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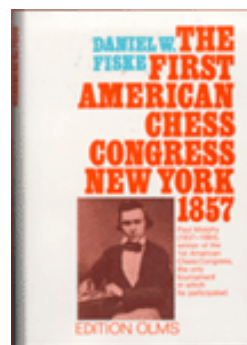


The Pride before the Sorrow

Neil Brennen

The Book of The First American Chess Congress New York 1857, edited by Daniel Fiske, First published 1859, Edition Olms 2002, English Descriptive Notation, Hardcover, 564pp., \$35.00

The story of Paul Morphy's rise and fall is a familiar one to most chessplayers, and so needn't be recapped here. Edition Olms, a company known for high-quality reprints of 19th and early 20th century tournament and match books, has republished Daniel Fiske's *Book of the First American Chess Congress*, first published in 1859. This Book of the Congress, as it was called by contemporaries, details the New York 1857 tournament won by Morphy. This was Morphy's only tournament in his too-brief career; all his other "serious" games were played in matches.



Morphy is the selling point of this volume, it appears; his photo adorns the cover, and his results in the tournament are summarized on the back of the cover. One would almost forget that Morphy wasn't the only attraction at the Congress. The table of contents tells us otherwise, listing reports from various committees, a blindfold display by Louis Paulsen, a chess problem tournament, and the celebratory Dinner of the Congress in addition to the "Grand Tournament" and "Minor Tournament", to use Fiske's description.

However interesting such doings may have been for the



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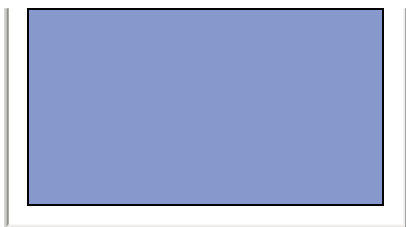
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participants, what many present day readers are interested in are the games. There are 67 games in from the "Grand Tournament"; however, they are rather uneven in quality, as we shall see.

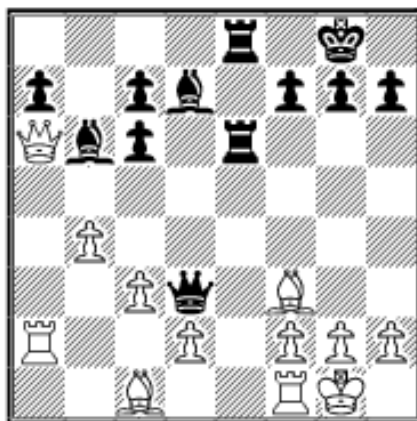
If one game from this tournament is known at all to contemporary chessplayers, it's the following game from the finals of the tournament between Louis Paulsen and Morphy, with its well-known queen sacrifice. The notes are from the book and are considerably more detailed than most of the other game annotations in the book.. Morphy is credited by Fiske with providing "comments to several of the games in the Grand Tournament", and it seems likely these notes are at least partially by Morphy. The notes have been reformatted slightly and, as with all the games and problems in this review, the notation has been changed from descriptive to algebraic.

Louis Paulsen - Paul Morphy First American Chess Congress New York

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 This irregular debut amounts to the same as the Queen's Knights opening, which is usually played as follows: 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 Nc6 and the position is the same as in the text. This method of commencing the game has, as is well-known, grown into great favor, within the last few years, among the players of continental Europe. It has been much elaborated by Mr. Hampe of Vienna, from whom it has sometimes been styled the Hampe opening. Lange calls it, very properly, the Vienna Game. It is treated of at length in the third edition (Berlin, 1858) of the *Handbuch* of Bilguer and Von der Lasa. A briefer analysis will be found in the second volume of the *Chess Monthly* (New York, 1858). **4.Bb5 Bc5 5.0-0 0-0 6.Nxe5 Re8** Better than 6...Nxe5, in which case White would have advanced 7.d4, regaining the piece with a better position. **7.Nxc6** By retreating 7.Nd3 White might have preserved his Pawn, but the cramped situation of his game would have amply compensated Black for his loss. **7...dxc6 8.Bc4** Indirectly protecting the e pawn, for suppose 8...Nxe5 9.Nxe4 Rxe4 10.Bxf7+ and White would keep his pawn, since if 10...Kxf7, White would win the Rook by 11.Qf3+. **8...b5** Black might also have played 8...Ng4. **9.Be2** If White had

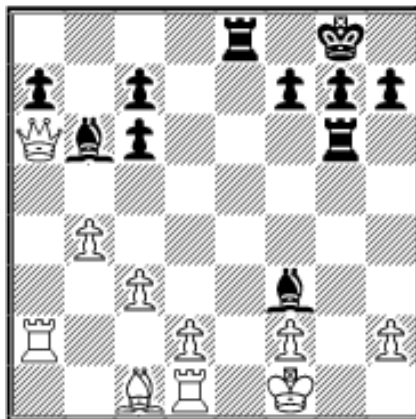


now moved 9.Bb3 Bg4 10.Qe1 b4 Black would have had a decided advantage. **9...Nxe4 10.Nxe4** If instead of this White had played 10.Bf3 he would have lost directly: 10.Bf3 Nxf2 11.Rxf2 Qd5 12.Qf1 (Or 12.Ne4 Rxe4 13.Bxe4 Qxe4+ 14.Kh1 Bg4 15.Be3 Re8 and wins.)...Qxf2+ 13.Qxf2 Re1 mate. **10...Rxe4 11.Bf3 Re6 12.c3** With the idea of playing 13.d4; 12.d3 would have been preferable, since Black is now enabled, by his next move, to completely shut in White's pieces on the Queenside. **12...Qd3 13.b4 Bb6 14.a4 bxa4 15.Qxa4 Bd7 15.Rg6** promises more than it would yield. **16.Ra2** Intending to proffer the exchange of Queens by 17. Qc2. 16.Qa6, however, would here have been far more to the point, compelling the second player to exchange or retreat his Queen. **16...Rae8** Threatening mate in two moves by ...Qxf1+ followed by ...Re1#. The real object of this move, however, was to enable Black, if possible, to play ...Qxf3. **17.Qa6 17.Qd1** was the proper reply to Black's sixteenth move, preventing both the threatened mate and the sacrifice of the Queen.



17...Qxf3 The winning move, for play as White may Black must now score the game. **18.gxf3 Rg6+ 19.Kh1 Bh3 20.Rd1** This, or 20.Qd3, was the only method of avoiding Black's threatened mate in two moves by 20...Bg2+ followed by 21...Bxf3 mate.

If 20.Rg1 Rxf1+ 21.Kxf1 Re1+ 22.Qf1 Rxf1# Or, if 20.Qd3 f5 (Again threatening mate in two moves.) 21.Qc4+ Kf8 (best) and White loses. **20...Bg2+ 21.Kg1 Bxf3+ 22.Kf1**



22...Bg2+ 23.Kg1 Bh3+ 24.Kh1 Bxf2 25.Qf1 The only move. **25...Bxf1 26.Rxf1 Re2 27.Ra1** In order to be able to advance the d pawn. **27...Rh6 28.d4 Be3** White cannot, except by the sacrifice of a piece, delay the mate longer than two moves. . **0-1**

An impressive performance by Morphy. However, there's a flaw in the gem. Let's look at the ending of this game again, annotated by another generation of chessplayer. The notes are taken from Philip Sergent's *Morphy's Games of Chess*. From the last diagram...

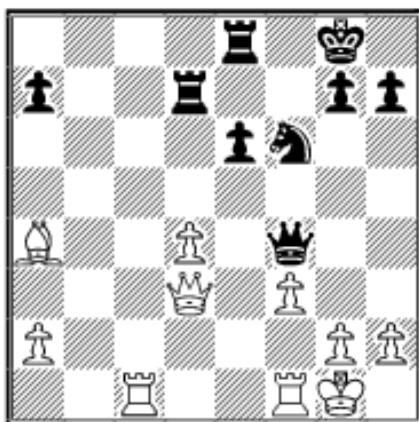
22...Bg2+ Here Zukertort discovered a quicker and more elegant win by **22...Rg2** (Threatening **23...Rxh2.**) **23.Qd3 Rxf2+ 24.Kg1 Rg2+ 25.Kf1 Rg1# 23.Kg1 Bh3+** Here again there is a quicker line in **23...Be4+ 24.Kf1 Bf5 25.Qe2 Bh3+ 26.Ke1 Rg1#** given by J.H. Bauer. **24.Kh1 Bxf2 25.Qf1 Bxf1 26.Rxf1 Re2 27.Ra1 Rh6 28.d4 Be3 0-1**

While there should be no blame attached to Morphy for not choosing the quickest line after White's 22nd move, as over the board, at least from a competitive standpoint, one win is as good as another, surely the annotator should have mentioned the quicker checkmates in his notes?

More typical of the quality of play and of game annotation in the book is the following game between Editor Fiske and Napoleon Marache. It took five games for Marache to defeat Fiske and advance to the second round of the tournament. This was the third game of their match:

***Daniel Fiske - Napoleon Marache* First American Chess Congress New York**

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5 4.Nf3 Nf6 5.c4 Bb4+ 6.Nc3
 0-0 7.Be2 c5 Weak; he should rather have played 7...Be6
 8.0-0 dxc4 9.Bxc4 Bxc3 10.bxc3 cxd4 11.Ba3 Re8
 12.Ng5 Be6 13.Nxe6 fxe6 14.Qb3 Nd5 15.Qxb7 Nb6
 16.Bb5 N8d7 17.cxd4 Rb8 18.Qf3 Nd5 19.Bd3 Qh4
 20.Rac1 N7f6 21.Bd6 Rb7 22.Bc2 Rf7 23.Qd3 Nf4
 24.Bxf4 Qxf4 25.f3 Rd7 26.Ba4

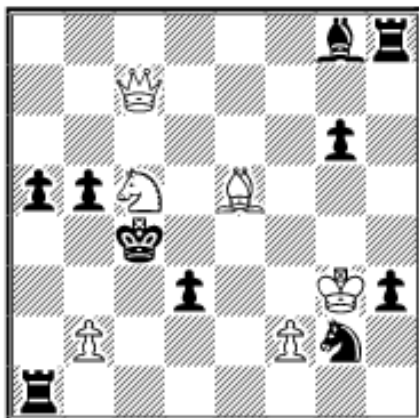


26...Red8 If the position be correctly recorded why did not Black take the Queen's Pawn with Rook? 27.Bxd7 Rxd7 and White went on to win. 1-0

This game is typical of the level of chess play among some of the participants.

While Morphy's play was usually at a high level, as was Paulsen's, some of the other participants in the First American Chess Congress no doubt could have benefited from reading [ChessCafe's](#) "Novice Nook", had it been available.

Hopes that the quality of chess will improve in the section of the book devoted to chess problems are likewise dashed. Consider this mate in four moves problem, the third in the first place set "Strive for Honor!" by Rudolf Willmers of Vienna, Austria:



The key is 1.Ne4+. Such checking keys have long been out of style in chess problems, and a modern day problem with a checking key would probably be dismissed as "obvious" and "primitive". And there are a number of such checking keys among the 57 problems in the book, in addition to a number of "cooked" problems. (A fitting

term, since Eugene Cook was one of the judges.)

Fortunately, the *Book of the Congress* is more than just a collection of games and problems. Fiske sensed the importance of putting American chess "on the map" so to speak, and accordingly filled his tournament book with historical articles on the Royal Game in America. A brief trip through the table of contents yields the following articles:

- "Chess In Philadelphia": Written by Dr. George Allen, a well-known chess bibliophile and author of a biography of Philidor (see the review of this book in the [ChessCafe Archives](#)), this account of the Royal Game in the City of Brotherly Love was a source of information for Gustavus Reichhelm and Walter Penn Shipley when they were preparing their book *Chess In Philadelphia*.
- "Chess In Boston": This article is supplement with an additional biographical sketch of Benjamin Lynne Oliver, a prominent Boston chessplayer of an earlier generation.
- "Chess in New York" and "Chess in New Orleans": Brief accounts, and in the case of New Orleans a very brief account, of the chess history of these cities.
- "Lowenthal's visit to America": Lowenthal's account of his three year stay in the United States, from 1849 to 1851, is a "coming to America" story detailing his arrival as a political refugee from Hungary to his trip to England for the 1851 London tournament. Lowenthal briefly discusses chess in Cincinnati, Ohio and Louisville, Kentucky.
- "The History of the Automaton Chess-Player in America": Again the work of George Allen, this lengthy and well-researched account of "the Turk" in the New World was used as source material by both Gerald Levitt and Tom Standage in their books on the Turk (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#) for

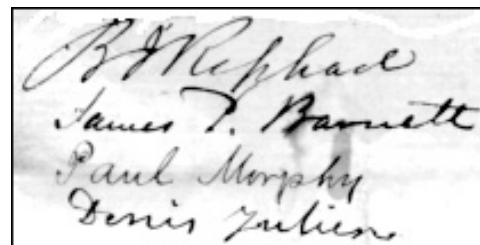
reviews of these books).

- "Paul Morphy": An account of "the greatest Chess-player of all time" from birth till his return from his first trip to Europe. The tone of the article isn't consistently as overblown as the phrase quoted in the last sentence, but instead presents a moderate-toned recounting of Morphy's rise to the top of the chess world, ending with his return from Europe in 1859.
- "American Chess Bibliography": A detailed, annotated listing of chess books, magazines, and columns published in the United States. The list of chess columns in particular is of great use to researchers, as many of the newspapers containing these columns are preserved on microfilm, and are awaiting a researcher to unlock their contents.

In addition to these and other historical and biographical articles, the book also contains accounts of the organization and management of the congress, and a day-by-day account of the congress.

To a present day reader, this may seem an odd mixture of items for a tournament book: historical articles mixed with an unevenly composed and played collection of problems and games. However, there is one theme to this book that serves to tie all the loose ends together, a broader theme from American culture of the time.

The Reverend Sydney Smith, while reviewing Seybert's *Annals of the United States*, summed up European opinion of American culture with the phrase, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American picture or statue?" The United States had to struggle against this image of America as a cultural backwater, and the large amount of historical material on the growth of chess in the United States in the *Book of the Congress* is, in one sense, a



Facsimiles of autographs (not from the book) of some of the participants

partial response to Smith's statement.

The best known reply to Smith's comment was in an essay by Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses". Ostensibly a book review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville used the review as a rallying cry for the worth of American literature in general. Substitute the word "chessplayer" for "writer" in the following passage from Melville's essay, and you have captured the spirit of the Book of the Congress: "Let American then prize and cherish her writers, yea, let her glorify them. They are not so many in number, as to exhaust her good-will. And while she has good kith and kin of her own, to take to her bosom, let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien... let America first praise mediocrity even, in her own children, before she praises (for everywhere, merit demands acknowledgment from every one) the best excellence in the children of any other land."

This attitude underlines much of the content of the book and indeed, the contemporary interest in Morphy's encounters with the best chessplayers in Europe. Morphy was the "kith and kin", to borrow Melville's phrase, of American chessplayers, and America's representative for American chess to the rest of the world. To borrow a word much used in descriptions of Morphy, he was the "pride" of American chess, and the culmination of all the "Incidents in the History of American Chess" listed in the Book of the Congress. And for all the flaws in the games of the Congress, they too are part of the "pride", and the Book of the Congress in essence becomes a celebration, even if it means praising mediocrity.

Since this book is a reprint of another, a word needs to be said about the production.. This is a sturdily bound volume, with a very readable typeface. Despite the fact this book came to the reviewer as a "new edition", it appears to be just a reprint of Olms' 1985 edition of the book. In a comparison between the "new edition" and the

reviewer's copy of the 1985 edition, no differences were found.

If a chess book is just a description of the technical aspects of the game to you, then perhaps this thick tome will be missing, but not missed, from your bookshelf. However, if you are a fan of chess history, and want to understand the early days of American chess, and the impact of Morphy on American chess, then this book is for you. The pride is between these covers: pride in American chess, and pride in Morphy's accomplishments, both untainted by future sorrow.

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New York 1857
edited by Daniel Fiske

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