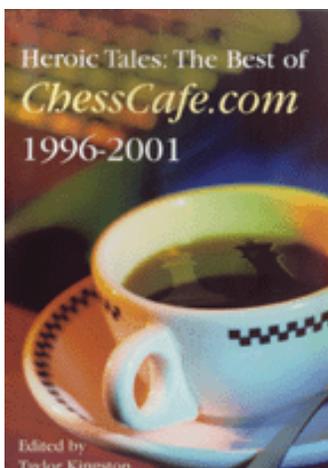


**BOOK
REVIEWS**

The Historian

Neil Brennen

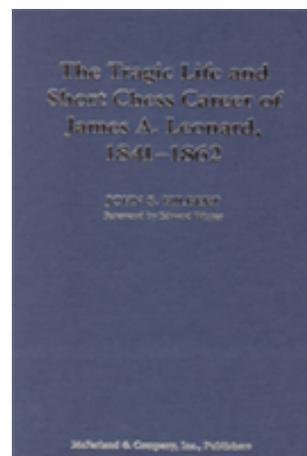
The Tragic Life and Short Chess Career of James A. Leonard, 1841-1862, by John S. Hilbert, 2006 McFarland & Co., English Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 213pp., \$39.95

John Hilbert's books are of such a uniformly elevated standard that the book reviewer despairs of finding new ways to praise them. The latest Hilbertian tome, his ninth book on chess history, is a biography with the title *The Tragic Life and Short Chess Career of James A. Leonard, 1841-1862*. Let me state at the onset that the book under review, despite the Victorian moralizing of its title, is excellent. Now, having gotten duty out of the way, let me indulge in the pleasure of describing why you should read the book.

The first question that needs to be answered is, "Who is James Leonard?" The title of the book gives a clue, and Hilbert encapsulates the man in a paragraph as part of his book's introduction:

"James Leonard was born in obscurity, the son of a poor, working class Irish family. He did not learn the game until he was sixteen or seventeen, and quit serious play before he turned twenty. Yet during his short career he won three major New York tournaments and defeated all the finest chessplayers of the city, and most of the finest players in the country, save one. Although the two main chess matches he played were left unfinished, his dominance in those matches was evident. Before he quit chess to serve his country in the Civil War, he gave a series of exhibitions of as many as ten blindfold chess games simultaneously. Leonard died of disease contracted while in a Confederate prisoner of war camp near Richmond before he turned twenty-one."

A lesser historian would leave the story at a paragraph. Hilbert takes the drop of water that is Leonard's life and finds an ocean in it. The story of this young man, his efforts to exercise his remarkable talent, and his ultimate abandonment of chess, serves Hilbert as a means to illuminate the Morphy era in New York as no other writer has done. While this emphasis on a minor chess player isn't what many people have come to accept as "chess history," it is increasingly an approach being utilized by top-notch chess historians. As Olimpiu Urcan put it



during a recent interview in *The Chess Journalist*:

“Researchers and historians need to go the lower layers of various chess societies of the past and identify the significant experiences of chess people who deserve remembrance for their contributions to today’s chess legacy. Until recently, chess history writing was much obsessed with the following archetypical hero: White (US or European-based), world champion (or challenger), male, a success story. Fortunately, such a perspective is gradually changing.”

Indeed, the changing perspective has been evident at ChessCafe, in the writings of historians Jerry Spinrad and Mr. Urcan himself. And Edward Winter, in his Chess Notes column and his books, has been championing so-called “minor” chess figures, among them James Leonard, for two decades. Now Hilbert’s biography of Leonard is the highest profile example of what we will call, for lack of a better term, the new chess history.

Urcan refers to such figures as he described in the excerpt above as “marginals,” meaning these subjects are out of the mainstream of what could be labeled consensus chess history. The precise meaning of the term “consensus history” is still debated among historians, but the generally accepted definition is that it described a view of American history that emphasized unity of thought, and one that, practiced uncritically, reduced the history of the United States to a chronicle of the exploits of rich and successful white males. (There’s hardly anyone else in Daniel Boorstin’s trilogy *The Americans*, for instance, as demonstrated by Peter Charles Hoffer in his book *Past Imperfect*.) Consensus chess history is likewise a streamlined and bowdlerized chronology, restricting itself to the coming and going of grandmasters, and recycling the same stock of stories each time. Consensus history is pretty much in eclipse these days, as historians are emphasizing the importance of individuals and groups that have been traditionally marginalized, and it now appears consensus chess history is on the same path.

Leonard superficially fits the mold of a subject for a consensus chess historian, in that he was a white male. However, he wasn’t wealthy; in fact, he was poor. His family were immigrants from Ireland, struggling to survive in America, like many other members of the Irish Diaspora of the 1840s. Chess was his talent, and perhaps his means of entry into another social sphere.

And Leonard traveled in a lower strata of society among chessplayers, a strata that he was ultimately unable to escape. Hilbert cleverly emphasizes the economic divide between the chess players in his book by providing descriptions of their respective clubs. First comes money:

“William James Appleton Fuller, then chess editor for New York’s *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, noted in his January 5, 1856, column that the New York Chess Club was the only club in the city devoted entirely to chess. In 1856 there were forty club members, and it could be said with some authority that ‘the names of the very best players in the city are enrolled on its books.’ The club was said to have six to eight tables

occupied each evening, and Fuller could add that ‘everything is conducted in the most quiet and orderly manner.’ No alcohol was served, but members were permitted to smoke.

“Fuller made clear that membership in the New York Chess Club was open to the public, and could be obtained simply by handing over five dollars to the club secretary, either at the club’s rooms or else at the National Bank, where Perrin then worked. While membership was open, the assumption was that no one other than a gentleman would seek entrance. In an age objectively more stratified by class than our own, Fuller could add in his chess column that ‘To be a good chess player is *prima facie* evidence of a gentleman, and the club have never yet had occasion to regret their broad and general rule in regard to admission.’”

It’s worth noting that five dollars was a lot of money back then, far more than Leonard could afford to pay. Far more reasonable were other places in New York:

“There was, as well, Limburger & Walter’s Saloon, corner of Nassau and Fulton Streets, opposite the *New York Herald’s* office. As Fuller described it, ‘Some of the best (and poorest!) players in town meet here daily. Drop in any afternoon after one o’clock and we will guarantee that as fine games will be in progress as are played in the city. The boards are also in use in the evenings, but the superior players congregate in the afternoon. Several of our strongest amateurs are in the habit of dining and lunching here, and digesting their meals over a chess-board, with a cigar and a glass of lager-beer.’”

Indeed, the subtext of the class struggle permeates the book, from the beginning pages through Leonard’s chess career, and even into his enlistment into the Army during the Civil War. (Then as now, military service was an escape from poverty for many.) Hilbert, as always, is a diligent researcher; his account of Leonard’s ill-fated match in Philadelphia with future Union General George Dwight uses published accounts from the *Chess Monthly*, the *New York Clipper*, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, and an unpublished letter from Leonard to *Clipper* chess columnist Miron Hazeltine. The match, while the score was tied and play unfinished, turned into a disaster for Leonard; his second proved a thief and left him penniless, the Philadelphians treated him as a social inferior, and Dwight was a slowpoke at the board – “OH GOLLY ain’t he a slow player!.... He considers 3 moves a side every hour as getting along very fast,” as Leonard wrote to Hazeltine. The match also exacerbated the usual tension between the New York and Philadelphia chess communities. Witness Francis Well’s blast from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* column:

“We did not expect to refer again to the circumstances connected with this match, but our attention has been directed to an article in the *New York Clipper*, purporting to have been written by Mr. Leonard. With the style of this article we have no concern. It is as vulgar, coarse, and illiterate as might be expected from anything emitting from such a source, and published in such a column. With the subject matter of the article, and the

assertions there broadly made, we have very little to say;—only so much as is needful to stamp the statement as a whole, as *willfully*, and *infamously false, in letter and in spirit*. Were it, in any sense, necessary to defend ourselves against such an assailant, we might be justified in exposing in detail his atrocious falsehoods. As it is, we merely desire to put the proper stamp upon them and let them go.”

Who said “minor” figures were uninteresting?

Leonard contains 92 games and positions, taken from contemporary newspapers and magazines. As always with pre-Steinitz era chess, one should keep in mind conditions of play were very different from today. We’ve come to take clocks and time controls, quiet playing rooms, and extensive opening theory for granted. The level of play, particularly among amateurs, has risen since Leonard’s day. With this thought in mind, Hilbert, and his chess engine, have corrected or supplemented some of the published annotations used in the book. For an example of both Hilbert’s use of analysis engines and Leonard’s play, we present a blindfold game of Leonard’s from 1861. Shortly after this blindfold display, in January 1862, Leonard would enlist in the Union Army, and his chess career ended.

“[Miron] Hazeltine eventually published all five games his correspondent sent, although Leonard’s Board One win over Mathews did not appear in the *Clipper* until April 15, 1865, the morning President Abraham Lincoln died after being fatally shot the evening before at Ford’s Theater by John Wilkes Booth.

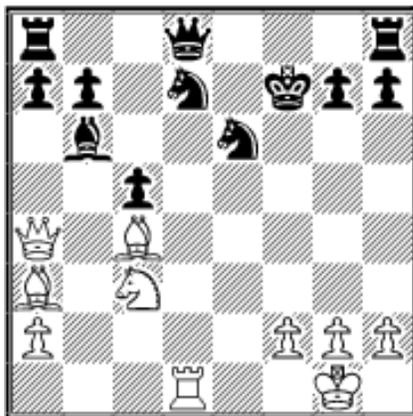
Leonard - Matthews [C51]

Brooklyn Chess Club

Blindfold Exhibition, Board One (1:6)

November 30, 1861

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.b4 Bxb4 5.c3 Bc5 6.0–0 d6 7.d4 exd4 8.cxd4 Bb6 9.Nc3 Nf6 That game is not on record in which even a seeing player takes more accurate measure and complete satisfaction of an imperfect move in the opening than Leonard does of this. **10.e5 dxe5 11.Ba3 Nxd4 12.Nxe5 Be6 13.Re1 c5 14.Qa4+ Nd7 15.Nxf7** The game is beautifully finished. **15...Kxf7 16.Rxe6 Nxe6 17.Rd1**

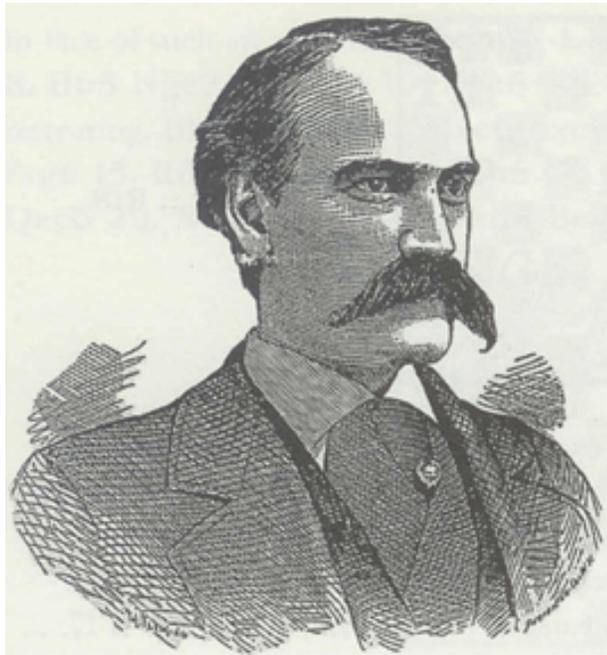


17...Kg6 [*Hazeltine's comments aside, Fritz 8 finds this to be the losing move. Had Black given up his Queen, a draw might well have been the logical conclusion: 17...Nf6 18.Rxd8 Raxd8 19.f4 Ke7 and the position, although full of play, is nearly even.—jsh*]
18.Bxe6 Qe7 19.Qg4+ Qg5 20.Bf5+ Kf6 21.Rd6+ Ke5 22.Re6 mate. (*New York Clipper, April 15, 1865*)”

The book is enhanced by many pictures, mainly from contemporary magazines, of prominent figures in American chess: James Thompson, Napoleon Marache, Sam Loyd, Eugene Delmar and others, including Leonard himself:



The one of Eugene Delmar is particularly formidable looking:



Hilbert's prose, often a subject of criticism with some reviewers, is tauter than usual in this book. For example, both fans and critics of Hilbert's work might note the aside about Lincoln's death in the game introduction. Taylor Kingston has chided the author for excessive use of such asides, criticizing a reference to a rose-grower in Germantown in Hilbert's Whitaker biography. Here, the aside works, because the Civil War is constantly in the reader's mind. But in this book the aside-roses generally stay in their footnote-gardens, never growing where they weren't planted.

Likewise, the sometimes flabby phrases and haphazard proofreading in Hilbert's books has been replaced with tighter writing and meticulous proofing. "No doubt," to borrow a Hilbertism, this is a continuation of the writer's new, leaner style, one first displayed in his previous book *Young Marshall*. And his flexible instrument now encompasses more color than it had previously shown. For an example, read Hilbert's description of a day in the life of Private James Leonard:

"The Irish Brigade was among the troops ordered to advance on Manassas, Virginia. It did so on Monday, March 10, 1862. Leonard and his brigade marched 19 miles in the rain during the first day, the drops of water dripping off the cedar trees as he went down the Little River Turnpike. The road alternated sand and mud, making the travel less than ideal, especially when artillery and cavalry passing beforehand had "left them deep and dirty for the infantry." Leonard ended his day rolled in a blanket, surrounded by his regiment, with muskets stacked and ready for action. The troops wakened in the predawn, a cold chill in the air making sleep difficult."

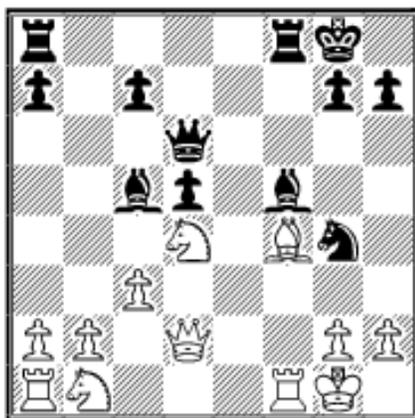
The word-painting in this passage is vivid; drops falling off cedar trees, the sand and mud, the blankets and stacked muskets before dawn. At such moments Hilbert leaves the rank and file of chess historians and stands with Barbara Tuchman, Bruce Catton, and other top-flight popular history writers. Catton may have been more poetic had he written the quoted paragraph, Tuchman cooler and

more ironic in tone, but Hilbert's work can stand besides theirs and not suffer from the comparison.

Indeed, the Civil War is a tough subject for most historians, since so many others have tackled it, and done so well. A consensus chess historian would never attempt it, since they restrict themselves to GMs and war is only important if it keeps Keres from a title match. Here, war is important because it killed a chess master; Leonard died within eleven months of his enlistment. As Edward Winter wrote in his Forward to *Leonard*, "It is curious to reflect that, in other circumstances, James Leonard might still have been in active play during the First World War. After all, J.H. Blackburne, another blindfold specialist, was born the same year as Leonard and participated in the St Petersburg tournament of 1914. But Leonard, fêted in his teens, was dead at 20."

We can do no better describing *Leonard* than Mr. Winter did. "Almost a century and a half later, Dr. Hilbert has paid him a magnificent tribute." It is a magnificent tribute, not only to James Leonard, his struggle, and his chess career, but to the field of chess history itself. Hilbert shows in this book just what a chess historian can accomplish by leaving the rut of "chess history" behind and writing as a historian. Would that more did just that.

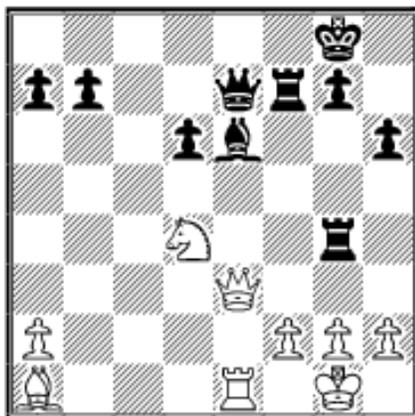
We'll conclude with two more Leonard highlights:



Perrin-Leonard, match, New York, March 1861:

16...Bd3!? — The prosaic 16...Qg6 is as strong or stronger, but the text was very much in the romantic style of the time. **17.Na3** (if 17.Bxd6 Rxf1#, or 17.Qxd3 Rxf4 18.g3 Rxf1+ 19.Qxf1 Bxd4+ 20.cxd4 Qh6 21.Qe2 Qc1+ 22.Kg2 Rf8—) **17...Qa6 18.Rf3 Be2 19.Rg3 Rf5 20.h3 Raf8! 21.hxg4 Rxf4 22.Kh2 Bxg4 23.Nac2 Qh6+ 24.Kg1 0-1** White apparently realized he was lost after

24...Rf1+ 25.Rxf1 Rxf1+ 26.Kxf1 Qxd2.



Barnett-Leonard, match, New York, 1860:

26...Bd5! 27.Qxe7 Rxg2+ 28.Kh1 Rgxf2+ 29.Nf3 Bxf3+ 30.Kg1 Rg2+ 31.Kf1 Bd5+ 32.Qxf7+ Kxf7 0-1

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of James A. Leonard, 1841-1862*
by John S. Hilbert

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