

Collecting and researching rare chess literature. By John McCrary

The major events in a person's life often come from opportunities that occur by pure chance. My introduction to chess came in late 1959, from a single sentence in my 6th-grade vocabulary-spelling workbook. To illustrate the word "valuable", the workbook had this sample sentence: "The queen is the most valuable piece in chess." I'd never heard of chess in my semi-rural Georgia neighborhood, which adjoined a small town that had neither a bookstore nor a public library. But that sentence caused me to look up "chess" in my home encyclopedia set, and it was fascination at first sight! The next chance event occurred at age 14 on a family visit to Savannah Ga, when on a drive to Savannah Beach, we made a random stop at a pharmacy. It happened to have for sale a few Barnes & Noble books, one of which was *The Golden Treasury of Chess*, with 575 master games going back for centuries. I bought it (my third chess book, after two primers) and it opened my eyes to the rich and fascinating world of chess history. (I've been very interested in general history since at least age 9.)

Over the next 12 years I built up a small collection of chess books, from which I learned much general information about chess history. But I didn't become a true chess historian until another series of chance events in 1975. My wonderful wife Kay found a store specializing in rare books in Charleston, SC, where I bought an original copy of Howard Staunton's *The Chess-Player's Handbook*. Then I looked in the University of Georgia library, where Kay and I were pursuing our doctorates, to find more information about the *Handbook*. By chance I mistakenly turned right instead of left in the library stacks, and by pure accident thereby discovered a complete set of the *Illustrated London News*. I knew from a recently-published book that Howard Staunton had a chess column in that publication from the 1840's; so I was soon going through those old Staunton columns, taking notes about the development of chess in the 1840's and 1850's.

The next chance event occurred very soon thereafter, when Kay and I drove with her sister Nan Johnson to Penn State University, where Nan was pursuing her Ph.D. I visited Penn State's rare-book room, where the librarian, seeing my chess interest, put me in touch with his friend Donald Byrne, a famous International Master who taught at Penn State. In my chat with Byrne in his office, I mentioned my research into Staunton's columns, and Byrne responded by giving me the address of Walter Goldwater, a New York bookseller who was also President of the famous Marshall Chess Club. When I wrote to Goldwater, I found that I had chanced on a bonanza of old chess books that Goldwater had temporarily acquired to compile a bibliography, and was then selling off! So all these chance events made me a collector of rare chess books and a serious chess historian as well with many future original research findings. Considering that Donald Byrne died seven months after our meeting, the timing proved fortuitous.

I now have a collection of about 100 rare pre-1900 chess books. I don't just own them, nor do I use them just to chronicle events. Rather, I research them from the sociological point of view in order to understand the ways in which our modern chess world came to be the great game it is. I go through the books sentence by sentence, looking for anything pertinent to changes in chess customs, rules, and terminology. I record any such finding in a large bibliography I keep in my computer, under topical headings listed alphabetically, including "agreed draws, championships, first move and opening position, game collections, notation, openings, organizations, problems, ratings, style of play, value of pieces, womens' chess", and a number of other topical headings.

In doing this, I also look for ways in which chess evolution interacted with the macrocosm of the larger society in which it existed. The huge changes in 19th-century society being brought by the railroad and telegraph were having a major impact on the evolution of chess, as well as other games and sports. As players began to travel over distances to compete together, the need developed to standardize rules

and tournament and championship systems; and to enhance international dialogue on chess theory such as openings. These changes affected other societal activities, including other games such as baseball, simultaneously with chess.

I'll give a some examples of my research publications that have been published in chess literature and in general sources outside of chess. My first significant research article involved the origin of chess tournaments. I'd always wondered why tournaments seemed virtually non-existent in chess literature before 1849. My research into original sources found that structured multi-player events in chess did occur occasionally in chess before the 1840's, such as in the German village of Stroebeck, but the advent of railroads in the early 19th century greatly increased the tendency to have such events. I also found, unexpectedly, that the term "tournament" evolved to its modern meaning in association with the regional chess events that began to be held thanks to the railroad.

I found a few uses of the word "tournament" and associated terms such as "joust" as early as 1787 in reference to chess events, but they were not tournaments in the modern sense of a multi-player structured set of games intended to determine a championship. For example, a living chess game was called a "tournament" because it resembled a medieval tournament pitting two mock armies versus each other. When the first regular regional chess meetings began in the Yorkshire area of England in 1841, they apparently had only one day of informal games, followed by speeches at a banquet. Those regional gatherings were "owing to the advantages of the railway" as a speaker at one such event noted. But the British chess author George Walker called the first such regional gathering in 1841 a "tournament" and used the term "jousts" for the games. The idea of calling a gathering of players a tournament was evidently Walker's; another article about the same event used no "tournament" terms at all.

The idea soon caught on: a speaker at the 1842 Yorkshire meeting said: "Chess had been compared with the tourney of old, where knights would come prepared to combat for their mistresses's eyebrow." A speaker at the 1843 Yorkshire meeting said: "They did not find that in the tilt-yard of old, with which the amusement of chess had so often been compared, the best lances were accustomed to quarrel, because this day one was unhorsed, and the next day another." The word "tournament" was sometimes applied to other types of chess competitions during that time: e.g. two-player matches, exhibitions, club meetings, and even individual games; typically medieval terms such as "jousts" were used in the descriptions of those events. Ironically, however, the handful of genuine chess tournaments in the modern sense (structured multi-player competitions) were never called tournaments! The term and its modern definition were completely separate until 1849, when a 12-player knockout event was called a tournament.

Although I won't go into more detail, it seems very likely that the use of the word "tournament" in other sports and games came from those 1840's chess events; I have found no use of the term in other sports and games, such as baseball, golf, etc. until after 1849. Incidentally, the claim in some chess books that the first chess tournament occurred in Madrid in the late 1500's, with Ruy Lopez and others, does not appear to have been a true tournament by modern definition. In fact the word "tournament" was apparently first applied to that event retroactively by George Walker in 1844. My paper "*The Birth of the Chess Tournament*" (1982) was described by Ken Whyld in the June 1983 *British Chess Magazine*, and then cited in the 1992 edition of *The Oxford Companion to Chess* under the "Tournament, The" heading.

Another of my findings concerned the place of chess in the emergence of national sporting organizations. Before 1850, national sporting organizations appear to have been virtually non-existent. Even where there were officially-sanctioned rules for games such as cricket, the sanctioning authority was a local club (like the Marylebone Cricket Club for cricket) or individuals (e.g. the Marquess of

Queensberry rules in boxing.) But the impact of the railroad, by bringing people together across greater distances and thereby inspiring the standardization of rules and formal competitions, began to create the possibility of national organizations for games and sports. In England, the above-mentioned Yorkshire regional chess meetings in the 1840's evolved into a British national chess association. Perhaps inspired by this, the First American Chess Congress formally established the American Chess Association on Oct. 19, 1857. Although that association was short-lived, its creation may have inspired the formation of the first national baseball association a few blocks away and five months later. In fact one of the members of the Committee of Cooperation to the First American Chess Congress was William R. Wheaton, who was also one of the earliest pioneers of the standardization of baseball rules. (Wheaton was one of two co-authors of the Knickerbocker Baseball Club rules in 1845 that are regarded as the beginnings of modern organized baseball). Another suggestion of a possible connection between chess and baseball was the election in November 1857 of a Dr. Jones to the presidency of the Excelsior Baseball Club. That club ordinarily elected officers in March, but moved up its election date in order to allow Dr. Jones to represent the club at the baseball convention scheduled for March 1858. Dr. Jones was elected Vice-president of the National Association of Base Ball Players that was newly-formed at that March 1858 convention; and became its President in 1860. Although the new baseball organization called itself "national", it was initially composed almost entirely of New York clubs, in contrast to the American Chess Association, which was truly national. Could Dr. Jones have read about the ACA in NYC newspapers in October 1857, and been thus inspired to form a national baseball organization by getting himself elected club president in November 1857, with a view to forming such an organization? Although I haven't found direct evidence that the National Association of Base Ball Players founded in March 1858 (the direct ancestor of the later National League) was inspired by the formation of the ACA, the circumstantial evidence was strong enough to cause ESPN Classic to note in a caption, as part of its TV broadcast of the "Searching for Bobby Fischer" movie, the coincidence of timing and location of the two organizations. (They used wording taken almost verbatim, though without credit, from my article "Chess and Baseball", published by the Miami museum on the Internet.)

I have been credited with other original historical findings, taken from my book collection. There was an old analysis of the relative value of pieces, computing values (based on pawn = 1.00) of Q=9.94, R=5.48, B=3.5, and N=3.05. These values, which were evidently the initial steps toward our modern scale, were long credited to Howard Staunton, who had published them, as did Steinitz later. But in one of my books, published in 1817, I found the original 40-page mathematical study, done apparently by Peter Pratt, which had computed those values by combining a number of variables. Pratt suggested rounding off this scale to Q=10, R= 5.5, B=3.5, N=3, though Staunton and Steinitz printed Pratt's original values as computed to two decimal places. So far, my finding of this 1817 source is still credited as the origin of this seminal contribution to the modern scale of values (Its computation seems to yield the earliest approximation of the modern accepted scale).

I'm also still credited by famous historian Edward Winter for finding the first published use of the phrase "champion of the world" in chess, as well as the first modern use of the term "best chess-player in the world", taken from my research into my rare old books. My nine-part article "The Evolution of Modern Chess Rules", which was taken from my original research in my book collection, first appeared in the the 19th CCI Biennial Congress program and later was published online by the US Chess Federation. I've also published an article on the history of US national chess organizations for the Hall of Fame, and a number of other historical articles in various places. Another benefit to my research is that I've served as a resource for historical questions from a number of people, including Hall-of-Fame members Andy Soltis and Maurice Ashley, for articles they have published.

One more thought on researching old and rare sources: Often, the full historical significance of such

sources has been forgotten over the years. For example, the museum has a copy of the first chess book published in the US (in 1802). But when Shane Samole purchased the book for the Miami museum that preceded the St. Louis one, the seller advertised it as only an early printing of Benjamin Franklin's essay *The Morals of Chess*. As such, it had been priced at less than 10% of its true value, so Shane had gotten a bargain, a fact I pointed out when he showed me the book! Similarly, when I bought an original copy of the London 1851 tournament book, it had the name of its first owner, Henry C. Allen. The seller, though he was a distinguished bookseller and historian, had never heard of Henry C. Allen. But I found that Allen was a prominent chess figure of the 19th century, as a chess columnist, national chess officer, patron of Steinitz, co-organizer of the Fifth American Chess Congress, and several other points of distinction. Furthermore, Allen had made numerous handwritten corrections of errors in the London 1851 book, initialing and dating his corrections for posterity. But posterity might have been unaware of the significance of those corrections had I not been the one who bought the book and researched it!