

## *Chapter IV*

### IN OUR OWN TIMES

**A**S we approach our own times, and move in familiar conditions and among personalities, still living or whose memory is still green, it is well to pause and look back, and take stock, before turning our attention to the present and the future. What have we done, and what may we still hope to do?

During its first one hundred years the Dublin Chess club has discharged the first duty of a chess club in providing facilities and amenities for regular play by its own members. The names and dates of some nine hundred members are on our records; add the names which by

chance or through inadvertence have not been recorded, and we may safely estimate our total membership at about one thousand members in one hundred years. Most of the thousand were, and are, unknown to fame; but the club has given them what they wanted, and they have been well content to enjoy their favourite pastime in comfort and congenial surroundings for a very modest sum.

One, at least, of our members earned in his own day the coveted title "Master." He was Mr. W. H. K. Pollock, who died in 1897, and who in 1888/9 with Mr. J. H. Blackburne attended a Chess Congress in Dublin on his way to a tourney in America. Our records speak of Pollock as "our brilliant young master who represented Ireland and was a member of this club for several years when studying medicine." Another brilliant member who died young was Mr. T. Cox, Irish Champion in 1937 and 1938. Elected a member in 1933 he died in 1939 at the early age of twenty-seven. His meteoric chess career, outlined below (p. 33), gave promise of master-class. Other members of chess repute, include G. Salmon who gave Paul Morphy a good game, Lord Dunsany, an original contributor to the theory and practice of chess problems, the stalwarts, W. Moffat Wilson, W. E. Thrift and J. J. O'Hanlon, and quite recently, J. J. Walsh, who writes on chess, who has played with distinction in tourneys in England and on the Continent and lost a "won game" against Botvinnik, and A. Dennehy, who beat Paul Keres in a simultaneous game in Dublin, and W. Heidenfeld, former champion of South Africa, and now of Ireland. These names are enough to show that our class I standard has been reasonably high, and is so still.

Many of our thousand members have been, of course, birds of passage, on the roll to-day and off to-morrow. Young folk with careers to make must follow where fortune leads; for a year or two they have their chess with us, and then they must "fold their tents, like the Arabs," and the chess club sees them no more. Then there are professional men and business men with a passing interest in the game; but other interests supervene and after some seasons they, too, go off the strength; for all such the chess club is a provider of amusement for value received. But there always has been in the Dublin Chess club, and still is, a hard core of devotees, an inner circle of enthusiasts; such players feel warmly towards the club for what it is, as well as for

what it gives ; they look forward to the club nights, and they come regularly week after week, month after month, to meet friends as well as to play games. The Dublin Chess club is a habit to them and they are proud to serve it on committee and in the offices. Some become too old for match play and even for club nights ; but they come down once a year to the AGM to hear how the old club is getting on ; they pay their subscription for *auld lang syne*, and they keep up their membership to their dying day. Not a few members have taken thought for the club after their day, and have left us books and souvenirs.

From that inner circle, as is natural, our committeemen and officers have been drawn ; and it is fitting here to pay tribute to all who have served the club in those capacities, or are serving ; the spirit of service has been an abiding source of strength to us ; our members have always been ready to sacrifice the prospect of an exciting game to the dull duty of routine committee-work. It would be invidious to mention names ; but there are a few outstanding figures which for sheer length of service should be named. First, J. B. Pim, a founder-member, who guided our infant steps and helped to guide our activities for 34 years, for most of that time as Vice-President. We owe much to him. Then there is W. Moffat Wilson, a commanding figure, a member for 51 years, a strong player, who captained the Armstrong Cup team and served as Treasurer for four years, as Auditor for 11 years, and as President for nine years. W. Nicholls was 40 years a member, and more than once acted as Secretary in emergencies. Many of us still remember with affection, T. G. Cranston who was a member for more than 30 years and had an unbroken tenure of the Secretaryship for 27 years, and H. M. McIlwaine, Treasurer for 29 years. Nor can I omit to name J. J. O'Hanlon, our President for 13 years ; his reputation was made before he joined this club, and he was long a national figure.

As was pointed out above (p. 6) our club sprang directly from an Irish Chess Congress with an international atmosphere, and while we have done our duty to our members, we have always aimed at something more than providing chess for Dublin folk. There have been times when we could speak for Irish chess ; and at all times we have shown ourselves ready to take the lead or join with

other clubs in movements to raise standards, stimulate play and benefit the game throughout the country. Our horizon is wide. We have helped chess clubs for the blind, for working-men, and in the schools. We have fostered inter-club activities ; we have striven to keep and extend our contacts with British and Continental chess; and, not least, we have kept alive the question, still unanswered, raised by Sir Horace Plunkett, forty years ago : Should there be a strong metropolitan chess centre where all Irish clubs can meet, deliberate and act?

From our review of the club's past we turn to the present day. The coming of the motor-car, the growth of *suburbia*, radio and television, the multiplication of alternative amusements and facilities for enjoying them have affected chess and chess clubs in this way, and in that. Afternoon play has almost died out ; club trophies are at a discount ; the keen inter-club match for the Armstrong Cup or the Ennis Shield is more attractive to ambitious players than "skittles" or off-hand games. These changes have raised standards of play but they are not unmixed gain to chess club life. It takes all sorts to make a chess club. Ticket tourneys make good "mixers." Chess for the fun of it, in a thriving club, will go hand in hand with the battle of wits and the long stern struggle for intellectual mastery and the turned-down king. With the increase of inter-club play and inter-provincial tournaments, standards of class I play have risen in the last generation, though they still fall short of what they might be. Young men have come to the fore and the composition of the club fifty years ago, described by Mr. Wallace above (p. 21) hardly corresponds to the facts of to-day.

In 1924 Mr. Moffat Wilson succeeded Sir Horace Plunkett as President. Over fifty years a member, a strong player, an active organiser, Mr. Wilson has left a lasting mark on the club and his name is commemorated in the valuable Moffat Wilson cup which he presented for the club championship. At the general meeting of 1924 presentations were made to the Hon. Secretary, Mr. Cranston, and the Hon. Treasurer, Mr. McIlwaine. Our debt to those gentlemen is great. The Report for that year notes that the chess section of the Tailteann Games was well supported by our members, that Mr. W. E. Thrift

made a fine showing and lost only by half a point to Mr. P. Baker, the Irish champion.

The club standard of play was high at this period and in 1925 we won the Armstrong Cup for the fourth year in succession. The re-binding of our early club records was ordered; but, alas, when it was found that the cost would be 18/6, this much-needed work was deferred. In the same year we joined with Sackville C.C. in inviting the Polish Master, Rubinstein, to give two "simultaneous" displays. At the general meeting of that year Mr. Bowesman of the Civil Service C.C., joint-founder with Mr. Cranston of the Leinster Chess Union, gave an interesting account of the Governing Bodies of Irish chess since 1885. His account is sketched in our Minutes.

Two public men, Lord Dunsany and Mr. Justice Creed Meredith, were active members of the club at this period. Lord Dunsany expressed his willingness to play for the Armstrong Cup team and in 1931 he instituted a "problem competition," which aroused considerable interest. He was an expert in the construction and solution of chess problems. He supplied the problems and promised to the winner "a present of game from Dunsany." Three such competitions were held, and, naturally enough, were well supported by the club. A brace of pheasants is a novel form of chess prize and highly attractive.

Judge Meredith was made an Honorary Member in 1930 and he presented the club with a valuable set of ivory chess men, with board, for use on special occasions. In 1932 he arranged a match at his house between a club team and members of the Bar. He was in the Chair at the general meeting of 1930, when Dr. Peyton lectured on the history of chess, and Mr. W. Nicholls, a former Librarian and Honorary Member, at the age of 92, made a happy little speech, showing deep affection for the club.

Amongst benefactions to the club in this period should be mentioned a framed portrait of Mr. O'Hanlon, presented by Mr. W. Hassell, a handsome silver challenge cup, presented in 1931 by Captain Prior-Wandesforde, and presents of books to the Library by Mr. P. J. Laracy, Librarian, and an interesting gift by Mr. F. Hobson of a copy of the rules of the Phoenix C.C., which flourished c. 1888/9. In 1934 Mr. J. Barry Brown presented a Georgian challenge cup. It became known as the "Novices' Cup."

In the same year Mr. J. J. Doyle presented a cup for the class II tourney.

The more public activities of the club and its members developed in the period between the two world wars. A match with Belfast City became an annual event. In 1931 nineteen of our members travelled to Liverpool and Manchester and played matches with the city clubs, doing creditably. They were received hospitably and our opponents requested a return match. In 1933 our team visited Manchester C.C. again, by invitation. In 1934 an Irish team composed largely of members of our club travelled to London to play the Imperial C.C., losing by  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to  $10\frac{1}{2}$ ; they went on to play Hastings and St. Leonards C.C., where they lost by 3 to 9. In 1935 three club members, Messrs. O'Hanlon, Creevey and Cranston, competed in a team tourney at Warsaw. In 1936 at the Margate tourney, Messrs. O'Hanlon and Doyle tied for third place, and at a congress at Nottingham, Messrs. Cox and O'Hanlon distinguished themselves and brought credit to the club. Among foreign visitors to the club should be mentioned A. Lilienthal who in 1935 played a selected side in the Regent House, Trinity College, G. Koltanowski, the Belgian master, who in 1937 lectured in our rooms, and the German Lady Champion, Fraulein Sonja Graf, who, sponsored by Mr. J. J. Doyle, played five games with Mr. O'Hanlon (score  $2\frac{1}{2}$  all); in a simultaneous display against 16 of our members, she won 7, drew 6 and lost 3. On September 14, 15, 1938, Dr. Alekhine gave simultaneous displays in the Regent House. Mr. C. J. Barry (Sackville and Dublin C.C.) was the only player to win a game.

In 1939 the club and Irish Chess suffered a severe loss in the death of Mr. Thomas Cox at the early age of 27. He won the club championship in 1937, the Prior Wandesforde Cup in 1938, and the Irish Championship in 1937 and 1938, defeating O'Hanlon in the final. He bequeathed to the club a signed photograph.

The outbreak of the second world war was followed, of course, by a lessening of public interest in games, and in 1941 competition for the Irish championship was suspended owing to an insufficient entry. Instead we staged the "Dunsany Premier Tourney," open to players of merit in other clubs. Lord Dunsany presented the prizes and the competition made a profit. In the following year a tourney

with similar rules was held under the title "O'Hanlon Premier Tourney." Mr. O'Hanlon presented the prizes. In the same year we placed our rooms at the disposal of the Gaelic League for a chess tourney, and in the following year we gave facilities for the Oireachtas chess tourney. In 1942 Mr. Taylor Vard presented a cup. The end of the war saw a large influx of new members. Our membership rose to 95 in 1946, and in consequence affiliated membership was suspended—a step of doubtful wisdom. History repeats itself. After the second war, as after the first, there was a sudden rise in membership, followed by a slow recession. In 1948 the club rooms were renovated and decorated at a cost of £30. The work was largely supervised and carried through by our indefatigable Treasurer, Mr. J. A. Bonner, who endeared himself to all members.

During the last two decades the club has pursued the even tenor of its way with only a slight jolt in 1956/7, when membership dropped and expenses rose. We were rescued from "the red" by the generosity of Mr. Eamon Martin, who presented a valuable rug as a prize for a handicap competition, open to all paid-up members. The fame of "the rug competition" spread and before long we had the welcome accession of 14 new members. This was only one of Mr. Martin's many benefactions and the "Martin competition" has become almost an annual event. At the General Meeting of 1955 there was a very memorable incident. Mr. Martin had the happy thought of making a presentation to our President, Mr. J. J. O'Hanlon, the doyen of Irish chess. He purchased a magnificent claret set of glittering Waterford glass and it was formally presented to the President. In his reply, Mr. O'Hanlon said that his happiest chess memories were associated with the Dublin Chess Club. That must have been almost the last appearance of Mr. O'Hanlon in the club. His health failed in the following year, and he died in 1960. Expressions of sympathy were received from many quarters, including the Ulster Chess Union.

In the same year died Mr. W. Hassell, also a benefactor of the club and a member for 39 years. In 1947 he re-bound at his own expense our valuable Visitors' Book. It is to be hoped that the Centenary year will not pass without a similar attempt to preserve for posterity other record-books in our archives, some of which are in

a bad way. Here, too, should be mentioned Mr. G. O'Nolan's gift of Venetian blinds (1961) and Mr. J. Sadlier's gift of six chess clocks (1963). In 1964 Mr. H. M. Tarlo offered a valuable prize to the winner of a "ticket" tournament. It is hoped to revive this form of continuing competition, which was in former days, and still might be, an attractive adjunct to the club's other activities.

Turning to business matters we note that in 1953 the annual subscription was raised to £2, in 1960 to £2-5-0, and in 1963 to £3-3-0. In 1958 the rent was increased to £40 *per annum*, plus rates, and a new lease of the existing premises was drawn up in the names of Messrs. Martin and McEvoy. A copy of the lease is in the Minute Book. In 1962 an agreement was reached with Messrs. Good and Ganly as to the use of the club rooms for property auctions on certain afternoons at a rent of £40 per annum.

The standard of play during recent years has been high. The Armstrong Cup has been won on several occasions, and in 1959 the club won the All-Ireland inter-club competition. Our playing strength has been enhanced by the accession in 1957 of Mr. W. Heidenfeld, formerly champion of South Africa, and several of our younger players are showing great promise.

We look back on our past record with pride and satisfaction. We look forward to the approach of our Centenary year in high hope. We shall do our best to make it a memorable occasion, suitably marked, worthy of our past, and a pointer to a successful future.

The rising tide of Irish education will mean more chess and more chess players eventually, I believe, and increased support for this ancient and honoured game of skill; and I know that I voice the feelings of all our present members when I salute the Dublin Chess Club of the future, and confidently wish it, together with our friendly rivals, the other chess clubs of Ireland, *ad multos annos*.

To finish reading Luce's history, return to the history page of the club's website and click on the link which leads to an appendix with lists of club officers and members over that 100 year period and includes two chess games.