

HAROLD MAHONY

The last Irishman to win Wimbledon is profiled by Christopher Warner

THIS SUMMER marks the 125th anniversary of Harold Mahony's victory in men's singles at the All England Lawn Tennis Club — better known as Wimbledon. In an epic 5-set battle, Mahony edged defending champion Wilfred Baddeley of England to become the third (and last) Irishman to win the sport's most prestigious title.

Harold Segerson Mahony was born on February 13th, 1867, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to Irish parents. His father, Richard John Mahony, served as a barrister, deputy lieutenant, and justice of the peace in County Kerry. His mother, Mary Harriette Mahony (née Waller), was the eldest daughter of John Waller, a barrister from Shannon Grove, Pallas, County Limerick. The Mahony clan was also deeply involved in the evangelical Brethren movement.

Shortly after Harold's birth, the family returned to their primary residence at Dromore Castle near Templenoe. Built in the 1830s and overlooking the Kenmare River, the Gothic manor was designed by renowned Irish architect Sir Thomas Deane. Tennis courts were later added and can still be found on the grounds today.

At age 19, Mahony entered Trinity College, where he eagerly embraced the vibrant campus atmosphere — a sharp contrast to his strict religious upbringing. While pursuing a B.A. degree, he mixed academics with a robust extracurricular slate that included swimming, football, and cross-country running. But he especially shined on the tennis court, benefiting from natural athleticism and a strapping 6'3" frame.

The closing decade of the 19th century ushered in the beginning and end of Ireland's golden age of tennis, an era which saw three different Irishmen crowned champion at Wimbledon.

In 1890, Mahony made his debut

on the hallowed grass courts but exited in the first round. Nonetheless, he quickly developed into an elite player, possessing a strong backhand and volleying game which made him nearly unpassable at the net. That same year, County Kildare's Willoughby Hamilton hoisted the trophy with a 5-set come-from-behind win.

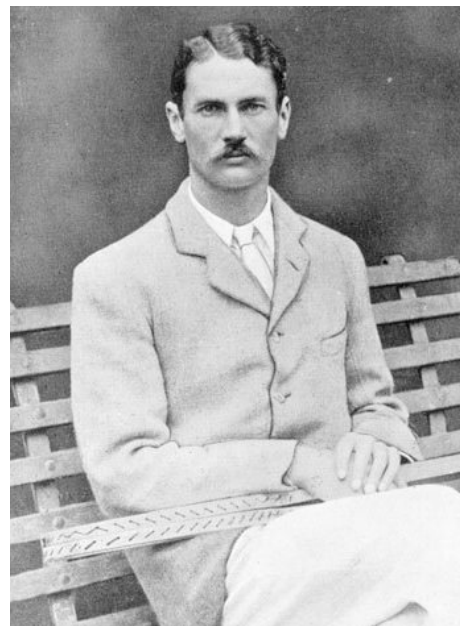
As Mahony's stock continued to rise, a medical student from Bray emerged to become the world's No. 1 player. Joshua Pim featured in four consecutive Wimbledon singles finals, winning in 1893 and 1894. He also partnered with Frank Stoker (Bram's cousin) to claim two additional Grand Slam doubles titles. However, Pim would eventually commit to medicine full time and later served as Medical Officer at St. Columcille's Hospital, Loughlinstown, a position he held for 42 years.

In 1892, Mahony inherited Dromore Castle and other properties, making him immensely wealthy. The young sportsman continued making a name for himself, winning titles on a variety of surfaces while hopscotching across Europe. In 1896, after winning the Queen's Club tournament (known then as the Championship of London), he set his sights on capturing tennis's biggest prize.

At that time, Wimbledon consisted of two finals in which the winner of the 'All-Comers' bracket played the defending champion in the 'Challenge Round'. After fighting his way through the preliminaries, Mahony stepped onto Centre Court to face Baddeley, the current holder, and a three-time champion.

The final took place in sweltering hot weather, exacerbated by long, continuous play. Unlike the modern era, players were not given 'changeover' rest periods.

Mahony, relying on his trademark serve-and-volley game, relentlessly



charged the net throughout the tightly contested match before wearing down the Englishman in a 57 game marathon, 6-2, 6-8, 5-7, 8-6, 6-3. The match featured the most games ever played in a Wimbledon final — a record that stood until 1954.

Another career highlight took place at the 1900 Olympics in Paris, where he won three medals (two silver and bronze), competing in singles, doubles, and mixed doubles. Mahony thrice crossed the Atlantic to play in tournaments and was a member of the winning British Isles Davis Cup in 1903.

In addition to his busy tennis schedule, the congenial and handsome Kerryman maintained an active social calendar and was especially popular with the opposite sex. In *The History of Irish Tennis*, author Tom Higgins wrote: "His looks and charm were much sought after by ladies looking for coaching."

A keen outdoorsman, Mahony handled a fishing rod with equal proficiency as a tennis racquet. But on June 27th, 1905, tragedy struck near Caragh Lake in County Kerry when he fell from his bike while descending a steep hill.

Reports vary, but it's likely he suffered a broken neck and died immediately at the scene. The celebrated athlete was mourned worldwide and buried at the family's plot in Templenoe. He was 38 years old. ■