

# From Dooradoyle to the Elysee Palace -

## The Life and Times of Marie Edme Patrice Maurice de McMahon, Duc de Magenta (1808-1893)

**T**he Irish have been a wandering people since the days when Irish Kings, such as Niall of the Nine Hostages led piratical raids into the dying Roman Empire. One of the most interesting phases of the history of the Irish abroad is the period of the Wild Geese. Between the Treaty of Limerick (1691) and the outbreak of the French Revolution (1789) many thousands of Irishmen (and Irish women) emigrated to the continent of Europe. They entered the service of the great European monarchies and several of them rose to high rank in both the armed forces and the civil government of their adopted countries. The exiled Irish nobility and gentry became assimilated into the rarefied, cosmopolitan world of the European aristocracy. The descendants of the Wild Geese continued to flourish in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These statesmen of Irish descent held very high office in nineteenth century Europe. Leopoldo O'Donnell, Duke of Tetuan (1809-67) was prime minister of Spain in 1856 and again from 1858 to 1863. Eduard, Count Taaffe (1833-95) was prime minister of the Austrian Empire from 1879 to 1893. The third of these statesmen was Marie Edme Patrice Maurice de McMahon, Duc de Magenta, (1808-93), who was president of France from 1873 to 1879. He was the only one of the Irish in Europe to become head of state and, as president of France, held one of the most prestigious posts in the world. France in the 1870s was one of the four chief powers on the planet, along with Great Britain, Germany and Russia. He has very strong connections with Limerick, as his great-grandfather was from the area now known as Dooradoyle.

Originally the McMahon family were from Co. Clare, but they lost their ancestral lands there during the turbulent sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the time of the Treaty of Limerick (1691) they were living in Toorodile, Co. Limerick (this is now Dooradoyle, site of the Crescent Shopping Centre). Moriart McMahon of Toorodile had two sons, Maurice and Patrick. The latter had three sons, all of whom emigrated to France, as the Penal Laws severely curtailed their chances of making successful careers at

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by Dr. Matthew Potter

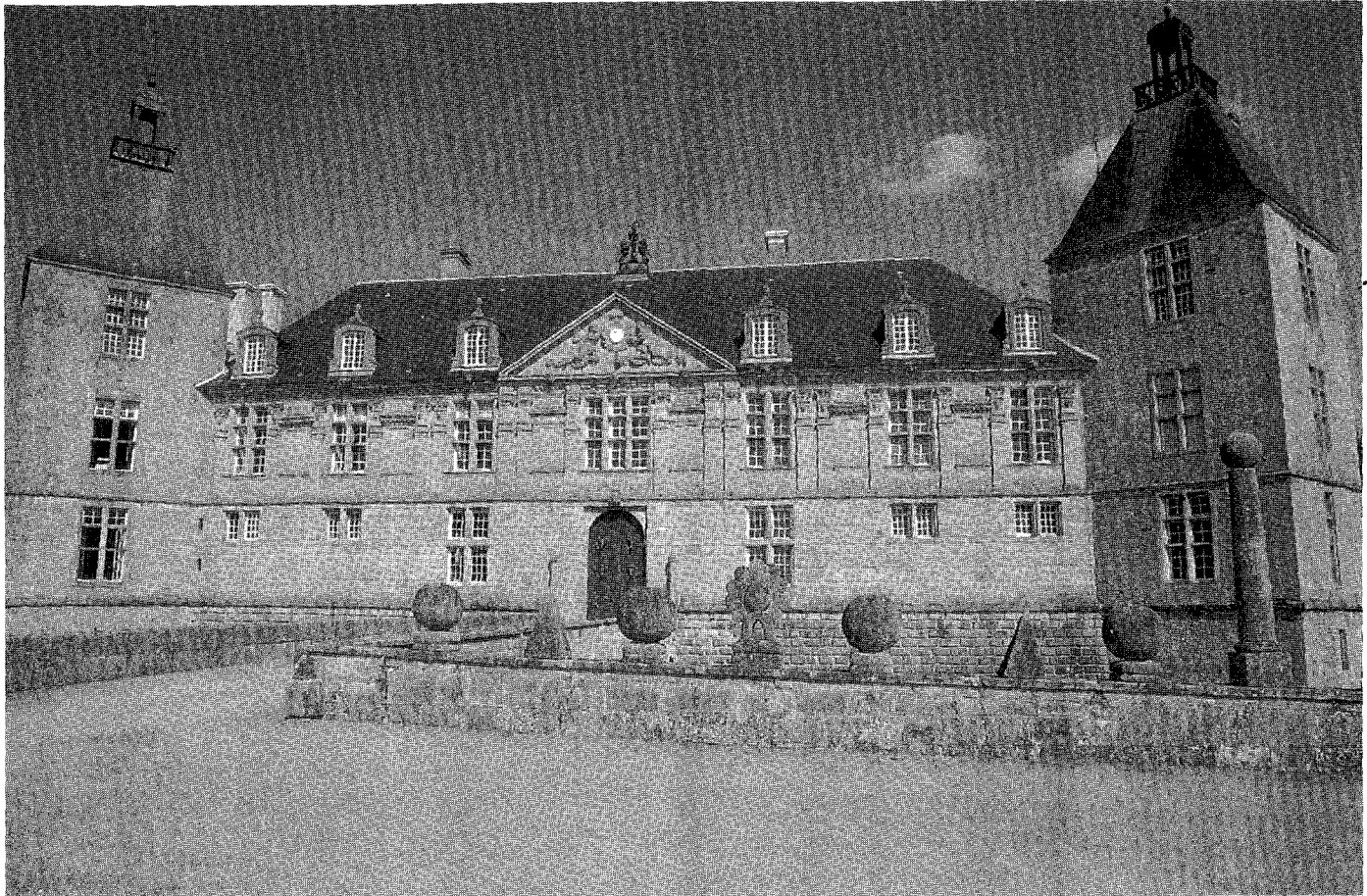
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home. One of the sons, John Baptist, trained as a medical doctor and practiced in the town of Autun, near Dijon, capital of

Burgundy. There he met and married Charlotte D'Eguilly, a noblewoman and one of the richest heiresses in Burgundy. Jean Baptiste (as he was known in France) was a commoner married into the nobility and, in accordance with the strict regulations of the ancient regime (pre-



Portrait of McMahon by Horace Vernet at Sully



Chateau Sully, front entrance

revolutionary France), he had to prove his aristocratic ancestry when applying to be accepted into the ranks of the French Noblesse. Having furnished the authorities with the necessary proofs, Jean Baptiste was registered as an aristocrat, and King Louis XV created him Marquis D'Equilly, Marquis Vianges, and other titles. The new Marquis had two sons, the second of whom was Maurice Francoise, Count of Charnay and Lord of Eguilly and Sully. He served in the French Army, but as a life-long Royalist, he lived in exile from 1792 to 1803. He was married and had a family of seventeen children, the sixteenth of whom was named Marie Edme Patrice Maurice. This boy, commonly known as Maurice, was to become Marshal McMahon, President of France.

It is ironic that the future President of the Republic should have been born into a staunchly royalist and aristocratic family. He was born at the Chateau de Sully, near Autun, on 13th July 1808. At the time of his birth, France and most of Europe was ruled by the great Napoleon I, Emperor of the French. McMahon's long life, which spanned most of the nineteenth century, saw a bewildering succession of regimes come and go in France. The empire of Napoleon was overthrown in 1814 and was followed by the Restoration Monarchy (1815-30), the Orleanist Monarchy (1830-48), the Second Republic (1848-52), the Second Empire (1852-70), and the Third Republic (1870-1940). Like his father, Maurice McMahon chose a military

career and following a period at the College of St. Louis Le Grand in Paris, he spent two years at the French Military Academy of Saint-Cyr (the French equivalent of West Point or Sandhurst). He graduated in 1827 and, entering the army, began a very long and distinguished military career. He served almost continuously in Algeria from 1830 to 1854. The French had invaded this North African country in 1830 and spent the next twenty years gradually conquering and settling it. In 1832, McMahon saw service with the French against the Dutch, during the campaign which helped establish Belgium as an independent kingdom. Thereafter, he fought in the endless Algerian wars of the 1830s and 1840s. He was a dashing and gallant officer, and distinguished himself at the Siege of Constantine in 1837. In 1843 he became commander of the famed Foreign Legion, and by 1852, had risen to the rank of Division-General.

In the meantime, France came under the rule of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who in 1852, proclaimed himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. This monarch was a nephew of the great Napoleon, and ruled France until 1870 (his regime is known as the Second Empire). He was determined to restore France to the greatness that she had enjoyed under Napoleon I. He involved France in a series of wars throughout his reign. Under the third Napoleon, France regained her old position as the greatest power in Europe, but the Franco-Prussian War brought his career to a disastrous and inglorious end.

The first major war of the reign was the Crimean War (1854-56). France and Britain, aided by Turkey and Sardinia, fought against the Russian Empire. The main theatre of conflict was the Crimean Peninsula in southern Russia. The object of the Allied war effort was to capture Sebastopol, the great Russian military and naval base in the Crimea, and to that end, this peninsula was invaded in 1854 and Sebastopol was besieged. The whole Crimean campaign was conducted with extraordinary incompetence by the British forces, and only the even greater ineptitude of the Russians, plus the relative efficiency of the French war effort, brought eventual victory to the Allies. In September 1855, McMahon conducted the assault upon the Malakoff fortress, which was the key to Sebastopol. The fortress was captured, but McMahon was warned by his commander-in-chief that the Russians had mined it. According to legend, McMahon refused to withdraw, proudly stating: "Here I am, and here I stay." Following the end of the Crimean War, McMahon declined the highest command in France and volunteered to return to Algeria. Following a distinguished campaign there, he returned to France and became a member of the Senate.

In 1859, Napoleon III declared war on Austria and invaded Italy. At that time Italy was divided into a number of independent states. While Lombardy and Venetia were ruled directly by Austria, the other Italian states, except Sardinia, were under the general tutelage of Austria. A movement

had developed in Italy (later called the Risorgimento), which worked to unite all of Italy into one state. Napoleon III was a supporter of this idea and invaded Italy in support of his ally, the King of Sardinia, who wanted to overthrow Austrian domination and establish himself as ruler of the country. The war was a triumph for the French. McMahon accompanied the Emperor and was given command of the Second Corps of the "Army of Italy." At Magenta, he met the Austrian army and inflicted a crushing defeat on them. This great victory was the high point of McMahon's career. Milan, the centre of Austrian power in Italy, fell soon after and following another French victory at Solferino, the war was brought to a victorious conclusion. Napoleon III conferred high honours on McMahon following the Battle of Magenta. Firstly he was created Marshal of France, the highest rank in the French Army. Soon after, he raised him to the peerage, with the title Duc de Magenta (this obscure Italian town, having given its name to a battle and a dukedom shortly afterwards, had a colour, similar to purple, named after it.) McMahon, son of a nobleman of the Kingdom of France, was now a Duke of the French Empire. He was also one of the most prominent men in France at this time. In 1860 a deputation from Ireland, which was joined in Paris by John Mitchel (a leader of Young Ireland and author of *The Jail Journal*), presented him with a ceremonial sword of honour. The following year, he represented Napoleon III at the coronation of William I as King of Prussia. Ironically this monarch's armies inflicted crushing defeats on McMahon a few years later.

In 1864, he was sent to Algeria as Governor-General (head of the administration). There, he attempted to enforce the Emperor's reforming plans for the colony. He did much to curb the excesses of the French colonists and made some attempt to protect the native population. However, he also contemplated establishing an Irish colony there. McMahon's rule in Algeria was not a success, however, and a rebellion broke out there shortly after his recall in 1870.

McMahon's rule in Algeria was brought to an end by the greatest crisis that France was to face in the nineteenth century. This was the Franco-Prussian War, and the civil war that followed immediately afterwards. When war broke out between France and Prussia (later helped by the other German states) in 1870, virtually everyone believed that France, still Europe's leading power, would be victorious. In fact, the war was to be a massive disaster for the French, and one of the greatest defeats in their entire history until the even more appalling catastrophe of 1940. Instead of the easy victories that they had expected, the French themselves faced invasion by three immense German armies. The French war machine was very inefficiently led, firstly by Napoleon himself, who was a



**Inauguration of the Paris Opera, 5 January 1875, by Edouard Detaille, showing President McMahon (centre) observing the Lord Mayor of London's entry**

poor soldier, and later by Marshal Bazaine, whose inactivity bordered on the criminally irresponsible, and later led to his being accused of treason. At the battle of Gravelotte, Bazaine at the head of the flower of the French army, including the Imperial Guard, was heavily defeated. Following this, he led his great army into Metz and the Germans then proceeded to lay siege to this city. Meanwhile McMahon, at the head of the Alsace army detachment, was defeated at the battle of Wurth. After these disasters, a new army was hastily gathered. It consisted of the remains of McMahon's "Army of Alsace" and a host of new recruits. The prime minister, the Count of Palikao, urged on by the Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon, ordered McMahon to lead this motley force to the relief of Metz. McMahon knew that it was a hopeless enterprise, as his army of 120,000 men was disorganised and demoralised. Accompanied by the Emperor, he marched on Metz, but at Sedan the army was surrounded and suffered a catastrophic

defeat. McMahon was severely wounded in the thigh and the following day the battle ended. The Emperor, accompanied by 39 generals, 2,700 officers and 83,000 men, surrendered and they were all taken as prisoners to Germany. McMahon was among them and was interned at Wiesbaden. Soon after the battle of Sedan, Metz was captured. The Germans then advanced on Paris and captured the city after a bitterly fought siege. The empire of Napoleon was overthrown and a republic, the Third Republic, was proclaimed by France.

The war ended in 1871 and France was in a state of collapse and humiliation. The German states were formed into a united German Empire, which was proclaimed at Versailles and France was forced to sign a humiliating peace treaty with the new Empire. Alsace and most of Lorraine were given by the French to Germany. To the woes of defeat in foreign war, France now added the agonies of violent revolution and civil conflict. The new republic was a very conservative regime initially. A

national assembly was elected on 8th February 1871 and an overwhelming majority of the new parliament consisted of royalists, determined to restore the old French monarchy. They were deeply suspicious of the city of Paris, considering it a hotbed of sedition and republicanism. The assembly set up headquarters in the great palace of Versailles and adopted harsh and unwise policies, which sparked off a violent revolution in Paris. This revolution was led by a commune, or city council, which governed Paris from 26th March to 28th May 1871. It consisted of a motley band of extreme republicans, socialists and a few Marxists. The right-wing government, led by Adolphe Thiers, feared that communism and anarchy would spread throughout France. Consequently they gathered an army consisting of prisoners of war released by the Germans, plus some new recruits. McMahon, who had been released from internment in Germany and who had recovered from the wound that he had sustained at Sedan, was made commander-in-chief of this "Army of Versailles." There followed a savage battle, during which McMahon's troops besieged and finally captured Paris after very heavy fighting. The Second Siege of Paris was marked by appalling atrocities on both sides, but the government forces were guilty of the worst excesses. Despite McMahon's orders to the contrary, the army of Versailles went on an orgy of killing and revenge and over 20,000 were massacred by them before the commune rebellion was finally crushed. The main result of this dreadful episode was to establish the Third French Republic firmly and to convince many conservatives in France that a republic was as stable and as safe a form of government as any royal or imperial regime.

During the first nine years (1870-79) of the republic's existence, the royalists were active in their efforts to restore the monarchy. Now that order had been restored, they turned their attention to this task, using their immense parliamentary majority. They were hampered by the stubborn and reactionary pretender to the throne, the Comte De Chambord, who made very little attempt to compromise with the political realities of the time. Thiers was president of France until 1873, but in that year, the royalist dominated assembly deposed him. McMahon, a man of noble birth and royalist sympathies, and a staunch conservative, was an obvious choice for the post from their point of view. Accordingly, he was elected president of France on 14th May 1873 by an almost unanimous vote of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies (the two houses of the National Assembly). The royalists hoped that McMahon would assist the restoration of the monarchy. The government that was appointed was led by the Duc de Broglie as prime minister (he was a close friend of Lord Emly, Tervoe House, Clarina, Co. Limerick). Two other dukes became cabinet ministers, so this

administration became known as the Republic of the Dukes. In autumn 1873, an attempt was made to restore the king. It failed because the Comte De Chambord refused to accept the tricolour as the French flag and insisted on restoring the old royal flag. This wrecked his chances, as the French were attached to their flag and regarded it as the symbol of their freedom. The attempted restoration fizzled out and McMahon was then appointed president for 7 years, as the royalists hoped to gain a breathing space to realise their ambition. In 1874, the Comte De Chambord came to France and stayed at the palace of Versailles. He expected McMahon to come to see him, but the president refused to do so, and the pretender left the country. McMahon had come to see that the Comte De Chambord would be a disastrous king and that the republicans were gaining in support. The president resolved to abide by "existing institutions." In 1875, a number of laws were passed which defined the constitution of the Third Republic. The president was to have wide-ranging powers, the chief of which was the power to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies and call a general election. In 1876, a general election returned a large republican majority in the Chamber of Deputies. This dismayed McMahon, who believed that the president should have the power to appoint ministers and who also wanted them to be answerable to himself. Also, he was anxious to keep the republic as conservative as possible. The royalists now persuaded him to use his new powers. He dismissed the prime minister, Jules Simon, and appointed the Duc de Broglie to that office again. When the Chamber of Deputies refused to yield, McMahon dissolved it on 16th May 1877 and called another general election. This act, although strictly legal, was called the Coup D'Etat of the 16th May. The president and prime minister were determined to win this election and employed every means possible to return a conservative majority to parliament. The administration, both national and local, was purged of republican officials, pressure was brought to bear on other government officials and the republican opposition was harassed. McMahon himself went about the country making speeches and campaigning for a conservative victory. In this campaign, the church and the gentry backed the government to the hilt. Despite this, the election was a major defeat for the conservatives. They won 207 seats against the republicans 326. In desperation, McMahon appointed General Rochebouet as prime minister, but the Chamber of Deputies refused to vote supplies and after a brief interval, McMahon had to back down and accept a republican prime minister. This crisis was a turning point in French history and marked the real foundation of the Third Republic. McMahon had been manipulated and used by the right in this whole affair and

emerged from it in a very compromised position. The presidency was gravely weakened and did not recover until De Gaulle founded the Fifth Republic in 1958. Henceforth the president was to be a mere figurehead, "an elderly gentleman whose function it was to wear evening dress in daytime." McMahon lingered on as president until 1879. In that year, the republicans also gained control of the senate. They now called for the removal of anti-republican generals in the army and rather than consent to this, McMahon resigned on 30th January 1879. It was claimed by Clemenceau (later to be prime minister of France during World War I) that by so doing, the Marshal had saved his country from a new civil war, but it is doubtful if McMahon had enough influence left to cause any real trouble. Following his resignation, he took no further part in politics. He lived in complete retirement for the next fourteen years and saw the republic take root and flourish in the 1880s and early 1890s. He died in Paris on 16th October 1893, aged 85.

Marshal McMahon was married to Elizabeth De La Croix De Castries, whose grandmother had been Irish. He was succeeded by his son Patrice (1855-1927), who became the second Duc De Magenta. Patrice married into the French royal house. His wife Marguerite was daughter of the Duc De Chartres and was great-granddaughter of Louis Philippe, King of the French (1830-48) and of Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil (1831-89). The fourth Duc De Magenta, grandson of the second Duc, is alive and lives in the family Chateau in France.

Marshal McMahon had a long and remarkable career. He served his country for more than fifty years, first as a soldier and then as a political figure. He was not a great general, but was skilled, competent and brave. He loyally served a variety of political regimes believing that by so doing, he was serving France. As a politician, he was a failure. He was unskilled, incompetent and naive, although he was well-meaning and honest. His blunders weakened the presidency for seventy years and helped destroy the conservative regime that he hoped to promote.

By birth and temperament he was a Royalist but, failing the restoration of the king, he favoured a staunchly conservative, right-wing form of government. In his private life, he was an aristocratic gentleman, honourable, courteous, generous and proud of his Irish ancestry. He was a tall, stern-looking man of distinguished appearance and erect military bearing. His name is commemorated in the Avenue McMahon in Paris, on one of the twelve great boulevards that radiate from the Arc de Triomphe, on the Etoile, and in many other place names in the former French Empire, including Fort McMahon in the Algerian Sahara desert. We should remember the connections that he had with our locality.