



## BOOK REVIEWS

## In the Beginning...

Taylor Kingston

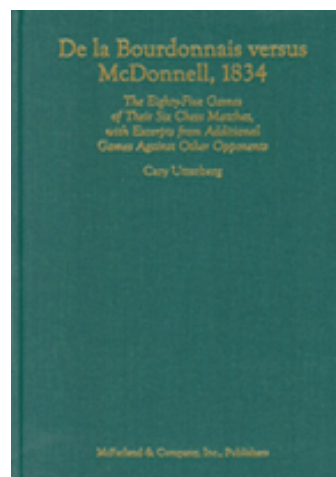
*De la Bourdonnais versus McDonnell, 1834* by Cary Utterberg, 2005 McFarland & Co., Hardcover, English Algebraic Notation, 404pp., \$55.00.

“Lots were drawn to decide who should open the first game, de la Bourdonnais won and played his move, Greenwood Walker carefully scribed ‘K.P. two,’ and the history of chess came into bold relief.” — from page 22



Ask the average person today to name the greatest inventors, and you are likely get a list of relatively recent vintage: Edison, Bell, Ford, the Wright brothers, maybe even someone as current as Bill Gates. Important, certainly, but they would never have conceived their creations were it not for the unknown Mesopotamian who first put wheels on an axle, or the Paleolithic genius who figured out how to start a fire or make a stone knife.

Similarly, when asked to name the most important matches in history, many chess fans would give one of the Kasparov-Karpov matches, or Fischer-Spassky 1972; the more history-minded might mention, say, Steinitz-Zukertort 1886.



Yet preceding all these, and in a very real sense inaugurating modern chess, was a duel less likely to mentioned: the Frenchman Louis Charles de la Bourdonnais versus the Irishman Alexander McDonnell, in London, 1834. Actually six matches of varying length, this was the first chess encounter that could be considered any sort of world championship. It was the first to attract widespread international attention, to be preserved in its entirety, to be extensively published and analyzed. It also had a major impact on opening theory, then in its infancy. And compared to this epic series of 85 games played June-October 1834, even such modern marathons as Capablanca-Alekhine 1927 and Karpov-Kasparov 1984-85 look like short sprints.

The match has gotten little attention for many years now. It's obligatory to note it at least briefly in any book of the *Compleat History of Chess* sort, but these tend to recycle the same few games and anecdotes. All the more surprising, therefore, to see the extensive treatment it gets in this book. Equally surprising is that comes from a relative unknown in the chess history field: Cary Utterberg, a mathematician and USCF master from Minnesota. Until now he had written only one (relatively obscure) book, *The Dynamics of Chess Psychology* (Chess Digest, 1994), and to our knowledge had given no indication that he could produce anything like this. *De la Bourdonnais versus McDonnell, 1834* is, quite simply, the most thorough and insightful work we have ever seen about this event, and one of the best of its kind.

Utterberg begins a thirty-page introduction by sketching the chess world of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During this era the best players came mainly from France (e.g. Philidor, Deschappelles, Schlumberger) and England (Sarrat, Cochrane, William Lewis et al). De la Bourdonnais, born 1795, started playing regularly at Paris' Café de la Régence around 1818 and soon became a pupil of the quirky, colorful Deschappelles, the house pro who made a living scalping amateurs in odds games. Deschappelles retired around 1824, de la Bourdonnais assuming his position as the Régence's (and therefore France's) top player. McDonnell, born 1798 in Belfast, took a more conventional career path in business, working as a merchant in the West Indies. Some time in the 1820s he came to England and became interested in chess, learning from Lewis, Capt. Evans (of Evans Gambit fame) and others, eventually surpassing Lewis as England's best about 1830, becoming especially famous for his skill when giving odds of knight or rook.

Organized chess competition was then virtually non-existent, and the two masters might have continued in their separate spheres indefinitely, but, motivated both by curiosity about McDonnell's growing fame, and by the prospect of financial gain, de la Bourdonnais visited London in 1834. Utterberg writes:

“With the world's two strongest active masters in the same city, it did not take long for both contestants to find financial backing, and a match was soon underway for a stake at the Westminster Chess Club.”



The games were played under conditions that would have horrified modern GMs. A crowd of onlookers huddled close around the board, their cigars and pipes clouding the air. Some following the game on other boards nearby made audible comments. De la Bourdonnais, a fast mover and not a humble man, continually peppered McDonnell with arrogant taunts and complaints about his slowness (no clocks were used). McDonnell bore this hectoring in stoic incomprehension, since neither

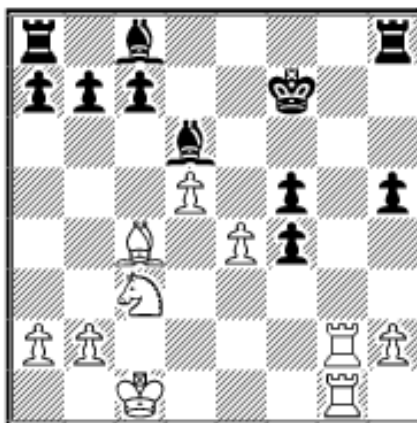
*Louis Charles de la Bourdonnais* spoke the other's language. Accustomed as we are now to top-level chess being conducted in smoke-free antiseptic silence, it seems amazing that the two men could have kept this up four to six days per week for four or five months. Draws did not count, so there were no energy-saving short draws; the average game was about 43 moves, and the longest contests lasted 81, 92, 93, 99 and 100 moves. If a match game concluded early enough, Bourdonnais, with seemingly boundless energy, would often stay up to all hours playing small-stakes skittles with spectators, while McDonnell would go home to sleep, or at least try, often wrestling with nervous insomnia.

Probably nothing like the eventual total of 85 games was originally envisioned; apparently the contest kept being extended by fresh wagers, as losing backers tried to recoup their losses. Who won how much money is not known, but by any measure, the game of chess was the biggest winner.

Utterberg attributes the match's impact to William Greenwood Walker, who acted as something of a Boswell to McDonnell's Johnson. Walker had the then novel idea of recording the games, and later publishing them in book form. He dutifully sat through the entire 85, recording every single move by hand. Utterberg considers this nothing less than "perhaps the single most important innovation in the history of chess." Before then, instructive books, such as Lewis' *Second Series of Lessons on the Game of Chess* (1832), were "dominated by a yearning desire to manifest forcing combinations," focusing on composed sequences of inferior play that allowed flashy refutations, rather than objectively analyzing actual games. Utterberg summarizes succinctly:

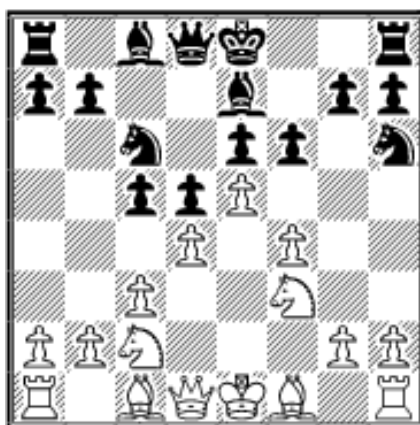
"At that time, after a thousand years of popularity, chess had generated almost no real, game tested *theory*. Then, within thirty to forty years — overnight by all previous standards — the strategic ideas of Steinitz were taking shape. The primary cause of this revolution was a movement away from abstract theorizing, establishing recorded master games as the ground of chess theory."

The games of the match proper take up the bulk of the book, pages 45-310. There are full annotations, for which Utterberg seems to have left no stone unturned: the notes come from a host of 19th-century masters including Morphy, Anderssen, Löwenthal, Jaenisch, Bilguer, Bledow, Staunton, Dufresne, Steinitz, Lasker, and Mason, later annotators such as Tartakower, Romanovsky, Keres, Bronstein, Neishtadt, Kasparov, Levy, and Harding, and even such obscure sources as the minor American master A.J. Goldsby. These are supplemented by Utterberg's own analyses. A sample excerpt, from game four of the first match, after Bourdonnais' **24.Rd1-g1**:

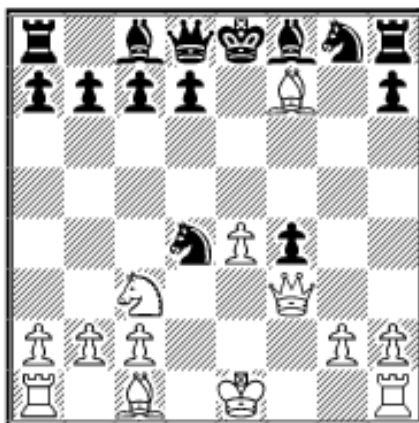


**24...Kf8?** — “The last few moves make a fine impression as far as de la Bourdonnais’ ability to bring his forces into aggressive cooperation. McDonnell now finds himself on the precipice, as evidenced by a line given by Tartakower and DuMont: 24...Bd7? 25.Rg7+ Ke8 26.e5! Bf8 (26...Be5? 27.Re1) 27.R7g6, with a much better game. Nevertheless — despite the danger of his situation — Black could now seize the moment and gain the advantage with 24...f3!, as demonstrated by Goldsby: (1) 25.Rg7+? Kf8 26.h4 Be5 27.R7g6 fe 28.Ne4 Bf5 29.R6g5 Bf4+, winning the exchange. (2) 25.Rd2 Kf6, and Black is threatening ...Bf4 — meanwhile dismissing any concerns over White advancing his center pawns.”

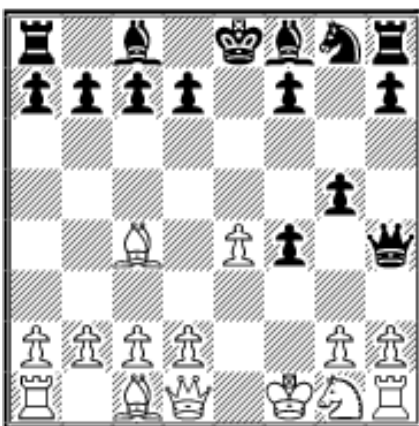
Openings, then very much *terra incognita*, are a particular focus of the book. Many of the lines look strange to modern eyes, for example in the Queen’s Gambit, we see **1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e3 e5 4.dxe5?!**, and **1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.Nc3 f5?!**. Against Bourdonnais’ Sicilian, McDonnell introduced the then-novel **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4**, but more often he played the stodgy Philidor variation, a line Morphy deemed “radically bad”: **1.e4 c5 2.f4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.e5 Nc6 5.c3 f6 6.Na3 Nh6 7.Nc2 Be7 8.d4**



effectively turning the game into a poor sort of Advance French. On the other hand, McDonnell’s line in the King’s Gambit, though now considered unsound, was anything but stodgy: **1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.Bc4 g4 5.Nc3?** (McDonnell’s preference over Muzio’s 5.0-0) **5...gxf3 6.Qxf3 Nc6?** (6...d6!) **7.d4! Nxd4? 8.Bxf7+!**

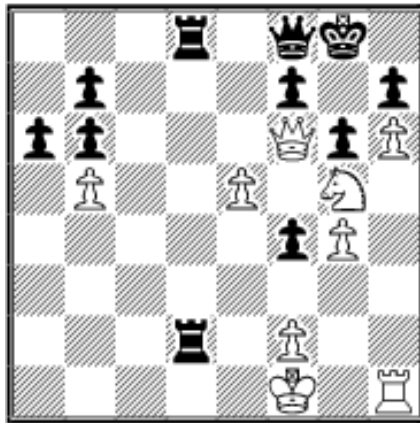


Prior to the match, McDonnell's favorite had been the Bishop's Gambit, **1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Bc4**, but despite Bourdonnais' meeting it with lines now known to be inferior, such as **3...Qh4+ 4.Kf1 g5?**

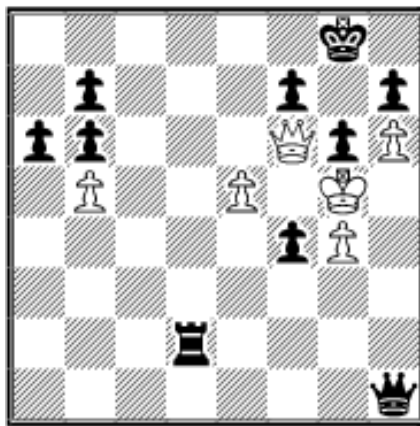


McDonnell scored poorly, losing seven out of 10 games as White. Other now seldom-seen lines included McDonnell's inferior response to the Scotch Gambit (**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Bc4 Qf6?**), the wild McDonnell Double Gambit (**1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Bc5 3.b4 Bxb4 4.f4**), and two lines of the Bishop's Opening, the López Gambit (**1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Bc5 3.Qe2**) and the Philidor Variation (**1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Bc5 3.c3**). The most frequent openings turned out to be the King's Gambit (10 games), Queen's Gambit Accepted (15), various Sicilians (20), and the then-new Evans Gambit (22 games), with which Bourdonnais scored +11 –3 =2 as White, McDonnell +4 –1 =1. Theory buffs will enjoy a 24-page appendix, "Opening Theory, Then and Now," in which Utterberg compares the games to various opening manuals, ranging from Philidor's *L'Analyse du jeu des échecs* (1749) to today's *ECO*.

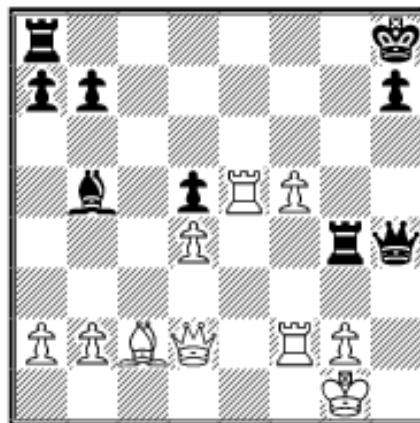
However, it is not openings for which the match is mainly remembered, but rather sparkling tactical play. Because theory and defensive technique were then relatively undeveloped, combinations abound. A few examples, the first from Bourdonnais-McDonnell, match two, game four (game 29 overall):



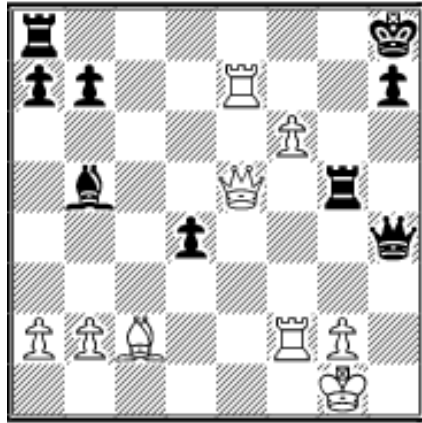
**31...Rxf2+! 32.Kxf2 32.Qc5+ 33.Kg2 — 33.Kf1 allows mate in five.  
33...Rd2+ 34.Kh3 Qe3+ 35.Nf3 Qxf3+ 36.Kh4 Qxh1+ 37.Kg5**



**37...Kf8** and 0-1, 55. Staunton later pointed out the elegant simplification  
37...Qxh6+! 38.Kxh6 Rh2+ 39.Kg5 h6+ 40.Kxf4 Rf2+ 41.K any Rxf6 43.exf6  
a5 and wins. Here is Bourdonnais-McDonnell, game 37:

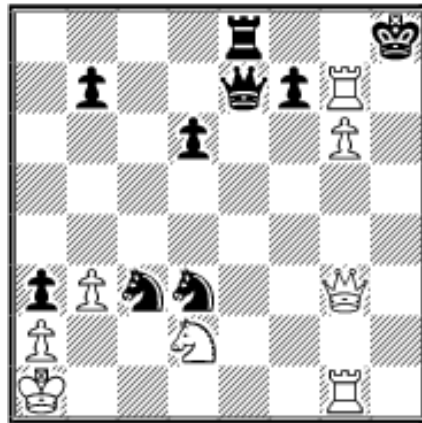


**30.f6! Rxd4 31.Qe3 Rg4 32.Re7 d4 33.Qe5 Rg5**



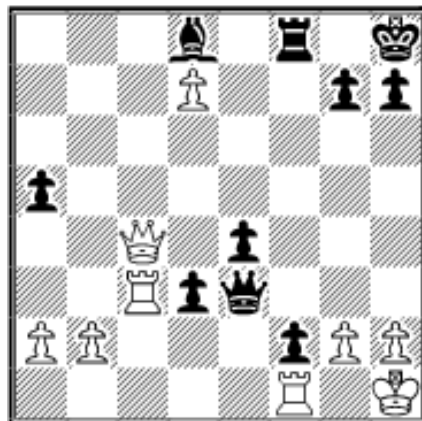
**34.f7+! Rxe5 35.f8=Q+ Rxf8 36.Rxf8#.**

A few brilliancies were assisted by mistakes, as in Bourdonnais-McDonnell, game 21:

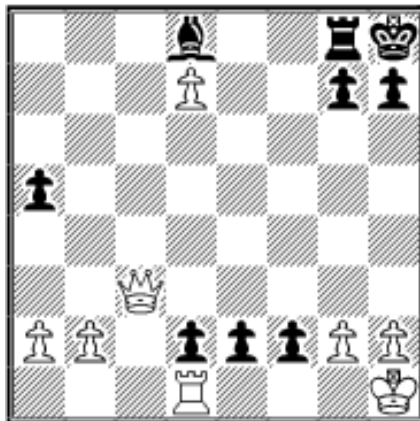


**33...Qe1+ 34.Rxe1? — White should win with 34.Nb1! Qxg3 35.Rh7+ Kg8 36.gxf7+ Kxh7 37.Rh1+! Kg7 38.fxe8=Q. 34...Re1+ 35.Qxe1 Nxe1 36.Rh7+ Kg8 37.gxf7+ Kxh7 38.f8=Q Nc2#.**

Perhaps the most famous finale is Bourdonnais' wrap-up to game 16 of match four (62nd game overall):



**32...Qe1 33.Rcc1 d2! 34.Qc5 Rg8 35.Rd1 e3 36.Qc3 Qxd1! 37.Rxd1 e2**



0-1. A position unique in chess history.

The combinations were not all of the forced-win variety. While neither player had great positional sense by modern standards, both understood the value of long-term sacrifices, as here, in “the first immortal game” (Fine),



where McDonnell made what Utterberg calls “the most famous move played up to this point in chess history,” **13...Nxd5!**. After **14.Bxe7 Ne3+ 15.Ke1 Kxe7** his active pieces gave him an enduring attack (0-1, 37).

The final overall result was  $+45 -27 =13$  in de la Bourdonnais’ favor; he won four of the six matches (the 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 5th), McDonnell two (the 2nd and 6th). The Frenchman went back to Paris, and the two never met again.

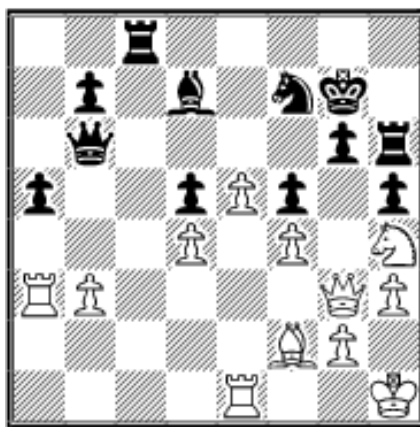
Utterberg follows the games with several appendices. “The Statistics” gives some Elo-rating calculations, and breaks down the games in various ways: results by opening and phase of the match, frequency of error, etc. “Statistical Data” tries to pinpoint all significant errors and assign them to the opening, middlegame, or endgame. Twelve games by de la Bourdonnais against opponents other than McDonnell are given, as are twelve by McDonnell against others, all fully annotated. Also six games and one fragment by Deschappelles, lightly annotated. There are brief excerpts from several books: Lewis’ *A Selection of Games at Chess* (1835), Bledow’s *Funfzig auserlesene Schach-Partien* (Fifty selected chess games, 1835), Greenwood Walker’s *Games by the Late Mr. M’Donnell* (1836), and George Walker’s *The Café de la Régence*

(1840).

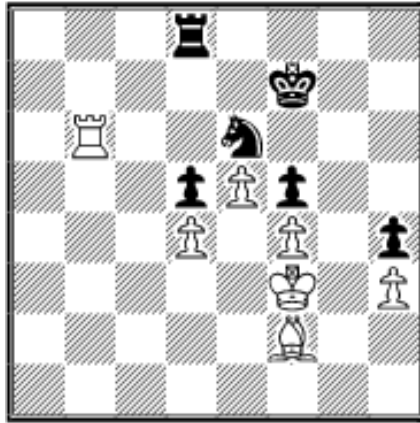
All told, quite a mass of material. There seem to be some new findings or corrections of old errors. For example, G.H. Diggle, writing in the *British Chess Magazine*, said the first match was a fixed length of 21 games, while Utterberg says it was for 16 games up, draws not counting, which seems more sensible in view of the final  $+16 -5 =4$  score. Some have thought that three game scores from the sixth match were lost; Utterberg explains that McDonnell was granted odds of a 3-point lead, and thus the “missing” games do not exist.

The book it is quite well organized. Scholars and serious history buffs will be pleased with the detailed indexing and careful listing of sources. Utterberg is a competent writer in terms of both chess and grammar; the only flaws we noticed were a tendency to omit hyphens and an occasional floridity (an example of both in one sentence: “Charles de la Bourdonnais was, above all, an over the board master — a sagacious brow inclined over the ancient *ashtapada*, his pulsing nostrils trained on the scent of prey.”)

Other flaws are few and relatively minor. There are some typos in the game scores. Spot-checking the analysis, it was surprising how often the old annotators proved correct, but the same is not true of Utterberg’s own notes (we say this on the assumption that uncredited notes are his). It appears they are not computer-checked. For example, at this point in game 81,

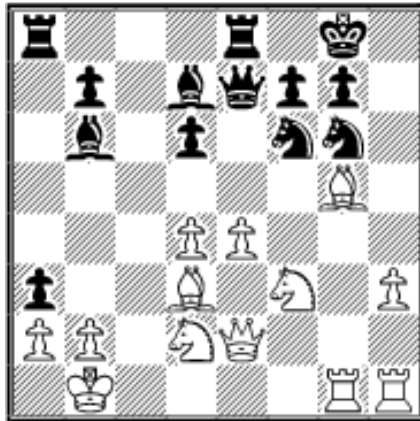


Utterberg writes “Black must concern himself with the pawn advance e6 if his queen advances prematurely: 28...Qb4? 29.Ra4.” Having mentioned the pawn advance, one wonders why he then recommends 29.Ra4, since much stronger is 29.e6! Bxe6 30.Rxe6 Qxa3 31.Nxf5+ Kf8 32.Nxh6 Nxh6 33.Qxg6+-. In a sub-variation from further on in the same game,

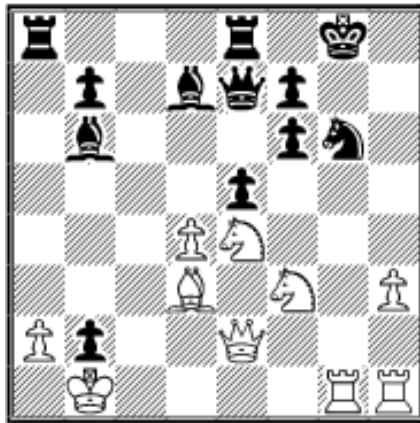


Utterberg here gives “48.Bxh4! Nxd4+.” In fact 48.Bxh4?! throws away much of White’s advantage if Black replies not 48...Nxd4? but 48...Rc8, Ra8, or Rh8; much better is first 48.Rb7+! and either 48...Ke8 49.Bxh4 or 48...Kg6 49.Re7 Ng7 50.Bxh4.

However, such errors seem confined to side lines — evaluations of the actual game moves, drawn heavily from the old masters, are generally reliable — with one major exception: Löwenthal. In checking several analyses by this contemporary of Morphy, *Fritz8* found some definite errors. The most glaring example is in game 21, where here

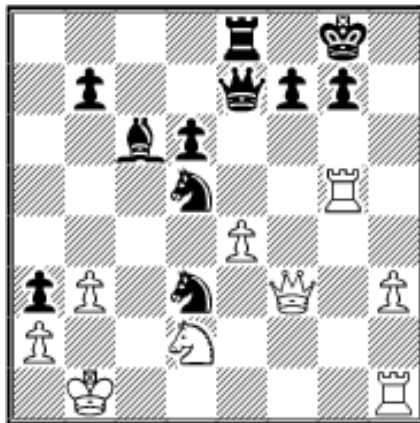


Bourdonnais played **21.b3**. Utterberg says “Bourdonnais misses his chance to seize the initiative. To that end, Löwenthal offers a fine piece of analysis, beginning with the expansive 21.e5! de 22.Ne4, and now ... Black’s king is in imminent danger if he tries 22...ab? 23.Bf6 Qa3? 24.Bc4.” True enough, but if instead of Löwenthal’s 23...Qa3?, Black plays a line that inexplicably goes unmentioned, the rather obvious and natural recapture 23...gxf6

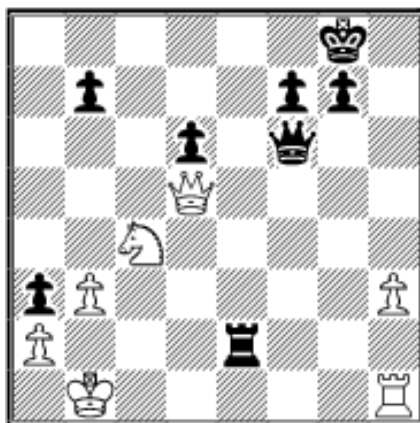


*Fritz8* shows Black winning in all variations, e.g. 24.Qxb2 Ra4 25.a3 (not 25.Qxb6?? Rb4+) 25...Bxd4 26.Nxd4 Rxd4 (rated by *Fritz* about  $-2.95$ ), or 24.Nc3 Qa3 25.Qxb2 Bc6 ( $-2.77$ ), or 24.Bc4 Kg7 25.dxe5 fxe5 (25...Bxg1!?) 26.Rg5 Be6 ( $-2.29$ ). Löwenthal's "fine piece of analysis" goes on for almost a full column, but is worth little due to the gross oversight at the start. Going back to the previous diagram, best seems neither Bourdonnais' 21.b3 nor Löwenthal's 21.e5, but 21. Nc4!, a move not mentioned at all.

Even Morphy errs now and then, though not as seriously. Later on in the same game, after **28...Nf6xd5!**



Utterberg writes "Morphy shows why neither knight can be captured ... Black has a solid two extra pawns after 29.ed Qg5 30.Qd3 Qd5." Actually in that line Black has a good deal more than two pawns after 30...Qf6! 31.Nc4 Bxd5! 32.Qxd5 Re2!,



followed by wholesale slaughter (–12.49). But at least in Morphy’s lines Black still wins easily.

We know of one possibly important historical source that goes unmentioned, the Diggle article referred to above. Written for the *BCM* at the 1934 centenary of the match, it has some local color and biographical detail that would have enhanced the book. Also there are some unresolved discrepancies: Diggle says that the sixth match “had to be left unfinished,” while Utterberg believes it concluded normally when McDonnell won five games. It seems unlikely that with all Utterberg’s research he was unaware of Diggle’s article. Perhaps he felt it had no independent significance, since it’s based largely on Greenwood Walker’s account.

Historically, it was no small loss to the game that this match was virtually the last serious chess either contestant ever played. McDonnell died within a year, at age 37, victim of a kidney infection that some think was exacerbated by the stress of the match. De la Bourdonnais lived a bit longer, founding the world’s first chess magazine, *Le Palamède*, but never again played any comparable match or opponent, just odds games for small stakes against lesser lights. After 1838 his health too deteriorated, and by December 1840 he was dead, at age 45. It is intriguing to imagine what might have happened had they lived two or three decades longer. Would McDonnell have improved enough to surpass Bourdonnais? How might they have fared against later masters: Saint-Amant, Staunton, Anderssen, Morphy? How might they have influenced the game’s development?

Fortunately, at least, no imagination is required now to understand what they did actually do. Mr. Utterberg has taken care of that in fine style. *De la Bourdonnais versus McDonnell, 1834* must be considered the definitive work on this important event, and one of the best of its kind ever. It is a book that scholars will cherish, and that anyone with the least interest in the game’s history will enjoy.

---

Order *De la Bourdonnais versus McDonnell, 1834*  
by Cary Utterberg

---

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE  
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)  
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)  
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.