

Forgotten Talents

Chessplayers Lost in the
Labyrinth of Life

Javier Cordero

Foreword by

Miguel Ángel Nepomuceno



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To my son Javier and his laughter

Forgotten Talents
by Javier Cordero

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Introduction

*...Was it his destined part
Only one moment in his life
To be close to your heart...?*
The Flower by Ivan Turgenev

Fate plays an important role in the destiny of every man. Without its assistance, reaching the tallest peaks (and even the more modest ones) can be quite difficult. Almost all the protagonists of this book did not have the goddess of fortune on their side. Indeed, in some cases it is as though misfortune walked with them every step of the way. Even so, they all deserve to be remembered for their talent at the chessboard.

Chess, always so unpredictable, shines a light on a select few while dooming most players to oblivion, regardless of their ingenuity. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the game's greatness: what a complicated task it is to rise to the summit of the chess world, and how populated its slopes are with those who tried to achieve glory only to fail in the attempt.

This book brings together a number of tragic stories of players who had a precious gift, but who did not know (or could not find) the way to success, getting lost in the labyrinth of difficulties that life always places before every human being. In the end, history forgot this select group of masters, for various reasons. For some, their careers were very bright (as in the cases of von Kolisch, Neumann and Charousek) but also extremely short, limiting their renown and depriving them of deserved laurels. For others, chess turned out to be an excessively demanding sport for which their minds were unprepared. Finally, for a truly unfortunate few, tragedy – always an unwelcome guest – took over their lives and then took life itself from them. Above all, these pages contain the stories of players with a very unique way of understanding chess (sometimes ahead of their time) and who prioritized the artistic side of the game over the results: an approach that was not properly appreciated in their time.

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It seems only right, almost mandatory, that these (and other) forgotten masters should regain their rightful place in chess history. That is the main purpose of this book: to make their stories known and to try to do so by providing historical perspective on each of them. As we go back to the times in which they lived, we will be better able to understand their legacy.

What was intended to be a stroll through the lives of this set of players, ended up becoming a long walk through the history of chess. Each chapter is a stage that will allow us to progress through that history and its changes, always in parallel with the course of society itself. At times, that meant great advances, and at other times it brought a flagrant loss of values and boundless materialism. So do not be shy, walk through the door of *Forgotten Talents* and learn about their lives, their games, how they thought, and what led their stories to get buried under the sands of time.

Javier Cordero Fernández
January 2024

Chapter 5

Tormented Soul

Cecil De Vere



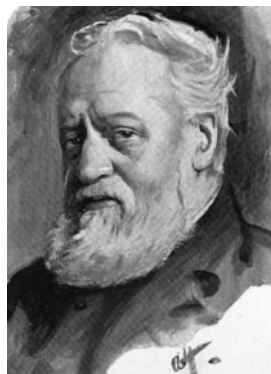
Cecil Valentine De Vere was born into misfortune, a circumstance which affected the course of his life, and which strongly influenced his personality. He showed enough natural skill at the chessboard to invite comparisons to Paul Morphy; yet this great talent was matched by an equally great lack of interest in the drudgery of preparation, which ultimately braked his meteoric rise.

De Vere's background is unclear. His birth certificate states he was born February 14, 1846, but the document lists neither his place of birth nor his father's name. As a child he was known as Valentine Brown, and this is the name shown for him in early reports of his activities. Considering that his mother was named Katherine Mathews, the "Brown" name would seem to show a deliberate attempt to cover up his origins – but, from whom? The key to the mystery lies in the fact that Cecil never knew his father, a secret which he tried to keep hidden but which gave rise to no little suspicion in conservative British society. De Vere's biographers, Owen Hindle and Bob Jones meticulously studied his parents' backgrounds and concluded (though not definitively) that Cecil Valentine was the son of a nobleman named De Vere and his servant, whose birth went unacknowledged to avoid scandal. This would leave an indelible mark on both mother and son, who had to live under the skeptical eye of society.

They lived in London where Cecil Valentine discovered chess at the age of 12. Soon displaying an astounding knack for the game, he began studying with the talented player Frank Burden, also a skilled competitor at billiards, whist, and backgammon. Later on, he took lessons from Samuel Boden,

one of the best-regarded 19th-century British masters. Cecil's rise was dizzyingly fast, and two years later he was introduced to the chess scene at Simpson's Grand Divan, where the leading players in London would gather alongside celebrities such as Charles Dickens. This was a singular establishment. For one shilling, customers could buy a cigar plus coffee and the right to play in the chess room, a luxurious hall lined with beautiful sculptures and mirrors and boasting tall windows and a high ceiling – and one where a deathly silence reigned. There was a large library, and dozens of chess magazines in a variety of languages were available. Players could recline on divans, chain-smoking as they played. The Immortal Game (see Chapter 1) took place here on a rest day during the London International Tournament of 1851. Cecil's time at the Grand Divan was quite successful and his rise continued as he vanquished the strongest players in Britain.

The Rev. George Alcock MacDonnell, a strong chess player from Ireland, became his mentor and friend and always stood ready to help when needed. As he may have come to know Cecil better than anyone, his recollections shed some light on the younger man's life. MacDonnell best describes his physical appearance, "Let me describe this youth as he was when first I met him. He was but fourteen years old, tall, slim, and lithe, extremely prepossessing in appearance, and aristocratic in bearing. His soft brown eyes, his rich auburn hair, his small regular features, his delicate but not unhealthy complexion, his graceful figure, his genteel manner, his melodious voice seemed to me to realize the ideal of Adonis."



George A. MacDonnell

The "Brown" family was not well off, so Cecil Valentine had to go to work as soon as he turned 18. Connections made at the Grand Divan landed him employment at Lloyds Bank, one of the oldest and most prominent banks in England. (Founded in 1765, the bank sponsored a major international open tournament in London from 1977 to 1994.) Chess took a back seat and over the next two years the Brown name disappeared almost completely from the British chess scene.

In 1865, several London entrepreneurs sought to sponsor a match to showcase the promising English chess star. There was but a single requirement: the opponent be something other than British. They settled on the Austrian-born future world champion Wilhelm Steinitz, who had lived in London for the past three years and who had already amply proven

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his skill. Because Steinitz was viewed as much the stronger player, the match conditions stipulated he would give the challenger odds of pawn and move. In light of the final score, the odds proved excessively generous as the young Englishman won by a score of 8-4 (+7 -3 =2). We can infer but little from this kind of match, but Cecil Brown did better than expected, raising his countrymen's hopes.

The following year, 1866, saw personal tragedy as his mother – the cornerstone of Cecil's life – passed away. Following this difficult period he made two significant life decisions, becoming a professional chess player and changing his surname to De Vere, a move he had delayed out of respect for his mother. His playing career began with a resounding success, taking first place in the Challenge Cup of 1866, organized by the British Chess Association and which came to be recognized as the first official British Championship competition. De Vere dominated the event, winning all twelve of his games against his four opponents: MacDonnell, Bird Minchin, and John Trelawney. A few months later, De Vere reaffirmed his domination of British chess with a victory at the North Sea resort of Redcar outpacing several masters beyond the London chess orbit, such as John Wisker, Edmund Thorold, and the Rev. Owen.

De Vere had a bright future ahead; he had won his country's gratitude, and word of his exploits spread to the leading European chess circles. His swift rise and his gift for the game engendered comparisons to Morphy. The ephemeral American genius made a lasting impression in the wake of his French and English tours (1858), when he trounced all opposition. Back in the United States a year later, Morphy could not take the pressures of Louisiana society, which looked down on professional chess, and he retired from chess to pursue a career in the law. This premature resignation actually worked to enhance the legend of Paul Morphy.

Just as in Morphy's case, De Vere's talent was a double-edged sword. Cecil wasted his natural abilities, showing little interest in spending the time or effort to enhance them – a choice which proved costly when he started facing the strongest players in Europe. In an age when chess theory was growing at an unprecedented rate, with a constant flow of new articles and an unquenchable thirst for discovery, De Vere remained stubbornly on the sidelines of this trend, refusing to study chess publications, and relying solely on his inborn talent.

In June 1867, at the invitation of the organizers of the Paris tournament, De Vere played in his first international competition. As the sole British-

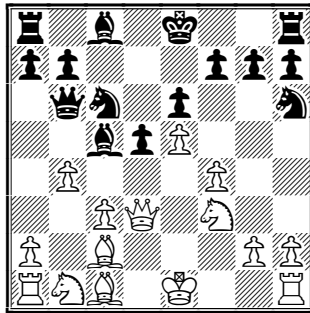
born representative, he crossed swords against the likes of Kolisch, Steinitz, Neumann, and Winawer. We discussed the details of this tournament in Chapters 3 and 4; here we need only add that De Vere placed fifth, with a score of 14/24. Taking his inexperience into account, we may look favorably on this performance, but in England it was viewed very differently, as great hopes had been pinned on their new star. And not only were these hopes not realized, but it was all the more disappointing as this had all taken place on the soil of their historic Gallic arch-rivals. De Vere finished well behind the top performers (three points below the fourth-place finisher), with no chance to fight for the top spots and making just a single draw in eight tries against the four players ahead of him.

(40) Rosenthal – De Vere

Paris 1867

French Defense [C00]

1.e4 e6 2.f4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c3 ♘h6 6.♙d3 c4 7.♙c2 ♙c5 8.d4 c×d3 9.♚×d3 ♚b6 10.b4



De Vere’s style was neat, sparkling, and harmonious. **10...♙×b4** Already in the opening, a piece sacrifice giving free rein to Black’s other pieces. **11.c×b4 ♘×b4 12.♚e2 ♙d7 13.♙d3 ♘g4 14.♟f1 ♞c8 15.♙d2 0-0 16.♙×b4 ♞c1+ 17.♚d2 ♞×f1 18.♚×f1 ♚×b4+ 19.♚e2 ♚×f4 20.♚g1 ♘×e5** Now we see the plan. Black has a secure grip on the center, with more than enough compensation for the material investment. **21.♚e3 ♘×d3 22.♚×d3 ♚c4+ 23.♚d2 ♚b4+ 24.♚c3 ♚g4** Enjoying the benefits of a center occupied by friendly pawns, the queen moves freely around the board. **25.♘a3 ♚×g2+ 26.♚e3 e5 27.♘×e5 ♞e8 28.♞e1 f6 29.♚d3 ♙f5+ 30.♚d4** Black’s advantage is overwhelming. **30...f×e5+ 31.♞×e5 ♚g4+ 32.♚e3 ♚h3+ 0-1**

Tragedy struck again early in the fall of 1867. After concluding a tournament in Dundee, Scotland, De Vere contracted tuberculosis, which

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at the time was practically incurable, with a high mortality rate. The illness may have been the result of an intense storm that suddenly hit as he took an outdoor walk, unprotected, on a rest day. Fate posed a serious challenge and Cecil failed to rise to the occasion. Sinking into repeated bouts of depression he did nothing to combat the advancing disease, seeking refuge in liquor instead. Mired in this state, he lost the zeal for chess and for life itself, falling into an irreversible decline.

From this point on, De Vere's performance shows a clear downward trend. Disease ate away at him but slowly, and so for a while he continued to perform well, as in the Second Challenge Cup (1868), where he tied for first with Blackburne but then lost in a playoff.

De Vere's Big Chance: Baden-Baden 1870

Despite the disease's adverse impact on his health, De Vere's reputation had yet to suffer, and he was invited to play in the prestigious tournament in Baden-Baden. The roster of participants underscored the event's significance: Anderssen (who won brilliantly), Steinitz, Neumann, Paulsen, Winawer, Blackburne, Rosenthal, Minckwitz. The competition took place against a tense background: Germany and France were mobilizing for possible war, which became reality soon after the tournament ended. Baden-Baden is a German city near the French border, and so suspicions of espionage abounded. The British players – Steinitz (still living in London), De Vere, and Blackburne – were accused as spies due to an unfortunate remark by Steinitz in the presence of a German patrol and were detained. Eventually, they were set free after proving they were simply chess players.

De Vere arrived in Germany showing clear signs of physical decline. Still drinking to excess and barely bothering to get ready for the tournament, he was not up to the task and finished sixth, with a score of 6½/16. Clearly, De Vere could no longer compete successfully against the top Europeans; at the age of just 24, his time had already come and gone.

In the midst of this mediocre performance, however, De Vere did show flashes of his potential, including smashing wins over Neumann and Paulsen.

(41) De Vere – Paulsen

Baden-Baden 1870

Ruy Lopez [C84]

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.d4 e×d4 6. 0-0 ♙e7
7.♘×d4 ♘×d4 8.♞×d4 c5 9.♞d3 b5 10.e5 ♘g8 11.♞g3 ♙f8
12.♘c3 b×a4 13.♘e4 g6 14.♙g5 ♞b6 15.♘d6+ ♙×d6 16.e×d6 f6