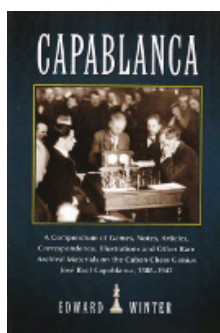




## Book Reviews



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### Rating Chart



## A Life Lived Elegantly

by John D. Warth

*Capablanca: A Compendium of Games, Notes, Articles, Correspondence, Illustrations and Other Rare Archival Materials on the Cuban Chess Genius José Raúl Capablanca, 1888-1942* by Edward Winter, McFarland & Co. Publishers 2011, Paperback, 349pp. \$35.00 (ChessCafe Price: \$29.95)

Comprehensive. Just as this breathy subtitle extols, Edward Winter has compiled a wealth of information about the world champion. In so doing, he has written the definitive account of Capablanca's life behind and beyond the chessboard. The author has given us – through the world champion's own words and through those of his opponents, friends, and wives – the fullest sense of Capablanca's character: the poise, nobility, and gentility that defined his gracious approach to life and to chess.

Winter's biography captures the imagination: the flavor and feel of living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We glean this *Zeitgeist* through extensive archival materials the author has exhaustively researched, including letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, game score sheets, tournament records, and Capablanca's own correspondence and authorship, including some of his finest games. Many of these writings are published here for the first time, keep in mind though that *Capablanca* is a paperback reissue of the 1989 McFarland hardcover edition. This publishing house is noted for its books on niche chess subjects and as a printer of historic tournament books.

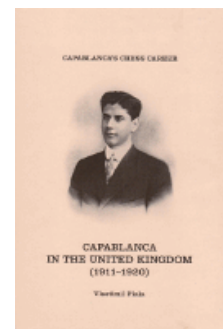
These documents reflect not just on a changing era, but mirror the growth in the golden age of chess, as it emerged from a gentleman's game played in smoke-filled clubs to an organized sport of international competition. Indeed, many of Capablanca's letters highlight tensions as he and World Champion Emanuel Lasker negotiate their upcoming match terms, straining to raise the required funds to guarantee venues and dates in difficult economic times.



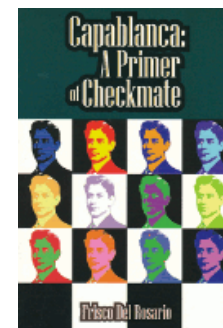
José Raúl Capablanca  
The frontispiece to Winter's monograph.

This is one of those rare books on chess that can be enjoyed on many levels: as biography, as history, or for Capablanca's brilliant games and their insightful notes; though it is less a games collection and more a compendium of miscellany. Many archival photographs are seen here for the first time, portraying a dapper and handsome champion. Between pages 54 and 55 there are sixteen pages of plates containing twenty-six photos. The frontispiece

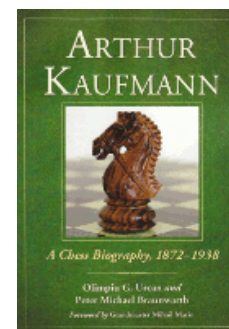
Purchases from our [chess shop](#) help keep [ChessCafe.com](#) freely accessible:



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by Vlastimil Fiala



[Capablanca: A Primer of Checkmate](#)  
by Frisco Del Rosario



[Arthur Kaufmann](#)  
by Olimpiu G. Urcan  
& Peter Michael Braunwarth



features a studio photograph of a handsome, confident champion. Capablanca is sharply-portrayed in a three-piece pinstripe suit. Why this photograph wasn't used as the book's cover is hard to comprehend. Instead, the cover shows a featureless, lackluster picture of Capablanca and Lasker at the board at St. Petersburg in 1914, an important event, but poorly pictured.

The contents are divided as follows:

- Sources of Photographs
- Preface
- **Chapters:**
- 1. Prodigy
- 2. Rapid Ascent
- 3. Negotiations with Lasker
- 4. To the Summit
- 5. Champion
- 6. London, 1922
- 7. New York, 1927
- 8. Changing the Rules
- 9. Challenges
- 10. In Search of a Rematch
- 11. An Active Ex-Champion
- 12. Moscow, 1936
- 13. Nottingham, 1936
- 14. Buenos Aires, 1939
- 15. Epilogue
- Notes
- **Appendices:**
- 1. Capablanca's Tournament and Match Records
- 2. General Bibliography
- 3. Games and Positions Chronologically
- **Indices**
- 1. Games and Positions by Player
- 2. Openings
- 3. General

Carefully chosen letters, pictures, games, and diagrams document peak moments of Capablanca's life. We see him as a precocious child and prodigy, as an engineering student in New York, as a rising star of chess, a Cuban diplomat, magazine editor, and a confident but frustrated world champion. We learn of his personal struggles and battles – over the board and beyond – that would consume much of his energy, and of his battle with hypertension: the dangerous high blood pressure that would lead to his sudden and untimely death. Ultimately, though, we are left with a full portrait of a brilliant man, in his own words, and in the words of his friends, wives, and rivals.

His was a life lived elegantly, and portrayed eloquently.

Capablanca's story unfolds in an era of enormous social, cultural, and economic turmoil, as the world moved from Edwardian stability to times of strife. These clashes of old orders and popular movements would affect nearly everything – up to and beyond – the First World War. The twentieth century's relatively stable beginnings were violently upended in a world conflict ultimately ending in millions dead and the heads of Europe turned on their crowns. Europe's borders were subsequently re-drawn and entire colonies absorbed or eliminated. This war, we were told, would end all wars – but it also paralleled one of class conflict and civil unrest in Eastern Europe. With it, the world was jarred by strife and revolution, and its boldest expression was the rise of the Soviet Union.

This new union of Soviet States was eager to showcase its power and capabilities, and with it the physical and mental strengths of the Soviet man. The young state provided support for chess, long its national game, and a favorite pastime of Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin. With the world's best teachers and training methods, these schools for chess created the world's first class of professional players, generations of men who would dominate the game in international events for seventy years. Unlike the great mass of Soviet citizens, these emerging competitors regularly traveled the world to play in

international events, living on government stipends, and given housing, food rations, and occasionally, automobiles.

Citizens would queue-up in long lines to see their favorite heroes battle over the board, giving the contenders the status, fame, and clout of film stars. Capablanca himself, on returning to Russia would be defeated in a simultaneous encounter with a young Mikhail Botvinnik, future world champion, and himself the epitome of – and trainer of – subsequent Soviet world champions.

Alexander Alekhine, a White Russian nobleman, would not be among these men. He had escaped his homeland, narrowly, during the time of revolution. Capablanca had encountered him at the great St. Petersburg tournament of 1914. Czar Nicholas, in fact, had conferred upon Alekhine and Capablanca and all the rivals of this event, a title he had coined, "Grandmasters of Chess." Capablanca and Alekhine would compete at many international events, with Alekhine eventually wresting the world crown from Capablanca. But once he had held the title, Alekhine seemed unwilling to play a re-match with his rival.

Capablanca himself would die at the height of the Second World War, never to regain the world title. Alekhine's story, equally compelling, is told only tangentially here, but is itself worthy of the same balanced approach that Winter has taken with Capablanca.

A masterfully-researched work, Capablanca's story has never before been told with such depth, though many readers will be familiar with the general outline. The genesis of Capablanca's genius is told in the first chapter. His grasp of chess concepts was solid. Without being taught, he learned the movements of the men and the rules of the game by watching his father and his uncle play. Legend has it that the young Capablanca even corrected their moves before playing his first game, but Winter is careful to quote only what is proven and not apocryphal.

Challenging his father to their first game, the young boy inexplicably won. He was not yet five. Capablanca's progress was meteoric. Starting as a club player, he rose quickly and challenged and defeated the Cuban champion Juan Corzo, and proved himself the island country's strongest player, if not official champion. The author has organized the highlights of Capablanca's life into chapter headings.

*Capablanca* is exhaustively cross-referenced as well. The index alone comprises a full forty pages – including match records, chapter notes, a bibliography, and games and tournament tables listed both chronologically and by player.

Books of this sort are so vast as to leave the reader in awe of how so much material could be compiled and distilled into an organized whole. But in chronicling touchstones so skillfully, Winter keeps the reader from becoming lost in detail. But what fascinating details *are* revealed: Capablanca comes alive in these pages, a completed character in the round, the treatment and details of his life fascinating enough to become the subject of a major motion picture. In fact, some scenes from Capablanca's life read like a screenplay. Let's look at some events:

In the fall of 1909, Capablanca went on his second tour of simultaneous chess, games played in large rooms against multiple opponents, where the challenger moves quickly from board to board, taking on all comers. The result of one notable game was reported from Lincoln, Nebraska on December 2, 1909.

"In the game against Ralph Murphey, Capablanca displayed his ability on the chess board in a spectacular way. Murphey challenged Capablanca to mark a pawn and mate him with that piece. He agreed and marked the queen's knight pawn. By forcing through another pawn, making a queen, Capablanca succeeded without running into a stalemate in checkmating his opponent. [Source: *Nebraska State Journal*, 3 December 1909, page 7.]"

This compendium includes many notes from friends and admiring fans of Capablanca. Here, Winter includes an entry from a young and enthusiastic Sergei Prokofiev, a rising star of the Russian music scene:

"I never miss chess contests. Chess for me is a world apart, a world of combat, of plans, and of passions. For many years I have followed not only the games but also the lives and destinies of chess players. In this tournament I met the ex-champion, Capablanca. My first meeting occurred in 1914 in St. Petersburg. He was then also the Cuban *attache*', and he gave a great simultaneous display. I was one of his opponents, going to the venue with some friends from the Conservatory. I lost. Capablanca made a surprising knight move and I was obliged to give up a rook. I realized that I was lost. My friends advised me to change the move, hoping that the master would not notice. Capablanca returned to my table, looked at me, smiled and made another move. But, oh! I was again lost!"

Sometimes Winter's longer entries could benefit from editing and paraphrasing. This is minor criticism, given the book's scope and magnitude. Winter's ordered presentation allows readers to study in depth or skip entire chapters without losing narrative context. Thankfully the editor has highlighted the words and writings of Capablanca in boldface, adding to the book's clarity and legibility. However, because many entries are in very small fonts, readers over forty may need to don comfortable "cheaters" to better discern the tiny text. Also, some of the game scores and notes are given in paragraph form, using an identical font, making the moves indistinguishable from the notes and that much more difficult to read.

Capablanca's elegant writing entries are often quoted at length throughout, perhaps showing deference. Like his chess, the champion's writing is clear and precise. He is unabashedly direct and unapologetically immodest when addressing his own abilities, leading some critics to detect arrogance:

"The general opinion, not only of chess enthusiasts and average masters but also of the great masters, is that the battle for the world chess crown will be between Lasker and me. We have gained a great deal. I have finally convinced nearly everybody that if there is anybody who can take the title from Lasker it is I and nobody else. The style of Morphy, they say, and if it is true that the goddess of fortune has endowed me with his talent, the result will not be in doubt ..."

At another venue, perhaps aware of the dangers of comparing himself to great men, Capablanca, asked by a reporter if he is the living incarnation of America's nineteenth century chess genius Paul Morphy, quips:

"There is no physical likeness between us; when I was at New Orleans – Morphy's home – the people who used to know him confirmed this. Morphy had a square forehead, quite unlike mine, and a stubby nose."

On the eve of World War II, writing on his voyage to Buenos Aires on the British transport *Amazon*, Capablanca says

"While I was on board a German steamer the news was received that Britain had entered the war, which meant that our boat had to enter the nearest port. By night, we traveled without any lights, and once we had entered the neutral port we waited for two days for the arrival of this ship to continue our journey. Of course, we have no news. I suppose that the Mannheim tournament, which began on 20 July, had to be stopped halfway through. ..."

Other inconveniences of sea travel in time of war and bad weather continued to plague him, this from page 92:

"I spent a few more weeks in the Argentine capital and finally decided to return to the United States. Unfortunately, there were only English ships and at that time the Germans had been sinking a number of vessels. Finally, thanks to the courtesy of Dr. Murature, the Minister of Foreign Relations, and the Naval Ministry, I obtained free passage on

board a ship belonging to the Argentine Navy which was bound for Philadelphia.

"The journey was a memorable experience for me in many respects. At sea we saw the great English cruiser *The Indefatigable*, which was returning to Europe after fulfilling its mission in those seas, where it had played a leading role in sinking the German squadron in the Southern Seas near the Falkland Islands, if I remembered correctly. ...

"After a journey of 23 days we arrived at San Juan in Puerto Rico, where we remained for two and a half days making excursions and *fiestas* of all kinds. So far so good, but the day after we again set sail the weather turned bad and we ended up in the tail of a cyclone which looked like anything but a tail. One inconvenience was that we had to eat standing up attached to iron poles, with only bread and meat for food. ..."

Harrowing times at sea, but returning to battles over the board, we get a sense of Capablanca's attitudes and sensibilities about the state of chess in his lifetime:

"Present players are better than the old players. They know more. They have studied more. I do not say they have better gifts. But the science of the game has advanced enormously in the last fifty years. The matches of the past cannot be judged by today's standard. Most of them would fail on comparison. The only player of the past who could stand modern criticism was Morphy, and that is because he followed the same principles as living masters. He relied not so much as his admirers think on the brilliant combinations produced in some of his games, but on his thorough understanding of the theories on which the present players work. Beyond this, personal comparisons between the men of different times are impossible."

Capablanca goes on to explain that good players arrive at age twenty and peak at age thirty. He had unconventional ideas to share about how climate might affect one's mental abilities:

"Men from cold climates – Englishmen, Germans, Russians, all Northerners – may keep their powers up to fifty or sixty years of age; men from warmer climates, not beyond fifty. A warmer climate saps the energy."

Capablanca's unparalleled success had led to boredom with chess, saying that it had played itself out. He tried unsuccessfully to introduce a chess variant to replace the standard game, adding two more pieces with enhanced powers to be played on a larger 8 x 10 board. Embraced by just a few of his peers, the alternative game led to quicker, more exciting wins. Chess theory would have to change, particularly in the game's opening stage, but Capablanca wanted to reinvigorate a game that had gone relatively unchanged for 500 years.

While the health of the game itself would prove intact, Capablanca's own flagged at times. His youthful vigor and energy had masked a life-long struggle with hypertension. He had written openly about his bouts of high blood pressure and its affect on his energy level. He was finding it harder to concentrate in tournaments without fatigue. He was no longer at his best. Ultimately, his life ebbed and flowed with the game of chess.

Capablanca's end came suddenly. One evening, while watching a game at the Manhattan Chess Club, he suffered a massive stroke and collapsed. He was rushed by ambulance to Mount Sinai Hospital but died early the next morning, March 8, 1942. He was fifty-three.

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My assessment of this product: 

Order [Capablanca](#)  
by Edward Winter

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