

Edgard Colle

CAISSA'S WOUNDED WARRIOR



TAYLOR KINGSTON

FOREWORD BY ANDY SOLTIS

The Fighting Chess of
Edgard Colle

Caissa's Wounded Warrior

**An exploration and celebration of the artistry of
the Belgian chess champion and prolific
international tournament player
Edgard Colle (1897-1932)**

Taylor Kingston

**Foreword by
Andy Soltis**



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Author's Preface

The spiritual precursor to this book is one of Fred Reinfeld's lesser-known works, *Colle's Chess Masterpieces*, first published in 1936. It was intended by that prolific American writer as a belated memorial tribute to Edgard Colle, who had died in 1932, and to make American readers more aware of the fine chess of the Belgian master, who had never played outside Europe. The publisher's original idea was simply to reprint Reinfeld's book with algebraic instead of descriptive notation, with this writer perhaps supplying a few gentle computer-assisted analytical corrections when it turned out Reinfeld had erred.

It soon became clear this approach would not do. Over the last several years I have done intensive computer-assisted analytical critiques of more than a dozen classic works from pre-computer days, by such greats as Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Euwe, Tal, Tartakower, Najdorf, Bronstein, Fine and others. These show that top-rank grandmasters, even world champions, can be quite fallible as annotators. Reinfeld was never in that class as a player, and in the 1930s, by his own admission, he was annotating about 500 games per year for various publications.* So when the unblinking stare of the lidless silicon eye was turned on his notes, mistakes were revealed like dental cavities by x-rays, of a number and degree unacceptable in a 21st-century chess book. Also, many of the games Reinfeld presented as "masterpieces" proved to be nothing of the sort; in some he was unaware that Colle made outright blunders and had lost positions. A few gentle corrections just would not be enough.

And of course in the 1930s Reinfeld did not have databases and web-sites with fingertip access to millions of games. Relatively few of Colle's games appeared even in European publications outside the Low Countries, and even fewer in American magazines. In retrospect it's remarkable that Reinfeld came up with the 51 games he had. Today the choice is much wider.

* *Book of the Warsaw 1935 International Chess Team Tournament* by Reinfeld and Phillips (New York, 1936), page v.]

Therefore it was decided to write a completely new book. Some of the games Reinfeld chose are still included, and his notes are cited here and there, but for the most part the annotations are derived from careful analysis by the computer engines Stockfish 11 and Komodo 11.2.2. The final choices were made after many hours of combing through hundreds of Colle's games – great, good, bad, and indifferent – trying to find the best and/or most interesting. While this was a time-consuming, eye-straining process, it was also edifying, for Colle played some exciting and beautiful chess, full of life, vigor, imagination and creativity. I came to have new respect and admiration for this small, frail man who could overcome the limitations his body imposed, and use his mind to grapple with and topple giants at the board. As his friend Hans Kmoch wrote, he was “this chess master with the body of a doomed man and the spirit of an immortal hero.”

Unlike most single-player game collections, this book is not organized chronologically, and is not intended as a biography or an account of Colle's career. Rather, it is an exploration of his chess artistry and style, his strengths as a player, and also some frank looks at his weaknesses. Each of the first eight chapters in the games section focuses on an aspect of chess skill or a certain type of game: miniatures, brilliancies, lucky escapes, failures and near-misses, the endgame, positional play, rough-and-tumble fighting chess, and salvaging a late draw from a lost position. Within those chapters the games and/or fragments are in roughly increasing order of complexity and difficulty, regardless of when they were played. Chronology mattered only in the last chapter, which features Colle's final game.

I could not have written his book without help. I want to acknowledge, first and foremost, Nikolaas Verhulst of Antwerp, whose website belgianchesshistory.be is a wonderful labor of love stocked with a huge amount of valuable information. Dr. Verhulst was always willing to answer questions, and was most gracious in providing several rare game scores, and parts of Max Euwe's *Gedenkboek Colle*, the great Dutch champion's memorial tribute to his friend, a book now very hard to find. Thanks to Jan van de Mortel for translating part of Euwe's book. I also had assistance from historian Hans Renette, GM Hans Ree, and various colleagues from the Facebook group Chess Book Collectors: Martin van der Hidde, Dan Scoones, Stefan Be, *et al.* And my long-time friend Bo Simons, who is not a serious chess player, offered some helpful suggestions to make the book more interesting and accessible to the casual enthusiast. My thanks to all of them.

Taylor Kingston
San Diego
November 2020

Foreword

Mention “Colle” and a typical tournament player may respond: “I played it as a kid but I outgrew it. It’s not much of an opening.”

Mention the name to someone more knowledgeable and you could hear: “He was a master, maybe a century ago. Won some pretty games. But he was pretty much a one-opening wonder.”

Ask a third player and he could add: “I remember some games of his. Nice ones, like his losses to Alekhine. Yeah, and when Capablanca refuted his opening.”

That may be what many people recall. But it is hardly fair to someone who was once ranked number 14 in the world (which is about where players such as Hikaru Nakamura and Sergey Karjakin have been recently). So, let’s put Edgard Colle in the perspective he deserved.

He was born in 1897 and, like others of his generation, his prime years were delayed until after the Great War, when he was in his late 20s. This was a generation that grew up studying Paul Rudolf Bilguer’s *Handbuch des Schachspiels*. That book was the go-to database for roughly a century. After many revised editions, it had ballooned to about 1,000 pages.

By the 1920s, its analysis of the Queen’s Gambit Declined, the dominant opening of the day, often lasted to move 20. Aspiring students were told to memorize it. The ponderous variations indicated there was no room for improvement for either side after 1.d4! was met by 1...d5!. Chess was dying and the QGD was burying it.

Three players helped overthrow this notion. One was Aron Nimzovich, who advocated starting a game with 1.♘f3. Johannes Zukertort had done that in the 1880s but Nimzovich continued with the revolutionary 2.b3.

One of the many ironies of the Hypermoderns is that they were credited with freeing players from the rote-play of the QGD. White had to think about his opening moves. But Nimzovich created a system opening in

Edgard Colle

which White could play his next moves with little or no thought. He could continue with 3.♘b2 and 4.e3. Then he could look at the Black side of the board and decide whether to play ♘b5 or ♘e2, followed by castling.

The second player who challenged orthodoxy was Richard Réti. He had his own no-think opening. It began with 1.♗f3 and 2.c4 and often continued with 3.g3, 4.♗g2 and 5.0-0. Réti's basic theme was to challenge Black on the light-colored squares, principally d5. Nimzovich's idea, in contrast, was to exploit ...d5 by occupying the dark center squares, principally e5.

Nimzovich and Réti didn't want to add to the sum total of opening knowledge but to overthrow it. A member of the older generation, the great annotator Georg Marco, predicted that so much 1.d4 d5 analysis had been rendered obsolete by the Hypermoderns that the next edition of "Bilguer" would be only eight pages long.

What is forgotten today is that there was a third innovator who was advocating his own opening of semi-automatic moves to replace the QGD. This was Colle and the Colle System.

It was another no-think opening. White could play 1.d4, 2.♗f3, 3.e3 followed in some order by ♗d3, ♗bd2, c2-c3 and 0-0. He looked for the right moment to advance e3-e4 and seek a kingside attack.

This looks naive but the Colle System slowly won adherents among the master class. They were as diverse as the speculative Savielly Tartakower and orthodox Géza Maróczy. But what about that game with Capablanca? Did the Cuban really refute the Colle System?

Well, at Karlsbad 1929 he showed that it mattered a lot what Black did in the first moves. Colle was the one playing for equality after 1.d4 ♗f6 2.♗f3 b6 3.e3 ♗b7 4.♗bd2 e6 5.♗d3 c5 6.0-0 ♗c6 7.c3 ♗e7 and now 8.e4 cxd4 9.♗xd4 0-0 10.♖e2 ♗e5!

But this was not a refutation. It just showed that the Colle System moves couldn't be played automatically against any Black move order. This fact was important, but it did not discourage Colle's companions in international chess. There were many more masters adopting the system *after* the Capablanca game, including Alexander Alekhine, Salo Flohr, Paul Keres and Sultan Khan.

Several major openings were popularized during the 1920s, the greatest era of innovation. Some, like the Alekhine's Defense and Grünfeld Defense and Tartakower's Catalan Opening, are standard today.

But 1.♠f3 and 2.c4 has become more of a transpositional device than a real opening. Réti's connection to it is often forgotten. (1.♠f3 is sometimes listed as "Zukertort's Opening" in databases. Maybe "Kramnik's Opening" is more appropriate.) Nimzovich's 1.♠f3 and 2.b3 is so rare at the master level that even Magnus Carlsen shuns it. And he plays everything.

But the Colle System remains a remarkably vibrant dinosaur. It is played by Levon Aronian, Karjakin, Wesley So, Vladimir Kramnik, Anish Giri – and, of course, the world champion.

As a player, Colle was ranked in the world's top 20 by 1924. He fell back, but then enjoyed his peak period in the 1930s. When he died, he was number 20, according to retroactive analysis by Chessmetrics.com.

He scored victories over Max Euwe (several times), Akiba Rubinstein, Yefim Bogoljubow, Ernst Grünfeld, Rudolf Spielmann and Frank Marshall. He played in many of the strongest tournaments of his era, such as Baden Baden 1925, Karlsbad 1929, San Remo 1930, and Bled 1931.

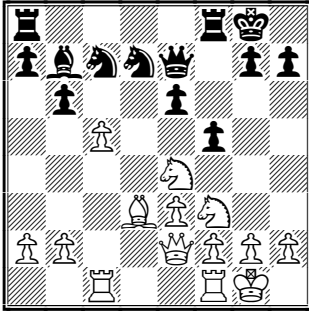
Why then is Colle forgotten as a player today? The main reason, of course, is that he died at age 34. We can't know how much he could have achieved if he had been healthy and survived into the golden age that was 1930s chess.

But we can make some more comparisons. If Richard Réti had also died at 34, he could be remembered for 1.♠f3 and little else. We might never have read *Modern Ideas in Chess*, for example, or seen his great 1.♠f3 victories at New York 1924. If Aron Nimzovich had died at 34, we would never have seen *My System* or appreciated how the Nimzo-Indian and Queen's Indian came about. They also died young but not nearly as young as Colle.

Fate has cheated chess out of much of the greatness of many players, from Harry Pillsbury to Leonid Stein and Vugar Gashimov. We should be thankful that we get to remember Edgard Colle.

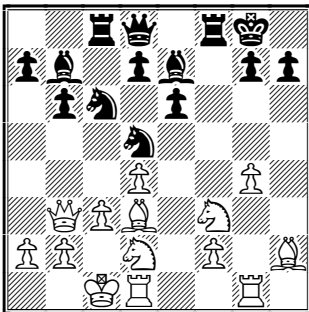
Andy Soltis
New York
November 2020

(33) Colle-Koltanowski
 Belgian Championship (m/3)
 Antwerp 1925



Black had just played 15...f7-f5, apparently expecting Colle to retreat his knight. Instead came **16.c6!** **f×e4** **17.c×b7** **e×d3** 17...e×f3 18.g×f3 is no better. **18.♖×d3** **♗c5** **19.♞×c5** Somewhat better was 19.b×a8♖! ♗×d3 20.♖×a7 ♗×c1 21.♞×c1 ♗d5 22.♖×e7 ♗×e7, winning two pawns, but the text is adequate. **19...♖×c5** **20.b×a8♖** **♞×a8** White has gained an important pawn and eventually won the game. **1-0** (41)

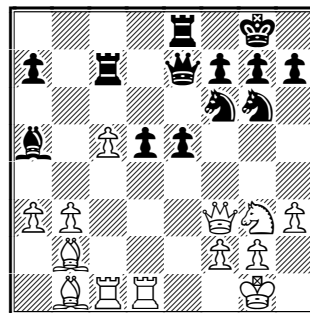
(34) Maas-Colle
 Nice 1930



George Koltanowski

White has just played 16.0-0-0, expecting to launch an assault against Black's king on the g- and h-files. He was quickly brought back to earth by **16...♗db4!** **17.♗e2** If 17.c×b4??, 17...♗×d4+. **17...♗a5** **18.♖a4** **♗c6** Even stronger was first 18...a6 and then 19...♗c6, since the white queen is helplessly stuck on a4. If 19.♖a3??, 19...♗d3+. **19.♗b5** **♗×f3** **20.♗×f3** **a6** **21.♗×d7** **b5** **22.♗×c8** **b×a4** and **0-1** (33).

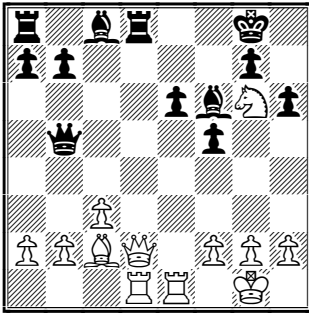
(35) Colle-Weenink
 Liège 1930



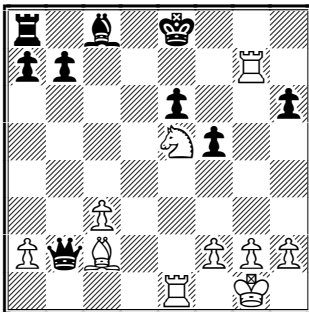
Black had just played 24...e5?. Colle pounced immediately: **23.b4** **♞b7**

Black must have counted on this to save his bishop, but he overlooked a fatal flaw. **24. ♖f5! ♖e6 25. ♘d6 ♖bb8 26. ♘xe8 ♖xe8 27. ♙xg6 h×g6 28. b×a5** and wins (1-0, 33).

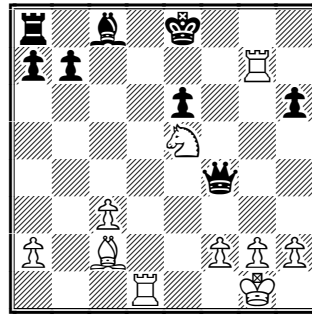
(36) Colle-Piccardt
Amsterdam 1926



21. ♖×d8+! ♙×d8 22. ♖×d8+ Because Black's rook and bishop cannot get into the game, White effectively has a big material advantage. **22... ♖f7** If **22... ♖h7??**, **23. ♘f8+ ♖g8 24. ♘xe6+ ♖f7 25. ♖f8+ ♖g6 26. ♘f4+ ♖g5 27. g3 h5 28. h4+ ♖g4 29. ♙d1+ ♖e2 30. ♙xe2#.** **23. ♘e5+ ♖e7 24. ♖g8 24... ♖×b2?** **24... ♖d6** or **24... g5** were less bad, but still losing. **25. ♖×g7+ ♖e8**



26. ♙×f5 26. ♙d1 intending **27. ♙h5+** would have done as well, but Colle liked such flashy moves. His further play is remarkable for its accuracy and coordination. **26... ♖d2** If **26... exf5**, **27. ♘g6+ ♖d8 28. ♖d1+**, etc. **27. ♙g6+ ♖d8 28. ♘f3 ♖d6 29. ♙c2 ♖e8 30. ♖d1 ♖f4 31. ♘e5! 1-0**



If **31... ♖xe5**, **32. ♙g6+ ♖f8 33. ♖f7+ ♖e8 34. ♖×b7+ ♖f8 35. ♖d8#.**

(37) Colle-Znosko-Borovsky
Tunbridge Wells 1927

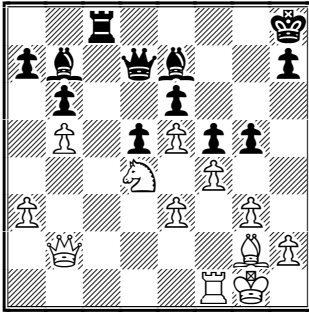
For some reason, Colle had a dreadful record against Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky (1884-1954, historical Elo 2450), a Paris-based Russian émigré who was perhaps a better literary and drama critic than chessplayer. Colle scored only +2 -8 =1 against him, though after an 0-6 skunking in a 1923 match, their score was even. But remembering 1923, Colle must have relished playing this combination:



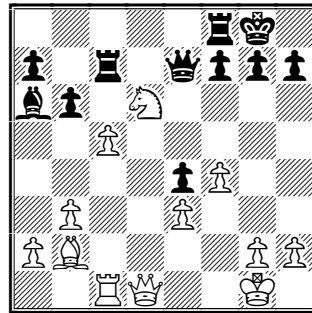
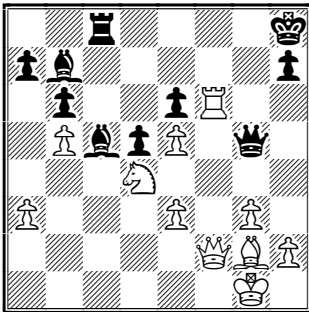
Evgeny Znosko-Borovsky

30...♙e7? 30...♞e8 was not as bad, but then after 31.♞f4 ♜xf4 32.gxf4 Black is still lost. Or if 30...♞xe5 31.♞f7 ♞c7 (if 31...♙a8 32.♙h3, or 31...♞b8 32.♙f1 ♠ 33.♙d3+-) 32.♞xc7 ♜xc7 33.♙xe6+- . **31.♞f7! ♙xa3** If 31...♞e8/♞c7 32.♙xe6. **32.♞xb7 ♞f8 33.♙xe6 1-0**

(38) Colle-Thomas
Karlsbad 1929



26.♙xf5! ♙c5 26...exf5?? 27.e6+ ♙f6 28.♞xf6+ ♞g7 29.fxg5+- .
27.♙d4 gxf4 28.♞xf4 ♞g7
29.♞f6! Not 29.♙xe6? ♙xe3+.
29...♞g5 30.♞f2

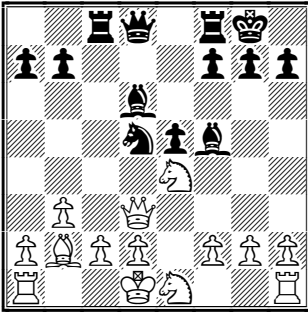


21.♙xg7! More than a mere pawn grab, this blows the game wide open. If now:
(a) 21...♞xg7 22.♙f5+;
(b) 21...f6 22.♙f5! ♞d7 23.♞g4 forcing 23...♞xf5 24.♞xf5+- ;
(c) 21...♞d7 22.♙xf8 ♞xf8 23.♞d4! ♞xc5 24.♞xc5 bxc5 25.♞xc5 with 26.♙xe4+ to follow in most variations;
(d) 21...♞d8 22.♞g4 ♞xd6 23.♙f6+ ♞f8 24.♞g7+ ♞e8 25.cxd6 ♞xc1+ 26.♞f2 ♞xd6 27.♞g8+ ♞d7 28.♞xf7+, etc.; and finally
(e) 21...♞fc8 22.♞g4 ♙e2 23.♞g3! ♞d7 (else 24.♙f6+) 24.f5! (to play 25.♙h6+ without 25...♞g4 being possible) 24...f6 25.♙xf6+ ♞f8 26.♞f4! bxc5 27.♞h6+ ♞g8 28.♞g5+ ♞f8 29.♙e5 etc.

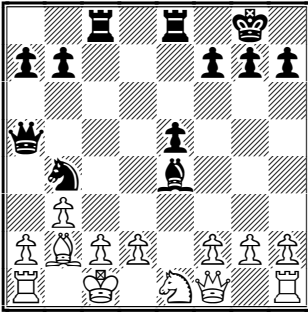
Actual play continued **21...f5**
22.♙×f8 ♖×f8 23.♖d5+ ♜h8
24.♗e5+ ♜g8 25.♘×f5 1-0

(39) Olland-Colle
 Utrecht 1928 (m/3)

From a match won by Colle 5-0.



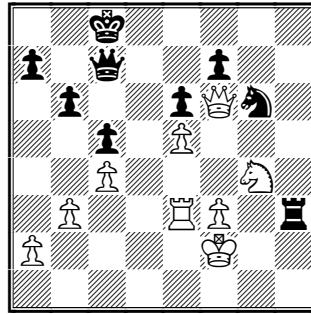
15...♙a3!! 16.♙×a3 ♙×e4
17.♖f1 If **17.♖×e4 ♘c3+**, or
17.♗g3 ♘c3+ **18.♗c1 ♘e2+**.
17...♞e8! 18.♗c1 ♖a5 19.♙b2
♘b4



20.d3 In a way, it's a shame that
 Olland did not allow the most
 brilliant variation: **20.♙c3 ♞×c3!!**
21.d×c3 ♖a3+ 22.♗d2 (if **22.♗b1**
♞d8 and mate soon) **22...♞d8+**

23.♗e3 ♘d5+ 24.♗×e4 f5+ 25.♗f3
e4+ 26.♗g3 ♖d6+ 27.f4 e×f3+
28.♗f2 (if **28.♗×f3 ♖f4+** **29.♗e2**
♘×c3#) **28...♗b6+ 29.♗g3 f4+** and
 mate in eight more moves.
20...♞ed8! 21.♗e2 If **21.d×e4**,
♘×c2 22.♘×c2 ♖d2+ 23.♗b1
♖×c2#. **21...♘×d3+ 0-1**

(40) Davidson-Colle
 Scheveningen 1923



41...♖d7! This quiet-looking
 move begins a remarkable
 combination, in which Stockfish
 says every one of Colle's moves is
 optimal. There are any number of
 threats, chief of which are **42...♞h1**
43.♞e1 ♖d2+ 44.♞e2 ♖d1 and
 mate soon, and **42...♖d2+ 43.♞e2**
♖d4+ 44.♗g2 ♘f4+, forcing
45.♖×f4 ♖×f4 46.♗×h3 ♖×f3+.
42.♗g2 ♞h5! 43.♖g7 Or **43.♘f2**
♞f5 44.♖g7 ♖d4 45.♞e4 ♞g5+
46.♗f1 ♖a1+ 47.♞e1 ♞g1+
48.♗×g1 ♖×e1+ 49.♗g2 ♘f4+
50.♗h2 (50.♗g3 ♘h5+)
50...♖×f2+. 43...♘h4+ 44.♖f2
♘f5 45.♖g8+ ♗b7