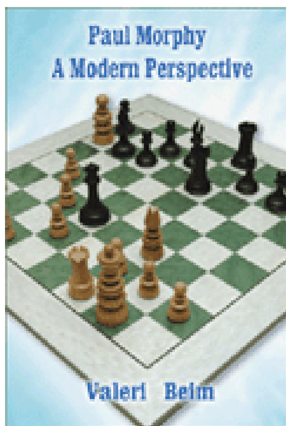
COLUMNISTS

New Stories about Old Chess Players

Jeremy P. Spinrad



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Chess History and Literature

If you do research in chess history, you find out early on that very few people want to listen to you. If you mention an exciting new find to a fellow chess fan, they look at you strangely; how is discovering a game played in 1834 by an obscure German master going to help you beat the latest variation of the Sicilian? Of course, non-chessplayers cannot understand that our time spent on chess in any form is an entertaining form of relaxation, but they understand reading about chess even less than playing chess. Finally, academic historians have no respect for chess history; it does not fit very nicely into any general battle of ideas, standards are quite low, and you certainly cannot hope to turn it into an academic book or position. Every once in a while, however, you run into something that might have a little relevance to some academic subject. This section deals with a few places where I think chess history may have some relation to the study of literature.

There have been quite a few books in which chess plays a critical role. In some, such as Nabokov's *The Defense*, the book on which the movie *The Luzhin Defense* was based, chess is used primarily as a setting. In others, chess plays a deeper role. Probably the most famous mix of chess and literature, the one that has gained "classic" status in both popular and literary culture, is Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. It is well known that Alice represents a pawn in a chess game who eventually becomes a queen, and the people she encounters represent pieces that come into her view as the Alice-pawn (A-pawn?) moves across the board. Unlike some later books that use this theme, the actual game played is still the subject of debate. Earlier examples of a story based on chess moves include George Walker's *Vicenzo the Venetian*, which appears on pages 177-189 of the February 1839 issue of the *United States Democratic Review*, and a romance called *Anastasia* (or *Anastasia und das Schachspiel*) written by Heinse in 1803, which consisted of chess problems and scenes based on the game.

Alice Liddell and ferns.

Photo by Lewis Carroll, July 1860

There have been many books and theses written on Lewis Carroll, his feelings towards the young Alice Liddell, the exact meaning of each of the famously tricky caricatures of schools of philosophy in the book, and so forth. The accepted view of how the story came to be, however, is very simple. Lewis Carroll was teaching Alice how to play chess, and devised the stories to entertain young Alice while she was learning the game.

There is no doubt that Lewis Carroll was a sufficiently enthusiastic chess player so that teaching a young child chess seems plausible. In addition to having written the story itself, Carroll (a.k.a. Charles Dodgson, his real name) is known to have owned a number of chess books that show he was a keen player; these included Staunton's book on London 1851, for example. But would Alice, even at her age, have been so ignorant of the game of chess that she was just learning the moves, having been given, as the story goes, a chess set by Carroll? In those days, among the educated classes, chess played a far more important part in social life than it does today, when social chess might be viewed as an oxymoron. After a dinner party, it was common for guests to adjourn to a living room, where they would have games set up. Chess and whist were very popular at the time, and in the social circles of Oxford (where the Liddells lived) I would imagine that chess was fairly ubiquitous.

Charles Dodgson

In the case of the Liddells, there is a much closer connection to chess. Although the connection seems pretty clear now, I thought I was oh-so-clever when I first pieced it together, solving my first chess history puzzle.

First, I noticed that one of the supporters of the London 1851 tournament, with a contribution of 5 pounds to the prize fund, was H.T. Liddell. Liddell also appears in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games*, losing to Staunton in 1854 at P+2 odds. I looked for H.T. Liddell on the net, and found reference (in a book on birds) to an H.T. Liddell of Ravensworth Castle. Alice Liddell's father was Henry George Liddell, and his father was Thomas Henry Liddell, the Baron of Ravensworth until 1855. In 1855, the title passed to Henry George's older brother, Henry Thomas Liddell, who was Baron Ravensworth from 1855-1878. Thus, I speculated that Alice was the niece of the serious chess player and patron H.T. Liddell.

A definitive proof of this speculation comes in H.A. Kennedy's book *Waifs and Strays, Chiefly from the Chessboard*, page 181, which describes one of London's classier chess clubs in the old days (the context is an article on Albany Fonblanque as a chess player):

> "I am alluding now to the palmy days when the St. George's Club held its meetings in Cavendish Square. Among the habitués were the Bishop of Rochester, Lord Cremorne (now Earl of Daltry), Hon. H.T. Liddell (now Earl of Ravensworth), Messrs. Benjamin Smith, Milnes Gaskell, Brooke Greville, M. Wyvill, M.P., C.R. Talbot, M.P., Sir Charles Marshall, Mr. Staunton, and other staunch adherents of the game ..."

We therefore know that H.T. Liddell, contributor to London 1851 and opponent of Staunton, is also Lord Ravensworth. Ravensworth took part in one important chess event, Blackburne's ten-board blindfold simultaneous exhibition in 1862. He achieved one of the draws in a carefully played game against Blackburne (Blackburne's overall score was + 5 -2 =3) with the following game. Other games by Ravensworth appear in the *Chess Player's Chronicle*.

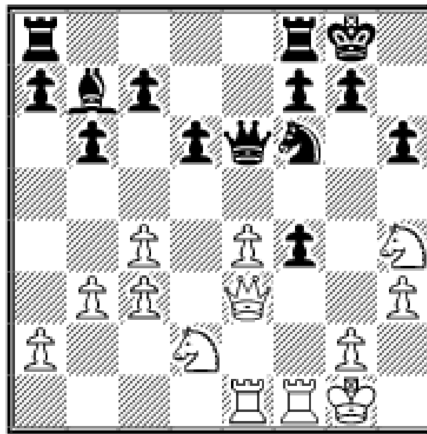
Blackburne-Ravensworth*, blindfold simultaneous, 1862*: **1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.Nf3 Nc6 4. Nxd4 e5 5.Nb5 Bc5 6.Nd6+ Bxd6 7.Qxd6 Nge7 8.Bc4 0-0 9.0-0 Na5 10.Bg5 Nxc4 11. Qxe7 Qb6 12.Nc3 f6 13.Nd5 Qc6 14.Qb4 a5 15.Qc3 Rf7 16.Bh4 Nd6 17.Qb3 Kf8 18. Qd3 Ne8 19.Bg3 d6 20.f4 b6 21.fxe5 dxe5 22.Rf3 Raa7 ½-½**

In the *Chess Players Quarterly Chronicle* of 1868-1869, page 104, there is an Evans Gambit game between Lord Ravensworth and Reverend Skipworth, which Ravensworth loses as White. The notes on the game mention that the game is given at Lord Ravensworth's request, as a sequel to two games given in the previous issue [JS: perhaps referring to two games in which Wayte as black beat Löwenthal] showing the strength of Black's pawns when the attack has been stopped. One family member inspired one of the best loved children's classics, and the other asked to get a loss of his into the journal; a truly remarkable family!

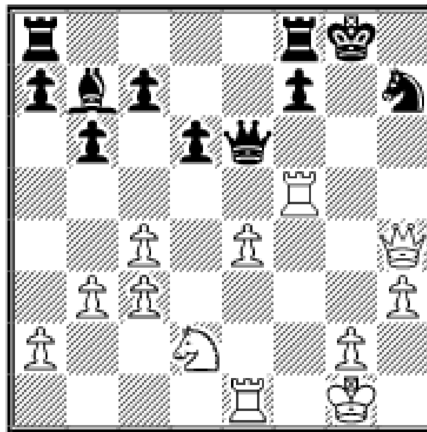
Queen Alice, and the Red and White Queens

I give a Ravensworth game below, from the *Chess Player's Chronicle* 1868-69 pp. 301-302. I find the game appealing, though many players from our time will not. The result is not dictated by positional advantages, instead coming from a bold sacrificial plan starting at move sixteen.

Ravensworth-Skipworth, *Nov. 5, 1869 (notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8)*: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.c3 d6 6.h3 h6 7.Qe2 Na5 8.Be3 Bxe3 9.Qxe3 Nxc4 10.dxc4 b6 11.0-0 Ba6 12.Nbd2 Qe7 13.Nh4 Qe6 14.b3 Bb7 15.Rae1 0-0 16.f4!? exf4**



17.Rxf4 Objectively better was 17.Qxf4, preventing 17…g5, but White seems to want to provoke the pawn fork. **17…g5 18.Rf5 gxh4 19. Qxh6 Nh7 20.Qxh4**



20…Qg6??A fatal mistake. With 20…f6 Black could have held. **21.Re3** Obviously threatening 22.Rg3, which prompts Black to jump from the frying pan into the fire. **21…Qe6 22.Rg3+ Kh8 23.Rh5 1-0**

Thus, with regard to knowledge of chess, Alice was not just another girl from Oxford; she came from an active and even celebrated chess-playing family. Could Alice's board really have come from her uncle rather than Carroll? I have no proof, but my feeling is that Alice very likely knew the rules of chess before Lewis Carroll came into her life.

There is another interesting connection between the highest levels of British chess and Alice Liddell. To illustrate the charms of the young Alice, *The Annotated Alice* gives an anecdote about her and another celebrated writer, Professor John Ruskin. Some people have expanded on the quote to construct a "flirtation" between Alice and Ruskin as well as Alice and Carroll, but this is debated. Ruskin was also well known as a chess player. He was vice-president of the British Chess Association at one point, and his effects include an unpublished manuscript of John Cochrane's titled "Loose Indian Chess Leaves" which is now in the John G. White collection of the Cleveland library, along with many other fascinating manuscripts. It is surprising to see how much real chess surrounds this young girl, who in a completely different way will always be associated with the game.

George Salmon

My other discovery relating chess with literature comes from my attempt to guess what a list of "top 20" British masters would look like in the mid-1800s. There are some indications that such a list was kept, as I will discuss in another article. One player to consider for some years was an Irishman, George Salmon (1819-1904). Salmon played at the Birmingham 1858 tournament (attended by Morphy, who did not play), beating one Djuro Szabo (1840-1892, not to be confused with twentieth-century Hungarian GM Laszlo Szabo) 2-0 in the first round before losing to Owen in the second; he also played in the blindfold exhibition against Morphy. Reading the chess journals and source books, Salmon is mentioned from time to time as one of the strongest players in Ireland. He is listed in the book of the London 1851 tournament as a donor, "Rev. Geo. Salmon of Trinity College, Dublin."

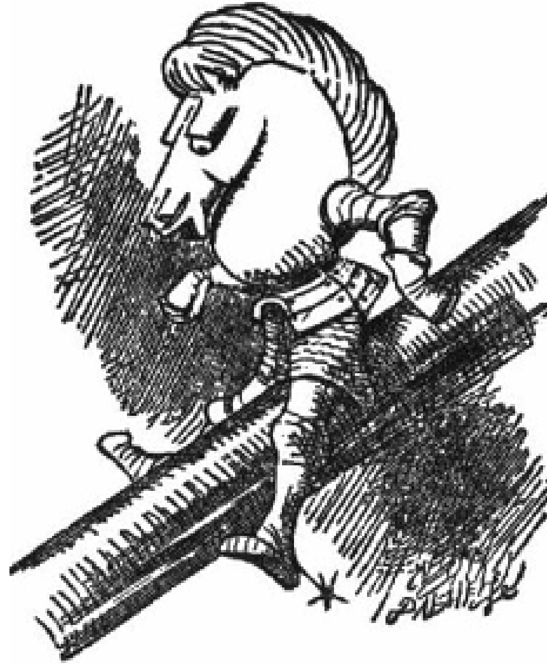
Attempting a quick search for Salmon and chess on the net gives too many hits, so I had to narrow my aim. In one good hit, dealing with the Irish Chess Congress of 1865, he is referred to as Rev. Dr. Salmon. Deciding to search on this (together with chess) led to some interesting pages. A search argument of Reverend Dr. Salmon *and* chess, returned hits that were all passages from James Joyce's famous *Ulysses*, a book many of us remember with some pain from college reading lists.

Joyce scholars have told me that the mention of chess on this page is simply a fortuitous coincidence, but the character referred to is indeed Salmon the chess player. He is considered a role model for the young Bloom in *Ulysses*. Salmon was the Provost of Trinity College in Belfast. There is still a statue of him at the college, but people seem to use it as a prop for a single joke. Apparently, Salmon had said that women would be admitted to the college "over my dead body"; within a year he was dead and the first woman was admitted.

In fact, Salmon was an extraordinarily accomplished and versatile intellectual. He was trained in mathematics, and made significant contributions in geometry and algebra. As well as doing original work in these areas at a very high level, his books on the subject were considered to be excellent.

However, he is most remembered now for his work in theology. In particular, his attack on the concept of papal infallibility is still considered to be important both by supporters and

opponents of the Catholic Church; this work was republished as recently as 1997. This famous work mentions chess: arguing that the question of papal infallibility is all-important, he says that if this doctrine is not refuted all other arguments would be of little importance, as when a chess-player wins some pieces and pawns but gets his king checkmated. This chess analogy is credited by Salmon as a favorite illustration of Archbishop Whately, rather than being his own, but its use in the introduction is still noteworthy.

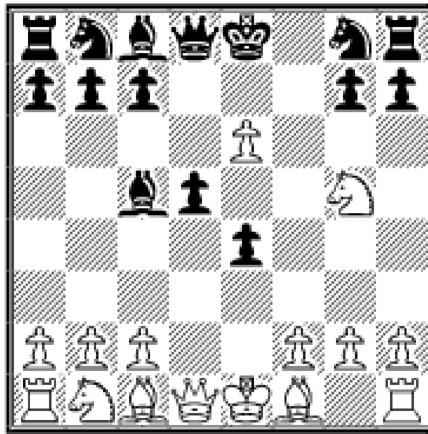


Knight sliding down the poker

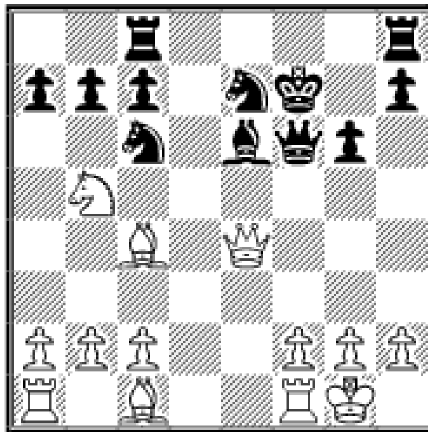
Some of the last one-on-one games I have seen by Staunton were against Salmon. I feel that as Staunton tried to distance himself from the chess world, he was more willing to play a gentleman intellectual such as Salmon, than a serious professional. Several Salmon-Staunton games played at P+2 odds in 1859 and 1860 are given in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games*.

For examples of Salmon's play, I chose his two wins over Szabo in the Birmingham tournament of 1858. In the first game, Salmon makes it look easy, as he calmly and nicely crushes Szabo's weak opening play. The second game is much more thrilling, not technically precise, but good fighting chess. I was impressed by these games, and would like to see more of Salmon's games, in particular those against Owen in the second round of the tournament. These seem harder to find; readers are encouraged to contact us with any relevant information.

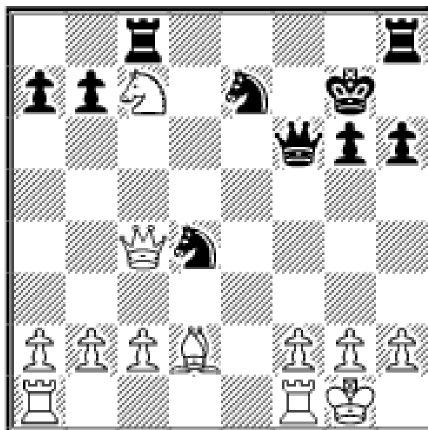
Salmon-Szabo*, Birmingham 1858 (notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8)*: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 f5 4.dxe5 fxe4 5.Ng5 d5 6.e6 Bc5??**



Black has misplayed the opening badly and is already as good as lost. Relatively best was 6…Nh6. **7.Nxe4** It's not clear why Salmon prefers this to 7.Nf7. The text allows Black to cut his losses by 7...Bb4+ 8.c3 dxe4 and either 9.Qxd8+ Kxd8 10.cxb4 Bxe6 or 9.Qh5+ g6 10.Qe5 Qf6 11.Qxc7 Ne7. But Szabo fails to see this. **7…dxe4 8.Qh5+ g6 9.Qxc5 Bxe6 10.Qe5 Qf6 11. Qxe4 Nc6 12.Bc4 Kf7 13.0-0 Re8 14.Nc3 Nge7 15.Nb5 Rc8**

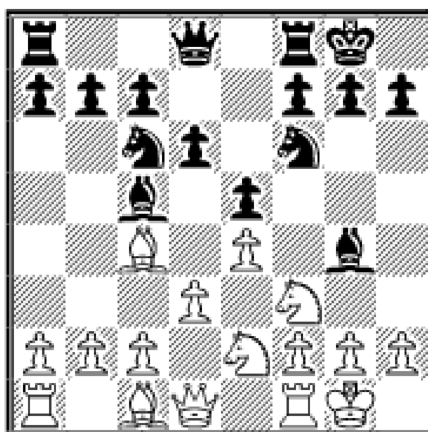


16.Bf4 The immediate 16.Nxc7 was possible; if 16…Rxc7 17.Bxe6+ Qxe6 8.Qf4+. **16…Bxc4 17. Qxc4+ Kg7 18.Nxc7 h6 19.Bd2 Nd4**

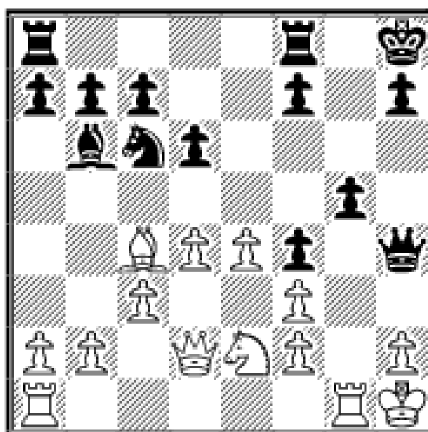


Allowing a merciful end to a game in which Salmon completely outclassed his opponent. **20. Qxd4 Qxd4 21.Ne6+ 1-0**

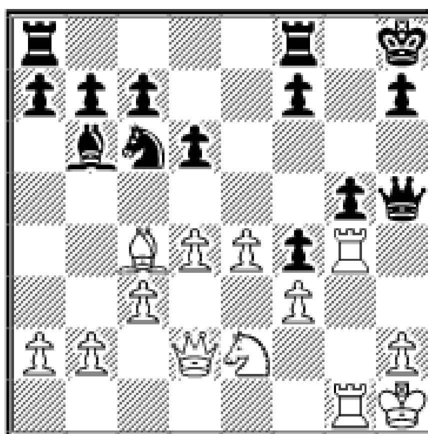
Szabo-Salmon*, Birmingham 1858 (notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8)*: **1.e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.0-0 0-0 6.d3 d6 7.Ne2** To enable c2-c3 and d3-d4, but if White intended this 4.c3 was better than 4.Nc3. It was better here to proceed in normal Giuoco Pianissimo fashion with 7.Be3. **7…Bg4**



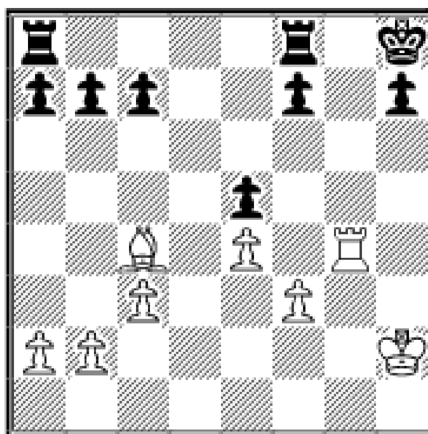
8.c3?! White thinks nothing of weakening his castled position. The game now centers around the f-and g-files. **8…Bxf3 9.gxf3 Nh5** A bit too direct, perhaps. Instead, with Black better developed and White vulnerable on the kingside, opening things up with 9…d5 seems in order. **10. Ng3 Nf4 11.d4** Superiority in the center now compensates somewhat for White's kingside weakness. **11…Bb6 12.Bxf4 exf4 13.Ne2 Qh4 14.Qd2 g5 15.Kh1 Kh8 16.Rg1**



16…Qxf2 Better seems 16…f5, allowing for rook lifts over to the h-file, capitalizing on White's cramped and weakened kingside. The text allows White to wriggle out of his difficulties, but he fails to seize the chance. **17.Raf1?!** Instead 17.Rxg5 Qxf3+ 18.Rg2 Rg8 19.Nxf4 Qxe4 20.Re1 leads to a slight advantage for White. **17…Qh4 18.Rg4 Qh5 19.Rfg1**



19…Ne5? This ends up working much better than it should. Objectively better was 19...Ne7, when if 20.Rxg5 Qxf3+ and either 21.R5g2 Ng6 with some advantage for Black, or 21.R1g2 when Black can force a draw with 21…Qf1+ 22.Rg1 Qf3+ 23.R1g2 Qf1+ etc. **20.Nxf4??** The decisive error. The natural 20.dxe5 Bxg1 21.Kxg1 dxe5 22.Qd5 would have given White a slight advantage. **20…gxf4 21.dxe5 Bxg1 22.Qxf4 Qxh2+ 23.Qxh2 Bxh2 24.Kxh2 dxe5**



The smoke has cleared with Black up the exchange and a pawn. The rest is simple. **25.Rg5 f6 26.Rg4 Rad8 27.Rg2 f5 28.Kh3 fxe4 29.fxe4 Rf4 0-1**

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