

**MODERN CHESS
FROM STEINITZ TO THE
21ST CENTURY**

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CRAIG PRITCHETT

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Introduction

'I as though traced the evolution of chess thought and repeated its basic steps in my own development ... convinced that any player with high ambition should follow such a path'

Vassily Smyslov, *125 Selected Games* (1983)

This book takes the reader on a journey from early 19th century developments in the game up to the present-day. It takes in the revolutionary Wilhelm Steinitz's early summation and establishment of a firm positional basis for chess and the considerable contributions made by all of the subsequent world champions and certain other great players, including the contemporary computer phenomenon, AlphaZero.

Take note of Vassily Smyslov's wise words. Recalling a period of intense study in his father's chess library, Smyslov stressed that, without obtaining an understanding of the ways in which chess has developed over time, no aspiring player is ever likely to achieve his or her fullest potential. What went for Smyslov also applies to all of the inspirational players who appear in this book. Today's top players still borrow from the best games and ideas of past generations. Do join them!

I wrote this book primarily to explore, confirm and convey my own understanding of this grand sweep of chess history. To that extent it can only be a subjective work and readers may hold other opinions. Though I hope that much in this book is, indeed, persuasive, please feel free to reflect and draw your own conclusions. I also aimed at containing my account in one accessible volume, inspired by such succinct chess classics, as Richard Réti's, *Masters of the Chessboard*, Max Euwe's, *The Development of Chess Style*, and others.

We are all historically rooted, inescapably driven to constantly re-interpret the past to help make sense of our present and possible future. Indeed, the past often touches us when least expected. My working copy of Imre König's fine book, *Chess From Morphy to Botvinnik*, on loan from the Edinburgh Chess Club's 'Aitken' collection, is warmly inscribed by the author to his friend, Dr James M Aitken (1908-83), ten times Scottish chess champion.

That unexpected, near 70 year link to the middle age of one of my own illustrious countrymen, who, towards the very end of his chess career, was one of my own Scottish team colleagues, at the 1972 Skopje Olympiad, greatly encouraged me to pursue this project. Rarely, if ever, truly definitive, history moves on ceaselessly. The game itself changes. The context varies. Do enjoy the continuing journey!

Craig Pritchett
Dunbar, September 2021

From the Romantics to the Early Modern Age

‘The indiscriminate and chiefly tactical kingside attack has been superseded by strategical manoeuvres, marches and counter-marches for gaining and accumulating small advantages at any point on the board’

Wilhelm Steinitz, *International Chess Magazine* (April 1885)

Wilhelm Steinitz (1836-1900), the first player ever to be formally acknowledged as ‘world chess champion’ (1886-1894), dominated the development of the game in the 19th century. He therefore forms the major focus of this chapter, which takes us from an earlier period that is often labelled ‘Romantic’ to what Steinitz considered to be superseded by what he called a ‘Modern’ school.

It isn’t easy to define either of these terms exactly, as the development of chess thought unsurprisingly tends to reflect mainly subtle nuance and adaptation to existing understanding rather than radically polarised jolts. Steinitz’s oft-quoted words at the top of this chapter do, however, neatly summarise the essential elements of change in the 19th century. Let them stand as a starting point.

Very broadly, earlier in the 19th century, in the absence of anything other than a fairly rudimentary body of openings theory and of a more profound strategic understanding of a later Steinitzian kind, the strongest players tended to exhibit an understandable tendency to consider the king the weakest link in an opponent’s armoury and that the game’s consequent primary aim was to topple it fast.

The Early Romantics

Bourdonnais and McDonnell

In his use of the phrase, ‘indiscriminate, chiefly tactical kingside attack’, Steinitz was certainly on to something of defining significance about the way much chess was played in the 1820s and 1830s. These two decades saw the discovery of the mercurial *Evans Gambit* and the first great international match series, at London 1834, between the world’s two best players, Alexander McDonnell (1798-1835) and Louis-Charles Mahé de la Bourdonnais (1795-1840).

In the visceral battles between these two – they played a punishing 85 games through the summer of 1834, which ended, +45 =13 -27, in Bourdonnais’ favour – you can sense not just the brute nature of the mainly tactical and direct attacking nature of both of them, but also that they could rely on little in the way of available chess knowledge to help them orientate and nurture their attacks, other than their own calculating powers and powerful imaginations.

Such skills took them far but they were constrained by the limits of the age that they lived in. They understood the significance of material, time and spatial strengths and weaknesses, not least around vulnerable kings, but the idea that a player might best seek to accumulate ‘small advantages at any point on the board’, rather than to overwhelm an opponent’s king directly, was largely beyond them.

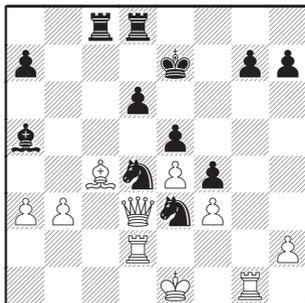
Bourdonnais and McDonnell’s chess may have been a touch naïve from the perspective of much better informed succeeding generations but their best games still nevertheless thrill with combinative excitement. We can still learn much from their attacking verve and considerable skill in concluding attacks with, at times, outstandingly conceived, beautiful and brilliant combinations.

Of the two, Bourdonnais was the stronger, more insightful and creative player, who to this day retains the deserved reputation of having been by far the most



1. Louis-Charles M. de la Bourdonnais

16. ♖d3 ♜d8 17. ♜d2 ♞c6 18. b3 ♙a5 19. a3
 ♜ac8 20. ♜g1 b5 21. ♙xb5 ♙xf3 22. gxf3
 ♞d4 23. ♙c4



White may have had some way to stay in the game but defence was difficult. Now, however, he's certainly lost. White obtains a few spite checks but Black's perfectly safe king can fend off all serious threats and even assists in the final mating attack. Black's pieces and kingside pawns continue to dominate after the almost equally unconvincing alternative, 23. b4 ♞xf3+ 24. ♙f2 ♞xg1, and if 25. bxa5 ♜c1 26. ♖b3 g5.

23... ♞xf3+ 24. ♙f2 ♞xd2 25. ♜xg7+ ♙f6
 26. ♜f7+ ♙g6 27. ♜b7 ♞dxc4 28. bxc4
 ♜xc4 29. ♖b1 ♙b6 30. ♙f3 ♜c3 31. ♖a2
 ♞c4+ 32. ♙g4 ♜g8 33. ♜xb6 axb6 34. ♙h4
 ♙f6 35. ♖e2 ♜g6 36. ♖h5 ♞e3 0-1

This dramatic kind of bare-knuckle contest still warms the soul. Full of wonderfully original and daring ideas, McDonnell's achievement has an attractive grandeur in its conceptual boldness and assured combinative flow. Over a century later, however,

Imre König, while sharing his admiration and indeed sense of wonder at this beautiful game, nevertheless felt duty bound to assert, in his book, *Chess From Morphy to Botwinnik*, that 'whilst some phases were beautifully played [they] are too disconnected and do not form a coordinated whole'.

Of course, peering so far back into a 'romantic' pioneering past, we can and must surely allow for many such retrospectively perceived, positional 'disconnects', of a kind that belong to a much better informed future age (and König does so). In context, Bourdonnais and McDonnell's most brilliant and best games certainly expanded the game's creative and combinative boundaries and still speak persuasively to us about skills that remain essential in any top player's armoury nowadays.

In his *Manual of Chess*, Emanuel Lasker draws out an especially valuable learning point. Quite taken by Bourdonnais' 'extraordinary genius', Lasker credits him as 'the father of the soundest plan known to the history of chess: to combat every developed unit of the enemy in the centre with a force at least equal to it and to follow the enemy, after having thrown him back in the centre, with a well-supported advance post in the heart of his position'.

This particular characteristic in Bourdonnais' chess is splendidly on show in the most famous game played in the 1834 series, a real gem that has scarcely lost its appeal since it was

played almost 200 years ago. Bourdonnais' instincts for the development and exploitation of control in the centre provide a bridge between the 1830s

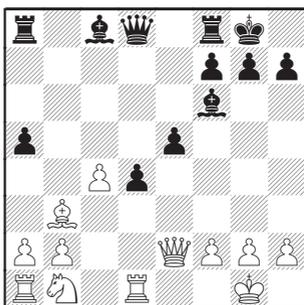
and the full flowering of that powerful playing style, two decades later in the games of Adolf Anderssen and Paul Morphy.

A.McDonnell – L-C. M. de la Bourdonnais

62nd Game, London Series 1834

Sicilian Defence

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4
e5 5.♗xc6 bxc6 6.♙c4 ♗f6 7.♙g5 ♙e7
8.♚e2 d5 9.♙xf6 ♙xf6 10.♙b3 o-o
11.o-o a5 12.exd5 cxd5 13.♚d1 d4 14.c4!?

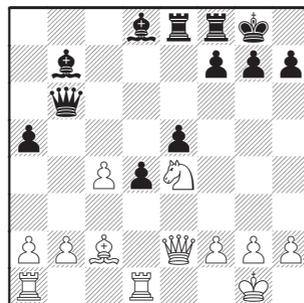


Following a colourless opening by White, Black has at least equalised. With the text-move, White tries to reintroduce some imbalance into the game, but by allowing Black to obtain a secure passed d-pawn and the potential to mobilise and (eventually) advance his f-, e- and d-pawns, he incurs some positional risk.

Presumably White was banking on being able to mobilise his own queenside pawns, but he is objectively further distant from achieving that aim than Black in the latter's more immediately

trenchant, expansionary aims in the centre.

14...♚b6 15.♙c2 ♙b7 16.♗d2 ♚ae8
17.♗e4 ♙d8!?



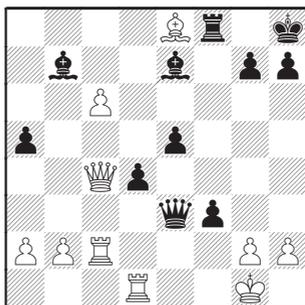
Objectively 17...♙e7, and if, say, 18.♗g3 ♙c5 19.♙e4 ♙xe4 20.♗xe4 f5 21.♗xc5 ♚xc5, might have improved, since if Black can maintain control of c5, he might better constrain White's queenside pawns, while continuing to play for ...f5 and the eventual mobilisation of his central pawns. That course would have avoided the kind of fuzzy counterplay that White now drums up, based on the light square weakening in Black's camp that now follows.

18.c5 ♖c6 19.f3 ♔e7 20.♞ac1 f5

Black goes all in for a promising, but well nigh incalculable central assault at the cost of an exchange sacrifice.

21.♞c4+ ♔h8 22.♔a4 ♞h6 23.♔xe8 fxe4 24.c6 exf3 25.♞c2

White had no time for 25.cxb7? ♞e3+ 26.♔h1 fxf2+ 27.♔xg2 ♞f2+, and mates; or if 25.gxf3? ♞e3+ 26.♔h1 ♞xf3+ 27.♔g1 ♞e3+ 28.♔h1 ♞e4+ 29.♔g1 ♔g5, and wins.

25... ♞e3+?! 

His eyes only on a win, Black spurns draws by repetition available after 25...f2+ 26.♞xf2 ♞xf2, and if 27.cxb7 (or if 27.♔xf2 ♞e3+ 28.♔f1 ♔h4 29.g3 ♞f3+ 30.♔e1 ♔g5 31.cxb7 ♞h1+ 32.♞f1 ♞e4+) 27...♞e3 28.♔h1 ♞xg2 29.♔xg2 (or 29.b8=♞ ♞g1+ 30.♞xg1 ♞f3+ 31.♞g2 ♞d1+) 29...♞e4+ 30.♔f1 ♞f3+ 31.♔e1 ♞e4+ 32.♞e2 ♔h4+ 33.♔d2 ♔g5+ etc.

It seems, however, that White might now have played 26.♞f2! and if 26...fxg2 27.♞e2!, forcing a welcome queen exchange and holding at least. The computer also favours White, after the extraordinary alternative

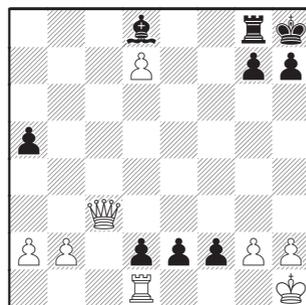
26...♔a6 27.♞xa6, and if ♔c5 28.♞f1 fxf2 29.♞e1 ♞xe1+ 30.♞xe1 d3 31.c7 ♞xf2 32.c8♞ ♞c2+ 33.♞xc5 ♞xc5. Black also suffers after 26...♔c8 27.♔d7, and if 27...♔xd7 28.cxd7 h6 29.♞d3 ♞xd3 30.♞xd3 ♞d8 31.gxf3 ♞xd7 32.♞e2 ♔f6.

26.♔h1 ♔c8 27.♔d7 f2 28.♞f1

Happily for chess history, the advantage is back clearly with Black, whose powerful pawns and supportive queen can hardly be stopped. After 28.♞c1 ♔xd7 29.cxd7 d3, and if 30.♞f1 e4 31.♞c8 ♔d8, Black wins.

28...d3 29.♞c3 ♔xd7 30.cxd7 e4 31.♞c8 ♔d8 32.♞c4

Or if 32.♞c5 ♞xc5 33.♞xc5 e3 34.♞e5 e2 35.♞xf2 ♔g8 36.♞e8 e1♞+ 37.♞xe1 ♞xf2 38.♞e8+ ♞f8.

32... ♞e1 33.♞c1 d2 34.♞c5 ♞g8 35.♞d1 e3 36.♞c3 ♞xd1 37.♞xd1 e2 o-1

What a remarkable finale! A queen to the good, White cannot defend against Black's simultaneous threats to promote to either of three possible queening squares, d1, e1 or f1.

Mature Romanticism

Adolf Anderssen



2. Adolf Anderssen: in younger years

Such combinative brilliance is rare indeed and it took some time before a worthy successor to Bourdonnais' sparkling attacking style, grounded firmly on the idea of first obtaining control in the centre, eventually emerged. The distinction passed to a young Silesian German, Adolf Anderssen (1818-1879), who made a dashing name for his play through the 1840s in German chess circles, before triumphing in the first ever grand international tournament, at London 1851.

Like Bourdonnais, Anderssen was a great artist of the chessboard, bewitched by the idea of the combination as the ultimate source of mastery and indeed beauty in chess. Neither, how-

ever, pursued combinations to the exclusion of soundly-based strategic goals. Their well-honed combinative skills, allied to their exceptionally well-developed positional instincts gave them their cutting edge and set them apart from their peers, not least in especially complex, open and unbalanced play.

Unlike Bourdonnais, however, Anderssen had to adapt his positional/combinative playing style to the demands of a much better informed and more technically proficient, post-1830s chess world. Successful in this, his chess mind proved sufficiently supple to make continuing successful adaptations up to the time of his death. The world's 'champion' by repute from 1851 until his defeat in a match against Paul Morphy in 1858, he regained that reputation on Morphy's effective retirement from chess in the early 1860s.

The late 1830s and 1840s saw considerable change in chess, based on an expansion in the number of chess clubs, chess magazines, mainstream periodical and newspaper columns and instructional books, centred on the main European capitals, especially Berlin, London and Paris, as well as in many of Europe's other

large cities. Anderssen himself published a popular collection of superb combinational puzzles, *Aufgaben für Schachspieler*, in 1842, and contributed regularly to the German chess press.

The purely German contribution to this significant expansion in internationally available chess knowledge was considerable. Centred on Berlin, perhaps Germany's greatest achievement, certainly a landmark event, was the publication, in 1843, of the first edition of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, which rapidly became the first international openings 'Bible', going through many expanding editions into the early 20th century.

Edited in its first four editions by the Prussian aristocrat, Tassilo von Heydebrand und von der Lasa, the *Handbuch*, often popularly referred to as the *Bilguer*, was a comprehensive and wonderfully judged piece of international openings research, with a large dash of chess history to boot. Von der Lasa, possibly Germany's strongest player in the early 1840s, took over the work after the tragically early death, aged 25, in 1840, of its original editor, Paul Bilguer, whose name was retained on its cover and title page.

Against this background, it might almost have seemed surprising if such a promising player as Anderssen had failed to develop considerable technical as well as purely combinative steel. Although never a professional player, by the end of the 1840s Anderssen had become a many-sided talent and a threat to anyone. Often lauded by later generations mainly for his wonderfully imaginative combinative powers, Anderssen's contemporaries also recognised in Anderssen's games a thorough mastery of the manoeuvring arts and closed play.

Many, though certainly not all of Anderssen's most famous combinations occurred in his frequent recorded off-hand 'friendly' games and (non-stakes) matches. As White, he was to hazard only one King's Gambit and no Evans Gambits at all in his (tied) top-class breakthrough match against Daniel Harrwitz, at Breslau 1848, and in winning his most famous event, at London 1851. In these two deadly serious contests, Anderssen relied primarily on hard-hitting positional choices.

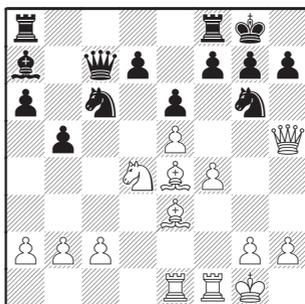
At London 1851, Anderssen was particularly clinical against Howard Staunton (1810-1874), the pre-tournament favourite, who was then considered widely to be the world's best player, following his decisive match victory (+11=4-6), against Pierre Saint Amant, at Paris 1844. Anderssen comfortably won their best of seven, third round, knock-out contest (+4-1). He set the tone for the match with a positionally well-controlled win in their first game.

A.Anderssen – H.Staunton

Game 1, Rd 3, London 1851

Sicilian Defence

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.♘f3 e6 4.♗xd4 ♕c5
5.♖c3 a6 6.♙e3 ♙a7 7.♙d3 ♗e7 8.o–o
o–o 9.♞h5 ♗g6 10.e5 ♞c7 11.♞ae1 b5
12.f4 ♙b7 13.♗e4 ♙xe4 14.♙xe4 ♖c6



White has achieved an edge and now embarks on a plan to attack on the kingside, by playing g4 (with f5 in the air), and the manoeuvre ♞f3–h3, followed (in the event of ..h6) by g5. Possibly 15.c3, keeping the d-file closed, improves, making it more difficult for Black to open lines and obtain counterplay.

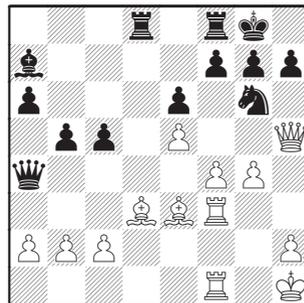
15.♗xc6 dxc6 16.g4 ♞ad8?!

Here Black misses a chance: after 16... ♙xe3+ 17.♞xe3 ♞b6, and if 18.♞h3 ♞ad8 (or perhaps first 18... ♞c5) 19.♙h1 ♞c5, Black maintains a weather eye on e5 (and inhibits f5), thereby slowing down White's attack sufficiently to establish a rough balance.

17.♙h1 c5 18.♞f3 ♞a5 19.♞ef1 ♞a4?!

Here, too, Black might have put more pressure on White by playing the more critical 19... ♞b4, attacking b2. He may have feared the consequences of the complicated line, 20.♙d3, and if 20... c4 21.♞h3 h6 22.♙xg6 fxg6 23.♞xg6 ♙xe3 24.♞xe3 ♞xb2 25.♞xe6+ ♙h8 26.f5, but he might still battle on in this position, by playing the computer suggestion, 26... ♞xc2, and if 27.f6 ♞d2 28.fxg7+ ♙xg7 29.♞e7+ ♙g6!.

20.♙d3

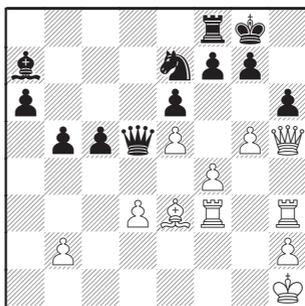


White can afford to let his less critical a-pawn fall, as its capture draws Black's queen too far out of play and White's attack crashes through. Black's last practical chance may have been 20...c4, although after 21.♞h3 h6 22.♙xg6 fxg6 23.♞xg6 ♙xe3 24.g5! (the computer again), and if 24...♞xf4 25.♞xf4 ♞d1+ 26.♙g2 ♞g1+ 27.♙f3 ♙xf4 28.♞xe6+ ♙f8 29.g6!, White still most probably wins.

20...♖xa2 21.♗h3 h6 22.g5 ♗xd3

Or if 22...c4 23.gxh6 cxd3 24.hxg7 ♖d5+ 25.♗ff3, forcing 25...♖xf3+, and White wins quickly.

23.cxd3 ♖d5+ 24.♗ff3 ♖e7



White also remains an exchange ahead with a winning attack after 24...♖xd3 25.gxh6 ♖d1+ 26.♔g2, and now either 26...♖e2+ (or 26...♖c2+) 27.♔g3.

25.gxh6 g6 26.h7+ ♔h8 27.♖g5 ♗f5

Or if 27...f6 28.exf6 ♖xg5 29.fxg5 ♗f5 30.♗f1, threatening ♗c1, and wins.

28.♖f6+ ♗g7 29.f5 ♖b3 30.♔h6 ♖d1+ 31.♔g2 ♖e2+ 32.♗f2 ♖g4+ 33.♗g3 1-0

Playing though such games might lead you to question how far labels such as 'Romantic' might be entirely trustworthy. Right in the middle of what we usually consider to be the Romantic Age we get a game that seems unusually 'modern'. White plays superbly well, but Black, too, after a slightly passive start, reveals an intuitive grasp of the importance of the centre and the development of hard-hitting counterplay.

Apart from a possible slip on White's 15th move, Anderssen's play throughout is exceptionally sound and wholly strategic. His attacking initiative develops in an energetic, correct and gradual way that conforms fully to the needs of the position. Black lost because he made one or two more marginal errors than White. Anderssen's final combinative fireworks work precisely because they are based on a sufficiently critical mass of strategic advantage.

Credit to both players! Yet contrast this heavyweight battle with Anderssen's so-called *Immortal Game*, also played at London 1851, but only as one of a very large number of 'friendly' games that were played 'almost daily' (according to Anderssen's biographer, Hermann Gottschall) between Anderssen and Lionel Kieseritzky, at Simpson's Divan, in downtime from the main tournament, in which Kieseritzky had been defeated by Anderssen (+2=1) in the first knockout round.

It is far from clear how seriously the two protagonists took their friendlier 'contests' but White's final combination in *The Immortal Game*, probably the best known and most re-published in chess history, is still widely held to be emblematic of Anderssen and the early Romantic Age. In his *Manual of Chess*, Emanuel Lasker, an ardent Anderssen fan, considered it 'splendid' but quite rightly cautioned against reading too much into the game's overall course.