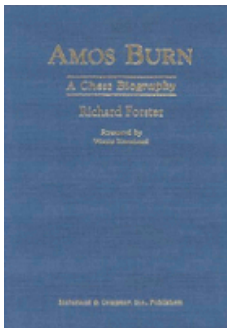




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## Burn, Baby, Burn

By Sean Gonsalves

*Amos Burn: A Chess Biography*, by Richard Forster, 2004 McFarland & Company, Inc., Figurine Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 972pp. \$95.00 (ChessCafe Price: \$89.95)

My mother tells me that I never crawled when I was a baby. I just got up one day and started walking, almost running. Maybe that's an impressive feat when you're in diapers but, in retrospect, I'm thinking it set a bad developmental pattern for me - one that I have yet to break. Is there something about the tactile experience of crawling that establishes the propensity to get the basics down before trying to do more complicated stuff?

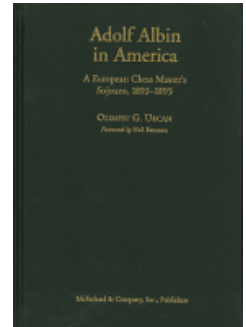
Perhaps that's the wrong question. But, I can't believe it's coincidence that with nearly every endeavor I've embarked on I'm consumed with an overpowering urge to start with the hard stuff, born out of an unrealistic expectation/desire to compete among the best from the get-go. I get so caught up in the urge - so impatient - that I often skip or breeze over the basics, as if a looped audio tape is playing in my head: forget crawling, start walking, *now!* Problem is: this is a formula for regret. It wasn't until my late thirties when I realized that I missed my shot at being the best at anything because of my habit of getting lost among experts without first learning to crawl.

So now that I'm really interested in chess (as it is with the piano and physics), it's far too late for me to engrave my name in the annals of historical achievement, even though I'm finally willing to crawl. Alas, I'm a very busy thirty-eight-year old father acutely aware that the young have taken over the game.

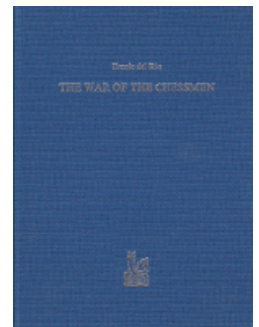
Bryan Caplan, writing for the Library of Economics and Liberty notes that "the young have increasingly dominated the game since the 1970s, outperforming older players at progressively earlier ages. The median age of the top 50 players dropped from 38 years old in the 1970s to 29 in the 1995, and the proportion aged under 25 more than doubled. The median age of the top 10 dropped from the late 30s in the 1970s to the mid-20s in the 1990s. The median age of world championship contenders dropped from 37 in 1971 to just 26 in 1994 ... The longstanding record for youngest grandmaster, set in 1958, has been broken four times since 1991."

Theories abound as to why this is but none that I've encountered dispute that the top of the chess world is the domain of youth. The sting of regret I feel for not having kept with the game when I first learned it at the age of seven is abated by the fact that it's still within the realm of possibility for me to play strong competitive chess, having dialed down my personal-expectation-meter quite a bit. Besides, my five-year-old son is already playing and loves it! Oh, the possibilities.

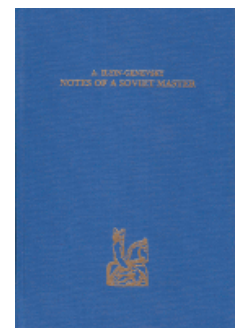
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Amos Burn

Still, I have this recurring nightmare where I become a GM, but no one's playing anymore. Everyone has moved on to Texas Hold 'Em. So I was bound to enjoy crawling through Richard Forster's *Amos Burn: A Chess Biography*. Forster's three-year effort is an inspirational study, of sorts, dispensing stoic hope for over-the-hill players and off-hand gamers. And, like any good biography, the author casts a bright light of context on the surrounding historical environs.

Though Forster - a well-known Swiss chess master himself - did not pen a beginner's book, non-expert tournament players and even recreational wood pushers in their crawling phase can glean gold from its pages, if only to prospect a bit of inspiration. Yes, the Burn bio is a 972-page tome, thoroughly detailing the chess life of a faded star in the British chess world - back when London was the center of the Royal Game universe and Emanuel Lasker was lashing both friend and foe for fun and blood. But this isn't a book for the coffee-table or a living room bookshelf to impress your guests. Keep this one next to your chessboard in your study to imbibe on in between sips of cognac. OK, the cognac is optional, but smoking is a must, as in Burn, baby, Burn.

Amos Burn isn't exactly a household name, so let's start with the basics. Who is this guy? "One of the first masters to become a pupil of (Wilhelm) Steinitz - or rather the first pupil of Steinitz to become a master - was the young merchant Amos Burn from Liverpool."

Forster's introduction tells us that "Burn firmly believed in sound play and became particularly famous for his great resourcefulness in defence." Already I'm intrigued because when you make a lot of blunders "great resourcefulness in defence" becomes of even greater importance.

The introduction is short, but that's about the only short item in the entire book. Thankfully, given that Burn is the size of an Encyclopedia, it's highly organized like a good textbook. Divided into five chronological sections, each chapter of the book begins with brief but densely packed historical sketches, providing the context of Burn's stop-and-go playing career, garnished with details about his off-the-board chess work as a popular chess journalist and distinguished member of the Liverpool Chess Club. Each of the games discussed in the chapter, which take up the bulk of the book, are followed by a move-by-move analysis with both original commentary from Burn's contemporaries to the author's own perceptive points.

At first browse, Burn looks like a dust-collector, which only confirms you really can't judge a book by its monotone uninviting cover. As early as page thirty-six, the reader stumbles upon an archeological discovery in an offhand Mocatta-Burn game. It was a casual game at the Westminster Club in which Burn lost with black, facing an Evans Gambit. But in that encounter, you'll find "some interesting and advanced positional ideas which were quite unusual for the time."

Is there an amateur alive who wouldn't want that said of one of their casual games - that it displayed "some interesting and advanced positional ideas

which (are) quite unusual for (our) time?" I was hooked.



Burn v. Blackburne, Belfast 1886  
[Click [here](#) to enlarge image.]

Pages later, another goal worthy of any serious non-elite player is presented. Commenting on MacDonnell-Burn, an offhand game involving the King's Gambit, Forster quotes the Westminster Papers of 1871, calling it "a very lively game, full of interesting incidents." And that's what I'm looking to mimic in my chess-for-fun pursuits - "a very lively game, full of interesting incidents." (Note to self. Memorize this game).

Soon after, the reader is treated to a genuine historical gem. In a King's Gambit Declined, Burn, playing with white, moves ...Nd4 on his seventh move, which Forster notes is "one of the first games - if not the very first - with this modern move. Though never a great theoretician, Burn made a number of important discoveries."

Of course, there are warnings along the way - "embarrassing" moves made by Burn and several instructive blunders. The London BCA Challenge Cup of 1870 stands out. With white, Burn employed a Steinitz variation, which his opponent relished a bit too much early on, as evidenced by his game notes. "Black has already completely wrested the attack from his opponent," Burn's opponent wrote after the sixth move.

It was that lack of humility that led him right into a Burn trap fifteen moves later. But in the ensuing nine moves, Burn misses a line of continuation for white that would have led to a technical win. Instead, "Black is suddenly back in the game." Burn forgot about Black's king and it was all downhill from there, though his opponent noted at the end of the game that "it required the most exact play on Black's part even now to win. The endgame is a study."

More interesting is what the *Illustrated London News* observed three years later: "A very curious encounter. One wonders whether Burn's life would have taken a different turn if he had not spoiled the win in this game and had won the Challenge Cup with a clean score. Would he have listened to Caissa's sirens, rather than returning to business?"

Though not Forster's intended audience, there's a hidden treasure in Burn for people like me - content at reaching the level of crushing my chess playing friends and acquaintances. I happened to have read an interview with Michael de la Maza, a competitive chess player with a 2041 rating. In his article 400 Points in 400 Days, ([here](#) and [here](#)) de la Maza recommends 1000-level-type players to focus on nothing but tactics.

"I wrote the article because I saw things that basically broke my heart. I saw a 1000 level player reading Kotov's middle game book. That's like someone who's just learned to add reading a calculus book," de la Maza said.

Not that I've read Kotov (I haven't), but de la Maza could have been talking about me. Forget crawling, let's get straight to the walking. I like to think strategically - big picture - not tactically. Because de la Maza helped me to see the folly of my ways, I was excited to come across a game between Burn

and Owen that included "a variety of tactical tricks." Again, crushing all casual on-comers is good enough for me and sound tactics are the key. I think.

For a "truly epic battle," there's **Burn-Wisker** - a fifty-eight move, six-hour tie-breaker. And for a game with true modern relevance, Forster details the Scotch Opening that Burn used against Thorold at the Eighth Counties Chess Association Congress in Birmingham 1874.

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Bc5 5.Be3 Qf6 6.c3 Nge7 7.Bc4 Qg6?! 8.0-0**



[FEN "r1b1k2r/ppppnppp/2n3q1/2b5/2BNP3/2P1B3/PP3PPP/RN1Q1RK1 b kq - 0 8"]

Modern theory, Forster says, recommends 8.Nxc6! Qxc6 9.Bxf7+!, giving White a clear advantage. Instead, Burn played **8...Ne5 9.Bb3 Qxe4 10.Nd2 Qg6 11.Bc2 Qg4 12.Qe1!**



[FEN "r1b1k2r/ppppnppp/8/2b1n3/3N2q1/2P1B3/PPBN1PPP/R3QRK1 b kq - 0 12"]

"A similar variation gained fresh popularity in the 1990s. White's lead in development compensates for the lost central pawn, but he has to act very carefully to maintain his initiative."

By the time he was twenty-two, Burn was considered to be the top player in London even though he didn't learn how to play until he was seventeen. But, as Chapter Three highlights, instead of pursuing chess full time, Burn followed his business interests, only to re-emerge years later as a first class master. In those intervening years (and chapters), the reader gets a well-researched overview of the London chess scene of the late 1800s and short profiles on some of Burn's contemporaries like Major William Martin and the Rev. John Owen.

In covering Owen, Forster includes a flattering description by Steinitz, characterizing him as "one of the most amiable, honorable and straightforward gentlemen I ever met, and one who ought to be commemorated as an example of pluck and perseverance at an old age in the study of our game ... at the age of sixty-six, he was one of the strongest amateurs in England, who would make a hard fight with and occasionally win games on even terms from first-class members."

Ah, hope for aged! Indeed, that is one of the key takeaways from Burn. He didn't hit his peak chess playing level until he was fifty-years old, when he won the German Chess Federation's international tournament in Cologne in

1898.

"Burn's success at Cologne is exceptional in that there is probably no other chess-master of this calibre who achieved his greatest success at such an advanced age, except perhaps the phenomenal Lasker with his win at New York 1924," Forster notes.

The esteemed Professor Johann Berger also wrote of Burn's success at the time, concluding that "the very fact this modest, enthusiastic amateur-master won gives pleasing warranty to everybody, including the younger masters who probably also hope to be old one day, that safe knowledge and serious, persevering devotion cannot so easily be touched by the influence of age... Burn must currently be regarded as England's most outstanding national master."

Of course, Forster also provides a move-by-move analysis of the games Burn played in this period of his life, before we learn that Burn was called away from the game again to tend to business affairs in America. When Burn returned to England two years later in 1904, he re-entered the chess world, but at its margins, staying active with the Liverpool Chess Club and writing a new weekly column for the Liverpool Courier.

It wasn't until 1912 that Burn, now in his sixties, returned to international competition - twenty-years older than his competitors, with his several pipes and long white beard. Along with Holmes, Spencer, England, and Conde, Burn represented the Liverpool Club, facing off against their Manchester rivals. Burn contributed eighty-three percent of the possible points for his victorious team.

Later that year, he was invited to what would become his last tournament in Breslau. Forster reports that Burn had "several ups and downs. He played two very fine games ... but in others he lost without much resistance. Even so, he did his best to overcome his rustiness and fought as stubbornly as ever until the last round had been completed. An average of 48 moves per game confirmed his great fighting spirit."

At this point - nearly 600 pages into the book - and without Forster saying so, Burn emerges as a hero for chess geezers. And while like other sages Burn never wrote a book, his final years (1913-1925) are still worthy of emulation. He took over the prestigious chess column in *The Field* and played his last official game on November 1, 1913. And it is here where the reader reaches the height of Burn inspiration.

"On top board he led his team to an undisputed victory ... Burn concluded his public career with a crisp 15-move win against E.H. Collier."

I can't think of a better way to retire. And I can't imagine a better way to die than how Burn met his maker. The *Morning Post* reported that "Mr. Burn, who was in his 77th year, had appeared to be in his usual good health until Tuesday evening, when, at his flat ... he entertained a friend and fellow member of the Committee of the City of London Chess Club, to supper and a discussion of chess problems. The two men were afterwards chatting when Mr. Burn put his hand to his head and said: 'What a pain I have got here.' Rising from his chair he staggered and would have fallen into the fire had not his friend been quick to save him. A doctor was immediately called, and found that Mr. Burn was suffering from a stroke. His condition became hopeless, and he passed away as stated."

Forster ends his study, noting that even though Burn was "a man of nerves" and a "silent chess master who never sought public recognition for his chess work," he hoped Burn's biography will "help restore Amos Burn to his proper place in the history of chess."

On that score, Forster's contribution should prove invaluable. And while any student of chess can mine the work for nuggets of historical gold, the real value of Burn is the subtle inspiration it provides to those of us who don't have a chess prodigy bone in our body and need a little practice crawling before walking.

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**Order *Amos Burn: A Chess Biography***

by Richard Forster

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