



BOOK  
REVIEWS



## Return of the Great Curmudgeon

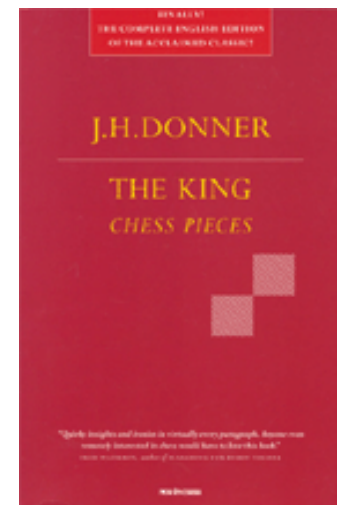
Taylor Kingston

*The King* by J.H. Donner (2nd English edition), 2006 New In Chess, Paperback, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 391pp., \$29.95

*“The chess player who has lost his game — who will describe him? ... I have heard him calling annihilation upon himself in crude blasphemy ... Derisively, he rejected our words of solace, demanding insults and chastisement. Standing afar and horror-stricken, I have witnessed how he swore to tear out his genitals, because he had played Qb6 instead of Qf6.”*

Over the past eight or nine years, this writer has reviewed something like 120 books and CDs here. With that large a number, an average of well over one per month, they tend to blur together somewhat. But a few stick clearly in memory, mainly the very good and the very bad.

Happily, our subject here is definitely in the former class. Only the second book we ever reviewed for **ChessCafe**, the first English edition of *The King* (1997) remained, until now, perhaps the best book we ever reviewed here. To any reader unfamiliar with that first edition, or whose memory of it needs



refreshing, we recommend reading that review before proceeding:

<http://www.chesscafe.com/text/donner.txt>.

If there were any flaws in the first edition, they were that (1) it was incomplete compared to the original 1987 Dutch version, (2) it was rather expensive (\$65.00 US), and (3) only 750 copies were printed. Granted, the hard-bound volumes were beautifully produced, but the high price and low print run denied the book the wider readership it deserved. Now, the new English edition has everything that was in the Dutch, and while its softcover binding is far less opulent, the \$29.95 price puts it within the reach of many more readers.

Since we've already reviewed the first edition extensively, we'll concentrate here on the new material. There are 162 articles, 27 more than before. A representative sampling of the additions:

- “Mythology” (1957), examining an Alekhine biography by Soviet GM and propagandist Alexander Kotov.
- “Rather Not” (1963), discussing then new World Champion Petrosian’s playing style.
- “Incorrect” (1965), analysis of an endgame study by Kovalenko.
- “A Long Left to the Face” (1965), a humorous description, in boxing terms, of a game from the Spassky-Tal Candidates Match.
- “Fist” (1973), one of Donner’s typical curmudgeonly bouts of sardonic boasting, tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation and self-pity, castigation of Holland as a country, and grudging praise for colleagues who finished ahead of him in a tournament.
- “Plenary Session” and “Fischer’s Limit” (1975), reports and commentary on debates in FIDE over Fischer’s conditions for his (eventually cancelled) world title match with Karpov.
- “Exceptio Chapaisiana” (1977), a lengthy excerpt from *Het Eindspel* (The Endgame), a book Donner wrote with Euwe.

- “Simul” (1977), advice on how win when playing against a master in a simultaneous exhibition.
- “Tragedy” and “Distracting an Opponent” (1978), reports and commentary on the Korchnoi-Spassky Candidates Match.
- “To Argentina with a Guilty Conscience” (1978), Donner’s explanation of why he chose to play in the Buenos Aires Olympiad despite calls for a boycott in protest against Argentina’s repressive military government.
- “A Politically Sinister Affair” (1978), about the mysterious disappearance of the chief organizer of said Olympiad, who it seems was secretly arrested and detained by said military government for several days.
- Five reports on the 1978 Karpov-Korchnoi World Championship match.
- “Publicity” (1981), about a game-fixing scandal in checkers (!).
- “Per Line” (1981), a critique of Dutch chess journalism.

As can be seen, the new material, like the old, is quite varied. We’ll highlight a few excerpts.

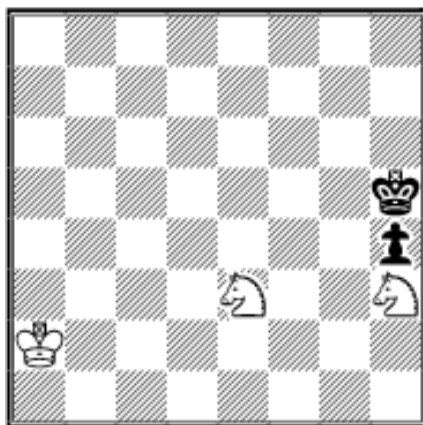
Donner’s talent for merciless but hilarious hatchet jobs is seen in “Two Books”:

“A book about the *Life and Works of Willem Jan Mühring* is bound to cause widespread hilarity. If only for the title! ... Mühring is quite adequately portrayed in the end as the pompous ass he always was ... It must have been a veiled kind of malice that made [the editor] collect and publish all these trivial, stultifying and plagiarized chess articles ... It’s truly too dreadful for words! ... It takes a strong stomach to work one’s way through it all, and its aftertaste makes the enamel split from one’s teeth, and the penetrating stench arising from it discolours the windowpanes with an ugly brown vapour.”

And his unrepentant male chauvinism surfaces in “Fist”:

“Returning from their Mallorca Interzonal, our ladies beat the French national team 9-7 in Paris. The utter loathing justly felt by right-minded chess players when witnessing women’s chess must not be allowed to close our eyes to reality. They’re not as stupid as all that.”

Among the “pure chess” articles, readers who like endgame studies and deep analysis of strange and seldom-seen positions will enjoy “Exceptio Chapaisiana,” a discussion of an ending that rarely occurs in practical play, two knights versus pawn, in particular this position:



first discussed in a little-known manuscript, *Essais analytiques sur les Echecs*, published circa 1780 by a French analyst now so obscure we know only his last name, Chapais. In contrast to the curmudgeonly swipes above, Donner’s approach to his subject here is serious, even scholarly, as he cites Troitzky, Chéron, Bridier and other relevant analysts.

We’ll mention one piece that already appeared in the first edition, “Dear Viktor,” a reply to some outrageous accusations by Korchnoi about Donner’s coverage of the 1978 Karpov match. It has become timely again, in view of Korchnoi’s recycling of the same accusations in his recently released autobiography. A sample:

“If it was your intention to turn the match into a confrontation between East and West at all costs, you only played into the hands of the Russians, allowing them to come out with their heads held high as the champions of silent rectitude ... You’re laboring under the same misconception that proved so hard to dispel with Pachman at the time ... the fallacy that the world is divided into the Soviet Union on the one hand and the rest on the other. As long as you were living in Leningrad, you could count on my unqualified support, but the situation is completely different now that you’ve become a citizen of the West, and when you behave foolishly now, I’ll tell you so, because I can.”

We strongly advise owners of Korchnoi’s *Chess Is My Life* to read both this Donner article and Raymond Keene’s “A Reply to *Anti-Chess*” (in *Karpov-Korchnoi*:

*Massacre in Merano*) for a fuller understanding of these issues.

The book has about a dozen photos of Donner, of which our favorite is this 1972 shot,



in which it appears that the act of shaking hands with fellow Dutch master (and future **ChessCafe** columnist) Hans Ree (left) has afflicted Donner with severe depression. This is explained by the fact that Ree had just beaten Donner in a match which Donner had publicly guaranteed to win.

Do not suffer Donner's fate. If you do not buy this book, and you later realize just how good it really is, and what a treasure you have missed, you *will* be depressed, and deservedly so. You may even feel as strongly as the lost soul Donner described in our opening epigraph above. I would exempt only one kind of person from this warning: those whose chess interest is strictly confined to openings and instructional works. As we said in our 1998 review, "Those seeking instruction in opening theory or middlegame strategy will find almost nothing in *The King*." However, as we immediately added, "Yet this book is more *about chess*, about what chess really is and what it means to be a chessplayer, than anything an 'instructive' book could possibly convey."

Back in 1998 we expressed the hope that a more affordable edition of *The King* would eventually be produced, but were told that was unlikely. Happily that pessimistic forecast proved untrue. Do not miss this second chance.

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[Order \*The King\*](#)  
by J.H. Donner

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