

Medals fit for an all-action hero

Amateur Open titles included in sale of FG Tait memorabilia



Alan Pattullo

HE IS credited with being the subject of the first golfing biography, but was as valiant on the battle field as fairways. The 19th century golf medals awarded to the Edinburgh-born golfer Freddie Guthrie Tait will go up for auction next month in his hometown, with the sale also including a collection of diaries and golf score books all hand-written by Tait.

Among these journals is the diary in which he wrote his final entry before being killed less than a month after his 30th birthday at an engagement at Koodoosberg during the Boer War, when many hundreds from the Highland regiments fell. Almost as poignant is Tait's chronicling of his last rounds of golf, played at Muirfield on 14 October, 1899. "It was a splendid day", noted Tait after winning the first round and halving the second in a foursomes match against AR Paterson and WG Blossom, captain at Luffness. These were the last balls hit by Tait before he travelled to the South African front with the Highland Brigade.

Four months later Tait, a contemporary of Old Tom Morris,

perished. His diary entry for 7 February, written on the day he was shot in the chest, simply states that the "Boers made another slight attack". The pages thereafter remain blank, except for some golf results scribbled down at the back of this last diary. One line records his efforts at the Tantallon medal earlier that year.

Tait is buried on the bank of River Riet, near Koodoosberg. The Freddie Tait golf week is held every year in Kimberley, South Africa, near to where he died. "A small cross marks the spot, the left-hand one of a group of three, and behind and around are trees, and greenness, and freshness, all rendered more pleasant by contrast with the sandy barrenness

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Auctioneer David Convery

of the surrounding county," writes John Low in F.G. Tait, A Record; Being his Life, Letters and Golfing Diary. This was published in 1900, the same year as Tait's death. It is regarded as the first golfing biography of its kind, although of course it was about much more than Tait's two Amateur Open championship victories in 1896 and 1898 and his

two third place finishes at the Open, in 1896 and 1897.

The medals from his Amateur Open wins are included among the 36 which have been given top billing in a sale of over 300 lots of sporting memorabilia at the Royal Highland centre at Ingliston next month. The medals are expected to fetch between £120,000 and 180,000, and the journals over £10,000.

"As a Scotsman and also as an auctioneer my wish is that the R & A might step in," said David Convery, who will host the sale on 20 May. "We have certainly sent the catalogue to them. Golf is a massive sport worldwide. It is something we have mentioned to the family, so they are aware it could end up overseas."

"The family contacted us to say they had the collection of medals won by Tait, which had been hanging at Luffness golf club, and could we do a valuation of them," continued Convery. "Freddie obviously died young and had no immediate heirs so although it is the Tait family that are selling, they are 'down the line', so to speak. Seven people have inheritance claims. They thought it would be much easier to put it onto the market and split the proceeds between them."

Many of Tait's descendants still live on the east coast of Scotland. Tait, educated at Edinburgh Academy and later at Sedburgh, was the third son of Professor Tait, a noted maths professor at the University of St Andrews and also a keen golfer. His son was always likely to develop an interest in the game. Tait was admired for the extraordinary length of his drives, famously hitting one of over 350 yards at St Andrews. He would lay down his briar-root pipe on the grass before letting loose.

But it is impossible to think of Tait simply as a golfer when reading his journals, many of which concern his life serving in the Black Watch. His neatly-written entries during his periods spent fighting in the Boer War hold a particular charge. He was injured in the Battle of Magersfontein in the last days of the 19th century, finally falling to a more accurate shot weeks later.

He notes the sustaining of this first wound in typically matter-of-fact style on 11 December,



Freddie Tait, pictured with the Amateur Championship trophy he won in 1898 Picture: Stan Warburton

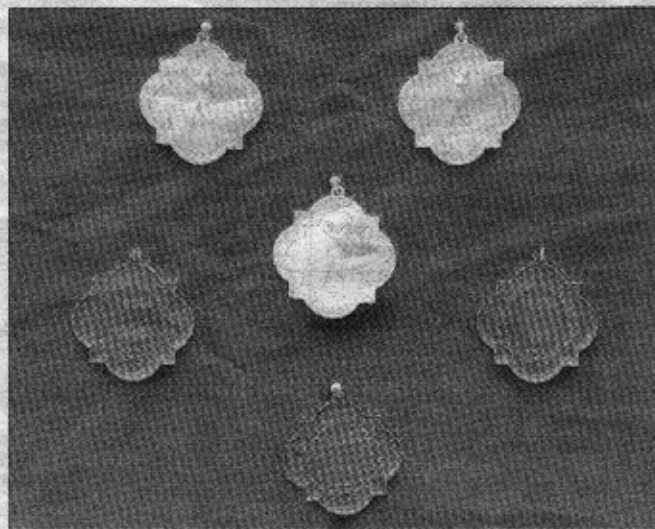
1899, referring to himself, as he always did, as 'FGT': "Parade at 12.30am for night attack. Received tremendous fire in mass of quarter column at 4am; suffered great loss. Charged to withdraw in 200 yards of Boer position. FGT hit in thigh, and remained, being shot at all day, until 7pm at night. Reached hospital at 10pm and got wounds dressed. 355 killed and wounded in the Black Watch; seven officers killed and eleven officers wounded."

Tait was soon added to this

ghastly toll. "Lieutenant Tait was thought an awful lot of by both officers and men; he treated men as men and not as dogs," wrote Private Hacker in a letter back to Tait's family. It was said that never throughout the course of the war had so many enquiries been made about an officer. As A Lang writes in an introduction to Low's biography: "His memory does not rest on his athletic prowess." He further notes that Tait "lightened the murky days" in "that wintry little town

of St Andrews". Lang's only complaint is that he played pibrochs [pipes] at the midnight hour. A last Scottish action hero indeed.

● Sporting Memorabilia Auction Wednesday 20 May at 11.30am, The Highland Suite, Royal Highland Centre, Ingliston, Edinburgh. David Convery, director of Convery Auctions, will conduct free valuations of sporting memorabilia on Monday 18 May at the same venue, from 10am to 5am.



The sale of Tait's Amateur Championship medals includes two winners', one runner-up, two third places and a fourth place