Stuart Milner-Barry

Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander: A Personal Memoir

The first time that I met Hugh Alexander was in my sister's flat in Edgbaston. She was at that time a lecturer at Birmingham University, and had got to hear of Hugh who had followed me a year or two later as the British Boy's Chess Champion at Hastings. Hugh was then at King Edward's High School, Birmingham, and I was at Cheltenham College. My sister and a colleague with whom she lived arranged tea, and thence began a friendship which ended only with Hugh's death in 1974. I cannot remember much about this occasion except that I was struck by that liveliness of manner which remained characteristic of him all his life.

We no doubt met in the next year or two, but only got to know each other well when he came up to Cambridge in 1928. He was already a very strong chess player, and in his first year (this being my fourth) he won the University Championship. He played four times in the University match, losing only once to S. Adler in 1930 on the 3rd board and winning on boards one both in 1931 and 1932. In his first appearance, which was in 1929, he won a particularly brilliant game against R. H. Newman. He was a very good mathematician at King's and took First Class Honours in 1931. He did not, however, obtain the coveted star which indicated exceptional distinction. This he attributed, I have no doubt rightly, to the amount of time he devoted to chess.

Chess was not the only game Hugh played. Surprisingly enough, he played table tennis well enough to be first string for the University. He was not naturally good at ball games (for instance tennis and squash, at which his movements seemed curiously uncoordinated), but at table tennis, he was remarkably effective in an ugly and contorted style that enabled him to retrieve endlessly. My brothers and I, who rather fancied ourselves, never managed to get the better of him; and as he did not like losing (though he did so most amiably if occasion arose) he never conceded a point that he could help. As far as I know, he never played table tennis seriously after he left Cambridge; but he became a good fives player, and in later life expert at croquet, which he greatly enjoyed. He found time to play regularly at the Cheltenham Croquet Club, and he was also very fond of bridge. Both of these he played at a good competitive standard without, of course, claiming to be more than of high-grade amateur status.

Hugh and I played a great deal of serious friendly chess in Cambridge together. We inaugurated a series of matches with clocks which we continued later at Winchester, and after the war in Hampstead and Blackheath. He was by the time I left the University one of the strongest players in the country, and came second in the 1932 British Championship. He continued to be in one of the top positions each year until his first victory at Hastings in 1938. Here he won ahead of E. G. Sergeant and Sir George Thomas, with myself in fourth place. In the meantime he had been representing England in the International Team tournament and had been one of the British representatives in the great Nottingham tournament of 1936.

Only a year or two ago I met at the high table at Trinity Professor J. E. Littlewood, the Cambridge mathematician, who was, I believe, Hugh's supervisor or tutor. He told me that Hugh was on the borderline of a Fellowship, but that Hugh himself had thought that his chances were not sufficiently good to justify him in turning down an offer to teach mathematics at Winchester College. Alexander, when I told him about this conversation, thought that Professor Littlewood had over-rated his merits as a mathematician. But Professor G. H. Hardy, who also taught him, said of him that he was the only genuine mathematician he knew who did not become one; so he must have been pretty good.

Accordingly Hugh went to Winchester in 1932 and remained there for the next six years. By all accounts, he

was a brilliant teacher of mathematics, and he also instituted a pioneer class in chess. He was a born expositor, he liked dealing with boys, and he thoroughly enjoyed his work. I thought it a pity when in 1938 he moved to London to join the John Lewis Partnership, but Hugh had only been at John Lewis's for about a year, when we were overtaken by the war. When the war broke out, the British team for the International Team Tournament, consisting of Sir George Thomas, Alexander, Harry Golombek, myself and B. H. Wood (who had taken E. G. Sergeant's place), were in Buenos Aires, where we had arrived (with the exception of Sir George) on an elderly Belgian boat, the *Piriapolis*, specially hired to transport a large number of the European teams. This was, as may be imagined, a remarkable menagerie of chess players, who in those days (long before the improvement in the status of chess as a profession) were much more Bohemian and less respectably bourgeois than they have since become. Hugh got a great deal of amusement out of witnessing my reaction to this motley gathering.

When we reached the Argentine we had time only to complete the preliminaries, and to qualify successfully for the final, when the war broke out. A decision had to be taken at once, and with the vision of a London in flames, most of us did not think we could go on playing chess. The British team, therefore, withdrew and by the kindness of Sir George Thomas, who lent us the money, Hugh and I came back with him on the *Alcantara*, leaving Buenos Aires that very night.

As may be imagined it was a curious voyage. The ship was blacked out, and it was carrying fewer than 100 passengers, instead of its normal complement of 1500 or so. It was here that I first acquired, and encouraged Hugh to acquire, a taste for wine. We reckoned that if the ship were going to be sunk we might as well enjoy ourselves, and as I was then a bachelor, expense was no serious object. From time to time, too, Sir George Thomas entertained us most hospitably in his first-class cabin. We also took lessons in ballroom dancing. Hugh threw himself into this, as he did into everything he undertook, with the utmost enthusiasm, and proved far more proficient than I. The voyage passed without incident, except when waking from my watch-keeping on deck I mistook a porpoise for a submarine. We came safely home unconvoyed in something like thirteen days.

There ensued the strange autumn of the 'phoney' war, in which both of us were looking for something to do. After I had been turned down for military service, I found myself invited early in the New Year by W. G. Welchman, a contemporary from Trinity who subsequently became a mathematical Fellow at Sidney Sussex, to go to Bletchley to join a mysterious organisation then known as the Government Code and Cypher School. There I found Hugh, who had arrived a week or two earlier. It was to be our home until the end of the European war.

Much has been written lately about what came out of Bletchley, but only from the point of view of the user. Security restrictions on the story of the breaking of the Enigma from the technical point of view have not yet been lifted. I still hope that they may be in my time. It would, I believe, make an enthralling story which would be particularly fascinating to chess players. Both for Hugh and myself it was rather like playing a tournament game (sometimes several games) every day for 5-1/2 years.

During the whole of this period Hugh Alexander and I, in company originally with Gordon Welchman, were billetted in an old-fashioned but exceedingly comfortable pub called "The Shoulder of Mutton" in old Bletchley. Although by now we had been close friends for at least fifteen years, we became not only friends but colleagues in a game even more tense and much more important than chess. When Gordon Welchman moved on to a higher sphere, I was put in charge of an organisation called Hut 6 and Hugh of one called Hut 8. (They really were huts built in the grounds of Bletchley Park.) Hut 8 was concerned with the breaking of the Naval Enigma, and therefore played a main part in the Battle of the Atlantic. Whatever might have been happening on land, the one thing certain was that we should be starved into submission in short order unless means could be found of saving our convoys from destruction by the U-boats. That this was done successfully—though sometimes with a hideously narrow margin of error—is now a matter of public knowledge. When, as sometimes happened, Hut 8 became bogged down, losses mounted alarmingly. But when they were reading the Naval Enigma consistently and continuously, as they did for the best part of the war, it was possible to re-route the convoys and thereby keep them out of harm's way. Sometimes, I believe, when anti-submarine measures temporarily came into the ascendant, the Navy challenged the U-boats by sailing the convoys straight into the packs.

It is sometimes supposed that these results were achieved by a few backroom boys all of whom were mathematicians or chess players. Of course, the truth was entirely different. Hut 6 and Hut 8 were expanded from an original nucleus of about 30 until they comprised several hundred people all of them billetted in and around Bletchley, and from very small beginnings they grew into large and complex organisations—assembling, recording and preparing the raw material of encoded messages from which the essential clues to a breakthrough could be

derived, and finally decoding them into the original German.

We worked through the war on a continuous three-shift basis. The night shift, although it had a unique atmosphere of peace and quiet, was not generally popular because everybody got very tired through lack of proper sleep in the day; but Hugh himself had a strange passion for working at night and used to put himself on nights for weeks on end. That did not prevent him working much of the day as well, and he would seldom come home before lunchtime, having worked from midnight the previous night. He seemed to thrive on this strange regime.

Although, as I say, I was in charge of a different section concerned with the breaking of the Army and Air Force codes, Hut 8 and Hut 6 were joined like Siamese twins, in that we had joint use of the embryonic electronic computers, which formed an essential part of the tools of the trade. Since I was never able to understand how they worked, I am in no danger of revealing any official secrets. But the fact that there was a common requirement for this machinery, at a time when intelligence was vitally urgent for the conduct both of the Navy and Military wars, meant that there were inevitable problems of priority—who should have first use or greater use of the "bombes", as they were called. In these circumstances, the fact that Hugh and I had been friends for so many years made it possible to resolve differences which might otherwise have had to be referred to higher levels, with disastrous loss of time.

I was particularly struck by the fairness and impartiality with which Hugh approached problems of this kind. He knew perfectly well the urgency from the naval point of view of breaking the naval codes and he fought his own corner; but he was always prepared to take the broad view, and to balance his own requirements against what might upon occasions be the even more urgent operational needs of Hut 6. In the end we always seemed to reach a sensible time-sharing compromise, and I do not recall a single instance on which we seriously fell out on an issue of this kind. Later on, I seem to remember, we managed to obtain a more adequate supply of bombes, and this particular problem became less acute.

There is no doubt that we were extremely fortunate to have this job during the war and extremely fortunate, too, in our living circumstances. We were hardly at any kind of risk, unlike the Londoners in the blitz and the inhabitants of other major cities or the fighting Services. One could not help sometimes feeling ashamed of the sheltered life that we led. At the same time probably most of those who worked at Bletchley felt in retrospect—however insensitive it may appear against the whole background of the war—that it was an experience which they would not have missed, and which on balance they enjoyed. I am sure that both Hugh and I felt this, and in a sense what happened after the war had a feeling of anticlimax. Never again could one recapture the same sense of unity in a common cause, or the sheer excitement of the day-to-day work.

After the war Hugh went back briefly to London to rejoin John Lewis's. He was not cut out to be a businessman (he looked singularly incongruous in a black jacket and striped pants) and I think he was heartily thankful to find himself pressed to join Government service in 1946. He moved to Cheltenham, advanced steadily in the office, and in 1955 was promoted CBE[1] (he was made CBE[2] for his wartime services in 1946). In his early fifties he reached the highest rank that the office could offer him in the technical field, and held it until his retirement in 1971. Although our official paths had diverged and I was not concerned with his work at Cheltenham, I have heard from many sources that he had the highest possible reputation, both for his technical brilliance and for the inspiration and leadership he gave to his staff. That merely confirms all that I saw during the war. In 1970 he was made CMG,[3] and if the Foreign and Commonwealth Office could have recommended him for Knighthood they would, I believe, have been happy to do it.

During all these 20 years or so, Hugh led an extremely busy life. Apart from his full-time professional work, which would have been enough for most people, he played top board for England until 1958, and took part regularly in the International Team Tournament except when the exigencies of the Service prevented it. Thus he was unable to go to Helsinki in 1952 or to Moscow in 1956, both of which I attended, and it was a disappointment to both of us that we never after the war took part together in one of these memorable competitions. He won the British Championship again in 1956, but that was not a particularly good year (it was just before the Moscow tournament), and on the whole his post-war record in the Championship was not particularly impressive. But he achieved many splendid performances against top-ranking foreign masters, the pinnacle of his achievement being to tie with Bronstein for first place in the Hastings International Congress of 1953. He defeated Bronstein in their individual encounter in a marathon Queen-and-Pawn ending which went on for over 100 moves; and slaughtered the other Soviet grandmaster, Tolush, in no time with the Black pieces. This feat made a great sensation at the time and hugh became a popular hero in the Press. He accepted this with his usual charm and equanimity.

[1] Commander of the Order of the British Empire.
[2] Order of the British Empire.
[3] Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.

On top of all this, he took on a great deal of journalistic work at chess. He had a regular column in the Sunday *Times* and others in The *Spectator, Star* and *Evening News*. Late in life he added an excellent weekly contribution to the *Financial Times*. He wrote a number of books on chess and, both as a journalist and as a more serious writer of the game, he was an extremely lively and illuminating writer. In spite of his congenital state of untidiness, both in his appearance and in his surroundings, he was a surprisingly well organised person. If he had not been he could not have kept under control all the things that he did. In fact, he was a highly efficient operator who knew how to make the best use of his time, and he had immense reserves of physical and nervous energy. He hardly knew what it was to be ill, had no patience with illness in himself and not much with it in others.

In 1958 Hugh quite unexpectedly gave up competitive chess while still under the age of 50, and thereafter could never be persuaded even to take part in a holiday Congress. He felt that his standard was gradually declining—as of course commonly happens after the age of 50, if not after 40. He felt that he had achieved all that he could achieve in the chess world, and he had undoubtedly lost his zest and enthusiasm for top-class play. As with great players at any game, the competitive instinct was very highly developed, and he hated the feeling that he was failing to win or losing games that in his prime he would have won or saved. I thought it was a great pity, but I have little doubt that the weight of his responsibilities at the office, on top of all his other activities, influenced his decision, which I do not think he ever regretted. All the same it was a sad loss to British chess, for he could have continued to be an anchor man in the British team for many years.

He subsequently took up correspondence chess, and naturally he could hold his own with anybody at this. He enormously enjoyed it, and tried in vain to inveigle me into playing. But, as I told him, I found playing even one correspondence game far too time-consuming, whereas he seemed to be happy to have a dozen or more going at the same time. (I believe, however, that towards the end of his life he began to find the strain telling on him.) He continued also—his one concession to over-the-board chess—to win the strong Cheltenham Club Championship with great regularity.

In 1964, he was appointed non-playing Captain of the British team and held this position for the next 8 years. He greatly enjoyed this role, even though it was not a particularly good time for British chess, and he suffered several disappointments in failing to get a BCF team into the finals of the Olympiad. With his enthusiasm and friendliness, and his prestige as a player and a personality, he naturally commanded the affection and loyalty of his team. Yet I am not sure that he was ideally suited for the job. He took immense trouble for the comfort and convenience of the players, but I sometimes felt that he made too heavy weather of the actual business of selecting who was to play in any particular match, which is one of the principal duties of the non-playing captain. Certainly he devoted immense thought to his decisions—more thought, I sometimes felt, than the weight of the subject justified. In the end you back your hunch and it may or may not come off: nobody can prove you would have done better to choose somebody else. Moreover he suffered acutely from the nervous tensions inseparable from watching your team falter and go down—far worse, as he said, than playing oneself—and this may sometimes have communicated itself to his players.

Hugh gave up the captaincy after his illness in 1972, and it was sad that he should have died just before the flowering of talent which made 1974 a vintage year for British chess. That this was largely attributable to the efforts which he, in company with a few others, had made towards the training and encouragement of our young players, I have no doubt at all.

Hugh was kept on at Cheltenham for 2-1/2 years after the normal retiring age, in itself a great compliment in a smallish organisation where vacancies at the top rarely arise. Some years earlier he had been invited to become Bursar of his old college at Cambridge, King's, and on his retirement he was invited to take up an extremely responsible post in the United States. He rejected both these offers, the first because he felt, quite rightly I think, that attractive as Cambridge might be he would be unsuited to the detailed work of college administration; and the second because he had made up his mind by then that when he retired, he would make himself a home in Cheltenham and devote himself to further writing on chess, for which he had a formidable programme of work already laid out. He was in fact seriously tempted by this offer, but providentially, as it turned out, came down against it.

Though he was sad to retire, he settled down very happily in a charming small house in Cheltenham, establishing for himself a home of his own for the first time for many years. But in April 1972 he became unwell when captaining the British team in the Clare-Benedict Cup at Vienna (in fact we had been concerned about him as early as Christmas), and came home obviously a very sick man. Indeed, he speedily became so ill that it was not thought that he could survive, and my wife and I, when we saw him in hospital in Cheltenham, feared that we had said goodbye to him. He, however, thought differently, and he told her so. He then left hospital and gradually recovered. For many weeks his friends did not

dare to hope, but in fact he gradually regained his strength and by the autumn had resumed full working activity. His illness and hospitalisation coincided with the Fischer/Spassky match (which he intended to write in Rejkavik), and only a man of iron determination could have managed not only to fulfil his contract with the publisher within the stipulated time, but to complete what to my mind is a brilliant account of the match. While the first half of the book had been written in advance and set up in type, the games themselves had to be sent to him in hospital, and subsequently to his home, where in spite of physical weakness he mustered all his powers of analysis and exposition to annotating the scores—completing the last game with the publisher's messenger actually at the door.

When Hugh was ill and after he came out of hospital, he was devotedly looked after by neighbours and friends, both from Cheltenham and outside. At that time it appeared to be a matter of weeks only, but Hugh's recovery, temporary though his friends realised it must in all probability be, ushered in a period of great contentment for him. Although Hugh had had a busy, full and satisfying life, and although he was attached to his family and took a lively interest in his grandchildren, I do not think that he had found his bachelor existence in furnished rooms, while comfortable enough in material terms, particularly congenial. For the first time for many years, he had a real home; it was indeed an Indian summer, which lasted for 18 months of borrowed time.

During that time, apart from writing one of his most attractive and attractively produced books, *A Book of Chess*, he performed a last service to the British Chess Federation in connection with the European Team Tournament at Bath. This was our biggest effort in the international field for very many years. It was made possible only by the generosity and enthusiasm of the Bath Corporation (who took it under their wing as part of the "Monarchy 1000' celebrations), but, since neither they nor the British Chess Federation had any recent experience of an operation of an operation on this scale, there were naturally a great many practical problems to be settled. The main burden of the administrative work fell on David Anderton, now Deputy President of the BCF and Hugh's successor as non-playing captain of the British team. He was loyally seconded by Hugh, who made frequent visits from Cheltenham and indeed spent much of the tournament actually at Bath. His prestige in the international world, together with his tact and friendliness, were invaluable in soothing the ruffled feelings that were, perhaps, only to be expected where so many grand masters, accustomed only to the highest standards of comfort and convenience, were gathered together.

The tournament was an outstanding success and reflected great credit on all those concerned in its promotion. In one respect only, but an important one, it was too much of a success. Contrary to all previous experience in this country, the number of spectators who wanted to see the play (and were charged admission for doing so) was far in excess of the capacity of the Guildhall. Even had this been foreseen, little could have been done about it, since no other venue was available. In the upshot, emergency arrangements had to be made to set up a demonstration room where would-be spectators could see something of the play, while being allowed into the playing room in rotation to see the gladiators themselves. All this, of course, involved a great deal of extra work. Hugh, although his illness was clearly gaining on him, exhausted himself in the practical arrangements of fixing up hotels, dealing with last minute change of plans, non-arrival of teams on their expected trains, daily transport problems, and so on; and by the end of the tournament both David Anderton and he were pretty well worn out. The British Chess Federation and the Friends of Chess owe them both a great debt.

On what was to be his last Christmas Hugh came to stay with us, and we had an extraordinarily happy weekend. We played a spirited game which he won decisively—indeed his superiority over me became more marked in the last few years than it had been earlier. He and my family indulged in the usual vigorous arguments which he so much enjoyed. In February, he became seriously ill again and my wife and I went down to see him. We found him weak but by no means (unless it was a front) abandoning hope of recovery. A few days later, after appearing to improve and getting downstairs to watch television, he collapsed on getting out of bed and died very shortly afterwards without fully recovering consciousness—as happy a way of going as could be hoped for.

It is now time to sum up. There is no doubt that Hugh was in the front rank of British chess masters, ranking (after the historic times of Staunton, Amos Burn and Blackburne) with H. E. Atkins and Jonathan Penrose as the outstanding players of this century. How he ranked in comparison with these I do not know, and it is not important. This sort of issue can be argued indefinitely, and Hugh himself had a passion, which I by no means shared, for arguing about matters of this kind on the basis of statistical records. All his life he was curiously interested in making comparisons of people's respective abilities, whether they were chess masters or Permanent Secretaries. How, for example, did Lord Briges compare with Lord Normanbrook, or either of them with Lord Helsby or Lord Armstrong? He would have liked a grading system—another modern invention for which he

cherished a misguided affection—to give him the answer.

I would guess that he was more uneven in his play than either Atkins or Penrose, but more dangerous than either of them to the very best players. His victories against Evwe, Botwinnik, Bronstein, Pachman, Gligoric and others are evidence of this. When one remembers that he combined chess with a career of outstanding distinction in the professional field, and that he always put his profession first, it is astonishing that he should have been able to maintain himself as England's leading player over a period of some 25 years.

While in his youth his reputation was that of a dangerous and dashing combinative player, his style matured as he grew older and he became much more of a strategist. Although he had a wide and pretty complete range of opening knowledge, and kept himself up to date with developments, he was not himself much of an innovator. He liked to rely on well-tried openings like the Ruy Lopez, which he would cheerfully play as Black or White. But Golombek and Hartston are much better qualified than I am to analyse his style. The remarks that I venture below are based only upon the personal experience of scores of serious games played over the years.

Hugh liked to be attacked. He preferred an active defence, and he was a most dangerous counter-puncher when in difficulties. He had excellent judgment of the kind of positions that could be defended, and he defended them with great resource. Thus, like Muhammad Ali, he appeared to leave himself wide open and to invite me to attack him. His instincts were to accept any gambit that was offered to him, and his instincts were usually right. That no doubt was one reason why he won the large majority of games that we played. Another was that he was a much more complete player.

Of course, when he was playing top board for England, and particularly after he had established himself by his record against topranking masters, his opponents did not launch speculative attacks upon him; nor did they leave themselves open to his combinative genius. That he won fewer games as he became older was no doubt due as much to this as to any waning of his youthful fire; and he developed a very practical technique, in the interests of his side, of allowing the game to peter out where half a point against a grand master opponent appeared to be all that could reasonably be expected.

As a man, Hugh was a wholly delightful companion. He was extremely lively and talkative, full of ideas and genuinely interested in everything that his friends were doing. He liked arguing for its own sake, but was never quarrelsome. He was the kind of person who, when he came into a room, always appeared to make everybody feel more alive. In fact he was the most vivid person I have ever met. Hugh was entirely natural and spontaneous. He was the most open of men, and said exactly what he thought without beating about the bush.

There was never any sense of strain because you always knew where you stood with him. He viewed himself with the same dispassion as he did others, and was his own sternest critic. If anything went wrong in his life, or if he made an error of judgment, he was always ready to admit—not always rightly—that he was to blame. He was never sorry for himself, even when he was ill, nor did he expect others to be sorry for him; neither did he encourage others to be sorry for themselves.

Hugh himself used to say that he did not particularly care for people, did not particularly mind when they were not there, and could get on perfectly well without them. The first statement was manifestly untrue, but it may well be that he was more interested in ideas than in people; and he was certainly far from being a sentimentalist. There was plenty of Irish toughness about him, and his realistic attitude to life sometimes bordered on ruthlessness. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he was a true and staunch friend in good times and in bad. He had a particular gift for putting himself on terms with the young, with whom he talked as though they were his contempories. To my son, when he was at school at Cheltenham, he showed particular kindness, but to all of the children he was always ready with practical help and encouragement. There are not many of one's friends, however fond of them one may be, of whom it can be said that one is invariably glad to see them arrive, sorry to see them go, and looks forward eagerly to seeing again. I am sure all Hugh's friends felt the same about him.

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