

Gossip

Edward Winter

(2004)



George Hatfeild Dingley Gossip

An article about G.H.D. Gossip on pages 55-56 of the 18 August 1888 issue of the *Columbia Chess Chronicle* presented the following biographical details:

'Mr Gossip was born in Franklin Street, New York City, on 6 December 1841. His mother, Mary Ellen Gossip, oldest daughter of Mr Chas. Dingley, died when he was only 16 months old, at 55 Bond Street, on 8 May 1843 (*vide* *New York Herald* of 9 May 1843). About two years after his mother's death his father (an Englishman) brought him to England, where he was brought up at Barlborough Hall, Derbyshire, the seat of his aunt, Mrs Reaston Rodes (the "Bracebridge" as well as the Barlborough Hall of Washington Irving, *vide* *Abbottsford and*

Newstead Abbey (page 164), and at Hatfield, in Yorkshire. Mr Gossip, who was educated at Windermere College, Westmorland, could have taken a scholarship at Oxford, but owing to the loss of a lawsuit by his father, uncle and aunts, which utterly ruined them, was unable to go to Oxford, and has had through life to depend on his own exertions. He lived for over five years in Paris, where he held several appointments and contributed to some French newspapers. From 1879 to 1880 he was employed occasionally as translator and otherwise in the London *Times* office, 22 rue Vivienne, Paris. During a residence of over four years in Australia he has been engaged in journalistic work, and has contributed leading and other articles to the Sydney *Australian Star*, *Globe*, *Evening News*, *Town and Country Journal*, *Adelaide Advertiser*, etc.; besides literary articles in the Melbourne and Sydney magazines, *Once a Month Quarterly Magazine*. In San Francisco he contributed articles on the 'Chinese Question in Australia' and on 'Protection and Free Trade in New South Wales' in the San Francisco *Examiner* and *Chronicle* respectively.'

The most extensive overview of Gossip's life, G.H. Diggle's article 'The Master Who Never Was' on pages 1-4 of the January 1969 *BCM*, strove to be fair, but Gossip has always been a soft target for mockery. Below is what appeared on page 168 of *The Even More Complete Chess Addict* by M. Fox and R. James (London, 1993):

'Of players who've entered chess history, perhaps the strongest claimant for the all-time grandpatzer title is George Hatfeild Dingley Gossip (1841-1907). George had a worse record in major tournaments than anyone in history (last at Breslau 1889, London 1889, Manchester 1890, London 1892, and New York 1893: a total of just 4 wins, 52 losses and 21 draws). This didn't prevent him from promoting himself as a great player; nor did it inhibit him from writing a series of instructional books on the game. These contained a number of flashy (and entirely fictitious) wins he'd scored against famous players; and in one of them he proudly published the summit of his achievement: third prize in the Melbourne Chess Club Handicap Tournament 1885.'

We take up just three points:

1) What is put forward as Gossip's 'record in major tournaments' conspicuously omits the event in which he produced what G.H. Diggle called 'perhaps the best performance of his career': New York, 1889. Gossip scored +11 =5 -22, did not finish bottom and secured victories over Lipschütz, Judd, Delmar, Showalter, Pollock (twice), Bird (twice), D.G. Baird, Hanham and J.W. Baird. Regarding Gossip's win against Showalter, Steinitz commented on page 388 of the tournament book:

'One of the finest specimens of sacrificing play on record. Mr Gossip deserves the highest praise for the ingenuity and depth of combination which he displayed in this game.'

2) 'A number of flashy (and entirely fictitious) wins.' The entry on Gossip in the 1984 edition of *The Oxford Companion to Chess* (which treated him essentially as light relief) stated that 'he was accused of publishing fictitious games in which he supposedly defeated well-known players', but this passage

was dropped from the 1992 edition (which dealt with him more equitably, although it too omitted any mention of New York, 1889). Gossip himself denied the charge in an item on pages 201-203 of the July 1888 *International Chess Magazine* :

'With regard to the slur thrown on me by the mean insinuations made that some of these games were never played at all, I may observe that my veracity has never been called in question except by a few unprincipled persons and their dupes.'

We should welcome a list of the games, flashy or otherwise, which Gossip is deemed to have invented.

3) '... in one of [his books] he proudly published the summit of his achievement: third prize in the Melbourne Chess Club Handicap Tournament 1885.' This too is reminiscent of an assertion in the Gossip entry in the *Oxford Companion* . To quote the 1992 edition's wording: 'He was not at a loss when recommending himself to readers: 'Third Prize in the Melbourne Club Handicap Tourney, 1885' seemed to him an adequate testimonial.'

But what actually appeared in Gossip's output? Page v of the 1891 edition of his *Theory of the Chess*

Openings contained a biographical note on him, 16 lines long. Far from the Melbourne, 1885 result being presented as 'the summit of his achievement', it was simply one of 16 deeds listed.

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In early 1888 a new edition of Gossip's *The Chess Player's Manual* was published with a 122-page appendix by Lipschütz, and Steinitz reviewed it on pages 137-138 of the May 1888 *International Chess Magazine* :

'There was a great stir and commotion in the chess literary circles of England when this book made its first appearance in London, about 14 years ago, and quite a newspaper raid was made on the author and his work by various writers in different periodicals. In justice we feel bound to say that the author had brought a great deal of this adverse criticism upon himself by some reprehensible peccadillos. Mr Gossip had given a handle to ridicule by according to himself on the front page titles and airs as the winner of an insignificant correspondence tournament for which only a few obscurities had entered, and by describing himself as an active or ex-member of various clubs for which, of course, he deserved no more credit than thousands of other chessplayers who join chess societies and pay their annual dues. We are glad to see, by the way, that most of those pompous announcements have been omitted in the new edition. More serious, however, was the charge against the author in reference to his own games which he published in the *Manual* , and it is only just to say that he had richly deserved at least some of the sharp criticisms that were directed against him in that respect. For Mr Gossip had practiced the unfair ruse of carefully preserving stray skittle games which he had happened to win or draw, generally after many defeats, against

masters whose public records stood far above his own, and who had not the slightest warning of his intention of publishing such games until they found those unprepared efforts immortalized in his book as specimens of relative skill either in the analysis or in the game collections without the least acknowledgment of their own victories, thus leading the public to believe that the author stood on a par with them, or was even their superior.

Such trickeries had, of course, the effect of prejudicing the critics against the author and his book, but I feel bound to say, after some careful perusal of the latter, that Mr Gossip has produced a useful work, which in some respects must be regarded even superior to that of Staunton or any other previous writers on the chess openings. ... But the most meritorious distinguishing feature of the *Manual* is the large collection of illustrative games by various first-class masters, and in that respect Mr Gossip's work stands second only to Signor Salvioli's *Teoria e Pratica* among the analytical works in any language.'

Gossip replied to Steinitz on pages 201-203 of the July 1888

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. He denied that the players in the correspondence tournament had been 'obscurities' and explained that he had mentioned his clubs 'to let chessplayers (to whom my name was then comparatively unknown) know that I had mixed in Metropolitan chess circles, and therefore had some good practice'. He then turned to the 'more serious' charge of having published so many of his own won games. After writing 'my defence to this charge is that I simply followed the example and precedent of Staunton and other authors', he quoted a lengthy defence of himself which had appeared in the *Academy* of 12 December 1874. Gossip added to Steinitz:

'Such is my defence. Nearly all these games were contested in public rooms in London for a pecuniary stake, no stipulation whatever being made as to their non-publication. I admit that I made a serious mistake in not giving the scores of my opponents, and to this indictment alone I plead guilty. But as I was then living in a remote country village where I had no chess practice for more than five years, and was quite out of the chess world, I never even in my dreams imagined that the public would suppose me to be superior to all my opponents. I might as well have supposed that they would think me equal to yourself, because my *Manual* contains a game which I drew with you on equal terms, and my worst enemy, I imagine, would not believe me conceited enough for that. I can only plead guilty to an error of judgment in having too hastily published these games. Every rose has its thorns, and there is no cloud without a silver lining; and perhaps I have unwittingly rendered a great service to future chess authors, inasmuch as my sad fate will be a warning to them to all eternity not to commit the deadly sin of which I have been guilty, and they will thus steer clear of the breakers on which I have been shipwrecked. I may here, however, flatly contradict the mendacious assertion of the critic in the *London Sportsman* "that nearly every player of whom I won the games published in the *Manual* was vastly and immeasurably my superior". Out of 24 opponents I won a majority of games of 15. Your accusation of trickery therefore, I think, falls to the ground.'

Gossip then replied to the accusation of having invented games (see his words quoted above). He concluded by quoting a number of critics who he said had noticed his book favourably, including Löwenthal on pages 297-304 of the January 1875 *City of*

London Chess Magazine

. Our own reading of Löwenthal's review is that it was considerably more negative than Gossip suggested.

Steinitz's response (on pages 204-205 of the July 1888

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) acknowledged that Gossip 'has some just cause of complaint especially in reference to a writer, now deceased, who within a few days after the publication of the book which had cost the author two years of labor, assumed to consign the whole work of over 800 pages to a sweeping condemnation'. This seems to be a reference to John Wisker's review of the *Manual* in the *Sportsman*. See page 10 of Cathy Chua's 1998 book *Australian Chess at the Top* (Oaklands Park, 1998).

However, the world champion maintained his 'obscurities' remark and continued:

'As regards the selection of games for publication, Mr Gossip is, we fear, only aggravating the case in pleading that he merely followed the example of Staunton. For he must have known, being well enough acquainted with chess history, that the practice of Staunton in ignoring the victories of his opponents or rivals caused a great deal of bitter feeling against him, albeit he was a celebrated player and author. Mr Gossip could have easily, therefore, concluded that his imitation of such a practice would be held still more unpardonable in the case of a new rival for fame who had not earned his spurs yet at that date. We still think, therefore, that he had exposed himself to some of the sharp, adverse criticism that was directed against him at the time. But we quite concur with Mr Gossip's claim that his book was too harshly treated in consequence ...'

Even Steinitz's fair-minded comments were subsequently used against Gossip, as was reported on pages 70-71 of the *Columbia Chess Chronicle*, 1 September 1888:

'Mr Gossip has been much wronged by false accusations made against him both in the English and Australian chess press. For instance, the Melbourne *Australasian*, in a recent issue, in noticing Mr Steinitz's review in the *International* of the third [sic] edition of Mr Gossip's *Manual* suppresses all mention of the high praise conferred by that eminent critic on the work in question (which Steinitz declared to be in some respects superior to the work of Staunton or any previous authors), and only refers to Steinitz's condemnation of the course pursued by Mr Gossip in publishing only his victories and suppressing the publication of his defeats in the *Manual*, and adds "that Mr Gossip practiced the same course in Australia". Now, so far from this being true, we have before us the back files of the chess column of the Sydney *Town and Country Journal*, which Mr Gossip edited for a considerable time in Australia, in which we see that Mr Gossip repeatedly published games which he lost in club matches, etc., in Sydney to Mess. Russell, Heimann and others. We state this in the interest of fair play.'

In the 1890s Gossip was still bitter over the critics' treatment of his books. In 1891 he brought out an updated version of *Theory of the Chess Openings*, which began with four pages of commendatory quotes on the first (1879) edition from reviewers such as Steinitz, Duffy and Delmar. At the bottom of page x Gossip added a note:

'Such are a few only of the favourable reviews of the first edition of the present work, which received the highest praise from the best authorities in England, America and the Continent. Yet it is never even once referred to in Mr Bird's latest treatise. Under these circumstances, it is not, perhaps, surprising that I was unable, even with £50 worth of signed orders for copies, to find any publisher willing to undertake the publication of a second edition, although I made strenuous and unceasing efforts to publish it before I sailed for Australia in February 1884. However, *perseverantia omnia vincit*, and I have at length succeeded in bringing out the present work, in spite of incessant opposition, disparagement and non-recognition.'

The last mention of Gossip that we have found in the contemporary chess press is this brief paragraph on page 59 of the June 1897 *American Chess Magazine* :

'Another Buffalo player who should be mentioned is H.D. Gossip, who has written several books. Mr Gossip's play is very strong.'

As G.H. Diggle's *BCM* article pointed out, although P.W. Sergeant referred in 1916 to 'the late G.H.D. Gossip' (i.e. on page 1 of the January 1916 *BCM*), it was not until the mid-1960s that the date of Gossip's demise became known to the chess world. On page 306 of the October 1964 *BCM* David Hooper reported that Gossip had died of heart disease at the Railway Hotel, Liphook, England on 11 May 1907.

One final curiosity. George Hatfeild Dingley Gossip left Australia in 1888, and we have yet to find any reference to his returning there. Yet a [website](#) gives details of a 'George Hatfield Dingley Gossip' born in Sydney in 1897.

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Pages 91-92 of the 15 September 1888 issue of the *Columbia Chess Chronicle* reported on a lecture about the Steinitz Gambit delivered by Gossip two days previously. His remarks were not confined to openings analysis:

'Before his departure for America, Mr Steinitz told me that he considered his gambit sound, notwithstanding his defeat in the London tournament of 1883, when he adopted his favorite opening. This is an important point of theory, and it will be well, therefore, to show how utterly worthless is the analysis of this *début* published in the *Illustrated London News* and the *Illustrated (London) Sporting and Dramatic News*, both of which periodicals declared in the most confident and positive manner that Black could obtain a draw by checking backwards and forwards with his queen on his seventh and eighth moves [1 e4 e5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 f4 exf4 4 d4 Qh4+ 5 Ke2 d5 6 exd5 Qe7+ 7 Kf2 Qh4+, etc.] ...

In order, therefore, to establish an important point of theory, and at the same time to

prevent American chessplayers from being misled and deceived by the superficial analysis of incompetent British chess editors, whose object in condemning the Steinitz Gambit has obviously been mainly to depreciate the originality of its illustrious inventor, whom they invariably try to drag down to their own miserable level of shallow incompetency and self-conceit, I submit the following variations which at any rate possess the undeniable merit of exposing the hollow analytical twaddle continually published in the two London journals above named. American chessplayers are all the more likely to be imposed upon in as much as the *British Chess Magazine* declares the chess editor of the London *Sporting and Dramatic News* [G.A. MacDonell] to be a most accomplished master, and the *Illustrated London News* asserts that the death of its late chess editor [P. Duffy] leaves a void that cannot be filled.'

For the last few months of 1888 Gossip was listed as being on the 'Editorial Staff' of the *Columbia Chess Chronicle*. On pages 218-229 of the 29 December 1888 issue he contributed a lengthy general article which, though entitled 'Chess in the Present Day', offered a broad sweep of chess history and the advances made by the game in the United States. 'In no other country in the world, with the solitary exception, perhaps, of intellectual Germany, does chess flourish as in America.' He described Morphy and Steinitz as 'the two greatest chessplayers that have ever lived'. What little criticism the article contained focussed on England: 'no Englishman has yet attained, or probably ever will attain, to the eminence of chess champion of the world. ... The deep-thinking German, the brilliant Frenchman and the versatile American have always been too much for sober, stolid John Bull.'

Finally, with regard to the last paragraph of C.N. 3245 Brad Dassat (Oldham, England) writes:

' You remarked that Gossip left Australia in 1888, and that there are details of a George Hatfield Dingley Gossip on an Australian website about World War One aces. In fact, this point was picked up on in an article by Ken Whyld in the *BCM* (July 2001, page 391). This was a follow-up to an earlier article by Whyld on Gossip in the *BCM* (May, 2001, pages 262-265). The WW1 ace Gossip was apparently the grandson of the chessplaying Gossip.'

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George Hatfeild Dingley Gossip (detail from New York, 1893 group photograph)

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That G.H.D. Gossip could not expect equitable treatment from Zukertort and Hoffer's magazine the *Chess Monthly* was shown by pages 102-103 of the December 1883 issue, which reviewed the London, 1883 tournament book. Although Gossip ('this tedious mediocrity') had played only in the minor (Vizayanagaram) tourney, almost half the extensive review was given over to an attack on him. Regarding his win over G.A. MacDonnell the *Monthly* commented, 'the latter played like a child, and that game ought not to have been published'. The tournament book (pages 336-339) also had Gossip's notes to his game (as Black) against W.M. Gattie, which had begun 1 Nf3 Nc6 and eventually reached this position:



Here Gossip played 41...Bf5 and wrote:

'The only possible move to avoid loss. In this extremely difficult and interesting position Black took 25 minutes for reflection before writing down his 41st move at the adjournment.'

The *Monthly* scoffed:

'We have examined the "extremely difficult and interesting position" and can only say if it took Mr Gossip 25 minutes to find such an obvious move, how long would it have taken him to find a really difficult move? Well, the answer is easy enough: he would not have found it at all.'

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C.N. 3241 above criticized on three counts the disparaging treatment of G.H.D. Gossip on page 168 of *The Even More Complete Chess Addict* by M. Fox and R. James. On pages 58-59 of the May 2004 *CHESS* the co-authors accept our criticisms and state that their only defence is that they used to trust unquestioningly one of the writers of *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, their source.

The third of our strictures was that, taking its cue from the *Companion*, *The Even More Complete Chess Addict* mocked Gossip for presenting his modest Melbourne, 1885 result as 'the summit of his achievement'. Although the *CHESS* item gives the impression of quoting our full rebuttal from C.N. 3241, it omits our reply on this third matter, i.e. the paragraph in which we pointed out that Gossip's book *Theory of the Chess Openings* gave his Melbourne, 1885 result as merely one deed in a list 16.

In C.N. 4879 Joost van Winsen (Silvolde, the Netherlands) provided information regarding Gossip from British censuses:

1871 census: George Gossip, age 29. Born in New York (British subject). Address: 8 Mayfield Road (Hackney), London. Occupation: translator of languages. Married with Alicia Gossip (age 30, born in Dublin). Child: George Gossip (son, age 11 months). Other household members: Charlotte Pripke[?] (age 16), general servant; Lucy Pripke[?] (age 12), nursemaid.

1881 census: George H.D. Gossip, age 39. Born in New York, United States. Address: 1 Lilian Villas, Spring Road (St Helen), Ipswich. Occupation: author of work on chess. Married with Alice Gossip (age 40, born in Dublin). Children: Helen J. Gossip (daughter, age 9), Harold K. Gossip (son, age 7), Mabel M. Gossip (daughter, age 2).

1891 census: G.H.D. Gossip, age 49. Born in New York as a British subject. Address: 20 Alfred Place (St Giles), London. Occupation: literary profession. Widower. Gossip, a lodger, shared the address with: William Belcker[?] (age 49), lodger and assistant brewer; Gustav Dürholdt (age 24), lodger and electric engineer; W. Edmund James Leach (age 32), lodger and captain in army; Alexander Mackintosh (age 54), commercial traveller; Janet [surname illegible] (age 53), head and lodging house keeper; Lizzy Chapman (age 19), general servant (domestic).

In C.N. 4883 Michael Clapham (Ipswich, England) presented a photograph of Gossip's house in that town.

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