



BOOK REVIEWS

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**His column
begins
October 11.**



Detailing the Irredeemable, or, Good Book About a Bad Man

Taylor Kingston

Shady Side: the Life and Crimes of Norman Tweed Whitaker, Chess Master, by John S. Hilbert, 2000 Caissa Editions, English algebraic notation, Hardbound, 481 pp., \$48.00.

"I assure you Sir, that the story of your life in all its unsavory and sordid details, will be paraded before the Court." — U.S. Chess Federation president Frank Graves, to Norman Whitaker, 1955

In legal terms, chess masters have been a fairly well-behaved bunch. Certainly, some have been a bit strange, even insane, and some have broken laws, but very few have been habitual felons. An almost unique exception was Norman Tweed Whitaker (1890-1975). At the same time he was becoming one of America's top players in the 1920s, Whitaker began a life of intermittent crime that would bring him national notoriety, infamy, financial gain and loss, and years in prison. His posthumous reputation has been mixed. GM Arnold Denker, with what seems more than a trace of sneaking admiration, dubbed him "Stormin' Norman, Caissa's Conman" while historian Edward Winter has disdainfully called him "irredeemable."

A quirk of Whitaker's, and one fortunate for history, is that he was very much a pack rat, saving nearly every scrap of paper he had that pertained to his life: letters, telegrams, bills, newspaper clippings, official records, legal documents, chess bulletins, scoresheets etc. After he died, this large cache, some *2,000 documents* spanning his life literally from beginning to end, came into the possession of chess historian, collector and publisher Dale Brandreth. Years later, when John Hilbert, author of the highly regarded book *Napier, the Forgotten Chess Master*, expressed an interest in Whitaker, Brandreth offered him this material. It was eventually supplemented by various interviews, legal records, contemporary newspaper and magazine articles and other





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sources, making *Shady Side* far better researched than many books on more important figures in chess history.

This not a trivial or simple book, and a balanced, thorough discussion of its strengths and flaws cannot be brief. Since, even among Americans, Whitaker is not a household name, I will first sketch his portrait at some length (based almost entirely on material from *Shady Side*), before evaluating the book itself. Those who just want a verdict on the book may skip to the section headed "*Shady Side, the book*", but I recommend reading the full review.

Whitaker, the man

Whitaker was born in 1890 in Philadelphia, which during his youth was second only to New York City as a chess center in the United States. His origins in a respectable, law-abiding middle-class family gave no hint of his future ignominy. He learned chess about age 14 from his father Herbert, an educator, mathematician, and president of one of the city's many chess clubs. Young Norman improved quickly in club play against strong opponents, and by frequent contact with some of the greats of his time: Pillsbury, Marshall, world champion Lasker, and Capablanca (beating the latter two in simuls in 1907 and 1909, respectively). Around 1908-1912 he was one of the country's best and most active collegiate players. It was also at this time that he began to show a strong argumentative streak, a hypersensitivity to slights (real or imagined) and a hostility toward established chess authority, which led to his expulsion from the Franklin, Philadelphia's premier chess club.

After receiving a law degree in 1913 Whitaker began work as a patent attorney in Washington, DC. During the next few years he played frequent chess, with mixed results, for example winning the championships of the District of Columbia and the Southern Chess Association in 1913, but badly losing a 1916 match to former US champion Jackson Showalter 6-1. Soon, however, he improved rapidly, defeating Showalter 5½-2½ in 1918 and reaching his peak in the 1920s: 2nd (of 12) at Atlantic City 1921 (behind European veteran David Janowski but ahead of US champion Frank Marshall, both of whom he defeated), 2nd of 12 at the 1922 Western Chess Association Championship (the *de facto* US tournament championship of the time), equal 1st at the 1923 WCAC, and clear 1st (of 9) at Kalamazoo 1927, a tournament billed as the first National Chess Federation Championship, ahead of Kupchik, Mlotowski, and two future US champions, Sammy Reshevsky and Herman Steiner. The next year Whitaker played in one of his few major events outside the U.S., at The Hague in the 1928 FIDE "Amateur Championship", where he scored a respectable 9½-5½, finishing 4th-6th of 16, 2½ points behind future world champion Max Euwe. Though no rating system was in use at that time, at least two of his

performances have since been calculated in the 2600+ range. His Elo rating for the 1920s has been estimated at 2420 to 2490, which during that period, not the strongest in American chess, placed him probably in the country's top 5 or 6, behind Marshall and the briefly active Carlos Torre, but on a par with such players as Edward Lasker, Abraham Kupchik and Charles Jaffe. From 1916 on Whitaker three times began negotiations for a title match with Marshall, but for various reasons one never took place.

By age 40 he was being surpassed by younger players such as Kashdan, Steiner, Horowitz and Dake, and he was omitted from the 1930 and 1931 Olympiad teams, much to his angry displeasure. A reason for both this and the aborted Marshall negotiations was that Whitaker had begun his life of crime. He committed his first felony, car theft, in 1921, and though he played every angle he could to delay the inevitable, he would spend substantial portions of the years 1925-1950 behind bars and virtually all of 1932-1946 away from organized chess.

Whitaker's illegal acts were characterized not by major evil, but mostly by a self-centered amorality in the areas of money, property, and honesty. Though not given to violence, Whitaker felt relatively little obligation to keep promises, tell factual truth, respect the feelings or possessions of others, or honor debts (though he never forgave others' debts to him). His solipsistic outlook led him to commit or assist in numerous thefts. Some were major frauds and larcenies, involving many thousands of dollars. Others were ludicrously petty: not paying parking tickets, using fake coins in pay phones, stealing library books. In between these extremes he bounced checks, welched on business debts, dodged the military draft, used aliases, filed false insurance claims, stole cars, tampered with the odometers of cars he owned legally, dealt briefly in narcotics, attempted various forms of extortion, and seduced, swindled and jilted women. The one major exception to his pattern of money-related crime was a conviction for sexual molestation of a 12-year-old girl, committed when Whitaker was 59.

His most famous crime was not his own brainchild, but the scheme of one Gaston Means, a notorious swindler compared to whom Whitaker was a bumbling rookie. In 1932, when the baby of aviator hero Charles Lindbergh was kidnapped, Means convinced a wealthy but gullible heiress that he had contact with the kidnapers, and could for \$104,000 secure release of the child. Whitaker, who had known Means since 1924, joined in by posing as a gangster/kidnapper, a role the hammy Whitaker no doubt enjoyed. Neither had any contact with the real kidnapers, but before the credulous heiress caught on she gave out the money. Shortly thereafter Means and Whitaker were arrested, but the money was never recovered, and of course the child, tragically, was dead. Their

callous ploy of using concern for the kidnapped baby to their own selfish ends was seen as particularly detestable.

After years in prison, including time in Alcatraz with Al Capone, and after suffering the loss of his wife of 16 years in 1944, Whitaker returned to a much-changed chess world in the late 1940s. His skill had deteriorated badly, evinced by his 6-13 score and 16th place (of 20) in the 1948 US championship, though he still won local and regional events, and was heavily involved in organizing them. He began years of rancorous dispute with the fledgling U.S. Chess Federation, mostly involving petty personal grudges and gripes. He still demanded to be treated as one of the country's elite, despite the fact that the Elo system, adopted in 1951, put his rating at only about 2180. He considered the rating system one of many conspiracies by enemies in the USCF to belittle him. Disbarred from practicing law, he tried to make money from various shady schemes and nuisance lawsuits, but lived mostly off the charity of friends and relatives. His attacks on the USCF escalated to virtual war, culminating in his "expulsion for life" in 1955. However, Whitaker filed numerous lawsuits the cash-poor USCF could ill afford, and in an ugly compromise he was reinstated next year. That same year, through E. Forry Laucks' "Log Cabin Chess League," he had a brief association with the young Bobby Fischer, the two playing in Cuba as members of a touring Log Cabin team.

An inheritance from the estate of a sister provided Whitaker with a steady, modest income after 1958 (though he was accused of forging the will!). On the plus side, he continued heavy involvement in youth chess and local/regional promotion, which won him friends. He continued to win lesser tournaments, and played often in Europe, for example in 1960 drawing a short match with the old GM Friedrich Sämisch (who later though hinted he threw games to humor the "mad American"). In 1965, after years of heavy lobbying by Whitaker, FIDE awarded him the International Master title, based mainly on his 1920s achievements. On the negative side, he continued to be a chronic complainer especially about the USCF, he filed innumerable nuisance lawsuits, evinced racial bigotry, once attempted a clumsy sort of blackmail, and again showed his pedophilic tendencies when, at age 68, he proposed marriage to a girl of 14.

In his late years, Whitaker's reputation began to improve, due less to any change in him than to the fact that those who remembered his misdeeds were dying off, while younger players knew him only for his laudatory local efforts in chess education and organization. The December 1969 *Chess Life* published his autobiographical article "65 Years in American Chess", a (not surprisingly) self-serving piece that won him further admiration among the unknowing. However, as his

siblings and old associates died off, Whitaker found himself increasingly alone. At age 84 a series of strokes gradually left him incapacitated. One of his few remaining friends got him into a nursing home in Alabama, where he died on May 20, 1975, leaving a pathetically small estate with more debts than assets. The man who in 1932 tried to get rich quick, died a pauper.

Shady Side, the book

First, some raw statistics. Main author Hilbert's biographical narrative covers 297 tightly printed pages. This is followed by a 25-page chapter of recollections by people who knew Whitaker, such as GM Arthur Dake, correspondence chess champion Hans Berliner, and publisher Brandreth. A 127-page games section follows: 570 Whitaker games, spanning the years 1907-1975, many with at least brief notes, about 100 fully annotated. Brandreth contributes a special section discussing Whitaker's chess style and presenting 14 games particularly representative or important in his career. Lastly come a table of Whitaker's major tournament and match results, a one-page chronology of salient events in his life, a "Glossary of Major Figures" giving quick descriptions of the book's cast of characters, and the usual indexes of chess opponents and openings. There are many photographs. Physically, the book is handsome, in a red cover with gold lettering, and a dust jacket with a police mug shot of Whitaker.

Most chess biographies concentrate on chess-related matters: games, tournaments, matches, results, prizes, titles, ratings, rankings, relations with rivals and such. That is here to ample degree, but what makes *Shady Side* different is the huge mass of source material author Hilbert has available, making it one of the most thoroughly researched and detailed portraits in the whole genre, covering almost the whole of its subject's life. Imagine our brief summary above multiplied by a factor of over 100. By comparison, some important chess biographies, such as Hannak's of Emanuel Lasker, are mere skeletons. The material is not only detailed but well organized into a coherent story.

Certain sections are especially good, not only for showing us Whitaker but also the chess world of his time. The Philadelphia of his youth with its respected patriarch Walter Shipley, the regionally fragmented American chess scene of the 1920s, U.S. involvement with the embryonic FIDE, and the struggles of the fledgling USCF, are well described; this is particularly informative for readers who may have always taken such institutions for granted. I found the sections dealing with the early USCF to be among the most interesting, colorful, and informative, not only about Whitaker's character but about the political struggles in and around the USCF. A sample passage:

"In June 1951 Whitaker was exchanging letters with Harold Phillips, USCF president, concerning chess in the nation in general and in particular the failure of the selection committee for the next championship ... to secure other than New York players. Writing expansively, Whitaker complained that 'the great South is excluded entirely' ... Whitaker, of course, knew the last thing the USCF wanted was more regional factionalism, a chess Civil War eighty-five years after Lee had surrendered to Grant. Discord and division were already clearly present ... two Southern Association Championship tournaments would be held at the same time, [one] open to all chess players, while the Tampa event remained segregated ... Whitaker played in the segregated event ..."

A longer excerpt from the book is available in **The Chess Café Skittles Room**. I also recommend the "Chess Archaeology" website at www.chessarch.com/excavations/excavations.shtml. Hilbert's excellent essay there on Whitaker is actually material that he chose to leave out of the final version of the book, however it is very similar in style and content. Both will give potential buyers a very good idea of what the book is like.

Many persons in Whitaker's life, memorable figures in their own right, are well sketched in *Shady Side*: the aforementioned Shipley, eccentric chess promoter E. Forry Laucks (apparently a closet Nazi), fulminating *Chess Life* editor Montgomery Major, early USCF officials Maurice Kuhns, Harold Phillips, Frank Graves, Kenneth Harkness, and Whitaker sidekick Glen Hartleb, who, like the *Dracula* character Renfield, would reply to him "Yes, Master."

However, the main focus is of course on Whitaker. Since many of the source documents were his private papers, it is sometimes an unpleasant close-up view, exposing things never intended for the light of day, finally carrying out the threat Frank Graves made in 1955. We see, for example, suggestive letters Whitaker wrote to girls and young women 40 or 50 years his junior, his crude attempt to blackmail socialite Barbara Hutton by writing a sleazy book about her sex life, and Whitaker's ugly streak of anti-Semitism and race prejudice. In such passages, Hilbert is not descending to sordid sensationalism; it's just that with Whitaker the sordid cannot be entirely avoided. Hilbert does not force one into any moral judgements, but few readers will have difficulty making their own.

There is some important historical correcting and debunking. For example, in Arnold Denker's *The Bobby Fischer I Knew and Other Stories* (1995), one reads that Whitaker attended Oxford University and was an Assistant Secretary of the Interior during the Harding administration in 1922; the general

impression is that he was a charming, smooth-talking rogue who deftly fleeced the gullible rich, something like Paul Newman's character in *The Sting*. Hilbert, in contrast, finds no evidence that Whitaker ever matriculated at Oxford, ever held a federal post higher than minor patent attorney, or ever gained much from any major con besides years in jail. Whitaker may have taken a perverse pride in his criminal record, and it may have impressed some, but Hilbert shows him as a rather inept criminal.

Shady Side is not uniformly excellent. The unusually large store of documents Whitaker left seems at times to prompt Hilbert to use any or all of them, whether important or not. For example page 31 mentions a letter from a John Welsh Young "whose stationary [*sic*], in passing, makes clear that his occupation was that of a wholesale grower of roses, in Germantown, Pennsylvania". From an historical standpoint, it is fortunate that Hilbert has this sort of detail available, but that does not mean, from a literary standpoint, that his narrative must include all such minutiae regardless of relevance. Even details about Whitaker himself sometimes elicit a "So what?", as when we learn about fruitcakes his mother tried to send him while he was in prison.

Some passages combine rather flat prose with a surfeit of mundane detail to produce dull reading. This from page 184 is an example: "On October 10, 1950, [Whitaker] received a letter from Blanche, the sister of his dead wife Beatrice, letting Norman know she was at least 'still alive.' ... Whitaker also learned that his nephew was elected president of his seventh grade class, and that Blanche's other three children were doing well. The children asked about Uncle Norman, and wanted him to come and visit. One persistent nephew even volunteered to sleep in a sleeping bag so Whitaker could have a bed. Whitaker would develop a close interest in Blanche's family, and visit them on a number of occasions." It's not clear why such interesting material as the Chess Archaeology essay was left out in favor of this kind of soporific extranea. The interest level flags when the pace is slowed by too much detail or digression. Fortunately it's raised elsewhere, but some judicious pruning was in order, in this writer's opinion.

The book shows frequent small mistakes of editing and proofreading. There is confusion over homonyms: "fair" where "fare" is meant (as both noun and verb), "stationary" for stationery, "breech" for breach, "roll" for role, "desperate" for disparate, "tact" for tack, etc. Worse is the rampant omission of hyphens, e.g. "far reaching consequences," "USCF rated events," "tie break system," and the confusing "three year contracts" and "muck raking book," to list only a few. Misuse of apostrophes, spaces, and diacritical marks is also common: "it's corporate officers," "Candidate's Tournament," "straight forward," "bon a fide," and "José Calderon" (for José

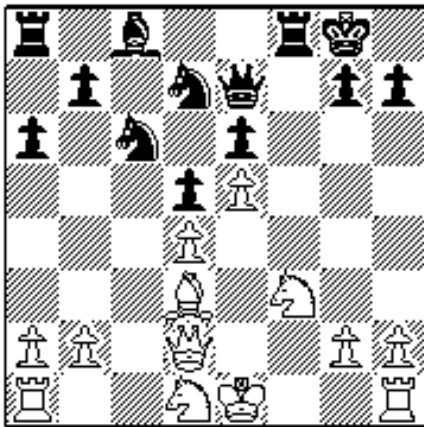
Calderón) being a few examples. Awkward split infinitives such as "failure to timely retract" and "to not further muddy the waters" crop up. Page 44 says "Seven of his games have been preserved [Games No. 54-61]." That's actually eight games.

The usual indexes of chess opponents and openings (by name only, no ECO codes) are present, but there is no general index, a bothersome omission. A book of this kind, more biography than games collection, about a man who had many important contacts and dealings outside the chess world, needs an index for non-chess references. Also there is no bibliography, and though a partial tournament record is given there are no crosstables or standings. On the positive side, whenever a game is mentioned in the narrative, its reference number is given in parentheses, as also for items from the Russell Collection. However, on the whole the book must be considered inadequate in the index and reference areas.

On balance, these flaws are small compared to the overall quality of the book. And I suppose if one is to err in the level of detail, too much is preferable to too little. However, I do consider these problems significant enough to drop the book from a potential "great" rating to "very good."

The games collection is a prodigious piece of research. Most databases have at most a few dozen Whitaker games, here we have 570. This is not only a huge increase but a significant contribution to the game's history. Some representative samples follow.

Whitaker was a sharp tactician, as shown in this early game, by which he won a prestigious club championship. **W. A. Ruth-Whitaker**, Philadelphia, 1909: **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Be7 5 e5 Nfd7 6 Bxe7 Qxe7 7 f4 a6 8 Nf3 c5 9 Qd2 Nc6 10 Nd1 0-0 11 c3 f6 12 Bd3 cxd4 13 cxd4 fxe5 14 fxe5** (*See Diagram*)

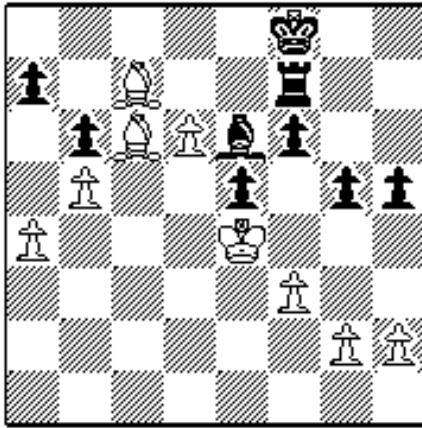


14...Rxf3!? **15 gxf3 Qh4+** **16 Nf2?** (16 Qf2!? may hold) **Nxd4 17 Be4 Nxe5 18 0-0-0 Nxf3** — Three pawns and an attack are plenty for the Exchange. **19 Bxf3 Nxf3 20 Qe3 Bd7 21 Qxf3 Rf8** and 0-1, 28.

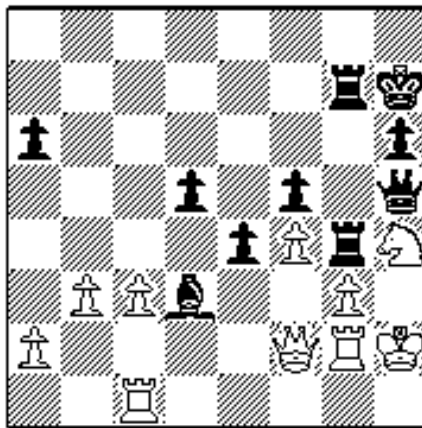
At Atlantic City 1921 Whitaker had one of his finest results, finishing

2nd, only ½-point behind winner Janowski and well ahead of US champion Frank Marshall, both of whom he defeated. Here is the finish of his game with Janowski, Whitaker

playing Black (*See Diagram*):



**40...Rxc7 41 dxc7 Bc8
42 g4 hxg4 43 fxg4 Ke7
44 h3 Kd6 45 Be8 Ke6
46 Bc6 Kd6 47 Be8
Kxc7 48 Bf7 Kd6 49
Bb3 Bb7+ 50 Kf5 Ke7
51 h4 gxh4 52 g5 fxg5 53
Kxg5 h3, 0-1. (*See
Diagram*)**



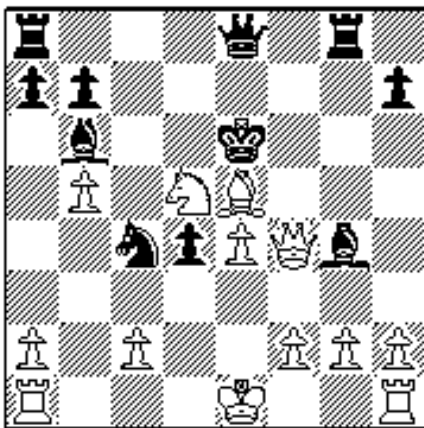
Here Whitaker (Black) is near perfection in finishing a powerful attack, against the strong master Stasch Mlotowski at Detroit 1924:

**44...e3! 45 Qxe3 Be4 46
Rcg1 Rxh4+ 47 gxh4
Qxh4+ 48 Qh3 Qxf4+ 49
Rg3 Rg4 50 Rf1 Qd2+
51 Kg1 Qxc3 52 Kh2
Qe5** — Slightly better

was 52...Qd2+/Qc2+ 53 Kg1 Qd3, but it hardly mattered. **53 Re1 Qb2+ 54 Kg1 Qd4+, 0-1.**

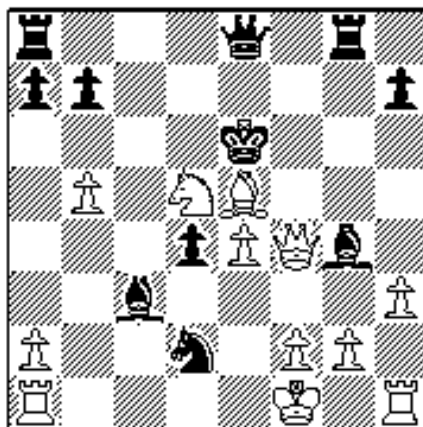
By 1930, having spent some years in jail, Whitaker showed some signs of decline, as here where he stumbles in a wild game against an established IM. **Whitaker-George A.**

Thomas, USA-Britain Cable Match, 1930: 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 b4 Bb6 5 b5 Na5 6 Nxe5 Nh6 7 d4 d6 8 Bxh6 dxe5 9 Bxg7 Rg8 10 Bxf7+ Kxf7 11 Bxe5 Bg4 12 Qd3 c5 13 Nc3 cxd4 14 Nd5 Qe8 15 Qg3 Nc4 16 Qf4+ Ke6 (*See Diagram*)



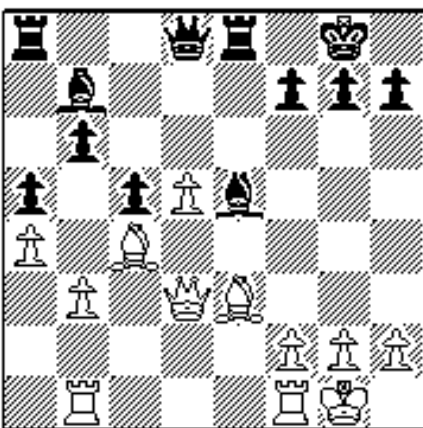
17 h3?? — Tartakower and DuMont recommend 17 Nxb6 axb6 18 Bxd4, however White might have done best with 17 Bc7!, a sample line being 17...Qf8 18 h3 Bh5 19 Bxb6 Nxb6 20 Qh4 Nxd5 21 exd5+ Kd6 22 Qxh5 Rxc2 23 0-0-0 when White has won back his sacrificed piece but the position is complex. In

any event, the text is a decisive error. **17...Ba5+! 18 c3 Bxc3+ 19 Kf1 Nd2+** (*See Diagram*)



20 Qxd2 — "By this temporary sacrifice of the Queen, White hopes – mistakenly, as it turns out – to redeem the situation." (T & DuM). If instead 20 Kg1 Nf3+ 21 Kf1 Qxb5 mate. 20 Ke1 was relatively best but no salvation. **20...Qxb5+! 21 Kg1 Bxd2 22 Nc7+ Kxe5 23 Nxb5 Bf3**, 0-1.

After WW II Whitaker was no longer a top player, but he still could upset those who were, as with a defeat of Kashdan in 1951. Here is another example, from the 1947 US Open. His opponent, George Kramer, was at the time considered a top young prospect on a par with future GMs like Evans and Bisguier, but from this position (*See Diagram*)

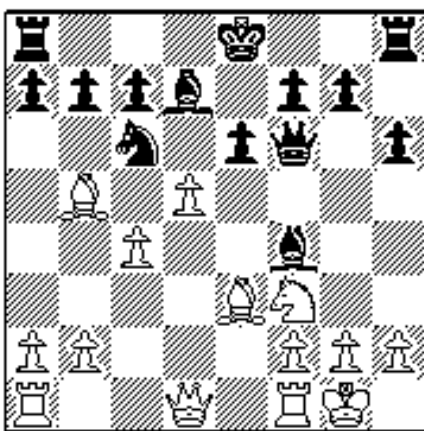


Whitaker creamed him with **19...Qd6 20 g3 Rad8 21 Rbd1 Bc8 22 Bg5 f6 23 Bd2 Bg4 24 f3?** — Better 24 Rc1, though Black is then still preferable. The text fatally weakens the kingside and allows a decisive strike. **24...Bh3 25 Rfe1** — If 25 Rf2 Bd4. **25...Bxg3! 26 Rxe8+ Rxe8 27 f4 Bg4!**

28 Rf1 Bh4 29 Be3 f5 30 Qd2 Bf6 31 Kg2 Re4 32 Bd3 Bc3

33 Qf2 Qg6 34 Bxe4, 0-1. White apparently resigned before Black could play 34...Bf3+! 35 Kxf3 Qg4 mate.

After 1948 Whitaker played mostly in local, regional, or state-level tournaments. Over half of *Shady Side*'s games date from then on. He was fond of playing sharp, trappy lines he had studied for years: the Latvian and Budapest gambits, and a special line of the French. These could backfire against well-booked players, but led to many quick wins against the unprepared. **Whitaker - R. Hayes**, Gem City Open, Dayton, Ohio, 1959: **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Be3** — Usually attributed to Alapin and Janowski, Whitaker modestly preferred to call this the Whitaker variation. **3...dxe4 4 Nd2 Nc6 5 Nxe4 Nf6 6 Nxf6+ Qxf6 7 Nf3 h6 8 Bb5 Bd7 9 0-0 Bd6 10 c4 Bf4?! — Better 10...0-0-0. 11 d5** (*See Diagram*)



11...Ne5?? — 11...Bxe3 was necessary, though after 12 fxe3 exd5 13 cxd5 Nb8 White is better. **12 dxe6** — Also good is 12 Bxf4 Qxf4 13 Nxe5, when if 13...Qxe5? 14 Bxd7+ Kxd7 15 dxe6+ Kc8 16 Re1. **12...fxe6 13 Nxe5 Bxb5 14 Bxf4 Qxf4 15 Qh5+, 1-0.**

However the aging

Whitaker became increasingly prone to blunders, and sometimes found himself the victim of similar traps.

Whitaker-Stopa, Downeast Open, Portland, Maine, 1973: **1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Bxc6 dxc6 5 Nc3 f6 6 d4 exd4 7 Nxd4 c5 8 Nf3 Qxd1+ 9 Kxd1 Bd6 10 e5? fxe5 11 Nxe5?? Bxe5 12 Re1 Bg4+ 13 f3 0-0-0+ 12 Bd2 Bxc3**, 0-1. Though anger and dishonesty prevailed in many of Whitaker's dealings, oddly he was seldom if ever discourteous at the board, and was never known to cheat at chess. His opponent in this game recalls that "he resigned gracefully ... [and] withdrew from the tournament after this loss."

I have gone to more than my usual length to give the reader a clear idea of this book because I feel it is an important one. John Hilbert currently is doing some of the best historical research and writing of anyone on the chess scene. He is among the few whose work can be compared with biographies by scholars in serious academic fields such as political or military history. *Shady Side*, along with its predecessor on William Napier, has raised the bar for chess biography. The common run of half-baked rehashes lacking in original research will look increasingly silly alongside such books as

this. Its subject may have been a bad man, but *Shady Side* is a very good book, one serious chess history lovers will prize and future authors should emulate.

Order *Shady Side: the Life and Crimes of Norman Tweed Whitaker, Chess Master*, by John S. Hilbert



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