

Kingwalks

PATHS OF GLORY



Yasser Seirawan & Bruce Harper
Foreword by Hans Ree

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Introduction

Getting off to a good start

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort...

We wanted to start this book with a compelling opening sentence, but it was pointed out to us that this one was already taken. So we tried again:

When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.

Sage legal advice forced us to also give up on this equally striking start, so we can only hope that the third time's the charm:

We celebrate not the cautious, sedentary monarch who remains at home, counting his treasure while fearful of its loss, who sends his minions into battle against the enemy king while cowering in his fortress; but rather the brave, inspiring leader who asks nothing of his followers that he would not do himself, and who will risk all to prevail.

This starting sentence, while overly long and somewhat inaccurate – kingwalks often involve movement away from, not into, danger – at least avoids a lawsuit. But surely *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are the epic recounting of long, dangerous and ultimately successful kingwalks? Did Tolkien consciously or otherwise base his underlying theme on a memorable chess game he played in his distant past?

There is no evidence of this, either way, as far as we know, so we will never know. But this book, which explores the subject of kingwalks in chess, might well be placed on your bookshelf next to Tolkien's masterpieces. Or not.

The fascination of kingwalks

There is something fascinating about a kingwalk. What is essentially a strategic or tactical maneuver charms us, perhaps because of its inherent contradiction and even implausibility. One of the weakest, and certainly the most important and vulnerable, chess piece *does something*, apart from trying to remain safe. Checkmate ends the game, so king activity carries with it the seeds of total disaster. Make a mistake with the other pieces or pawns, and the game goes on. If a kingwalk goes awry, that's it.

But it's not just the risk of kingwalks that attracts us. The chess king may move only one square at a time, which means that it moves at a snail's pace compared to a bishop, rook or queen. Even the short-range knight can move twice as fast as the king. The deliberate and regally serene pace of the king ensures that kingwalks are indeed walks – in a game where a single tempo may often decide the outcome, kingwalks are fascinatingly incongruous. A king may be said to race to catch a pawn that threatens to promote in the endgame, but the term *kingwalks* somehow seems apt when the board is still full of pieces.

More could be said on the aesthetic and psychological attraction of kingwalks, but it would be hard to justify an entire book on the subject of kingwalks based only on their beauty, undeniable as that beauty is. As we will see, in some instances kingwalks can be hideous as well. In chess, form and function merge in a manner that would delight the most devoted member of the *Bauhaus* school. If something works, it's beautiful; if it doesn't, it's ugly. "Ugly moves," in this sense, cannot be strong moves. Equally, an unsound sacrifice must at least have a psychological component that can cause the defender to make a mistake before it can be called "beautiful." Tal made many beautiful combinations, and some of them were even sound. For the others, what hidden resources his opponents might have had often remained hidden until after the game.

Kingwalks must have a point in order to be interesting and attractive – simply moving your king around for no reason is just weak play. This is not to say that the goal of every kingwalk has to be strategically justified or objectively sound. We may justifiably be entertained by dubious or unsuccessful kingwalks, just as we are amused when someone slips and falls into a muddy puddle. When a king walks off a cliff, it's funny – as long as it's not our king. Still, a good kingwalk has to have some justification, if only in the mind of the player concerned. Our emotions will then likely be engaged, one way or the other.

Practical applications

While our hope is that readers of all strengths will enjoy this book, there is also much to be learned from the study of kingwalks. They are a legitimate part of chess, and can transform the nature of the position to a great extent. Given the difficulty people, including chess players, have in coping with change, the psychological effect of kingwalks cannot be overestimated.

The extent to which a kingwalk will throw the opponent off his or her game depends in part on the position and the nature of the kingwalk, and in part on the opponent. There are two aspects to this. One is that king location and safety are fundamental elements of every chess position. Moving the king to a different area of the board alters the position in an objective sense. The second aspect is that a kingwalk may distract the opponent, either by offering a real or imagined target for attack (depending on the soundness of the kingwalk), or by making a direct attack against the king impossible, more difficult, or just different.

This subjective impact may cause an opponent to lose his or her bearings, in the same way an unexpected offer of material may induce “sacrificial shock.” When a player starts to wonder if an opponent’s kingwalk is an act of desperation or a colossal blunder, his or her focus may shift to thoughts of mate. If this shift is unjustified, bad things may happen. Of course, if the shift to a mating attack is justified, bad things may also happen...

In the pages that follow, we not only give examples of different types of kingwalks, but we try to explain the positional, tactical or psychological basis for each example. A legitimate kingwalk doesn’t come out of the blue, any more than a combination arises by chance. By exploring the preconditions for the different types of kingwalks, we hope the attentive reader will recognize positions in his or her own games where a kingwalk might be the path to victory. Equally, this type of analysis will help players in coping with opposing kingwalks.

What is a kingwalk?

The entry for “kingwalk” in the *Caissa-Webster Dictionary* reads:

kingwalk /'kiŋwôk/

Etymology: From Middle English *king*, *kyng*, from Old English *cyng*, *cyning* (“king”); and from Middle English *walken* (“to move, roll, turn, revolve, toss”), from Old English *wealcan* (“to move round, revolve, roll, turn, toss”), *gewealcan* (“to go, traverse”).

In chess, a voluntary, purposeful maneuver with the king, part of a deliberate, planned strategy occurring usually in the opening or middlegame, whereby the king seemingly is put in danger as it moves near or among enemy pieces, seeking a strategic or tactical goal.

Kingwalks: Paths of Glory

Our definition of the term “kingwalk,” which in turn defines the scope of this book, is slightly different from the dictionary definition. Clearly every kingwalk involves the movement of the king, but not every movement of the king can be termed a kingwalk (a book on games where one player’s king never moved at all might be interesting, but that’s for another time).

The term “kingwalk” as used in this book refers to a king maneuver with the following characteristics:

- It must be purposeful, in that the king maneuver must have a strategic or tactical goal (although, as discussed above, this goal need not be justified).
- It should be voluntary. A kingwalk may be made under duress, in that it is the only viable defense, but it should still be a deliberate, planned strategy on the part of the player doing it, having anticipated the opponent’s attack, as opposed to an unplanned blasting of the king out into the open.
- It generally occurs in the opening or middle game, as opposed to the endgame (although we have been flexible on this – compelling and clear king maneuvers in endgames have been included).

Kingwalks are therefore clearly (and in some cases, not so clearly) different from “king hunts,” where an attack results in the exposure of the defender’s king. There is also no minimum length for a kingwalk, although naturally the longer the kingwalk, the better. But it is wrong to emphasize this factor too much, just as it’s wrong to say “the longer the combination, the more impressive it is.” A kingwalk of even one or two squares can be compelling. The length of a kingwalk may be a measure of its audacity, but this will depend on the circumstances.

The organization of this book

The chapters in this book deal with different subjects, and may be grouped as follows:

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss kingwalks made in preparation for later developments: chapter 1 for an attack (usually by positioning the king on the opposite flank to the location of the attack) and chapter 2 for the endgame (positioning the king in an advanced square so that endgame activity is facilitated).

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 involve a more active role for the king: chapter 3 discusses the king’s role in shouldering the burden of defense; chapter 4 looks at the king’s role in pressuring enemy weak points and attacking or capturing enemy pieces; chapter 5 explores the most dramatic and extreme example of an attacking king – participation in a mating attack.

Chapters 6 and 7 are quite different – they are concerned with kingwalks to safety (sometimes under pressure and sometimes not). The difference from chapters 1

and 2 is that the king relocates because of enemy pressure, not to prepare an attack or prepare the activation of the king for the endgame. Chapter 6 looks at kingwalks across the board, while chapter 7 looks at kingwalks up the board, which tend to be even more spectacular.

Chapter 8 turns to the opening, giving a variety of examples of kingwalks early in the game, which is when you would least expect to see them.

Chapter 9 follows naturally, as its topic is kingwalks in the endgame. King activity is a fundamental aspect of all chess endgames, some more than others. As the number of other pieces drops, the king tends to come into its own more and more, with the ultimate example being king and pawn endgames. At times the king's role in an endgame is so striking that it can properly be termed a kingwalk, and the examples given will help remind us of how important it is to have an active king in the endgame.

Chapter 10 addresses a particularly curious animal – games that feature kingwalks by both players. Such games are uncommon and are highly entertaining.

Chapter 11 might be even more entertaining, while being instructive as well. This chapter deals with failed kingwalks – the kingwalks off a cliff as alluded to earlier. Exactly how one defines a failed kingwalk is a judgment call, as even during successful kingwalks there can be a moment where the right response from the opponent could have radically changed the outcome. In some cases, though, the failure is indisputable.

Chapters 12 to 16 look at examples of kingwalks from five different players. To some extent the selection of players (Steinitz, Nimzowitsch, Petrosian, Suttles, Seirawan) was somewhat arbitrary, being based in part on the authors' familiarity with the subject matter, but all five players are arguably "positional players" (and perhaps "extreme positional players" at that). At the very least, these chapters provide additional interesting and instructive examples. Where games involving these players appear in earlier chapters, they are not repeated..

Finally, chapter 17 gives a selection of recent kingwalks, which show that kingwalks are alive and well and are an integral part of modern chess.

Sources

This book contains a range of games, with the sources ranging from world championships, candidates' tournaments and matches, and classical time control events, to rapid, blitz and bullet games. The sole criteria for inclusion were whether the kingwalk in question was instructive and entertaining (not necessarily in that order). Sometimes a kingwalk didn't even occur in the actual game, and is found only "in the notes," as they like to say.

Kingwalks: Paths of Glory

The examples have been gathered from various sources. A list of those is provided in the bibliography. However, two works deserve special mention. The first is Mednis's interesting 1999 book *The King in the Middlegame*, which contains a number of well-known and not-so-well known examples of kingwalks. The second is *Chess Curiosities* by the Dutch writer Tim Krabbé, as the third chapter (Steel Kings) is devoted to kingwalks. His website is a treasure trove and well worth visiting: <https://timkr.home.xs4all.nl/chess/chess.html>.

Where analysis has been borrowed from other sources, it is acknowledged. Where the authors have used their previously published analyses, we have been less generous. All analytical errors are most definitely someone else's fault.

Yasser Seirawan, Amsterdam
Bruce Harper, Vancouver
May 2021

Foreword

Bravery and Profundity

Paths of Glory, the subtitle of this book, is the bitterly ironic title of a movie by Stanley Kubrick from 1957 in which French soldiers in World War I are being sent to their death by ruthless commanders, in missions that serve no military aim, except to provide glory to the generals.

But here the expression is used sincerely. True, there is a chapter in which the kings walk to their doom, but mostly the kingwalks that are shown here are really glorious: horizontal, vertical or, for intrepid walkers, even diagonal, to run to safety or help in a mating attack or in some spectacular instances even both.

A few times the authors stress the educational power of their examples. Readers may develop a feeling for the required conditions for a successful kingwalk. It's always good to learn something, but surely their main aim must have been to inspire awe and amazement. And provide entertainment sometimes, when things go wrong.

There is no bravery without the possibility of failure, so obviously there is a chapter about unsuccessful kingwalks. The authors make no secret of the fact that these failures can be funny. Maybe they subscribe to the old maxim that all good jokes are an elaboration of a man slipping on a banana peel. They write: "There is nothing quite as entertaining as someone failing – provided it isn't you (or someone you're cheering for)!"

Elsewhere they mention "the near universal human trait" of *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure with somebody's misfortune. And they go on: "Chess can be a very cruel game. That's why we play it." Far be it from me to deny the fact that this innocent sadistic streak is no stranger to me. But the joyous admiration for spectacular and successful kingwalks prevails. Once you have seen one of the classic examples, you'll never forget it.

Kingwalks: Paths of Glory

Whenever a book has two authors, you may wonder sometimes who wrote what. I think I found a sentence about Nimzowitsch that may betray a small difference of opinion between the authors. They write: “It is therefore unfair to consider him a thief, and equally unfair to accuse him of fraud, although he was not as generous in acknowledging the discoveries of his predecessors as he might have been”

I imagine an argument: “But Yasser, surely you can’t call the great Nimzowitsch a fraudulent thief?” “OK, Bruce, let’s say then that it’s unfair to call him so, but...”

The book has a large and entertaining collection of kingwalks. But, among all these great kingwalks I missed the magnificent game Gashimov-Grischuk (Bursa 2010) where Black’s king marched all the way from e8 to b1, to victory. Of course, with a subject as vast as this, every reader will always miss one of his favorites. It cannot be otherwise.

I have mentioned already that I am not quite immune to what the authors call *Schadenfreude*. Not to my credit, I experienced quite some *Schadenfreude* after I had executed the one and only successful kingwalk in my career. It certainly can’t be called a path of glory, but I found it hilarious. By coincidence it happened in a blitz game against the Great Sage of kingwalks Tim Krabbé, played at my home.

My king walked from g1 to a5. He could have mated me on the kingside, he could have mated me in the middle of the board and he could have mated me on the queenside. Finally I found refuge near b2 and then he immediately blundered a piece. I won the game and Tim cried: “With my own theme, the winning king’s march!”

Immediately after he left my place, I wrote down the moves of the game. Tim himself had once published a blitz game against me in which right after the opening he had mated me with his black knights on f3 and c3. I would have my revenge on Tim. Beaten with his own theme, hoist with his own petard.

After reading Yasser’s and Bruce’s exhilarating book, I tried to find the notation of that blitz game, looking forward to the pleasure of playing it over move by move. Many years and a move to another apartment had passed since I had played that game. I couldn’t find the notation. But no matter, the sweet vague memory was enough.

Executing a successful kingwalk has the power to make a chessplayer happy and the same can be said about playing over the many beautiful examples in this book. Enjoy!

Hans Ree
Amsterdam
May 2021

Chapter 17

Recent Examples

As should have been obvious from the previous chapters, kingwalks not only have a long history, but are still an important part of the game today. Despite the pervasive influence of computers on modern chess, psychology continues to play an important role, and when players are confronted with unusual and surprising developments at the board, all-too-human errors often result.

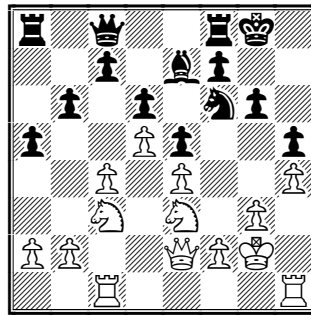
Whether kingwalks are “mere technical maneuvers” that have been internalized by today’s top players, or are creative and inspired achievements, there is no doubt that kingwalks are alive and well – more than ever. In this final chapter, we give a selection of kingwalks from recent games, and invite the reader to compare them to some of the classic kingwalks that appear earlier in the book.

Ultimately, we think the maestros of the past would be pleased.

Kingwalks to prepare an attack

In our first example, White could well have been Tigran Petrosian himself. At least for the kingwalk part of the game.

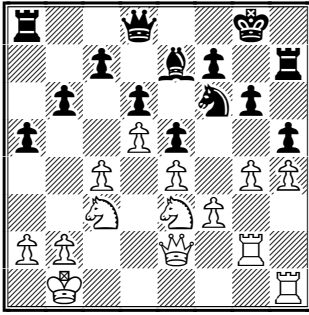
Tomashevsky – Ponomarev
Baku 2016



White has a nice edge. He has more space, and Black’s e7-bishop is somewhat “bad,” as it is on a poor diagonal. The normal approach to this position would be to advance on the queenside, but White comes up with a different idea. He decides to try to take advantage of Black’s h5-pawn by attacking on the kingside.

To prepare for this, White undertakes a classic kingwalk.

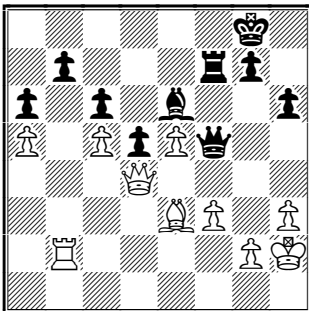
22.♖cg1!? ♔g7 23.♕f1 ♜h8
24.♕e1 ♜d7 25.♕d1 ♕g8 26.f3
♜f8 27.g4 ♜h7 28.♕c2 ♜e7
29.♜g2 ♜d8 30.♕b1 0-1 (58)



A typical end position of a kingwalk of this type. If you didn't know better, you would think that White had castled on the queenside, brought his queen's rook to the kingside, and started a pawn advance on that side of the board. White now has many ways to build up the pressure on the kingside, but instead he sacrificed a pawn and ultimately lost.

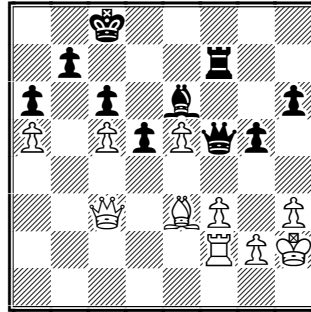
Given the players in the next example, it might be better to term Black's kingwalk a "kingwalk to prepare a counterattack." Black transfers his king to the queenside not so much for safety reasons, but rather to facilitate his response to White's potential attack on the kingside. Subtle stuff, but this is a world championship match we're talking about.

Carlsen – Karjakin
New York 2016



The position is equal. Karjakin decides to try to infuse some life into the position with a kingwalk, anticipating future activity on the king side.

32...♖f8!? 33.♗c3 ♕e8 34.♞b4 g5
35.♞b2 ♖d8 36.♞f2 ♕c8 ½-½ (51)



Mission completed.

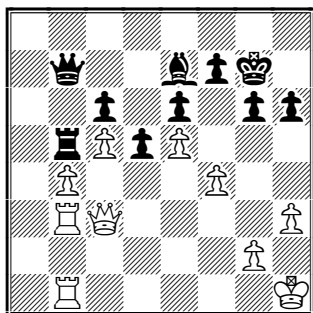
The position is still equal, but later White advanced his g2-pawn to g4 and Black did indeed get chances for a serious advantage. Carlsen held the draw, however, and the match headed into a rapid chess tiebreak, which he won, retaining his title.

The next example is very hard to categorize. In part this is because it is from a blitz game (albeit a "serious" one), and in part because White's kingwalks may or may not have had an actual purpose. But since White was eventually planning to break into Black's position, there presumably were variations where the position of White's king would have mattered.

In one sense this game may be the best example in this entire book, since it features the most kingwalks. It could have been placed in the "double kingwalk" category, but really this

example mainly shows how irritating and wearing kingwalks can be for an opponent consigned to passive defense.

Nakamura – Caruana
St. Louis 2017 (blitz)



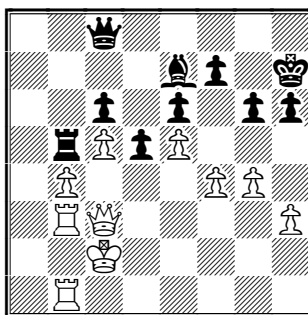
White has a winning material advantage, but what is the best way of converting it? The engine favors the direct approach – crashing through with f4-f5 as soon as possible. A human being is inclined to take a more subtle approach, wearing down the opponent’s resistance by maneuvering – especially in a blitz game.

38.g4 ♖c8 39.♗g2

White rejects the forcing approach, in favor of what can be termed “tacking.” This sailing term isn’t wholly accurate, though, as it refers to the series of oblique maneuvers required to sail into the wind. Here the wind is at White’s back, but he still defers a breakthrough until Black’s resistance has been worn down.

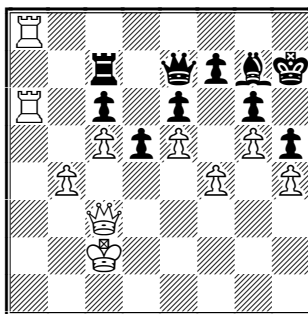
So perhaps “preliminary bombardment” might be a better term.

39...♗h7 40.♗f3 ♖d7 41.♗e3 ♜h4 42.♗d2 ♜e7 43.♗c2 ♖c8



White has brought his king to the queenside, and now explores the possibility of invading down the a-file.

44.♞a1 ♖d7 45.♞a4 ♞b7 46.♞ba3 ♜f8 47.♞a8 ♜g7 48.♞3a6 ♞c7 49.h4 ♖e7 50.g5 h5



51.♞b8

51.♞a3! was cleaner, followed by a rook trade.

51...♖d7 52.♞bb6 ♖c8 53.♖d3 d4 54.♖c2 ♜f8 55.♖g2 ♜e7 56.♞a2

And here 56.♞e4, followed by 57.♞xc6, did the job.

56...♖d7 57.♞b8 ♞b7 58.♞xb7 ♖xb7 59.♞b6 ♖d7 60.♞b8 ♜d8 61.♞a8 ♜c7 62.♞a7 ♖g7 63.♖c4 ♖d8 64.♖xd4 ♖b8 65.♞a3 ♜d8

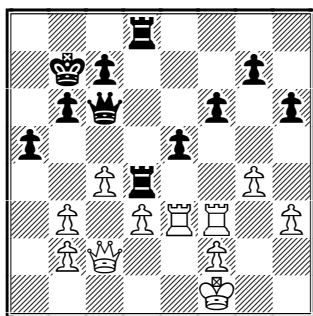
Kingwalks: Paths of Glory

White conducts a short kingwalk of his own, to free up his pieces by over-protecting his d3-pawn, but White's king is by no means safe on e2.

42...♖c6 43.♖c3 ♘d7 44.♖c2 ♖c8
45.♝f1

A change of plan!

45...♝b7

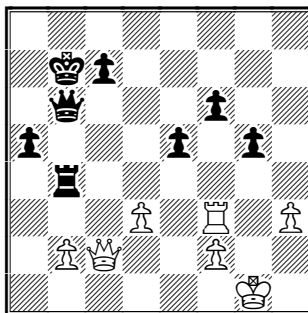


Mission accomplished. Now Black can stir up trouble on the kingside. Note that if queens are traded, Black's king will have a quick path to the b4-square. We will follow the game a little bit longer.

46.♞g3 ♞f4 47.♝g1 g5 48.♞e1
♝e8 49.♝g2 h5! 50.♞e4 ♖c6
51.♞f3 ♖d7 52.♞g3 ♖h7 53.g×h5
♝×h5 54.c5

White seeks counterplay, but it's not easy to attack Black's king.

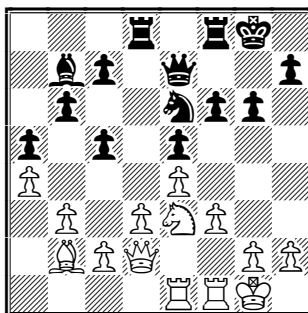
54...♞d4 55.b4 ♞×b4 56.♞×b4
♞×b4 57.♞f3 ♖f7 58.♝g1 ♖e6
59.c×b6 ♖×b6 0-1 (96)



Black went on to win in another 30 moves or so.

In the following blitz game, Black's kingwalk succeeds against none other than the world champion.

Carlsen – Ding
Kolkata 2019 (blitz)



This position, which arose out of a Deferred Exchange variation of the Ruy Lopez, is more tense than it looks, especially in a blitz game. Both players would like to open up the position on their own terms – White by breaking with f3-f4, when he's ready, and Black by advancing his kingside pawns. These similar plans are based on the position of White's b2-bishop and its counterpart on b7.