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The Kibitzer

Tim Harding



Was there a "Golden Age" of Correspondence Chess?

I recently looked at the 2nd edition of *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, which was edited by the late David Hooper and Ken Whyld. I noticed a few points that I would have liked to have them clarify or discuss but it's too late now. I am sorry that I did not write to one of them about this while they were still alive, but regrets are no use. Maybe some Kibitzer reader will know the answer to my questions.

At the time *The Oxford Companion* appeared, I received review copies of virtually every chess book published in Britain but the Oxford University Press chess editor who knew me had left and somehow I never received either edition of the book.

The entry in the book for 'correspondence chess' is only one and a half columns in length, yet it contains a major digression about the cost and technicalities of the British postal service in the 1820s and 1830s – space that would have been better devoted to some facts about the game, such as names of world champions. However, I suppose some people love the book for its eccentricities of this kind.

There are also some statements of fact for which I would love to know Hooper and Whyld's source (see below) and underlying it all there is a kind of patronising tone that indicates that the editors, like so many other chess writers unfortunately, saw correspondence chess as the 'poor relation' of over-the-board play. Nowadays, when so much of the chess in the world is played between distant opponents, mediated by the Internet, it seems a good time to challenge their assumption.

First I will raise my factual queries and corrections. Then I will address the main issue and their theory that "the 'golden age' of correspondence chess was in the first half of the 19th century". I find it deeply unsatisfying.

Factual Errors and Queries

"In the 1850s some magazines promoted tournaments, in 1870 the Caissa Correspondence Club, the first of its kind, was founded in England, and in 1888 *Monde Illustré* organized the first international tournament". In that sentence we have two interesting statements, for which I should like to see the evidence. The third statement is definitely factually incorrect since there was an earlier international tournament.

Sometimes announcements are made in magazines or newspaper columns and nothing comes of it; either an insufficient number of people respond or the announcers lose interest. I would like to know specifically which publications organised CC tournaments, in what years and where the documentary evidence may be found. Are results or games known? When did the Caissa Club, if it started, end its activities and why; how many members did it have at its peak and were any of them well-known players? This would have been far more relevant

information for a chess encyclopaedia than to be told how many staging posts for horses were required between London and Edinburgh in 1824. If any reader can give me chapter and verse for the first two claims made by Hooper and Whyld, I should like to have them so that I can look up the references for myself.

Nevertheless, maybe the first two statements in that sentence are true. I would love it if anyone can confirm the details. At present I am working more or less chronologically through the *Chess Player's Chronicle* volumes and lesser magazines of the early 19th century and have not yet reached the 1870s. I have seen no announcements of CC tournaments as yet.

The third statement in that long sentence is incorrect. The first international CC tournament of the French general publication *Le Monde Illustré* actually began in November 1887, not 1888, and anyway it was not the first international CC tournament. If we consider that an international event should have representatives of at least three countries; that honour must go to the second CC tournament organised by a different French magazine, *La Stratégie*, in the years 1884-89. As ICCF founder member Erik Larsson has shown in *Chess Mail* 8/1997, which has the complete crosstable, its 10 players included an Algerian, a Greek, a Londoner, a Belgian and a Hungarian as well as five Frenchmen. The first *La Stratégie* tournament had only French and Algerian players.

The next error in the article is the date of 1917 given for the start of publication of *The Chess Correspondent*. Actually the first run of this was from February 1916 to August 1917 (vide Bryce Avery's book *Correspondence Chess in America*, page 28). In 1940, the Correspondence Chess League of America decided to adopt the same title for its now-printed bulletin, and the magazine still prospers under that title today.

Anyway, *The Chess Correspondent* was by no means the first periodical devoted to correspondence chess. In England, the British Correspondence Chess Association, founded in 1906, started its own magazine in 1908 which was published regularly until October 1914, i.e. just before the First World War broke out, and intermittently thereafter.

I am not sure if the date 1961 for ICCF's affiliation to FIDE is correct; I think it was earlier but the book *ICCF Gold* gives no information on this point. I don't see any announcement in *Fernschach* 1961. I believe, but cannot now find the reference, that in 1959 FIDE approved a list of ICCF title-holders, perhaps for the first time. Already at the December 1959 ICCF Congress at the Grand Hotel Krasnopolsky in Amsterdam, L. Abramov (USSR) was appointed ICCF's official contact person with FIDE (see *Fernschach* 2/1960).

Perhaps this all seems like nit-picking over dates but while the *Oxford Companion* has a reputation for accuracy, I wanted to show that it cannot be taken as gospel truth and that the editors really made little effort to find out and check the most interesting facts about CC for their article.

Golden Age

I know where Hooper and Whyld got the incorrect information about the first international CC tournament as one of their stated sources was a series of historical articles by Dr. Bruno Bassi, which were first published over a period of years (circa 1949-52) in the magazine *Mail Chess*, and collected together later, probably by Egbert Meissenburg, the *Oxford Companion* gives the date 1965 for this. I am grateful to Dr. Michael Negele for scanning and sending to me the series of Bassi articles that were originally published. From this, I can see that Hooper & Whyld's statement about the "golden age of CC" has also been taken uncritically from Bassi.

The earliest mention about games of chess being played via correspondence comes from Thomas Hyde in his book *De Ludibus Orientalis* (1694) about 17th century games between Croatian and Venetian merchants, the moves being sent along with their commercial correspondence. There is however no recorded CC game scores until the 19th century when Friedrich Wilhelm von Mauvillon (1774-1851) included the game scores of three games he had played against a brother officer in the army during the Napoleonic wars.

Mauvillon was stationed in The Hague and his opponent, name unknown, in Breda. Mauvillon published three games in a book *Anweisung zur Erlernung des Schachspiels* (Essen 1827) on pages 373-5. He did not say who was White or Black but there may be a presumption that he was the winner of all the games? Neither was a strong player. In the second game, Black castled queenside at move 19 although White controlled the d8-square.

The next known games began in 1824, matches London-Edinburgh and Amsterdam-Rotterdam; it is probably due to the public interest in those matches that Mauvillon published his games.

The Oxford Companion refers to these events and says: “The ‘golden age’ of correspondence chess was in the first half of the 19th century. Players from different cities and countries could not easily play together in any other way until travel facilities improved, after which over-the-board matches and then tournaments came into vogue.”

I disagree thoroughly with this picture of events. Since until 1824, i.e. in virtually the first half of that half century which is supposed to be so significant, there was almost no CC being played at all, it is strange to say that this period forms part of any “golden age.” Between the years 1824-1839 I have in my database 42 correspondence games, almost all between clubs or cities, and I don’t if more than another 50 at most could be found by the most diligent searching in newspaper archives of the time. Already in 1843 Ludwig Bledow published all the CC games he could find up to that date.

The implication in the *Oxford Companion* that there was some international CC in the first half of the 19th century is only supportable for the 1840s, when the cheap post began and there was indeed an explosion of CC activity. With only one exception, the inter-city matches played before 1840 can only be considered “international” if you consider a contest between London and Edinburgh to be such, although they both were in the United Kingdom and shared the same postal service. As for the matches involving Posen (Poznan) and Breslau (Wroclaw), which is now in Poland – at the time they were German cities, so their CC matches cannot be counted international either.

The one exception, and the first true international CC contest, is the two-game match won by Paris against Westminster Chess Club in the years 1834-36. This was followed in 1842-46 by the match in which Szen and Löwenthal, leading the committee representing the Hungarian city of Pest, scored a surprise 2-0 win over Paris. Hooper and Whyld rightly say that these results were “pointers to France’s superiority in the 1830s and decline in the 1840s.” In both these matches, the play of the losing side was weak, caused to some extent by the refusal of some of the strongest players to participate, or their withdrawal at a critical stage.

Paris (Cercle des Echecs) was led by Chamouillet and St. Amant but for much of the time the latter was engaged in his Staunton contests. In a report on the second game of the match in the *Chess Player’s Chronicle* (1846, p.163, note n) Howard Staunton himself remarked that “The loss of M. Deschappelles was to be regretted

certainly, but it was of far less import than the secession of M. Kieseritski (sic) which was irreparable. Another of his fathom they had not; and it is evident that afterwards they were completely outplayed, crushed in a manner, by the superior weight and talent of the adverse band.”

There were very few international CC matches in the first half of the 19th century in which leading masters participated; although perhaps in Germany some of the top players were involved in their internal inter-city matches. Because these matches tend to get published in newspapers, which were often the vehicle for communicating the moves between the rival cities, more of these games have been preserved than games between private individuals. Even so, going up to the end of the supposed “golden age” in 1850, barely 140 CC games are preserved. That is including all the games discovered by the researches of Bledow, Max Lange, whose *Correspondenz-Partien* of 1872 is a major source for this era, and Professor Carlo Pagni of Turin.

When you consider that in the second half of the 19th century, there were several genuine inter-city matches with master participation, the Hooper/Whyld picture is misleading. For example, a few years ago two Kibitzer columns were devoted to the London-Vienna match of 1872-74, which involved Steinitz on the winning side, while in the 1880s and 1890s Russia the great M.I. Chigorin was often mightily involved in matches played by his native St. Petersburg.

There is evidence that the quantity of CC games played greatly increased in the 1840s but very few of these games played by individuals got into print in the chess magazines. Either they were not submitted or the quality was inferior or both. This was at a time when a high proportion of the games appearing in *CPC* and the like were games played by masters against amateurs in simultaneous displays or giving odds of pawn and move!

A curiosity, then, in *CPC* 1843 (volume 4 page 155) is the start of an international postal game between two army officers. “We have been favoured with four interesting games, now playing by letter between La Capitaine Lucas, French Artillery, and Major Nesbitt of the 60th Rifles...” The start of one ongoing game, to move 24, was given; unfortunately the end never appeared in print.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 dxc4 3 e3 e5 4 Bxc4 exd4 5 exd4 Bb4+ 6 Nc3 Bxc3+ 7 bxc3 Ne7 8 Nf3 0-0 9 Qb3 c6 10 Ba3 b5 11 Bd3 Re8 12 Bxh7+ Kh8 13 0-0 Nd5 14 Bb1 Nd7 15 Qc2 N7f6 16 Ne5 Qc7 17 Re1 g6 18 Bd6 Qb7 19 Qd2 Kg7 20 Bd3 Nh5 21 c4 Ndf4 22 Be4 Bd7 23 cxb5 Nd5 24 Rac1 “and Black has to play...”

So if I were to speak of a “golden age” of CC, I certainly would not place it in the first half of the 19th century. I would rather call the period to 1839 the “old stone age” and the next three decades from 1840 the “new stone age.”

What is the concept of a “golden age” anyway? My understanding is that it is a nostalgic reference to a time, perhaps anthropologically somewhat incorrect, when life was better than it is now and there was a flourishing of works of great craftsmanship and artistic merit. As gold was relatively plentiful and easy for Bronze Age man to work, this means that a “golden age” might actually be concurrent with the age where bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was the main material used in tools and weapons. Thus fine works in gold were created by the early Irish and Greeks. Finer ones were later created by the Aztecs and Incas, though they didn’t invent the wheel, but little survives because they were seized and melted down by the Conquistadors.

Really, the idea of a golden age is a myth and it doesn't have much relevance to the history of correspondence chess, especially if misapplied to a period that cannot be regarded as golden in any way. Hooper & Whyld's source for this wrong-headed idea was, as I said, the series of articles by Bassi. Writing just after World War II, Dr. Bassi divided the history of CC thus.

- (i) Prehistoric period covering everything before 1800 (it is unlikely there is anything more to be discovered here);
- (ii) "The 'golden age' of CC 1800-1851, that is until the holding of the first international master tournament, during which period C.C. performed the functions and possessed all the importance of the master tournaments which followed."
- (iii) Modern period from 1851, which Bassi divided into:
 - a) 1851-1888 Private games and national CC tournaments; (strangely he doesn't mention intercity matches);
 - b) "the first playing of C.C. on an internationally organised basis" (which Bassi dates from 1888, but the correct date as shown above was a few years earlier).
 - c) the "technical organisation of international CC" (starting in 1928); this was indeed a landmark date although as Erik Larsson has shown, the short-lived ICSB preceded the IFSB.
 - d) the foundation of the ICCA by Erik Larsson, 1946 (actually late 1945) which has led directly to ICCF.

A better division, if one insisted on a division along such lines, could be as follows, but the dates overlap:

- (i) Prehistoric, before 1824;
- (ii) The era of the intercity matches, 1824-1880 approx. (During this period games between individuals played a less important part. Inter-city consultation-style games continued into the 20th century but with decreasingly less significance as it became more usual for team members to play opponents on an individual basis rather than as committees.)
- (iii) Individual tournaments and matches of various kinds, mostly sponsored by periodicals (1870s through 1939, but floreat 1880-1914).
- (iv) Foundation of national and regional CC clubs in various countries (from the 1890s and first decade of the 20th century, with a new impetus between the world wars). The years 1914-28 were largely a fallow period for CC.
- (v) Glorious era (1928-39) of the IFSB in continental Europe, with significant but unconnected national developments in other parts of the world;

- (vi) World War II (1939-45) during which some countries had significant CC activity while in others play virtually ceased.
- (vii) Years of dominance of ICCF and its National Federations (1946-1995 approx, including the precursor years of ICCA 1945-51).
- (viii) Internet Era, from 1994/1996 approx. Years of diversity with a proliferation of international CC organisers, to which ICCF is starting to adapt.

I think I have shown that quite a lot is wrong with Bassi's picture, adopted by Hooper and Whyld. Their motivation was different too.

I think that Bassi, writing for an audience of postal players, was trying in a misguided way to exalt the correspondence game by saying there had been a time when it was the most important mode of chess-playing. I think that is actually not true. In the period 1824-1850, in the major European cities at least, the most significant factor for the development of chess was the growth in chess cafes and chess clubs, together with growth of publications on chess, including from the 1840s the first regularly-published periodicals.

Hooper and Whyld adapted Bassi's schema with a different idea, belittling CC. They were more or less saying that it was only in this supposed "golden age" that CC had any significance and as soon as opponents could meet face to face, they preferred to do so.

Of course the year 1851 was a very important year for chess, in that the first international tournament was held in London. It also conveniently marks the mid-way point of the 19th century. However, I would deny the implication that around this time people who were interested in chess no longer had to indulge their fancy with postal play because now they could go and out and do the real thing? The railway network was growing in developed countries throughout the century; it did not suddenly reach its completed state in 1851. If you didn't live near a railway line, you were still dependent on horse-drawn transport for another half century or so. Major local CC competitions like inter-club leagues seem to have taken around 1890 to become established, for example the Woodhouse Cup in Yorkshire.

Actually the development of club and social OTB chess was a process of continuous development through the 19th century, as was the development of the art of chess problems, and of correspondence chess. They also followed the communications and socio-economic progress in that era.

Their theory may seem to make some sense if one thinks, as the Oxford Companion's editors probably did, largely in terms of highly-populated and wealthy south-east England, but if you lived in other parts of the world the story might be different. Anyway the truth is that even much later in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th, just because you lived in a city didn't necessarily mean you preferred OTB to CC.

One of the strange things about Hooper and Whyld's book is the way it can be so precise, almost annoyingly so, when they bother and so casual when they don't care. For example, I was taught at school that the launch of the first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black, in England on May 6th 1840 was the start of the modern prepaid postal service. I always remembered that date because May 6th is

my birthday.

So when I read in the *Oxford Companion* that “on 10 January 1840 Britain introduced a nationwide penny post,” my first reaction was that they had got this wrong, but I looked into the matter further. It turns out that it is true that while the Penny Black was launched on May 6, the date of January 10 is correct for the official start of the nationwide penny post. Similarly I have no doubt that the details given in the previous paragraph about the postal service in the days of the stagecoach are meticulously correct because evidently this was a hobby-horse (sorry about the pun!) for either Hooper or Whyld.

So why then did they get other facts wrong, such as the start-date of *The Chess Correspondent* and the misidentification of the first international CC tournament? Evidently they didn't care very much about the subject-matter of this article. CC was of little interest to them and they were happy to pad it out with some pretty irrelevant stuff rather than, for example, write to the ICCF General Secretary who would have delighted to provide them with some more accurate and meaningful information.

The Real ‘Golden Age’

As I have said, I am not that keen on the term “golden age” applied to correspondence chess at all. If there is any era to which that term could be applied with some justification, it would be the time of the Internationaler Fernschachbund, begun by Germans in 1928 and ended by other Germans with the outbreak of war in 1939.

It was only for Europeans and players from some countries, notably Britain and Russia, were hardly involved at all, but the IFSB did provide an international structure and competitive environment for postal players of all strengths from beginner to grandmaster, as well as the magazine *Fernschach* which printed many high-class articles and games; indeed the *Fernschach* of the late 1930s was a much better magazine than its namesake of today.

Many players who were active in over-the-board master chess also competed in some IFSB matches and tournaments. Among the winners of its annual international championship, the Bundesmeisterschaft, the IFSB could claim the great Keres, and GM Milan Vidmar as well as the Austrian chess writer and IM, Hans Müller, the French artist Marcel Duchamp and other recognised masters. Many fine players tried and failed to win this title. I finish with a game played in the IFSB. It was hard to choose which one; I did not want to give a game from my forthcoming book *50 Golden Chess Games* or its predecessor *64 Great Chess Games* but there are still plenty to choose from.

The IFSB Olympiad (prelims 1935-37, finals 1937-39) attracted strong teams from several countries; Hungary eventually won and post-war FIDE grandmaster Gideon Barcza was one of its stars. They finished ahead of an Austrian team that included GMs Ernst Grünfeld, the famous theoretician, and Eliskases who was about to win Noordwijk 1938 ahead of Keres, Euwe and other famous masters.

In this particular game, the Austrians got the better of the Hungarians.

White: Dr. Geza Nagy (Hungary)

Black: Erich Eliskases (Austria)

IFSB EU-OL final-A board 2, corr 1937-38

Open Spanish (C83)

1 e4

In the preliminaries, two years earlier, Dr. Nagy had played the English Opening and won. He decides to avoid any special preparation by a switch of opening but Eliskases was ready for revenge.

1...e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 0-0 Nxe4 6 d4 b5 7 Bb3 d5 8 dxe5 Be6 9 c3 Be7 10 Bf4!? g5 11 Be3

This idea had been played first in a 1936 postal game Nagy-Dyckhoff and was fashionable for a while. White deliberately loses a tempo with the bishop to provoke what he hopes is a weakness in the black position, but this turns out to be a dubious idea and 10 Bf4 is no longer played.

11...g4 12 Nfd2 Rg8

12...Nxd2 13 Nxd2 Nxe5 14 Bd4 followed by f4 is dangerous for Black. Other games around this time showed that 12...Nc5 is weak but 12...Ng5 (Euwe) could be best.

13 f4?!

White was trying to improve on his draw with Dyckhoff (IFSB Bundesmeisterschaft 1936-37) where he played 13 Nxe4.

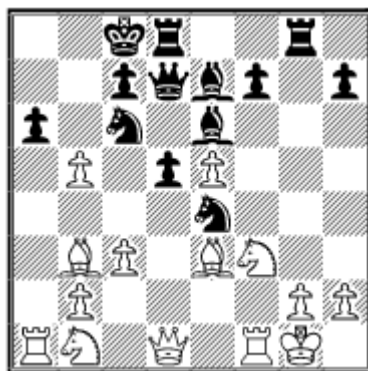
13...gxf3 14 Nxf3 Qd7 15 a4?

15 Nbd2 was correct, when Black should castle, rather than fall into the trap 15...Bh3 16 Nxe4 which is good for White after 16...Rxd2+ 17 Kh1 (or 16...Bxg2 17 Ng3). Now the continuation given in *Fernschach* seems wrong: 17...dxe4 18 Bxf7+ Kxf7 19 Ng5+ Ke8 20 Qh5+ and White wins. Instead of this, Black has 19...Kg6!, so White should exchange queens at move 18 or 19.

15...0-0-0!

Fernschach asks: "Who would have thought Black would dare to castle into the attack? White tries to punish his opponent's impudence but he has underestimated Black's threats."

16 axb5?



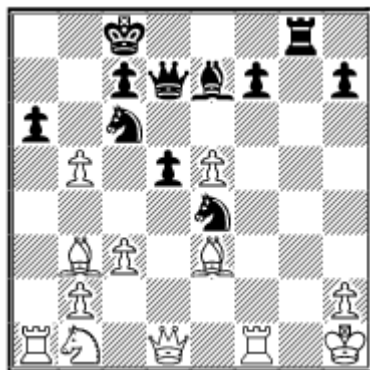
This is a fatal loss of tempo; it turns out that Black does not need to defend his queenside because he finds a brilliant winning combination. Eliskases said 16 Kh1 was necessary; not 16 Nbd2 Bh3 17 Nxe4 Rxd2+ 18 Kh1 dxe4 19 Qxd7+ Rxd7 and Black wins.

16...Bh3!!

Presumably White expected 16...axb5 17 Qd3 when the black king and b-pawn become targets.

17 Ne1

Dr. Nagy finds the best defence but Eliskases' attack is too strong for him. If 17 bxc6 Rxc2+ 18 Kh1 Qg4 or 17 Rxa6 Bxc2, while against 17 g3 the Austrian GM had found the neat blow 17...Nxc3!, e.g. 18 hxc3 Rxc3+ 19 Kf2 Qg4!, with a winning attack.

17...Bxc2! 18 Nxc2 Rxc2+! 19 Kxc2 Rg8+ 20 Kh1

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