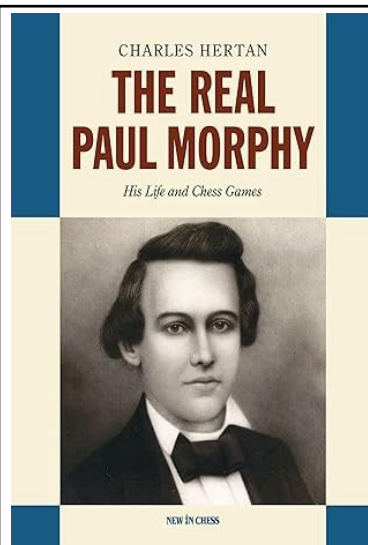


The Real Paul Morphy

By Charles Hertan

New in Chess, 2024, [ISBN: 9789083378800](#)

Reviewed by Mark Capron



“What Mozart as to innate, natural ability was to music, Morphy likewise was to chess.” Charles A. Maurian, from Morphy’s obituary.

“Boden remarked that only a fraction of Morphy’s enormous capacity for chess was ever tapped, since that was enough to reach his goal. There is no doubt that his repertoire would have evolved in many new and interesting ways had he continued to do battle.”

writings. Additionally, “Adolf Anderssen undoubtedly exerted great influence on Paul Morphy’s play, probably more than anyone. For a brilliant young tactician with a love of open gambits, there was no better role model than the world’s first super-GM.” p.62. The mesh of the two schools of thought would be ingrained within Morphy.

Next, Hertan discusses Paul Morphy’s ancestors. One of the more interesting stories was that of Paul’s paternal grandfather “Don” Diego Morphy and his interactions with the infamous Caribbean pirates, Jean and Pierre Lafitte. Don Diego had excellent diplomatic skills and dealt with the piracy ring operating just 23 miles from New Orleans. In the end, Don Diego and Jean Lafitte became allies. The pirate story continues, but this time with Paul’s maternal grandfather, Joseph Esau Le Carpentier.

Paul’s main chess mentor was his uncle Ernest Morphy. Ernest was a very strong player sometimes even called “The King of New Orleans Chess.”

Paul’s childhood is discussed next. Morphy was a studious, young lad and by the time he was nine his strong chess skills showed. By age ten, Morphy had bested the three leading New Orleans players, Eugene Rousseau, Ernest Morphy and A.P. Ford. Interestingly, in the Morphy household, chess was a secondary pastime, and Paul was only allowed to play formal games out of the house on Sundays. His parents instilled a strong belief that chess should not be mixed with monetary gain.

In 1850 Morphy played several offhand games against Johann Löwenthal at the Morphy home. Löwenthal was considered one of the great players of the time. A mystery surrounds the match concerning how many games were played, and what the final score was. Any which way, the very young Paul dominated his older opponent.

At this point, Morphy’s games start to appear interspersed throughout the text.

One of the book’s strengths is its analysis of games. They are presented with a mix of historical context, modern colloquialisms, and 21st century engine insight. I found the author’s annotations like a home-cooked meal; they just make you comfortable and satisfied.

A favorite note was found in the game

Let’s get this out of the way immediately, WOW!! Charles Hertan’s latest work is one of the best I have read about Paul Morphy. The 384-page book published by *New In Chess* will be a contender for book of the year.

Hertan aims to uncover the man behind the legend, separating fact from myth while highlighting Morphy’s enduring influence on the game of chess. He delves not only into Morphy’s games and brilliance, but also into his personal life, motivations, and the psychological complexities that may have led to his eventual withdrawal from competitive chess. Hertan, an International Master and professional psychotherapist who worked with mental health patients for 15 years, is uniquely suited for the subject.

Paul Morphy has been written about potentially more than any other player. Especially a player with such a short chess career (1857-1859). Morphy has generally been believed to be one of the greatest players of all time.

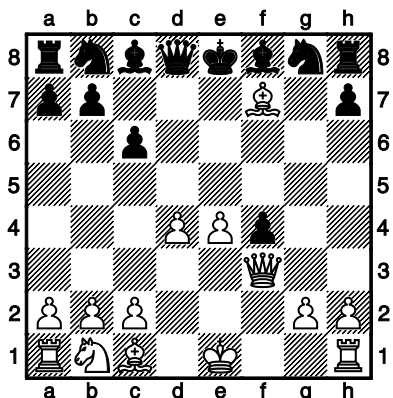
Morphy was born in 1837 in New Orleans. Unfortunately, before the time Morphy was 23 he had stopped playing competitive chess.

Hertan begins by covering some of the famous matches and tournaments in the early 1800s prior to Morphy’s time setting the stage for what chess was like. It was “an age when most strong players were gunning to rip your head off from move one, ...”. The landscape would change with Howard Staunton as he began to play more positionally. Morphy would learn much from Staunton’s games and

Cochrane, John—Staunton, Howard

London 1842

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.♖f3 g5 4.♗c4 g4 5.d4 gxf3 6.♝xf3 d5
7.♗xd5 c6 8.♗xf7+

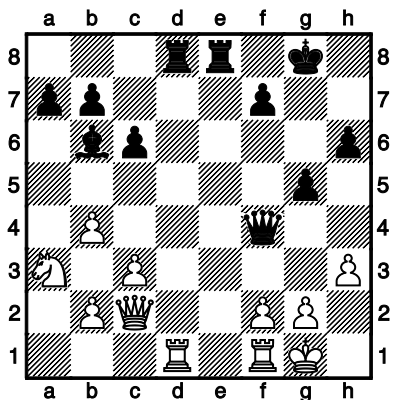


Vintage Cochrane—what’s another piece among gentlemen?

Another good example, this time Hertan offers a glimpse into the strategic mind of Morphy:

James Thompson—Paul Morphy

First American Congress New York 1857 Round 1 Game 3



Black is simply much better. His killer bishop dominates White’s lame knight, and all his men are more active. White can’t contest with 22.♖fe1? ♖xe1+ 23.♖xe1 ♖d2 and is induced to blunder. Such games make it hard to fathom how some dispute that Morphy was ahead of his time positionally.

22.♖d3?!

Maroczy suggests 22.b3 but 22. ... ♗c7 23.g3 ♝f3 ‘and Black is winning’ per Fritz.

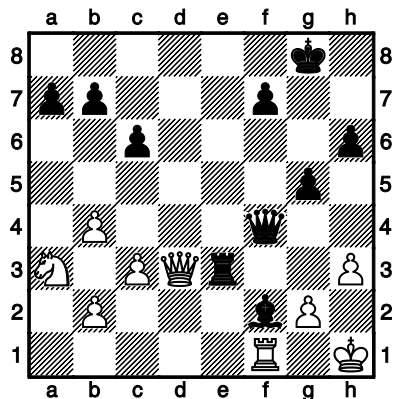
22. ... ♗xf2+!

Black’s strategic dominance results in a very ‘modern’ *pe-tite combinaison*.

23.♝h1

23.♖xf2 ♖e1+ and mate.

23. ... ♖xd3 24.♝xd3 ♖e3



25.♝d8+

25.♝c2 ♖xh3 is mate in three. White trades queens to escape this fate, but Morphy’s technique is deadly:

25. ... ♝g7 26.♝d4+ ♝xd4 27.cxd4 ♖e2 28.♗c4 ♖e1 29.♖xe1 ♗xe1 30.♗a5 ♗xb4 31.♗xb7 ♝f6 32.♗d8 c5 33.♗c6 ♝e6 34.dxc5 ♗xc5 35.g4 ♗d5 36.♗d8 f6 37.♝g2 a5 38.♝f3 a4 39.♝e2 ♗d4 40.♝d3 ♗xb2 41.♗f7 ♗e5 42.♝c2 ♝c4 43.♗d8 a3 44.♗b7 a2 45.♗a5+ ♝b4 46.♗b3 ♝a3 0–1

The First American Chess Congress in 1857 paired Paul Morphy with Louis Paulsen in the Finals. This was the toughest test Morphy had ever faced. After four games, they had each won a game and drawn two. Then Morphy took over and won all four remaining games and with that the tournament.

A few more fun annotations from the Paulsen match:

“Paulsen isn’t up to the task. Opponents seemed to tremble and quake when Morphy launched an attack.” p.136.

“Morphy has again made Paulsen look like a two-bit club player, unable to cope with the direct assault on d6. In typical fashion he elects to cash in concretely.” p. 141.

“According to Lawson, ‘Morphy took twelve minutes before offering his Queen for a Bishop (Morphy’s longest time on any move during the tournament.)’ [!!] *Twelve minutes!* Who else in chess history analyzed this fast, or had such faith in his analysis during the most important game of his life?” p.148.

After the First American Chess Congress, Daniel Fiske asked Morphy to be co-editor on the *Chess Monthly*. The first issue together was to be the January 1858 issue. Morphy was never good about writing and barely met his commitments thereof.

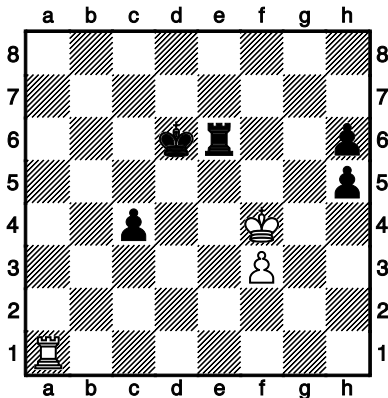
The book contains a beautiful 16-page section of color photographs. Some of these rare photographs were contributed by Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam and David DeLucia, both huge Morphy collectors.

Another aspect of the book was to infuse today's technology into the games to see how well Morphy's moves and analysis held up.

Löwenthal, Johann—Morphy, Paul [C42]

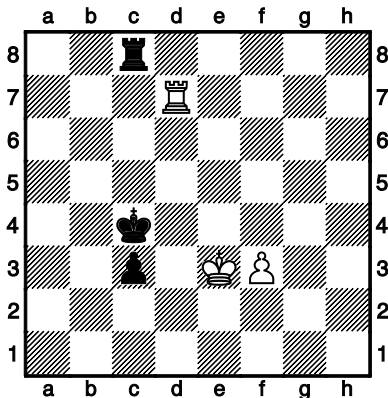
Match Morphy-Loewenthal +9-3=2 London (3), 22.07.1858

54.h5 gxh5!



Löwenthal criticizes this move, claiming that 54. ... ♖f6+ 55.♗e3 g5 'would have won without difficulty'. In the present age of 3500 rated leviathans, Löwenthal's line yields only a draw after 56.♖a6+ ♗e7 57.♖a7+ ♗d8 58.♗d2 (58. ... ♖xf3 59.♖a6).

55.♗f5 ♖e3 56.♗f4 ♖e8 57.♖a6+ ♗d5 58.♖xh6 c3 59.♖xh5+ ♗d4 60.♖h7 ♖c8 61.♖d7+ ♗c4 62.♗e3!



62. ... Re8+? 63.Kf2!!

Löwenthal wrote: 'This was a grievous error. 63.♗f4 would have made the *remise* a certainty.' Max Lange concurs, 'it seems that 63.♗f4 would have ensured the draw.' I regret to inform Löwenthal's ghost that only his 63.♗f2!! holds. If 63.♗f4? c2 64.♖c7+ ♗d3 65.♖d7+ ♗e2 66.♖c7 ♗d2 67.♖d7+ ♗c1 Black again gets back to stop the f-pawn, e.g. 68.♗g4 (or 68.♗g5 ♖g8+) 68. ... ♖c8 69.♖h7 ♗d2 70.♖h2+ ♗e3.

In pre-computer times it was extremely tempting to fall back on old analysis at such complicated junctures.

Maroczy followed his predecessors into the analytic quagmire: '63.♗f2? The decisive error! White had the draw in hand with 64.♗f4 etc. The text move loses because the white King cannot support his pawn satisfactorily.' In times past the grandmaster had the last word – but now a chap named Fritz intones the postscript, 'baloney'.

63. ... c2 64.♖c7+ ♗d3 65.♖d7+ ♗c3 66.♖c7+ ♗d2 67.♖d7+ ♗c1 68.♖b7?

This perfectly innocent-looking move turns out to be the culprit. 68.♖c7!! holds.

68. ... ♖e5 69.f4 ♖e4 70.♗f3 ♖c4

This move would not be possible after 68.♖c7!!, and White's counterplay would suffice.

71.♖h7

White must expend a tempo because on 71.f5 ♗d2 72.♖d7+ ♗c3 he can't get back. If you understand every nuance of this ending, congratulations! You likely gain 20 elo points.

71. ... ♗d2 72.♖h1 c1♗ 73.♖xc1 ♖xc1 74.♗e4 ♖e1+ 75.♗d4 ♗e2 76.f5 ♗f3 77.♗d5 ♗f4 78.f6 ♗g5 79.f7 ♖f1 80.♗e6 ♗g6 0-1

Maroczy appends the comment, 'a game replete with sins of omission' - but the real sin of omission is Maroczy's failure to fully grasp Morphy's technical power. Paul's depth of understanding of the pure rook ending was about as deep as a human could hope to achieve, hence Löwenthal's experience of 'a grasp against which it was almost vain to struggle.' p. 208-12.

One more example of this found in a game vs. Paulsen:

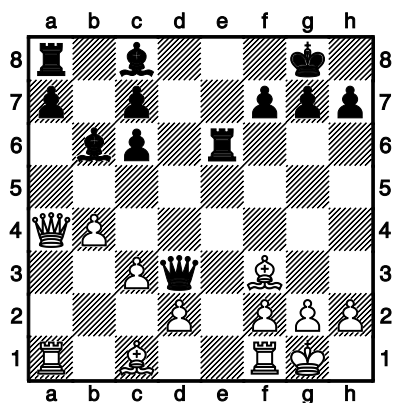
Paulsen, Louis—Morphy, Paul [C48]

USA-01 Congress Grand Tournament New York (4.6), 08.11.1857

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♖c3 ♖f6 4.♖b5 ♖c5 5.0-0 0-0 6.♖xe5 ♖e8! 7.dxc6 8.♖c4 b5 9.♖e2 ♖xe4 10.♖xe4 ♖xe4 11.♖f3 ♖e6 12.c3

Morphy notes that 12.d3 'would have been preferable'. What an understatement for a move that simply equalizes. Better yet, White could make active equality with a move that leaves humans in the dust: 12.d4!! The main line is 12. ... ♗xd4 13.♖e3! ♗xd1 14.♖axd1 ♖e7 15.♖f4 and White's problems are over.

12. ... ♖d3 13.b4 ♘b6 14.a4 bxa4 15.♗xa4



15. ... ♘d7

'15. ... ♖g6 promises more than it would yield.' – Morphy. Sorry, Paul, but 15. ... ♖g6 yields quite a bit. If 16.♘xc6 ♖b8 White can scarcely meet the dual threats of 17. ... ♘h3 or 17. ... ♖xc6!! 18.♗xc6 ♘b7 with the crushing idea of 19. ... ♗g6 20.g3 ♗e4. If 17.♖e1 ♘d7!! 18.♘xd7 ♗f3 mates. Maroczy's suggestion 15. ... ♘b7 is also good for Black.

If computers ruled the world back then, we would have missed out on one of the greatest combinations in chess history, as Morphy had envisioned a shot for the ages.

16.♖a2 ♖ae8! 17.♗a6 ♗xf3!! 18.gxf3 ♖g6+ 19.♗h1 ♘h3 20.♖d1 ♘g2+ 21.♗g1 ♘xf3+ 22.♗f1 ♘g2+ 23.♗g1 ♘h3+ 24.♗h1 ♘xf2 25.♗f1 ♘xf1 26.♖xf1 ♖e2 27.♖a1 ♖h6 28.d4 ♘e3 0-1

"This thunderous 'game for the ages' decided the match psychologically. Morphy fever had already enveloped the land, and we can only imagine the delirium that followed the greatest combination ever seen on US soil." p.146-8.

Morphy has been condemned for not being very creative and not very good in closed positions. Herten states: "Creativity is certainly subjective, though, and my 'scientific' reply is: hogwash!" p.366.

An interesting anecdote (attributed to Frederick Edge) was found on page 244: "months later (November 1, 1858) Edge got a letter from Löwenthal asking for the complete score of this game, as Staunton had published only the first 24 moves. '... I [Edge] said I should be obliged if he would let me bring him a board and light in order that he might dictate to me the required moves [M. had gone to bed], when he answered, 'There's no necessity for that; read me over what Staunton published, and I'll give you the remainder.' He called over the omitted [25 extra] moves as fast as I could write them down."

A large section of the book details Morphy's trip to Europe. Although he never got to play Staunton (mostly due to

Staunton ducking the match) he did get to play several other strong players including Adolf Anderssen. There is a lot of detail on the Paris match with Anderssen. Morphy lost the first game of the match in a long 'grueling struggle'. After a draw in game two Morphy evened the match, winning game three by uncorking a novelty (12.c3!) in the Ruy Lopez. Anderssen didn't score again until the eighth game which was drawn. Morphy won game nine and eleven, but lost game ten. After game ten Anderssen jokingly stated, 'Mr. Morphy wins his games in Seventeen moves, and I in Seventy.' The final score was +7-2=2 in favor of Morphy.

Morphy decided that he had reached the apex and there were no other players to challenge him, so issued a challenge to the chess world of pawn and move.

No one came forth to accept this challenge. The stronger players would have been embarrassed if they had accepted and either won or lost. The weaker players already knew they could not win even at odds.

Morphy gave a speech when he returned to America from Europe in 1859. "Chess never has been and never can be aught but a recreation. It should not be indulged in to the detriment of other and more serious avocations – should not absorb the mind or engross the thoughts of those who worship at its shrine; but should be kept in the background and restrained within its proper province. As a mere game, a relaxation from the severest pursuits of life, it is deserving of high commendation. It is not only the most delightful and scientific, but also the most moral of amusements. Unlike other games in which lucre is the end and aim of the contestants, it recommends itself to the wise by the fact that its mimic battles are fought for no prize but honor. It is eminently and emphatically the philosopher's game. Let the chess board supersede the card table, and a great improvement will be seen in the morals of the community [great applause] (...). I shall leave New York with melancholy sorrow, for I part from friends than whom none truer can be found. Let them rest assured that along with the memory of the chess board I possess the memory of the heart..." p.331.

Many lucrative deals started to appear, but Morphy could not shake his upbringing and mix chess and money. However, when Robert Bonner publisher of the *New York Herald* newspaper offered Morphy \$3000 (\$114,000 in today's money) to write a weekly chess column, Morphy accepted. Morphy wrote 52 columns.

***** Continued on Page 27 *****

15...♙f7 16.♚h5+ ♘g8 17.f6 g6 18.♚h3 ♚c4 19.♗e6 ♜xg4
20.♞f1 ♙f7

Modern engines find 20...♞f5 21.♞xg5 gxf5 22.♚xf5 ♚h4+
23.♞f2 ♚h5, but that's a lot to expect of a human playing
over-the-board.

21.♗g7 ♞f5 22.♞xf5 gxf5 23.♚xf5 ♞d8 24.b3 ♚d5 25.♞d1
♚h1+ 26.♙d2 ♚xh2+ 27.♙c1 ♞xg7 28.♞xd6 ♞f8 29.g6+ 1-0

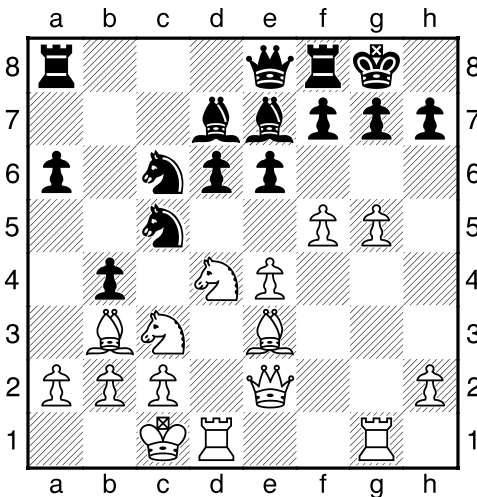
And, while I am tempted simply to soak up pages in this
review by replicating all the book's fun annotations, I will
constrain myself to one more example:

Velimirovic - Vuckovic, B
Belgrade, 2000

1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 ♗c6 6.♞c4 e6
7.♞e3 ♞e7 8.♞b3 0-0 9.♚e2 a6 10.0-0 ♚e8 11.♞hg1 ♗d7
12.g4 ♗c5 13.g5 ♞d7 14.f4

Correctly avoiding 14.♚h5 ♗xd4 15.♞xd4 ♗xb3+ 16.axb3 f5!

14...b5 15.f5 b4



16.f6 bxc3 17.♚h5!

"Velimirovic keeps the game at a high level of tension. It
did not even occur to him to take on g7 or e7, whereupon
his game would gain clarity but offer Black a break to close
his ranks in defense.

"The power of the white pawn on f6 is incredible, because
with it White cuts off the black pieces that cannot defend
themselves. The material is no longer important at all
(Lubomír Ftacnik)"

The game continues, interspersed with Velimirovic's own
notes taken from those newly discovered dusty old boxes.

17...cxb2+ 18.♙xb2 ♗xe4 19.♞df1 ♚d8 20.fxg7 ♚a5 21.♗xc6

"I could have chosen 21.♞f3 but in the upcoming time
crunch, did not notice the wonderful 21...♚e5 (21...♙g7
22.♞f3 +-) 22.gxf8(♚) ♞f8 23.♞f5!!, when Black would lose
control over the fifth rank and the break-through of the g-
pawn would decide. For example, 23 ♚g7 24.♞f7! ♞xf7
25.g5! h×g6 26.♞xg6 or 23...exf5 24.g6 with checkmate"

21...♞xc6 22.♞d4 ♚d2 23.gxf8♚+ ♞xf8 24.♞d1 ♚a5 25.♚h6

These are the sorts of annotations that permeate both vol-
umes and make them a lengthy, very fun read. At this
stage of my advancing chess book collecting, shelf space
is at a premium. I have made it a priority to find room for
these two volumes.

***** Continued from Page 24 *****

Morphy's aversion to mix money and chess further re-
moved him from the game that had brought him so much
fame. It seemed everyone wanted to talk chess, and he
struggled in his attempts to be "normal."

The Civil War took its toll on the Morphy family, and they
ended up fleeing to Paris until the war was over. While in
Paris Morphy avoided most chess situations. After coming
back to New Orleans, he tried to practice law, but it just
never worked out.

"His growing morbidity, extreme sensitivity and increasing
suspiciousness of those around him culminated in an im-
balance that deprived him of practically all company ex-
cept that of his immediate family." p.348. Morphy died on
July 10, 1884 from "congestion of the brain [stroke]" while
taking a midday bath.

The second to last chapter details Morphy's mental illness
(deterioration) from the perspective of the author's profes-
sional opinion. Using modern diagnostic tools, Herten says
quite a bit about Morphy's illness. Evaluating the origins
and symptoms that became apparent. "Paul Morphy's life
reads like the most pathetic of Greek tragedies, and it is
certainly tempting to view his illness as the culmination of
an astounding fall from grace." p.357. This chapter is ex-
tremely enlightening, and I won't divulge its secrets. I leave
that to you the reader to uncover for yourselves.

The book paints a well-rounded portrait of Morphy—not
just as a chess prodigy, but as a complex individual, navi-
gating the pressures of fame amid his personal struggles
and mental deterioration. The only negative comment I
have about the book is that I wish it were longer! It is a
must have for Morphy fans and any student of the game.
Highly recommended. **5/5 Stars.**