenen till death. It is said that the routing of the colf match followed the routing of the barrel.

To commemorate the death of Floris and to celebrate the capture and death of the murderer, people started to play a colf match the following year and continued to do so every year till 1830, when the castle was demolished.



Floris V was killed in December 1296 by Gerard van Velsen, probably at the instigation of King Edward I – Drawing by Johannes Jurres, 1911

Early Golf

Already in 1972, Steven van Hengel wrote about the 'Loenen match' in the Netherlandish magazine 'GOLF'. Because it was written in Netherlandish, it did not attract much attention in the Anglo-Saxon golf world.

In 1982, he told in his 'Early Golf', written in English, that in 1297 two teams of four players struck in turn a wooden ball with a wooden stick towards several consecutive targets.

The first 'hole' commenced at the Courthouse in Loenen and ran to the kitchen door of Kronenburg castle. The winners of this first hole (or better: door) received a barrel of beer, while the spectators were showered with apples. The second hole went to the door of a mill, followed by a hole to the front door of the castle 'Huis te Velde', where again the winners received a barrel of beer and the spectators could pick up some more

apples. The last hole went back to the Courthouse door and was followed by a big party in the tavern.

In 1997, when the 700th anniversary of the Loenen match was celebrated, nobody expressed in the open any doubts about the truthfulness of the story.

But in the 2002 December issue of the Netherlandish golf magazine 'GOLFjournaal', the first article appeared about the truthfulness of the Loenen story. This article was written by the golf historian Ayolt J. Brongers. He wrote: "Van Hengel was not a historian, he was a very enthusiastic man. Perhaps in his hyper enthusiasm he handled the Loenen story to unquestioning."

Michael Flannery, the co-author of 'Golf through the Ages', expressed his anger about the, in his opinion, inaccuracy of the Loenen story: "Van Hengel made up the whole story. The bibliographical support he offers in his book did not exist. Gullible readers around the world who never took the time to verify the sources, I too, swallowed his history of the origins of golf. I was shocked and furious when I discovered that it was fiction. Golfers, writers and historians were hoodwinked by Van Hengel."

Dr. Heiner Gillmeister, linguist and sports historian characterises the Loenen story as: "Absolute nonsense, there is not one written piece of evidence. It is an anecdote, an oral tradition."

Renée Vink, an historical oriented author of detectives, is of the opinion that the Loenen story "is fiction, a 19th century addition to history, but historical myths are often more beautiful than the truth."

The origin of the story

The Loenen golf match was certainly not invented by Steven van Hengel and he never used that story to claim that Scottish golf was of Netherlandish origin; the golfers did, the writers did, the historians did. He just told the story that colf (and not golf) was already played in 1297. Van Hengel found the story in a book called 'De Volksvermaken' (Public entertainment), written by Jan ter Gouw in 1870, long before Steven van Hengel was even born. Van Hengel mentioned his source openly in the bibliography of his book 'Early Golf'.

A reprint of the book of Ter Gouw can be found in every public library in the Netherlands. The

Loenen story does not need to be a secret for anybody who can read Netherlandish.

In 'De Volksvermaken', Jan ter Gouw stated clearly that he found this story in the magazine 'Nieuwe bijdragen ter bevordering van het Onderwijs en de Opvoeding' (New contributions for the promotion of education and upbringing) of March 1870, a much respected periodical from the Ministry of Education.

In this issue, a certain Hendrik Breuninghoff who was a headmaster at that time, mentioned that when he was an assistant teacher in 1836, he heard about the 'spiky barrel' which he judged as being unlikely, but he described the golf match on Boxing Day and mentioned that the match was played till 1830.



The book 'De Volksvermaken', written by Jan ter Gouw in 1870, in which Steven van Hengel found the story about colf in 1297

So, Jan ter Gouw was not the original source. So far it was Hendrik Breuninghoff. But where did he find the story? Or perhaps did he made up the story himself? No documents have been found or have been looked up to support the idea of the Loenen story. If Breuninghoff invented the story, one should wonder where he did find the information about how the game was played: with wooden balls and clubs, with targets, series of holes, etc. Colf was not played for more than 150 years. Over the centuries, historians have never shown any interest in the history of 'unprofitable' games, even when they were very popular at that time. The question remains: why did he invent

such a story or where did he find the original story?

Breuninghoff has a rival. There are unconfirmed stories, that the Loenen colf match was composed by Jacob van Lennep (1802-1868), a lawyer, politician and 'romantic' author. It is also said, that not Van Lennep, but a university friend, perhaps Dirk van Hogendorp, wrote the story. Here again you could wonder where they found the specific information or why they invented such a story. The original story from Jacob van Lennep or Dirk van Hogendorp has not been found or has never been looked up.



Jacop van Lennep was a 'romantic' author who wrote several novels with a historic background – Portrayed by A.J. Ehnlé/P. Blommers

Conclusion

Steven van Hengel was not an impostor, although he did not double check his information sources. In the world of (amateur) historians this it not uncommon. He who is without sin, throw the first stone.

Van Hengel did not invent the story. What he did, was dressing up a wonderful story he found.

The observation that the name Boxing Day or 2nd Christmas day came only in use in the 19th century, is not relevant. Christmas day was a day of festive prayer and entertainment could be held the day after.

Also the improper inclusion of the 'spiky barrel' is not relevant to the colf match. One should consider that as a poetic licence, dressing up the story.

As long as the original story has not been found or looked up, if it exists at all, we better include the Loenen colf match in the list of 'legend has it'

... that Mary Queen of Scots played golf and pall mall on the grounds of Seton Palace in 1567;

... that King James VII played with a cobbler, James Patterson, in 1680 (or 1682?);
... that a Scottish or German or Flemish or French shepherd invented the game of golf (or colf or choule or chicane) when he was hitting pebbles into a rabbit hole with his shepherd's crook.



Legend has it that golf was invented by shepherds who hit for one reason or the other pebbles into rabbit holes – Detail of a tapestry in Hôtel Dieu, Beaune, France

Sometimes, fiction is more beautiful than reality.

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