

A Chess Hoax

Edward Winter

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Charles Tomlinson

The alleged blindfold chess expert Richard Rooke Rookewarden came to public attention in an article entitled 'On Blindfold Play and a Post-Mortem' by Charles Tomlinson on pages 380-388 of the August 1891 *BCM*. Rather than summarize the feature ourselves, we reproduce Steinitz's credulous résumé on page 230 of the August 1891 *International Chess Magazine* :

'In an article in the *British Chess Magazine* entitled "On Blindfold Play and a Post-Mortem", Professor Charles Tomlinson relates an extraordinary story of a gentleman, Mr Richard Rooke Rookewarden, of the Rookewood family, in Worcestershire, who was known in private circles as a remarkable blindfold player, being able to play as many as 12 games simultaneously without sight of board or men, and with ease. He had also attempted to play 14, but had to

confess that the two extra games were failures. After his death, about a year ago, his brother, who is a skilful anatomist, examined the brain of the great blindfold player with the permission of the rest of the family. We can do no better than to give the rest of the story in Professor Tomlinson's own words:

"The results of Dr Rookwoode's examination of his brother's brain are detailed in an elaborate memoir which, as soon as the numerous illustrative drawings are completed, is to be submitted first to the Royal Society, and the purely anatomical details to the College of Surgeons. The author has been so good as to communicate to me the following results, which are alone interesting to chessplayers, namely that the constant exercise of one particular organ not only increases it in capacity but also produces a molecular change in the direction of the line of study adopted. In the case before us, a microscopic examination of the organ of locality revealed the astonishing fact that the molecules had arranged themselves into forms somewhat resembling chessboards, with certain marks on the squares supposed to represent the final position of the pieces in the last 12 games that had been played blindfold. Twelve positions were thus probably indicated by the aid of the highest power the microscope could supply; the 13th and 14th boards, or what might represent them, were blurred and indistinct, thus accounting for the fact that these two extra games always embarrassed the blindfold player. The general result, however, of this most interesting enquiry leads to the conclusion that the chessplaying organ thus highly excited so far undergoes molecular changes as to spare the memory by enabling the player, as it were, to see the various positions in his own brain, just as if he had the material wooden boards and men before him."

Six years later the *BCM* returned to the matter, i.e. on pages 214-216 of its June 1897 issue:

'Readers of the *BCM* who are conversant with the late Professor Tomlinson's admirable article "On Blindfold Play and a Post-Mortem", which appeared in the August number of our Volume XI (1891), pages 380-388, will enjoy the amusing way in which the *Glasgow Daily Record* of 7 May has attempted to invest the fanciful spicy humour of Professor Tomlinson's article with all the authority of absolute fact, and supports his statements by quoting "an arrangement" of the molecules of the brain of a noted shipbuilder as evidence that such peculiar brain qualities as those said to be possessed by the lamented Richard Rooke Rookewarden, a member of the Rookwoode family, of Worcestershire, are quite of the *bona-fide* order. The paragraph reads as follows:

"A Wonderful Deformity. The most wonderful deformity in the human brain that has ever been noted by the scientists, and made a matter of record, was that of the phenomenal chessplayer, Richard Rockwoode. Rockwoode, it is said, could play 12 games of chess simultaneously, but not more, not even being able to begin on the 13th. After death his brain was carefully examined by skilled anatomists, who found in the region known to phrenologists as 'locality' that the molecules of that portion of the brain had actually arranged themselves into a combination of squares resembling a chess board, and that each of these squares had certain marks upon it, supposed to represent the final position of the pieces in the last 12 games played by the great expert while he was blindfolded. The doctors who make this report declare that it is true in every particular, but that the arrangement of the atoms of the brain into the chessboard squares referred to could only be distinguished by microscopes of the highest power."

Our readers will notice the alteration of the name Rookewarden to Rockwoode, but the writer in the *Record* evidently sets this at naught, for he boldly declares that:

"More than 40 years ago, when Sir William Dean Bakker made an examination of the brain of Forbes, the shipbuilder, and reported that the molecules of the brain had arranged themselves (the 'grey matter' separating from the other constituents of the brain and 'lining up') into a rude form of a vessel's hull, he was only laughed at. The Rockwoode investigation proves that Bakker knew what he was talking about."

In a subsequent issue of the *Record*, 11 May, Mr F. Krasser, who is an old subscriber to the *BCM*, in a letter to the Editor says:

"Since Friday last I have been way-laid by numerous chessplaying friends, whose curiosity has been aroused by your article headed 'A Wonderful Deformity'. They ply me with questions as if I were an authority on matters pertaining to chess, but I refer them to the pages of the *BCM* for August 1891, wherein all that need be known can be found regarding Richard Rooke Rookewarden (of the Rookewoods of Worcestershire, whose crest 'beareth azure, a fesse between three chess Rookes or ') in an essay on blindfold chess by the late Professor Charles Tomlinson, F.R.S."

Mr Krasser concludes with the following slyly sarcastic comments:

"Sceptics may sneer as they like, but truth remaineth verily stranger than fiction. When the history of the Victorian Era comes to be written, with its glories of newspaper enterprise, the modern editor will not be forgotten in the roll-call of fame; he is the pioneer of science, the instructor of millions, and it is he who throws light into the darkest corners of the earth, quite regardless of expense. Chessplayers owe to the press of this country a debt of gratitude for rescuing from oblivion the memory of Richard Rooke Rookewarden, one of their shining lights."

We presume that it is our duty to add a concluding word, and we hereby solemnly disown the "Richard Rooke Rookewarden of the fable", for whose existence, demise and post-mortem we decline to be held responsible, in order to avert further mischief.'

There was, though, further mischief-making from time to time. For example, page 67 of the January 1954 issue of *CHESS* quoted the following passage from a recent issue of *Tit-Bits*:

'Scientists who secured permission to probe the brain of the world-beating chess champion, Richard Rockwoode, after his death, found an amazing "deformity" in it.

They found that the molecules of one portion of his brain had actually arranged themselves into a combination of squares resembling a chessboard.

Each of these squares, they solemnly reported, had certain marks upon it supposed to represent the final position of the chessmen in the last 12 games Rockwoode had played and won while he was blindfolded.

The arrangement of the atoms of the brain into the chessboard squares could only be distinguished by the finest microscopes then available, said the scientists, but there was not the slightest doubt about their existence.'

CHESS commented:

'Did you ever read such nonsense? Has any chessplayer ever heard of the "world-beating chess champion" Richard Rockwoode?'

In the February 1954 issue (page 82) T.W. Sweby pointed out that he had related this 'obvious leg-pull' in the August 1945 *CHESS* (page 187), and it was also reported that F.A. Rhoden had 'badgered the editor of *Tit-Bits* about the item', only to be told that according to the contributor of the article the mysterious Richard Rookwoode ...

'... was an unofficial chess champion of the world who lived, as far as he can ascertain, towards the end of the eighteenth century and died some time in the 1820s ... he was an American and ... that he lived some time in Russia where his chess feats were performed ... may account for the fact that Rockwoode's feats do not appear to be printed in standard histories of the game.'

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