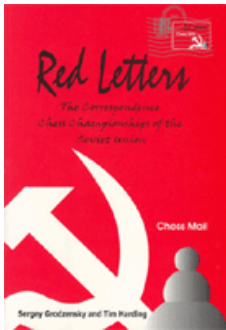




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Masters and patzers in the biographical dictionaries

All kinds of people have played chess down the centuries, but not every player whose name survives to posterity is famous for his or her chess prowess. Also many people who may, at least by the standard of their day, have been excellent players are possibly no longer remembered - the 'mute inglorious' Karpovs, one might say, because very few game scores were preserved until the late eighteenth century. Voltaire and Rousseau avidly played chess at one time but weakly according to Harold Murray; no authentic games by them survive, so far as I am aware. The experts (or middling strength opponents) who beat them are forgotten.

In Francis Douce's interleaved copy of Richard Twiss's *Chess*, in the Bodleian Library, facing page six where Twiss mentions Voltaire, Douce adds "Mr Wilbraham told me that he had played at chess with Voltaire and beat him." Voltaire then said "I must go to Paris to learn chess". (Who was this Wilbraham?)

And just below, regarding Rousseau, Douce quotes a French book, *Le Voyageur a Paris* saying that "Rousseau's playing chess in this coffee-house attracted so many people that the Lieutenant de Police was obliged to place a sentinel at the door". Some men and women who were distinguished in their primary fields of activity may have been humble patzers at the chessboard, just like Rousseau, but enjoyed the game nonetheless, and spectators enjoyed watching them lose.

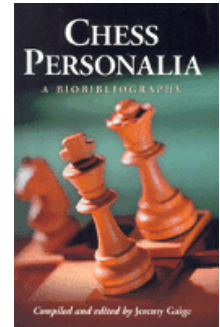
At least we have some hope of finding out about the British amateurs who enjoyed a game of chess, thanks to the magnificent multi-volume *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, which runs to sixty-one printed volumes of scholarly but entertaining essays, including the supplementary volume covering people who died in 2001-4. The criterion for inclusion means that while entries are nearly all on British people, there are also many Irish persons and also some foreigners who had a strong British connection in their lives or were important in British history for some reason. A recent entry is the Russian dissident Aleksandr Litvinenko who was sensationally murdered by radioactive poisoning.

The *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, published by Cambridge University Press in association with the Royal Irish Academy at the end of 2009, is a work of comparable scholarship containing far more entries than any previous Irish biographical dictionary. As with *O.D.N.B.*, there is a fully searchable online edition available to subscribing libraries and academic institutions. For this article, I have been searching through the online versions of both dictionaries in search of chess-players, and spotting that in some entries the subject's interest in chess goes unmentioned.

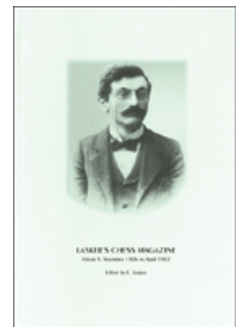
In most cases, but with a few interesting exceptions, the references to chess in both dictionaries are merely among lists of the subjects' interests or recreations, but occasionally more is said. A small number of the subjects have been selected chiefly, if not exclusively, for their chess prowess. One of the qualifications for being included in these books, of course, is death and it takes time for editors to decide on inclusion and commission articles, so there are some obvious cases for inclusion who will be added later to the electronic editions, and perhaps ultimately in printed supplementary volumes. For example, Tony Miles is now in the online *Oxford D.N.B.* although he was not originally in the printed version, but Bob Wade died too recently.

A limited amount of information and sample biographies can be found online

Purchases from our [shop](#) help
keep ChessCafe.com freely
accessible:



[Chess Personalia](#)
by Jeremy Gaige



[Lasker's Chess Magazine](#)
by Emanuel Lasker



[First Anglo-Pacific
Invitational](#)
by Erik Osborn

free and there is a good deal to read on these sites where free information changes daily. For those interested, here are the links:

- [O.D.N.B.](#)
- [DIB](#)

I should be interested to hear from readers if other countries have similar works (especially in English) where biographies include information on chess players.

Oxford D. N. B.

There are too many references to chess in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* to mention them all. It is the totally revamped twenty-first edition of the old *Dictionary of National Biography* which was first edited by Virginia Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen. There are currently 57,258 biographies online after entries for people who died in 2006 were added in January.



Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

One policy decision that was taken when designing the new dictionary was that every person who was previously included would be retained, although the entries were rewritten and in some cases shortened. Another important decision was to increase the percentage of females and to include people from a wider range of activities. The dictionary cut-off point was originally death by the year 2000, but there are two updates to the online edition annually, one of which includes people who have died more recently and the other people who are being added to strengthen the coverage in thematic areas, and also to correct errors or add material to existing articles.

When the print edition first came out in late 2004, and the online edition became simultaneously available, I found 240 hits in separate articles when searching for "chess". By the end of 2007 there were 249, of whom seventeen were women, and at the end of 2009 there were 252, three more articles mentioning chess having been added in the meantime and now there are 253. A recent addition is a son of Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander: Sir Michael O'Donel Bjarne Alexander (who died in 2002). Some more are planned for 2012, when because it is Olympic year in Britain, they propose to add many more sportsmen and women.



Isidor Gunsberg

I have made several suggestions to the editors and they have commissioned me to prepare the articles on Isidor Gunsberg and Mary Rudge, both of whom

I have mentioned in the Kibitzer series in the past. I shall be doing more research and completing the articles several months from now, so in the meantime there is a chance for readers with special knowledge to contribute. (Substantial and well-documented help will be acknowledged.) I am particularly looking for information about Gunsberg's family and early years before he came to England, and about Mary Rudge's last years after she gave up competitive chess round about 1900.

Among people living before the nineteenth century, there are only occasional mentions of chess. The article on the printer William Caxton is of course one of them. The Elizabethan Arthur Saul (who died some time between 1614 and 1618) is described as "writer on chess and supposed spy", and "a figure about whom much remains obscure." Kings Charles I and George III were said to be fond of chess.

The article on the politician Charles Spencer, third Earl of Sunderland, does not mention his interest in chess. He was apparently the equal of skill in the early 1700s with the Alexander Cunningham after whom the King's Gambit variation 1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 Nf3 Be7 is named. The question of which of two contemporary Scotsmen of the same name this was may now have been settled. Harold Murray in his *A History of Chess*, concluded, contrary to normally accepted opinion, that it was Cunningham the historian (1654-1737), chiefly because he could not place the other man in The Hague at the right time. The *Oxford Dictionary*, probably with good cause, adheres to the traditional view that it was the critic Alexander Cunningham of Block (died 1730) to whom the Cunningham Gambit should be attributed.

I found some other names of eighteenth century London chess-players in Murray and checked them to see if they were included in *O.D.N.B.* and if so was their chess mentioned. Philidor, although French, is included because of the many years he spent in England, but Phillip Stamma of Aleppo, who wrote the first English chess book to employ algebraic notation, is only mentioned in the article on Philidor.



Francis Earl of Godolphin

Apart from Sunderland and Cunningham, and the chess authors Captain Bertin and Stamma, Murray lists several people on page 846 who frequented Slaughter's Coffee House, which was the London HQ of chess from about 1700-1770. Among those who played there at one time or another were Francis Earl of Godolphin (1678-1766), Alexander Lord Elibank (1677-1736), Sir Abraham Janssen (died 1765), Dr Black (a Chiswick schoolmaster mentioned by Twiss), a Dr Cowper, Mr Cargill and Mr Salvador.

Of these, Godolphin is in *O.D.N.B.* but his playing chess is not mentioned, although that of one of his ancestors is. Nevertheless, that entry could be useful to chess historians because archives and sources are cited, among which the diligent researcher might, if fortunate, find some mentions of eighteenth century chess. The others are not included - except that Salvador could well be Joseph Salvador (1716-86), a merchant and leader of the Sephardic Jewish community in London. It could be worth pursuing research on him.

Also mentioned by Murray was Abraham de Moivre (a Huguenot born in France in 1667) as "the mathematician who lived for nearly thirty years on the petty sums he made at Slaughters by chess." Murray states he died in 1750 but *O.D.N.B.* indicates that the Westminster parish register shows his burial was in 1754.

Nothing is said about chess in the article, so is the anecdote true? If it is, that would probably make De Moivre the earliest recorded coffee-house chess hustler and one of the earliest professionals at the game. This story also appears in the Wikipedia article about him, but that proves nothing; they probably got it from Murray. Murray cites Fiske as his source, but is notorious that he believed in the lost manuscript of the Rev. Louis Rou, where the story was supposed to be found, whereas others suspect the "Rou manuscript" to have been an elaborate hoax by Fiske. Therefore the story about De Moivre as chess hustler cannot be accepted unless independent proof turns up.

Murray himself does not have a personal entry in the *O.D.N.B.* but his father and daughter Elisabeth do. He, of course, was Sir James Murray who edited the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Moving to people who lived in the nineteenth century, there are far more mentions of chess in the *Oxford D.N.B.* Thanks to their policy of including more women than in the older *D.N.B.*, we can find Camilla Dufour, a singer and writer who died in 1846. She was also the second wife of Sarratt, "the professor of chess", and because of the article on her, there is new information about him also.



Charles Babbage

Among those people included for other reasons, but whose interest in chess is mentioned, is the great-grandfather of computing, Charles Babbage. He, it is said in the *O.D.N.B.*, "was a spirited undergraduate and relished the company of his friends. He played chess, participated in all-night sixpenny whist sessions, and missed lectures and chapel to go sailing."

A quick trawl through the alphabet will show some examples of famous people whose interest in chess may not be well known. There are the critic Matthew Arnold, Walter Bagehot (who wrote on British constitutional matters), Aleister Crowley the occultist, Isaac Deutscher (biographer of Trotsky), Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) and Peter Mark Roget (original author of the *Thesaurus*), although there is more on his chess interest in the original *D.N.B.*

Also included is Walter William Rouse Ball (1850-1925), educationist and historian, who represented Cambridge in early chess matches against Oxford. Thanks in part to him, there is good information about chess players in the reference works he co-edited about graduates of Cambridge University, and in particular Trinity College.

Among the players who attained or came close to master strength at chess in Victorian times and are included in the book for that reason are Henry Bird, Joseph Blackburne, the historian Henry Thomas Buckle, Bernard Horwitz, William Lewis, J. J. Loewenthal, George Walker, Zukertort, and of course Howard Staunton. Augustus Mongredien is included principally because he

was an economist. Amos Burn was added since the print edition came out. From the twentieth century, there are now Harry Golombek and Sir Philip Stuart Milner-Barry as well as Vera Menchik, F. D. Yates, and Sir George Thomas.

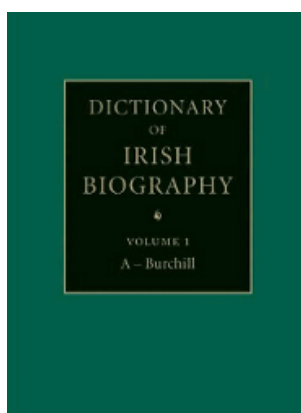
Among the women whose interest in chess is mentioned was Ursula Mellor Bright (1835-1915), campaigner for women's rights, praised for her "keen brain and fine judgment" which explains why she "was an excellent chess player". Also included is Margaret Alethea Gyles (1868-1949), chess-playing artist and poet. Dame Sarah Elizabeth Siddons Mair (1846-1941), from Edinburgh, was a promoter of women's education and campaigner for women's rights. *O.D.N.B.* says "she set out to demonstrate women's equality in her two chief leisure interests, archery and chess." She was one of the co-founders and a mainstay of the Edinburgh Ladies Chess Club, which seems to have closed in the 1950s.

Many people who were significant in the later twentieth century and also played chess are not yet in because they are still alive or died too recently. Nevertheless, there are some. Celebrities of more recent date whose chess-playing is mentioned include Alan Turing, the father of computing; Henry Longhurst, the golf journalist; film director Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999), who lived in England in his later years, and the novelist Sir William Golding.

Chess sometimes features by analogy. I learned that Erith Gwynne Nicholls (1874-1939), rugby player and businessman, wrote in his 1908 book *The Modern Rugby Game* that: "In an ideal Welsh game, you really see fifteen great chess masters working in partnership and without consultation, each man knowing instinctively not only the best thing to be done, but that all the other fellows know it also."

The Irish Dictionary

A search for "chess" in the full text of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* produced twenty-nine hits, of whom only Alexander MacDonnell (the one who played Labourdonnais) and Cork-born C. H. O'D. Alexander, and one nineteenth century problem composer are included principally for their chess achievements. Alexander is of course also important for his intelligence work at Bletchley and after the war at GCHQ. MacDonnell and he also have articles in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.



Dictionary of Irish Biography

The names of few of the subjects of other articles will probably be familiar to readers. The other twenty-seven articles mentioning chess are the ones about the playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-89), naval officer and marine painter Richard Brydges Beechey (1808-95), Patrick Martin Austin Bourke (1913-95), John Francis Byrne (1880-1960), Joseph Graham Campbell (1803-91), Roderic James Connolly (1901-80), Ephraim MacDowel Cosgrave (1853-1925), Maurice Edward Dockrell (1850-1929), Étain (a female figure from mythology), Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1763-98), Thomas Jackson (1807-90), Michael Littleton (1938-2002), Barbara Montgomery McDonnell (1847?-1928), Ciarán Ó Nualláin (1910-82), Eoghan Ó Tuarisc (1919-82), Roderick O'Connor (1883-1922), Roderick O'Hanlon (1923-2002), Brian O'Nolan (better known as the writer Flann O'Brien, 1911-66), Laurence Orr (1918-90),

James Cecil Parke (1881-1946), John Howard Parnell (1843-1923), Edward Plunkett (Lord Dunsany, 1912-98), Niall Sheridan (1912-98), Czech-born Petr Skrabánek (1940-94), William Edward Thrift (1870-1942), John Vard (1926-98), and Thomas Woods (1921-61).

In two of these cases, Beechey and Dockrell, the person named is the principal person in the article because the chess reference actually relates to a relative discussed within it. Beechey did enjoy playing chess but the reference is there because of his daughter, Mrs Frideswide Rowland. Frank Hegarty (professor of chemistry at University College Dublin), who wrote the article (and cited my paper on Mrs Rowland) actually owns the Dublin house which was Beechey's home for several years. Barbara McDonnell only turns up in the search because she was "probably a relative" of Alexander MacDonnell. Thomas Jackson, architect, only turns up because of "chess-rook like turrets" on a building he designed.

There are some people included in the Irish dictionary for whom chess was certainly a significant recreation, but where the game is not mentioned in the articles, probably because the writer of the article was not interested in the game. These include Arthur Aston Luce (1882-1977) who wrote the centenary history of Dublin Chess Club, of which he was president; William Henry Stanley Monck (1839-1915), one of Ireland's leading correspondence players for about forty years; Mountifort Longfield (1802-84) who was secretary of one of Dublin's chess clubs in mid-century when Mackenzie and G. A. MacDonnell were members; and George Salmon (1891-1904), whose opponents included Harrwitz, St. Amant, Morphy, and Steinitz.

Chess was much more important in the lives of all of them (except perhaps Longfield) than it was for several of the people for whom it is mentioned. Parke, for example, "played chess for the Clones team at the age of nine"; hardly a major achievement. By contrast, the omission of chess is particularly disappointing in the case of Salmon whose *Oxford D.N.B.* article at least does say he "was a competent musician and an excellent chess player, and found time to pursue his love of music and chess throughout..."

Eoghan Ó Tuarisc is mentioned because he wrote a detective novel, which I have not read, entitled *Murder in Three Moves* and based on a chess problem. In general, where people are in both editions, the *Oxford D.N.B.* tends to give more information about hobbies and leisure pursuits than the Irish dictionary, perhaps for space reasons, has done. For example, the Irish version tells us that John Ball (1818-1889), the Dublin-born scientist and politician, "enjoyed the pleasures of society". *O.D.N.B.* is more specific: "the charming Irishman became extremely popular as a chess player, at the piano, and as a vocalist".

The chess connection between James Joyce's university friend John Francis Byrne and J. H. Parnell is not mentioned. Byrne is described as "a prize-winning champion at chess" - can somebody tell me what he won? The article on John Howard Parnell (elder brother of Charles Stuart Parnell) observes that "he was not a good parliamentarian, and never spoke in the chamber. It seems he was more interested in playing chess with other MPs." The article also points out correctly that he appears seven times in *Ulysses*, set in 1904. In two of those he is playing chess, and in the 'Wandering Rocks' episode you can read: "John Howard Parnell translated a white bishop quietly and his grey claw went up again to his forehead whereat it rested".

According to Byrne's memoirs, *Silent Years*, he played chess with Parnell in the Dublin Bakery Company café in Sackville Street for several days before somebody introduced him to his opponent! Life was much more formal in those days. Sackville Street is now O'Connell Street but the D.B.C. building, along with all the chess equipment of the Sackville Chess Club, was destroyed in a fire in 1916 due to the fighting in the Easter Rising. Joyce used to wait impatiently for the games to finish so he could resume conversation with Byrne, who is portrayed in the novel as 'Cranly' - apparently because Archbishop Cranly, who had come to Dublin in 1398, was known as the 'white bishop'. (Harrie Grondijs first told me of this connection and it is confirmed in an article, 'Notes on Ulysses', by Ward Swinson in the Winter 1996 issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly*.)



Michael Littleton

I was particularly pleased to see Michael Littleton, who was twice Irish Chess Champion (as is mentioned). He represented the country internationally several times and I played him at least twice in tournaments in the late 1970s. He is chiefly included, however, for the excellent work he did as an innovative producer of radio features for the Irish national station, R.T.E.

Unfortunately the article on the rather interesting character Dr Ephraim MacDowel Cosgrave (1846-1925) is unsatisfactory. It says he was president of the Dublin Chess Club ("a" club yes, but not that one) and that "he was the first person in Ireland to play chess with living pieces". I think that is not proven; it might have been done in an earlier century even. Cosgrave, with Thomas Rowland, founded the Club of Living Chess which organised several performances of that type to raise funds for charities, including Alexandra College (a Dublin girls' school) and a school for the orphaned daughters of Freemasons. The article, by C. J. Woods, also fails to say that Cosgrave was a prominent mason nor does it mention his major involvement in a protestant charity, the Dublin Total Abstinence Society. It was at their temperance hotel and restaurant in Townsend Street that the City Chess Club was based and the society's magazine had a chess column sometimes.

Campbell was the most interesting discovery in a way as I had previously assumed from his name that he was Scottish. He is the only person apparently to be included in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* solely because of his chess achievements, which is somewhat curious when one thinks of others who might have been chosen: James Mason, O'Hanlon, or Wolfgang Heidenfeld perhaps. This entry is particularly useful to have because he is not in the *Oxford D.N.B.* but he is still rather a strange selection for inclusion.

Campbell lived most of his life in London but according to the *D.I.B.* he was born in either Belfast or Cookstown, in what is now Northern Ireland. (According to Jeremy Gaige's [Chess Personalia](#), it was Cookstown.) He is perhaps best remembered as the 1862 problemist who "won" the problem composing tourney organised by the British Chess Association in connection with the London 1862 Congress. The event took months to judge and was not well organised. When faults were discovered after the award was made, he was reduced to second place and then disqualified but according to *D.I.B.*, Campbell refused to return the prize money, leading to a major controversy in the chess world, from which he withdrew until the 1880s. Part of the difficulty was that entries were judged as a set of problems so that a flaw in just one of several affected the whole assessment of that composer's work. The *D.I.B.* article also says he was a strong over-the-board player, but nevertheless he was surely not as important as two men who are not included: George Frith Barry (who also captained Ireland at cricket) or J. A. Rynd who was the first Irish chess champion and the leading resident Irish player for decades in the later nineteenth century.

J. G. Campbell – Robert Bownas Wormald

London, match, 1859

Ruy Lopez/Philidor Defence [C62]

From *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, 2 July 1859

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 d6 4 d4 exd4 5 Qxd4

Reaching a Philidor Defence position by transposition (2...d6 3 d4 exd4 4 Qxd4 Nc6 5 Bb5 being the usual move order).

5...Bd7 6 Bxc6 Bxc6 7 Bg5 f6!?

Perhaps 7...Nf6 may be played at this juncture, wrote the columnist H. C. Mott.

8 Bh4 Ne7 9 Nc3 Ng6 10 Bg3 Be7 11 Qc4 Ne5 12 Nxe5 fxe5 13 0-0-0 Bg5+ 14 Kb1 Qe7 15 Nd5 Qf7 16 Rd3 Bxd5 17 exd5 0-0 18 Rf1 Qh5



19 Rb3

Mott pointed out that 19 Qxc7? would have been fatal, owing to 19...Qe2 20 Rfd1 Rac8.

19...Bf4 20 Rxb7 Bxg3 21 fxg3

Apparently his best move, said Mott, in view of 21 hxg3 Rxf2! or 21 Qxc7 Qg6 threatening ...Rac8.

21...Rxf1+ 22 Qxf1 Rf8 23 Qe1 Qxh2 24 a3 Qxg2 25 Qa5 Qf1+ 26 Ka2 Qc4 + 27 Rb3 Qxc2 28 Rc3 Qg2 29 Rxc7 Rb8



30 Rxc7+ Kxc7 31 Qxa7+ 1/2-1/2

I was particularly surprised by the entry on Vard, of whom I had never heard, probably because he did not play the game competitively as an adult. He was included for his business activities and his prowess as a sportsman (rugby player and amateur wrestler) and was for several years a member of the Irish Olympic Committee. Apparently he was a child prodigy at chess and was a child prodigy at chess, playing in the 1937 Irish Championship. The article, by Joseph McNabb and Jim Shanahan, says, somewhat bizarrely, that: "as a boy of twelve he achieved the feat, unsurpassed to date, of being the only Irishman to draw two consecutive matches with two Russian masters. These masters were Alexander Alekhine, then ranked in the top ten in the world, and the lesser known Kilkonoski."

Of course anyone with some knowledge of chess history knows that Alekhine was world champion at the time, having regained the title in 1937. So

evidently some small edits to that article would be in order, but one should not be too harsh on the writers for the inaccuracies here; several of the articles must have been written some years ago before the launch of *Irish Times* digital archive (which is relatively new) and the volumes had to go to press well in advance of publication date.

Secondly, the article clearly does not distinguish between serious matches and simultaneous displays. Thirdly, who was this "lesser known Kilkonoski"? Maybe the incorrect name was in an obituary consulted by the writers, but the claim about the two draws turns out to be essentially correct.

I guessed "Kilkonoski" must have been George Koltanowski, who anyway was Belgian, not Russian. Koltanowski played two displays in Dublin on 9 and 10 March 1937, the former against thirty opponents and the latter a blindfold simultaneous with ten opponents. Young Vard was indeed playing on the former occasion, although the *Irish Times* report of 10 March inaccurately gives his age as nine; he was actually ten, having been born on 29 May 1926 according to the *D.I.B.*

The paper said that Vard "though somewhat nervous at the start played cleverly as the night wore on, and put up an astonishingly good performance, being eventually given a courtesy draw after 40 moves. It was a very fine achievement for a boy of such tender age".

Research in the *Irish Times* and in the Dublin Chess Club minute books (to which the authors of the article would not have had access) show that it was on 14th and 15th September 1938 that Alekhine played two simultaneous displays in Dublin.

The annual report of Dublin Chess Club for the season, pasted into the minute book, says the club engaged Alekhine to give two simultaneous displays, which (like those the previous year) were both held in the Regent House building of Trinity College. The *Irish Times* of 15 September says that the previous day Alekhine played thirty-five opponents, losing only to Charles J. Barry, who had been a strong player since before the First World War. Skinner and Verhoeven's big book on Alekhine includes that game, as number 2,169; it was published in the *Observer*. The *Irish Times* confirms that Alekhine also drew three games: to P. J. Larney of Dublin Chess Club, R. T. Varian of Blackrock Chess Club, and Jackie Vard of the Dublin Chess Club. Lord Dunsany was among those who lost. One of the strongest Irish players, John J. O'Hanlon, was not playing. A photograph shows Mrs Alekhine knitting while Dunsany and two of the other players concentrate on their games. Vard is not in the picture. The club minute book congratulates him, but does not give the moves of the game.

The second simultaneous saw Alekhine win twenty-eight and draw seven, one of which was against Taylor Vard (Jackie Vard's father) who had lost the previous day. The players who lost to Alekhine were not named.

Postscript

London readers may be interested to know that I shall be speaking at the Sport and Leisure History seminar in the Institute of Historical Research, Malet Street (in the London University Senate House) on Monday 1 March at 5.15pm. The lecture will last about fifty minutes followed by about half an hour for questions and discussion.

My lecture is entitled: "Home Accomplishment or Public Competition: The Dilemma of the Victorian Chess Queens". It is free and open to anyone with a serious interest in chess history or women's history. The talk will be illustrated with some pictures but I won't be demonstrating any chess games. Come in good time if you do so, because you will have to negotiate the institute's security desk and the Ecclesiastical History Room, where the seminar is held, is quite small.

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