



## COLUMNISTS

## New Stories about Old Chess Players

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## Obituaries

In this column, we take a tour of obituaries of 19th- and early 20th-century chess players. Some of these manage to summarize a player's life wonderfully well in a short death notice. For example, the melodramatic arrogance of Alexandre Deschapelles seems to be caught quite nicely in his obituary from *der Humorist*, December 24, 1847:

*In recent days in Paris, a European celebrity died, a man whose loss is irreplaceable, a king who held the scepter many years: Whist king Deschapelles. His life was full of adventure. As a soldier he was left twice half-dead on the battlefield; in Baylon he was taken prisoner and brought to Portsmouth on a prison ship, from which he miraculously escaped through cleverness and persistence, although he had one arm. After coming to Paris after unheard of dangers, he took on a small official position, and in his free time he became without lessons the greatest whist player. He was called the Whist Encyclopedia, because there was no question or card combination he couldn't answer. His ability in all games was legendary; even in billiards he never lost a game, despite his one arm, and he had no equal in chess.*

The following note about Howard Staunton shows that his work on Shakespeare was truly respected in his day. Think how much Morphy would have loved to have chess listed as his *second* accomplishment in his obituary! The paper seems to imply that Staunton had an Oxford degree; according to *A Century of British Chess*, he merely resided in Oxford rather than attending the university. *Wiener Zeitung*, June 30, 1874:

*Shakespeare authority Howard Staunton, who was also widely known as a chess authority, died in London at age 64. After his studies in Oxford he went to London, where he busied himself primarily with his literary works.*

Ignatz Kolisch's obituary in the *Wiener Zeitung* of May 1, 1889 goes even further: chess is not mentioned at all, though in the 1860s he was one of the top players in the world! He is instead remembered as the former publisher of the *Wiener Allgemeiner Zeitung*.



*François-André Danican Philidor*

Philidor has one impressive claim to greatness in the obituary department. It isn't so much his own obituary, which is fairly simple. *London Times*, September 2, 1795:

*On Monday, Mr. Philidor, the chessplayer, made his last move into the other world. For the last two months he was kept alive merely by art. To the last moment of his existence, he enjoyed, though nearly eighty years of age, a strong retentive memory, which rendered him remarkable in the circle of his acquaintance. Mr. Philidor was a Member of the Chess Club near thirty years, and was a man of those meek qualities, that rendered him not less esteemed as a companion, than admired for his extraordinary skill in the difficult game of Chess, for which he was pre-eminently distinguished. It is not two months since he played two games blindfold, at the same time, against two excellent chess players, and was declared the victor. He was besides an admirable Musician, and a Composer.*

A greater sign of the respect for Philidor is a note, fifty years later, in *der Humorist* of August 6, 1845, that the last of his four sons had just died at the age of 83. Given that many prominent players, (Bledow, Harrwitz, and many more; the list is quite long) seem to have gotten no mention in the papers when they died, it is quite a mark of distinction that *der Humorist* chose to announce the death of someone whose fame came from merely being the son of a chess player!

It is rare that someone is able to read his own obituary, but Wilhelm Steinitz had that opportunity. We cannot really call it a pleasure in his case, since his premature obituary in the *New York Times*, February 23, 1897, is announced in an article titled "Chess and Brain Disease," which begins "It is not without significance that the death of Steinitz should have been due to mental disorder and that he should have died in a private asylum." Steinitz was in fact confined to a Moscow psychiatric clinic in early 1897, one of the stranger and more mysterious episodes in his life, which is discussed at length in Kurt Landsberger's *The Steinitz Papers* (reviewed [here](#)). However, he was soon released and lived on until August 1900.

I note that Winter, in his *Chess Omnibus*, gives a number of other players who got premature death notices, including Morphy (died 1884) in 1879, Alekhine (d. 1946) in 1920, the endgame composer Alexis Troitzky (d. 1942) in 1920 and 1922, Jacques Mieses (d. 1954) in 1937, and even Mikhail Tal (d. 1992) in 1969.

Some people's obituaries are interesting because of the strange form of death involved. Here are some of my nominations for oddest:

*London Times*, Aug 21, 1935: *Woman Chess Player Killed. Mrs. R.H. Stevenson was killed at an accident at Poznan Aerodrome this afternoon. She was flying to Warsaw to take part in the women's tournament for the Championship of the World, having been selected by the British Chess Federation to represent England in that event, and on returning to the machine after alighting for passport formalities was struck by the airscrew.*

Charles A. Gilberg (1835-1898) was a reasonably strong American player of the late 19th century, editor of the book of the 5th American Chess Congress, and owner of an excellent chess library. Here is his obituary from the *Washington Post* of January 22, 1898:

*New York, Jan 21 - Charles A. Gilberg was found dead in his bed at his residence in Brooklyn today. Mr. Gilberg, who was sixty-two years of age, was well known in chess circles. His physician is of the opinion that his death was due to suffocation, caused by the pressure of a pillow against his face while he was sleeping.*



*Pierre de Saint-Amant*

Pierre de Saint-Amant (1800-1872) was, of course, one of the most famous chess players of his day. His death seems odd to us, though for all I know this was a common form of traffic accident in the days before the invention of seat belts. Certainly, I have been surprised at the number of people in my reading who were run over before the days of motorized vehicles, but I have not seen others who died in quite the same fashion as Saint-Amant. From the *New York Times*, December 19, 1872:

*The late tragical death of Fournier de Saint Amant brings back many interesting recollections. Once famous as the greatest chess-player of the world, and for years held to be champion of France, M. St. Amant lived to be nearly seventy-three, and to die from being thrown from his carriage.*

I was unable to find any contemporary sources for some well-known stories about deaths of chess players. For example, Thomas Barnes, a strong British player who played Morphy, is said to have died from the effects of losing too much weight on a diet; it would be interesting to see how this would be reported in an obituary of the time.

Many chess players have committed suicide, but I know of only one who took the precaution of killing himself in *two* different ways. The *Washington Post* of August 12, 1909, reports that Rudolf Swiderski (1878-1909), “the celebrated chess player, was found dead today. Apparently he had poisoned and shot himself.”

Another odd suicide detail comes from the *Chicago Tribune* of February 11, 1912. When Murray Goldsmith, the 26-year-old chess champion of Ohio, committed suicide (possibly because of health problems), they add the perhaps appropriate comment that he had a strange fascination with self-mate problems.

Lesser known players also have interesting obituaries. Joseph L. Sossnitz wrote an obscure chess manual called *Sehok ha-Shak*. His obituary in the *New York Times* of March 3, 1910, makes interesting reading. He is called “the Socrates of the Jews,” and among other odd facts I learned that he was often in danger of a thrashing as a youth, because he loved to read and “reading was not encouraged in Russia at that period.”

*American Chess Nuts* by Eugene Cook (1830-1915), is not so obscure. His chess library was one of the best in the world, and forms the core of Princeton's current impressive chess library today. I learned from his obituary in the *New York Times* of March 20, 1915 that "recently when his house was on fire, Mr. Cook stood at the door of his library and refused to allow the firemen to enter, fearing they would damage his collection of books."

Reverend Galen C. Spencer of Greenwich, Connecticut, is not a name I had heard of with respect to chess, but he is called a chess expert in his obituary carried in the *New York Times* of October 20, 1904. His death is another odd one, in that it may have been caused by hiccoughs, which he had for seven straight days before dying.

An unusual obituary came up in my research on a noted female chess player, Ellen Gilbert (*née* Strong) who was the wife of John W. Gilbert of Connecticut. She was left \$100 in a bequest from a Mr. Sidney Hall of Hartford, but the bulk of Hall's estate (\$11,120) went to quite an odd cause. The *Washington Post* discusses this strange will on July 29, 1899, with the headline "To Combat Immortality." At first, I thought this was an amusing typo, and that the money was given to fighting immortality, but the headline is correct. There is something delightfully ironic about giving money in a will to fight immortality, but Mr. Hall wanted to fight the "pernicious doctrine of the immortality of the soul," which he called "the greatest of pagan delusions, and upon which is founded all the great systems of error and superstition in the world."

One amusing obituary deals with a man who had several peculiar interests, one of which involved chess. This is from the *New York Times* of October 12, 1896. "Professor August Duhr, who just died at Friedland, in Mecklenburg, at the age of ninety, had for many years devoted his time and learning to the curious and useless task of translating German classical works into Greek. The best-known is his Greek edition of Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*. He also published such a translation of Geibel's *Memories of Greece*. His strangest work was a low German poetical version of Homer. The professor collected with much trouble a quantity of poems on chess, old and new, and published them in 1860."

The choice of a game to include in this section is an easy one. Although a number of famous players have had chess games published along with their death notices, I found only one example of an amateur whose game was published at the time of his death. This is from the *London Times* of February 16, 1895. The first game is taken from the *Chess Player's Quarterly*, volume 2, page 110, and the second is from the *Illustrated London News*, volume 57, page 227. Notes are from those publications, as reprinted in the *Times*.

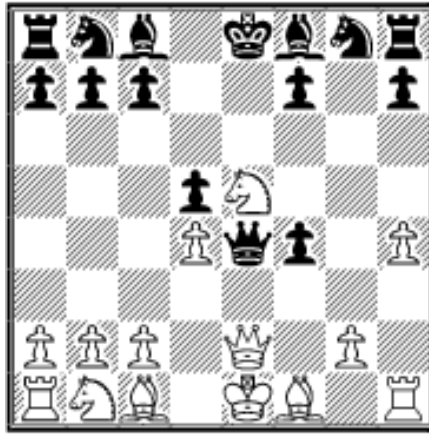


*Lord Randolph Churchill*

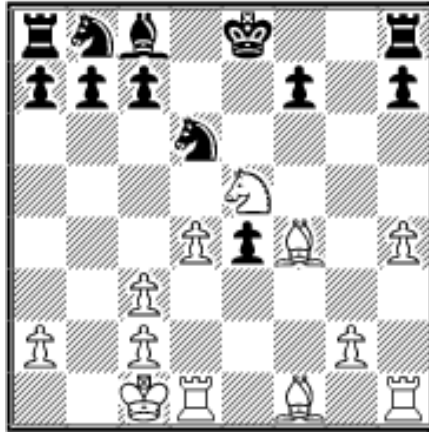
Lord Randolph Churchill may now be remembered (at least outside of Great Britain) as the father of Winston Churchill, but he was an important and controversial politician in his own right. The *London Times* article from which these games are taken is titled “Lord Randolph Churchill as a Chess Player,” and is a response to the fact that none of his many obituary notices mentioned his chess. According to the article, he was one of the founders of the Oxford University Chess Club. He was for some time vice-president of the British Chess Association, though I have the impression that this title was mostly honorary. The article notes that he played chess little after entering public life, but that he did play occasionally with Steinitz for some time after entering the House of Commons. The Churchill Centre mentions that he would often play Steinitz when both were in London in 1877. I might mention that like Steinitz, Churchill also was the subject of a premature death notice, in the *Wiener Zeitung* of September 24, 1893, well before his actual passing on January 24, 1895.

In the first game below, Steinitz shows that he is in a different class from Lord Randolph. However, Churchill does not make any obvious blunders, and clearly has more ability than we have come to expect from the general run of celebrity chess players.

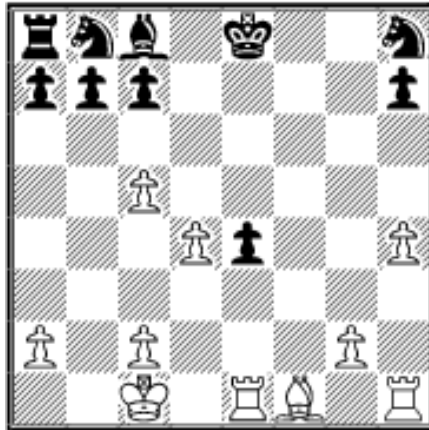
***Steinitz - Lord Randolph Churchill***, (date?; notes in italics from the Times; other notes by Taylor Kingston assisted by Fritz8): **1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.h4 g4 5.Ne5 Qe7** This was once a common defence to the Allgaier opening, but it seems to entail the loss of the gambit pawn. **6.d4 d6 7.Nxg4 Qxe4+ 8.Qe2 d5 9.Ne5**



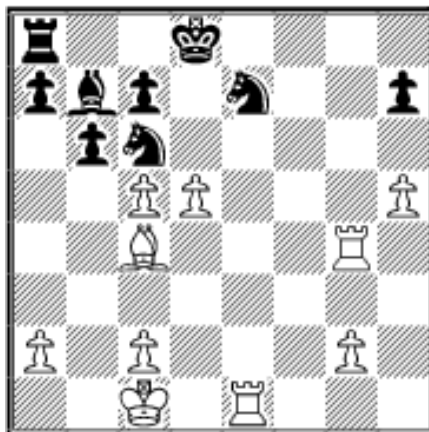
**9...Nh6?! 9...Bh6** would not have done, for White would then have exchanged queens, and played Bc4 etc. Actually 9...Bh6 is not conspicuously worse than the text, however neither move is very good. Best seems 9...Nf6, when if 10.Qxe4 Nxe4 11.Bxf4, Black can choose between 11...Be6, 11...Bd6, 11...Rg8 or several other moves with about an equal game. With 9...Nh6, followed by several more somewhat inferior moves, Churchill drifts into a nearly lost position. **10.Nc3 Bb4 11.Qxe4 dxe4 12.Bxf4 Nf5 13.0-0 Bxc3 14.bxc3 Nd6**



**15.c4** This move loses White a piece, but he obtains for it a full equivalent. It actually sacrifices two pieces for a rook, with more than ample compensation. White could have also maintained the advantage without sacrifice by 15. Nc4. **15...f6 16.c5 fxe5 17.Bxe5 Nf7 18.Bxh8 Nxh8 19.Re1**



Material is about even, but with Black's laggard development and unsafe king, White has a won game. **19...b6** Black should have lost no time here in getting his pieces out; Be6, followed by Kd7 seems the best play. If 19...Be6 20.Rxe4 Kd7, Black is actually quite lost, e.g. 21.Bb5+ c6 22.Rhe1 cxb5 23.Rxe6, etc. Of course if 19...Bf5 20.g4! Bxg4 21.Rxe4+. Black really has no good move here. **20.Rxe4+ Kd8 21.Bc4 Bb7 22.Rg4 22.d5!** was even stronger. **22...Ng6 23.h5 Ne7 24. Re1 Nbc6 25.d5**



**25...Nb4** Na5 would be, perhaps, better, but in any case he must have the worst of it. (Very much so in either case, actually.) **26.c6 Bc8 27. Rg7 Nbx6 28.dxc6 Nxc6 29.Bb5 Bb7 30.Rd1+** and wins.

The second game was played in Oxford by Steinitz against the consulting team of Churchill, the Reverend Charles E. Ranken, and Edwyn Anthony; I believe from the comments on this game that Anthony was the writer of the *Times* article. At one point, Churchill suggested a move

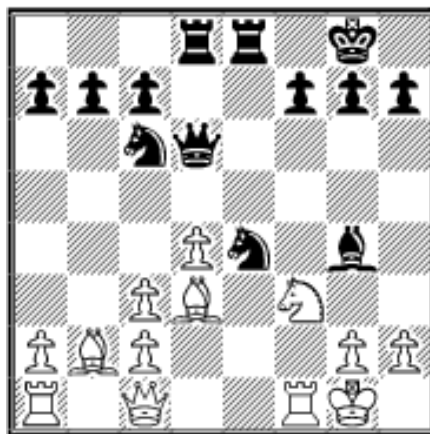
(he believes it was 21...f6) which was disapproved of by Ranken, the senior and ranking member of the trio. As might be

expected from a politician who was known for his independence and stubbornness, “the discussion on the point was long, and its animation seemed to surprise the great champion. At length, by that pertinacity and pugnacity which he afterwards so often and so brilliantly displayed on a larger battlefield, Lord R. Churchill won the day. As the allies managed to draw the game against their redoubtable adversary, they have no reason to regret the move made.”

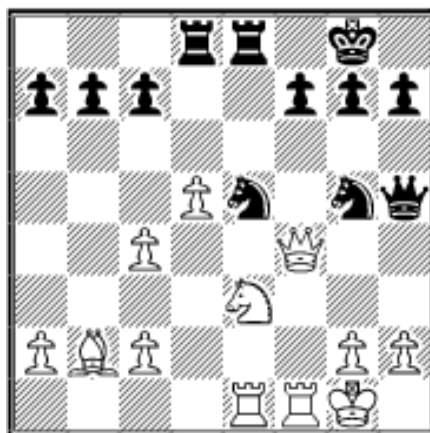
*Steinitz - Churchill + Ranken + Anthony, in consultation, Oxford, August 1870 (notes in italics from the Times; other notes by Taylor Kingston assisted by Fritz8):* **1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.f4 Bb4?** The allies are unversed in theory; correct is 3...d5. **4.fxex5 Bxc3**



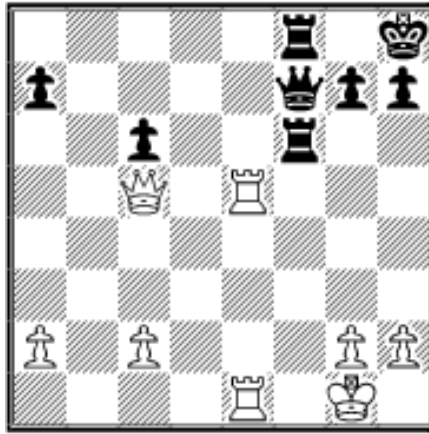
**5.bxc3?!** White’s advantage would be much greater after 5.dxc3!, when if 5...Nxe4 6.Qg4 Nc5 7.Qxg7. **5...Nxe4 6.Nf3?!** Letting slip most of the advantage afforded by Black’s third move; instead with 6.Qg4 Ng5 7.d4, forcing 7...h6, Steinitz still could have maintained much the better game. **6...0-0 7.Be2 Nc6 8.Bb2 d6 9.exd6 Qxd6 10.0-0 Be6 11.d4 Rad8 12.Qc1 Rfe8 13. Bd3 Bg4**



**14.Nd2** If he had played to win the exchange here the attempt would have cost him the game, ex gr - 14.Bxe5 Rxe5 15.Ng5 Re2 16.Nxf7 Qd5 etc. (Absolutely correct!) **14...Ng5** It was thought afterwards by the Allies that they erred here in not taking off the adverse knight. Probably best was 14...Nf6. **15.Nc4 Qh6 16.Qf4 Qh5 17.Ne3** There seems no valid objection to taking the QB pawn here. True, though the text is fine also. Still, Steinitz’s play in the game seems surprisingly meek overall. **17...Be2 18.Bxe2 Qxe2 19.Rae1 Qh5 20.d5 Ne5 21.c4**



Had he now played h4, the result would have been as follows: 21.h4 Nef3+ 22.Rxf3 Nxf3+ 23. Qxf3 Qxf3 24.gxf3 Rxd5 etc. (Again correct.) **21... f6** The move Churchill argued for so vehemently. Fritz8 confirms it as best. The only playable alternative was 21...Qg6, when after 22.Kh1 (not 22.Bxe5?? Nh3+), 21...f6 is necessary anyway. **22.Bc3 Qg6 23.Qf5 Ngf7 24.c5 c6 25.d6 b6 26. Qf4 bxc5 27.Nf5 Nxd6 28.Nxd6 Rxd6 29.Bxe5 fxe5 30.Rxe5 Rf6 31.Qc4+ Kh8 32.Rfe1 Ref8 33.Qxc5 Qf7 1/2-1/2**



The last words of Morphy's friend Frederick Perrin (1815-1889) apply to many chess players, and make a fitting conclusion to this article. As reported in the *Brooklyn Eagle* of January 28, 1889, they were "Doctor, I am puzzled over that last move of mine."

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