

A Chess Whodunit

Edward Winter

(2004)



'The Rou MS is one of the most mysterious things in chess and, if true, was one of the greatest treasures.' That is how John Keeble assessed an elusive eighteenth-century document which provoked considerable controversy among historians and bibliophiles. Was it the first chess text to emanate from the United States or an elaborate hoax/joke perpetrated more than a century later by one of the game's most respected authorities?

The affair having been altogether forgotten today, readers may appreciate an overview here, and a good starting-point is the summary provided by H.J.R. Murray on page 846 of *A History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913):

'In the *Craftsman*, No. 376, for 15 September 1733 there appeared a paper with the title of *A Short Essay on the Game of Chess*, with the signature R. The

paper was really a feeble political skit in the Tory interest, couched in the language of chess, but showing a very slight knowledge of the game. It provoked a speedy reply in the Whig interest, *A Letter to the Craftsman on the Game of Chess, occasioned by his Paper on the Fifteenth of this Month*

which was dated Slaughter's Coffee House, 21 September 1733. The reply, while professing to expose the blunders in the paper in the *Craftsman*, makes nearly as many of its own, even confusing Stalemate with Fool's mate, and its chief interest lies in the fact that it was the occasion of the writing of a far abler paper,

Critical Remarks upon the letter to the Craftsman

..., by the Rev. Lewis Rou, pastor of the Huguenot Church in New York, the dedication of which was dated 13 December 1734. The MS, now unfortunately lost track of, is the oldest reference to chess in the New World.'

D.W. Fiske had written about the matter in his chapter entitled 'Lewis Rou' ['Louis' is seen in some sources] on pages 340-345 of the New York, 1857 tournament book. He commented that:

'...a scanty ray of light has been thrown upon the story of American chess in the eighteenth century by the discovery of a manuscript work written in New York in the year 1734. Its author, the Reverend Lewis Rou, was the pastor of the French Protestant church in that city.'

The opus was described by Fiske as:

'... a very closely written manuscript of 24 pages, of a quarto size, and, from its general appearance, appears to have been prepared for the press, but for some reason or other was never printed. It is divided into 17 brief chapters or paragraphs. It is dedicated to Governor Cosby ...'

Fiske recounted in detail not only the contents of the manuscript but also its genesis, noting that the above-mentioned Whig pamphlet:

'... was probably widely circulated by the Government and its supporters, and a copy was sent to William Cosby, Governor of New York. He showed it to Rou, and requested him to write out some critical remarks upon the chess portion of the *Letter*. With this request Rou agreed to comply, and the result was the work which we are about to describe. From the expressed wish of the Governor, we can gather that Rou must have possessed the reputation, among his friends at least, of being a lover of chess and a good player. And in this opinion we are fully confirmed by the work itself. His language throughout is that of one thoroughly acquainted not only with the game but with its literature, and with what was then known of its history. He uses the technical terms with exact precision; he owns two editions of *Vida*; he quotes both the French and English translations of *Greco*; he gives chess terms in the Persian and Hebrew; and he speaks in disparaging terms of the players which he had encountered on this side of the ocean. In short, we may very fairly conclude, even from the slight evidence which we possess, that he was the foremost practitioner of his time in our country.'



Daniel Willard Fiske

Nearly half a century later Fiske brought out a slightly adapted version of his article on the Rou manuscript (a 16-page booklet published in Florence in 1902), and the following year this paragraph appeared in the *BCM* (page 386 of the September 1903 issue):

'We have received the following: "The sum of three hundred dollars will be paid for accurate information indicating the present whereabouts (with permission to copy the same) of the MS work, written by the Reverend Lewis Rou, entitled: 'Critical Remarks upon the Letter to the *Craftsman* on the Game of Chess', being a closely written, thin, small quarto of 24 pages, beginning with a dedicatory letter: 'To His Excellency William Cosby, Esq., Captain-General and Commander-in-Chief in and over the Provinces of New York and New Jersey'. At the end of this dedicatory epistle is the date: 'New York, ye 13th, of Decemb. 1734', which date is virtually repeated at the end of the MS. This unpublished tract was, during 1858-9, for a while in the possession of the late Dr George H. Moore, then librarian of the New York Historical Society, to whom it had been lent by the now unknown owner. Information concerning it may be sent to The Librarian of Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.'"

No record has been found of the guerdon being claimed, and there is a 30-year gap before we pick up the story again, on pages 75 and 77 of the April 1932 *American Chess Bulletin*. In an article entitled 'The Rev. Lewis Rou and his Manuscript' Alfred C. Klahre recounted the essentials and added information about Fiske's involvement:

'The manuscript existed in New York as late as 1858, when Professor Willard Fiske, a zealous propagandist for chess, borrowed it from Dr G.H. Moore. At the time the latter was connected with the New York Historical Society, the Long Island Historical Society, the New York Ethnological Society, as well as being librarian for the Lenox Library, now known as the Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundation (New York Public Library). ... Professor Fiske officiated as secretary to the American Geographical Society of New York in 1859 and 1860, was professor at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, mainly as teacher of North European languages.

... The manuscript had not been copied completely by Fiske, and it was duly returned to Dr Moore, who died in [1892]. Several years afterwards, a search was made in the libraries mentioned, but without avail. In the year 1902, Professor Fiske raised another hullabaloo and there was published in Florence, Italy a pamphlet signed W.F. re the lost manuscript. Items also appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Nation*, NY. and others, in which it was stated that if any person had anything to say concerning the later history of the manuscript or its final fate, such information would be appreciated.

... If any reader can locate the manuscript, or at least knows of a copy of it (which, no doubt, also existed owing to it having been dedicated to New York's Governor) the chess world would be much interested in having the information.'



Alfred Klahre

The following issue of the *American Chess Bulletin* (May-June 1932, page 99) had a response from John Keeble. He observed *inter alia* :

'A curious feature of this account of the Rou MS is that nobody can say it is fictitious without saying that three persons had a hand in it. The three are Professor Fiske, who wrote the account, Professor George Allen of Pennsylvania and George H. Moore, the librarian referred to above.'

Klahre returned to the subject on page 13 of the January 1933 *American Chess Bulletin* . Concerning the possible whereabouts of the manuscript he speculated that it might be in Europe, although ...:

'... several interested parties have failed in finding any trace in France. The Cleveland Public Library, Cleveland, O., where perhaps are filed more papers pertaining to the missing tract than anywhere else, due to the enthusiasm of the late John Griswold White, has a letter from Hon. Horatio S. White, Professor Fiske's literary executor. Fiske had written to Professor Allen of Philadelphia, Pa. (1857) that "having in his possession an American chess manuscript, written in 1734, is no common find". He described it as being a quarto of two plus 22 closely written pages, the title page being lost, probably.'

An aspect which had particularly interested Keeble was the letter to Fiske from George H. Moore which appeared on page 397 of the New York, 1857 tournament book. This quoted the words of Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776) about Rou's connection with chess:

'I knew Mr Rou, and I never heard him reproached with any immorality. He was bookish and, as such men frequently are, peevish, and had nothing of the courtly, polite Frenchman. The game of chess was the only amusement he took, and perhaps was too fond of it. It was said that he wrote a treatise on that game.'

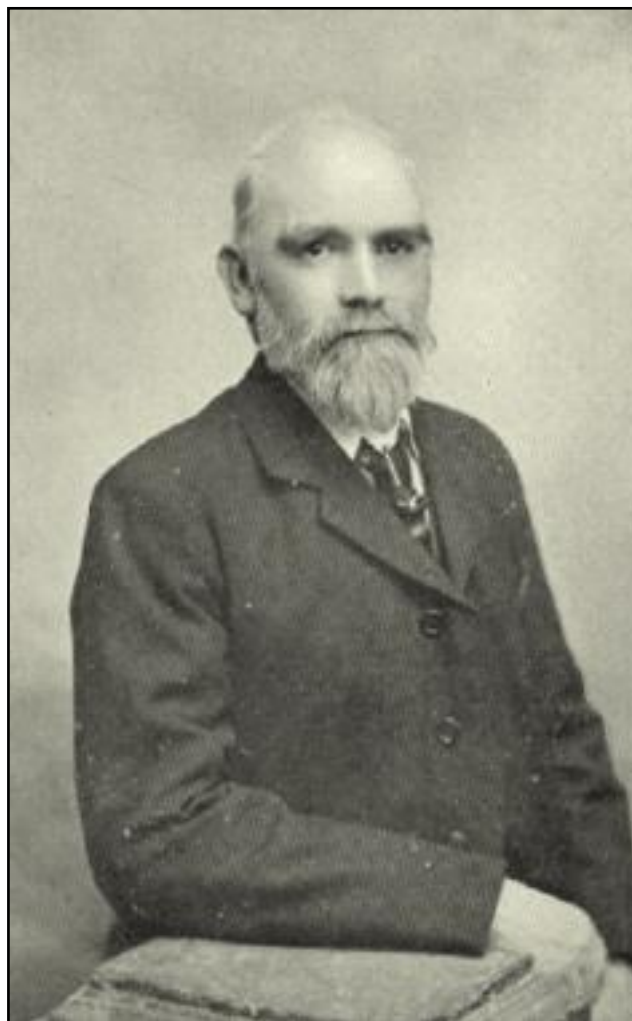
Keeble wanted to know whether this letter of Colden's existed, and on page 13 of the January 1933 *American Chess Bulletin* Klahre provided documentation to demonstrate that it did. Then on page 138 of the September-October 1933 *American Chess Bulletin* Keeble wrote:

'The late Mr J.G. White, who was most positive that this account by Mr Fiske was a hoax, once or twice told me that he could never imagine how Mr Fiske came to fasten the thing on Rou. It occurred to me (before I wrote the *Bulletin*) that perhaps he thought this letter [from George H. Moore to Fiske regarding Rou, as published on page 397 of the New York, 1857 tournament book] was a hoax also ...

... George H. Moore was librarian to the N.Y. Historical Society and as such would have had charge of the Cadwallader originals. I now think if Mr J.G. White was alive he would, in his positive way, say that, as C. Colden said Rou had written a treatise on chess and no such treatise was known, Mr Fiske decided to make one, but if that was the case there must have been two "in it".

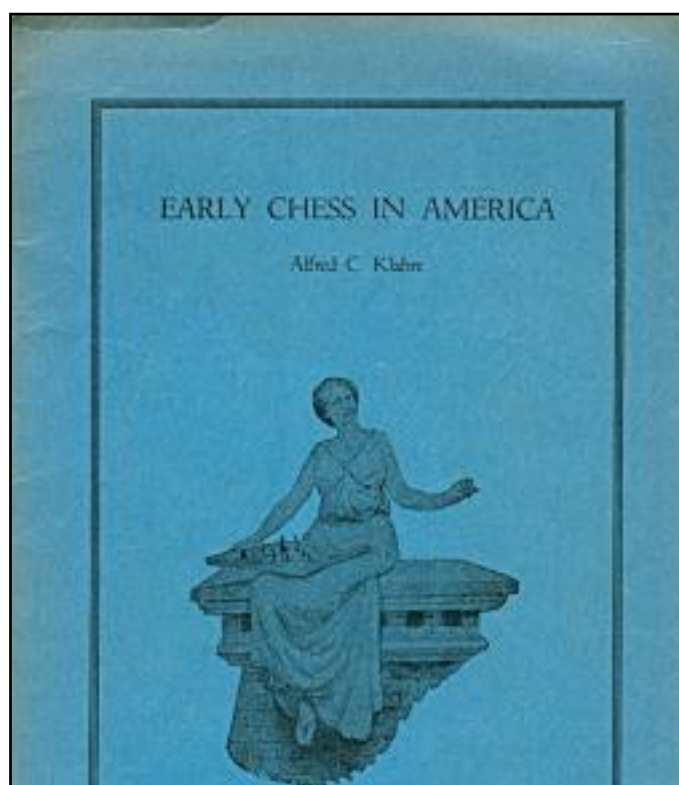
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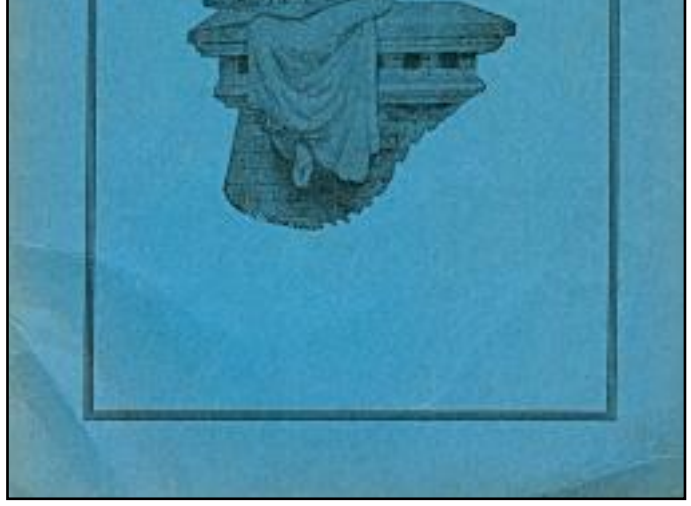
greatest treasures. Everyone who reads about it will marvel that two of the greatest enthusiasts in chess history the world has known, viz. Professor Fiske and Professor George Allen, should know of it and not take the trouble to get a copy of it.'



John Keeble

The following year, 1934, Alfred C. Klahre published *Early Chess in America*, a 20 page-booklet. Pages 3-11 gave a detailed account of the Rou affair, and an extract follows (from pages 6-7):





'To his friend, Prof. George Allen, Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, whose chess books and copies of many letters are now at the Ridgeway Library of that city, including some chessmen and boards, he wrote, at the time he, Fiske, had the treatise, that a manuscript 124 years old was no common find ... He also wrote to Prof. Allen that he was half crazy with glee at this glorious discovery and, in another letter, "the owner of it gives me permission to keep it for a while and publish all or in part in the *First American Chess Congress Book* "'

Early Chess in America

did not discuss the possibility that the Rou manuscript was a hoax, as Keeble pointed out in his review of the pamphlet on pages 405-406 of the October 1934 *BCM* :

'... Professor Fiske reported that Rou's original MS book of 24 pages had been found in the possession of George Moore, librarian to the New York Historical Society. This Fiske declared he borrowed and wrote an account for the book of the *First American Chess Congress*, 1859. Professor George Allen, of Philadelphia, was largely associated with Professor Fiske in the production of the tournament book referred to, but none of the three ever secured a copy of the MS. One would have thought George Moore would, seeing his position as librarian to the New York Historical Society, but he did not, and was never known to mention it. Fiske and Allen were two of the keenest collectors of chess literature of that day. Allen never mentioned the MS. No contemporary editor ever referred to it, and Professor Fiske himself was silent for more than 40 years. Later on tremendous efforts were made by Americans and others to find the original, but without success, and eventually those best able to judge came to the conclusion that the so-called Rou MS was a joke. Mr Klahre, however, takes no notice of this, and does not anywhere say that the very existence of the thing he describes so fully has been questioned. It has been seriously disputed, so much so that the Cleveland (USA) library has, with the late J.G. White's books, an essay written to show how the whole thing could have been made up.'

In a letter published on page 449 of the November 1934 *BCM* H.J.R. Murray took issue with Keeble:

'... The existence of this MS, so far as I know, has been questioned by only three persons, and on very flimsy grounds. Their theory is that Fiske invented the MS in order to perpetrate a joke on the chess world by including an account of it in a piece of serious research into the history of chess in the USA. The justification for the theory is that when search was made for the MS in the late 1890s no trace of it was found – not an uncommon event to judge from the frequent unsuccessful inquiries as to the present location of MSS which have been lost to view that appear in the columns of the *Times*

Literary Supplement

. To anyone who knew Fiske personally, or is acquainted with the high standard of his literary research, the charge is incredible. Fiske's letters of 1858-9 are inconsistent with guilt. He announces the discovery of the MS the very day that it was brought to him. Later, in reply to Allen, he tells him that he has permission to keep the MS as long as he likes. And when in 1901 the suspicions as to the genuineness of the MS were communicated to him, he replied: "I wish to assure you as solemnly as may be that there was in the Rou MS chapter of the *Congress Book* no shadow or trace of a hoax. Everything there stated about it, every phrase there quoted from it, is exactly as represented, and I have often regretted that I did not make a complete copy of the document. Mr Moore lent the thin booklet to me for some time, but I was then a hard-worked man in N.Y. and could not well afford either to copy it myself or to have it copied." The whole matter is a mare's nest, and Mr Klahre was fully justified in ignoring it in his brief essay.'

Finally, A.C. Klahre contributed a letter to the December 1934 *BCM* (page 485):

'... It scarcely seems possible, so many years after Mr Fiske perpetrated his alleged joke, that he would have thought it worthwhile to dig it from its grave and try to galvanize it back to a semblance of life ... It is clear that Dr Moore knew of the MS and of Fiske's interest in fact about Rou. Why should Fiske have included Dr Moore's letter in his *Book of the First American Chess Congress* ? A contemporary of Dr Moore's has recently informed the writer that he was a serious scholar and not given to literary hoaxes ...'

Some 18 months after writing to the *BCM* Klahre died, and Keeble followed him in 1939. Interest in the Rou MS subsided, and we have yet to note any substantial discoveries or developments since the 1930s. Has the trail really gone cold?

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A further comment by John Keeble about the alleged Rou hoax comes from page 99 of the May-June 1932 *American Chess Bulletin* :

'... The late J.G. White would have had a word or two to say on this had he been alive. The question whether the MS ever existed is a problem which, a few years ago, at J.G.W.'s request, I tried to solve. My attempt at a solution has been dubbed "more ingenious than convincing" ...'



John Griswold White

The Cleveland Public Library's catalogue lists a mid-1920s document by Keeble entitled 'An analysis of the Lewis Rou ms in the Book of the first American chess congress, 1859'. Not having seen it, we should like to know how convincing a case he made for his theory that the Rou manuscript was a hoax.

Below is a further brief extract from Alfred C. Klahre's *Early Chess in America* (page 5):

'Touching other writings of Lewis Rou, the New York Public Library has on hand three volumes of his sermons and poems, filed in the Manuscript Division, written by Rou, himself, in French, which came into the library's possession with the book collection of Theodorus Bailey Myers, Washington, D.C., bequeathed by Theodorus Bailey Mason Myers.'

Finally for now, John McCrary (Columbia, SC, USA) writes to us as follows regarding an article he contributed to the December 2003 *Chess Life* (page 32):

' Around 1735 Rou wrote a short poem in Latin about chessplayers at the New York City coffeehouse he frequented. The poem

was published in a collection in 1744. It was recently found at the University of Edinburgh by Professor David Shields of the Citadel, who sent it to Professor Gilbert Gigliotti of Central Connecticut State University. Professor Gigliotti brought it to my attention and supplied the English translation which I quoted in my column.

The poem has major significance, since it appears to supplant Benjamin Franklin's Chess by some 42 years as the earliest-known published piece on chess by an American author. Interestingly, I have also recently found evidence suggesting that Franklin wrote, but did not publish, an outline of his

Morals of Chess in 1732.

The poem shows clearly that Rou did play chess at the approximate time of his reputed manuscript.

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John Hilbert (Amherst, NY, USA) has forwarded us a photocopy, obtained from the Cleveland Public Library, of the handwritten text 'An analysis, by John Keeble, of the Lewis Rou MS' which set out J. K.'s reasons for believing that Daniel W. Fiske had perpetrated a hoax regarding the alleged eighteenth-century document. Perhaps an enterprising publisher could, with the Library's permission, bring out a small edition of Keeble's text, not least because it would be difficult to summarize his various arguments here.

The Library holds, moreover, a copy of a letter to Keeble dated 27 March 1926 from John G. White, who expressed the view that Fiske had a penchant for hoaxes:

'I am surprised at your telling me that Mr Murray still believes in the Rou Manuscript. Fiske dearly loved such mystifications in his younger days, and when his memory of this particular one was revived by my correspondence with him the zest returned – hence his correspondence with Notes & Queries and his later elaborate attempts to bolster up the story. How he came to father it on the particular person that he did I do not know, and cannot guess, but I presume his reading advised him of the existence of the person and he knew it would be impossible to dispute his statement. I think in former letters I have told you of some of his more elaborate hoaxes.'

What is, in fact, known about (other) hoaxes allegedly perpetrated by Fiske?

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