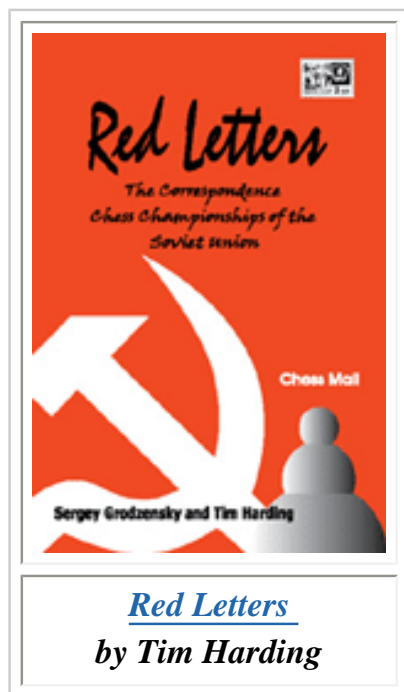




COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding



Amos Burn Revisited

Amos Burn: A Chess Biography by Richard Forster (McFarland & Co., Jefferson NC & London, 984 pages US Letter format, casebound; ISBN 0-7864-1717-X; \$75.00; approx. weight 2.6kg)

This month's column is devoted to a review of one of the largest chess books ever published, Richard Forster's recent biography of Amos Burn. This book has not previously been reviewed at the [ChessCafe](#). My article is a greatly expanded version of the opinion I gave about the book for the more limited readership in my *Chess Mail* magazine 1/2005.

I doubt if anybody ever got rich writing or publishing a chess book – especially one as heavy as this – and I don't recommend anyone with back pain to bring it on a journey, but Richard Forster and McFarland have done the chess world proud with this volume.

Typically with chess books from McFarland, you get a handsomely bound book on quality paper, designed to last forever in a library, but priced beyond the pocket of most private individuals. The production can only be called lavish. The text, illustrations, and chess games are beautifully printed.

Although Forster is Swiss, he has no problem writing in perfectly fluent English, so the prospective purchaser need have no worries on that score. The author is a FIDE IM, a computer scientist at Zürich University, chess columnist for a Swiss newspaper and was formerly a writer of a monthly column at this site.

“Why so big a book?” is one obvious question. “Why Burn?” is another. The answer to the former is that Forster has happily found a publisher willing and able to give the book the treatment it deserves and not insist on cuts, which anyway would not make a significant difference to the length. Once the decision had been made to include every available Burn game, with notes where possible, this was always going to be a mammoth task.

As for why bother to do such a massive job on the English chess master Amos Burn (1848-1925), the author makes a good case that he was a much more important figure in the chess world of the 19th and early 20th centuries

than is generally appreciated, that his games are worthy of study and that his life had some interesting features too. However, the book is very much a chess book and biographical matter is secondary.

To manage such a large project, Forster has divided each chapter into two sections. First come the text (with crosstables and other details of events in which Burn participated) and the games follow within the same chapter. At intervals he gives brief “chronicles of the chess world” to show what was happening elsewhere and many photographs of players, amateur and professional, punctuate the text.

Sources for the games are given and where Forster corrects the contemporary annotations, he makes it clear what is the original and what is his interpolation.

The book has no footnotes, but additional notes to chapters and to source queries on the games can be found in the back of the volume, along with a bibliography, etc. For each chapter, the end-notes to the games are given separately from the general notes to the chapters. There are also various indexes. So it takes a while to find your way around the book, but once you understand how it is organised, you can usually find what you want.

Burn was an active businessman all his life and never a professional chess player. He took up chess only at the age of 16; Chigorin was another player of this era who came to the game late yet reached the heights. There was not so much to learn then and the competition on the way to the top was not so intense for one of real talent and determination.

Although Burn began to make his mark as a player in his early twenties, there were times in his life when the game very much took a back seat. Then he made various comebacks. Burn also played some correspondence games, both as an individual and as a member of club committees, but these are not of great importance, amounting to a handful of the approximately 900 games included here.

Although the book deals with Burn’s private life to some extent (see below), it is almost exclusively his chess activities you will find here. A reserved man, he didn’t write chess books or reveal much about his life and so the author has had to rely a lot on what others said about him, and let the games speak for themselves. Burn was involved in many local and national chess activities in Britain but also spent some time in America, usually not for chess it seems.

Forster shows that although Burn was already a strong player in the early 1970s, his international career really didn’t get under way until the mid-1880s and peaked in 1889. His last tournament was the 18th German Chess

Congress, held in Breslau (now Wroclaw) in 1912. Then at the end of 1913, he became a final phase of his career when he was invited to succeed the late Leopold Hoffer as chess editor of *The Field*.

At the points in Burn's life where he was very active in both international and local chess, this system leads the author to divide his study into chapters that overlap, so a strict chronological order is not followed. Thus in Part II, a chapter on Burn's chess activities in Liverpool and London (1886-88) comes between a chapter on international play in 1886 and further international tournaments (1886-88). Similarly in part IV, a separate chapter on the Barmen and Ostend Congresses of 1905-7 and another on his last tournaments (1909-12) follow a chapter dealing with his life in Liverpool over that period of eight years.

Forster has provided a handy diagram on page 7 to show how the chapters relate to the periods in Burn's life. He also provides at intervals various short "Chronicles" to show how Burn's career related to activities in the chess world as a whole. These are all brief; usually less than a page. Many photographs of players, amateur and professional, also punctuate the text.

Some Criticisms

It seems a bit churlish to pick a few holes in such a thoroughly researched and comprehensive work as this, but I don't think anyone could write a book of over 900 pages without making a few mistakes, albeit minor ones (depending on your point of view). I offered only one correction in my earlier review, but since space is not a factor in a web page, I will now offer a few more criticisms. This does not however mean that I have lowered my opinion of the book as a whole.

On page 17 (the very first page of the first chapter, following various preliminaries) there is a statement that could be construed as a howler. Liverpool, the city where Burn grew up (though he was born in Hull) and lived much of his adult life, is described as being in the 1860s "England's most important trading centre at the time."

Liverpool was a very important port, it is true, probably at least as important a trading centre as Bristol by this time and had not yet outstripped by Manchester or Glasgow, but what about London? The metropolis (as contemporaries described it) must have vastly exceeded any other city in the world for trading turnover in any year you care to pick in the 19th century. Of course, this isn't of any importance for assessing the book as a chess book or a biography, but it's a warning that however deeply one researches and however carefully one thinks the words have been chosen, silly mistakes can creep in. An English editor would have spotted this one, but the book is edited and published in North Carolina.

Around the same time I was reading this book, I also began Roy Jenkins' biography of Gladstone (a rough contemporary of Burn's and also with Liverpuddlian connections). The American edition of that book has an introduction with two even worse howlers which an English editor would have caught; one was a reference to Queen Victoria's "golden jubilee" in 1897 when it was in fact her diamond jubilee year. So Mr. Forster is in good company.

Confronted with a major work of this type, one tends to turn to the index early on and look up people one knows about – out of interest, to see if anything new has been discovered and to test the author in an area where one feels one's own knowledge and expertise has a chance of equalling the author's. Unfair perhaps? So I looked up two people of whom I have been making a special study lately: the important Irish chess journalists Frideswide and Thomas Rowland, and sure enough I found a mistake.

On page 173, Richard Forster writes that information concerning Burn's whereabouts in 1885 can be found in the chess column of the *Sheffield Independent* and *Rotherham Independent* for 25 July 1885 "edited by Frideswide F. Beechey, the future Mrs. Rowland." Yet, at that date the Rowlands had been married more than 13 months: their union took place on 5 June 1884, a date that is not hard to find because this wedding was very famous in chess circles at the time. The event was reported soon afterwards in the *British Chess Magazine*. (I have seen the marriage register and the date given in BCM is correct.)

On page 892, the caption to the illustration "Admonition of Will" is incorrect; "Admon." is a legal abbreviation and means administration (as opposed to probate); the word "admonition" means a warning or reproof. Presumably the reason why probate of Burn's will was not granted is that it only named his wife as "sole executrix and legatee;" instead letters of administration were granted on 12 January 1926 to his daughter Elsie. From this we may reliably infer that Mrs. Burn had predeceased her husband, but Forster fails to make any comment on this.

This is one of the few cases in the book where Forster's not being a native English speaker and student of general history may have caught him out.

Another detail I found a little strange was the sentence on page 151 where Forster mentions that when Burn's second daughter was born in 1881, he "declared his occupation vaguely as 'gentleman,' a sign that his professional career had drifted into great uncertainty."

I should be inclined to draw the opposite inference. On such official forms where a Victorian was required to give his status or profession, "gentleman" was the degree to which one aspired, meaning (if one wasn't a landed

member of the country gentry) that one was respectable, comfortably off, and most definitely not involved in retail trade. So a man in a profession, or a partner in an import, or wholesale business (as opposed to an employee) might consider himself entitled to describe himself as a gentleman, especially if much of his income came from investments or rents.

Forster's book is immensely authoritative where it deals directly with Burn. He has consulted city directories for Hull and Liverpool and all kinds of manuscript and printed primary sources, including obscure provincial newspaper chess columns like the one just mentioned. There is a page showing his family's entry in the census of 1851. If he has been unable to find something out, or is suspicious of a source, he frankly admits it and he sometimes suggests sources that others might be able to find which were unavailable to him.

So far I have not found a game by Burn that is not in the book and he is certainly right, for example, when he says that the second correspondence game in his Appendix A (pages 901-2) was played by Thomas Bourn (of Clifton) and not by Amos Burn, notwithstanding the fact that the *Illustrated London News* gave the loser's name as "Burn."

It is when Forster moves a little away from Burn himself that little errors creep in. I think this must be a problem for anyone doing a big biographical project. Do you check every seemingly trivial peripheral fact – or get a researcher to do it, who maybe isn't as dogged and committed and careful as you are yourself? Or are you sometimes tempted to write something from memory and not set it about with caveats?

Not Really a Biography

There is one fundamental objection to Forster's enterprise, although I suspect it will not bother most chess players who may read it. That is, this book is not really what I would call a biography. This reader never really felt he was being introduced to Burn as a person and many details of his private life remain obscure after 972 pages (including index). We are left on the outside looking in and wondering, not what the reader of a biography expects these days.

The arrival of this book – just because it is so good and thorough in so many ways – raises questions about what chess history and chess biography are, and what they should be. For a start, I would say that history and biography are two different things and that the historian and biographer, while sharing some techniques, have a different approach to their subject.

In the early 1970s Michael Holroyd changed the world of literary biography forever with his book on Lytton Strachey. Chess biography still awaits its equivalent, although John Hilbert came closer to his subjects than most chess

biographers with his books on Walter Penn Shipley and Norman Tweed Whitaker, which are the reverse of this book on Burn. Forster has written primarily a chess book and game collection; only secondarily a life.

Unfortunately, Forster has been unable to find many clues to what exactly happened in 1901, when it seems that Burn had a financial crisis, which also perhaps cost him his marriage. As I have found myself when researching other people, obituaries in chess periodicals tend to be extremely uninformative about details of personal lives, sometimes not even mentioning whether the subject was survived by spouse or children.

Burn's wife and marriage are mentioned, as I have said above but Forster's brief discussion (see pages 469 and 668) of the limited evidence that a marital split occurred in 1901, possibly because of a worsening of Burn's financial circumstances, seems to me inadequate. I don't know how much work Forster did to try to find out more about Mrs. Burn but she remains a very shadowy figure and I do not believe it would have been impossible to trace her life (and indeed that of their children) to its end through local records and official documents. This failing above all marks the book out as a "chess biography" rather than a true biography.

I do appreciate that Forster was most reluctant to go beyond what he sees as the firm evidence, but it looks as if he has only sought for evidence in a few places. For somebody with a journalist's nose for a good story, this mystery of what really happened to the Burn family in 1901 would have been a scent too good to ignore, and if in the end I had to admit defeat then I would have wished to make clear what sources had been investigated in the attempt to establish, at least, the date of death of Martha Ann Burn.

Also, Forster provides very little information on what happened to his children except that one survived him, unmarried and living in Edinburgh. What happened to the other daughter? It is rather strange that in a book of almost one thousand pages we are told so little about the females in his family.

The final chapter is very cursory and — since we are talking about 12 years of his adult life, during which he was definitely not senile — more should have been found. A few extracts from his *Field* columns — with some analysis of their style and content — would not have come amiss. Forster however contents himself with some quotes about how the column came to be awarded to him rather than, as was expected, to Richard Teichmann.

Otherwise, the final chapter largely consists of extracts from obituaries of Amos Burn, one of which mentions in passing that he was survived by a daughter, so does this mean Hilda quoted Marian Burn was deceased by then, or else the writer did not know of her existence? Again, some indication from

the author was required, I think.

As it is, one is left with the impression – possibly incorrect – that Forster just isn't interested in the women in Burn's life.

Not Really a History Either

The first Irish Conference for Sports History was held in UCD, Dublin on February 18-19, 2005. One of the papers was delivered by Professor Vincent Comerford from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He made a point which is just as applicable to "chess history."

"If we want to be taken seriously by other historians, he said, we need to show that there is more to sports history..." [for "sports history", read "chess history"] "...than cataloguing. Things like result lists," he said, "constitute *raw material* for study rather than the history itself."

Chess is a special case, it is true, or at least we like to think it is. The fact that games can be recorded and replayed makes the study of chess events of the past in some ways more like the history of literature (where the words of past poets are still available) or mathematics (the equations, theorems, etc. are still available) than the history of cricket or baseball or football.

This book on Burn is much more than a chronicle of the events in his life and career. Nevertheless, the general criticism is perhaps valid when applied to the presentation of results in this book. There is a sense in which this book on Burn is just a case of cataloguing carried almost *ad absurdum*. Some illustrations that take up nearly a whole page (and so contribute to the cost of the book), like the chart of the Liverpool club handicap tournament won by Burn, don't really add much except as proof the author did his research; they could just as easily have been posted on a website.

Every available Burn game, however bad, is included with painstaking source references and often with inaccurate contemporary annotations. A sample of these would be fine, but for nearly every game? At the end of 900+ pages, is any more light thrown by Burn on to the times in which he lived, or vice versa? I think it is, but the sheer volume and weight of the book make it hard to find the man among the moves.

Treatment of Games

Because the book is weighted so heavily to the games, with huge space devoted to annotating encounters that are not always worth it, I have to wonder who will actually get out the chess set and play through all these games?

One solution that the author and publisher might have considered would be the one adopted by *Chess Mail* with *Red Letters*, the history of the USSR

Correspondence Championships by Sergey Grodzensky and myself. All available relevant games were included with the book in a database CD; we didn't attempt to print them all as it would have made the book prohibitively expensive. In the future, we may see more publishers adopting this solution.

Where it is known that Burn played a game, but the moves are missing, the header for the game is given, but it is stated below that the score is unavailable. Mr Forster tells me that it is possible a few Burn games will eventually turn up, probably in obscure local newspaper columns or club archives. Unfortunately the Dublin 1889 tournament is one of those for which records are incomplete. If you find a Burn game that is not in the book, please send it to Mr Forster c/o the publisher or via his website. So far I have not found a game that isn't in the book and I do look at a lot of 29th century chess columns in the original sources.

Until not so long ago, McFarland chess books were still printing "ch" instead of the universally used "+" for check; now they have taken the final step and adopted figurine fonts instead of English algebraic. The change will be transparent to many readers, but I am sure it will be welcomed on the continent and in Latin-America.

One detail I don't like about the presentation of games may be the fault of the publisher rather than the author. That is, that only the surname of the players is given.

A Few Burn Games

To conclude this column, I have picked out three games by Burn from various periods in his career, but the notes are brief. For full coverage, please consult the book.

Amos Burn is remembered partly for the Burn Variation in the French Defence, which has regained some popularity in recent years. According to Forster (page 342), "in serious tournament play he scored nine wins, five losses and one draw with it." He thinks this was the first game in which Burn played the line.

Charles D. Locock – Amos Burn

Bradford (British Congress) 17.08.1888

French Defence (C10)

From the *Leeds Mercury Weekly Supplement*, 25 August 1888

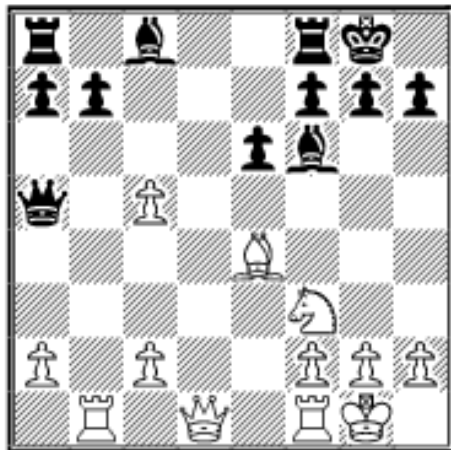
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 dxe4 5 Nxe4 Nbd7 6 Nf3 Be7 7 Nxf6+ Nxf6 8 Bd3 0-0 9 Bxf6?!

There is no reason for parting with the bishop at this early stage. 9 Qe2 is the generally approved continuation.

9...Bxf6 10 0-0 c5

More ambitious is 11 c3. After the text move Black seizes the initiative.

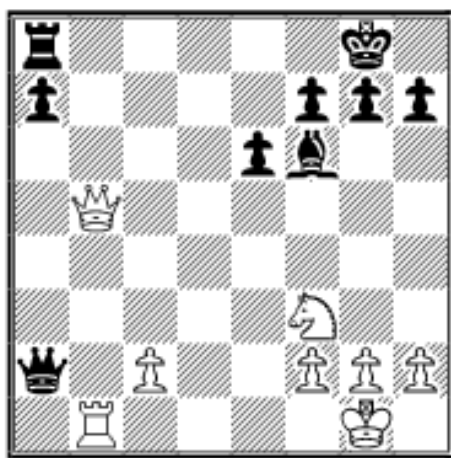
11 dxc5? Bxb2 12 Rb1 Bf6 13 Be4 Qa5!



**14 c6 bxc6 15 Bxc6 Ba6 16 Bxa8 Bxf1
17 Qxf1 Rxa8 18 Qb5?**

An oversight, but even after 18 Qc4 Black stands better on account of his superior minor piece and the potential weakness of the white c-pawn.

18...Qxa2! (see next diagram)



Locock had probably assumed this to be impossible on account of 19 Qb8+ but 19...Bd8! is an adequate defence.

19 Kf1 Qxc2! 20 Ne1 Qc7 21 g3 a5 22 Nd3 a4 23 Nc1 a3 24 Na2 g6 25 Qb3 Qc6 26 h4 Bb2 27 Rd1 Qh1+ 28 Ke2 Qe4+ 29 Kf1 Rc8 30 Kg1 Rc2 0-1 White resigned.

Forster considers that 1889 was the peak of Burn's chess career. Although his only first prizes then were in relatively minor master events (Dublin and Amsterdam), the former included Pollock and Mason while in the Dutch tournament he finished ahead of the young Emanuel Lasker as well as Mason and Gunsberg.

The major events of 1889 were New York (a 20-player double-rounder won by Chigorin and Weiss ahead of Gunsberg and Blackburne with Burn fifth on 26 points), and Breslau (18 players) where Burn finished second to Tarrasch. On page 351, Forster prints a table calculated by W. Sonneborn showing the relative strength of tournament players in 1889, with Steinitz (who played none of the aforementioned events) clear first and Burn second ahead of Blackburne, Tarrasch, Winawer and Gunsberg.

Here is one of Burn's games from 1889. A lot of his wins with White against

masters are very long, but this is an exception.

Amos Burn – Louis Paulsen

6th German Congress, Breslau 1889

Pirc Defence (B09)

Notes by Tim Harding

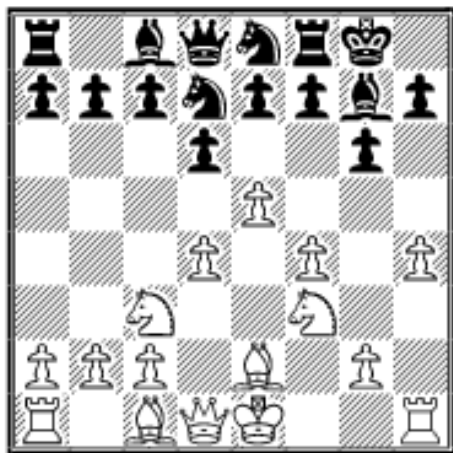
1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 g6 4 f4 Bg7 5 Nf3 0-0 6 Be2

In modern times, White has usually preferred 6 Bd3 or sometimes the very sharp move 6 e5.

6...Nbd7

Nowadays a Pirc player would challenge the centre by 6...c5. This slow move enables White to get an attack going.

7 e5! Ne8 8 h4!



More dynamic than 8 0-0 c5 as in Levy-Hort, Siegen olympiad 1970.

8...c5 9 h5 cxd4

9...Qa5 would be more active.

10 Qxd4 dxe5?

This makes matters worse.

11 fxe5

Black is already lost.

11...Nd6 12 hxg6 Nf5

12...hxg6 13 Qh4 and wins.

13 gxf7+

Following the tournament book, Forster gives this an exclamation mark although it is not clearly the best move (maybe 13 gxh7+).

13...Rxf7 14 Qg4 Nf8 15 Bc4 Be6 16 Ng5 Qd4 17 Qxd4 Nxd4 18 Bd3! Bxe5

Black must lose the exchange. 18...Rf5 is a lesser evil.

19 Nxf7 Bg3+ 20 Kf1 Bxf7 21 Be3 Be5 22 Re1 Ng6 23 Rh5 Nc6 24 Bd2 Bg3 25 Re4 Nce5 26 Rxe5! Bxe5 27 Bxg6 Bxc3 28 Bxf7+ Kxf7 29 Bxc3 1-0

Forster considered Burn's strongest point was his solid style and defensive skill, to which he owed a debt to Steinitz (Burn had been a pupil of Steinitz when he first lived in London in 1870.) So to conclude, here is one of Burn's most famous counter-attacking wins, following a bad opening choice that should have cost him the game.

Geza Maróczy – Amos Burn

Ostend, 1906

Falkbeer Counter-Gambit (C32)

1 e4 e5 2 f4 d5 3 exd5 e4 4 d3 Nf6 5 dxe4 Nxe4 6 Nf3 Bc5 7 Qe2 Bf2+?

Burn forgot that Alapin had refuted this move back in 1899.

8 Kd1 Qxd5+ 9 Nfd2! f5 10 Nc3 Qd4 11 Ncxe4 fxe4 12 c3 Qe3



12...Qb6? loses rapidly to 13 Nxe4.

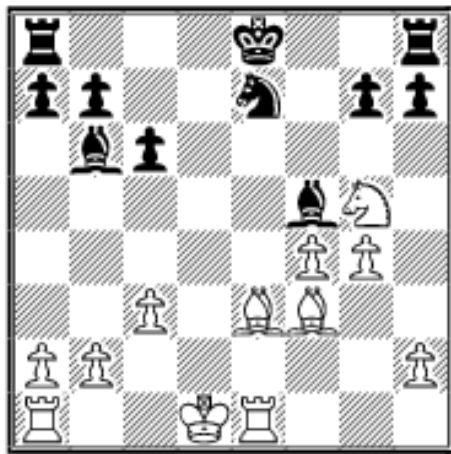
13 Nxe4

Following Alapin, but 13 Qh5+! Kf8 14 Bc4 Qxf4 15 Qd5! is the clearest win, as in Reti-Breyer, Budapest 1918.

13...Qxe2+ 14 Bxe2

14 Kxe2! is better according to Von Bardeleben.

14...Bb6 15 Ng5 Nc6 16 Re1 Ne7 17 Bf3 c6 18 Be3 Bf5 19 g4!?



19 Ke2 followed by 20 Kf2 was safer. Maróczy is letting the advantage slip and Burn punishes his further inaccuracies impressively.

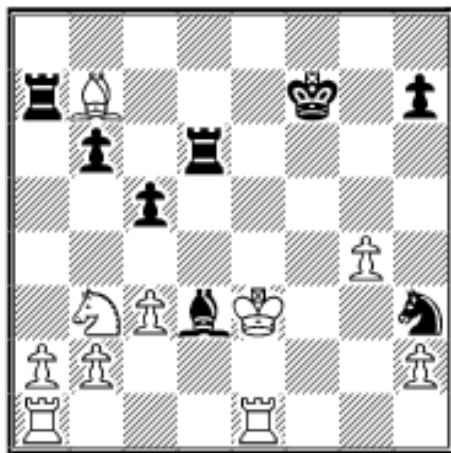
19...Bd3! 20 Ne6 Kf7 21 Nxc7?!

21 Ng5+ would force the black king to retreat.

21...Rhd8! 22 Ne6 Rd6 23 Bxb6 axb6 24 Nd4?

24 Ng5+ Kf6 25 Be2!.

24...c5! 25 Nb3 Ng6! 26 Kd2 Nxf4 27 Ke3 Nh3 28 Bxb7 Ra7!



29 Bg2?

29 Bh1 was the only move, when 29...Re7+ 30 Kf3 Be2+ 31 Kg2 Nf4+ gives Black a strong attack (*Deutsches Wochenschach*).

29...Re7+ 30 Kf3 Be2+! 0–1

White resigned, for if 31 Kg3 (31 Rxe2 Rd3+ and mates) 31...Re3+ 32 Kh4 Rh6#.

Who Next?

It is hard to imagine any other master of comparable stature receiving this kind of treatment in the future. A comparable work on Blackburne, for example, would probably run to thousands of pages so any future biographer of his would have to be much more selective about the games, and notes to games, that would be included.

For Burn there is a lot of primary source material available – probably far more than Forster expected when he began his work – but not quite as much as would make the project utterly unwieldy. When a player's career is catalogued, I don't think it is necessary to include every blindfold game played at knight odds – as would be a problem with Blackburne.

Nevertheless I can think of a few masters of the period who do deserve a biography of this kind: Isidor Gunsberg immediately springs to mind as a subject who would have been intrinsically as interesting as Burn, and whose playing peak was even higher. John Hilbert once suggested a good subject

would be George Henry Mackenzie, the Scot who fought in the American Civil War and became US Champion. Maybe somebody is working on him now and, if so, I hope they are not neglecting his Irish period.

Henry Bird might also make a good subject, though he wasn't quite on the level of Burn and Gunsberg as a player. In countries other than the U.K. there are doubtless other figures who deserve a thorough treatment, or who have perhaps received it but not yet in English. For France, Rosenthal would make an interesting subject

Also, as Hilbert has shown, the most interesting subjects for biography may be people who were not in the first rank of players but who had an interesting life story, or amateurs whose life and chess careers were the background to an era where the game and society were in transition.

Notwithstanding my reservations expressed above, for anyone interested in chess history, this book is simply a must.

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