



BOOK  
REVIEWS

## Bittersweet Book

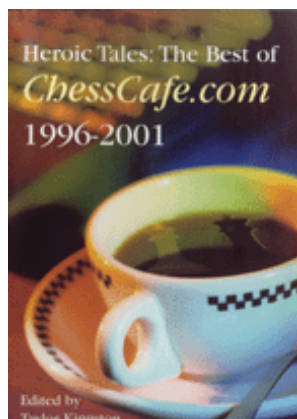
about

### "A Great Bloke"

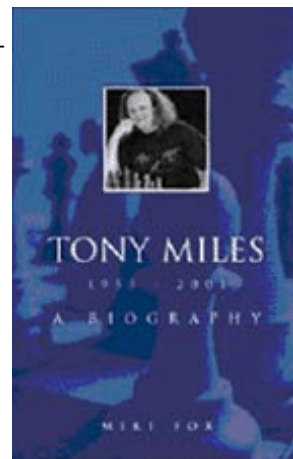
Taylor Kingston

*Tony Miles: 'It's Only Me'*, Compiled by Geoff Lawton, 2003 Batsford, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 288pp., \$27.95.

*"These days they are breeding the super kids, the Kasparovs and Shorts. The machine type creatures. I don't think a human being can win the World Championship any more. And I prefer to be human." — Tony Miles, 1980*



As many readers know, Anthony J. "Tony" Miles, born 1955, became in 1976 the first native-born grandmaster from England, a country with no player of that caliber since Blackburne a century before. For the next twenty-five years Miles was one of the best and most active chess players in the world. He was also an effective writer, producing a column for the *New Statesman* 1976-1981, various articles for the magazines *CHESS*, *New In Chess*, and *Kingpin*, and a monthly column for this web-site 1999-2001. His work conveyed the knowledge and experience of a veteran chess professional in a style of unvarnished frankness and keen wit.



Miles died in his sleep, peacefully but unexpectedly, at age 46 in November 2001, from heart failure due to complications of diabetes, a sad loss to the chess world. Few people, especially those who die suddenly and relatively young, get to write their own epitaph, but that is in effect what we have here. Miles' friend and colleague IM Geoff Lawton, assisted by Leonard Barden, Mike Fox, Malcolm Hunt and other British journalists, has crafted a selection of Miles' chess, writings and interviews into a combination biography, games collection, and memorial tribute. The result is a bittersweet book, provoking both laughter and sadness in its portrait of a very human person. It is informative, instructive, and entertaining; somewhat sloppy and perhaps short of what it might have been, but overall quite good.

The book is about 95% Miles' own work. After a two-page foreword by Barden and a 12-page summary of Mile's career (uncredited, presumably by Lawton), the next 216 pages are all full games or fragments annotated by Miles himself. Arranged chronologically, they cover highlights of his career

from 1967, when Miles was 12, to shortly before his death in 2001.

Miles played a huge amount of chess (the book's tournament and match record has about 400 entries), here condensed into 118 games, mostly from strong international events just short of the highest level. Miles' peak Elo was in the 2600s and at various times he was among the world's top 10, but inconsistency kept him from qualifying for the Candidates Matches. Still, at his best he could beat almost anyone in the world, and he took high places in such major events as Tilburg 1977 (2nd to Karpov, ahead of Hort, Kavalek, Timman, Hübner, Gligoric et al), London 1980 (=1st with Andersson and Korchnoi, ahead of Sosonko, Speelman, Gheorgiu, Ljubojevic, Timman et al), Vrbas 1980 (clear 1st, ahead of Petrosian, Adorjan, Yusupov et al), Oslo 1984 (2nd to Karpov), and perhaps most impressively Tilburg 1984 (sole 1st, 1½ points ahead of a field including Beliavsky, Hübner, Ribli, Portisch, Timman and Smyslov), to give only a few examples. Over his career he beat most of the important GMs of the last 50 years, from Reshevsky and Korchnoi to Short and Anand, with several world champions (Smyslov, Tal, Spassky, Karpov, Kramnik) on the list.

Miles' games are worthwhile not just for whom he beat, but how he did it. His style was aggressive, dynamic, experimental, colorful — fun, interesting chess. This was partly due to his originality and unorthodoxy in the opening. The most famous example is his **1.e4 a6!? 2.d4 b5!?** as Black against Karpov at Skara 1980, but the book features many other unusual lines. For instance here is an early king-walk in Miles-Rivas, Amsterdam 1978: **1.c4 Nf6 2. d4 e6 3. Nf3 b6 4.Bf4 Bb7 5.e3 Be7 6.h3 0-0 7.Nc3 d5 8.cxd5 Nxd5 9.Nxd5 Bxd5 10.Bd3 Bb4+ 11.Ke2 Bd6 12.Bxd6 Bxf3+ 13.Kxf3!? Qxd6**



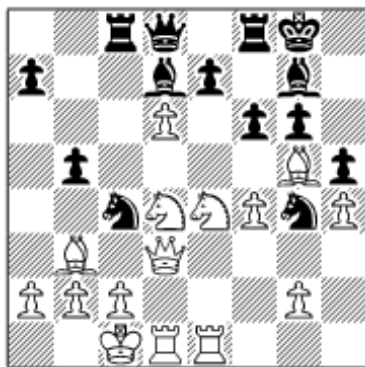
Shades of Steinitz!

Another of Miles' offbeat favorites was the English Defense, as in Olafsson-Miles, Las Palmas 1978: **1.c4 b6 2.Nc3 e6 3.d4 Bb4 4.e3 Bb7 5.Nge2 f5 6.a3 Bd6**



A throwback to the days of Bird and Owen, and so much for the “knights before bishops” rule. Besides reviving antique openings, Miles contributed to some topical modern lines, notably the Sicilian Dragon, of which the book has several examples. A good one is Ljubojevic-Miles, Malta Olympiad 1980, which showcases Miles' considerable tactical skill: **1.e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 0-0 8.Qd2 Nc6 9.Bc4 Bd7 10.h4 Rc8 11.Bb3**

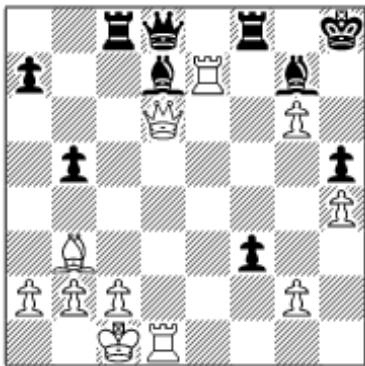
**h5** — Miles adopts the Soltis variation, which Kasparov would later use in his 1995 title match with Anand. **12.0-0-0 13.Bg5 Rc5 14.f4 Nc4 15.Qd3 b5 16.e5 Ng4** — A critical line at the time. White now follows Soviet analysis which supposedly refuted Black's 16th. **17.Ne4 Rc8 18.exd6 f6 19.Rhe1**



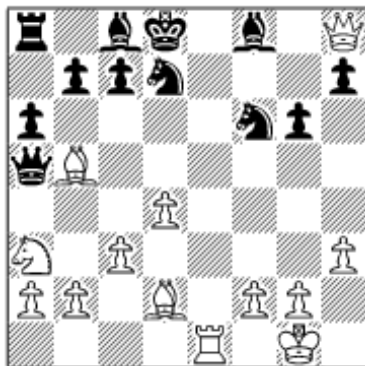
Miles writes: “The key move of the Soviet analysis which now gave reams of variations to show that White was winning ... However, my powers of perception are not that deep. All I could see was a bishop on g5 and the fact that after **19...exd6 20.Nxd6** no mention was made of the simple **20...Kh7!** I did not analyse in depth. I merely observed that White was going to lose at least two pieces for a rook for an attack which was by no means clear.” **21.f5 Nxd6 22.fxg6+**

**Kh8 23.Bf4 Ne5 24.Bxe5 fxe5 25.Nf3 e4!** — “Dragon thematic — opening the long diagonal with little regard for material.” **26.Qxd6 exf3 27.Re7**

**27...Bg4! 28.Qe5** — Apparently hoping for a swindle like **28...Bxe5?? 29.Rh7#**, but Miles has it sussed. **28...Qxd1+ 29.Kxd1 fxg2+ 30.Kd2 Rfd8+ 31.Bd5 Rxd5+, 0-1.** An *Informant* best game prize winner.



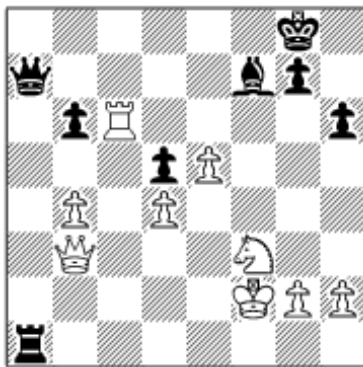
A few more of the book’s combinative highlights:



An old-fashioned Morphyesque sac-fest from a 1978 simul: **1.Qxf8+! Nxf8 2.Re8+! Nxe8 3.Bg5+ Nf6 4.Bxf6 mate.**



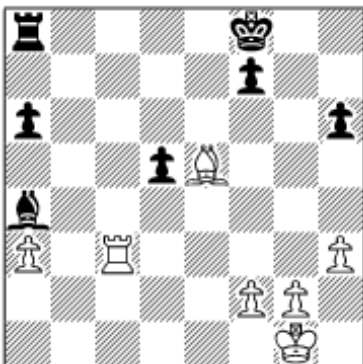
Miles – Gonzales Mestres, Las Palmas 1980: **1.Nxb6! Qxb6 2.Rc8+ Rd8 (2...Kh7 3.Qf5+ g6 4.Qf6 Rd8 5.a5) 3.a5 Rxc8 4.axb6 Rc6 5.Qf5 Be6 6.Qa5, 1-0**



Miles-Panno, Puerto Madryn 1980:  
**33.Rc8+ Kh7 34.Ng5+! Kg6** (34...hxg5  
 35.Qd3+ and mate shortly) **35.Rc6+!**  
**Kxg5 36.Qg3+ Kf5 37.Qf3+ Kg5**  
**38.Kg3, 1-0** (Black overstepped the time  
 limit just before 39.h4 mate).

In addition to his attacking skills, Miles' possessed excellent endgame technique; one game shows him winning a theoretically drawn rook ending from noted endgame expert GM Pal Benko.

Another good example is this opposite-colored bishops ending from Miles-Spassky, Buenos Aires Olympiad, 1978:



**31.Rc5! Rd8** (31...Bb3 32.Rc6) **32.Bf6**  
**Rd6 33.Rc8+ Be8 34.Bd4 Re6 35.Rd8**  
**Kg8 36.Rxd5 Re1+** (36...Bc6 37.Rc5)  
**37.Kh2 Rd1 38.Rd8 Kh7 39.g4 Rd3**  
**40.f4 h4 41.f5, 1-0.** Endgame enthusiasts  
 will find the book engrossing, as several  
 endings are analyzed at length.

Besides the quality of his play, another factor making the games a good read is Miles' writing style. Unlike some GMs whose annotations maintain a stiff,

impersonal objectivity and a façade of omniscience, Miles, as the Ljubojevic notes show, tended to wear his thoughts on his sleeve, saying whatever passed through his mind. He was informal, irreverent, blunt, but unpretentious, even self-effacing, and often the butt of his own jokes. A few sample quotes:

“As I am supposed to be writing a book on the Dragon, I feel obliged to play the opening once in a while. Apparently there is a rumor that I am an authority on the subject.”

“Actually most of my opening preparation consisted of browsing through Peter Wells' book on the Semi-Slav. Not that I actually played it in any games, but at 304 pages it's a lot more substantial than most opening books and therefore much more useful for swatting mosquitos.”

*After opening 1.e4 Nc6 as Black:* “I like playing this in the first round of swisses. Future opponents waste lots of time preparing for it.”

“[Playing Speelman] is never a pleasant pairing. Nothing to do with chess — just the eternal nightmare of having to sit opposite the second most fidgety player on earth (Walter Browne is the first in case anyone is wondering).”

“Henrique Mecking ... apparently, plays just one tournament every three years ... spending most of his time studiously preparing for the moment when the World Championship will be his. I will not bore you with my views on this practice but suffice it to say I consider it most unnatural and faintly unhealthy. Having said this I must confess that I've just lost

to him without getting out of the opening.”

This lack of pretension is amply evident, as the book includes a number of his losses, some described in mercilessly (but humorously) self-deprecating terms.

Though Miles by his own admission was not much interested in chess history, his work has some historical value for its firsthand descriptions of several chess events, most notably Tilburg 1985. As Miles described for *New In Chess*, a spinal malady forced him to play most of the tournament in pain and a horizontal position. Despite this handicap, and some bizarre off-board machinations by his competitors, Miles managed to take equal first with Korchnoi and Hübner, ahead of Ljubojevic, Polugaevsky, Romanishin, Timman and Dzindzichashvili. The story, the longest single article in the book, is well worth the reader’s time, both for its depiction of the psychological tensions and mind-games of high-level chess, and for the marvelous quote from Hübner: “Oh no, it was always my intention that the moves should be utterly stupid.”

As a writer, Miles played for British journalism somewhat the same curmudgeonly role as J. H. Donner did for the Dutch (see *The King* in the review archives). Miles’ sardonic wit, sometimes understated but more often bluntly outspoken, would expose malfeasance to pitiless glare or flatten pretensions like a falling anvil. A few samples:

*From a report on the 1978 Olympiad in Buenos Aires:* “By far the most memorable feature of the event was the organisation. We arrived to learn that the chief organiser had just been ‘kidnapped’. It later transpired that this was the one and only sensible thing he had arranged during the whole tournament.”

*On why British and west European GMs were no longer playing in the annual Hastings tournaments:* “In my opinion it is Hastings’ ever-growing reputation as one of the worst tournaments in the world. Where else could one find a chess tournament (of any kind) played ... to the accompaniment of organ music and the thundering of hundreds of tiny feet? ... Oh, my tip to win this year’s tournament? Petrosian — not because he’s ex-World Champion, but because he’s deaf.”

*From a review of Samurai Chess by Raymond Keene and Michael Gelb:* “Actually I quite like the cover. If you want something to leave lying about on a coffee table it’s just the job. However, opening it is not recommended. The fly-leaf sets the tone. Raymondo, we learn, is ... the ‘winner of 14 separate British championship titles.’ That’s twelve more than are generally known.”

*In reply to a claim by Karpov, in Learn from your Defeats, that he had scored  $+6 = 1$  in a string of seven games against Miles:* “Well, I know nostalgia tends to blur the memory, but I really didn’t think things had been that bad. Fortunately this monumental and diligently researched tome comes equipped with a tournament record. Carefully I added up my next seven scores:  $\frac{1}{2} + 0 + 0 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + 1 + 0 = \frac{1}{2}$  !? Oh well, I

suppose it must be the new FIDE scoring system.”

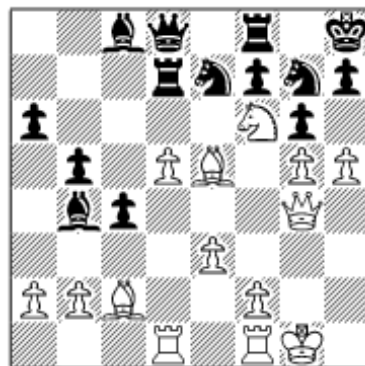
*On a 1998 report that Miles and Nigel Short were not on speaking terms:* “Not true. I said good morning to Gump as recently as 1994 in Moscow. Never the fastest or most fluent of orators, I assume he is still trying to think of a witty retort.”

The above gives some idea of *It's Only Me's* many good points. The book also has noticeable though not serious shortcomings, in three areas: proofreading, analysis, and balance. Spelling and punctuation are rather sloppy. It's not clear whether the typos came from Miles' originals or are new with this compilation, but either way they should have been corrected.

Analytical flaws were perhaps inevitable, given that Miles often wrote under pressure of short deadlines (*New Statesman*, for example, published weekly). An illustrative example is Miles-Spassky, Montilla Moriles 1978, where at this point (*see diagram*) Miles produced what is generally considered one of his best attacks:



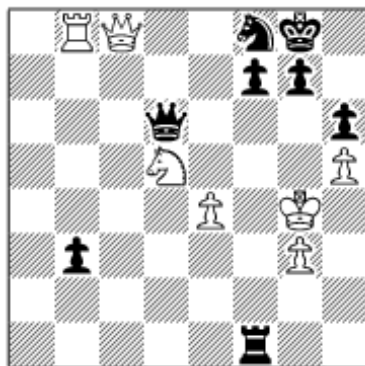
**18.Nd7! Bc8** — If 18...Bxc3 19.Nf6+ Kh8 20.bxc3 and 21.h5 wins. **19.Nxd5 Kh8 20.N5f6 Ra7 21.d5 Ne7 22.Be5 Rxd7 23.h5** and now here



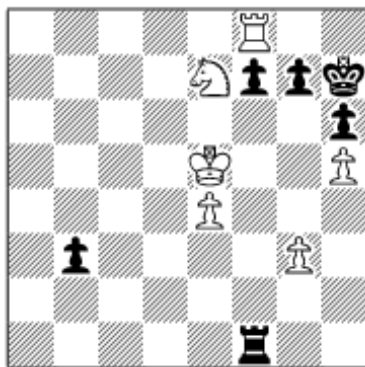
Miles makes no comment on Spassky's **23...Rxd5**, giving the impression Black had no better alternative, though it was probably the decisive mistake. The reader is left to guess what Miles had in mind after 23...Bd6, which as Meyer and Müller note in *The Magic of Chess Tactics*, “was the best defense, when matters are not completely clear.”

Another instance is this position from Miles-Schneider, World Open 1980.

After being in a losing position for



much of the game, Miles here pulled off the delightful swindle **1.Qxf8+! Qxf8 2.Ne7+ Kh7 3.Rxf8 b2 4.Ng6!!, 1-0**. He later mentioned the position in his column, noting that instead of 3...b2??, Black had a much better defense in 3...Re1!, but claiming that then 4.Kf5! still won. His analysis is convincing, except for one line: “4...Rf1+ 5.Ke5 doesn't help — unless, as an afterthought — 5...Rh1 has any chances.”



In that position, 5...Rh1 does not appear adequate, but both 5...Rf6!? (preserving the b-pawn, viz. 6.Rb8? Re6+ or 6.Nd5 Rb6!) and 5...Rg1!?, leading to the elimination of all but one of White's pawns, offer definitely stancher resistance. I note these omissions not to fault Miles; no human analyst is perfect, and of course he did not have the chance to re-check his old work for this book. At best editor Lawton might have written an appendix of corrections; in its absence

potential buyers are advised to exercise a chess player's normal skepticism.

The third area that might have been improved is the choice of articles. The book is heavily skewed toward games at the expense of Miles' other work. He was about as good a reporter, commentator, critic, and satirist as he was a player, and perhaps better than he was as an annotator, but the book's "Articles" chapter is a mere twelve pages. This imbalance leaves out a lot of good, relevant material, such as Miles' 1989 letter to *Kingpin* about Raymond Keene's now notorious scam of claiming to be Miles' second at the 1985 Interzonal in order to milk the BCF for £1,178.

Especially disappointing (I say at the risk of sounding biased) is the choice of articles from Miles' **ChessCafe** column. Of the four used, three are straight game annotations, the other ("The Holey Wohly") is opening analysis. Missing are any of Miles' delightfully scathing comments about incompetence, dishonesty and corruption among tournament organizers, FIDE, Raymond Keene, and other international chess entities. A writer of Miles' curmudgeonly bent improves with age, as youthful idealism is replaced by hardened cynicism, such as Miles put into "India", "An Ohrid Time", "Chateau Tone, Outer Milesia" and other installments of *The Miles Report* on this site. For example, in reply to David Levy's open letter asking if Keene had "really reached a point in [his] life when nothing is more important than making money, not caring how you make it or who you hurt in the process?" Miles wrote

"Well, as far as I am aware the answer to this question is yes, and a long time ago. I recall it being suggested to Ray some years ago that he had sold his soul to the devil. He actually quite liked that idea, and probably considers that the devil paid way over the going rate."

A deft stroke of the acid pen, quintessential Miles. Why wasn't it included? Miles was a charter member of the anti-Keene camp, yet the book's only Keene-bashing bit is one book review. It would be highly ironic if Keene's association with B. T. Batsford Ltd, publisher of *It's Only Me*, was a factor in this posthumous leniency.

Such considerations aside, I still like this book — a lot. It concludes with several memorial tributes to Miles, including one by Mike Fox calling him "a great bloke." An apt term for Miles, who liked a good beer and a good joke as much as he liked a well-played game. I never knew Miles, but this book makes me wish I had. That's probably as strong a recommendation as anything else I've said here, so I'll leave it at that.

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Compiled by Geoff Lawton

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