

Edward Falkener: Old Board Games for New / Irving L. Finkel

1. The Book

The interesting work by Edward Lyon Falkener (1814-1896) entitled *Games Ancient and Oriental and How to Play Them*, was first published by Longmans, Green and Company in 1892,⁽¹⁾ and remained a very considerable rarity until it was reprinted by Dover Books in 1961. In its day this was a pioneer investigation which combined scholarly method in historical research with practical field-work and discussion with native players. Falkener also undertook what hardly a single board-game specialist has attempted since, namely to give for each game, be it ancient or oriental, a step-by-step record of a complete game played through for the purpose, often with the aid of patient friends who had learned the rules specially.

Falkener's investigations cover five principal groups of games, tracing oriental and other versions in some detail. It is subdivided as follows:

1. The Games of the Ancient Egyptians
2. Chess
3. Draughts, including We'i k'i
4. Backgammon
5. Magic Squares
6. Figures of the Knight's Tour

The book was admittedly affected for the worse by the author's over-enthusiastic attempts at reconstruction, both of fragmentary ancient boards and their possible system of play. The classical scholar R. G. Austin, for example, remarked disparagingly of Falkener that his "zeal for reconstruction so often outruns scholarly method,"⁽²⁾ and many subsequent writers, often benefiting from new discoveries, have been equally dismissive of the book. The volume itself, always hard to find, was effectively eclipsed by the remarkable products of Stewart Culin, and nowadays, if mentioned at all, Falkener's work tends to be relegated to discussions of the history of board-game studies. Nevertheless, there is much of interest within its pages, and the book can still be consulted with profit in regard to some oriental games.

Edward Falkener was architect, antiquarian, Justice of the Peace and other things; an outline sketch of his life and achievements has been given by R. C. Bell.⁽³⁾ After the fashion of the day Falkener had a sepia photograph of himself included as the frontispiece to the original book. It is interesting to compare the solemn and august character that he presented to the world in 1892 with the drawing made of him by S. Vogel von Vogelstein in Dresden in 1847, when the subject was 33 years of age.⁽⁴⁾

The book itself is a handsome production, and includes nine additional original photographs of Oriental games and pieces, pasted in by hand. One reason for its scarcity became clear in 1991, when Falkener's last surviving grand-daughter died at the age of eighty in her house in Guernsey.⁽⁵⁾ Among the family possessions that came to light was a considerable number of original copies of *Games Ancient and Oriental*, in brand-new condition, many still in their original wrappers as received from the printers.

Falkener, like many an author before and since, subscribed to a commercial review service, but unlike many he kept all the reviews very carefully, and they survive among his papers to make highly interesting reading today.⁽⁶⁾

The majority of these reviews were enthusiastic and favourable, although usually written by people who had no serious knowledge of the subject. One or two professional reviewers struck a jaundiced note in 1892 that will jar on the ear of any valiant worker in the field of board-games history. One wrote, in *The World*, as follows:

“Varieties of taste are, of course, infinite, but it may be doubted whether under any stress of ennui or laziness, the majority of men would care to be instructed in all the intricacies of the games of skill and chance played by the ancients ...”,

while the *Yorkshire Post* commented:

“Nothing is more curious in literature than the devotion of scholars to out-of-the-way subjects. The man of the world, who tries everything by the utilitarian test, ‘Will it pay?’ is amazed to see persons devoting their leisure to the elucidation of some obscure subject, or corner of a subject...”

although the same journalist, considering the persistent nature of some games, muses that

“Their permanence is a remarkable proof of their fitness to meet the needs of intelligent men in all time; and the fact that some definite forms of recreation are older than powerful religions should convey an instructive lesson to those who, from a strange misconception of human life, would cheerfully confide all forms of recreation to the keeping of the devil.”

One particular short review in Falkener’s local *Weekly Mail* seems to endorse the book without reservation, but ends up a little obscurely with the following remarkable sentence: “The book is bulky, and ought to be interesting.”

Two reviews in particular were more critical, focussing on the methodological drawbacks to the book that have been criticised subsequently. The *Classical Review* examines the material from Greece and Rome with a very detached pen, especially with regard to use of literary sources. The review in *The Field* is lengthy and hostile, and greatly upset the author, indeed it formed the subject of correspondence between Falkener and the editor of the *The Field*, Ilyd Nicholl. From this letter it is clear that the reviewer, who attacked Falkener very vigorously, was the “Mr Kesson” who had written articles on Magic Squares in 1879-1881 referred to by Falkener in his book, pp. 337-338.⁽⁷⁾ Nicholl, evidently an experienced editor, wrote consolingly (probably not for the first time in his career):

“... you must take comfort in the thought that to be found fault with at such length is in itself a compliment. Probably your work has forestalled something of a similar nature which Mr Kesson himself contemplated, and that is an offence which some people can never forgive.”

It appears from papers preserved by Falkener that about 468 copies of the book were printed by Messrs Longmans, Green and Co. By March 1892 some 310 were left; a note from the firm dated October 6 1892 reads “We now have about 242 copies of your work on “Games” on hand,” and by June 1893 some 170 still remained unsold. One surviving

letter from W. H. Wilkinson⁽⁸⁾ dated August 20, 1892 reveals that Falkener considered that the book was not selling well. Item 14 of Messrs Longmans and Co.'s still surviving Terms For Producing and Publishing Books on Commission stipulates that "When the demand has ceased, the stock to be returned to the Author or proprietor, or disposed of ..." Thus it came about that the remaining stock of copies was sent to Falkener himself for disposal. The distinguished author died four years after publication, and the books remained in the family ever since.

2. The Games

Page 361 of the original publication contained a brief advertisement that for obvious reasons was omitted from the modern Dover edition, while a longer loose advertisement was distributed within the pages of the book. These advertisements show that Falkener had arranged for commercial reproductions to be made of the four Egyptian games he had studied and reconstructed, and that these were available to the public on receipt of the considerable sum of seven shillings and sixpence. Commercial reproductions of ancient games with reconstructed rules, dice and pieces, are nothing unusual in this day and age, but it seems probable that this spirited venture by Falkener in 1892 was the first of its kind.

The four available games, reconstructed according to Falkener, are the following:

1. Ludus Latrunculorum (12x12 squares)
2. The Game of Senat (13x13, 11x11, 9x9, 7x7, or 5x5 square board)
3. The Game of the Bowl (12 concentric rings)
4. The Game of the Sacred Way

Each of these reconstructions, it must be said, is extremely doubtful. The reconstructed boards proposed for nos. 1 and 2 never existed as such; the name "Senat" has been misapplied by Falkener to his reconstruction no. 2, whereas in reality it is the name of the well-known ancient Egyptian race-game *senet* which was played exclusively on a board of 3x10 squares. Some evidence has since been forthcoming for how the "Game of the Bowl," anciently called *mehen*, might have been played, and it seems probable that this was a race from the outer ring to the middle, and back out again. Falkener's so-called "Game of the Sacred Way" is again a misnomer, since the name belongs properly within the classical world, while the board is that for the ancient Near-Eastern Game-of-Twenty-Squares, sometimes otherwise known as the Royal Game of Ur. The rules for this game are now understood, a subject to which the present writer hopes to return in a future issue of this magazine.

It seems far from likely that this product sold in great number or brought great riches to its originator, and up until recently it has seemed doubtful that many examples of such little-known replicas have survived. Falkener's own set has been preserved within the family.⁽⁹⁾ A second complete set is to be found in the reserve collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, accession no. 57.IX.220.⁽¹⁰⁾ This set was presented to the Museum by Lady Tylor, widow of the eminent English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917). Tylor was one of the most productive and influential of early anthropologists, and among his many writings are two serious articles on the

subject of board games, the first of which was published in time to be used by Falkener, p. 258.⁽¹¹⁾ It is not surprising that Tylor should have procured a set of Falkener's reproduction games for consideration and experiment, and one can readily imagine how Lady Tylor, packing up her late husband's books, papers and collections to be handed over to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, slipped them in with the other treasures with the thought that they might one day be useful to future researchers into the history of board games.

Notes

1. Games Ancient and Oriental, and How to Play Them. Being the Games of the Ancient Egyptians, the Hiera Gramme of the Greeks, the Ludus Latrunculorum of the Romans, and the Oriental Games of Chess, Draughts, Backgammon, and Magic Squares. By EDWARD FALKENER. With numerous Photographs, Diagrams &c. 8vo. pp. 440, price 21s. Messrs LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.
2. R.G. Austin, "Greek Board Games," in *Antiquity*, 14 (1940) p. 258.
3. R.C. Bell, *Board and Table Games of Many Civilizations*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1960) pp. 191-192. Edward Falkener could well form the subject of a serious biography.
4. This drawing is now housed in the Kupferstich-Kabinett in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden. I am very grateful to Madeleine McClintock, Falkener's great grand-daughter, for informing me about this portrait, and lending me a photograph of it for reproduction here.
5. An evocative description by Andrew McClintock of the "excavation" of this veritable Aladdin's Cave under the title "Treasure Trove at Icart" was published in the *Guernsey Society Review*, Summer 1992, pp. 52-53.
6. It is a pleasure here to acknowledge the kindness of Colonel Michael Portman who has loaned me the Falkener papers drawn on here. The surviving clippings include reviews from the following publications that appeared in 1892:
 1. March 3: *The Sheffield Independent*
 2. March 9: *The Saturday Review*
 3. March 14: *The Scotsman*
 4. March 14: *Weekly Mail*
 5. March 16: *The Yorkshire Post*
 6. March 17: *The Times*
 7. March 24: *The Standard*
 8. March 30: *The World*
 9. April 1: *South Wales Daily News*
 10. April 27: *Western Daily Press*
 11. May 14: *The Field, The Country Gentleman's Newspaper*
 12. July: *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review*
 13. August 6: *The Graphic*
 14. October 1: *The Spectator*
 15. *South Wales Daily News*, undated
 16. *The Ladies Pictorial*, undated
 - 17-18. Two unidentified and undated reviews
 19. W. Wayte in the *Classical Review* for 1892, pp. 458-460
7. This reviewer wrote furiously: "Then, when discussing Indian squares, Mr Falkener remarks (p. 338) that Mr Kesson, who has treated of these squares in the Queen, says that name

- 'Caïssan squares' was given to them by Sir William Jones. Mr Kesson says nothing of the kind; that gentleman knows better than anyone else that the adjective 'Caïssan' was suggested to him by 'Cavendish', who originated it. Caïssa is Sir William Jones' fanciful goddess of chess..." According to Iltyd Nicholl "Kesson" was a nom-de plume, deriving from the site called "Nassek," where a contention-producing magic-square had been earlier discovered over a gateway.
8. Then H.M. Consul at Wenchow, China. W. H. Wilkinson carried out very serious investigations into Chinese and Korean chess and Oriental playing cards; see H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford, 1913), pp. 125-137; S. Culin, *Korean Games* (Pennsylvania, 1895), pp. vi, 82-91. In this letter Wilkinson identified the mysterious Japanese gameboard described by Falkener, p. 363 (about which they were corresponding) as a backgammon (*i.e. sugoroku*) board. In a later letter from Chemulpo, Korea, dated February 27, 1894, and following his researches into the Korean game, Wilkinson wrote as follows: "Is there, I wonder, a variety of chess besides this of Corea yet left to be explored? Perhaps there may be in Tibet; and if I go to Chungking and am sent to the frontier I may be able to send you a description of that too!" Unfortunately for the board-game historian Wilkinson seems not to have been posted to Tibet.
 9. Again I owe thanks to Colonel Portman for kindly making this material available to me for study and photography.
 10. Thanks again are offered to Marina de Alarcon for her help at the Pitt Rivers Museum.
 11. "On the Game of Patolli in Ancient Mexico, and Its Probably Asiatic Origin," in *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 8 (1879), pp. 116ff., and "On American Lot-Games as Evidence of Asiatic Intercourse Before the Time of Columbus, in *International Archiv für Ethnographie*, 9 (Suppl. 1896) pp.55-66, reprinted in the immensely useful compendium E. M. Avedon and B. Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (John Wiley and Sons, 1971) pp. 77-99 For a modern consideration of the problematic relationship between Patolli and Pachisi see T. Kendall, *Patolli. A Game of Ancient Mexico* (Kirk Game Company, Mass., 1980) pp. 10-11, and C. J. Erasmus, "Patolli, Pachisi, and the Limitation of Possibilities" in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 6 (1950) pp. 369-387 (reprinted in Avedon and Sutton-Smith, *op. cit.*, pp.109-129). For a consideration of Tylor's writings on games see also G. E. Smith, *The Diffusion of Culture* (London, Watts, 1933) pp. 153-164.