

A Tribute to Hugh Alexander

Sir Stuart Milner-Barry

Editor's Preface

This tribute to the great chess master and cryptologist Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander was written by Sir Stuart Milner-Barry, himself a great chess player, cryptologist and a long-standing friend, on the occasion of Hugh Alexander's death at Cheltenham 15 February 1974. The tribute has previously been published in Harry Golombek and William R. Hartson's book entitled "The Best Games of C.H.O'D. Alexander", Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976.

The Editor,

Frode Weierud, © December 1998

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I first met Hugh Alexander when he was a schoolboy at King Edward's, Birmingham, and I was here at Cheltenham. He changed very little over the years and seemed to me to be much the same when we visited him at his home just a few days before his death. I think this was partly because there always seemed to be something boyish about him. This was due partly to his untidiness, which must have been a great trial to anybody that looked after him, partly to his naturalness and spontaneity, and to the enthusiasm with which he attacked everything that he did — whether it was chess, bridge, croquet, table tennis, stamps or his work at the office. He always had the same eager and lively manner because he was genuinely interested in whatever either he or you were doing.

I am not going in this company to recite his triumphs at chess, or to try to describe his immense services to British chess over forty years. Nor would I be the right person to describe his work at GCHQ since the War. But I would like to say something about him as a colleague and a friend, because I was lucky enough to be very closely associated with him both at chess and in his official work during the War.

Although we had been close friends in the chess world from our Cambridge days, and I had often stayed with him at Winchester when he was a teacher of mathematics there in the 1930s (and he must by all accounts have been a first-rate teacher), it was during the War that we first found ourselves thrown together as colleagues. We shared the same billet at Bletchley through the whole five years, and we were in charge of neighbouring sections at the Park. Hugh was an ideal colleague. He was invariably candid and straightforward, and said exactly what he thought. He always took the broadest view of the issues involved, and never attempted to press his own claims beyond the point which he thought right on the merits of the case. This was a characteristic which struck me again and again. He was an exceptionally fair-minded man, and he never took advantage of the fact that he was much cleverer and quicker witted than the rest of us. On the rare occasion when he was wrong, he did not, as most of us do, think up excuses or seek to defend himself — indeed, he tended, I thought, all through his life to be more critical of himself than he had real cause to be. Hugh was a tremendously hardworking man, much given to what are now known as "unsocial hours", i.e. working all night and most of the following morning as well, for weeks on end; and he enjoyed it all enormously.

After the War (at the end of which he was made OBE), he went briefly back to the London Store business into which he had been persuaded to make a rather ill-advised foray just before the War. He was not at all well suited to being a business man, and I think it was a relief when after a short interval he returned to GCHQ. By that time I had been transferred to another Department, and our official paths no longer crossed. But his record at GCHQ speaks for itself. In 1955 he was promoted CBE at the early age of 45, and in 1970, shortly before his retirement, CMG. None of these awards were of the kind that are sometimes regarded as routine for public servants. They were given because of his outstanding technical skill, and for the gifts of leadership and administrative capacity

that he first displayed during the War. He must have been a most inspiring chief. If it had been possible within the conventions I believe that he would have received still higher recognition.

As it was, the office were reluctant to let him go and when he finally retired at Christmas 1971 he was already two years over the normal retiring age. When he did go his international reputation was such that our American friends made determined efforts to secure his services for the United States. There cannot be many superannuated British Civil Servants to whom a compliment of this kind has been paid. Hugh gave this offer very careful thought, but — as it turned out providentially — he finally decided to go ahead with the plans that he had already mapped out. Although he had dreaded retirement, he was delighted within a few weeks to find himself as busy as he had ever been with a very heavy programme of books, articles and so on about chess — to say nothing of all the time he gave to it on the administrative aide, for instance with the Friends of Chess.

Most of us here know pretty well the story of the next two years. How he was taken ill in the Spring of 1972 just before the Fischer/Spassky match, how his life was despaired of by everybody except himself, how he survived to enjoy great happiness, to produce more notable writings on chess and to delight his friends with the gaiety, humour and warmth of his personality, which seemed even to have been enhanced by his illness. He had practically never been ill before, and I think it was a revelation to him to realise the depth of the affection which his friends felt for him.

I imagine that the predominant feeling in all our minds is that his death was altogether premature. He was intellectually, and appeared to be physically, in the prime of life. But I am equally sure that if he had died 10 years later we should have felt exactly the same, for he was not one of those who could ever grow old. Another thing I am sure about is that Hugh himself would not have wished grief to be our predominant feeling. He was a realist, made of pretty tough fibre, and was not at all given to sentiment or self-pity. He would have said in that clear-cut definite way of his "Well, it happens to all of us, no good making a fuss about it". He would have wished rather, I think, that we should remember that he had had a full, happy and successful life, that he left behind him a famous name and memories that will always be treasured by his friends of all ages. I do not know whether he knew, as many of us did, that he was living on borrowed time. I do not think so, but if he did I doubt whether he would have told us. And whether he did or not I believe that the last 18 months were as happy and rewarding as any he had ever spent.