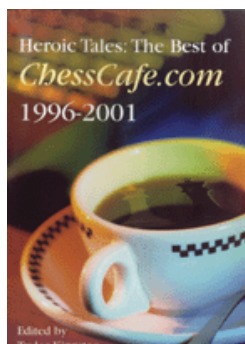




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They Laughed When We Sat Down at the Keyboard

Glenn Petersen

Albert Beauregard Hodges, The Man Chess Made, by John S. Hilbert & Peter P. Lahde, 2008 McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, Algebraic Notation, Library Binding, 542pp., \$65.00

I had great expectations when I saw the title of this book. I was born in Staten Island. Albert Hodges lived and worked in Staten Island. Albert Hodges worked at Snug Harbor. I worked just a couple blocks away on Richmond Terrace. Call us kindred spirits.

And with two respected authors at the helm, I really had my hopes up. I was anticipating a good read. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

If one were to judge this opus (542 numbered pages) by the table of contents, it certainly appeared to be well-organized: Part I: The Chess Life of Albert Beauregard Hodges (“The Tennessee Morphy,” Ajeeb and the “Snugs,” New York, 1890-1892, 1893, A Year of Achievements, etc.), and Part II: The Chess Games of Albert Beauregard Hodges, followed by a number of Appendices (The Chess Problem, The Match and Tournament Record, and so forth). But appearances can be deceiving.

I suppose an astute reader might have taken a clue from the Introduction:

“Throughout his long laying career, Hodges was above all a club man ...”

“This is his story, as well as the story of the men, clubs and larger organizations that transformed chess in the United States from a pleasant pastime into a social institution ...”

“In a very real sense, this volume owes its existence to the men who for little pay penned weekly columns and edited the monthly journals that recorded not only the national and international chess news, but the details of local play. And it is in the details, idiosyncrasies, and asides of such columns that the most revealing sense of the players and events of the past are found. When Hodges wrote his first chess column in 1884, the *Brooklyn Chess Chronicle* listed fewer than 35 columnists nationwide. Ten years later, when Hodges defeated Showalter for the national championship, there were more American chess columns than could be easily counted ...”

That should have been a tip-off. Infatuation for a time gone by.

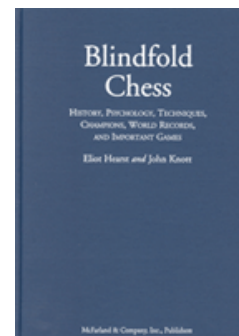
The Notes

It was the notes that did me in. This wasn’t as much a book about A.B. Hodges as it was about his local, national, and international contemporaries, and the people who wrote about them. I’m sure Edward N. Olly was a fine player and competitor. He may, some day, even deserve his own book. I’m not sure he deserved almost a full page note on page 104, especially when subsequent text in half a dozen places through page 173, make references to Edward N. Olly.

By the time I got to page 173, I didn’t know who Edward N. Olly was. I had to page back until I found that full page note to refresh my memory. If Edward N. Olly was that important, why wasn’t the note on page 104 part of the narrative? The same can be said of S. Lipschutz, Howard Jason Rogers, and dozens of other minor players in the cast. Back and forth, back and forth. By the time I got through to the end of the book once, I felt as though I had read it three times or more!

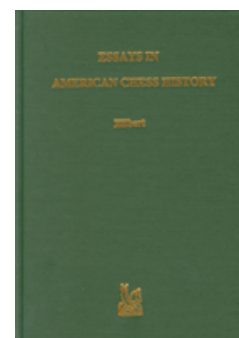
I’m sure we’ve all seen musty old text books and technical journals that follow this sort of format ... but a chess book about one particular man? I don’t think it works. Perhaps if all the notes were listed in one place – an easy reference for those of us who suffer from short term memory – I

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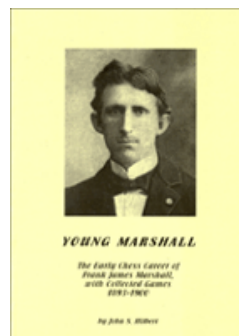
by Eliot Hearst
& John Knott



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would have been far less distracted. And it certainly would have made for an easier read.

Does it really make sense to create page after page looking like this (with four lines of text and two full columns of notes):



How can one concentrate on the narrative? And this was especially true when the notes were far more interesting than Hodges! I can see why the authors included so much of the trivia of the day. I just don't agree with the presentation.

Historical Seduction

Once one begins to delve into the musty archives of what the authors call "The Golden Age of Newspapers," one can easily become seduced. Any time a project such as this is undertaken, it requires tons of research, and it is natural to want to share that research with your readers, as well as to be recognized for the work you have done.

That is not to say that it all belongs between the same two covers. Greater editorial judgment should have been exercised. I got the distinct impression Hodges was just a convenience for presenting a secondary goal – that of giving props to the columnists and major and minor players of the day.

Please don't get me wrong. It's a fine goal. But it should have been reflected in the title of the book.

Part II is particularly good. All of the English Descriptive notation has been changed to Algebraic Notation, the notes faithfully preserved from newspapers and publications of the day. It might have been a fine book on its own. You're sure to recognize the names of most of the opponents. But if you don't, you can always go back and check the notes in Part I.

I'm glad it is part of my library, and I'm sure I'll go back and read it through another three times. After all, ol' A.B. and I are kindred spirits.

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