MAESTRO: THE LIFE OF HENRY COTTON
The members behind us never seemed to mind. They regarded Cotton as God. If we went out to a fashionable restaurant to dine in the evening, the people at the tables near by stood up as he entered. But mostly we dined at his home which Toots had furnished with exceptional taste and where she kept a table the like of which could not have been bettered in Brussels.

We played fourteen rounds at Waterloo, a course of some 6,700 yards, during our visit. We went off the furthest back tees and every putt was holed out. Henry never missed a fairway from the tee and he never took more than 67.

He had, by then, just made a huge change in his swing. It is worth describing it in detail for, as far as I know, he never wrote about it nor did he ever speak about it except to his few intimates who were also his disciples. He guarded it like the Ultra Secret. Most of the great players, past and present, have had to make big changes in their actions to get to the top and stay there. But, usually, they've been quite open about it. Not so Cotton.

When he won the championship at Sandwich in 1934 he was, he knew, vulnerable in a right-to-left wind. With his always weak left-hand grip, he had started his professional career as a fader of the ball. Then he went to the United States and, as his biographer makes clear, found that Tommy Armour and the rest of the leading tournament players there were drawing the ball from right to left and hitting it further.

He decided to do likewise, but soon after Sandwich — in 1935 and early 1936 — he concluded he would never achieve the absolute mastery he sought over the flight of a golf ball along that road. And the ability to flight the ball — to move it about at will — to suit all winds and conditions became, for him, the Eldorado for which he strove.

He had always taken the club back flat and well inside and his hands at the top of the backswing remained relatively flat, i.e. barely above the level of his shoulders with the club-face not as open as it subsequently became. Now he made, off his own bat and without any prompting from anyone, the massive change which took him to the summit.

He still took the club back well inside but as it moved up towards the top he began, he said, to get his hands deliberately up and into a more upright and open position with the left wrist more under the shaft and the club-face itself well open, i.e. with the toe pointing downwards. He confided that he had to be
conscious at the top that his hands were “up and forward” with the shaft of the club “not so much across the top of the back as forward almost above the neck”. That was, he said, the latent feeling he was always striving for – the feeling that was to lift his striking into the highest class.

From this upright and open position at the top, he contended he could hit the ball “as early as you like without any fear of hooking it”. Hitting the ball early from an open and relatively upright position at the top – releasing the club, as he put it, early from the top – now became the aim to end all aims in his swing. But he remained ever secretive about his discovery. With it he became confident that he could flight the ball and move it about any way he wanted. It was noticeable to his disciples that he began to judge his contemporaries by their ability to flight the ball – “to throw the ball up, boy, with a long iron or a wooden club: a lot of them drive the ball low and can’t do it”.

From all this flowed his doctrine that to play good, consistent golf in the highest class “you must, boy, know the angles and the extremes of your swing and what they give you. Only then can you find a balance.” Thereafter, he never deviated from these principles.

The only player Henry ever looked up to in the great days of the late 1930s was Harry Vardon, six times Open champion. “Old Harry,” he used to say, was the purest striker of the lot “because he hit it earlier than the rest – hit the ball early with the club-head”. That was also, he said, why Vardon took so little turf with his irons.

After this change, which took him (under Toots’ ever vigilant eye) some eighteen months to perfect, there wasn’t another contemporary striker, British or American, to touch him. He didn’t win the 1936 championship at Hoylake (he was equal third), but his hitting in that Open was, he said, consistently the best he had yet achieved. A friend of mine, one of the game’s best judges, saw much of it. “My dear,” he exclaimed afterwards, “Henry’s striking at Hoylake was so exquisite it was enough to induce a sexual orgasm!”

I doubt whether more than a handful will remember today just how good a golfer Cotton became in the last years of the 1930s as Europe slipped relentlessly into war. I saw every shot he hit in his last victorious round at Carnoustie in 1937 when, as Peter Dobereiner so well recalls, he beat off the weight of a very good
US Ryder Cup team with a brand of golf which set him apart. People wondered then why he didn’t go to the States to pit his skills against the Americans. Some even suggested he funked it to avoid the risk of damaging his reputation. The answer, in fact, was purely financial. Give or take a dime, there were, at the ruling exchange rate of the day, five dollars to every pound sterling. Much better, then, to be paid in pounds than in dollars. Toots saw to that. “Let them come here,” she cried, “if they want to take Henry.”

Paradoxically, I never thought Cotton was a good teacher of the game. He taught it as he himself had learnt it, and that wasn’t necessarily what others needed. But to play with, or up against him at his very best was an exhilarating experience. His rhythm was infectious, his extrovert enthusiasm for the game, and for perfection, contagious. I remember John Jacobs once telling me how, as a boy of thirteen, he had seen Henry play much of his fine two final rounds in the Open at St George’s in 1938, the year of the Great Gale.

“Henry didn’t win,” he said, “but for umpteen years after that every time I played golf I was Henry Cotton.” That was the captivating influence of the man. He was the paragon of his time.

Only a few months before he died in 1987, aged eighty, my wife and I dined with him and his stepdaughter, Chickie, at her Westminster home. It was a delicious evening, with only the four of us present, the last time I saw my old friend alive. After dinner, and fortified with a glass or two of Krug, Henry and I got down to it together. Suddenly (and it wasn’t the champagne), he seemed thirty years young again and we were back once more in the great days, the golden days of Waterloo and Ashridge pre-war. All his interest and natural enthusiasm for golf came pouring out in a torrent of thoughts and words. We went through it all and I remember thinking again what a marvellous talker he was about the game . . . There were the ‘rules’ he had imparted to his disciples, and the “hitting early from that lovely upright and open position at the top – my trade mark, boy, remember?” Then there were the controversies – “the size of the ball, boy: we were right, weren’t we, about that?” And then there was his weak left-hand grip which, pre-war, the Americans had mostly decried.

“Remember what they used to say? ‘He’ll never last with a weak left hand like that.’ Now nearly all of them play showing only two knuckles of the left, or less. Even Ben (Hogan) spent weeks in
Opposite At Foxgrove, aged twenty.

Right Leaving for the United States, 1928.

Below The revised swing in more upright plane.
The grip.

*Opposite* Off the first tee at the 1930 *News of the World* finals, with Charles Whitcombe.
Cotton's tall and slim physique was deceptive. He habitually wore long-sleeved shirts and tailored slacks for golf and his outfits were very carefully chosen, both for understated elegance and to disguise the disproportionate development of his golfing muscles. Reg Whitcombe described his forearms as resembling other men's calves and on the occasions when Cotton wore plus-fours it was plain to see that his calves were almost heifers. He had deliberately structured himself with selective body-building exercises into his ideal of a golfing machine, based on his highly personal and controversial concept of golf as a game to be played mainly with the hands.

To over-simplify a highly complex subject, the received wisdom of golf theory was, and largely remains, that the club-head is accelerated by a rotation of the body multiplied by a downward pull of the arms to a point where centrifugal force takes over and carries the club-head through the impact zone, with the wrists acting purely as free-swinging hinges. The ball is almost incidental; it simply happens to be located on the path of the swinging club-head at the point where the speed is at its maximum. In other words, the golf swing was a flail action in which the only function of the hands was to hold on to the grip.

From his earliest days as a teenager Cotton became convinced that the hands had a much more vital contribution to make. He became obsessive about building up the strength of his hands and spent hours scything thick rough with a club and squeezing squash balls. And, while he assiduously watched and questioned great players and experimented with their methods, he never
wavered in his belief that the hands held the key to golf.

His schoolboy swing produced a natural fade and on his first visit to the United States he was persuaded, by the counsel of Sam Snead and others, that he would have to master the technique of drawing the ball from right to left if he was ever to command enough length to compete at the highest level. In the classical, flail swing, the hands naturally roll anticlockwise through the impact zone. But this necessarily has to be a left-sided action, causing conflict within pupils who find it difficult to understand (and even more difficult to obey) exhortations not to let their right hands dominate the action. Why not? Their main strength lies in their right hand and yet they are not to use it.

For a while Cotton was attracted by the prevailing view that there must be a perfect golf swing, a method which optimised all the potential of the body’s major muscles to deliver the maximum power at impact. This would be the standard swing which everyone should employ. He studied the actions of all the great players, experimented with their styles and copied elements which he felt he should incorporate into his own game. This search for golf’s holy grail proved fruitless, as it has for many others, and he wrote that it was not until he decided that he could not play like the golfers he had tried to copy that he made much progress. He became persuaded by the evidence of watching the individual methods of the great masters of the game that a universal swing could not and should not be imposed on all golfers, regardless of their shape and size. The bespoke swing, incorporating certain fundamentals but tailored for each individual, must be the way.

Cotton set about cutting out the pattern for his own golf and the first requirement he demanded was that the right hand should not only make its due contribution but that it should be the very key to his golf. He liked to illustrate his point by recounting the story of a Frenchman who came to see him at Penina in a state of despair. This man had been receiving regular lessons from a French pro for six months and in all that time he had not been allowed to hit a ball. Monsieur le Prof had apparently selected this pupil as a guinea pig for an experiment in golf instruction, based on the theory that pupils became hypnotised by the sight of the ball and their attempts to hit it out of sight militated against the acquisition of a sound swing. The imagination falters at the thought of a man enduring six months of such self-denial but apparently this pupil did indeed devote six months to swinging a
club without a ball, under the guidance of the pro. He perfected the motion of the swing through long hours of practice in front of a mirror at his home in the evenings. When the great day arrived and the pro deemed him ready to hit a ball the man felt certain, as the pro had assured him, that his patience and self-discipline would be richly rewarded; he would play like Ben Hogan right from the start. In the event he popped the ball along the ground about fifty yards and fled in outrage from his treacherous mentor.

Cotton confirmed that this golfer did indeed have a beautifully grooved, classic swing. The problem was that he had not learnt how to give the ball a hit. His hands had not been schooled to absorb the shock of an eight-ounce club-head travelling at 100 miles an hour and generating an impact value of a ton and a quarter. Fortunately, a cure was at hand from an exercise of Cotton's devising. He took the man to the practice ground and led him to a worn car tyre lying on the ground. "Forget all about golf technique," he commanded, "just hit that tyre as hard as you can with your seven-iron." The pupil took a slightly apprehensive swipe at the tyre. "Harder!" said Cotton, "Sting it! Make it jump from the fury of your blow." Reassured that the club did not break under such rough treatment the man began to belabour the tyre with a will. "Put more venom into it!" said Cotton. Satisfied at last that his pupil was operating at full power, Cotton dropped a ball alongside the tyre and said: "Now I want you to give the tyre as hard a whack as you can summon and then step back and repeat the action on the ball." The Frenchman did as he was bid and gazed in amazement at the sight of the ball soaring high into the distance. It was a miracle. In five minutes Cotton had given him what his pro back home had failed to achieve in six months, not quite a Hogan swing, perhaps, but palpably an effective golf shot.

It was sometimes said of Cotton's miracle cures that they did not last. Pupils would return home and find that the magic had worn off. Some telephoned him to complain about their relapses. Cotton's bantering response was invariably a counter-attack: "You have neglected the most important thing I told you – ten minutes of tyre drill every day. You can't play golf without strong, educated hands." So what was this vital tyre drill?

The equipment is cheap and simple: a cane, an old club and an even older tyre, preferably bald. The first point to bear in mind is
To a golfer's eye, Cotton's style was both beautiful and slightly mysterious. He would take the club in what can only be called a caress, holding it so lightly that you wondered whether it might slip from his fingers at any moment. The act of grounding the club-head behind the ball was ritualistic, almost reverential in the care and precision of the operation. The gigantic feet were plonked solidly into position, with the toes pointing straight ahead. Then one stare of his aquiline eyes at the target would complete the preliminaries.

The delicacy of touch on the club was emphasised as he turned away because as his hands moved back the club-head remained at rest momentarily. He made a full shoulder turn, with the hips opening about 45 degrees and, like all good players, by the time the club reached its position at the top, a markedly short back-swing with the club-face in an open position, the lower body had already started to recoil. The downswing was so leisured that the onlooker wondered how on earth he could generate enough club-head speed to hit the ball any distance at all. The human eye could not follow the speed of the action as those mighty forearms whipped the club through the impact zone and so it seemed that it had not happened. The only image on the retina was of Cotton standing perfectly still, both feet solidly flat on the ground, his head immovable, looking at the spot from which his divot had been displaced. His extended right arm, with the back of the hand pointing at the sky, having rolled over the left, was waist high on the follow through before there was the slightest movement of the head to follow the progress of the ball.

The other characteristic Cotton action which was clearly discernible was the snapping straight of the left leg to brace his body against the shock of impact. But here was the mystery. How could such a languid movement generate the sound of a whip-crack as the club met the ball? And what strange force was propelling the ball such an inordinate distance on a bee-line towards the target? The answer, of course, was that the whip-crack was produced by the unseen whip-lash of those forearms. The quickness of the hands did indeed deceive the eye. Only a player of prodigious strength and immaculate timing could play golf like Henry Cotton.

He did try to get his pupils to employ the same technique, however, despite the inadequacy of their physical capacity. One of his drills was to get a pupil to set up aiming right of the practice
to demonstrate his skill with different clubs. When he judged that the pupil was becoming arm weary, as any golfer must after hitting twenty or so shots without a break, Cotton would remark innocently: "You could hit the ball twenty yards farther if you used your hands better." Then he would put the pupil through the one-handed and hitting-without-regripping routine and quietly savour the onset of embarrassment and humility.

Cotton well understood the attitude which many pupils have towards teachers. "It is all very well for him; he's been at it full time all his life and it's second nature to him now. He doesn't know how I feel, or understand about my bad back, or realise how difficult this damn game is for somebody who has to sit in an office five days a week. I hope he doesn't try to make me use that stupid Vardon grip because unless I hold the damn club like a baseball bat I can't hit the ball out of my own shadow." Cotton understood all too well. He had a remarkable facility for picking out a golfer's main fault and correcting it with a simple exercise or instruction. The result was an instant and dramatic improvement in the pupil's striking and the conversion of a sceptic into an adoring disciple.

Naturally, the technique varied with each pupil and, apart from his emphasis on the hands, he made no attempt to impose a preconceived Cotton style. Each pupil was given a bespoke golf swing according to his or her size, shape and strength, a method which would enable him to get the most from his potential.

As he taught he expounded his philosophy of golf. He himself wrote several books on golf technique, and innumerable newspaper articles, so it is impossible to do full justice to the range of his ideas in a compressed version. But there is a common thread running through all his instructional writing and an attempt may perhaps be made to distil the essence of it.

The golfer who attempts to play by positional changes of the body, with passive hands, condemns himself to loss of control and almost certain back trouble in the long run. The hands hold the club and they must take priority in the swing, both to control the club-head and to supply its energy. The rest of the body moves to accommodate the paramount action of the arms, wrists and hands. Your swing can only be as effective as your ability to hang on to the club at impact and your hands can never be too strong. Exercise them as much and as often as you can.

The correct tension of the fingers throughout the swing is loose at first, tightening at impact and then relaxing again. This sequence will occur
without conscious thought on your part provided you start the action with a light grip on the club. How light is light? Exert just enough pressure with the fingers to prevent the club from turning during the stroke.

The hands must move faster than the rotation of the body through the impact zone, hitting past the body rather than with it. To achieve this acceleration the right hand rolls over at impact and hits past the left hand. Remember, this is a rolling action, not a cupping of the left wrist combined with a forward bend of the right wrist, not a hinging action but a natural twisting movement.

The right hand guides the shot and finds the ball. If you grip the club with the palms in the same plane as the club-face you will automatically square the club-face at impact, as instinctively as you would deliver a blow absolutely flush when slapping someone’s face. Feel that you are making a definite ‘hit’ with the hands. Slicing is mostly caused by failing to sling the club-head through the ball with the right hand. If you have the club-face closed at the address position it is impossible to apply proper hand action.

Hands, always the hands. The stronger they are the better you can play. Most social golfers will despair at the message because they simply do not have the time or opportunity to train their hands to the degree necessary for playing the Cotton way. The tyre drill may not take all that much time but even that is an inconvenience and a chore which only the most enthusiastic golfers will willingly undergo every day. Well, there is a simpler method of strengthening the hands which can be done more or less anywhere and at any time. Raise the arms in the surrender position and then clench and unclench the hands as hard and as fast as you can until you feel that your forearms are about to explode. Anyone can do that while putting on a shirt and this daily exercise will quickly condition the hands and forearms for better golf the Henry Cotton way.

For the last twenty years of his life Cotton’s main interest was helping young professionals. By his own efforts he had turned professional golf into a respected and lucrative career and revitalised the standing of British pro golf. He wanted the standards he had set to be maintained and he enjoyed passing on the lessons he had learnt by painful trial and error. For the groups of young professionals who visited him at Penina, a week in Cotton’s company was a crash course in how to become a champion, a combination of finishing school with heavy emphasis on personal appearance, deportment and making a point of sending ‘thank
The Austin Sheerline, 1949.
The first tee at Langley Park.
Career Victories

1925 Kent Professional championship
1927 Kent Professional championship
1928 Kent Professional championship, Croydon and District Professional championship
1930 Kent Professional championship, Mar del Plata Open (Argentina), Belgian Open
1931 Dunlop Southport tournament
1932 Dunlop Southport tournament, PGA championship
1934 Belgian Open, OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP
1935 Leeds tournament, Yorkshire Evening News tournament
1936 Italian Open, Dunlop Metropolitan tournament
1937 German Open, Silver King tournament, Czechoslovakian Open, OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP
1938 Belgian Open, German Open, Czechoslovakian Open
1939 German Open, Daily Mail tournament, Penfold League tournament
1940 PGA championship
1945 News Chronicle tournament
1946 PGA championship, French Open, Star tournament, Vichy Open
1947 French Open, Spalding tournament, Yorkshire Evening News tournament
1948 OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP, White Sulphur Springs Invitational (USA)
1953 Dunlop 2,000 Guineas tournament
1954 Penfold 1,000 Guineas tournament
1956 Metropolitan Qualifying tournament, US Open
Books by Henry Cotton

*Golf*, Eyre and Spottiswoode 1931.
*This Game of Golf*, Country Life 1948.
*Thanks for the Game*, Sidgwick and Jackson 1980.
The Golf Course Architect

Courses designed by Henry Cotton

**Great Britain**: Abridge, Ampfield, Beamish Park, Canons Brook, Ely City, Farnham Park, Folly Hill, Sene Valley, Windmill Hill, Gourock, Moray, Windyhill, St Mellons.

**France**: Mont d'Arbois.

**Italy**: Bergamo L’Albenza, Bologna, Tirrenia, Torino.

**Madeira Islands**: Santo da Serra.

**Portugal**: Monte Gordo, Penina, Vale do Lobo, Alto Club.

Courses revised by Henry Cotton

La Moye, Castle Eden, Eaglescliffe, Felixstowe Ferry, Royal Cinque Ports, Temple, Langley Park, Deauville, Campo Carlo Magno, Lido de Venezia, Stirling, Puerto de Hierro.
MAESTRO is the extraordinary biography of one of the great sporting individuals of the twentieth century. Peter Dobereiner, with full access to Henry Cotton’s family papers, captures the spirit of the three-times Open Champion who dominated British golf for fifty years.

In the 1920s, when Cotton turned professional aged only sixteen, golf was not accepted by the establishment as a respectable career, but Cotton’s forceful campaigning led the way for post-war professionals. His single-minded application and desire for success led him to dominate Europe’s tournaments from the 1930s to the 1950s, winning eleven continental Opens in all and two important matchplay titles.

Peter Dobereiner writes about Cotton’s life – his beliefs, his passions, his relationship with his wife Toots (his greatest supporter, mentor and critic), his ambitions – as well as about his golf. He has written the book which explains how and why Cotton became known as the Maestro.

Peter Dobereiner was Golf Correspondent for both the Observer and the Guardian for many years. He is also feature writer for the top golf magazines in Britain and America and the author of numerous books on golf. He is without doubt the most widely read golf writer in the world.