

Early Uses of 'World Chess Champion'

Edward Winter

We present a compilation of early uses of such terms as 'world champion' and 'world championship' in relation to chess. Some further details are available in the references indexed under 'World champion (early uses of the term)' in our [Factfinder](#). As regards Steinitz, fuller versions of some of the quotes appear on pages 135-137 of *Chess Facts and Fables*. Additions to the compilation will be welcome.

1845:

Pages 177-182 of the 1845 *Chess Player Chronicle* (with the cover date 1846) carried a report on the annual celebration of the Yorkshire Chess Clubs in Leeds, chaired by the Earl of Mexborough and with Howard Staunton in attendance. The report of the Earl's speech included the following description of Staunton: '... the Chess Champion of England, or, as he might truly call him, the Champion of the World'.

178

THE CHESS PLAYER'S CHRONICLE.

was but a poor player, and he was not seldom unsuccessful. (Cries of "No, no.") He too often sat down with the conviction that he should lose, which was a sorry preparative for victory, and he wished he could once again recover the confidence of his boyish days, when in all his battles he felt animated by an assurance of success. (Hear, hear, and applause.) However, whether winning or losing, he dearly loved the game of chess. It had been his recreation in childhood, and he trusted it would be his solace in old age. (Cheers.) He was happy to say that although he frequently lost his game he never lost his temper with it. He had become too much accustomed to a Chess drubbing to think very seriously about it. (Applause.) That day, too, he had been amply repaid for many defeats—he had had the honour of fighting with the Chess Champion of England, or, as he might truly call him, the Champion of the World (reiterated cheers), and the game was drawn. (Applause.) Mr Staunton, to be sure, had given him a great advantage in pieces to begin with (laughter), but then he soon won them back again (renewed laughter), and finally the battle was drawn. (Applause.) He hoped they would often meet, not only in Yorkshire but in other parts of the world, to enjoy that noble game, which could be played without fear of losing anything but temper; and he was of opinion that the man who lost even that over a game of Chess was one who would be apt to lose it foolishly upon other occasions. (Hear, hear, and laughter.) He would detain them no longer, but conclude by giving the "YORKSHIRE CHESS ASSOCIATION, and Success to Chess in all parts of the World." (The toast was drunk amidst the loudest acclamations, and a right English round of Kentish fire.)

The above quote was provided by Robert John McCrary (Columbia, SC, USA), who also drew our attention to the next two.

1850:

The following come from the 1850 volume of the *Chess Player's Chronicle* (pages 318-319 and 347-349 respectively):

- In a letter from 'a member of the Calcutta Chess Club', dated 1 August 1850:

'I remember lately reading a suggestion somewhere that a "Grand Match" might be fitly got up on the occasion of the great Scientific Meeting projected for 1851 – a match in which the stakes should be of sufficient magnitude to induce the presence of the continental chess magnates, and which might be fairly deemed a contest for the "Championship of the World".'

- In a letter from H.A. Kennedy, dated October 1850:

'There can be little doubt, I fancy, that all the finest chessplayers of the day, who can possibly find opportunity to attend, will be attracted by this tourney. The first-rates will gird up their loins, and march with stalwart tread into the lists, to combat à l'outrance for the baton of the World's Chess Champion, which would be the victor's meed ...'

1851:

Two claims on Staunton's behalf were published in his magazine, the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, in 1851, shortly before that year's London tournament (at which he was to fare poorly). The first, on page 88, was from the *Brighton Gazette*:

'At this grand tournament it will be a spectacle of surpassing interest to witness Mr Staunton the English Champion, and in general estimation the first player in the world, in actual conflict with two or three players of the finest talent, but with whom he has not hitherto broken a lance.'

The next two pages had a letter from a correspondent, Edward Cronhelm, which included a reference to 'H. Staunton, Esq., the present holder of the chess sceptre'.

1857:

'But one remains – the noblest heart –
At him thy glove be hurled;
Der Lasa conquered then thou art
The Champion of the World.'

This was the final stanza of a poem to Paul Morphy by Edwin J. Weller, Boston, 9 November 1857 in *Chess Monthly*, December 1857, page 367.

1858:

(Regarding the Morphy v Harrwitz match): '... no man living can tell whether, or no, these two gentlemen are not now engaged in fighting *for the Chess championship of the whole world*' C.H. Stanley, *Harper's Weekly*, 9 October 1858.

'Morphy is comparatively a boy, but he stands today the champion of the world'. *The American Union*, 9 October 1858.

'The Chess Championship of Europe – Morphy vs Staunton'. *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, 13 November 1858. The article also referred to Staunton's 'assumed position as Chess Champion of Europe'. In the same column N. Marache wrote that Staunton 'has, for years, written and printed himself the "Champion of the World", (?) without ever having taken the slightest steps to sustain his usurped title'. The following week's issue (20 November 1858) also called Staunton 'the self-styled Chess Champion of the world' and wrote about Morphy v Staunton under the heading 'The chess championship of Europe'.

1866:

Steinitz defeated Anderssen +8 –6 =0 in London. No use of any term such as 'world championship match' has been located.

1872:

Steinitz defeated Zukertort +7 –1 =4 in London. From page 150 of the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, October 1872:

'The one-sided character of the play must be attributed (as the *Westminster Papers* have pointed out) to the ill-health of Mr Zukertort; but this does not detract from the well-earned laurels of Mr Steinitz, who may now be fairly pronounced the champion player of the time.'

1876:

Steinitz defeated Blackburne +7 –0 =0 in London. From Alphonse Delannoy's article/report on page 100 of *La Stratégie*, 15 April 1876:

' Aujourd'hui que ce
charmant Morphy a
abandonné les échecs, il
faut considérer M.
Steinitz comme le roi de
l' Echiquier moderne, et
nous nous inclinons, tout
éblouis, devant son
éclatant triomphe.

1882:

As a result of an analytical argument between Steinitz and Zukertort, the former issued a match challenge. From page 25 of the 18 January 1882 *Chess Player's Chronicle*:

'Mr Steinitz's claim to be recognized as the champion of the world is based on the fact of his having defeated the three great chess masters of the age – Anderssen, Blackburne and Zukertort – who, apart from Mr Steinitz himself, occupied the foremost position in the chess world since the time of Morphy. Mr Steinitz also won the first prize at the London tourney of 1872, and the Vienna tourney of 1873.'

1883:

From page 50 of the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, 18 July 1883, i.e. shortly after Zukertort won the London, 1883 tournament, three points ahead of Steinitz:

'The chess championship of the world is a subject which will form a topic of discussion in the chess press for some time to come. The last issue of the *Bradford Observer* contains some remarks on it. The writer argues that Zukertort may hold the title and yet be "quite right in refusing to enter into so hard an engagement" (the match recently proposed is referred to) "after the trial he had to go through in the International". We disagree. It is very certain that Steinitz was, at one time, fairly entitled to the position of champion, and under such circumstances would hold it so long as he could defend himself against all comers. He has just taken an inferior place to Zukertort, in a tournament, and for the time being Zukertort, in the opinion of some, becomes champion, but if he desires to hold that title he must defend himself against all comers; so soon as he declines to play a match, unless under very exceptional circumstances, he loses his position, and this is more particularly the case when his would-be opponent happens to be the man who for years past has been recognized as the champion. A tournamental advantage is not considered of much moment as regards the chess championship, and unless it can be maintained by after play we should be inclined to dismiss it as one of the freaks of fortune. Steinitz has challenged the only man who has beaten him since he has been chess champion; if he will not play, then Steinitz will be right in resuming his old title.'

A noteworthy point is that the item made no mention of Morphy, who was still alive.

1885-86:

Steinitz defeated Zukertort +10 –5 =5 in New York, Saint Louis and New Orleans. In January 1885 Steinitz had begun publication of his *International Chess Magazine*, which contained much documentary material about the protracted match negotiations. At first the references were merely to the 'championship' or 'the champion title', without 'world'. For example, on page 38 of the February 1885 issue Steinitz reported that in *Turf, Field and Farm* of 8 February 1884 [*sic*] he had published a challenge ...

'... to the effect that he was willing to play Mr Zukertort in New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans or Havana, or any other place this side of the Atlantic, *for the champion title only, without any other stake or prize, and without charging any fee for expenses*, while Mr Zukertort would be at liberty to make any terms he chose with any society which would arrange the contest. As the *Globe-Democrat* of St Louis subsequently remarked, Mr Steinitz offered to make the match *a benefit performance, solely for Mr Zukertort pecuniary profit*.' [Italicized emphasis as in the original.]

On page 353 of the December 1885 issue of the *International Chess Magazine* Steinitz wrote:

'The two players will soon enter on their heavy trial for the coveted championship of the world ...'

The first sentence of the contract between the two players (the *Chess Monthly*, January 1886, pages 136-137) specified that the match was 'for the Championship of the World'.

1887:

Steinitz on page 265 of the *International Chess Magazine*, September 1887:

'Of course, such literary trickeries are nothing new to me, and I have been used to it for 20 years that according to the constructions in certain journalistic quarters everybody in turn was the champion during that period, excepting myself. The only consolation I had was that most of the defeats I suffered occurred in my own absence.'

1888:

On page 86 of the *International Chess*

Magazine

, April 1888 Steinitz asserted 'for once' that he had been world chess champion

since 1866:

'And I mean to devote to the task [i.e. exposing the alleged dishonesty of James Séguin], if necessary, the space of this column for the next 12 months, or for as many years, in case of further literary highway robberies perpetrated by the same individual, and provided that I and this journal survive, in order to statuate for all times, or as long as chess shall live, an example that the only true champion of the world for the last 22 years (I may say so for once), who has always defended his chess prestige against all-comers, has also a true regard for true public opinion, and that he can defy single-handed all the lying manufactories of press combinations to show any real stain on his honor; and that he can convict and severely punish any foul-mouthed editor who, like the shystering journalistic advocate of New Orleans, attempts to rob him of his good name outside of the chess board.'

1890:

In a letter dated 3 April 1890 to a publishing company, Geo. Routledge & Sons, Steinitz wrote:

'...in 1866 I won the Match championship of the world by beating the late Prof. Anderssen and I have held it ever since though Zukertort, Blackburne and Martínez contested it twice each in Matches as well as various other players including Chigorin, Mackenzie etc. in a match or series of games.'

Source: Page 115 of *The Steinitz Papers*
Landsberger (Jefferson, 2002).

by K.

1894:

Steinitz's career was summarized on page 163 of the April 1894 *BCM* :

'Wm. Steinitz, who is in his 58th year (he was born 17 May 1836), has held the chess championship of the world for 28 years, having won it by his defeat of Anderssen in 1866. During these 28 years his career has been one of continuous triumph ...'

1900:

The clearest statement we have seen from Steinitz himself was quoted in his 14 August 1900 obituary in the *New York Times* , from a pamphlet entitled *My advertisement to anti-Semites in Vienna and Elsewhere* :

'And since 1895 I have been obliged at an advanced age and while I was half crippled to export myself in order to import only a portion of my living for myself and family, and this portion did not amount to \$250 per annum within the last two years when I deduct traveling expenses and

increased cost for staying abroad, although I was chess champion of the world for 28 years!!!'

1908:

Emanuel Lasker's view appeared in an autobiographical article in *Lasker's Chess Magazine*, May 1908, page 1:

'The last tournament held there [in England] was in 1899. The continent has had more than a dozen meanwhile. England has not been the playing ground of a match for the championship of the world since Steinitz beat Anderssen, in 1866.'

The inescapable implication of Lasker's references to England and to 1866 is that he considered a) that Steinitz's matches against Zukertort (1872) and Blackburne (1876), both of which took place in London, were not for the world title and b) that, consequently, Steinitz held the world title for 20 years (1866-1886) without defending it at all. It is hard to imagine, though, that this was the meaning that Lasker intended to convey.

We close with a few eccentricities from *The Knights and Kings of Chess* by G.A. MacDonnell (London, 1894):

- Page 7, regarding J.H. Blackburne: 'But as a tourneyist he is supreme. Multitudinous have been his victories in international contests, and at Berlin, in 1881, he won the championship of the world.' A footnote after the first sentence reads: 'Written about three years ago.'
 - Pages 10-11: 'In 1881, Blackburne won the first prize at Berlin, together with the Championship of the World.'
 - Page 31, in the section on G.H. Mackenzie: 'The above sketch was written in 1887, just after Mackenzie had won the Chess Championship of the World.'
 - Page 78, on Gunsberg: 'In all the great contests since then he has taken part and maintained his reputation as a very first-class tourneyist; whilst by his victory at Bradford Place [*sic*] in 1888, he surpassed all his previous performances and won a place among the champions of the world. Nor have his latest performances been unworthy of his championship, for he drew a long match with Chigorin and made the good score of 4 to 6 against Steinitz.'
-

Afterword:

C.N.s 4369 and 5095 drew attention to a passage (conveying the same concept, but without the word 'champion') on page 116 of *The History of Chess* by Richard Lambe (London, 1764):

braham Janssen, Mr Montgomery, and Mr Bofan for this knowledge.

To the names of these Gentlemen there ought to have been added that of Mr A. D. Philidor, for the Lovers of this Game will be under full as great obligations to him, for the precepts which he hath given relating to the management of the Pawns.

Mr Philidor is a Frenchman, and supposed to be the best Chess-player in the world. When he was at Paris, and only 18 years of age, the Authors of the Encyclopedia say, that he could play at two chess-boards, without seeing either of them, with two good Gamesters, and beat them both.

To the Chess Notes [main page](#).

To the Archives for [other feature articles](#).

Copyright 2007 Edward Winter. All rights reserved.