

FAREWELL TO AN GOLFING LEGEND

PETER THOMSON, 1929-2018

THE LIFE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOLFING GREAT AND FIVE-TIME OPEN CHAMPION WAS CELEBRATED AT A MOVING CEREMONY IN MELBOURNE. PAUL PRENDERGAST WAS THERE.

A great family man and leader was farewelled in late June in the presence of around 1,000 well-wishers from all walks of life and from many points on the globe, at a 'Celebration of Life' held in his honour in the dining room of the Melbourne Cricket Club.

This was a man known to his grandchildren simply as 'Tui', a term denoting a Fijian chief; a man who from a young age lent an appreciative ear to Beethoven and Mozart and was a voracious reader with a keen interest in most topics in life; a passionate supporter of the Carlton Football Club (for better or worse, as one of his grandsons opined during the eulogy); and, most importantly, a lover of his family and devoted wife Mary, who cared for him during his battle with Parkinson's disease until it finally claimed his life at 88 years old.

Did I mention that Tui, from suburban Brunswick, Victoria, also won five British Open titles during a career spent whacking a white ball around a field? It might have come up on a few occasions in the ceremony, and the presence of the Claret Jug in Melbourne, accompanied by Martin Slumbers from the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, Scotland, might also have given it away.

The celebration of Peter Thomson's life was just that. And the great man would have been looking down with pride and no doubt with the corners of his mouth turned upwards in a sly grin, as he was known to do. At the behest of his family, the occasion was marked with more laughter and mirth than sadness and grief, which is just as he would have wanted it.

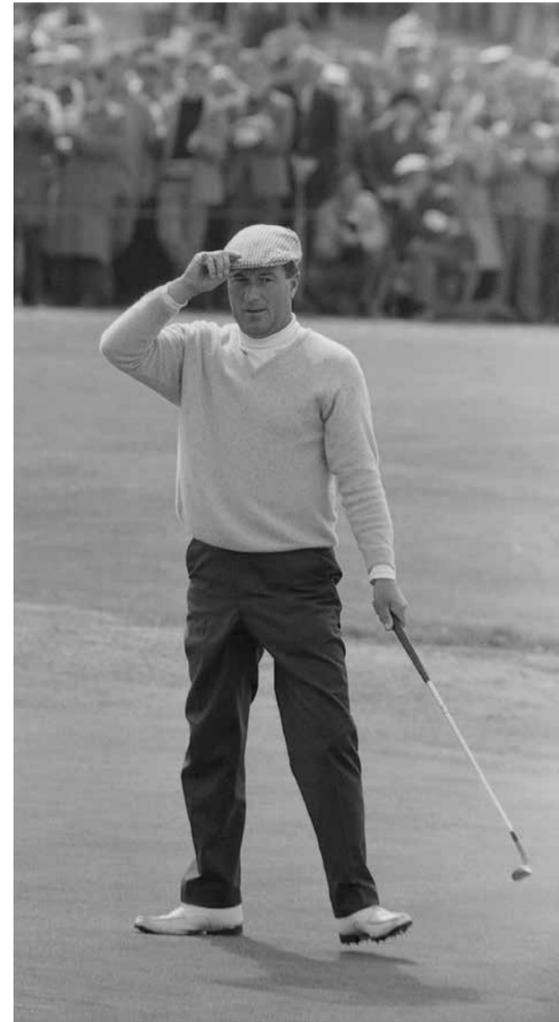
Many who have known Peter Thomson, AO, CBE, much longer than I were treated to tales of private moments far removed from golf. His long-time partner in golf course design, Michael Wolveridge – who met Thomson in 1962 while playing in the Australian Open at Royal Adelaide – was floored on hearing the 'Tui' reference for the first time when Thomson's grandchildren took the stage to speak with fondness and love.



Peter Thomson holds the Claret Jug following his victory at the 84th Open Championship at St Andrews in 1955.



Peter Thomson and six-year-old Andrew holding the Australian Open trophy, which his father had just won.



Peter Thomson during the 1965 Open at Royal Birkdale, where he claimed his fifth Claret Jug.



Kel Nagle (left) and Peter Thomson at the 1961 Open at Royal Birkdale Golf Club.

In a rollicking eulogy that had the gathering in hysterics, the Englishman recalled his nervous first encounter with the great man while trying to two-putt the final green at Royal Adelaide and glancing up to notice Thomson watching him from beyond the green. The two met properly that night at a post-round function, which led to Thomson offering Wolveridge a lift back to Melbourne before the next event.

Wolveridge accepted and nervously piled his ragamuffin assortment of worldly possessions into the then four-time Open champion's scarlet Aston Martin for the trip back to Thomson's Toorak home. Wolveridge noted that for many hours they found themselves talking about anything but golf. In fact, Wolveridge said, if you wanted to talk golf for hours, "Peter Thomson would be the last person you'd want to be sitting next to".

Thomson's 1965 and last Open Championship win was

often regarded as his finest, given the notables (Nicklaus, Palmer, Player) he eclipsed in the process. But the return of the Claret Jug to Melbourne for the fifth time 53 years ago was a source of great pain and suffering for a young Andrew Thomson, who served as MC at his father's tribute. Andrew recalled how, as a four-year-old, he proudly took the trophy to school for a 'show and tell', returning home in tears after being told by another child that "my father's got a dozen of those" – a story Thomson found vastly amusing and recounted for many a year.

Incidentally, it says much about the man that, when quizzed on which was his most satisfying Open Championship victory, Thomson's reply was always the 1960 Open at St Andrews – the title won by his greatest friend among golfers, Kel Nagle.

Former chair of the PGA of Australia Mark Gibson

recalled that, at Nagle's 90th birthday, Kel admitted Thomson was the best competitor he ever saw. Sitting in his wheelchair, Nagle leaned forward and quietly told Gibson he wasn't to let Thomson know, because, "If we ever have another match, I don't want him to have the edge."

"When I told this story at Nagle's funeral four years later, Peter had tears streaming down his face," Gibson said. "Nagle and he were very close."

Then there was the Thomson story Peter Alliss told Gibson at a teaching conference in Germany in 2003.

"Fifteenth of June 1976, Thomson and I were commentating on the US Tour," Alliss had said. "A young Andy North came over to us during a break and said, 'Peter, you've had a pretty good run at the British Open and I'm playing over there for the first time this year. I wondered if you could give me a tip.'"

"Thomson replied, 'Andy, the wind plays havoc with putting over there, but when it's blowing a gale and the crowd are nine deep, the wind doesn't get through to affect your putts.'

"North then asked, 'What happens if the crowd isn't nine deep around the greens?'"

"I don't know," Thomson answered, as he spun on his heels and left."

The Asian Tour as we know it owes Australia an eternal debt of gratitude, as it well might not exist but for a world star like Thomson making it part of his early-season schedule for years, invariably alongside Nagle and the man who was influential in convincing Thomson to turn pro, Norman Von Nida (who died in 2007).

Thomson's extensive travels allowed him to accumulate a vast collection of titles – 28 on the European Tour, six

in Japan, the national titles of Hong Kong, India, the Philippines, Spain, Germany, Italy and, of course, Australia and New Zealand. Often on multiple occasions. It was mentioned at the ceremony that the late New Zealand-born satirist John Clarke wrote that when he was growing up, "I knew it was summer when there were nectarines on the ground and pictures of Peter Thomson in the paper."

In a 21-year period, Thomson won the New Zealand Open nine times and was runner-up in another three. Most of the other titles (seven) contested in that span of time were won by Nagle.

In his prime, Thomson and the US Tour were strange bedfellows. During his infrequent appearances on the PGA Tour he won just the one title, the Texas International Open, in 1956. He contested the Masters and US Open a total of 13 times, his best finish a T4 at the '56 US Open. He never played in a PGA Championship.

He made amends for a lack of time and success on American soil, however, during a short but tremendously prolific sojourn on the Senior PGA Tour (now Champions Tour), where, during the 1985 season at age 55, he won nine times, setting a single-season record that has been matched only by Hale Irwin. Actually, in a 13-month stretch from late 1984, Thomson won 11 times on the Senior Tour.

Over the past fifty years, commentary and, of course, golf course design, have occupied much of Thomson's energies and there are few corners of the earth that do not feature a Thomson layout in association with various partners, including Wolveridge and Ross Perrett.

Only declining health in recent years curtailed his hands-on participation in the business and I can recall first-hand when, in 2012, he called me from a site in China after hearing that the governing bodies were making 'subtle' alterations to the revered Old Course at St Andrews.

"Preposterous!" was the typically forthright reaction that came bellowing down the line when I asked his opinion on the news that the ancient blueprint for modern golf was getting a tweak.

I finished the conversation fully expecting Thomson's next call would be to the R&A or St Andrews Links Trust, demanding that they explain themselves. Speaking and writing over decades with the courage of his convictions – as he did for the *Melbourne Age* newspaper and many other publications – was a trait he exhibited from a very early age.

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— NEW ZEALAND-BORN
SATIRIST JOHN CLARKE

Equally noteworthy has been Thomson's role as a mentor to colleagues and the generations of players who came after him. The 1991 Open champion, Ian Baker-Finch, referred to Thomson after his passing as his "idol" and credits the man for helping him to become a Major champion in his own right.

David Graham, like Thomson a multiple Major winner, Hall of Famer, Presidents Cup captain and a sometime assistant to legendary club professional George Naismith at Riversdale Golf Club in suburban Melbourne, said he was inspired to become a better golfer by watching – and later competing against – Thomson.

"Words cannot express my feelings for this great player and great Australian," Graham said.

"I first met Peter when I was 18, when the wonderful George Naismith arranged for me to go to Victoria Golf Club to play nine holes with him. Looking back, I can't help but think what a wonderful thing for an Open champion to do for a young, unknown assistant pro.

"Peter actually pioneered the Asian Tour and also the Japanese Tour. In those days, most of the tournaments in Japan were by invitation only, but Peter made a point of getting as many Australian professionals as possible in nearly all those events.

"I was so blessed that he and Mary were at my induction to the Hall of Fame in 2015. At the dinner following the ceremony, he presented me with my life membership

into the Australian PGA. May he rest in peace."

Stories like these abound from those in and around golf, from those who, in some way, shape or form, have had their lives enhanced by the influence of Peter Thomson. The list of those with a tale to tell gets longer when you add the colleagues, friends and acquaintances forged through mutual interests in politics, the arts and sciences and charitable causes at home and abroad – not to mention the many 'ordinary' folk Thomson embraced and who knew him as someone other than a Hall of Famer, Open champion, pioneer, advocate, architect, mentor or leader.

There are many thousands from all walks of life who mourn his passing and pay homage to his enormous legacy, none more so, of course, than his wife Mary, their four children and extended family in Australia and those pursuing their lives across the globe – much like their beloved Tui had done before them.

An extraordinary life, sir. Well played. □



Peter Thomson will be remembered as a great Australian and a mentor to colleagues and the generations of players who came after him.