

Book Review

by Don Aldrich
first published in [Chess Today](#) No. 1068

French Defence 3. Nd2, by GM Lev Psakhis (Batsford, 2003) 287 pp., approx. 300 diag., \$22.95

While not exactly prolific, Lev Psakhis should be familiar to readers from his two previous monographs for Batsford from the early 90's, *The Complete French* and *The Complete Benoni*. Both were well received when published, and have taken on the aura of minor classics since publication, especially given the lack of any competing 'complete' volumes since. Alas, the current effort, while equally well written and thorough, suffers from a terrible layout making it almost inaccessible.

Apparently the days of the 'complete' opening monograph are over. With the information explosion of the last decade, even the average player now has easy access to million game databases, and a game played this morning in Krasnoyarsk is being analyzed this afternoon. A 'complete' book had better have these games, or a hue and cry of criticism rapidly follows. Undaunted, the publishers have forged ahead, now giving us multi-volume treatments, a process that began more or less with John Nunn and Graham Burgess penning the two volume set on the King's Indian. Gambit has followed suit with several entire books on variations in the Sicilian, and started in on the French with Pederson's *French Nc3*. The promised second volume has yet to appear. And so the revived Batsford enters the fray with the first volume of a promised three-volume work on the French (*I heard that there would be 4 volumes - Alex Baburin*).

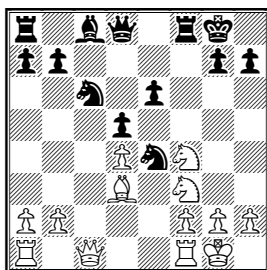
In this battle of opening wars, Gambit and Everyman have drawn a clear line in the sand. Gambit continues the older Batsford trend of encyclopaedic treatment; a Gambit book is full of references to line B321113(a) and such. While somewhat off-putting, the outline basis of organization does make it easy to keep track of where you are, and where you are going.

Everyman has selected the 'complete game' approach — each major branch in a line is given through a complete game, and sub branches are discussed within the game. While not allowing for as thorough coverage as the outline treatment, it allows the author more room for discussion of the ideas, and still provides a fairly detailed treatment of the opening. It also must be mentioned that Everyman works have a very 'clean' look — each game heading is highlighted by a text box, and there are usually summaries at the end of the chapters detailing the lines covered in that chapter.

As a result, the Gambit approach is more favoured by correspondence players, professionals, and those amateurs who have far too much time to spend studying chess. Everyman is preferred by amateur players as it tends to spend more time on explaining the ideas inherent in a particular opening line, and putting the ideas into the context of a complete game.

Someone at Batsford must have surveyed the status quo of opening publications, and decided rather than joining one or the other camps it would carve out its own niche with a new type of treatment — the encyclopaedic complete game approach.

This might have worked had they used the outline treatment within each complete game. Unfortunately for Psakhis and the reader, this is not done. They follow the Everyman model, using some thirty five complete games. Unlike Everyman, there is no 'introductory' material at the beginning of each chapter setting out the parameters and ideas of the variation to be shown; the chapters simply start with a game. And for some inexplicable reason, the games are not even numbered, which makes cross referencing them somewhat difficult. The problem is still further aggravated by the occasional use of (A), (B), (C) for some main sub-variations. As the first moves are set off and in bold, just like the main line, it is sometimes difficult to find your way back to the main variation. Rather than describe the problem, have a look:



14...♠g5! 14...♞f6 isn't so convincing: 15.♗e2 e5 (Or 15...♗d7 16.♞e3 ♗d6 17.♗e5 ♗e8 18.♗g4! ♞e7 19.♗f4 ♗f7 20.♞fe1 ♞g5 21.♗e5± Dzhakaev–Sobyamin, Russia, 2001); Nor can Black improve with 15...♗d6 16.♞c5 ♞d8 17.♗g3 ♗f7 18.♞ae1±) 16.dxe5 ♗xe5 17.♗xe5 ♞xe5 18.f3 ♗f6 19.♞c3± Ivanchuk–Ruzhiale, Kramatorsk, 1989. Black similarly fails to equalize with 14... ♞d6 15.♗e2 ♗d7 16.♞e3 ♗f6 (16...♞ae8 17.♗xe4 dxe4 18.♗g5 e5 19.♗xe4 leaves Black with insufficient compensation for the pawn; Barkhagen–Olsson, Swedish Ch., Linkoping, 2001) 17.♗e5±; **15.♗xg5 ♞xg5 17.♗xh7!?**+ White just often plays 16.♗e2 when there can follow: 16...♞f6 (I don't think Black should exchange queens; Korneev–Moskalenko, Salou Open, 2000, went 16...♞xc1 17.♞axc1 a6!? 18.a3 ♗d7 19.f4!? ♞ac8 20.g3±) 17.♞e3 ♗d7; There is more analysis, all in one column, until we get a break and then the bolded main line returns.

What makes this choice all the more inexplicable is that when I created this with ChessBase, CB automatically breaks the analysis out into outline form, and inserts the appropriate A,B,c,d,1,2, etc., at the appropriate place. And when you bring it in with a word processor, it automatically *italicizes* the next level down in analysis, again making it easier to read. Why none of these features was used is beyond me. The result is long unbroken columns, sometimes spreading over several pages, all in the same typeface and setting. Even worse, one can get totally lost in a forest of unending (((s. Again, the common practice of alternating round and square brackets is unused.

As a result, it is very difficult to wade through these variations and remember where you are, and from whence you came. This mishmash makes it very hard to recommend what otherwise would be an outstanding book.

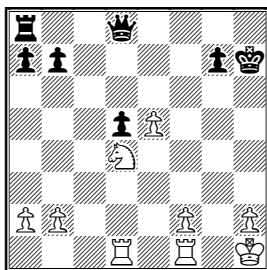
The benchmark for comparison at this point must be Emms' *The French Tarrasch* published by Batsford in 1998. This was the 'old' Batsford, and was one of their first efforts in their 'Opening Guides' effort. Using complete games, it was directly challenging the Everyman approach on their own turf. It was not meant to be a 'complete' treatment, but rather to "provide a rapid understanding of fashionable openings through the use of model games and clear explanations." [Blurb from the back of the book.] Emms uses 84 games in only 144 pages, so he should not come anywhere close to Psakhis for thoroughness.

Turning to chapter one of Emms, we find the first chapter heading includes the moves: 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.♗d3 c5 6.c3 ♘c6 7.♞e2 cxd4 8.cxd4 f6 9.exf6 ♞xf6 10.♞f3 ♗d6 11.0-0 0-0. As can be seen, he is starting with main line 3...♘f6, and then handles earlier deviations with later chapters. Going to Psakhis' chapter on 3...♘f6, we see the deviation 4...♞e4 handled in the first game, and are told that the more common moves will be "seen in subsequent games". Here is the first hint of organizational problems — when Emms does this, he says "see game No. X". Psakhis can't do this, as the games are not numbered, and apparently referring to them by name and page number is too much effort.

Thus, the only way into the labyrinth is through the 'back door' — the Index of Variations at the back. I cannot emphasize this enough. There is absolutely no way of paging through the chapter on 3...♘f6 to find what you want. There is not one single sub heading or division in this 90-page chapter, just the games and text. The games are not even prefaced by a heading telling you what variation you are in.

So, we turn to the Index, and find that it is not laid out in a particularly clear way. Paging through it, we find "5...c5 6.♗d3 — see 5.c3 c5 6.♗d3" Now, that 'I' has one of those funny little marks on it that shows up when you are using figurine notation but don't have the right font turned on. It means the symbol for bishop. Nonetheless, it can be confusing, might totally confuse the less sophisticated computer user, and this is not the only place it happens.

Anyway, we finally get to page 122, and the game proceeds: 12.♗f4 ♗xf4 13.♞xf4 ♞e4 14.♞e2 ♗xf3 15.gxf3 ♞g5 16.♞h1 e5 17.dxe5 ♞xf3 18.♗xh7+ ♞h8 19.♞g1 ♞cd4 20.♞xf3 ♗g4 21.♞xd4 ♗xd1 22.♗axd1 ♞xh7 (**D**). Now this is still on the first page of Emms' analysis, and actually is the point he wants to get to, as he tells us this is the crucial position for the variation starting with 14.♗xf3, noting that White has obtained a rook, knight and dangerous passed pawn for the queen, but that tactics will determine who is better.



Psakhis has used *ten* pages to get here. Considering that Psakhis uses smaller type and the material is more densely packed, this gives a good feel for how much more material he is presenting. He pretty much makes the same comments as Emms. At this point, Emms gives the move 23.f4, and says "Supporting the passed pawn with 23.g1?, with the idea of g3 and fg1 is another way to play the position". He then follows his game to the end with two more variations.

Psakhis' game actually plays the move 23.g1?. He gives two alternatives, one of them being the game Emms follows [Kramnik–Ulibin, USSR Ch 1991]. Psakhis follows his game to the end as well, along with more thorough analysis and game references. It also ends in a draw [Vokarev–Gleizerov, Poland 1999].

In his final conclusion, Psakhis recommends Black take a closer look at 17...xe5? rather than 17...xf3. Both Psakhis and Emms looked at 17...xe5, Emms calling it underrated, and Psakhis maintaining that 17...xf3 was "probably stronger", but giving more analysis, and two games not referred to by Emms as they happened in 1999 and 2002.

So, in comparing their treatment of this rather complex line, Psakhis does do a more thorough job of presenting the line, with far more sub-variations and analysis. Both authors offer some of their own ideas and analysis, but both, in the end, get to pretty much the same place.

And that is where you must make your choice. Psakhis has far more material than Emms. His analysis is more complete and thorough; there is hardly a move that does not have several if not many alternative lines given. The problem is finding those moves.

Conclusion:

This book is the last word currently available on the French Tarrasch. Alas, the layout and organization makes that information almost inaccessible. If you absolutely must have the 'last word', then it's a must buy. If you are still learning the French, or want to play through French Tarrasch games with some theory, then you are still better served by Emms.