

SADLER ON BOOKS

by MATTHEW SADLER

This review deals with a real chess publishing 'event' - the publication of Garry Kasparov's *My Great Predecessors*.

This book, the first in a series, is a journey through chess history, based on the rise and fall of the 14 world champions (Steinitz to Kramnik) and their greatest adversaries. The first volume focuses on Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, and Alekhine supplemented with extensive treatment of the unofficial champions such as Morphy and Staunton.

The book is co-authored by Garry and Dmitry Plisetsky. The co-author is a Russian chess master and journalist who also co-authored the excellent book 'Russians vs Fischer', reviewed in *New In Chess* 2002/4. I'm not quite sure what the division of labour was - I imagine that Garry was alone responsible for the chess part while Plisetsky was chiefly responsible for the substantial historical background information. While reading the book, I couldn't help getting the image in my head of Garry dictating the game annotations at 200 mph while furiously moving the pieces on the board at the same time. That's how it reads anyway. The typical annotation in this book is that a series of moves suggested by another analyst are given, with the analyst's evaluation of the position. Then a full stop and the deadly words: 'Excuse Me' followed by the correct variation/evaluation!

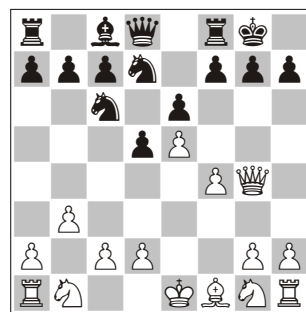
Each chapter follows a fairly standard pattern - the development of a world champion is traced from early games and successes, building up to the all-important world championship matches which are dealt with in great detail. The end of the chapter presents a summary of comments made by other world champions about their predecessors - always good stuff!

Just to digress slightly, it is exceptionally unusual nowadays for a strong player to write about anything else but his own games. Of course, such annotations are always interesting to read - it is always fascinating to gain an insight into how strong players think during a game, the things that they saw, the things that they missed, and also the things that they did not think were worth worrying about! However, this can lead to some 'lazy' annotations. It is always easier to annotate your own games - you were there when it happened after all. This makes it very tempting to use emotion in place of analysis to justify decisions. If you don't really want to investigate the complications that occurred during the game, then you do tend to use 'it worked, so I was right anyway' logic to explain your moves.

It is much more difficult to analyse the games of others - you have to 'start cold' as the emotion of the game is not at your disposal. Certainly, I've always found my annotations of other people's games



to be full of mistakes, despite the fact that I usually spend much more time annotating them than annotating my own games. Kasparov is one of the few living players you can think of (Timman would be the other) who would be interested enough to put in the enormous effort required. I have to confess though that I couldn't help smiling at the number of strange positions that Garry must have had to analyse in order to write this first volume... yeah, if you're going to write about players like La Bourdonnais and McDonnell, I guess that you will have to suffer a little bit! I think you can detect some of this suffering back in his comment about the opening of 18th game of the Chigorin-Tarrasch 1893 match:



Chigorin-Tarrasch
position after 8...c6

9. ♖f3

'In the final, 22nd game, Mikhail Ivanovich 'corrected' himself with

9.c3 but after 9...d4! Black also gained the advantage (...). It is amusing that a theoretical duel in the match developed in a position where for White one already wants... simply to resign!

In general, the annotations in the book do not try to overwhelm you with long complicated variations. However, a large number of faulty analysis/evaluations made by other commentators are corrected, partly by Garry and partly by his silicon friend.

It's a sign of the times I guess, but I really had to get used to the fact that Garry so often writes 'analysing this with my computer' or 'the computer finds...' I mean... this is the strongest player who has ever lived writing this! Felt a bit like the end of chess.

However, the essential point about the book is that it is an absolutely cracking good read! I'm currently in the middle of a rather hectic period studying for exams, and just picked up the book in the morning while waiting for my computer to start up... I didn't study that day! The enthusiasm that Garry has for chess jumps from the pages – the whole book reads like a fast-moving thriller! Moreover, reading about chess history through the eyes of a world champion gives this book a special feel. When Kasparov writes about the titanic struggle in the middle phase of the Capablanca-Alekhine match, you know that he is writing with the experience of someone who has lived through this sort of pressure and overcome it. I'd never been able to muster much interest in the old world championship matches, but after this book, I suddenly realize how much I've been missing...

Well, I think it's time to give you an extended taste of the book.

First the following extract, taken from the chapter 'Jose Raul the Third'. It is a typical example of the way that Garry's personal experience adds unique insight to the description of the course of a world championship match.

The situation is as follows: Capablanca has just won the 7th game brilliantly and stands 2-1 ahead in the match.

'The champion had clearly warmed up! After this excellent win, Capablanca took the lead and he possibly thought that later too everything would go smoothly: draws with black, wins with white...

However, in the ninth game a slight disappointment awaited him: from the opening he would have seized the initiative but with a series of precise moves, Alekhine brilliantly solved some rather difficult problems. This was the first symptom of the imminent turning-point. Alekhine's wins in the 11th and 12th games took him into the lead – 3-2, and undermined Capablanca's confidence in his ultimate success. "I am not doing as well as I expected", he wrote at that time to a friend in New York. "I believe however that should another match be arranged in New York, for, say, the beginning of 1929, I could do much better ... Should the match here end in a draw, I suggest that the next match be limited to twenty games..."

These impressive wins influenced the evaluation of the further course of the match: in chess literature the opinion was expressed that Alekhine, despite isolated failures, confidently sailed to the champion's title – especially since he won the 21st game in splendid style, increasing his lead to 4-2.

But to me, the picture seems somewhat different. After his de-

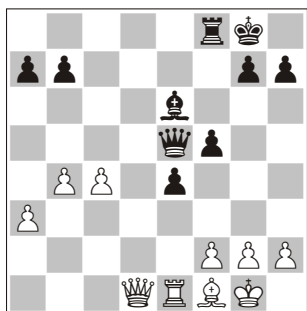
feats in the 11th and 12th games, Capablanca came down to earth, gathered his strength and began making draws, in order to gradually come to, get back to his best and begin a new offensive (this resembles Lasker's strategy in the 1921 match: the main thing being to hold on!).

After four successive draws he had completely calmed down, but the 17th game again upset him. After letting slip an enormous positional advantage, he angrily said: "If I can't win *such* a game, I will also not win the match..." With two respite draws he regained his calm, but then came the 20th game, in which he seized the initiative, won the exchange and... barely escaped with a draw. Alekhine was playing very very strongly! I think that Capablanca was shocked, at any event he played very badly in the 21st game, whereas Alekhine's play was again very strong.

"By inertia" Capa also nearly lost the 22nd game. Alekhine conducted it with great verve, but in a difficult endgame, he missed a win (at the end the Cuban defended brilliantly). And here it seems to me, a new phase of the match began: the challenger faded, whereas the champion, realising that the loss of his title was now a reality, revived and began playing with increasing power. After four relatively quiet draws the most interesting events began. In the next 5 games Capablanca held the initiative. The fact that Alekhine capitulated only once appears simply miraculous!

Before I read this chapter, I always had the idea that the Capablanca-Alekhine match was just an error-filled dull match full of QGD's...

Now something from the Alekhine chapter. It's a nice example of the approach Garry takes throughout the whole book – he quotes widely but always critically.



Yates-Alekhine, The Hague 1921
position after 23.♖d1

23...♗c3

‘Alekhine attaches an exclamation mark to this move (although I would have played 23...f4! immediately) and makes an interesting, somewhat malicious comment: “Against this move White has nothing better than to offer an exchange of queens, because after 24.♙e3 Black would gain the necessary time by 24...♗f6 to occupy the d-file, which would be decisive.

The ensuing endgame admits of a majority of pawns on the queenside for White, but this advantage is here somewhat illusory. On this subject I am anxious to state that one of the most notorious prejudices of modern theory lies in the fact that this majority is *in itself* considered an advantage, without any reference to whatever pawns or, more especially, pieces are concerned.

In the present game Black has very evident compensations: (1) the greater mobility of the black king, the adverse king being hampered by his own pawns; (2) the dominating position of the black rook on the only open file. With correct play, these points should ensure a win.”

Alekhine would appear to be conducting a correspondence dispute with Capablanca, who classically converted a queenside pawn majority in the 23rd game of his match with Marshall. And although he clearly overrates Black's chances (the white pawns are also mobile!) these comments reflect his style: the advance of the e and f pawns creates tactical threats to the king. The most interesting thing here is the clash of conceptions: whereas Capa ‘simply’ queened a pawn, Alekhine ‘simply’ gave mate! But the successful strategy of both the one, and the other, depended mainly on the fact that their opponents did not understand their plans at all...

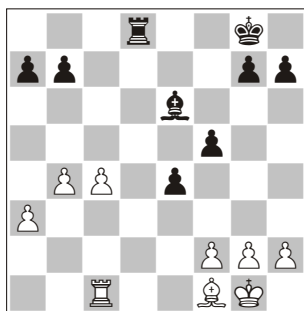
24.♖c1

It is likely that 24.♙e3 ♗f6 25.c5 ♙d8 26.♗c1 was nevertheless possible, but White, remembering Capablanca's successful experience, heads for the endgame.

24...♗c1

Black does not object, already anticipating the manoeuvre of his king to e5 and the development of an instructive attack with a small army. Fischer's remark involuntarily comes to mind: “He disliked clear-cut positions. If an opponent wanted to clarify his situation with Alekhine, he had to pay the Russian's price”.

25.♙c1 ♙d8



26.g3

“Trying to exchange the bishops which would increase White's chances of a draw” (Kotov) 26.c5 ♗f7 27.b5 ♗e7 is good for Black.

26...♗f7 27.c5 ♗f6

An important moment which has escaped the attention of the commentators.

28.♙c4?!

The simple 28.c6! bc6 29.♙c6 ♙d1 30.♗g2 ♗e5 31.♙c4 ♙c4 32.♙c4 would have ensured a draw: 32...♙d2 33.♗f1 etc... Of course had Capa or Lasker been playing White, something like this would have happened...But Yates wants to advance his a and b pawns as Capablanca “bequeathed”!

28...♙c8!

This unexpected retreat was beyond the understanding of most of the masters at that time.

29.a4?!

Evidently White should have moved his bishop from c4 and played c5-c6 as soon as possible. It soon transpires that the white pawns are “going nowhere” whereas Black's are weaving a mating net.

29...g5 30.b5 f4 31.♗f1 ♙d2 32.♗e1 ♙b2 33.gf4

After 33.c6 bc6 34.♙e2, there is a choice between 34...♗e5 and 34...c5 35.♙c5 ♙e6.

33...gf4 34.♙e2

Or 34.♙d1 ♗g4 35.♙d6 ♗e7 36.♙d4 ♗f3 and 37...e3 (Alekhine) And here after 34.c6 bc6 35.♙e2, apart from 35...♗e5, there is 35...c5 36.♙c5 ♙e6.

34...♗e5 35.c6 bc6 36.♙c6?!

“Bad is 36.bc6 f3 37.♙d1 e3 and wins” (Kotov). But after 38.♙c2! ♙c2 (38...♙b1 39.fe3) 39.♙c2 there is no question of Black winning! Therefore after 36.bc6 he would have had to continue seeking how to exploit his positional advantage.

36...♙e6 37.♙d1

The awkward position of the bishop also tells in the variation 37.♞c7 (37.♙c4 ♙g4!) 37...♞b1 38.♙d2 ♙d4 39.♙c2 ♞a1! 40.♙d1 (40.♞a7? ♞a2) 40...♞a4. Unexpectedly, White's position has become lost: while rigorously carrying out the plan of a queenside offensive, he finds himself facing mate.

37...♞b1 38.♞c5 ♙d4 39.♞c2 e3

Or 39...♙b3!? 40.♞d2 ♙c4 winning. **40.fe3 fe3 41.♞c6 ♙g4 42.♞d6 ♙e5 43.h3 ♙h5 0-1'**

I really like this type of annotations – a wide range of sources are referenced but always with the critical judgment of a world champion. You feel that you are learning in two ways at the same time: from Alekhine's play and from Kasparov's comments – and what superb teachers!

I do have to say – in slightly mean-spirited fashion – that this game also reminded me why my eyes sometimes glaze over when playing through old games. You can't help feeling for most of it (especially if you play through the opening phase as well) that the whole thing is all a bit irrelevant. After all, objectively speaking, 23...♞c3 was probably not the best move – it just allows White to draw without too much difficulty just by pushing his c pawn. So aren't we just witnessing a game from a White player who just couldn't play endgames particularly well?

In a way yes, but I guess that this is probably just missing the point. The main reason for the difference in the play of the two players was that Alekhine believed (rightly) in the fact that he did not stand worse – and could easily stand better – despite White's

queenside majority. He acted powerfully and consistently according to this correct evaluation. Yates played as though he felt he should be better but didn't have a clue how that should be accomplished. I have an image of him in my mind, looking at his position and constantly thinking 'But if I play this, I stand worse...how can this be? Everyone knows I should stand better!' That Alekhine's evaluation was over-optimistic does not change the theoretical value of the game. It also demonstrates the strength that you gain in practical chess by understanding something correctly. It might be shown later that the opponent could have saved himself with better play, but that is not the point in a practical situation. The only thing that was important was that you could play with force, conviction and power because you believed in the general correctness of your standpoint; the opponent, who believed nothing but just accepted what he had been told, seemed to be powerless. And yes, I am speaking from experience – I've been on the bad side a few times!

I should also be careful not to be too dismissive about Yates. Just by coincidence, I read an excellent article about him today in British Chess Magazine. He was a very dangerous attacking player and even defeated Alekhine twice with black, both times in great style. Just play through this game quickly to see what I mean:

Kl 73.2

Alexander Alekhine

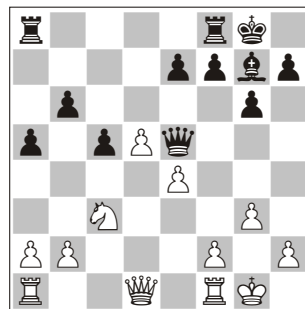
Frederick Yates

Karlsbad 1923 (7)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.g3 ♙g7 4.♙g2 0-0 5.♙c3 d6 6.♘f3 ♙c6 7.d5 ♘b8

Original play! The King's Indian was a favourite of the most successful English players of the 1920s – Yates and Atkins.

8.0-0 ♘bd7 9.e4 a5 10.♙e3 ♘g4 11.♙d4 ♘ge5 12.♘e5 ♘e5 13.c5 dc5 14.♙c5 b6 15.♙d4 ♙a6 16.♞e1 ♙d6 17.♙f1 ♙f1 18.♞f1 c5! 19.♙e5 ♙e5



Black square domination! And it gets even better!

20.♙b3 ♞ab8 21.♙b5 f5 22.♞ae1 f4 23.♙d7 ♞bd8 24.gf4 ♙f4 25.♙e6 ♙h8 26.f3 ♙g5 27.♙h1 ♞d6 28.♙h3 ♙e5 29.♞e2 ♞df6 30.♘d1 ♞f4 31.♘e3 ♞h4 32.♙e6 ♙h5 33.♘g4 ♞g4! 34.fg4 ♞f1 35.♙g2 ♙h2 36.♙f1 ♙h1 37.♙f2 ♙d4 38.♙g3 ♙g1 39.♙h3 ♙f1 40.♞g2 ♙h1 41.♙g3 ♙e1 42.♙h3 g5 43.♞c2 ♙f1 44.♙h2 ♙g1 45.♙h3 ♙h1 46.♙g3 ♙d1 47.♞c3 ♙g1 48.♙h3 ♙f1 49.♙g3 ♙f2 50.♙f3 ♙g1

White resigned.

Quite an impressive thing to do to a future world champion!

Digressing a bit there I'm afraid. If you haven't got the message already – this is a fantastic book. The sort of book that I will have to lock away for fear of spending too much time reading and re-reading it! I can't wait until the next installment! ■