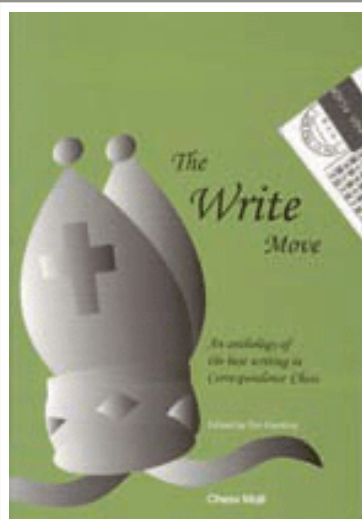




COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding



[The Write Move](#) by Tim Harding

In the Footsteps of Harold Murray

One year ago ([Kibitzer 105](#)) I wrote about the joys and occasional frustrations of doing chess research at the British Library. In this article I turn my attention to Oxford's great library, the Bodleian, to which I paid a recent visit as well as two short ones last year and a very brief one in 2003. I still have more to discover there and probably will write a further article, maybe next year, after I have seen some more of their treasures which so far I have not had time to examine.

Like the British Library, the Bodleian receives a copy of everything published in print in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and has done so (under copyright legislation) since the 1820s or earlier. In practice, many old items may be unavailable, and the collection of chess literature is probably less complete than at the BL. Moreover, it is harder to gain access to the Bodleian unless you are an Oxford University graduate or can prove you need access for serious research. During university term (see below), it primarily exists to serve the current staff and students, so the book delivery service from stacks can come under pressure at busy times. To read manuscript materials you need to make a special and well-justified application as the standard reader's ticket does not allow access to these. On the other hand, I have found the Bodleian staff unfailingly pleasant and helpful and it is a very pleasant place to do research once you find your way around.

In this article, I shall chiefly deal with the books and papers bequeathed to the Bodleian by Harold James Ruthven Murray (1868-1955), the author of the classic treatise *A History of Chess*, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1913. Murray also wrote a *History of Board Games other than Chess* (Oxford, 1952) and a *Short History of Chess* was published posthumously with additional material of inferior quality by other writers; more of that anon.

Although large, the Murray collection of chess and games literature is not by any means on the scale of the John G. White collection in Cleveland or the Van der Linde/ Niemeyer collection in The Hague. Nevertheless it is probably the largest chess collection available publicly in the United Kingdom. I do, however, suspect that the English Chess Federation (formerly BCF) holds lots of material from bequests, as well as its own archives, that it

does not know what to do with. I would strongly urge them to give all this to a major library, probably the British Library, rather than hoarding the stuff in a state where it may deteriorate and cannot be seen by anyone.

There are also probably some good collections of old chess material in some chess clubs and old municipal public libraries; to find out who holds what would be a rather large task. I found out that the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, for example, was donated a large collection towards the end of the nineteenth century but after buying a photocopy of the catalogue I found out that nearly all the items were to do with draughts (checkers); there is nothing very much on chess there.

Most of the rest of this column is devoted to what can be found in the Murray papers, but first a little about the man himself. Unfortunately I cannot show you any of Murray's games as I have not looked at the file boxes that contain his game notebooks.

The Murray Family

Harold Murray was the eldest child of James Murray, the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. James Murray came from humble origins in the Borders region of eastern Scotland and became one of the outstanding examples of a Victorian autodidact, who ended up showered with honours including a knighthood. When first recruited to the great dictionary project, which had been floundering for some years, he was the senior assistant master at Mill Hill School in North London, where Harold Murray went to school.

Some sources say that Harold only started playing chess in his twenties; his father reputedly saw games as a waste of time, but that may have only applied to physical sports, and he was an active hill-walker in his holidays. Probably some chess was played at Mill Hill, and it seems possible that Murray junior picked up the rudiments there even if he did not pay the game any serious attention during his childhood and teen years.

Eventually James Murray was persuaded to give up the school job and move to Oxford to work full-time on the dictionary. Harold Murray went to Balliol College, where his father was an Honorary Fellow, and after taking a first class honours degree in mathematics, he went into education himself. After holding various teaching positions, including Headmaster of Ormskirk Grammar School (Lancashire, 1891-1900) he became an Inspector of Schools for the Board of Education. Many of his manuscripts in the Bodleian are written on, or pasted into, left-over booklets for school examinations and the like, so he had evidently learned thrift (as well as much else) from his father.

The notoriously unreliable Wikipedia encyclopaedia has a [page](#) about Harold

Murray which when I saw it (2 February, 2006) had several obvious spelling errors and at least one definite error of fact. Maybe that's an old version as a [newer page](#) corrects some of the spelling mistakes but still gives 1956 as the publication date of the short history (actually 1963).

Even the venerable *British Chess Magazine* managed to make a mistake in its obituary, in the August 1955 issue, which stated that "his only son," Major D. M. J. Murray of the Royal Engineers was killed in Hong Kong in 1941. As the magazine had to admit the following month, he had a second son who was still alive and living in Nigeria. Murray and his wife also had a daughter, Kathleen K. M. E. Murray, who wrote a book about her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words* (Oxford, date 1977) from which many fascinating details of Murray life can be gleaned, though Harold is only mentioned a few times. The most readable account of the dictionary-making process however is *The Meaning of Everything: the Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 2003) by Simon Winchester (Oxford, 2003); the BBC made a television program based on that around the time the book appeared.

There also exists a shorter memoir of Sir James, entitled *Murray the Dictionary-maker*, written by her brother Wilfrid G. R. Murray (published in 1943 in South Africa). Incidentally, Wilfrid Murray writes that: "At one time Mill Hill was a favourite week-end resort of members of the Irish Parnellite Party," a detail that perhaps he got from his father but Harold is not "present" in this book at all.

Nevertheless, reading these books gives a good feel for the earnest, literary and rather puritanical background from which Harold Murray emerged. Respect for, indeed a passion for, meticulous scholarship was ingrained in him from an early age. Like all his siblings at one time or another, he did some work on the *O.E.D.*, but perhaps less than some of the others because he was older and advanced in his career at the time when the most intensive work was being done at the Murray "scriptorium" in Oxford. No doubt, however, his family connection did him no harm when he was looking for a publisher for his "magnum opus."

Clearly there was no need to think twice about which house to approach, and for the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, the name Murray by that time spelled quality. The actual writing of the book seems to have begun around 1906 but only on 13 September 1910 was he ready to write a formal letter to the Secretary of the University Press, Oxford, offering his book for publication. I have seen this letter in the archives of the Press, thanks to the assistance of the archivist, Dr Maw.

Harold Murray envisaged his history as two volumes, each complete in itself. He told the Secretary that the first (dealing with the origin of chess and its development in Asia and Russia) was ready in typescript for them to inspect

at his father's house in Oxford should they wish to do so. The second volume, dealing with chess in Europe, was approaching completion. He estimated an overall length of 450-500 pages but the final result was a one-volume work about twice that size. Still it took about two years for the book to go through the Press, organising illustrations, proof-reading and so on.

Murray's Books

Murray's reputation essentially rests on this work, which almost a century later has not been supplanted or seriously challenged. For example, Richard Eales of the University of Kent (and a noted Cambridge player of the Keene/Hartston generation) wrote in his 1985 Batsford book *Chess: The History of a Game* that:

The very excellence of his work has had a dampening effect on the subject, for whenever historians or critics come across a mention of chess in their researches they almost invariably put in a reference to Murray's History and pursue the matter no further.

By today's standards, it's surprising that the scholarly apparatus in Murray's 900-page tome is so flimsy. Index and footnotes are skimpy in the extreme and a bibliography is non-existent. Moreover, from reading the Murray papers, it's evident that even less assistance for the reader was offered in the original draft, but John G. White gave him some good advice about that. The early work on his father's dictionary, where everything possible had to be abbreviated to minimise the number of lines taken by a head-word while maximising the content, must have imposed a discipline on Harold Murray that he found it hard to shake off.

Really it's only in the 20 years since the publication of Eales's book that interest in the chess history has re-awoken, especially from the new cultural history and sports history viewpoints. My main reason for going through the Murray papers is looking for references to correspondence chess (there are very few indeed) and to chess or pre-chess games in Ireland. Incidentally I have looked at a large amount of other stuff that happens to be there and later in this article I will give some indication of what may be found

Almost 40 years and two world wars after the big book, a very long gestation, Murray's history of board games other than chess appeared. It cannot really be said that Murray wrote with style in his books, though his meaning is always clear, and the reader has to put in some work. It must also be remembered that by the time this work was complete, he was over eighty years old and his wife had died. Some of its detail may have been challenged, but it attempts a typology of games and description of their history so at least has provided later researchers with a starting point. The book includes not just the games familiar in Western Europe but also the mancala family of games, principally from Africa, about which Murray had probably learned

something from his son. For a more recent, and readable, book on the subject I would direct you to David Parlett's *Oxford History of Board Games* (1999), although its raciness sometimes spills over into undignified flippancy.

The posthumous *Short History of Chess* is more of a puzzle. Whether it did much for Murray's reputation must be doubted. Its original manuscript or typescript is unavailable so I cannot confirm yet whether the date of composition (1917) given in the publisher's note is certain, probable or unreliable. Nor, in the absence of any correspondence from the author relating to it, is it clear for whom exactly this work was composed. It is not an abridgement of the big book but a re-presentation of the general line of argument with some details different, and apparently with the intention of making the end-result more readable for the general chess player. It looks in some places as if Murray had changed his mind, or (more likely) deliberately chose to leave things out, but if the real date of composition (at least of some chapters) was actually earlier that would alter the view.

Murray's typescript or manuscript ended with the year 1866 compared with 1851 for the big book. The chapter dealing with 1850-66 is only six pages long, however. Nor do I believe that the chapters written by Murray in this book are particularly authoritative, but to be frank he was not very interested in writing about the chess of the nineteenth century in either book, which is the period I find fascinating and where I am doing my primary source research (from the 1820s). After the time of Philidor I don't consider Murray to be a reliable authority.

The last two chapters of the book are worse. From some correspondence I have been allowed to see in the Oxford University Press archive, the original idea, after Murray's death, was that Basil?? Goulding Brown (a some-time contributor to *British Chess Magazine*) would write a final chapter to bring the story up to date, but the editors at the Press were unhappy with what he produced. It was decided that Brown's chapter would do up to about 1930 only and Harry Golombek was commissioned to write a second extra chapter, although Brown was unhappy about this, judging from letters in the file from the Press to Kathleen Murray. (At the same time Golombek was working on his own chess history for another publisher, but this was a popular work based on secondary sources.)

Ultimately, after the project had hung fire for some years, the Press gave Golombek a deadline of late 1962 to finish his work and this must have spurred him into action since the book appeared in 1963. There must have been a compromise with Goulding Brown, too, because in the printed book his chapter goes up to 1945 and overlaps with Golombek, who starts with Alekhine and the decline of the hypermoderns. In the O.U.P. file there is even a mention that a new edition was being considered as late as 1976 but, so far as I am aware, it was never proceeded with – just as well because it would have been even less a genuine Murray work than the first edition.

Catalogue of Murray's MSS

Just finding out what Murray papers are held by the Bodleian takes a little know-how. The starting-point is the *Summary catalogue of post-medieval western manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford : Acquisitions 1916-1975* (SC 37300-55936) edited by Mary Clapinson and T.D. Rogers. Many big libraries should hold a copy of this and from it you can see a summary list of the Murray collection with call numbers.

If you have read Bob Meadley's "[Letter to Bert](#)," which I mentioned in [October](#), you will see some examples of the detail, i.e. lists of correspondents. This information comes directly from a more detailed catalogue held only in the Bodleian itself, which I managed eventually to discover. It has a number "R. Ref 722" and is kept in the wonderfully restored Duke Humfrey Library in the Old Bodleian. I managed to obtain a photocopy, but it is still not a complete description of contents and does not indicate when several catalogue numbers are actually together in one box. While some items are bound, others are just loose folios numbered by an archivist and put into large envelopes.

The [linked table](#) may be of use to any serious researcher who needs to look at the Murray papers, although it should be used in conjunction with the full catalogue. I have seen very few of the manuscript boxes up to number 64 as the catalogue shows they mostly contain material relating to ancient and mediaeval chess. After that I have looked at most boxes (some in great detail) except ones relating to problems, the knight's tour and draughts, of which I have only made a cursory examination of some samples.

Apart from the letters and draft articles, Harold Murray also collected scrapbooks of chess columns in the form of cuttings and galley proofs (many of them still loose). These were taken especially from W. S. Branch's column in Cheltenham and John Keeble's in Norwich. For some unknown reason, these items were catalogued along with Murray's book collection rather than the manuscripts but should not be called up by anyone inexperienced in handling delicate material.

These and the book collection are listed in a manuscript catalogue, called "Printed book handlist 265." These items should all be in the Bodleian's online catalogue, which can be viewed by anyone, but it is convenient when actually doing research to have the little booklet in hand. In a future article I may discuss some of the books to be found here but up to now I have concentrated chiefly on the correspondence because it can be found nowhere else.

Murray's Correspondence

Reading Murray's correspondence can be very boring for stretches and then

you find something of interest, but there is one very frustrating point. He almost never kept copies of his own letters so, with very rare exceptions, the boxes contain only the letters he received. Of course this is not unusual but one would love to know what he said. After he became well-known in the chess world (and especially after the *History of Chess*, appeared), it seems he was often consulted and asked questions. Then the next letter will be thanking him for his advice or corrections, but what exactly the advice or information was can only be guessed at.

For example, at the end of MS H. J. Murray 159, on folios 291-3, there is a letter to Murray from W.R. Thomas, dated 4 October 1927 trying to reconstruct the life of Captain Evans (Evans of the Gambit). He gives some local knowledge from Pembrokeshire and an outline of what he thinks the Captain's career was. Then comes a follow-up letter on 26 October where Thomas says: "In the light of your letter my thinly spun scheme of E's life goes phut, and I will now try to reconstruct it."

Thomas had found some good sources but apparently overlooked volume 4 of the *Chess Players' Chronicle* and Murray has pointed this out. Thomas finds this and in a third letter on 28 Oct 1927 to Murray it is clear that Thomas has now found the Irish connection in Evans's career.

The resulting article by Thomas duly appeared in *British Chess Magazine* for January 1928, pages 6-18. There is noteworthy gap in his account, between January 1840 when Evans retired from the postal service on a pension because of ill-health and late 1842 when he returns to London. Martyn Griffiths recently sent me the chapter on Evans from his typescript history of chess in Wales, but he too has nothing on this missing period in the Captain's life.

However, I have discovered that for at least part of this period he was in the Mediterranean. George Walker's column in *Bell's Life in London* for 6 March 1842 includes a mention of Evans proving much too strong for the local players when paying a surprise visit to the chess club on the island of Corfu. A correspondent informed Walker that Evans was commanding an Iberian steamer plying between Malta and the Greek isles. Evidently Murray did not know about this or he would have informed Thomas.

The most fascinating part of the Murray correspondence, in my opinion, are the letters from John Griswold White in Cleveland, Ohio, who was his greatest helper in providing copies and transcripts of manuscripts, suggesting references and ideas and generally providing a peer-review of the great work. Murray's replies to White are probably in the Cleveland library, and a great enterprise for somebody in the future would be to produce an edited edition with both sides of the correspondence.

Nearly all White's letters to Murray are typed, and one remarkable thing to a twenty-first century eye is the formality of the address. Even when they have been exchanging letters for years, sometimes several times in a month, White still begins his letters "Dear Sir." The sign-off perhaps gets warmer. The first letter from White is dated 13 Nov 1900 and is signed "Yours respt'y" but by 1906 this has become "Yours truly."

Folder 2 in Box 1 starts with a typed document (undated but probably early 1907) headed *NOTES ON A HISTORY OF CHESS*. This goes up to Chapter 9 of Murray's draft and contains very stern but friendly criticism on lots of levels. After making some grammatical points, regarding use of prepositions, White says that Murray assumes too much knowledge on the part of his readers. Such as German and French notations, abbreviations for certain learned publications, knowledge of book titles (by van der Linde etc.), so advises him to give proper citations first time.

White warns him against doing what van der Linde did, being too polemical in language: "Forbes was often wrong, stated things as facts which were the result of reasoning; but I don't think there is reason to charge him with bad faith. V.d. Linde sinned quite as much."

On 1 Oct. 1907 after a big trial, White says he is taking a month off to sleep under the stars and hunt in the Rockies, so when he gets back he will be good for another year of work. (Twenty-one years later he died on such a trip; maybe it's the way he wanted to go.)

Although I found no other big document of notes like the first one, evidently Murray continued to send batches of draft chapters for quite some time. On 27 Jan 1908, White thanks Murray for more chapters of History:

I have read through these last hastily with much interest and with admiration of your ability to extract information from the most unpromising sources. You certainly give for the first time an adequate account of Oriental chess.

On 6 October 1908 he informs Murray he has mounted and bound letters he got from Van der Linde and Von der Lasa on chess subjects; these must be in the Cleveland Public Library.

The correspondence between the two men continued for years, often discussing minute details to do with manuscripts they had both seen, or attacking Köhltz's rival theory about the earliest chess or "ur-chess." Without a more detailed comparison of the correspondence (on both sides) together with the published text it would be hard to be certain, but my impression is that White influenced Murray in some directions.

Murray's own "voice" can be heard in some of the typed articles and drafts in the boxes. Especially in MS HJ Murray 75 which includes a summing-up by Murray of his debate with Köhltz as well as translations of numerous articles on the topic including Murray's own last word in *Wochenschach* xxx,37 1. Unfortunately I cannot give lengthy quotations without explicit permission because Murray's works are still in copyright but I will quote one passage to show what I mean. Dated Birmingham 1915, Murray writes in the preface to his document:

In opposition to all other students of the history of chess, he [Köhltz] maintains that the older chess, as it was played by Islam from A.D. 650 to 1580, and by mediaeval Europe from A.D. 1000 to 500, was a pure game of baring or taking prisoners, like our modern game of draughts. He regards the checkmate as a later added embellishment...

Already back on 20 December 1909. White had written to Murray (in connection with K's article in the *Handbuch*) that he believed the German's theory:

...in important respects, to be almost grotesquely wrong. He says first, 'ur-chess had only one ending, bare king.' This I believe to be utterly wrong, as it is at war with the whole theory of the game. The theory of the game, from the time we can trace its beginning, has been of an attack on the hostile king, not upon his men. The attack on the men is simply a means of obtaining the end of overcoming the king.

Murray writes in his 1915 preface that "Köhltz believed in reflection not research" and Köhltz's leaping rook theory was mentioned. I noted that Ricardo Calvo was trying to revive this lately (in *Homo Ludens IV*, published in Salzburg a few years ago), but unfortunately I don't have an English translation of that article, only Calvo's short abstract. I don't claim to be an expert on these early chess issues but I doubt if anyone who read all the Bodleian papers on Köhltz's theories, and the detailed refutations of Murray and White could possibly defend the German's position unless really incontrovertible evidence has emerged in the meantime.

After the controversy with Köhltz, a Dr. Seyferth sent Murray his theories too. Early in that correspondence, Murray was reluctant to get involved, but got dragged in against his better judgement. From a summary of this debate (in MJS H. J. Murray 76) I extract the following:

I... accordingly expressed my willingness to examine his theory, adding a hope that Dr Seyferth and his friend Dreike would weigh carefully any opposing evidence that I might bring to their notice with an open mind... not realising the lengths to which he was prepared to go in adopting unnatural and strained explanations of facts which on

their natural interpretation told against their reconstruction of the early history of chess.

Nor was it only Germans who gave Murray these kinds of problems. In case of the game of checkers (draughts), he also found that J. Alexander was most unwilling to accept arguments and evidence contrary to his own preconceived opinions. In the box MS H. J. Murray 162, I found that rarity, a typed copy of a letter written by Harold Murray himself, in this case to the Cheltenham columnist W. S. Branch, who had written on checkers in America. It is dated 18 Sept. 1919.

I have read your letters with much interest. What I should really like is a long talk. Writing is such a slow business.

Then Murray criticises “Dameh” (Alexander) who “reproduces v.d.Linde’s exploded belief that **dame** meant any chessman in 1300. It rests upon a misreading of a MS. Where aiue is plainly written and the I is dotted. VdL didn’t know the word and made a shot at it, and so invented the word dame= a game piece, and built his whole theory of the origin of draughts on this rotten foundation. It is absolutely untrue to say that dame meant a chessman in general, it meant the chess Queen and nothing else. The draughtsman was called same because so far as move went it was a chess queen. And the ordinary draughtsman was called dame first, and crowned man later, Yours truly, HJR Murray.”

Postscripts

At some time in the future I hope to say more about chess libraries, following revisits to the Bodleian and to the chess collection in the Royal Dutch Library (in The Hague). However, for the latter I may have to wait until next year, as a big reorganisation of that building is currently in progress. It had just started when I made my first visit there last September. The chess collection is still accessible (though little is on open shelves) but you should check before planning a visit to The Hague, e.g. a few weeks ago the microfilm room was temporarily closed. Moreover I hope one day to get to the John G. White Collection in Cleveland, Ohio, which is America’s greatest chess research resource, but I don’t know yet when a visit will be possible.

Next month’s column will deal with the Italian Game and Evans Gambit. This will be the promised a continuation of the mini-series begun in [November](#) and [December](#) last year, in which I re-examined the Two Knights Defence. I had originally intended to do this for February but have had insufficient time in recent weeks because of my Oxford trip and the start of a new correspondence tournament. Readers are welcome to send in games or queries, which should reach me not later than 24 February.

Finally, I have ceased publication of my *Chess Mail* magazine after 82 issues

and over nine years, with the intention of pushing on as far as possible this year with my researches into the history of correspondence chess in its social and cultural context. I also hope to get some chapter drafts written, but don't expect anything to appear in print until 2008 at earliest, as a university thesis must take precedence over a commercial book. I want to thank all those who have encouraged me in this task and I hope my health and energy, not to mention finances, last long enough to complete the task.

Meanwhile the [Chess Mail site](#) will continue at least until May, and longer if readers continue to support it by buying a few things from us. So please pay the site a visit from time to time. I hope to have some new content up by early March and also a review of some of the best articles that appeared in the magazine over the years.

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Catalogue of Murray's MSS

MSS no	Description
1-48	Miscellaneous transcripts from old manuscripts held in other libraries or owned by collectors.
49	References to chess in literary works
50-3	Miscellaneous transcripts
54-8	Problem collections I don't need
59	Games of Cochrane, William Lewis notes
60-1	Games by Adolf Anderssen
62-3	'Chess miscellanies'
64-7	Miscellaneous early games (mostly English; some Evans Gambit in #67)
68	Small collection of games (apparently noted by Attwood at Parsloes, late 18 th cent.)
69-71	Games by Harold Murray
72-4	Murray collected papers and maxims
75	<i>Primitive chess and a history of the baring victory</i> : various articles on the debate with Köhltz.
76	Material relating to Seyferth's theories about primitive chess
77	Problem notes and queries
78	References to chess and games in Irish and Welsh literature
79-80	Collections of refs to chess in literature of various countries
81	Definitions of board games terms
82	Miscellaneous papers and notes
83-4	History of problems & articles by HM
85-7	Miscellaneous articles translations (but #86 is in German; #87-91 come in one box)
88	The Louis Rou MS mystery (in two parts)
89-91	Cuttings, transcripts & translations (#89 relates to problems, #91 to Asiatic chess)
92	Transcribed article (by Amelung, re chess in the Baltics)
93	Transcribed articles, re educational value of chess

94	Index to chess items in <i>Notes and Queries</i> up to 1923, compiled by John Keeble
95	Transcript of article in German by Köhltz on the European problem in the middle ages
96	Transcribed article from 1898 re chess in Asia
97	Typescript of Köhltz correspondence.
98	Collections for bibliography: typescript list. Earlier date than items in #99.
99	Ditto: card index of periodicals with columns (3 boxes)
100	Ditto: miscellaneous lists and articles
101-126	Knights tour stuff
127-129	Miscellaneous items, not seen
130-134	Miscellaneous checkers, not seen
135	Unpublished Murray article on checkers: <i>The Riddle of the Ancestry of Western Draughts</i> ; #138 has a later version.
136-141	More on checkers
142-152	Miscellaneous on other board games; #149 is mostly about merels, alquerque, oriental games.
153-7	Misc. notes & references for <i>History of Board Games</i>
158	Miscellaneous correspondence bound into a notebook, including letters from Sir James Murray.
159	Misc correspondence re chess: see 'Letter to Bert' for detailed breakdown. Includes Irish and Welsh material.
160	J. Alexander correspondence on checkers (typescript is in #140)
161	Correspondence, mostly from Bergholt and Buschke
162	Correspondence, mostly from Branch
163	Chicco and Hammond correspondence
164	Keeble correspondence
165	Köhltz originals (see #97)
166	Klahre and Williams correspondence
167/1	Correspondence J. G. White 1900-7
167/2	Correspondence J. G. White 1907-27
168	Miscellaneous correspondents, including Bassi



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