

# Alexander McDonnell

## Edward Winter

(2004)

Many chess luminaries have investigated and debated how Alexander McDonnell's surname should be spelt, and here we review the discussion.

A letter dated 27 April 1842 from William Harris of Richmond appeared on pages 11-12 of the 1843 *Chess Player's Chronicle* :

'A few days ago I visited that interesting "City of Tombs" Kensall [*sic* ] Green Cemetery, for the purpose of discovering and paying my homage to the graves of those two lamented sons of Caissa – M<sup>d</sup>Donnell and La Bourdonnais. After a long search I succeeded in finding that of the former, in a sequestered spot at the North-west corner of the cemetery, near a shady plantation of evergreens; it is a modest-looking grave, covered by a plain stone slab, on which is inscribed:

"Sacred to the Memory of  
ALEXANDER MACDONNELL,  
(Formerly of Belfast,)  
Who died 14th September, 1835,  
Aged 37 years."

... Not far from thence, on the southern side of the cemetery, and near the chapel, is the grave of his great rival, the late Chess-King of Europe – La Bourdonnais; this is a very humble affair, consisting merely of a common head and foot stone, bearing this simple inscription:

"LOUIS CHARLES DE LA BOURDONNAIS,  
The celebrated Chess Player,  
Died 13th December, 1840,  
Aged 43 years."

The above information was repeated in the *Chess Monthly* , November 1859, pages 357-358, with the same spelling Kensall (instead of Kensal) but without any mention of Harris or the *Chronicle* .

When the 1846 *Chronicle* (pages 250-251) quoted a letter written by A.M. in 1834, it put McDonnell. The following volume (pages 362-363) gave two of his 'unpublished games', using the spelling M'Donnell. Two further letters from him were published, courtesy of George Walker, on pages 13-14 of the January 1860 *Chess Monthly*, both being signed 'Alex. M'Donnell'.

As shown above, within four years the *Chess Player* 's *Chronicle* had employed the spellings MacDonnell, McDonnell and M'Donnell, and subsequent writers took their pick. In *A History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913) H.J.R. Murray gave MacDonnell, explaining in a footnote on page 880: 'I follow the spelling of the name on MacDonnell's tombstone at Kensal Green'. (As will be seen below, he later regretted the decision.) His posthumous book *A Short History of Chess* (Oxford, 1963 – but written in 1917 and updated by B. Goulding Brown and H. Golombek) had McDonnell.

A feature on pages 132-133 of *CHESS*, 14 December 1935 began as follows:

'Saturday, 14 September marked the centenary of A. McDonnell's death but, to the best of our knowledge, in the whole of chess literature, only one person noted the fact or paid any tribute to the memory of one of the greatest players Britain has ever produced. This was Mr H.W. Hawks [in the *Newcastle Chronicle*] ...'

*CHESS* then quoted Hawks' article, which repeated the Kensal Green inscriptions as given in the *Chess Player* 's *Chronicle* of 1843, but with MacDonnell now appearing as McDonnell.

Before the *CHESS* item the *BCM* (October 1935, page 460) had published its own brief notice:

'14 September was the centenary of the death of Alexander M'Donnell, who was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London. Five years later his great rival, Louis La Bourdonnais, was also interred in the same cemetery. M'Donnell was the greatest English [*sic*] player of his time, and his matches created world-wide interest. A correspondent tells us that he finds the grave in excellent condition, the stone above it is very substantial, and about 20 years ago it was restored by the Good Companions Chess Problem Society, Philadelphia, Pa., USA.'

About a dozen years later the *BCM* hosted a debate about the spelling of the master's name, after the November 1947 issue (pages 369-370) had given a game against Evans won by 'MacDonnell'. The following appeared on page 13 of the January 1948 *BCM*:

'Mr Goulding Brown points out that the name of de Labourdonnais' great opponent was spelt *McDonnell*, and thus he himself spelt his name on the title page of his book on Economics. The mistake has probably become common because

of the similarity of the name of the Rev. G.A. MacDonnell. Even Bird, on page 15 of his *Chess History and Reminiscences* both versions of the spelling to the older player.'

gives

It might have been added that Bird also gave the wrong year of death (1837 instead of 1835).

On page 66 of the February 1948 *BCM* R.N. Coles responded:

'Mr Goulding Brown raises a point of some small importance in the January issue. It is preposterous that we do not know how to spell the surname of one of our six greatest native chess masters. It has been quoted variously as McDonnell, MacDonnell and M'Donnell. The evidence he now adduces in favour of the first is very strong, but his cursory dismissal of the second as a mere confusion with a later player is hardly justified, for the second spelling is used on the tombstone, and tombstones are not usually erected except by someone who has been closely connected with the deceased during his lifetime. It would be interesting to know whether any readers can produce any other evidence of value, and particularly in connection with the third alternative spelling.'

The exchange of correspondence was rounded off by H.J.R. Murray on pages 82-83 of the March 1948 *BCM* :

'Mr Goulding Brown is right as to the spelling of McDonnell's surname, but his contemporaries often went wrong. Lewis wavered between M'Donnel and Macdonnel; Greenwood Walker used M'Donnell; George Walker M'Donnell and McDonnell, and finally started the legend that it was MacDonnell on his tombstone, and the *Dictionary of National Biography* followed suit. I regret to say that I adopted this in my *History of Chess* when I found it in the *DNB*. In 1934 I discussed the matter with J. Keeble and suggested to him that he should try and solve the question as he enjoyed this kind of research, and on 8 September 1934 he wrote me the following postcard from London:

"I have been in London earlier than I expected. Have today (Saturday) seen Alexander McDonnell's grave. It is correctly engraved Mc, a small c with a dot under it. The inscription is wholly in capital letters. The cemetery books also record him as McDonnell. I could not find Labourdonnais' grave."

In the above quote from Keeble the letter c was raised, with the dot just below it. The item also specified that the site was 'a substantial stone lying down, about 18 in. thick' and had the following reproduction of the text:

SACRED  
TO THE MEMORY OF  
ALEXANDER M'DONNELL  
FORMERLY OF BELFAST  
WHO DIED  
14 SEPT. 1835  
AGED 37 YEARS.

It will be noted that in the 1948 discussion nobody referred to 'MacDonnell' being reported as the tombstone spelling by William Harris in the early 1840s. Detailed information about the location of the graves of both McDonnell and Labourdonnais was given by David Hooper on pages 514-515 of the November 1986 *BCM*.

Another writer who became interested in the spelling controversy was C.J.S. Purdy. Two items in his magazine *Chess World* in 1955 (January, page 11 and November, page 236) added nothing new, but a significant article entitled 'Alexander M'Donnell, MacDonnell, McDonnell' appeared on pages 170-171 of the August 1958 issue. Extracts are given below:

'Some problems have little or no practical importance but gradually accumulate human interest because many people tackle them and fail. When at last someone succeeds, it is something. Mount Everest.

... The mystery has now been solved – and on the initiative of an Australian 12,000 miles from the scene of the crime. He is that indefatigable chess antiquary of Melbourne, Mr M.V. Anderson, possessor of the biggest chess library in the Antipodes. He appointed as local sleuth his nephew Mr E.J. Watson, who proved much more efficient than any of the antiquaries who have tackled the problem before. Above all, he unearthed a signature – two, in fact.

First of all, Mr Watson consulted – in the British Museum Library – the title-pages of all the books and pamphlets on political

economy of which A.M. was the author. The titles are lengthy, and we content ourselves with listing the ways the author's name is spelt, together with date of publication and the name of the publishers.

1826, M'Donnell (John Murray)

1826, M'Donnell (John Murray)

1827, M'Donnell (John Murray)

1828, MACDONNELL (Murray).

(This pamphlet is in the Public Library, Sydney, and Mr F.M. Dunn showed us the title-page some years ago; the style is capital letters for everything, and this could have determined the spelling, i.e. because it looked the nicest when only capitals were used. Ed.)

1830, M'Donnell (Ridgway)

1830, M'Donnell (Effingham Wilson)

1833, McDonnell (Effingham Wilson).

The 1833 pamphlet (in the form of a letter) ends with the (printed) words, 'Your obedient Servant, A. McDonnell'. This would more or less compel Messrs Effingham Wilson to use that spelling on the title page.

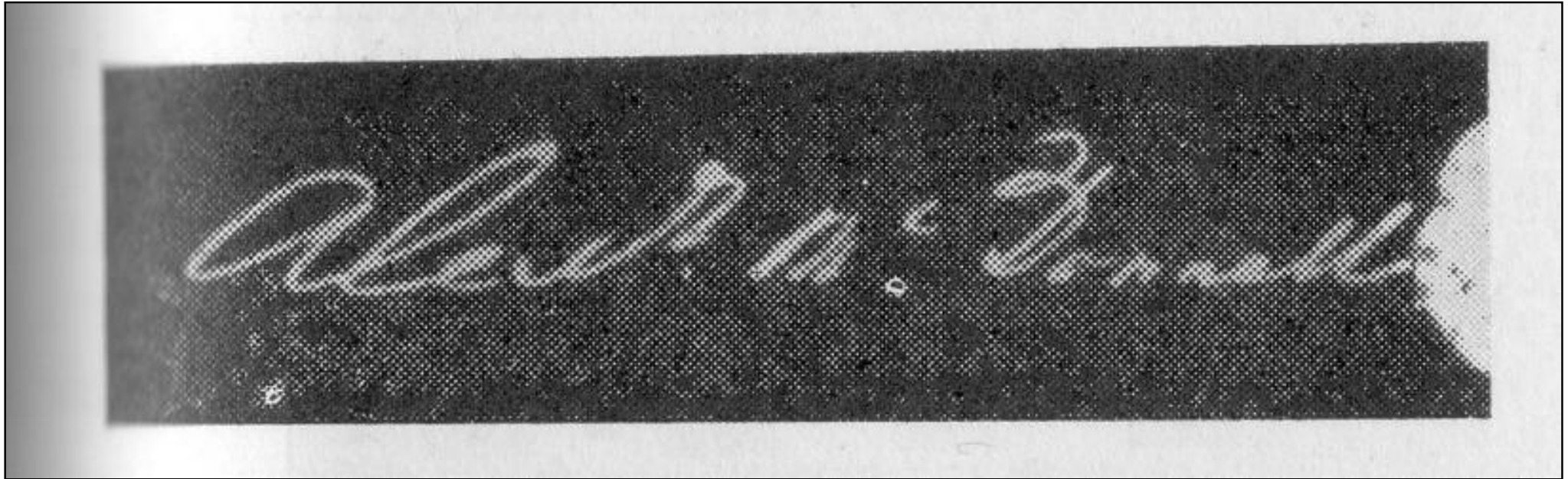
So far it is quite evident that A.M. sanctioned the spelling of his name in three different ways. Did he himself sign it in different ways, like Shakespeare? The answer is yes. Sir John Murray of Messrs John Murray & Co. lent Mr Watson a letter from A.M. dated 23 December 1825, and by courtesy of Mr Anderson a photostat copy is before us. The signature reads:



Alexr. M'Donnell.

That was 1825. Subsequently, the Minute Books of the West Indian Committee of Merchants, of which A.M. was secretary, showed the name as McDonnell but not in the form of a signature.

Finally, we come to A.M.'s will of 2 September 1835. A photostat of the relevant portions is also before us. The will begins, in a scrivener's copperplate hand, 'This is the last will and testament of me Alexander MacDonnell' and winds up with, 'In witness whereof I the said Mac Donnell ....' (with this time a clear space after the 'Mac'). BUT the signature reads:



Alexr. McDonnell.

He died two weeks later, so it is fair to assume that whatever variant of his name he may have preferred at one time or another, he died Alexander McDonnell. There is no birth certificate, as civil registration of births in Ireland only began in 1864. In any case, a birth certificate is only conclusive for given names, in this case Alexander. Nobody is bound to spell his surname the way his father did, and it is rather the last spelling than the first that matters.

The spelling on the tombstone follows the signature on the will – McDonnell.'

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From David McAlister (Hillsborough, Northern Ireland):

*' Since I was first able to spell my name (in the 1950s) I have considered M plus a small c (Mc) to be interchangeable with M plus an apostrophe (M'). A friend who has an excellent knowledge of the Ulster Scots heritage has confirmed that until probably about 50 years ago M was frequently used (particularly in print) to represent Mc. My cuttings of Belfast News-Letter chess columns from the 1930s to the 1950s suggest that it was the standard rendition. Today, M has fallen out of use.*

*When I sign my name the small c is aligned with the top of the other letters, so that it actually looks quite like an apostrophe. I would therefore suggest that McDonnell and M' are in reality the same. MacDonnell, however, is a true variation in spelling.*

*The other issue is the full stop under the small c. Having checked this with my expert friend, I think that*

*' ).*

*'*

*'*

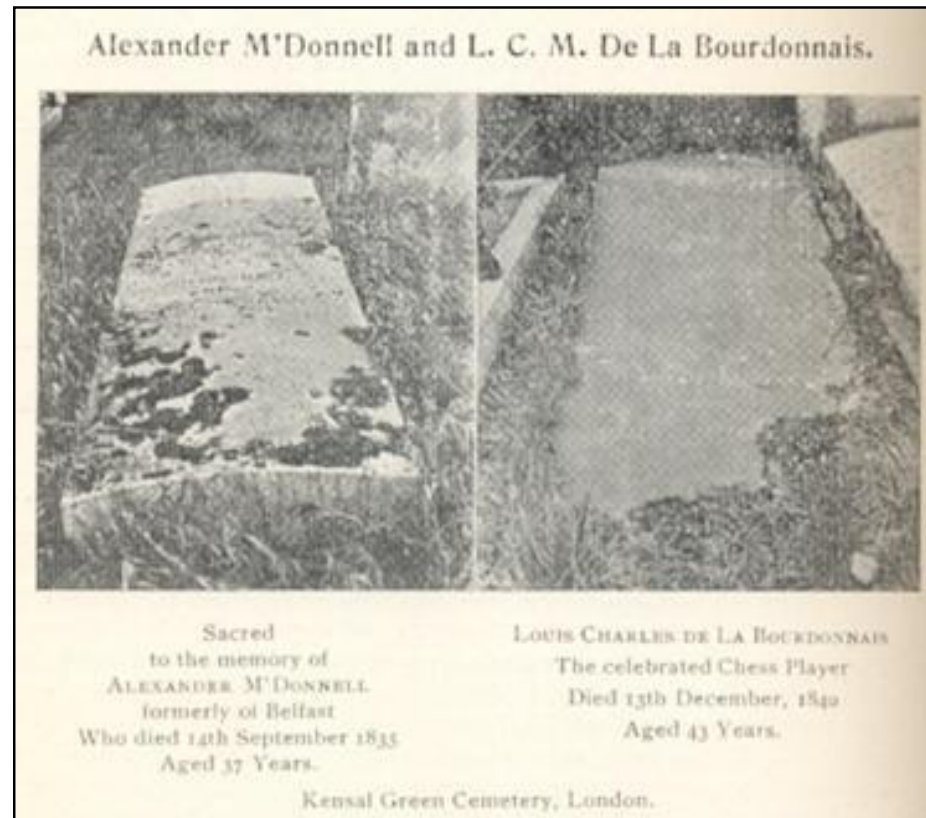
*' McDonnell are*

*the full stop is decorative  
in nature or emphasizes the  
fact that the small c should  
appear at the top of the line  
of characters.*

(3437)

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Below is the only photograph of McDonnell's grave known to us. It was published on page 202 of  
" Our Folder " (The Good Companion Chess Problem Club) 1 May 1921:



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