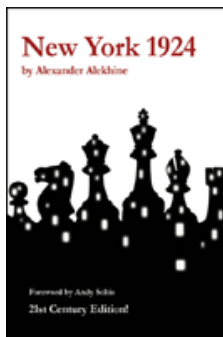




COLUMNISTS

From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



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From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](#) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

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The Kibitzer, by Tim Harding

Who was the strongest Irish player of all time?

The question as to who was strongest Irish player of all time is a difficult one, and I am unsure if I know the answer. Like most such tricky questions, definitions and criteria have to be settled first before we can identify some candidates.

The problem is not a general one; it is (almost) specific to Irishness. If the question was, who was the strongest Indian player then until about ten years ago everybody would have said “Mir Sultan Khan” and for the last few years the answer to that question has been “Vishy Anand”. End of argument.

Name several other countries and the answer would be almost as simple Estonia? Paul Keres. Latvia? Mikhail Tal. USA? Bobby Fischer.

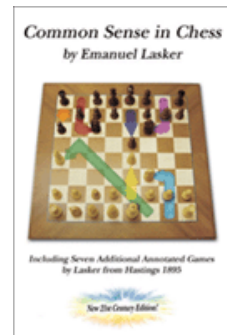
In most countries, at least the debate would quickly be narrowed down to two or three grandmasters, with the debate centering on the greats of the past and present. Sweden – Stoltz or Ståhlberg or Ulf Andersson; Holland – Max Euwe or Jan Timman?

In some countries, the question might arise whether to count immigrants. Was Najdorf the greatest Argentinean player or a candidate for the greatest Polish player? (Or both?) If Nimzowitsch isn’t a candidate (up against Bent Larsen) for Greatest Dane, then where does he fit? (He came from Riga, but he wasn’t an ethnic Latvian.)

Is Alekhine a candidate for the greatest Russian or the greatest Frenchman?

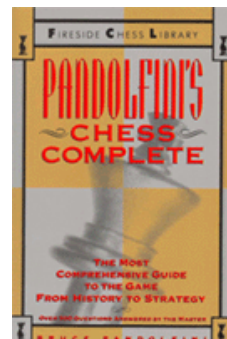
My (possibly controversial) answer is that such questions are to be settled in favour of the land of birth and/or parents’ nationality, not where people ended up. So in seeking the greatest Irish player of all time, I first exclude those of non-Irish descent who later settled in and represented Ireland. So

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that is grandmaster Alexander Baburin (five years resident in Ireland now) and the late Wolfgang Heidenfeld (German-born) out of the way.

On the other hand, I would tend to consider favourably those of Irish descent for consideration, even if they never set foot on Erin's isle. Just as if you were asked to name the greatest ever Jewish chessmaster, you would not feel you had to restrict yourself to those who lived in and represented the state of Israel. Like the Jews, the Irish have spread over much of the globe. Unfortunately, whereas picking the greatest Jewish player (an impossible task!) means choosing between world champions, the search for the greatest Irish player is perhaps doomed to disappointment.

Certainly I shall make no distinction between Ireland North and South since in chess (unlike soccer) the whole island has always, since becoming founder member of FIDE, had one chess team and organisation.

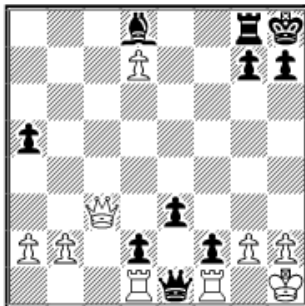
There are in fact some nineteenth century Irish players whose claims should not be ignored. Let's take them first. Foremost among these are the two masters called M(a)cDonnell and James Mason (not the actor). In fact there is one other whose claim to be Irish (if he ever made it) would have some validity – none other than Paul Morphy! His family name is a corruption (in Spain) of the familiar Irish surname Murphy, so this great American player undoubtedly had some Irish blood that can be traced back to the “wild geese” Irish noblemen who fled to other Catholic countries. Morphy's ancestors went to Spain and then a later generation came to Louisiana. However, I don't think we can accept Morphy as Irish – the argument would be over before it began!

Alexander McDonnell (1798-1835) was the son of a Belfast doctor and the strongest player from either Britain or Ireland before the rise of Staunton. In contemporary publications his name was sometimes printed as M'Donnell and he is not to be confused with the Dublin-born Rev G.A. MacDonnell (1830-1899) who had some good results in the 1860s and 1870s.

So far as one can compare such things, Alexander McDonnell was probably the better natural player of the two, had they been of the same generation and played head to head, but of course G.A. MacDonnell had the benefit of being able to learn from the writings of Staunton and from playing opponents like Steinitz.

Alexander McDonnell is best known for being the loser of the first known Evans Gambit game (to Capt. William Evans himself) and for his marathon series of matches against the French champion Labourdonnais in 1834.

From this match, I always enjoy the following finish (from their sixty-second game) although the Irishman was on the wrong side of it; Black (Labourdonnais) to play.



Now Black finished by **36...Qxd1! 37 Rxd1 e2**. You don't often see three connected passed pawns on the seventh rank! White resigned.

The Frenchman won the epic series overall, but the Irish player put up an

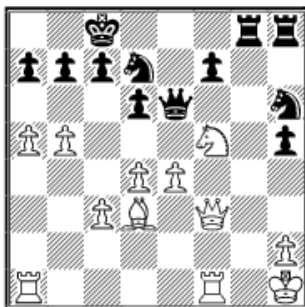
excellent fight in many games. Unfortunately McDonnell died the next year of Bright's disease, else he could well have lived to compete in the first great London tournament of 1851, which might have shown how good a player he really was. Here is one of his best efforts against Labourdonnais, the forty-fourth game of the series (in the third of their matches).

McDonnell – De La Bourdonnais, London 1834

1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 Nf3 g5 4 Bc4 Bg7 5 d4 d6 6 c3 h6 7 Na3 Nc6 8 Bd2 Qe7 9 0-0 Bd7 10 b4 0-0-0 11 Bd3 g4 12 Ne1 f3 13 gxf3 Nf6

Better 13...Nxb4 14 cxb4 Bxd4+ 15 Kh1 Bxa1 16 Qxa1 with an unclear position.

14 b5 Nb8 15 Nac2 Rdg8 16 Kh1 h5 17 Ne3! gxf3 18 Qxf3 Bg4 19 Qf4 Nbd7 20 Nf5 Qe6 21 Nf3 Bxf3+ 22 Qxf3 Ng4 23 a4 Bh6 24 Bxh6 Nxb6 25 a5



25...Nxf5?

In this opposite side castling position, White has adopted the right plan getting his pawn roller (stalled for a while after move 14) moving forward again. Instead of trying to simplify, Black had to try 25...Kb8.

26 exf5 Qb3 27 a6 d5

Here we see the consequence of the mistake at move 25. After 27...b6 28 Qb7+ Kd8, the pawn that Black diverted can advance to participate in a mating net: 29 f6+.

28 c4! Nf6 29 axb7+ Kb8 30 c5 Ng4 31 b6! axb6

Or if 31...cxb6 32 Qg3+ Kxb7 33 Rxa7+ Kxa7 34 Qc7+ Ka8 35 Ra1+ and White wins.

32 c6 1-0

James Mason (1849-1905) is still celebrated annually in the ancient Irish town of Kilkenny where he was born. An excellent weekend tournament is now held there each November, sponsored by Iona Technologies. Mason emigrated to the USA early in his life before coming to England in 1878. He played many important tournaments of the 1880s and 1890s and like G.A. MacDonnell was a writer on the game. Mason was third behind Steinitz and Winawer in Vienna 1882, second equal at Hamburg 1885 and seventh in New York 1889.

Moving to the first half of the twentieth century, it seems doubtful if there were any Irish players of sufficient strength to be considered as candidates for our accolade certainly none living in Ireland. One often comes across the games of O'Hanlon, but only in the capacity of the loser of instructive games, e.g., to Yates (British Championship 1921, in an early Marshall Attack game) and to Colle.

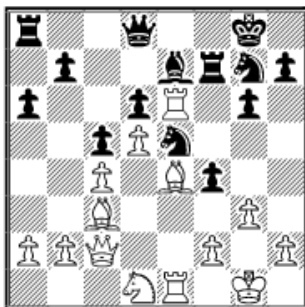
Ireland's first appearance at a Chess Olympiad was in 1935 at Warsaw; since Folkestone 1933 would have been much more convenient for travel, I can only suppose that they could not raise a team. O'Hanlon was board three and top board was conducted by Brian Reilly, many years later to become editor of British Chess Magazine. His was a grueling debut with 5½/19, but he did win four games. One of them was against a real titan of the chessboard.

Brian Reilly-Reuben Fine Warsaw Olympiad, 1935

1 d4 e6 2 Nf3 f5 3 g3 Nf6 4 Bg2 Be7 5 c4 d6 6 Nc3 0-0 7 0-0 Qe8 8 Qc2 Nbd7 9 e4 Nh5

If 9...fxe4 10 Ng5!.

10 exf5 exf5 11 Re1 Ndf6 12 Ng5 e6 13 d5 c5 14 Bd2 Ng4 15 Nb5 Qd8 16 Ne6 Bxe6 17 Rxe6 a6 18 Rae1 Rf7 19 Nc3 Ne5 20 Nd1 f4 21 Be4 g6 22 Bc3 Ng7?



The American grandmaster should have played 22...Nd7 23 b3 Qf8.

23 Bxe5 dxe5 24 Nc3! Rf8 25 Rd1 fxe3 26 hxe3 Nxe6? 27 dxe6 Qe8 28 Rd7 Bf6 29 Bd5 Kh8 30 Ne4 Bg7 31 Nd6 Qb8 32 e7 Re8 33 Nf7+ Kg8 34 Nxe5+ Kh8 35 Nf7+ Kg8 36 Nd6+ Kh8 37 Qe4 Bd4 38 Kg2 Bf6 39 Qe6 Bxe7 40 Qe5+ 1-0

At this period, Fine was a rapidly-improving master who (in three more years) was to share first prize with Keres at the 1938 AVRO tournament that was supposed to decide the next challenger for the world championship.

Reilly represented Ireland in several post-war Olympiads, but never matched this glorious moment. Irish teams were, as always, composed of amateurs whose only chance to compete under proper match conditions against genuine masters came in the Olympiads (once every two years) and World Championship zonals (every three years). There have been a few more victories against grandmasters as when the (still very active) Eamonn Keogh scored the following win.

Keogh-Gideon Ståhlberg Tel Aviv Olympiad, 1964

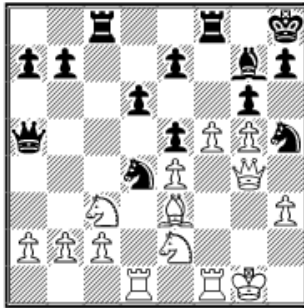
1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 d6 6 Be2 Be7 7 0-0 a6 8 Be3 Qc7 9 a4 Nc6 10 Nb3 b6 11 f4 Bb7 12 Bf3 0-0 13 Qd2 Rab8 14 Qf2 Ba8 15 Rfd1 Nb4 16 Rd2 Nd7 17 a5 b5 18 Rad1 Rfd8 19 Bg4 Nc6 20 f5 b4 21 Na4 e5 22 Nb6 Nf6 23 Bf3 Re8 24 g4 h6 25 h4 Qd8 26 Nc4 Nd4 27 Nxd4 exd4 28 Rxd4 Nh7 29 Nxd6 Bxh4 30 Qh2 Bg5 31 Bf2 Bf6 32 Nxe8 Qxe8 33 R4d3 Rc8 34 Bd4 Bd8 35 Qe5 Qxe5 36 Bxe5 Bxa5 37 c3 Ng5 38 exb4 Nxf3+ 39 Rxf3 Bxe4 40 Rc3 Bb6+ 41 Kf1 Re8 42 Bc7 Bxc7 43 Rxc7 h5 44 Rdd7 Rf8 45 Rd4 Re8 46 Rdd7 Rf8 47 Re7 Bd3+ 48 Kf2 hxe4 49 Rc5 Rb8 50 Kg3 Rxb4 51 Rc8+ Kh7 52 Rxf7 Kh6 53 Rc6+ Kh5 54 Rc5 Kh6 55 Rd7 Bb1 56 Rd6+ Kh5 57 f6+ g5 58 f7 Rb3+ 59 Rc3 Rb8 1-0

More impressive as a game was the following four years later in which Michael Littleton another regular member of Irish teams in the 1960s and

1970s defeated Canada's top grandmaster of the day.

Littleton-Abe Yanofsky Lugano Olympiad, 1968

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 g6 5 Nc3 Bg7 6 Be3 Nf6 7 Bc4 0-0
8 Bb3 Qa5 9 0-0 d6 10 h3 Bd7 11 f4 Rac8 12 Qf3 Nh5? 13 Nde2! Nf6
14 g4 Kh8 15 Rad1 Be6 16 g5 Nh5 17 Bxe6 fxe6 18 Qg4 e5 19 f5 Nd4



20 Nxd4 exd4 21 Rxd4! Qb6 22 f6! exf6 23 Nd5 Qc5 24 Rd2 Qc4 25 b3
Qc6 26 gxf6 Nxf6 27 Rxf6! Rxf6 28 Ne7 Qa6 29 Qxc8+ Rf8 30 Qc4
Qxa2 31 Rf2 Qa1+ 32 Kg2 Re8 33 Qe6 Rd8 34 Rf4 Qe1 35 Bf2 Qe2 36
Nxc6+! hxc6 37 Rh4+ Qh5 38 Rxh5+ gxh5 39 Qg6 Rg8 40 Qxh5+ Bh6
+ 41 Kf1 Kh7 1-0

Since those days a few Irish players have achieved the International Master title, but as yet no native Irishman has become a grandmaster. Undoubtedly part of the problem has been the geographical situation of Ireland. Amateur or semi-professional players in continental Europe, or even England, have relatively short journeys to make to compete against foreign masters and have title opportunities.

The other part of the problem is cultural and economic; the only solution will be if FIDE can succeed in getting chess established as an Olympic sport. Without that, State funds and sponsorship are almost impossible to get for the game as only physical sports qualify for official support. Ireland has produced many promising players in recent decades, almost all of whom have dropped out of the game in their twenties, usually after leaving university when they got jobs, became married or emigrated in search of work.

There are, nevertheless, hopes that Ireland will before too long produce a grandmaster. For example, Brian Kelly, who won a board prize in his early teens at the Moscow Olympics, is now an IM and has the potential to develop into a very fine player.

However, to return to our original question...

There is no doubt which player with an Irish name has the finest record. Count Alberic O'Kelly de Galway (another descendant of the "wild geese") was a grandmaster of both FIDE and ICCF and won the Third Correspondence World Championship. Unfortunately, despite his surname, he came from Belgium and not Galway although occasionally he did visit Ireland.

If we are not allowed to count him or Morphy as the greatest Irish player, I think the winner must be another master who was undoubtedly Irish by birth and descent, although he lived most of his life in England and represented that country rather than his native land.

I mean, of course, Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander (1909-74), an IM of both FIDE and ICCF, who was undoubtedly strong enough to have become a grandmaster had he played professionally. As it was he met most of the leading players of the 1930s to 1950s and beat quite a few of them, including Botvinnik and Bronstein.

Alexander was born in Cork, where his father was a professor at University College, but was transplanted to Birmingham in his youth. Maybe if Irish chess had been better organised, he would (like Reilly) have been willing to play for Ireland, but unfortunately the opportunity was lost.

Here is his most famous victory, from the 1946 radio match Britain v USSR:

Alexander-Botvinnik, USSR-Great Britain Radio Match, 1946

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 Bxc3+ 6 bxc3 Ne7 7 Qg4 cxd4?!

Of course 7...Qc7 is now the main line of the French Poisoned Pawn, and very unclear it remains! However Black has a different post in mind for the lady.

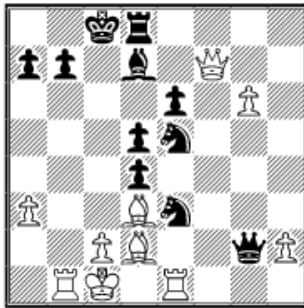
8 Qxg7 Rg8 9 Qxh7 Qa5

After this game, Black's last move was more or less abandoned, maybe without a fair hearing.

10 Rb1 Qxc3+ 11 Bd2 Qc7

11...Qxa3 would misplace the queen after 12 Nf3 Nbc6 13 Bd3 and if 13...Rxc2? 14 Ke2 when White has great piece coordination.

12 f4 Nbc6 13 Nf3 Bd7 14 Ng5 Rxc5 15 fxg5 0-0-0 16 Qxf7 Qxe5+ 17 Kd1 Nf5 18 g6 Ne3+ 19 Kc1 Qe4 20 Bd3 Qxc2 21 Re1 Ne5?



The losing move. Maybe White only has enough for a draw after 21...Nc4.

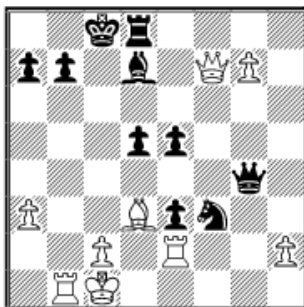
22 Qf4

Now White had a clear advantage against his eminent opponent.

22...Nf3 23 Re2 Qh3 24 Bxe3 e5

The central pawn mass apparently gives compensation for the exchange but Black has too many weaknesses.

25 Qf7 dxe3 26 g7 Qg4



Black has to watch the queening square as well as worry about d5 and b7.

27 h3! Qg1+ 28 Kb2 Qg3 29 Bg6! Nd4 30 g8Q Rxd8

30...Nxe2 allows White to keep the second queen by 31 Qgh7.

31 Qxd8+ Kc7 32 Qh7 Kd6 33 Bd3 e4

Botvinnik is playing for swindles now.

**34 Qh6+ Kc7 35 Rxe3 Qe5 36 Ka2 Nf5 37 Qg5 Be6 38 Be2 d4+ 39
Reb3 b6 40 Qd2 d3 41 Bg4 1-0**

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