

SADLER ON BOOKS

by MATTHEW SADLER



After a few delays, Part II of Garry Kasparov's retrospective on the greatest players from chess history dropped through my letterbox just in time for Christmas. Thank you Father Christmas! This volume covers Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov and Tal and just like the first volume, it is absolutely stunning. Surfing on the Internet, I was quite surprised to see the amount of criticism that the first volume received. It made me realise just how differently people approach chess books and how different everybody's idea is of what makes a good chess book. I gather that chess historians have found numerous historical inaccuracies in the first volume, while various players – strong, weak and computer-aided – have complained about the quality of the analysis in the book. Reading these comments, I couldn't help being in complete agreement with many of them, and yet you know, I couldn't bring myself to care! To me, to condemn the book on the basis of such errors really misses the reason why this is such a wonderful project. If I had to choose between a book on this subject written by a strong player (IM or GM), historically pristine and analytically perfect, and Kasparov's book, I would always choose Kasparov's book without hesitation. Why? Because

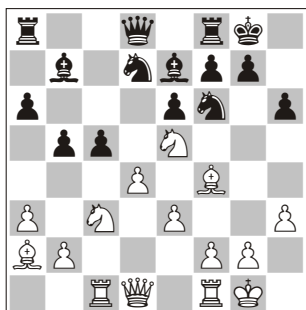
it's Garry! As always with Garry, you get to know what he thinks. The honest opinion of somebody who has been (still is?) the best, who has personally experienced every possible scenario in World Championship matches – sudden collapses, last-gasp victories, triumph and disaster – is priceless and makes for fascinating reading. Analysis comes and goes – I have had enough of my own 'wonderful' analysis refuted to be fairly sanguine about the objective merits of any analysis. For me, the magic of chess and the secret of its attractiveness lie in the thoughts and experiences of the people who play this game.

If there was one criticism to be made of the first book, it was that Kasparov's involvement in the book did seem a little uneven at times. You can usually really sense Kasparov's tone and presence, but occasionally you felt that the book was more or less repeating what has gone before without adding very much new. My feeling is that this is just a logical consequence of the scale of the project and probably also a result of how the book came together. I imagine that Garry had a lot of analysis of positions from old games before this project began – possibly Dvoretsky-style in the form of illustrative positions for strategical

themes – but probably not analysis of the whole games. These analyses were probably the basis of the whole project. To this he would have added a lot of work done specifically for this project (especially it seems, checking old games for faulty analysis very closely with Fritz) but that always leaves a lot of loose ends that need to be tied together in a narrative. And these are often the bits that end up more as a repetition of what has gone before. The first book did sometimes feel like a sequence of 'set pieces' of analysis/commentary/insight from Garry linked by better-known material to which he had not contributed anything new. From this point of view, the second book is a distinct improvement – you feel Garry everywhere.

From a personal point of view, this project has been revelatory for me. Although I knew a fair amount about the players from bygone ages and also a large number of their games, I realise now that I never approached their games in a properly critical way. I either unfairly rejected some of their games as too weakly played for consideration or too easily accepted their great positional victories as models of perfection. Of course I got to know most of these games when I was very young which was a time when I

was only looking for guidance from great games. All the same, I notice now how such an uncritical approach can breed dogmatism and have a detrimental effect on your chess understanding. This was brought home to me by Kasparov's annotations of the fascinating Euwe-Maroczy game from Zandvoort 1936. We start at move 14:



14...c4

This was the first thing that shocked me: no question marks. Countless games annotated by Fred Reinfeld flashed through my head where such moves were labeled as the decisive mistake: 'A bad decision releasing the central tension and giving White a free hand to attack on the kingside' – that's what Kasparov should have written! Instead, he contents himself with quoting Euwe's balanced comment 'This gives the game a particularly sharp character. Black now has the queenside majority of pawns which in the event of an ending might very likely decide the game in his favour. White therefore turns all his efforts to the preparation of a kingside attack' and stating that 'Also possible is 14...cd4! 15.ed4 ♖b6 and ...♗bd5 with the usual play against the isolated d4-pawn.'

15.♗b1 ♖e8?

Kasparov now states 'In my view a

loss of time. Better was the immediate 15...♗e5 16.♗e5 (no use is 16.de5?! ♖d1 17.♗fd1 ♗d5) 16...♗d7 17.♖c2 f5 18.♗f4 ♗f6 with chances for both sides'. By now, my jaw had dropped to the ground. Garry thinks that Black's position is just fine after a move like ...c4? But...but that can't be true – it's been known since the 1900s that this type of move is always bad!

16.♖e2 ♗e5

Kasparov now quotes Euwe again: 'This is probably a decisive mistake, since White's attack becomes more powerful than ever. On the other hand, the text weakens White's pawns so that his game will be decidedly inferior if the attack does not succeed.' Go Max, Go! That's the type of comment I'm used to hearing! Garry comments further 'However [16...♗e5] is hardly worse than 16...♗b6: here after 17.♗g3 followed by ♗fd1 and e3-e4 or f2-f4 White has good attacking chances.'

17.de5 ♗h7

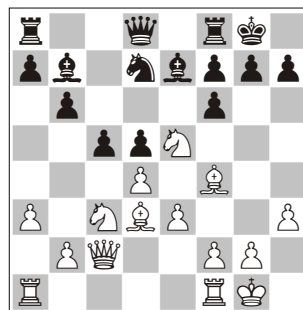
Euwe claims here that 17...♗d7 18.♖g4 ♗h8 19.♖h5 is winning for White but Kasparov demonstrates that after 18...♖c7! 19.♗h6 ♖e5 20.♗f4 ♖f6 the position is unclear and recommends instead '18.♖h5 ♗c5 19.♗fd1 ♗d3! 20.♗d3 cd3 21.e4 ♖d7 22.♖g4 ♗h7 23.♗d5 ♗d5 24.♗d3 with some advantage. Not enough? But after all, White in fact had hardly anything...'

In the complications that followed, Kasparov also demonstrates – with the aid of Fritz – that White's attack was not at all as dangerous as it seemed, but for me the 'damage' had already been done. Suddenly, a few things made sense: I couldn't help thinking back to two episodes in my chess

career where my dogmatic acceptance of the standard thinking on ...c4 had made its mark on my play:

1. Sadler-Frias

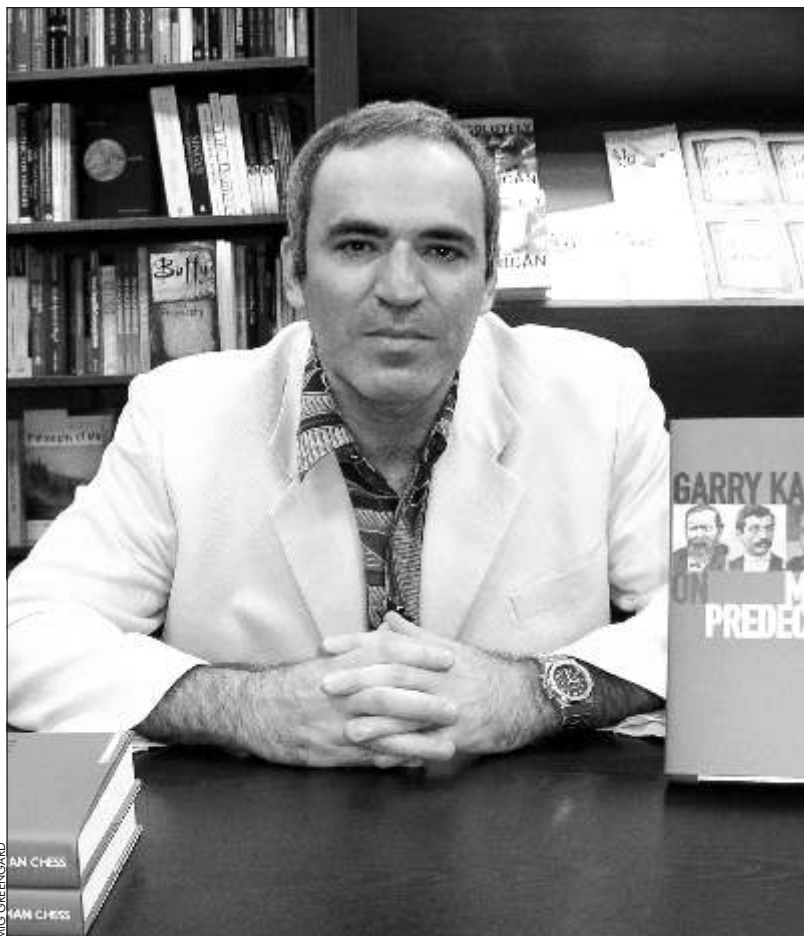
London Lloyds Bank 1994



This was actually the starting point for one of the most traumatic periods of my chess career. I had just won a strong open in Norway a couple of weeks before and I had started here with 2/2. I felt in really good form and a good tournament would see me above 2600 for the first time. Here Black played

13...c4

I vividly remember thinking 'Now Black is just lost' and becoming progressively more frustrated as I was unable to demonstrate a win. Indeed, from that point on I spent acres of time, Black played imaginatively and I completely imploded, losing on time in a disgraceful position on move 33. (Ah those were the days!) I cannot describe how overwrought I was after the game. That somebody could play such an 'obviously bad' move – a move that I knew to be bad since my earliest childhood – and beat me was too much for me at the time and the rest of the tournament became a complete nightmare. If I remember right, I was so wound up that I withdrew from the tournament after 9 of the 10 rounds and had to take a break from chess for 3



Garry Kasparov (here seen at a signing session in New York) continues his history of the World Championship with the second volume on Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov and Tal. **Matthew Sadler** liked *My Great Predecessors II* even better. One reason: 'You feel Garry everywhere.'

months to give my nerves a rest. Obviously 13...c4 was not the only reason for this, but my reaction to it during and also after the game – it never occurred to me that ...c4 might be a risky but reasonable idea in this position – showed the extent to which unfounded dogmatism had infected my game.

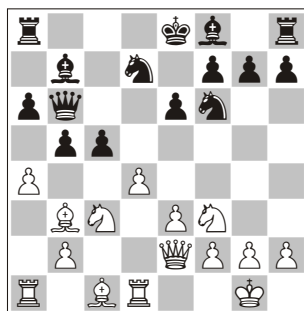
2. Hoi-Sadler

Yerevan Olympiad 1996

This was my second game in the British team and I was looking to impress after a very unconvincing first win.

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.c4 dc4 4.e3 e6 5.♙c4 c5 6.0-0 a6

7.♘c3 b5 8.♙b3 ♙b7 9.♖e2 ♘bd7 10.♖d1 ♗b6 11.a4



Here 11...b4 is normal, but I became attracted by the idea of **11...c4 12.♙c2 b4 13.a5 ♗c7 14.♘a4** which I eventually played. But my

God – I spent so much time making that decision! Some of it was spent calculating but most of it was spent fighting against all my childhood instincts. If I lost, I was positive that the rest of the team would tell me 'How could you play such a move? Everybody knows such a move is always bad' (although with Spess (Speelman) and Jules (Hodgson) in the team, I should have known that during the Olympiad they would bring weirder moves to the board than I could ever dream of!) If Garry had written this book 7 years earlier, I would have played ...c4 much quicker!

Another comment that made a very big impression on me was in the splendid section on the titanic match between Botvinnik and Bronstein in 1951. Apart from the result, this match was almost unknown to me. I remember reading somewhere that the number of blunders was very high, but whatever the case, it was certainly a match of high drama. Kasparov does some very interesting analysis of the magnificent 18th, 19th, 22nd and 23rd games but he also draws attention to a wonderful comment of Bronstein's to the opening of the 17th game:

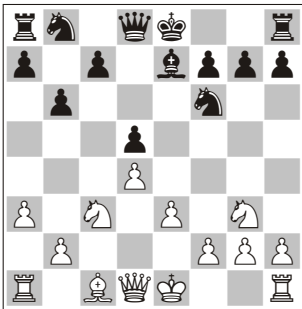
Botvinnik-Bronstein

17th match game 1951

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♖b4
4.e3 b6 5.♗e2 ♙a6 6.a3 ♙e7
7.♗g3?!**

7.♗f4 was still waiting to be invented by... Botvinnik!

**7...d5 8.cd5 ♙f1 9.♗f1 ed5
10.♗g3**



10...♙d7 11.♙f3 ♘c6! 12.0-0
12.♗f5 ♙f8 13.♗g3 ♙e7 with equality.

12...g6

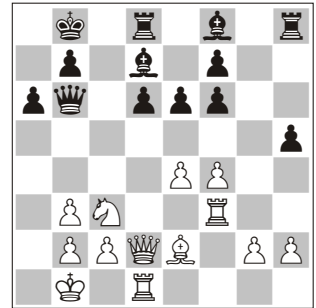
Bronstein achieved a comfortable game, gradually seized the initiative and gained a deserved win. Bronstein commented on 10...♙d7: 'The start of a series of strong moves, which have the aim of confusing the opponent and up-

setting his harmonious train of thought. White wanted to play his knight to f5 - Black prevents this. With 11.♙f3 White renewed the threat, and Black does not object. Isn't this eccentric? Sheer tricks, with no logic at all. But take a look at the position: all the pieces are in play, and if 11...g6? Then 12.e4! Later Botvinnik said that my play was confusing and that often he could not even understand what I wanted. I consider these words to be the very best compliment. If the world champion does not understand your plan, what more could you want?'

I don't think that I have ever read a better description of modern chess! That it comes from a player in the 1950s is a testament to how ahead of his time Bronstein was. The preoccupation with the concrete details of the position ahead of the general positional niceties of the position - 11...♘c6! not only does not attempt to prevent ♗f5 but also blocks Black's natural plan of ...c5 striking at the White centre - and a huge flexibility and attention to 'accidental' tactical details during the execution of a plan is the hallmark of the finest modern chess, but Bronstein's fantasy seemed to take him there many years in advance. Looking at the match, you really get the feeling that Bronstein could have beaten Botvinnik in so many ways, but his tragedy was that he never quite managed to choose between all his possibilities. And almost miraculously, through enormous tenacity and fighting spirit, Botvinnik held on to Bronstein. At the end, it was Bronstein who was happy to agree a draw to make it 12-12.

In my review of the first book, I did comment on how often 'the ma-

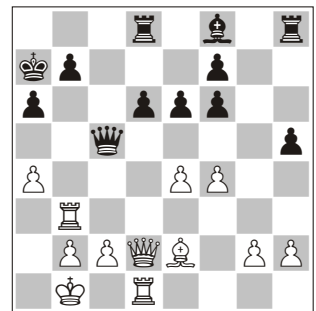
chine' was credited with critical improvements. This book is no different but it is starting to grate a little less. It did prompt me to scour the book for the 'machine improvement' I liked the most. There are many candidates, but this was the cheekiest, taken from Kasparov's analysis of Keres' magisterial win against Botvinnik in Moscow 1956:



17.♗a4

What happens after

**17...♙a4? 18.ba4 ♖a7
19.♙b3! ♙c5?**



20.♙b5!

winning the h5 pawn! A wonderful computer move!

To summarise, this is a wonderful achievement. Not only is this an enormously instructive book on all levels - it could even be seen as an openings tutor: the section on the Euwe-Alekhine match is a mini-masterclass on the 6.♗e5 ♗bd7 7.♗c4 ♙c7 system for example - it is also great fun to read! You can't ask for much more from one book! ■