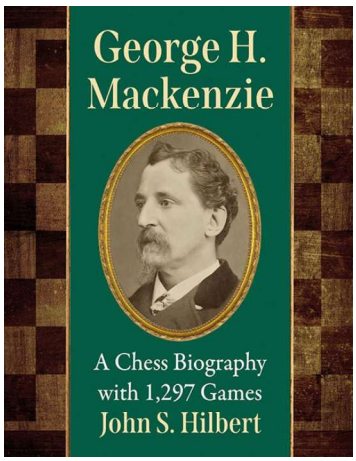
George H. Mackenzie, A Chess Biography with 1,297 Games

by John S. Hilbert

Reviewed by Mark Capron



Imagine the nicest gentlemen you have ever met. They are very charismatic and have manners to spare. Their upbringing makes them friends with everyone they meet. This describes George Henry Mackenzie.

Author John S. Hilbert is known for his meticulous research, and this monstrous (684 page) book is no exception. It is a treasure trove of information. Mackenzie has long been one of my favorite players of the 1800s. Besides covering every detail that could be found about Mackenzie, Hilbert briefly covers all the contemporary chess events, figures, and players. I especially liked that the research was so deep, going as far as the names of the steamliner ships Mackenzie took when traveling and the short biographies of each opponent prior to their games with Mackenzie.

George Mackenzie was born in the Scottish Highlands on March 24, 1837, the fourth of four sons. His father (John Mackenzie) died three days after his first birthday. His mother was Anne Douglas.

Mackenzie went to school in Aberdeen. Later he was sent south to Southampton to attend high school. He briefly attended Marischal College.

In 1856, he became an ensign in the 60th Rifles (The King's Royal Rifle Corps). In 1858, he was promoted to Lieutenant.

Around 17 or 18 he began to study chess. He decided to move to London in 1861 where he could improve his game. There, players such as Staunton, Buckle, Lowe, Williams, Harrwitz, Falkbeer, Biden, Bird, and Barnes filled Simpson's Divan (a hot spot for chess).

Mackenzie sold his commission at the end of 1861 to, it seems, live off chess. Quite a brave decision.

Shortly thereafter Mackenzie won the 1862 London Handicap tournament, defeating Adolf Anderssen along the way. Mackenzie had been given the odds of pawn and move against Anderssen.

In mid-1863, he decided to sail to America. The reason is unknown but could be due to a family quarrel about supporting his twice-widowed mother. At the time, Scottish law said a son must support the mother if she is widowed. One son had died and one was in Australia, so was out of jurisdiction. George headed to America, so he was also out of jurisdiction. That left brother Thomas to support her. This didn't work out so well and the mother ended up suing Thomas.

The author provides a detailed discussion about Mackenzie's attempt to join the Federal Army in America. It was an interesting discussion in that it gave a glimpse into how things worked back at the time. Hint: lots of confusion, games and misinformation. The bottom line was after being charged with desertion and spending a brief time in jail, Mackenzie and the military parted amicably.

Throughout the story no strong source of income was ever reported for Mackenzie. He wrote several chess columns over his lifetime that must have provided some income. Over time he wrote for the *New York Albion*; *Turf, Field and Farm*; *Brooklyn Union*; *Oestliche Post; Globe-Democrat; The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic Journal*; *New York Tribune*; and *New York Sonntag's Journal*.

Another source of income, potentially his main source, was money earned by playing chess games (10¢ a game). Although gambling was frowned upon at the time, he could frame it as paying for his time or lessons. It was a tough time to make a living at chess due to this fine line of gambling or not gambling. Samuel Loyd and Dr. CC Moore even attacked the idea of gambling in chess in print. In addition, they wrote about the distinction between professional and amateur, degrading the professional all along. Mackenzie was considered a professional chess player. His affable personality got him through most sticky situations.

Mackenzie also worked in almost all the chess clubs in New York during the course of his time living there. Cafe' Europa, Cafe International, New York Chess Club, Brooklyn Chess Club, and the Manhattan Chess Club.

Lastly, Mackenzie was paid to do simultaneous exhibitions (simuls). The author lists over 150 of Mackenzie's simuls with a discussion about most, if not all, of them.

In 1866, Mackenzie played a match in New York against Gustavus C. Reichhelm from Philadelphia. Mackenzie won 5—0 with one draw. The match was billed as the National Championship, because Paul Morphy had refused to play

anyone. Then some of the Philadelphians wanted a rematch, because they thought their guy was ill or one of several other excuses. The rematch was granted in May 1867 in Philadelphia and Mackenzie won 7—0 with two draws. Mackenzie would be considered the Champion of the United States during most of his life in America.

One of the more humorous parts of the book was the author's discussion of a baseball game held on July 25,1873, featuring a team of New York chess players captained by Mackenzie versus a team of chess players from Brooklyn captained by Theodore M. Brown. It was all in fun, and the reporting was very funny. For example, the box score showed Brown's team winning 40—30 with Brown's team having 62 errors and Mackenzie's team having 114 errors!

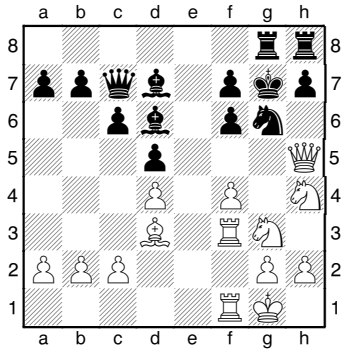
Mackenzie won both the Second and Third American Chess Congresses. He did not play in the Fourth American Chess Congress.

Not being familiar with the history of the Fifth American Chess Congress, the story was a highlight for me. In the Fifth American Congress, Mackenzie fell behind, then made a remarkable comeback going 5.5—0.5 at the end to tie for first with James Grundy, both scoring 13.5—4.5. A playoff commenced and Mackenzie won 2—0. However, one of the fallouts from the tournament was Mackenzie giving up his column in *Turf, Field and Farm*.

Mackenzie traveled to Europe in 1878 to play in the Paris International tournament. It was interesting to see how his skill compared to the best players in Europe. He placed fourth (tied with Bird) behind Zukertort and Winawer followed by Blackburne. He defeated the first two in their individual games. He also had this nice gem versus Mason.

Note: Mackenzie called his exciting games "gems".

Mackenzie, George H - Mason, James [C01]
Paris Paris (9.1), 15.07.1878
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e×d5 Simplifying. More usually there is no such exchange here, the idea being to leave the pawn at e6; partly preventing Black's queen bishop from taking any early active interest in the game. (Mason) 4...e×d5 5.♘f3 ♗d6 6.♗d3 0–0 7.0–0 ♘c6 Or 7...c6, a safer move. Black risks in allowing his kingside pawns to be broken as follows. The pawn doubled cannot be easily undoubled, his d-pawn requires attention, and the attack upon his king is so sharp that use of the file opened seems quite problematic. (Mason) 8.♗g5 ♘e7 In the second game between Blackburne and Zukertort, in the seventh round (published in the Turf last week) Mr. Blackburne made this move in a precisely similar position. In his notes to that game, Steinitz points out the course of play which White must adopt, to win—the same as that taken by Capt. Mackenzie here. (*Turf, Field and Farm*) 9.♗×f6 g×f6 10.♘h4 All this is in accordance with our recommendations in the comments on the game between Zukertort and Blackburne. (Steinitz) 10...♔g7 10...♘g6 is much to be preferred. (TFF); We believe that Black's best resource under the circumstances would have been 10. ...♘g6, followed by ... f5 on the adversary answering ♕h6. It was less dangerous to fight with a pawn behind than to face the tremendous attack which White is now preparing. (Steinitz) 11.♕h5 ♖h8 12.f4 c6 Preparatory to using the knight. Of course, White would not fall into the trap 12.♘×d5 ♘×d5 13.♕×d5? ♗×h2+, etc. —not if he saw it, certainly. (Mason) 13.♖f3 ♘g6 14.♖af1 ♕c7 15.♘e2 ♗d7 16.♘g3 ♖ag8



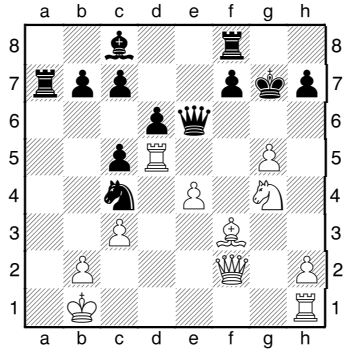
Thinking to escape with king, but too late—only leading up to an extraordinarily brilliant finish. And anything like this would be bad: 16...♗×f4 17.♖×f4! ♘×f4 18.♘hf5+ ♗×f5 19.♘×f5+ ♔g8 20.♕h6 ♘e6 21.♖f4 and mate in a move or two, with knight or queen. All the rest is forced. (Mason) 17.♕h6+ Mr. Steinitz in his letters to the London *Field*, says of this game: "The termination was so brilliant that it marks the game as one of the finest that ever occurred in any great contest." (TFF); A most ingenious and brilliant sacrifice. It would have been offered in any case, even if Black on the last move had played ...Rhe8; the only difference would have been that Black would not have been compelled to take it. (Steinitz) By sacrificing his queen, White compels Black's king to journey into the enemy camp, where of course he can expect no mercy. We shall later see that this kind of play—drawing the king by force into the zone of the hostile army—has almost acquired the status of a typical device. The combination in the present game, however, was one of the first to be based on this idea. (Romanovsky) 17...♔×h6 18.♘hf5+ ♗×f5 19.♘×f5+ ♔h5 20.g4+ This pawn sacrifice is not obligatory. White could also have mated in three moves with 20.♖h3+, and now 20. ... ♔g4 21.♘h6 mate or 20. ... ♘h4 21.♖h4+ ♔g6 22.♖h6 mate. (Romanovsky) 20...♔×g4 21.♖g3+ ♔h5 22.♗e2# **1–0**

As can be seen, the annotations in the book are from contemporary sources. On occasion the author has added his own comments to improve the understanding.

Mackenzie traveled to Europe for various tournaments and while there he played a few matches. One match, in partic-

ular, was three games versus Blackburne. Mackenzie won 2—1. Mackenzie, always on the lookout for sacrifices and brilliant flourishes, found a queen sacrifice in game one of the match.

Blackburne, Joseph Henry - Mackenzie, George Henry [C45] London m1 London (1), 25.09.1882



29.... ♕×d5 The Captain always looked out for such rare opportunities of effecting a brilliant stroke and he hardly ever missed it when the chance was offered. 30.e×d5 ♗f5+ 31.♔c2 ♖a1+ Most beautiful play. Black now forces mate. 32.♔×a1 ♗×c2 **0–1**

After his excellent play in Vienna 1882, it was remarked that "he (Mackenzie) confirmed with his ... excellent showing that despite living far from the chess centers of Europe, he was strong enough to be considered among the top seven or eight players in the world. This was an astounding accomplishment for a player who so rarely faced serious competition in the United States, then a relative chess desert compared to England and Europe in general. How strong he might have become, had he been disciplined with study and sought the strongest competition he could on a regular basis, especially earlier in life, will never be known."

Mackenzie won the Fifth German Chess Federation Congress held in Frankfurt in 1887. He finished 15—5 ahead of Blackburne in second and Miksa Weiss in third.

Before Mackenzie even made it back to America the papers reported him as the Champion of the World. Obviously, Steinitz objected due to his own win over Zukertort in 1886, thus claiming the title for himself. Mackenzie never denounced the title nor did he claim it. Steinitz was so angry he challenged Mackenzie to a match with odds. The press jumped on this as insulting to Mackenzie. Mackenzie never directly accepted or declined the match. He did, however, taunt Steinitz by saying "Permit me to reply by asking a question in return. Shortly before the Paris Tournament of 1878 you stated in one of your Chess columns that, in your opinion, the winner of the first prize would be entitled to consider himself as champion pro tem. What has occurred since then to cause you to alter your opinion?" Steinitz responded by saying Mackenzie left out an essential point: "provided that I had not met him before in a serious encounter and defeated him." Later Mackenzie wrote "The 'all important qualification' to which you refer therein, seems to me to be of no special importance, for, after Dr. Zukertort won the first prize in the London Chess Congress of 1883, you promptly challenged him, notwithstanding the fact, that some years previously, you had defeated him in a match. Such being the case I see no necessity for issuing any such challenge as you suggest..."

Shortly thereafter, a Boston paper printed an offhand remark that "Mr. Mackenzie states that he positively will not accept Herr Steinitz's challenge." It is unclear if Mackenzie actually said this or not, but it ended the controversy.

As time went on more poking fun at Steinitz was had when Eugene Delmar wrote:

"By the latest cable news from the International Tournament at Bradford, we learn that Mr. Gunsberg has taken the first prize, and hence is entitled to claim for himself the championship of the world ... We presume that the next thing in order will be a challenge from Steinitz to the winner offering to give him 9 games out of 10, in a match for a million dollars a side."

Many papers continued to call Mackenzie world champion for quite some time.

Another favorite saying by Mackenzie was "a plunge of despair", describing a desperate move. I will probably add this to my arsenal of annotations. It will describe a good many of my own moves!?

Mackenzie spent the last several years of his life travelling around to various chess clubs. Two of his favorite places were Cuba and New Orleans. In early 1889, Mackenzie got sick. It was first thought to be a case of typhoid fever, but as time went on it was determined to be tuberculosis. No cure was available at the time. On April 14, 1891, Mackenzie passed away in his hotel room while in bed.

For a book this length, I was amazed that I only found one error ("December" should have said "January" page 291). Nice job by the author and proofreaders! My only complaint is not on the author, but on the publisher, McFarland. The book can only be purchased as softcover. For a book of this size and weight, the softcover gets beaten up in the mail system when being delivered (mine had some minor damage and unfortunately, I wasn't able to get it replaced) and takes even greater damage from the wear and tear of reading it. A hardcover would have eliminated most, if not all of these inconveniences.

I spent an enjoyable several months reading the book and playing through many games. As I mentioned previously, Mackenzie has been one of my favorite players of the 1800s and this book definitely cemented that in. I learned many new things I didn't know about Mackenzie. Hilbert delivers an excellent story of Mackenzie's life, weaving it into the games. I would love to have included more games here, because they were so fun and so much can be learned from them, but discretion is the better part of valor, and I'll just call out four more games that you should check out: games 252, 397, 450, and 902. I especially liked how the author compiled the contemporary analysis into one resource. Games that didn't fit directly into the text went into an Appendix. There were also appendices that listed his match results and simul results. Another important appendix contained many obituaries for Mackenzie. An index of opponents, an index of openings, an index of games at odds, and a general index round out the book. If you love chess biographies or just biographies, you'll love this book. If you like history of the game this is your book. If you want to learn from yesterday's champions, again this book is for you. There is so much to digest with this book. Take the plunge and get this fantastic book. Five stars out of Five stars!

Available from the publisher McFarland & Company, Inc. here:

George H. Mackenzie, A Chess Biography with 1,197 Games

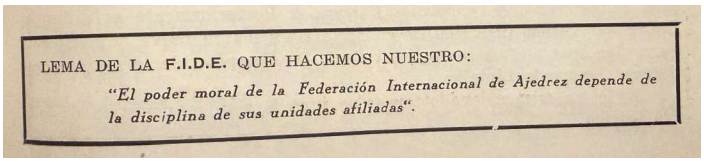
It was on sale when I last looked!

Frederick Perrin at one point stated, "Mackenzie, in games of importance, is hard to beat."

**********Continued from Page 18**********

A modest box at the bottom of the page displays the motto of FIDE:

> "The strength of the International Chess Federation depends on the discipline of its affiliated units."


LEMA DE LA F.I.D.E. QUE HACEMOS NUESTRO:
"El poder moral de la Federación Internacional de Ajedrez depende de la disciplina de sus unidades afiliadas".

Simple in design, yet powerful in meaning, it reflects the underlying structure that supports the global chess community. Beneath the creativity of the game lies organization, discipline, and shared standards elements that connect players across countries and continents.

In that small space, FIDE asserts its presence not loudly, but with quiet authority. As the governing body of international chess and the steward of the World Championship, it reminds the reader that the game, wherever it is played, belongs to something larger.

What is most striking is how understated that presence feels. At a time when chess was still largely local, analog, and rooted in craftsmanship, this small advertisement signals a global system already in motion, federations working together, standards being established, a structure taking shape in plain sight.

Today, chess exists in a vastly expanded world of sponsorships, streaming platforms, global audiences, and instant communication. Yet even in that earlier moment, the foundation was already there.

The authority of chess was not built overnight, instead it was printed, line by line, across pages like these.

Así se construyó el ajedrez.

London 1922 by Mark Capron

On page 43 there is an article entitled London 1922. These are a few books for further reading on this exciting tournament.

The Book of the London International Chess Congress 1922. W.H, Watts. Printing Craft Ltd, London, 1923. Reprinted by Dover in 1968.

London 1922. Geza Maróczy. Russell Enterprises, Inc. 2010.

International Chess Congress, London 1922. David Regis. Hardinge Simpole LtD. 2001.