



COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding

Chess Treasures at the British Library

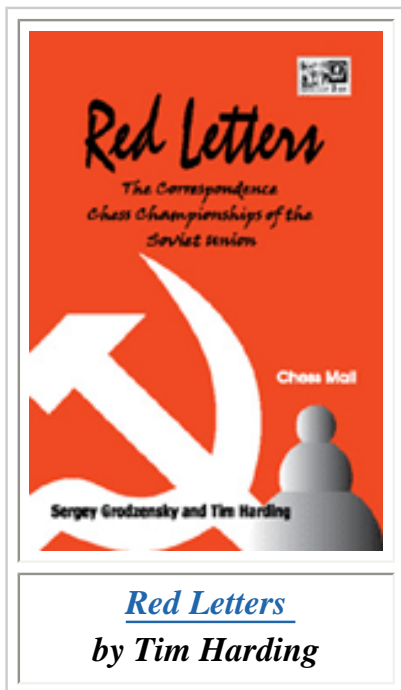
This Kibitzer article examines some of the joys and frustrations of trying to do research on pre-20th century chess in a major library. I deal specifically with the British Library, in London, but some of the comments may apply to other major public libraries also and should be of interest to any readers who ever need to look for chess books in public libraries.

The following item appeared in the replies of “To Correspondents” article in the newspaper *Bell's Life in London* on 9 August, 1835. Evidently a reader wished to know whether it was possible to read a 15th century chess classic in England. I quote this passage because it is indicative both of the state of chess literature in the national collection as it was 170 years ago, and of the improvement that has certainly taken place since.

There is no copy of Lucena's curious work on chess in the British Museum. The library there, though extensive, makes a poor show of chess books. This will probably, with time, be amended, one of the heads of the Museum, Sir F. Madden, being a great lover of chess, and better acquainted with its history and being as a science than any other man in England.

The first week of this month was spent in London doing chess research, primarily for my university thesis, involving looking at books, periodicals and newspapers from the 19th century. I noted the above paragraph a few days ago while perusing a microfilm in the British Newspaper Library, a branch of the British Library organization. The library, originally founded by King George III in the eighteenth century, was left to the nation and was housed for over a century in the British Museum. There Karl Marx, as is often observed, wrote *Das Kapital*, trying to use the resources of the capitalist society in an endeavour to overthrow it.

The present-day British Library is now housed in a purpose-built library campus about a mile from the Museum, situated on the north side of the Euston Road, adjacent to St. Pancras railway station. This building has only been open a few years. There is also a Newspaper Library, housed at Colindale (near Hendon on the Edgware branch of the London underground's Northern Line), which is where you have to go if you want to find the



[Red Letters](#)
by Tim Harding

passage cited above.

The paper *Bell's Life in London* was home to the first chess column to run for any great length of time, and is frequently referred to in chess history works and the magazines of the time. The newspaper was a broadsheet, initially of 4 pages but enlarged in October 1845, and it contained advertisements, political items, news (often of crimes, disasters, trials and executions) but primarily its subject was sports and leisure activities, including horse racing, cricket, pugilism, pedestrianism (various kinds of walking and running contests for money) and numerous other outdoor activities including coursing, cock-fighting, pigeon shooting. There was also a regular section of answers to correspondents where readers frequently wrote in seeking the answers to rules queries about various games – including indoor games of all kinds – or seeking information. I suppose the answers given by Bell were often taken as authoritative for settling bets.

Although the chess column was conducted anonymously (fairly standard for 19th century England), it is generally accepted that the chess editor was George Walker and some items appeared under his own name in the form of signed letters to the editor. His account of the funeral of La Bourdonnais in the issue of 20 December 1840 is an example of this.

Possibly some of the “To Correspondents” items could easily have been written by someone else (probably a member of the Bell family) when Walker was away from London on his frequent travels. He seemed to be well informed about chess activities in various town and cities of the United Kingdom, and in 1835 he specifically mentions going to Utrecht in the Netherlands to see a private chess collection. That was very early in the railway age and cannot have been a straightforward journey.

I intend eventually to index all the Bell's chess items, at least to the end of the Walker era in 1872, but this will be a very long-term project, given that there are nearly 2,000 issues of the paper to check and I have many other sources to consult. If anyone knows where I can read *Bell's Life* in “hard copy”, apart from the years 1840-45 which I have already studied completely, please inform me as the work can be done much more thoroughly (and with greater kindness to the eyes) with hard copy than with film.

Some sources say the Bell's column began in 1845, with occasional items previous to that from 1835. The actual situation is that regular chess material appeared from the first issue of 1835, with either games or answers in the “To Correspondents” section appearing in the majority of issues, and often both in the same issue. The games were numbered at first and Game 50 already appeared in the August 9, 1835 issue. Moreover, Walker himself stated later that he began to contribute chess items during 1834.

Although a few weeks had neither game nor answers, chess appears much more often than not in all the years I have seen from 1835 onwards. The only real difference that occurred in 1845 was that from the expansion of the paper, all the chess was collected together. Also the game was given more space and prominence. I cannot comment on years after 1845, which I haven't yet reached in my researches.

Lucena and Madden

Referring back to my initial quotation, there is, so far as I am aware, still no copy of Lucena in London. As for Sir Frederic Madden, I expect that Walker certainly knew of his 1832 article entitled *Historical remarks on the introduction of the game of Chess into Europe, and on the ancient Chess-men discovered in the Isle of Lewis* which can be read in the *Archæologia*, vol. xxiv, pages 203-291. It's mentioned in one of Walker's bibliographies.

I am not sure how many of Madden's arguments and conclusions would be accepted today. The origin of chess and the game's transmission to Europe and evolution to its modern form is not my field. Good places to start for readers interested in what has been discovered about early chess since Murray wrote his big history a century ago are *Chess: the history of a game* by Richard Eales and *Birth of the Chess Queen*, a recent book by Marilyn Yalom which deals mostly with mediaeval chess.

However I am interested in any evidence about how and when the old Celtic game of *fidchell* (Ireland; *gwyddbwyll* in Wales) was supplanted by modern chess, possibly with another game of Icelandic origin, *hnefatafl* (in Welsh: *tawllbwrdd*) intervening. The problem seems to be that in many texts the words "chess" and "chessboard" are used indiscriminately to translate both games, although *fidchell* (which had no infinitely valuable piece like a chess king) was definitely not any form of chess as we understand it.

So far as I can tell, the British Library has no ancient printed books or manuscripts relating to early modern chess as described by Lucena. They may well have oriental MSS but I have not yet looked into the library's manuscript holdings relating to chess, since I am dealing chiefly with the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The earliest English printed book is usually stated to be Caxton's *Game and Play of the Chesse* but this was not an instructional book on chess. The first book in English that could actually be used to learn how to play the game was published during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who was known to like chess. The author was named as James Rowbuthum (sometimes given as 'Rowbutham'); his book, first published in 1562, had a long title beginning *The pleasaunt and wittie playe of the Cheasts...* The BL has a copy of the second edition (1569) but I haven't seen it yet. I gather it was really a translation of the Italian work by Damiano.

Another work available in the BL, dating from the reign of the first Stuart King of England, James I, is: Arthur Saul's *The famous Game of Chesse-playe, truly discovered, and all doubts resolved...* (London 1614), which is available in facsimile at the BL.

Of course, at this fairly early stage of Walker's career, the chess publishing explosion in which he was a major factor was only just beginning. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was already a considerable amount of chess literature in English. The BL seems to have most, but not all, of what was published in the latter half of the 19th century, but there are some serious gaps.

Legal Deposit

Even when legal obligations were introduced for British publishers to deposit their works were introduced, they do not seem to have been rigorously enforced as they are today. Nowadays publishers in the United Kingdom have to make a 'legal deposit' of everything they produce to several copyright libraries: the British Library, the Bodleian Library in Oxford and Cambridge University Library, and to the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales.

Moreover, another copy must be sent to the library of Trinity College in Dublin and in return all the above libraries receive copies of everything published in the Republic of Ireland. As the ISSN system (for periodicals) and ISBN system (for books) now makes it easy for libraries or their agents to check on what is appearing, any publisher who fails to comply is soon chased and reminded of their statutory obligations but clearly this was not always the case in the past. That, and war damage, accounts for gaps in the holdings.

When trying to trace a book, even if you intend to buy a copy, the BL's online catalogue is usually the best place to start as you can get full bibliographical information there. However if you fail to find it, or need to track down items which are not where they should be, the COPAC union catalogue gives you the opportunity to search most of Britain's major research libraries simultaneously. Major libraries in other countries often have online catalogues too nowadays.

Many of the older chess books in the BL's collection were possibly acquired by gift, bequest or purchase. This is where an active chess interest on the part of a librarian such as Madden could make a difference, in making or recommending purchases and encouraging collectors to make donations.

I wouldn't expect the BL to spend taxpayers' money acquiring original editions of works of foreign origin such as Lucena, but there are certainly

many historic chess books the BL ought to attempt to acquire in order to complete its collection of British chess books. They do not, for example, have the first three years of *British Chess Magazine* (1881-83) and only two issues from 1892. Possibly there are other gaps later in the series but they do have bound volumes for most years. However there are some privately-held complete sets of 'BCM' and some specialist chess libraries have it as well.

It is a sad fact that some pre-1945 books, periodicals and newspapers were lost by German bombing in World War II and have not been replaced. For example, in the catalogue you can find reference to one of the earliest published collections of chess games actually played: John Cazenove's *A selection of curious and entertaining games at Chess, that have actually been played* (London 1817). Unfortunately when you actually visit the BL and try to order it, it comes up 'Destroyed.' I wonder how many copies of this book still exist, and who has them?

I once asked a library helpdesk staff member why they left things in the catalogue that no longer existed and was told this was because the catalogue had a bibliographic function. The British Library catalogue was greatly improved last year, with a new integrated catalogue coming onstream in the reading rooms in July 04 and online in September. Although I think the search engine and interface could do with more improvement, it is a great advance on the old one and superior to the Geoweb catalogue program used by the National Library of Wales and Trinity College Dublin. The main thing is that at last almost everything is in one BL catalogue.

For those readers interested in searching online for which libraries may have which works, I have included a list of URLs at the end of this article. It should be noted, however, that some libraries have not yet entered all their holdings into computerized catalogues, forcing the students and scholars to hunt through old card indexes and paste-up accession catalogues (all we had in my old days in Oxford!) for material which the library may in fact hold. If in doubt, contact the librarians. Both the main Irish libraries, TCD and the National Library, especially the former, in fact have quite a large quantity of older books which are not in the online catalogues. The barrier to completing the computerization is, of course, financial.

Gaining Admittance

Anyone intending to read at any branch of the British Library will first need to make a case for obtaining a reader's ticket. Published writers who can point to items in the catalogue shouldn't have a problem. Students may need a letter from their tutor or supervisor stating they need to see material unavailable at their home institution.

The best thing to do, whoever or wherever you are, is to read everything about admissions on the library's website and download the PDF format file

which includes an application form. Other libraries of this kind probably have similar procedures. The main thing to do is to contact admissions staff well in advance and make your case.

If you are only visiting the location of the library for a short period, it is possible to make advance arrangements. I have found with both the British Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford that it is possible to order some items in advance of the first visit, to be read on a specified date. When you do arrive, you have to go through the admissions procedure but then the books should be waiting for you.

You have to be prepared for a learning curve with any library you visit, in terms of regulations, geography, opening hours, catalogues, ordering, catering arrangements etc. Do not expect to achieve too much on your first day. You may find that computers can be used only at certain desks, or that some desks do not have power points. You may have to write in pencil rather than pen (in Rare Books and manuscript rooms especially). Copying is a special issue addressed below.

Branches of the BL

There are three main branches of the British Library. At St. Pancras, most books and periodicals are held as well as manuscripts, newspapers published before 1800 and a lot of other material. There are also numerous reference books and electronic resources available onsite. Except for a few days at Christmas and Easter, and public holidays, the library is open six days a week with a closing time of 8pm on Mondays to Thursdays, and its reading rooms open at 9.30am (10am on Mondays) which gives a good working day for researches. It is also extremely comfortable and there are good catering facilities onsite.

Colindale, as mentioned above, houses the newspaper collections – including many major overseas titles – but the reading room does not open until 10am and the closing time is 5pm. The shorter hours, combined with the very restrictive arrangements for ordering source material and holding overnight, make a day at Colindale typically much less productive than a day spent at St. Pancras. The ambiance is also considerably inferior and the catering arrangements consist of a room with some tables, chairs and a vending machine. You are strongly advised to bring a packed lunch.

I have not visited the other branch of the British Library at Boston Spa, near Wetherby in Yorkshire. This is the headquarters of the Document Supply Centre and inter-library lending section, although there is a reading room. Books catalogued with DSC cannot be ordered by readers in advance of a visit to St. Pancras; you can only order them by going to the main library in person a few days before you hope to read them.

When you visit St. Pancras, you can order books to be sent down from Yorkshire but it can be 2-3 days before they arrive and you may not get them at all, since they may be out to somebody else or in transit. (Even at St. Pancras, if a book is in use when you request it, it might not be available to you for a few days, but at least you have a chance as almost everything is held on-site.) The DSC ordering system is gradually being computerized and I did actually receive two of the items I requested the next day on this occasion. However, one item that I had ordered turned out to be on microfilm and wasn't given to me by the issue desk when I asked. It turned out too late that it had been in the wrong place.

One advantage of St. Pancras is that you are able to hold six books overnight in the reading rooms. If you are consulting pre-1850 material you may visit the Rare Books room (no pens allowed!) as well as the main Humanities-1 reading room where most chess books would be brought. Sometimes you need to cross-refer between books, especially several consecutive years of serial publications, or perhaps hold a bibliography for a few days. Even so, six items is not that many sometimes for serious research and when it is getting near the end of the day, you have to think seriously about what you want to hold and make copies of anything you need from what you will be returning.

At the Newspaper Library, where researchers into chess columns must mostly go, conditions are much less advantageous. Sometimes it is a mystery why certain publications (weeklies or even monthlies) have been put in the newspaper collection while others are at St. Pancras.

At Colindale, you can only order four items in advance and hold four overnight. When you give back two (bound volumes or microfilms) you can order four more. So at most you can normally hold six items at any one time, unless you are able to make special arrangements with the librarians. Sometimes one only wants to look quickly at a volume, to see if this is actually what you want, or to check one or two references or have a copy made of something. Other times you want to read at length. Sometimes when you order something, they find out it needs conservation and won't let you see it. If that happens at St. Pancras (as it did with one item last week) they let you see it before they withdraw it.

In theory, it might be possible to see over 20 microfilms or bound volumes in a day at Colindale, if you were lucky to go on a day when they were not busy and not short-staffed. With four items pre-ordered or held you might be able to make a start at 10:15, quickly dispatching two items where you only needed to make quick checks or copy an item or two on a self-service microfilm copying machine.

So you could in theory get four more volumes or films by 11:15 and so on at

every other hour until the last delivery, timing your break just after finishing the morning batch so you didn't waste time waiting. In practice, you will be lucky if you see ten or twelve. Microfilms are perhaps retrieved quicker as they are much less bulky and delicate. The disadvantage of course is that they are harder to read and it is less likely you will discover unexpected things in them by serendipity.

Especially if you are researching 19th century chess columns in bound volumes, some of the things you ask for probably will not arrive. I was brought the wrong title on one occasion and three others were unavailable, despite being in the catalogue. (It is always a good idea to keep one film or bound volume where you have plenty to read, so that you are not left with nothing to do.)

The first day I was there this month; things were so chaotic that I complained. As a result of that I was provided with additional items for my next day – but there was a false fire alarm, the building was cleared and I lost an hour. This meant that I did not have time to request some items I had hoped to check for Richard Forster.

Eventually something on your list will probably turn out to be so fascinating that you spend much more time on it than you expected, and you realise you need to see more years of that journal, or it may refer to other things you didn't know about. The outcome will be that you will leave Colindale with a wish-list for next time as long as the one you came with. This is not good news as this is not a place where you wish to spend much of the rest of your life.

Also at St. Pancras you will find new things you need to consult, but the chance of getting them in the same week (even the same day) is much better, it's a more pleasant place to spend time, and also the copying arrangements are superior.

Copying Concerns

Any researcher visiting a major library probably wants to copy some of the things they find to read later, or refer to later. This is especially the case for chess historians because of the game notations. Whereas you can quickly paraphrase most text into notes, a precious game score needs to be photocopied or scanned so that you can input it into your database later. It is a very slow process inputting a long game there in the library and in the end you may find notation errors which will require you to reconstruct the game. With limited library time, especially if you are researching abroad, this is something you prefer to do at home, with a copy of the actual printed text for reference.

However, copying in the British Library and other libraries of this kind can

prove problematic. Maybe, like some other archives, they will eventually change their policy barring digital cameras and hand scanners, but it doesn't seem likely in the near future. Obviously they have to be careful about modern copyrighted material, but 19th century books and periodicals are out of copyright by now. There should be a facility for serious researchers to use digital cameras (without flash) on limited quantities of old material.

At the National Library of Ireland at present, it is not possible to get copies of any kind from original (hard copy) newspapers. It is possible, but somewhat expensive, at Colindale if the condition of the original is satisfactory. At the NLI, it is possible to buy copies of printouts from microfilms but it is too expensive and there can be a very long wait. They don't have self-service copy machines. I am told this is because they hold extensive parish records used by genealogical researchers.

For this reason, I had prepared for my visit to Colindale by making long lists of Irish material where I had identified the actual weeks I wanted to copy. In some cases I was successful; in others. I found that the Thursday editions of the *Dublin Evening Mail* (which had the chess column) were not on the microfilms but the catalogue said nothing about that.

I find that the attitude towards copying in many research libraries is unduly restrictive, if not self-contradictory at times. Of course they have to consider conservation of material for future generations, but digital photography is actually no more harmful to documents than just reading them. If you have to order a scan, which means at least two people will have to consult the volume, bindings will have to be re-opened, pages handled twice as much, and the possibility of damage to the document is doubled. The underlying attitude seems to be something like the following: "This document must be conserved so that when the next generation of researchers comes along, we will be able to refuse them access to it also!"

The negative attitude to readers that some staff at Colindale appear to have is possibly connected with how they are trained. The newspaper collection there was established about 30 years before there was ever a reading room, so they are probably taught that conservation comes first. It is only relatively recently that reading facilities have been established and they don't seem to have enough staff to retrieve and issue material. (Cloakroom staff told me there were about 140 readers on-site when the fire alarm occurred. The next day, there were about 90 at lunchtime.)

However, in recent years I think that historians and history students are turning to primary printed sources like newspapers much more than before and the facilities for readers urgently need to be improved. Maybe I am being unfair to them, as some staff were very helpful, and probably they are underfunded. Possibly one reason why they don't want digital cameras is that this

would hit revenue from copying facilities, but maybe they could sell a one-day digital license and put the people purchasing that into a special well-lit area.

At Trinity College, Dublin, perhaps because I am actually a registered student there, I have been able to get permission to reproduce (for research purposes only) a fair amount of 19th century chess material, especially if the volumes are bulky and hard to put in a scanner.

Other Libraries

I understand from people who have done research in other libraries with chess collections that their policy is more relaxed and co-operative, especially where copying is concerned. The main specialist chess collections, which I hope to visit at a later stage of my research, are at the Royal Dutch Library in The Hague and the John G. White Collection at the Public Library in Cleveland, Ohio.

If you have easy access to either of these, then they are probably the places to go first if you are looking for rare chess materials to study. However, I am sure they do not want their facilities over-stretched by visitors who could easily find their needs satisfied by local libraries.

Games

One of the most interesting items I found on this visit to London was a collection of Draughts and Chess problems, catalogued at Shelfmark 7919.d.7 in St. Pancras. This turned out to be a little scrapbook tied with ribbons and held in a protective box which some games-lover had compiled over 100 years ago. A draughts history expert should look at this collection also.

Even a little manuscript index at the back gave no indication of creator/owner or what paper the extracted items were taken from. The items were mostly press cuttings but there were also MS notes. The BL catalogue suggests about 1904 as the date but to judge from the contents, I would judge it to be 1897 as there were games from the Berlin 1897 tournament and the Ladies International held in London the same year.

The newspaper they were taken from may have been Scottish: do the numbers chess problem 2517 and draughts problem 552 give a clue to any reader?

This item included the following game Olland-Meiners which is not the one from 1899 to be found in MegaBase 2005. I expect it was from 1897 or 1898.

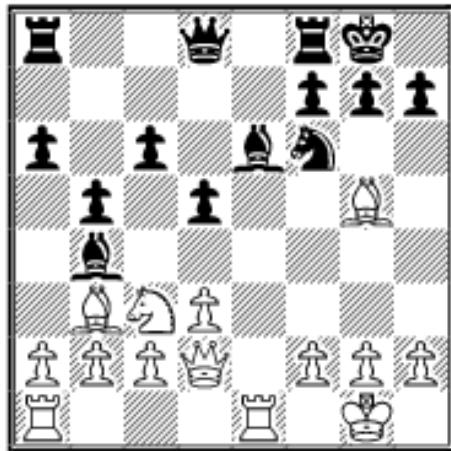
Dr A. Olland – W.Meiners
Ruy Lopez (C78)

Unknown event, probably Amsterdam, ca. 1897-8
Notes from the BL scrapbook.

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 0-0 b5 6 Bb3 Nxe4 7 Re1 d5 8 d3 Nf6 9 Nxe5 Nxe5 10 Rxe5+

All book on both sides. The text-move is preferable to 10 f4.

10...Be6 11 Bg5 Bd6 12 Re1 0-0 13 Nc3 c6 14 Qd2 Bb4



14...Be7 would be a more solid defence.

15 a3

White could simplify the position with 15 Bxf6 Qxf6 16 Nxd5 cxd5 17 Qxb4 Qxb2 and now continue with 18 a4 or 18 Qf4, leaving Black with an isolated d-pawn; but this variation might involve a tedious ending with only a slight advantage. He gets a better game through Black's determination not to defend the Knight

with ...Be7 anyhow.

15...Ba5 16 Qf4 Bc7 17 Qh4 Qd6 18 Bxf6 gxf6 19 Ne2 Bf5

A weak move. The intention obviously was to play ...Bg6 but seeing that the Bishop would be insecure in that position, he retires it on the next move.

20 f4 Bd7 21 f5 Kh8

21...Bxf5 was advisable, in spite of the threatened attack.

22 Ng3

White has now the much superior game.

22...Rg8 23 Re2 Rg5 24 Rae1 Rf8

24...Bxf5 25 Re8+ Rxe8 26 Rxe8+ Kg7 27 Qxg5+ fxg5 28 Nxf5+ with advantage.

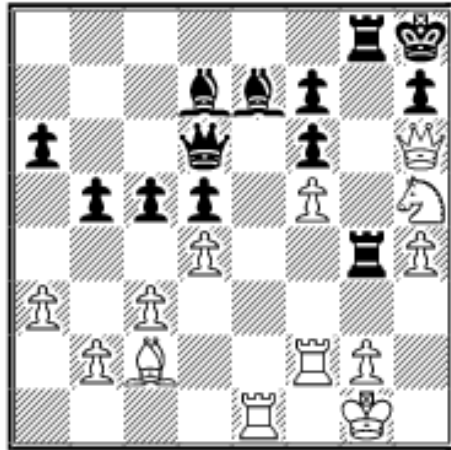
25 Qh6 Rfg8

Nor can the pawn be taken now.

26 c3 Qf4

26...Bd8 followed by ...Qf8 is compulsory now; afterwards Black's game is indefensible.

27 Rf2 Qd6 28 d4 Bd8 29 Bc2 Be7 30 Nh5 c5 31 h4 Rg4



32 Rxe7

A pretty final combination.

**32...Qxe7 33 Qxf6+ Qxf6 34 Nxf6 cxd4
35 Nxd7 Rxh4 36 cxd4 Rxd4 37 f6 Rd8
38 Ne5 Rf8 39 Re2 Rf4 40 Nxf7+ Kg8
41 Nh6+ Kh8 42 Re7 1-0**

Useful Links

Before considering a visit to any major library, you should spend time at their websites and consult their catalogues to build up prioritized lists of what you want to read, including their shelfmarks or catalogue references.

Here are the links to the library and catalog sites you are most likely to wish to consult.

[British Library home page](#)

[British Library integrated catalogue](#)

[BL newspapers](#)

[COPAC](#)

[Chess and Draughts collection at The Hague](#)

[John G. White Chess and Checkers chess collection, Cleveland Public Library](#)

[Library of Congress catalog](#)

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