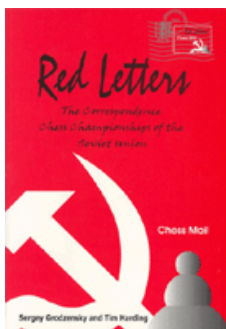




## COLUMNISTS

*The Kibitzer*

Tim Harding

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## The Myth of Celtic Chess

[Last month](#), in my Olympiad report, I had some positive things to say about present-day Irish chess. I cannot agree, however, with the author of an Internet article and subsequent booklet that was recently published privately with the title *The Irish Invented Chess*. Oh no, they didn't!

Just after Christmas 2009, [ChessCafe.com](#) noted that an article with this title was posted anonymously on a website called [Infowars Ireland](#). This was a summary of a [full version](#), bylined Brian Nugent, with many reader comments added subsequently. Nugent's privately published booklet has largely the same text as this version, but with some sections rewritten.

The theory he puts forward actually has a long tradition and is by no means original.

On 16 July 1887, one of the founders of the Gaelic Athletic Association, Michael Cusack, wrote an editorial in his short-lived newspaper *The Celtic Times*, urging his readers to take up chess. He saw it as a national pastime with a pedigree as ancient as that of the stick-and-ball sport of hurling which early texts also mention:

"We cannot hurl very well when night sets in, but we can then cultivate our minds, and we know no game of skill better calculated to do this than the peaceable warlike game of chess ... It ought to be played because it was Irish and National, and especially because it was the principal instrument of intellectual culture among the most glorious people that ever lived in Ireland – The Fenians of Ancient Erin."

When I began to research chess history at university six years ago, several people reacted to hearing about my topic by telling me that chess had been played in the Gaelic-speaking world of pre-Norman Ireland. Given that the Asiatic origin of chess has been established with near certainty by several scholars, and that there is evidence of chess being played in Europe only at the very end of the tenth century AD, I found such assertions puzzling.

The name I have given, for convenience, to the theory propagated by Nugent and others is "The Myth of Celtic Chess". Central to this myth is the belief that various references in early Celtic-language manuscripts to board-games – especially to one called *fidchell* in Irish (modern spelling "ficheall", pronounced roughly "fee-hill), *gwyddbwyll* in Welsh, and *gwezbouell* in Breton – constitute evidence that a game identifiable with chess was played in those parts of the world in the earliest centuries AD, and perhaps at an even earlier date.

Scholars agree that these early textual references imply that at least two different board-games were played, but it is denied that any of these are identifiable with chess, or for that matter with other games known first in the Middle Ages, such as draughts or backgammon. Those are also games for which there is no genuine evidence in pre-Norman Ireland, but that has not stopped writers from using those names in translations.

Standish O'Grady (1846-1928) was the writer who perhaps, due to his influence on Yeats, had the greatest popular impact in retelling the old Irish tales in the late nineteenth century. His translations were unreliable but his romanticisation of ancient Ireland provided good material for the chess myth-makers. Here is one of his versions, set in a mythical pre-Christian time:

"There then they tarried until day was come with its full light,

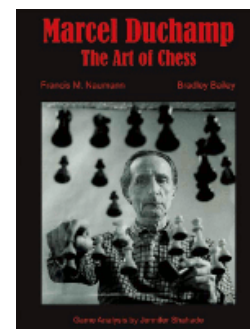
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whereupon the *túatha dé danann* in general proceeded to look on at the hurling: for every six [men?] was given them a chess-board; a backgammon-board for every five; for every ten men a timpan, for every hundred a harp..." [Standish O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (I-XXXI.): *a collection of tales in Irish* (London & Edinburgh 1892), volume 2, page. 250.]

I researched early Irish "chess", although this was tangential to my thesis topic, because I wanted to get to the bottom of this question. After doing some work on the subject, I consulted an expert on mediaeval Ireland, Dr. Angela Gleason (who now lectures at Princeton), and then did further research, leading to a paper I presented at graduate seminar in 2006. Aspects of that talk developed into a recently published major article for an academic journal, which was reviewed by several scholars before publication, from whom I received further good advice on how to approach this topic, leading to further amendments and changes of emphasis.

My revised article was being typeset when I learned of Nugent's booklet. It was only possible to insert brief references to it at the proofs stage. Anyway my article, while in fact refuting his argument, was only partially concerned with what was the central issue to him. Historians, generally speaking, tend to be more interested in how a myth has been used (e.g. by Cusack) than in its truth-value, and that where the editors of *Irish Historical Studies* advised me to place my emphasis.

Briefly, what my journal article sets out to do is explain how the Myth of Celtic Chess emerged and was fashioned in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at a time of reawakening interest in the Irish language. Around that time, the first modern attempts were made to produce reliable translations of the mediaeval Irish manuscripts which contain the raw material from which Nugent derives many of his quotations. My journal article discusses, in the context of cultural nationalism, how this "chess" myth was used in the 1880s and then somewhat later by leading figures in the Gaelic revival movement such as poet W. B. Yeats. For details of how to find my printed article, see the first Postscript.

This Kibitzer article is more concerned with the truth-value of claims in Nugent's web page and booklet. My printed article does cite some previous scholarly writings that deal with this topic, more or less successfully, and it also traces the misunderstandings and mistranslations which have led to the confusion that afflicts Nugent's work.

### **Origin of chess and early Irish games**

One fundamental trap that catches out many people is that "our" chess is today called *fidchell* in Irish and *gwyddbwyll* in Welsh, but the names being the same does not mean the games were the same. At some point the names of old games, whose rules are now long-lost, was transferred to the modern game by translators and editors who only knew the modern games of chess, draughts, and backgammon. Nugent's mighty efforts in tracing numerous references is marred by his failure to grasp this point.

The situation is complicated by the fact that *fidchell* is not the only board-game to be mentioned in early Irish texts. *Brandub*, *brannamh* (or *brannaimh*), and *búanbach* are also mentioned. These games beginning with "b" may or not have been the same as each other, or variants. The word *brandub* (which means "raven-black") is the one most often seen. Some of these references may be to games played by the Vikings who raided and settled in Ireland centuries before the Anglo-Normans, but long after the first manuscripts mentioning *fidchell*. At any rate, the texts usually make a clear distinction between *fidchell* and other games.

Dr. Thomas Hyde's *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694) includes some fragments of information about early Irish games which he obtained from his friend, Narcissus Marsh (1638-1713), an Englishman who became Anglican Archbishop of Cashel and corresponded with other scholars all over Europe. One striking quotation Hyde gave from the fifteenth century Yellow Book of Lecan is the following concerning the testament of a second century Irish king:

"Cahir or Cathir the Great... bequeathed to his son Falcus and certain other nobles, among many other things, five game boards called *Fichell* and five sets of chess pieces called *Brannadab*. And he left his son Crinethannus ten very ornate playing tables and two chess boards with various different pieces." [Hyde, *Syntagma Dissertationum* (Collected Works), volume 2, page 68; as translated by Dr. Victor Keats in, *Chess: Its Origin* (Oxford 1994), p. 72. Keats's book is an annotated translation of some portions of Hyde.]

The fifteenth century compilers of the Yellow Book of Lecan would have known chess but it is impossible that the early Irish played chess in the second century. It is highly unlikely that they did so before the eleventh or twelfth centuries of the Christian era, or that chess came to Ireland before it came to Britain. Readers who recall, or re-read in the [ChessCafe.com Archives](#), my earlier article about King Canute and chess ([The Kibitzer 135](#), August 2007) will know that the Vikings played board games, but it is doubtful whether these bore any resemblance to chess. Most likely the Normans brought chess with them to Ireland, which would mean at earliest the Irish elites learned chess in 1169 AD, the date which *The New History of Ireland* accepts as the transition from Early Ireland to Mediaeval Ireland.

The kind of chess played in the Muslim world in the eighth and ninth centuries was beginning to reach southern Europe at the end of the ninth and early tenth centuries – this was chess with pawns moving one step at a time, and the pieces that became the bishop and queen severely limited in power. Therefore, the game developed slowly and there was no need for castling to bring the king into safety in this peaceful era before ferocious attacking pieces stalked an open centre. That came in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Yet Arab chess of a thousand years ago and mediaeval European chess of 800-900 years ago were recognisably chess in several respects. The board was the same. Checkmate was the most important way to end a game. Significantly, the rook and knight and king had their present moves. In many other games, pieces move like the king (plodding one step at a time to any adjacent square) or like the rook (straight-line movement, optionally until reaching the edge of the board or an obstruction), but only games of the chess family have a knight's move. The move of the knight is of oriental origin, probably predating chess, as it is associated with divination and projection against evil spirits.

The knight is probably not mentioned in European texts prior to the arrival of chess, as I discussed in the Canute article. An Icelandic saga version of that story does mention a knight, but that is almost certainly because chess was known in mediaeval Iceland by the time Snorri Sturluson wrote the Canute and Jarl Wolf story down in *Heimskringla*. The original oral versions of the story that were handed down to him through the generations probably spoke of *hnefatafl* not chess. Similar distortions have occurred in the handing down and translation of the old Irish stories about board-games.

The king, a piece of infinite value, was also a distinctive feature of chess, but at least one Viking game, *hnefatafl*, also had a king-piece, the *hnafi*, whose capture ended the game. This has led some people to confuse early references to games of that type with chess. But *hnefatafl* was a game in which the forces and their initial placement were not symmetrical. One side had a King, and only a king which started in the centre of the board; the opponent had a large number of less powerful pieces that tried to surround and capture the king to win the game. If they failed, the King reached its destination, the edge of the board, and won. What follows from this is that references in ancient texts to a board-game involving a King, whose capture ended the game, are not necessarily references to chess.

Clearly references in old texts to board-games without such a piece, or references to games with asymmetrical forces, are definitely not about chess. Moreover, in games of this hunter-and-hunted type (such as fox and geese, an old game known in various forms England and other countries), skilful play usually results in victory for the more numerous, if weaker, hunted pieces. With the loss of some of their number, they eventually should succeed in

depriving the hunter of movement, and so win.

Another factor that enables us to draw some conclusions about the nature of old board-games from the limited information about them, is the method of capture. Harold Murray, on pages ten and eleven of his *A History of Board-games other than Chess*, distinguishes several principal types of capture (with sub-variants) that are seen in board games. Since he expressed himself somewhat confusingly, I prefer the terms over-leaping, displacement, and surrounding.

Over-leaping is the method of capture seen in all forms of draughts (including checkers). My piece A stands next to your piece B and the square, or cell, on the far side, is vacant; I leap A over your B, landing on the vacant square beyond, and remove B from the board. In some games, such as *dammen* (or Polish draughts) "long leaps" occur, but the principle is the same. The capturing piece, in its path of movement, crosses over a cell occupied by the enemy piece and takes it off the board.

Displacement (or replacement as Murray calls it) is the type of capture seen in chess and all race-games, such as ludo and backgammon. The *en passant* capture in chess is slightly different, but should be interpreted as capturing the doubly-advanced pawn as if it had only moved one square. So that too is really a replacement capture.

The third type of capture is capture by surrounding, or 'strangulation' as Murray called it. That has to be the way captures are made in Go since the stones never move but are placed on empty interstices of the board lattice. If the piece most recently placed completes the surrounding of an opponent's man or group, then the surrounded stone or stones are removed from the board. Surrounding capture can also occur in some games where the pieces move. So, in a situation where an opponent's man is partly surrounded by yours, the final move completing the encirclement means it is removed by capture. Or, as in fox and geese, the game ends with the defeat of the side that is surrounded and cannot make a move.

In games where one side has a distinct or even decisive advantage, rather than the slight advantage of first move enjoyed in chess and draughts, it was normal for two players to take sides alternately. If they were of equal skill, or even if one was somewhat inferior, it would be expected that the player with the fox, or the hnefi, would usually lose, and so each player would win fifty percent of the games.

In the old Irish poem, the *Táin* ('the Cattle Hunt of Cooley'), there is a classic statement of a case like this. The legendary, almost superhuman, Ulster hero Cú Chulainn (of whom the poet W.B. Yeats often wrote) used to play a board-game called *búanbach* with his charioteer Láeg:

"No one came into the plain unnoticed by Láeg and yet he used to win every second game of *búanbach* from Cú Chulainn." [translation from Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bo Cualgne from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin 1970), page 182.]

In other words, although Láeg could only give part of his attention to the game (because he had to keep watch), and although the superhero was successful at almost everything else he did, Cú Chulainn could not defeat his colleague when he played the weaker side in this game. Again, the source (The Book of Leinster) is a composite work dating from the middle ages (in this case, twelfth century) drawing on much older materials and telling of a mythical hero of centuries previously.

We have established certain tests to apply to descriptions of old board-games to see whether they resemble chess.

### **1) Are the forces equal and symmetrical?**

Unless they are, the game is not chess.

### **2) Does one player's task (the way that he wins the game) differ from the**

### **opponent's task?**

If the tasks differ, the game is not chess.

### **3) Does one side nearly always win if skilful players are involved?**

If chances are not roughly equal, the game is not chess.

### **4) Is there a piece of supreme value?**

If so, the game may be chess, but not necessarily.

If there is not, then chess can be ruled out.

### **5) Is there a piece that moves like a knight?**

If so, the game may be chess, but not necessarily.

If there is not, then chess can be ruled out.

### **6) Is the method of capture by replacement/displacement or not?**

If so, the game may be chess, but not necessarily.

If there is not, then chess can be ruled out.

A seventh, weaker test, may also be considered, but is omitted because it is not decisive. That is, whether the board is symmetrical and whether it is chequered and what its dimensions are. I do not use that test because the chess-board (ashtapada) was probably not originally chequered and the board in Chinese chess is only symmetrical on one axis, that is left and right.

Between the two players there is a river that some pieces cannot cross.

Moreover the play is on interstices of a 9x9 matrix not within an 8x8 square.

There is nothing essential to chess that says it must be on a board of 8x8 squares, nor that the squares must be alternately black and white.

Accordingly, somewhat different boards may be seen in forms of chess and other games can and do use boards that are chequered or which have some white and some black areas. Therefore, references in old texts to a game-board being partly white and partly black do not necessarily imply chess. Nor can anything be inferred from the colour of the pieces.

Claims that this or that old game from various countries were chess or precursors of chess have been made for a very long time and usually without any historic foundation. This was recognised over a century ago by Dutch chess historian Antonius van der Linde, who coined the term *Pseudo-schach* ("pseudo-chess") for such cases. He cautioned

"Es war das Schicksal fast aller unbekannten Brettspiele der Aegypter, Inder, Chinesen, Perser, Araber, Juden, Griechen, Römer, Kelten, Skandinavier, ja sogar der Rothhäute, mit dem Schach identificirt zu werden." [Antonius van der Linde, *Geschichte und Litteratur des Schachspiels* (2 volumes, Berlin 1874), volume 1. page 39].

This can be translated as follows:

"It has been the fate of almost all unknown board games – whether of the Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, Persians, Arabs, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Scandinavians, yes even the Redskins – to be identified with chess."

In the Celtic languages, however, there is a difference. Almost all European languages have words for "chess" and "checkmate" derived from Persian *shah mat*, meaning "the king is dead", and *shah* is echoed in many European languages. Even Hungarian, not an Indo-European language, has *sakk*; Hungarian chess historian Ivan Bottlik tells me that the Magyar people borrowed it from the Turks centuries ago. By borrowing the name along with the game itself, these peoples minimised the potential for confusion between

the new game and any pre-existing board games of skill in their cultures, but the Irish did not. The word *fidchell* combines the notions of "wood" (the materials out of which chess sets were usually made) and "sense"; the Welsh word *gwyddbwyll* is an exact translation of the Irish word.

In Ireland and Wales, the name of an old game, no longer played, was remembered because it survived in old manuscripts and oral tradition. When a new game came to Ireland, the old Irish name was applied to it, unlike what happened in continental Europe. Scribes and scholars of the middle ages (when chess had arrived in northern Europe) assumed the references were to what they knew as chess in their own time. Nothing can be validly inferred from these scholars translating *fidchell* as chess, but the modern Irish use of the word *fidchell* for chess makes it difficult for anyone without specialist knowledge to understand that old texts were not about chess.

### **Nugent's web article and booklet**

Let us now look at Brian Nugent's work with the above points in mind. Firstly, it can be noted that he doesn't cite the above passage about Láeg and Cú Cuchalainn, which shows that the game they played cannot have been chess.

Nugent begins with a quotation from the tale of Mac da Cherda and Cummaine Fota. One may suppose that he chose to begin with this illustrative quotation (for both his Internet and printed versions) believing it to be the one that highlighted the most striking similarity between the old Irish game and chess. However, the example he chooses fails at least one of our tests.

Two bored monks called Cummaine Fota and Guaire spend an afternoon together; one suggests an Irish game called *fidchell* to while away the time. Happily for us, the other is a bit unsure about the rules and so he is given an explanation of how to make a capture in this game. The translation comes from J. G. O'Keeffe's article, "Mac da Cherda and Cummaine Fota", in *Ériu* v. (1911), pp. 32-3.

"Good," says Guaire, "Let's play *fidchell*."

"How are the men slain?" says Cummaine.

"Not hard, a black pair of mine about one white man of yours on the same line, disputing the approach on the far side (?)"

"My conscience, indeed!" said Cummaine, "I cannot do the other thing (?), but I shall not slay (your men), you will not slay my men."

For a whole day Guaire was pursuing him and he could not slay one of his men.

"That is champion-like, o cleric," said Guaire.

This is actually, although Nugent evidently does not realise it, one of the best proofs that *fidchell* was **not** chess. From this quotation we can see firstly that the pieces in *fidchell* moved in straight lines and secondly that the method of capture was by surrounding or strangulation. Nothing is said about kings or knights or equality of forces, but we cannot judge by omission.

Just one of our tests clearly applies to this passage, the sixth, and it is decisive. So not only was *fidchell* not chess; it was a game of a different kind because the method of capture was strangulation, not displacement.

This was already pointed out by Irish diplomat Eóin MacWhite, in his key paper *Early Irish Board Games*, published shortly after World War II in *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, volume five. (The issue is nominally for 1945, but may not have been in print until 1948.) Somebody has posted the article online at [Unicornsgarden.com](http://Unicornsgarden.com).

It is unfortunate that when Murray wrote his *History of Board-games* he did not know the *Éigse* article. After the book appeared, MacWhite wrote a review in the journal *Anthropos* and sent it to Murray with his corrections. Other writers on the subject appear to have overlooked this correspondence which is in the Murray papers in the Bodleian Library. Nugent does not mention Murray's *History of Board-games*; he has just one reference to Murray's *History of Chess*.

It does not help when dictionary compilers extract brief quotations out of context that mislead modern readers. In an allegorical work entitled *Three Shafts of Death* by seventeenth century Irish Catholic priest Geoffrey Keating, there is a passage about a game he calls *brannamh*. The passage is based on the well-known "Innocent Morality", whose meaning is very like the well-known chequer-board stanza from Fitzgerald's version of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, saying that however high or low men are in their station in life (or as pieces on the game-board) they are all equal in death (when captured and thrown back in the box).

MacWhite observes that the game as described in the Keating passage is "clearly modern chess". The *Irish Academy Dictionary*, by quoting that phrase in their entry for the game-name *brandub*, tend to suggest MacWhite was saying that *brannamh* was modern chess, and Nugent makes the same claim. This is, however, a mistake, which careful reading of MacWhite's paper should make clear. Keating knew only modern chess so that is the game he described; MacWhite was well aware that *brannamh* or *brandub* was a quite different game and a careful reading of his paper unambiguously shows this. Fortunately for me, I showed this quotation from the *Irish Academy Dictionary* to Dr. Gleason at a very early stage of my investigations and she immediately put me right on this point.

Nugent argues that *brandub* and *brannaimh* are the same game and I agree he is likely to be correct on that point. I disagree when he says the following:

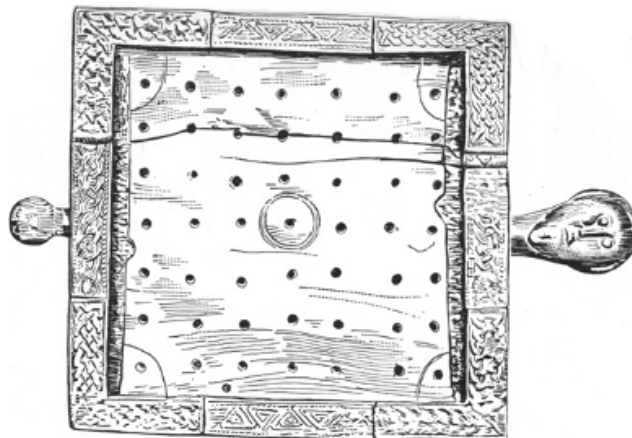
"Dr. Keating can be scribbled down as a witness that the game the old Irish were playing was indeed our modern chess."

This is just a complete misrepresentation of MacWhite. Similarly, he quotes the Hyde passage about the Testament of King Cahir to give the false impression that Hyde's book on board-games is in some way evidence *fidhchell* and chess being the same. Nugent's paper is full of misunderstandings of this kind.

Moreover, while he sometimes recognises that there was more than one game, in one of his notes he goes too far and says:

"In general I think *brannaimh* and *fidhchell* are just two words with the same meaning."

Here I think Nugent is demonstrably wrong and it shows again that he has failed to understand MacWhite's paper. MacWhite was writing after the major discovery of the Ballinderry game-board (which Nugent fails to mention) that can be seen in the National Museum of Ireland in Kildare Street, Dublin.



Beyond a doubt, this is not a type of board on which a chess-like game could be played, but it is exactly right for a simple form of *hnefatafl* or *tablut*. The marked central square is where the king-piece starts and its object is to win the game by reaching one of the marked corner squares. The opponent wins by preventing this.

In the eighteenth century, Carl Linnaeus found *tablut* being played in Lapland on a 9x9 board and it was his description of that game which gave Murray the clue to how *hnefatafl* was played – a puzzle whose solution had eluded Daniel Willard Fiske in *Chess In Iceland and in Icelandic Literature* (Florence, 1905). H. O'Neill Hencken, the archaeologist who found the Ballinderry board (in two pieces) in a bog in County Westmeath, Ireland, in 1932 thought the game played on it was fox and geese, but MacWhite shows it was a game of the *tablut* family. See Murray's *History of Board-games* or David Parlett's *Oxford History of Board Games* for more details on these games.

Also in the 1940s, a Welshman called Dr. Frank Lewis worked out the rules of a game called *tawlbwrdd*, which is mentioned in the ancient laws of Wales. Proof that the game was still being played at a late date is a manuscript of 1587 by Robert ap Ifan, which corresponds to two descriptions of *hnefatafl* in the Icelandic sagas and to Linnaeus. The Welsh manuscript includes a drawing of a board similar to Ballinderry, but larger (11x11 instead of 7x7) and the king-piece had twelve defenders while twenty-four enemy pieces seek to trap him. The number of pieces on each side of course varies with the size of board but the principle remains the same. The word *branan* in Irish corresponds to the *hnefi* in the Nordic games of this type. Nugent is jumping to conclusions when he identifies the *branan* and its defenders in *brandubh* with the king and lesser pieces in chess. Lewis wrote the most important article about Welsh board-games, "Gwerin Ffristial a Thawlbwrdd", in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, Session 1941 (London 1943), pp. 185-205. (This paper is mostly in English.) Lewis plausibly argued that the board was enlarged to make the game longer and more interesting. He wrote to Murray that "I have taught the game of *tawlbwrdd* on the 11x11 board to many people."

Lewis, Murray, and MacWhite therefore independently came to much the same conclusion about how this family of games was played, and clearly they do not correspond to either chess or games of the draughts family. A supposition, which I share with MacWhite and Murray, is that *fidchell* may have been a version of *ludus latrunculorum* (the game of the little soldiers) which was played at the outposts of the Roman Empire, including Britain. The Romans never came to Ireland, but sailors and traders might have introduced the game.

Another significant archaeological discovery for board-game history was made at Stanway, near Colchester in Essex, a few years ago. A Roman doctor's grave included a *latrunculorum* set laid out for play (the board had perished but the pieces in their arrangement survived). You can read about this in Philip Crummy, 'Colchester: The Stanway burials' in *Current Archaeology* 153 (London, July 1997), pages 337-42.

Admittedly, Nugent is in good company with some of his fallacious conclusions. Lewis, who knew less about Irish games than Welsh ones, also made the mistake of concluding (in a letter to Murray) that "the game of *fidchell* was that played upon the Ballinderry board, and that it was akin or similar to *tawlbwrdd* and *hnefatafl*." Unfortunately, Murray's reply does not survive, but I think he would have told Lewis that was probably incorrect. Also, Belgian researcher, Claude Sterckx, wrote in 1970 on "Les Jeux de damiers celtiques" in *Annales de Bretagne*, 77 (no. 4). There he wrongly asserted that *brandubh* corresponds to the Welsh *gwyddbwyll*, despite the fact that the passage from Robert ap Ifan, which he quotes, is about the other Welsh game, *tawlbwrdd*, and of course he forgot (at that point in his article) that *gwyddbwyll* has the same meaning as *fidchell*. Sterckx also seems to have been misled, through following Lewis rather than MacWhite, into saying that "Several details could lead one to believe that *fidchell* was a game of the same kind as *brandubh*." One of the arguments he adduced is that one of the two sides is stronger than the other, which is incorrect on MacWhite's analysis.

Moreover, there is no proof that the games played in ancient Ireland were necessarily invented there. So Nugent makes an illegitimate move in his argument. Even if he could show that the ancient Irish played chess, he would not have any proof that the Irish actually invented those games. It is possible they invented *fidchell* (whatever it was), but it is also equally possible that this



was the name they gave to *ludus latrunculorum*. In that case, did the Romans learn it from the Celts or vice versa? The ancient Greeks and Egyptians are known to have had board-games too.

The claim that chess was invented in Ireland is rather like the recent claim that golf was invented in China. Even if the ancient Chinese had a game involving a stick, a small ball and holes in the ground (which may be doubted), there is ample proof that golf was invented in Scotland. Similarly, people can and do argue about whether chess originated in India or China, but it was certainly not the Irish who invented it.

### Postscript

My academic article, entitled "A 'Fenian Pastime'?: early Irish board games and their identification with chess," was recently published in issue 145 (nominally May 2010) of the journal *Irish Historical Studies*. The scope of that article is much broader than Nugent's work, but does touch on some of the same areas and cites some of the same sources in early Irish texts. The final version is only available in print to the subscribers of *Irish Historical Studies*, although I have deposited a copy of the offprint with the chess collection at the Royal Dutch Library and will be sending another copy soon to the John G. White Collection in Cleveland. An [online version](#) is freely available in Trinity College Dublin's research publications archive, but this is not quite the finished article as there was a subsequent round of revision with the journal's editors which clarified and improved some paragraphs. Anyone wishing to quote or cite my article should refer to the final printed version.

### Post Postscript

A chess book in the Irish language, entitled "Ficheall" has just been published – probably the first ever to be written. The author, Una O Boyle from Duleek, teaches chess in schools and her book is aimed at beginners and children. Una was on the Irish women's team at the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansirsk last September. You can easily find information about her and the book by searching on the Internet. Nugent's book can also be purchased online.

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