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VALE LORD BOB MAY

famous Australian scientist & keen chess-player

8 January 1936 - 28 April 2020

By Nigel Nettheim



Lord May of Oxford, OM AC Kt FRS DistFRSN FAA FTSE HonFAIB
(Photo: The Royal Society)

Lord Bob May did important work on the far-from-obvious rule that a virus will survive if and only if its reproduction rate is greater than one (see here and earlier papers). That rule is the basis of worldwide efforts to control the present coronavirus. His scientific contributions in a number of fields and his many honours are so widely known that nothing further is needed here on those points. Because of his status in science, I have written here at slightly greater length than I would otherwise have done.

Chess and science

Bob saw a very close relation between games and science. He loved solving puzzles of all kinds. He considered that scientific work was like playing a game, the only real difference being that in science it was harder to find out what the rules are. He regarded chess as an example of a complex system where his aim was to find a fairly simple way of coming to terms with it, and that was his approach in all his scientific work. The desire for simplicity in the face of complexity is reflected by his admiration of Capablanca. On being asked what he'd take to a desert island he replied, in a 2002 interview [starting at 42'50"]:

“I’m going to take the book ... Capablanca’s Hundred Best Games of Chess [by Golombek] and I could keep myself cheerfully employed for the better part of a year working through that; and my luxury is that I’m going to take from the British Museum the Isle of Lewis chess set, with those wonderful old things that were found [at the] – back of a cave – that would be my chessboard”.

Simon Levin said: “He was driven by the view that there were similarities among systems, and that those similarities can help us develop unifying theories” (quoted here). He regarded chess and bridge as such systems, so his time spent playing them had a real purpose. I believe he took chess seriously for a reason that was clear to himself but not to others, while at the same time enjoying the more obvious game-playing and competitive side of it.

The leading Sydney chess teacher in the early days was C. J. S. Purdy, but Bob did not see eye-to-eye with him, perhaps because they were studying chess for different purposes. I once told Bob that I had come across a copy of the first Australasian Chess Review magazine, July 1929, signed by the editor, CJSP. Bob asked me whether that item cost more or less on account of the signature! A question of interest at the time was whether a computer chess program would ever beat a human player. Purdy said it would not, and referred in support to George Karolyi, a contemporary player; Bob deprecated that evidence.

Informal chess

Bob was a very keen chess-player in his early years at Sydney University. Most of his chess activity was fairly informal and, as far as I know, he did not play in state or national championships. It would, therefore, be hard to document his playing at all fully, but I can set down a few reminiscences. He spent a great deal of time in the Games Room of the Union Building at Sydney University. I did so too, and we met very many times in 1957-1958 and occasionally afterwards (I have letters from him dated 1963-65). He dived into chess and other games with great enthusiasm and a real desire to master them at as high a level as possible. Despite his huge talents and great competitiveness (it is known that when he came home after work and played with his dog, he played to win!), he never had any particular conceit, simply dealing with facts. He once told me that I was much better at chess than he was, and he said similar things to others in different fields.

Another anecdote: “When members of an exclusive Sydney chess club declined to appear until after dinner, Bob led the university team in breaking into the cupboards, setting up the boards and starting the clocks in their absence” (from a letter by Len Fisher to The Guardian, 8 May 2020; if forced to guess I’d say that was the Millions Club).

In those years we played many off-hand games in the Union Games Room and I also have a few score sheets (see below). He liked “nomination Kriegspiel” much more than ordinary Kriegspiel. The two opponents face away from each other with their own chess sets, and a third set is placed between them for the use of the umpire. Each player knows the positions of his own men but has to try to deduce the positions of his opponent’s men. The umpire announces the first move so that both players hear it, for instance, “White has moved to f3.” Then Black will keep in mind that White might have played 1.Nf3 or 1.f3 (actually the

descriptive notation was in use at that time). Or the umpire might announce “Black has captured on d5” or “White has moved and Black is in check along the rank”. The game is also known as Berkeley Kriegspiel and full rules (perhaps slightly different from ours) can be found here. The game requires fairly sound chess-playing together with a good memory for the sequence of partial information and good detective ability. That game seems not to be flourishing today.

In the 1960s Bob once invited Don Pike and myself to his home in Lane Cove, mainly to play nomination Kriegspiel. Don was the umpire. At one point Bob, competitive as always, said: “I think I’ve got Nige’s position down exactly”. Shortly after, however, Bob tried to make an illegal move and Don said: “well, that settles the question of whether you have his position exactly”. I don’t remember the result of that game.

I formed the opinion that Bob was a materialist in chess rather than a positional player or an appreciator of subtlety or artistry. He was freakishly excellent at academic exams and at calculations in general, and I had the impression that he was applying that ability in chess. I think he aimed for something in the direction of today’s Stockfish program, but he would have been most interested in the games of Alpha Zero where materialism seems to play a much less prominent part.

Farewell

I consider that Bob’s main distinguishing features were his enormous mental capacity and his great friendliness – he was always smiling or just about to smile. He never gave any impression of being a self-conscious egg-head, but rather an extremely quick thinker who put his abilities to excellent use. Although we didn’t fully realise it in those early years when he was not yet famous, those who knew him inside of chess or outside were privileged.

Appendix: game scores

Here are some of his scores, converted to algebraic notation from the descriptive notation then in use. They are in chronological order. I would, of course, like to make some of his wins available, but I have not so far been able to find other scores. The numbers in braces are the current clock-times in minutes (by the way, I suggest those times could more often be recorded and published today).

Sydney interclub A grade, round 3, board 3, 17 April 1958

Sydney University 2 vs Sydney University 1; 42 moves in 1½ hours

White R. M. May Black N. F. Nettheim

Centre Counter Defence

1.e4 d5 2.ed Nf6 3.c4 c6 4.dc? {8} Nxc6 {1} 5.Nf3 e5 6.d3 {10} Qb6 {1} 7.Qe2 {15} Bc5 {25} 8.Nc3 {25} Bf5 {35} 9.Be3 {32} Bxe3 {37} 10.fxe3 O-O {41} 11.h3 {38} Rad8 {46} 12.O-O-O e4 {52} 13.de Rxd1+ {53} 14.Kxd1 Nxe4 {55} 15.Qe1 Qxb2 {58} 16.Nxe4 Bxe4 {60} 17.Nd4 Nxd4 18.exd4 Qc2++ 0-1

That game was a disaster but, at the time, it was not well-known that 4.dc? gives Black too much compensation for the sacrificed pawn, especially with White's d-pawn remaining backward.

Sydney University Championship, round 5, 22 June 1959

40 moves in 2 hours

White N. F. Nettheim Black R. M. May

Albin Counter-Gambit

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e5 3.de d4 4.Nf3 Nc6 5.a3 Be6 6.e3 {21} de {9} 7.Qxd8+ Rxd8 8.Bxe3 {21} Nge7 {16} 9.Be2 {36} Nf5 {20} 10.b4 {48} a5 {36} 11.b5 {51} Nxe3 {39} 12.fxe3 Ne7 13.Kf2 {65} Sf5 {46} 14.Re1 {67} Bc5 15.Bf1 Ke7 {68} 16.Nbd2 {69} a4 {72} 17.Ne4 {70} Ba7 {79} 18.Ng3 {84} Rd7 19.Nxf5 Bxf5 20.Red1 {93} Rhd8 {85} 21.Be2 {94} Bd3 {89} 22.Rd2 {96} Bc5 23.Ne1 {101} Bxe2 24.Rxd7+ Rxd7 25.Kxe2 Ke6 26.Nd3 Bf8 {97} 27.Rd1 {105} g5 28.g4 b6 29.Rf1 {108} Bxa3 {104} 30.Ra1 Bf8 31.Rxa4 Bg7 32.Ra8 Re7 33.Rg8 {110} Bxe5 34.Nxe5 Kxe5 {107} 35.Rxg5+ {110} Kf6 36.Rf5+ Kg6 37.h4 {114} c6 38.Kf3 Rc7 39.Kf4 cb 40.cb Rc4+ 41.e4 1-0

My note at the time to White's 9th was: 9.Nc3 Ng6 10.Nb5! MCO 10 Col 89(o)(A)

Casual lightning game, 30 December 1961

All moves in 5 minutes

White R. M. May Black N. F. Nettheim

Sicilian Defence

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 g6 3.d4 cd 4.Nxd4 Bg7 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Be3 Nf6 7.Qd2 Ng4 8.Nxc6 bxc6 9.f3 Nxe3 10.Qxe3 Qb6 11.Qxb6 axb6 12.Nd1 O-O 13.c3 d5 14.ed cd 15.Ne3 d4 16.Nd5 dc 17.Nxc3 Ra3! 18.Kd2 Rd8+ 19.Kc2 Bf5+ 20.Kc1 Bh6+ 21.f4 Bxf4++ 0-1

The *New York Times* obituary on 11 May ended with a characteristic anecdote:

One friend recalled that during one hiking trip, with his party snowed in, "Bob went off to play chess with a 10-year-old." As the world-famous scientist walked back into the room, he announced, "I won."