

Vogt's 'Letters'

LETTERS ON CHESS; containing an account of some of the principal works on that celebrated game. With copious extracts and remarks, in a series of letters, from Carl Frederich Vogt. Translated from the German by U. Ewell. - London 1848.

This small book of 142 pages takes the form of a series of letters which examine important chess writers up to that date. It was the first work to give an account of Lucena, and in general took a balanced view of the books it examined.

It was suggested by George Walker (1803-1879) that U. Ewell was a pen-name, and that its English pronunciation, U.U.L., indicated W.L., and therefore William Lewis (1787-1870). Further, there was no such person as Vogt, and the work had never been written in German, but was entirely by Lewis. He thought that only someone like Lewis would have sufficient knowledge to write such a book. This view has been accepted by van der Linde, Murray, and others, without question.

Lewis and Walker formed a contrast. Lewis had been the strongest player of his day, at least in England, wrote precisely and originally, and published his books at high prices. His former pupil, Walker, never claimed to be quite equal to the best players, except in years of low standards, wrote fluently but often inaccurately, and tried to sell a higher number of books by making their prices low. There was rivalry between them at the time that 'Letters' was published.

Why should Lewis have written under a pseudonym? Two reasons were suggested. The first is that the book praises the writings of Lewis. The second is more subtle. Lewis was a pupil of Sarratt (c 1774-1821), and anonymously completed 'New Treatise of Chess', 1821, on his death. Vogt says of Sarratt's 'Treatise', 'It is now, however, well known that there is very little originality in it, for Sarratt, having access to the works of Ponziani, Ercole del Rio, etc., which were then very scarce in England, did not hesitate to extract much that is excellent without any acknowledgement, showing a want of ingenuousness very unbecoming a man of talent'. The loyal pupil would not want to belittle his master in this manner.

Lewis never accepted that he wrote 'Letters'. There is other evidence that perhaps he was not the author, because the accusation just quoted is untrue. Sarratt specifically emphasised his debt to del Rio and listed the others from whom he borrowed. Lewis, who edited the revised edition of Sarratt's book, would have known that perfectly well. He was a careful man.

Could there have been a Vogt? Well, there was a Carl Vogt (1817-1885). He became Professor of Zoology at the University of his home town, Giessen, in 1847, was elected deputy to the national assembly in 1848, fled from Germany because of his political views, and in 1852 took a chair at the University of Geneva, where he remained. He was a scholarly man, an original thinker (he defended Darwinism) and the author of several books, including 'Zoologische Briefe', 1853-54, two volumes. Could he have written 'Schachliche Briefe'?