

Death of the Rev. G. A. McDonnell

The genial and jovial, the wise and witty 'Mars' is dead! It is sad news to all of us; but it is especially sad to the writer of these lines, for by that death he has lost a kindly friend, a frank but appreciative critic, and a brilliant correspondent. For some time the Rev. G. A. McDonnell has been a lost figure in the chess world, illness—long and severe—being the cause. The end came on June 3rd, when he passed away in his 69th year.

If chess be the king of games, then most certainly must the Rev. G. A. McDonnell be called *the King's jester*, for indeed in the matter of a joke he was a *chartered libertine*, and though *motley* was not *his only wear*, he wore it with so much grace, and it so well became him, that one was always delighted when he donned the *cap and bells*. But he joked because he had a merry heart, and his *good things* were the natural outcome of his fun-loving nature. Some years ago a few chess players were apportioning appropriate mottoes to various chess masters, and this is what they tacked on to McDonnell's name: *Laughter for a month, and a good jest for ever*. Both life and chess may be looked upon as serious things, but after all there is ample room in them both for jest and laughter, but it is well that the jest should be witty and the laughter clear. There have been two McDonnells in the chess world, both celebrities in their own way. One was the renowned opponent of De la Bourdonnais, the other is the subject of the present sketch. Now there is a story that a person was once introduced to G. A. McDonnell, and said to him, *Oh! I beg pardon, but did you not play some games with a Frenchman called Bourdonnais? No!* replied McDonnell. *Then you are another McDonnell*, said the visitor. *"h dear no!* replied G. A. M., *I am the McDonnell, it was the other McDonnell who played the Frenchman*. Ever since then the Rev. gentleman publicly claims to be the McDonnell, leaving La Bourdonnais' celebrated opponent the title of the other McDonnell. Someone once joked him about the two McDonnells, saying chess had only one Steinitz and one Zukertort, and asking why it should have two McDonnells. *Ah!* he replied, *you can't have too much of a good thing, and two McDonnells are better than one Steinitz*.

The Rev. G. A. McDonnell was born on the 16th August, 1830. He was an Irishman, and was proud of his nationality. He received his academic training at Trinity College, Dublin, and did honour to his alma mater. He selected the church as a profession, and after some time found his way to England. For some years he performed occasional duty in Condon, ultimately becoming curate-in-charge of Old St. Pancras Church, and on the death of the vicar (for long absent from the parish) much sorrow was felt by the parishioners that the living was not given to Mr. McDonnell, as a recognition of the faithful discharge of his clerical duties. Shortly afterwards, however, the Duke of Rutland bestowed the living of Uppingham, Rutlandshire, upon him, and to that rural parish he partook himself, and henceforth visited London only at intervals. Mr. McDonnell has published several sermons of a high class, one especially, on *Man's Life and Destiny*, being very highly esteemed. His pulpit elocution was of a very high order, and he rendered the beautiful Liturgy of the Church of England in a very striking manner. Needless to say that he had endeared himself to his country flock as much as he had done to the parishioners of Old St. Pancras. We think it only fair to Mr. McDonnell to set forth this more serious side of his character, or those who knew him only as a chess player and humourist might form an erroneous opinion of the man himself. He loved chess, he loved a joke, and he loved most of the good things of life; but none the less he loved his calling, and faithfully performed the duties of his sacred office, and in his own life proved that to be a Christian it was not necessary either to be a bigot, a fanatic, or a rigid puritan.

We now pass to Mr. McDonnell's chess career. He learnt the moves very early, but he himself took pains to deny the statement that he was born with a *silver Pawn in his mouth*, as indicative of his future fame as a chess player. He asserted, however, that at the age of fourteen he was known in local chess circles as *the champion*, and we can quite believe it; but when he went on further to assert, as he did, that even at that early date, he knew every opening on the board, and had the end-game at his fingers' ends, we put it down as one of his little jokes. In 1853 McDonnell was in Dublin, and there he met the really great English player, H. T. Buckle, and played some games with him on even terms. As was to have been expected, McDonnell lost, but he lost not without honour, for he made a good fight of it, and was charmed with the great man. McDonnell came permanently to reside in London in 1856, when 26 years of age, and very speedily became a well-known figure at the Divan and other chess resorts. At this time Mr. Howard Staunton was still in his prime, and dominated the entire English world as chess King, holding his court in the Grand Divan, in the Strand. H. T. Buckle was also a constant visitor at this time, for if his celebrated *History of Civilization* was his work, chess was his relaxation, and McDonnell renewed his acquaintanceship of three years before. Bird and Boden were then regular frequenters of the Divan, playing innumerable games, bright and sparkling in form, and dashing in nature. *Old Lowe* went about the room with his faintly-heard chuckle. Barnes and Williams were to be found here; and here also came occasionally a handsome young fellow, afterwards to become the well-known Capt. G. H. Mackenzie; and R. B. Wormald,



G. A. McDonnell

the friend of Staunton, was a frequent visitor. In 1857 the genial Hungarian, Lowenthal, made one of the company. In 1860 poor Cecil de Vere became a pretty constant visitor. In 1862 the gifted Blackburne was added to the list, and Steinitz himself—not by any means the great man he afterwards became—was sometimes seen; in 1864 P.T. Duffy shed the light of his countenance upon the *happy family*. Such were the men that MacDonnell met on his first mixing with the English chess world. Amongst them he let off his first little jokes, told his little stories, and played his little games—all in a MacDonnellish sort of way. Staunton himself was a talker of repute; his stories were well told, his anecdotes pointed, and his humour flowed freely, albeit the stream might be somewhat turgid, and there was a general air about him which seemed to say, *When I ope' my lips let no dog bark*. But the brilliant young Irishman was quite capable of holding his own as a talker even with the great man himself, and he soon began to be a prime favourite in social chess circles, and a favourite he continued to the end. An after dinner speech by MacDonnell, on a big occasion, was always waited for with eagerness and listened to with delight. Someone once asked a great American postprandial orator how he managed to make such neat speeches. *Well*, he replied, *when the steam's up I just go ahead*. This was exactly MacDonnell's style, but with him the steam was always up, and he certainly went ahead. What direction he went in did not trouble him much, for in his after dinner speeches he had a grand discursive style with him, and the more discursive he was the better his audience appreciated him. His course was like a swallow's flight. He darted hither and thither, he wheeled and turned; now he swooped upon a little joke as the swallow might pick up a knat on the wing, anon he dashed upon an anecdote like the same swallow appropriating some larger insect. Joke, anecdote, good thing, ban mot, what mattered it? It was all delightful! To vary the simile, his oratory was like an olla-podrida, full of tit-bits and toothsome morsels; yet with just that suspicion of garlic about it that made one's mouth water. *Did you ever lose the thread of your discourse*. Mr. MacDonnell? asked a diffident youth who had been requested to respond to a toast. *No sir*, answered MacDonnell, *I never do that, for I take great pains never to have any thread to lose!*

It must not be thought, however, that because MacDonnell could make good jokes he could not play good chess, for his chess skill was of a very high order indeed, and most of his opponents found it no joke to meet MacDonnell in a tournament. He took part in the London International Master Tournament, 1862, taking the fourth prize; Anderssen being first. Steinitz (sixth) and Blackburne being unplaced. After the conclusion of the tournament, he played several off-hand but hard-fought games with Anderssen, then in the height of his skill, making an equal score with the celebrated Breslau professor. In 1866 he played in the English Challenge Cup Competition (the first of its kind), but was beaten by Cecil de Vere. He also played in the Handicap Tourney, beating the late Mr. Thorold in the first round, but he was defeated by Steinitz in the second round. At the Dundee Congress of the British Chess Association, 1867, he played in the Grand Tournament, and tied with De Vere for third and fourth prizes with 6 1/2 out of a possible 9; Neumann being first with 7 1/2 out of 9. He entered for the Handicap but did not play. In 1868 he competed in the *Glow-worm* Tournament, taking the first prize, and coming out ahead of Blackburne, De Vere, Wisker, and other strong players. In 1869 he played in the *Displacement* Tournament, organised by Mr. Mongredien, and gained a good position, beating Blackburne and other strong players.

In 1873 Mr. John Wisker was regarded as the English champion, but in a match with Mr. MacDonnell, played in that year, the latter won by 3 1/2 games to Wisker's 1/2, thereby securing the coveted honour. But Wisker had his revenge the following year, for in a match, which ended in November, 1874, the final score was Wisker 7, MacDonnell 4, drawn 4. In the early part of the match MacDonnell held his own, but fell off towards the close, and Wisker gradually got a strong lead. From this time the pressure of his professional and literary work gradually increased, and in consequence Mr. MacDonnell took little part in first-class chess play, and had to content himself with occasional appearances in the arena. He played in the Handicap of the Counties Chess Association, at Glasgow, in 1875, the other first-class players being Messrs. Bird, Blackburne, and Burn. The first and second prizes were carried off by Blackburne and Burn, but neither Bird nor MacDonnell was placed. In 1876 he took part in the Tournament at the Divan, but was not placed, Blackburne taking first prize, Zukertort second, and Potter third.

In 1881 he played in the Handicap at the Boston meeting of the Counties Chess Association, and carried off the first prize. He also played in the Handicap at the Birmingham meeting in 1883, and again took the first prize. In the Vizayanagram Tourney of the London Chess Congress, in 1883, he won the third prize, Herr von Bardeleben taking first, and Mr. Fisher second. In 1885 he played in the Master Tournament of the newly formed British Chess Association, but he only tied for fifth and sixth prizes with R. Loman; Gunsberg being first, Bird second, Guest third, and Pollock fourth. In 1886 he won the *Tennyson* Competition of the B.C.A. meeting, after a tie with Mr. Gwinner. In 1874 Mr. MacDonnell was elected an honorary member of the City of London Chess Club, where at one time he gave several exhibitions of simultaneous chess with success; he was also a constant guest at the annual dinner of the club, and his speeches on these occasions were amongst his happiest efforts in that direction.

Mr. MacDonnell was a racy writer, and for some years he conducted a chess column in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, where his chess gossip and sketches over the signature 'Mars' form a prominent feature. Someone once asked Steinitz, *Don't you think MacDonnell always spoils his stories? I don't know that he does*, replied Steinitz, *but I do know that he generally 'Mars' them!* Mr. MacDonnell has given to the world two works of a gossipy nature (mostly reprints from his chess column), one entitled *Chess Life-Pictures*, the other *The Knights and Kings of Chess*, both of a very entertaining nature. — J.G.C.