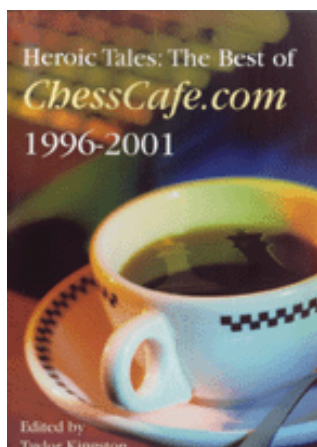




BOOK REVIEWS



Worthy Man, Worthwhile Book

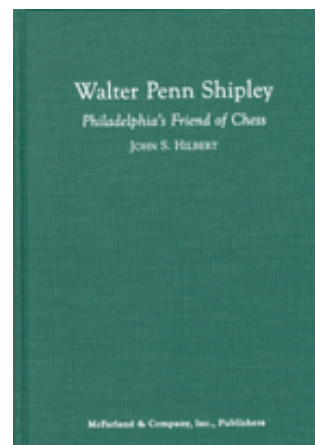
Taylor Kingston

Walter Penn Shipley: Philadelphia's Friend of Chess, by John S. Hilbert, 2003 McFarland & Co., Hardback, English Algebraic Notation, 442pp., \$45.00.

"Walter — be a good man." — Last words of Walter Penn Shipley's father

"In heaven all the interesting people are missing."
— Nietzsche

Though not as famous as his friends Steinitz, Lasker, Pillsbury, Marshall, Capablanca and other great masters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Walter Penn Shipley was hardly any less important to American chess. A very strong player, Shipley might have made a major mark, perhaps contending for the US Championship, had he devoted himself more to his own advancement. Yet his playing feats are perhaps the least important items on his chess résumé. In his 81 years (1860-1942), Shipley served long and ably as a chess administrator, journalist, patron, organizer, promoter, tournament director, referee, adjudicator, and in various other capacities for the popularization, expansion, economic health, and general well-being of the game. He carried out these roles with diligence and integrity, and made a significant contribution toward lifting chess from the club skittles level to the stature of a national and international sport.



One wonders if chess historian John Hilbert, probably best known as the author of *Shady Side: The Life and Crimes of*

Norman Tweed Whitaker, undertook this biography as an antidote to, or at least a contrast with, that of Whitaker. Shipley and Whitaker, who knew each other well and met several times at the board, had similarities: both were Philadelphians, both were lawyers, both were of high intelligence, and were of roughly equal chess ability. Yet the contrasts are greater: while Whitaker became an amoral liar and felon, and was a divisive egotist mistrusted and despised by many, Shipley was a modest, law-abiding, church-going family man and pillar of society, who worked for the benefit of the chess community and was widely liked and respected.

Hilbert has done his usual thorough job of research, compiling close to 300 of Shipley's games and gathering a large amount of biographical detail from a great many primary sources, including Shipley's own scrapbooks. The story begins surprisingly far back, in 1750, when Walter's great-grandfather William arrived in Pennsylvania from England, eventually settling on land that was part of the original 1681 royal grant to William Penn, founder of the Quaker colony. William's descendants would eventually join the Society of Friends, and this Quaker upbringing becomes a major factor in Walter's character and an ongoing thread in Hilbert's narrative.

This early background and Shipley's childhood take up the first 19 pages. The book then focuses on the adult Shipley, his life and chess career, in straightforward chronological style. We list a few of his major highlights and contributions:

- Shipley was five times champion of the Franklin Chess Club of Philadelphia over the period 1887-1914. During the early part of this time it was arguably the strongest club in the country, and for most of it no less than second strongest, behind the Manhattan Club of New York.
- He was three times champion of the state of Pennsylvania and twice of New York.
- He was a major force in correspondence chess, organizing and directing the Continental Correspondence Tournament of 1894-1898, and winning the 1902-1906 Masters' Tournament of the Pillsbury National Correspondence Chess Association, which gave him the title of Correspondence Chess Champion of North America.

- He served as president of the Franklin CC for 36 years.
- He organized the Philadelphia portions of two world title matches, Steinitz-Lasker 1894 and Lasker-Marshall 1907, and served as treasurer for the latter.
- He helped organize tours by major players, including Steinitz, Lasker, Pillsbury, and Capablanca.
- He was a frequent contributor to and fund-raiser for major tournaments and matches, providing valuable financial assistance. He was also a frequent advance subscriber to books and magazines by various masters struggling to make a living.
- He helped organize and direct several trans-Atlantic cable matches between the USA and Britain, and various telegraph matches between Philadelphia and other cities such as New York and Chicago.
- He served as chess columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for 35 years, from Pillsbury's death in 1906 until his own in 1942.
- He co-wrote (with Gustavus Reichhelm) the book *Chess In Philadelphia* (1898), a unique and valuable historical work.
- He was a co-founder in 1913 of The Good Companion Chess Problem Society, which evolved into an international organization publishing a monthly magazine with wide distribution.
- He was a leader in attempting to establish a national chess organization for the United States.
- He served as *de facto* referee in the acrimonious world title match negotiations between Lasker and Capablanca in both 1912 and 1921.
- He helped Capablanca draw up the "London Rules" of 1922, the first formal regulations for world championship challenges.
- He acted as a good will ambassador, forging ties between the U.S. and the chess communities of England, Canada, and Latin America.

The above is only a very partial list. On top of all this, Shipley also managed to maintain a successful law practice and stable marriage, and raise three sons to honorable manhood. But more than any particular chess success or contribution, Shipley became known for his general integrity and intellectual ability.

As Hilbert says,

“By bringing the persuasive powers of his legal education together with his search for unity and consensus, fostered no doubt through his early training among the Society of Friends, and further motivated by his love of the royal game, Shipley in his role as match organizer and promoter of chess exhibited his multi-faceted, yet unified character. Rarely had the voice and persuasive abilities of a proponent of chess been raised so well without thought of personal gain.”

Shipley also seemed to possess a likeability that made him good company. In a 1910 letter to his wife, Emanuel Lasker wrote:

“Walter Penn Shipley, a Quaker, whose guest I am at the University Club, then Stuart Robinson and Voigt, [are] excellent men ... they have a certain fascination in their social gatherings which I am not able to define, but I feel it. You can really relax with them. There is not an atom of falseness in them. And they are men of distinguished education with a convivial instinct.”

This combination of amiability, integrity and intellect gained Shipley the respect and friendship of men who otherwise disliked each other and were often seriously at odds, such as Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, and Alekhine. It also gained him a high degree of trust, as for example when Steinitz, Lasker and others engaged him to handle financial affairs, or he was appointed umpire of the USA-Britain cable match on behalf of the British side.

However we should not give the impression that the book is a monotonous paean to Shipley the Good. Hilbert works in much interesting period detail, both light and serious. For example there is Blackburne’s snit at not getting paid more for a simul than Gunsberg, or the cryptic aside of the Pillsbury umbrella incident, or the amusing matter of “Captain Pearson,” a freeloading impostor Shipley exposed, who made a career of hanging around chess clubs and cadging money with various phony hard-luck stories. Or on the sober side, there is the effect of the financial panic of 1907 on American chess, or the brutal, unsolved 1897 murder of Shipley’s colleague William Cheever

Wilson (first described in Hilbert's *Essays in American Chess History*). Many things of interest to historians are found, such as Henry Bird's comparison of Steinitz and Morphy, or details of the 1906 match negotiations between Lasker and Maroczy, or Shipley's views on the controversy between Lasker and Norbert Lederer about the 1924 and 1927 New York tournaments.

Various interesting bits of correspondence are included, much of it from Lasker. For example there is his tongue-in-cheek 1903 proposal on how to improve the financial plight of the professional chess player:

“Business is bad ... It will be necessary to form a union, to raise prices ... When Pillsbury returns I shall make a proposition to him to that effect, and get him to join me in a universal strike, with walking delegates to keep people from chess playing, if necessary by force of arms.”

And here is Lasker's intriguing early take on Capablanca, from 1910:

“If I arrange two games with Capablanca, a twenty-one year old Cuban, I will be able to earn somewhat more than 1,000 Marks. Quite good money for two games, but the bloke plays splendidly and is in marvelous condition ... And everywhere he is considered to be a genius. People would love to have a game between me and him. I will probably try in spite of the risk of losing. And if I first start getting scared, my chess will be out anyway then.”

Unlike the Whitaker book, in which narrative and games were kept in separate sections, here they are mixed together. There are pros and cons to each approach. At times *Friend's* narrative seems a bit chopped up by the interspersed games, but at other points it is much easier reading to have the description of an event accompanied by its games. Most of the games come from Franklin CC championships, Pennsylvania and New York state tournaments, Franklin CC vs. Manhattan CC team matches, other Philadelphia club events, national correspondence tournaments, and various simuls and exhibition matches. Though Shipley played in few if any of what we would call major tournaments, he nevertheless managed to cross swords

with many of the best players of his day, including Steinitz, Zukertort, Bird, Gunsberg, Showalter, Walbrodt, Albin, Lasker, Pillsbury, Janowski, Maroczy, Marshall, Capablanca, Alekhine and others.

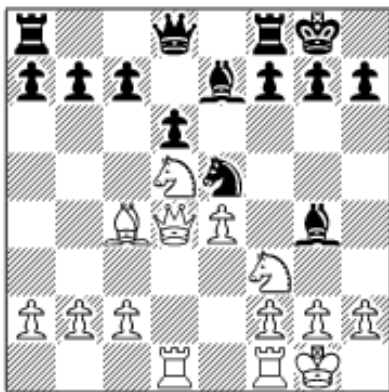
Ratings did not exist in Shipley's time, and he is not listed in Elo's *The Rating of Chessplayers Past and Present*, but we would estimate his peak with reasonable confidence at around 2400. In particular his results circa 1889-91 support this, when he made strong showings against several of the world's best in exhibition games at the Franklin. The first was Isidor Gunsberg (historical Elo 2560), against whom Shipley managed a very respectable +1 –2 =2 score in a 5-game match, this with a master who would soon play Steinitz for the world title. Less than a month later Shipley met another top master, Austria's Max Weiss (2540), who had just placed equal first (with Chigorin) at New York 1889, ahead of Gunsberg, Blackburne, Burn, Lipschütz, Mason and others. Shipley took him down in fine style:



17.Re2! Bg4 18.e6! Bxh5

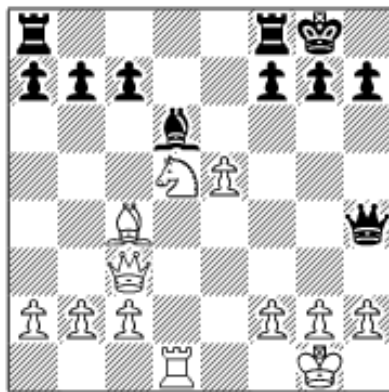
19.exd7+Kxd7 and Black resigned in view of 20.Bf5+ Kd6 21.Be7#.

This was quickly followed by the appearance of Henry Bird for an 8-game match. The Grand Old Man of British chess, one-time opponent of Morphy, found that unsound sacrifices were ill-advised against Shipley:

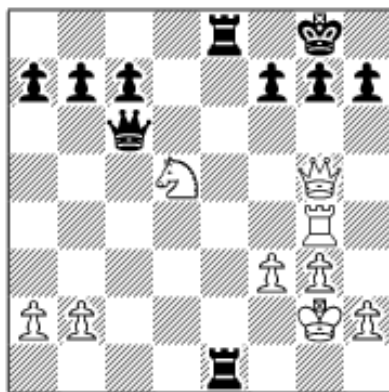


12.Nxe5?! dxe5 13.Qxe5 Bd6

14.Qc3 Bxd1 15.Rxd1 Qh4 16.e5



16...Bxe5! A resource Bird had overlooked when calculating his 12th move. **17.Qxe5 Qxc4 18.Rd4 Qxc2 19.g3 Rfe8 20.Qg5 Re1+ 21.Kg2 Qc6 22.f3 Rae8 23.Rg4**



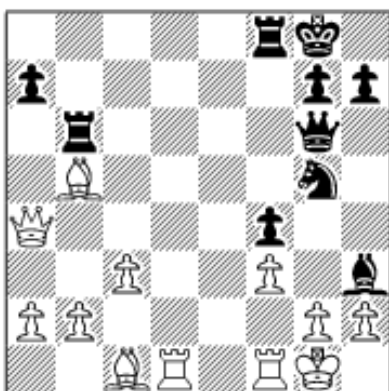
23...Qc2+ 24.Kh3 Qxh2+!, 0-1. Bird did win the match, but Shipley's $+3 -5 =1$ score against this international veteran was a credit to his ability.

Gunsberg again visited in 1891, and this time Shipley did even better than 1889, scoring $+2 -2 =1$. As with Bird, Shipley was able to refute an

unsound attack:



19...Ng5? Gunsberg hopes to make something out of the g-file pin, but Shipley does not flinch. **20.Qc4+ Be6 21.Qxc7 Rac8 22.Qxb7 Rb8 23.Qa6 Rb6 24.Qa4 Bh3**



25.gxh3 Ne4+ 26.Kh1 Ng3+ 27.hxg3 Qxg3 28.Qc4+ Kh8 29.Qxf4 Qxh3+ 30.Qh2 and wins. Shipley's even score in this match is especially remarkable in that only a month earlier Gunsberg had narrowly lost a world championship match to Steinitz $+4 -6 =9$. Keep in mind that all these examples were even-strength games at reasonable

time controls, not blitz, odds, consultation or simul games. Other

high-level victims of Shipley in such games included reigning US Champion Jackson Showalter in 1896. Additionally, in simul or thematic games Shipley defeated Zukertort, Steinitz, Pillsbury, and Lasker, and drew with Capablanca, Maroczy, Janowski and other greats.

Besides top internationals, Shipley played against most of the best American national masters of his time: Eugene Delmar, Emil Kemeny, Hermann Voigt, Julius Finn, Albert Hodges, Hermann Helms, J.M. Hanham, Gustavus Reichhelm, Samuel Bampton, Stasch Mlotowski and others. Lovers of old-style gambits (Evans, Scotch, Steinitz, Falkbeer, etc.) will find much of interest, though statistically the Ruy Lopez is probably the most common opening in the book, along with the French (including many examples of the McCutcheon variation; John L. McCutcheon was a friend of Shipley's). Many of the games can be found in no other book. The ratio of games to text is high in the early chapters, but lowers as Shipley gradually shifts more to administrator, journalist, and elder statesman as the years go on.

Physically the book is up to McFarland & Co.'s usual high standard, and unlike *Shady Side* it has a general index, which greatly increases its usefulness as a reference source. Sixteen pages of photographs show Shipley at various times from infancy to old age. In his prime he was a handsome man, well groomed and well dressed, with keen eyes and a formidable mustache.



And here is Shipley in his later years, playing chess with a grandson.



We are somewhat loathe to discuss the book's shortcomings, because they should not be seen as overshadowing Hilbert's fine job of research and organization. However, there are problems. One is a certain dullness. Comparing *Friend* to *Shady Side* calls to mind the Bible verse Luke 15:7: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Fairly or not, in accordance with Nietzsche's dictum one tends to see the unrepentant sinner Whitaker as more interesting than the righteous Shipley. *Friend* isn't hagiography, but after a while one starts to wish that some whiff of scandal would turn up, that Shipley had at least once chased a skirt, smoked some rag, or moonlighted as a bootlegger, just to spice things up.

Still, Shipley hardly led a dull life. Hilbert quotes Bernie Winkelman from a 1936 *Chess Review*: "An interview with Shipley is a rich adventure. His memory is stored with reminiscences of the great and near-great of the chess panorama. We carry away with us the significance of such a grand passion ...". Yet *Friend* sometimes lacks much sense of "grand passion" or "rich adventure," and becomes just a dry recitation of events: Shipley played in this or that tournament, Shipley met this or that person, Shipley traveled here or there. Factually accurate, but not engrossing.

Where Hilbert lacks factual documentation, he sometimes tries to fill in with informed speculation. But too often these come off as mere superfluous asides or statements of the obvious, viz.:

“With his father’s death, Shipley no doubt found himself working under additional burdens involving the care of his mother, arranging matters regarding his father’s estate, and of course handling his growing law business.”

“Unfortunately, Shipley’s response to his second blunder in a row has not been preserved, though no doubt it was courteous and apologetic.”

“No doubt Shipley followed newspaper accounts of the great New York tournament, but he must also have had family matters on his mind.”

“No doubt Shipley’s disappointment, if indeed he felt any, at not winning the Franklin championship was lessened with the birth of his second son ...”

“No doubt Shipley’s interest in the match was disturbed by the death of his old law partner ...”

“No doubt Shipley lost in Newman not only an opponent, but a friend.”

The phrase “no doubt” appears so often we half-expected to see Gwen Stefani in the bibliography.

As in some of his earlier works, Hilbert still shows a tendency to wordiness, and to redundancy, as on page 83, where the first paragraph begins with “Above all, George Vaux was Shipley’s intimate friend,” and the fourth with “Vaux was not only Shipley’s law partner, but his friend.” While Hilbert’s confusions about homonyms (e.g. “fair” for “fare”) have almost disappeared, errors with hyphens (mainly their absence) continue. Hilbert also has not lost his tendency, noted in our review of *Shady Side*, to get sidetracked by irrelevant extranea. For example, a lengthy, superfluous paragraph is devoted to the wedding of Shipley’s younger sister, including descriptions of the décor and the bride’s attire, the name and church of the presiding minister, and the exact times of the ceremony and the reception.

Since such unimportant matters, and most important ones, are

dealt with in adequate or even excessive detail, the surprisingly skimpy discussion of Shipley's lost archives is disappointing. Hilbert devotes only two sentences to this subject:

“The next week [*i.e.* about 18 January 1941 — TK] Buschke would write again, asking Shipley's help in collecting obituary columns on Lasker, and also asking to examine Shipley's files on Lasker, Capablanca, Steinitz, and Pillsbury, all of which included extensive correspondence and other materials Shipley had saved during the course of over sixty years on the national and international chess scene. Unfortunately, after Shipley's death, most of these papers were lost—without doubt, except perhaps for the papers of Hermann Helms, the single most regrettable loss of primary source material in the history of American chess.” (p. 426)

In fact Shipley's papers disappeared under somewhat mysterious circumstances, fueling speculation about skeletons in the closet. Ideally one would like to see a deeper investigation, with the aim of confirming or refuting the rumors.

On the other hand, some important matters are properly discussed to a degree of detail not to be found elsewhere. For example, Shipley became, in effect, a one-man Supreme Court on the question of exactly who was entitled to call himself US Champion after Pillsbury's death in 1906. While Marshall was then generally recognized as the strongest American player, Shipley's delineation of the post-Morphy line of succession amounted to a legal brief, that both refuted pretensions of certain St. Louis organizers to any ownership of the title, and prompted Marshall to play a match with Showalter to give himself *de jure* legitimacy. Other writers, for example Soltis in *The United States Chess Championship, 1845-1996*, have discussed this matter, but full details, including Shipley's writings on the subject, can be found only in *Friend*.

The book also makes clear that Shipley was a man ahead of his time. For example he was an early advocate of a regular tournament for the US championship (which he lived to see begun in 1936), and of putting world championship challenges and matches on a business-like, broadly supported basis, rather than leaving them as, essentially, wagers dependent on hard-to-

find backers. He realized the growth of chess was greatly hobbled by lack of money and organization, and did all he could to remedy both. It is unfortunate that his efforts on these lines bore relatively little fruit until late in his life, when the USCF and FIDE began to provide some structure for American and international chess, respectively. It is also unfortunate that both organizations have since suffered under leaders of much less competence and integrity than Shipley. FIDE in particular could use someone like him now.

In American chess, probably only Hermann Helms occupies a place comparable to Shipley, and also internationally very few come to mind, notably Max Euwe. He is certainly a figure who merits a full-scale biography, and Hilbert has clearly worked hard to do him justice, for the most part with success. Its shortcomings notwithstanding, the book serves well as a game collection, as biography, and as history, especially in showing how the chess of an era was shaped off the board by men not in the spotlight. On the whole, *Walter Penn Shipley* is a worthwhile book about a worthy man.



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