

Chapter II

MOLESWORTH STREET — 1875 TO 1909

CHESS PLAYERS are a quiet, decorous and inoffensive race of mortals. We may be rather combative, but we observe the conventions. If at boiling point, we boil inwardly. We rarely raise our voices; we do not throw furniture about; rowdyism we abhor. In consequence chess clubs make good tenants; they appreciate good landlords, and are not fond of flitting. Residential fixity is an asset to any club; for name and address stick in the memory together. It has been a source of strength to our club. For ninety of our first one hundred years we have had but *two* addresses. After our first eight uneasy years we settled in at the Friends' Institute, 35 Molesworth St., and there we stayed for 35 years. After a brief sojourn at 117 St. Stephen's Green we migrated to 20 Lincoln Place, where we have been ever since. We have been under this one roof for almost fifty-five years.

Our Molesworth Street period was a time of expansion and development. We engaged in social activities; we founded a library; our membership increased; inter-club chess matches became popular; our teams crossed the seas; we became known as a leading force in Irish chess, and gained something of an international reputation which was at its height in the late nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century. There were lean years; but on the whole it was a time of prosperity, and for a few fat years we boasted trustees with a little money put by against a rainy day — which was not long in coming.

Look first at purely internal affairs. The year 1885 saw two important changes; the name of the club was changed, and the offices of secretary and treasurer were separated. I explained above (p. 5) why the title "Dublin Chess Club" had to be avoided in 1867, and the title "City and County of Dublin Chess Club" chosen instead, and the probable reasons why in the end the change was made after the failure of an attempt to make it a few years earlier. The separation of the offices, which previously had been held by one person, was an obvious sign of growth and prosperity. Admission by ballot — also a sign of strength — was introduced in 1878. In the same period a sustained effort was made to stimulate competitive chess. A special committee was appointed to arrange a club championship and other tournaments, also inter-club matches. In 1880 the titles "President" and "Vice-President" appear on the formal list of officers, silently superseding (it would seem) the original titles "Chairman" and "Vice-Chairman" respectively. Attention was paid to the library. In 1882 a list of the books in it is recorded. In 1898 our first librarian, Mr. Parker Dunscombe, was appointed, and at his request a book-case was purchased for £4-10-0. Ten years later a large accession of books came from Professor S. P. Johnston, who divided his chess library between us and the Dublin University Chess club. A further accession came in 1914 when on Mr. Dunscombe's death at the age of 82, his chess books came to us by bequest.

In the early nineties during a temporary drop in membership, the affiliation system was introduced. Under it gentlemen who paid full subscriptions to other clubs were admitted to membership on a small payment. The system had an immediate effect; membership rose from 48 in 1893/4 to 56 in 1894/5, and to 74 in 1895/6. The system was suspended in 1902 owing to the large increase in membership, was resumed in 1910, when an extra room

was available, and was dropped in 1946, when our membership was 95. The system was not a mere expedient; it does not appear to have impaired relations with other clubs; it was a mutual convenience, of special benefit to suburban clubs and those with no summer play. Good relations with other Dublin clubs were fostered by a rule introduced in 1878 under which champions of other clubs were elected honorary members for one year.

In 1877 sets of chessmen and boards were presented to the Workmen's Hall, Back Lane. The "soirée," dear to Dickens (spelled "swarry"), made its appearance in November, 1886, when members of the Dublin University chess club were our guests. From 1892 onwards annual Club "At Homes" were held, with sometimes as many as 100 guests. In 1895 the "At Home" was attended by Lord Wolseley and his staff. The "At Home" in 1897 was an embarrassment, when Mr. F. F. Rowland wrote to ask why he and his wife had not been invited.

These events and measures were clear indications of growing prestige; so much business was involved that the original rule that the committee should meet once a month was enforced. In 1891 the committee failed to do so, and was duly called to account by the Rev. Father Maxwell at the next general meeting.

Our external activities were in keeping. Chess contacts were made with other provinces, with noted clubs in England, and several continental masters visited Dublin at our invitation or with our co-operation. Our reputation never stood higher than in 1896 when the "British Chess club" wrote to ask our opinion on the composition of a team to travel to America to play the Brooklyn C.C. We replied that we were not in a position to offer an opinion. Was it modesty or prudence that prompted that reply?

In 1887 Belfast C.C. wrote challenging us to a match in Belfast; the challenge made older members recall a Dublin-Belfast match 27 years previously. Our Secretary wrote courteously, accepting the challenge, but pointing out that "it would be more in accordance with usage," if the challengers travelled to Dublin. Our team travelled to Belfast by the 2 p.m. train from Amiens Street, played that evening, stayed the night, and played again next day right up to the time of the departure of the last train for Dublin. We won a clear victory.

Some years later Cork C.C. wrote inviting our members to visit their club, and asking us to hang a notice of their activities in our rooms; we arranged a match with them in 1907.

In 1888 the Irish Chess Association staged a tournament which proved a great success; it was attended by Blackburne and Pollock. We lent our rooms, and contributed £14 towards the expenses.

In 1892 Mr. A. S. Peake was elected Secretary. He was a man of boundless energy and enterprise, and he inaugurated (apologies for the little pleasantry!) our *peak* period. He was only able to serve for four years; but he did much in that time, and when he left the country in 1895 the club paid a glowing tribute to his services. Correspondence matches were arranged with the clubs of Birmingham and Brighton. Liverpool C.C. sent over a team of ten to play us. Membership rose; an extra room was rented from the Institute; four tables and timing clocks were purchased. The handicap ticket-tournament—a useful barometer of chess club life—boomed in this period; 1,600 games were played in the ticket tournaments of 1895; and over 2,000 in the following year. In 1896 the old gas fire went, and was replaced by coal grates. Better lighting was considered.

Our continental contacts began, I think, with the visit of Herr J. H. Zukertort in 1879. Zukertort was at the time joint-editor of *The Chess-Monthly*, which in its issue of February, 1880 (p. 134) contains a full account of the recent doings of the club. Zukertort was made an Honorary Member of the club, was its guest at a dinner at the Shelbourne Hotel, and was authorised to announce his display as under the patronage of the club. The display was given on 7th March, 1879, and as reported in the Dublin press next day, the Master played 12 simultaneous games, *blindfold*, "their Graces, the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough with numerous visitors, having witnessed this extraordinary feat."

It is just possible that Zukertort paid a second visit to the club; for in *The Westminster Papers*, vol. x, London, 1878, *sub* 1st March, 1879, we read, "On the 31st January Herr Zukertort played 12 simultaneous blindfold games at the City and County of Dublin C.C., his opponents being Lord Randolph Churchill, Major Creagh, Hon. H. C.

Plunkett, Sir John Blunden, Capt. Wallace, Capt. Malhado, and Messrs. Cairns, Pim, C. Lewis, Goodbody, Woollett and Tuthill . . . Play commenced at 3 p.m. and continued, with an interval, till 12. Zukertort won 8 games, lost 1 and drew 3." In spite of the discrepancy about the date, these are probably two accounts of the same event. It is interesting to note that Viscount Churchill, father of Sir Winston, was a member of the club and played for us on this occasion. An autograph letter from him about the match is in the archives of the club.

In the second week of January, 1881, Grandmaster Steinitz, world-champion, came to Dublin under the auspices of the club, and gave displays which were well attended. He played 3 consultation games on Wednesday, 4 blindfold games on Thursday and 16 simultaneous games on Friday. His opponents included Provost Salmon and Sir John Blunden. This was Salmon's first public appearance as a chess-player since his match with Morphy.

In 1900 no less than three masters put out feelers about displays in Dublin; they were Mieses, Maroczy and Dr. Lasker; the Committee discussed the proposals, but the visits did not materialise. In 1901 the Hastings and St. Leonards C.C. wrote saying they proposed to send a team to Dublin; they were invited to play a match with us, which the visitors won by two points. In the same year in the words of the Report to the annual general meeting, "the club shook off its lethargy, and sent a team to play Liverpool C.C., one of the strongest in England." Fourteen games were played; we won 1, drew 5, and lost 8. In the following year we sent a team to Scotland, and lost to Edinburgh C.C. by $4\frac{1}{2}$ to $6\frac{1}{2}$, and to Glasgow by $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 5. J. H. Blackburne, the English master, was a frequent visitor; he came to Dublin in 1888, 1904, 1905, 1906 and 1909, and he often gave displays under the patronage of the club. We elected him an Honorary Member, and in 1921 we contributed to the presentation made to him on his eightieth birthday. In 1909 the American Chess Bulletin asked us to give Capablanca an engagement; we were unable to do so at the time; but there was an important sequel, told in the next chapter. In 1906 a club team of 15 members travelled to Oxford by invitation to play the University. We won by $9\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$. In 1908 we had a tour in London, winning against West London C.C.

and losing to Hampstead C.C., and to the Metropolitan C.C.

Glance now at the internal affairs of the club before and after the turn of the century. We were still in Molesworth Street, but our numbers had increased, and members were dissatisfied with the accommodation. Dr. F. C. Martley, a forceful personality and a bit of a martinet, secretary from 1900 to 1903 and secretary and treasurer from 1903 to 1908, made many improvements. He kept his minutes with meticulous accuracy; he put a black mark against members of Committee who were late, noting the very minute of their arrival, e.g. "A. J. Nicholls at 5.7 p.m.," and "W. E. Thrift at 8.2 p.m." After a long agitation for better lighting electricity was introduced in 1902. The Martley touch appears in the "note for future historians" appended to the Report for that year, viz., "Though the fittings for electric light had been in for some weeks, no supply of electric current had been obtained on the day of meeting." In 1907 he installed a *metaphone*; and for the benefit of future historians he has kindly explained the purpose of that instrument. The purpose of the metaphone was "to communicate from the club room to the kitchen." There is more in chess than wood-pushing! At the general meeting of the same year, it was proposed that ladies should be admitted on condition that they retired at 5.30 p.m. The wind of change was blowing, but was not yet strong enough. After an interesting debate, the previous question was carried.

There were changes, too, in the playing of the game. Our class I players began to take an interest in a wide variety of openings. Scientific chess began to oust the "death or glory" style, and positional chess with its slow and steady building up and sound, unspectacular moves took the place of the showy combination and brilliant sacrifice. Professor W. E. Thrift, whose chess flourished at this period, once told me that in his lifetime the character of the game had materially altered, mainly under the influence of the Queen's pawn openings in their infinite variety. P to K 4, followed by the Ruy Lopez or the King's Gambit, was no longer the standard opening for White. The serious study of openings is evidenced by our records of the period, especially by the popularity of the tourney,

confined to a named opening. The Evans gambit long held pride of place.

In 1904 died Dr. G. Salmon, Provost of Trinity College. He succeeded Sir John Blunden in 1890 as President of the club. The vote of condolence describes him as "President of the club and foremost of Irish players for many years." Chess was only a side-line with him; but he could have excelled. A game of his with Paul Morphy is extant, in which Salmon had a winning advantage in the opening stages, but lost it in the middle game. Salmon took a keen interest in the welfare of the club.

Chess players are drawn from many occupations and walks of life, and there is no marked affinity between chess and academic studies. Learning and knowledge play no part in a game of chess, unless it be a knowledge of human nature. Electronic imitations of the chess brain have been discussed; but Chairs of chess do not yet feature in University Calendars. Still chess is unique among games in its high intellectual character, in the complete absence of the physical element and the almost complete absence of the element of chance. One feels that there ought to be some correlation between the chess mind and the academic mind. There is certainly one point of connection, viz., the hypothetical movement of thought. The chess player prefaces every move with a big IF. If P to K4, then P to K3. If my opponent castles king-side, I shall reply P to KR4, etc., etc. The same movement of thought is typical of some academic studies, particularly mathematics and philosophy. Our roll of membership contains several university teachers versed in those subjects, and we have long given special terms to those birds of passage, university students.

Sir Horace Plunkett succeeded to the presidency, and his tenure was of such importance to the club that I treat of it at length in the next chapter. His mediating powers were soon tested; there was trouble in the club soon after he took over.

Chess to be played at all must be played to win; and considering what a combative game it is, and has to be, there has been very little dissension and disharmony in the club; but in the first decade of the century all was not sweetness and harmony and light. It may have started with the Armstrong cup affair. This cup which bears the

inscription, "Challenge Cup presented by W. Armstrong, B.L., for annual competition by the chess clubs of Dublin" has done much to stimulate chess and keep up the standard of play, and a list of the winners from 1888/9 to 1928/9 has been recorded by our Secretary, Mr. Cranston, at the end of his Committee book. In 1906 we tied with Sackville, and Sackville won the re-play. A dispute arose about the conditions of the re-play; a letter appeared about it in the *Weekly Irish Times* that added fuel to the flames. The Armstrong Cup committee ruled that the re-play should be re-played. Sackville rejected the ruling, and retained the cup. A pleasing sequel is told below. Soon after the dispute with Sackville Dr. Martley resigned from Office, and Mr. Doyle was elected Secretary. The election was subsequently annulled on the ground of informality in the summons to the meeting. Five prominent members of the club resigned, and a serious split seemed inevitable. It was averted by the tact and wisdom of our new President. A general meeting of the club was convened to consider the matter, and after it Sir Horace sent each of the five members a personal letter, conveying the unanimous desire of the club for their return. The five held a meeting to consider the President's letter, and after it wrote to him saying, "We have met to consider the whole matter, and have decided to accede to the desire expressed therein." Thus the breach was healed.

The Armstrong Cup incident, too, had a happy ending; for after winning the cup in 1910, we lost it in 1911 by half a point to (in the words of the Report) "our friendly foes the Sackville Chess Club," and our Secretary was instructed to invite the Sackville team to an entertainment, and hand them the cup.

Medals, stamped with the club die, were a feature of club play at the time. There were three of them, one for each of three classes. They were known as Hunt Medals, and were presented by Mr. R. F. Hunt, "the father of the club." The winners could be challenged for possession. In 1912 the die was lent to the Leinster Chess Union for the engraving of a medal.

In 1909 our long and pleasant association with the Friends' Institute came to an end. Our landlords asked for an increased rent, and we decided to seek larger and better accommodation elsewhere. We engaged two rooms

at 117 St. Stephen's Green for £40 per annum. The rooms were described as "equal to, if not better than any chess club outside London." We spent a considerable amount on furnishings and fittings and installing electric light, and it was rather a blow when in November, 1912, the landlord resumed possession, paying us £20 in lieu of notice.

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