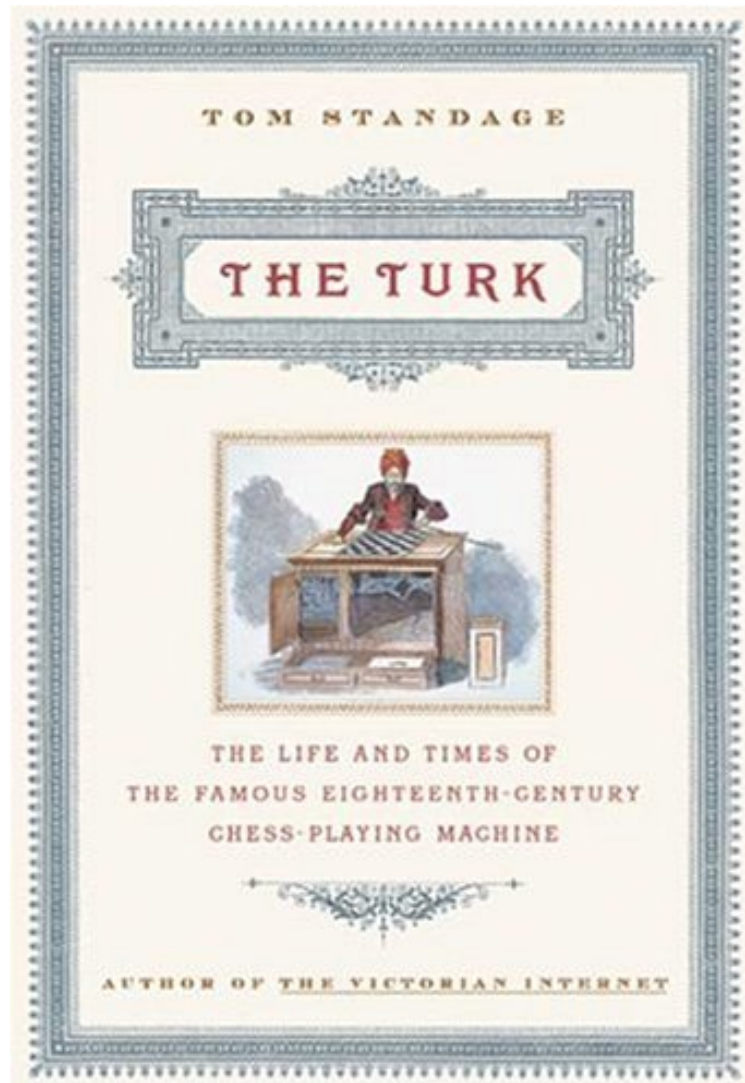


The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine

Tom Standage

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Tom Standage : The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Amazing Story of a Great Moment in the History of ChessBy Rick KnowltonAn amazing book. Takes the true history of the famous chess-playing 'automaton' and weaves it into a fascinating page-turning adventure, through episode after episode of the machine's many phases of existence.It would

be unexpected to make a moment of chess history into such a riveting narrative -- that's exactly what Tom Standage does in this book. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. YIKES! It's the AUTOMATON ATTACK! By Keith Halonen I'm going to do something daring - review this book before I've even read it! I'm an amateur chess historian and I already know quite a bit about The Turk. Obviously, author Tom Standage is a professional chess historian, given that he's filled a couple hundred pages with this fascinating account of Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen's 1769 automaton. SPOILER ALERT! There were no genuine chess-playing computers in 1769. Even Edgar Allan Poe figured that out and wrote a newspaper expose on The Turk. What makes the tale so fascinating is the willingness of society at every level to accept the mysterious machine at face value. You've seen the carnival sideshow fortune-teller automaton, a "robot" gypsy adivina with a crystal ball that dispenses your fortune on a slip of paper for the price of a coin. Now imagine a life-size chess-playing turban-wearing robot that kicks your butt without batting a fake eyelash. If you want to see a beautiful (though highly fictionalized) rendition of this story, find a DVD of Raymond Bernard's 1927 (2 hrs. 20 min.) silent masterpiece, "The Chessplayer." Automatons (animated mechanical robots) were all the rage amongst the wealthy nobles of the 18th and 19th centuries. But meeting one that crushes you over the board? That must have been a real delight! Now I am off to read the book! It can't be anything but enthralling. UPDATE 28 SEPTEMBER 2013 -- Finished the book and am now ready to provide a post-mortem (as chess players call the analyzing of a recently finished game). Loved it, five stars, provided more than I already knew about the topic (which was considerable). Standage details The Turk's life-of-its-own grip over its less-than-enthused creator and its subsequent owners and operators. Lots of biographical notes on all the main players and - as promised - references to The Turk's influence over future industry automation, artificial intelligence, and computing science. An entertaining, informative read. On page 127 there is mentioned a pamphlet compiled by one W.J. Hunneman, entitled "A Selection of Fifty Games from Those Played by the Automaton Chess-Player." I note that this pamphlet is available right here at for \$15.00 (search for it by name). However, I located and downloaded a PDF copy of the Harvard Library original via Google Books by entering its title in Google's search field. It is written in the earliest Long Descriptive English Notation and I'm currently converting it to a staple-bound print pamphlet for my personal chess library. I may go so far as to include the duplicate gamescores in modern Abbreviated Algebraic Notation, which is much easier to read. Maybe even a few diagrams generated by my chess font. Most interested parties would probably just order the pamphlet from as what I'm doing is definitely "the long way round." But this pamphlet is at best a niche item and probably not of great interest to the broader chess-playing public. As an amateur chess historian, Hunneman's pamphlet is a treasure to me and I am taking pains to recreate even the old 1820 cover for esthetic purposes. Anyone desiring to know more than you ever wanted to know about the origins and history of the game should consider H.J.R. Murray's definitive "History of Chess," available here at from about \$11.50 to \$375.00 depending upon whether you want to still be able to afford food while you read through its 900+ pages. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Thriller! By Carolyn Brown Heinz I wouldn't think it possible to make a historical study of a piece of technology from the eighteenth century into a thriller, but this lovely book about 'the Turk' had me turning pages and disciplining myself not to peek at the ending. How did the chess-playing machine that looked like an Ottoman official sitting at his study with his pipe and chessboard actually work? Was it entirely and autonomously and brilliantly mechanical? Had its inventor figured out a contrivance two centuries ahead of computers that could do what, so far, even computers can't do reliably: i.e., beat the best chess players in the land? Or was it a trick of some kind, with a child or a legless person or a dwarf who sat inside? I found myself rooting for the Turk, wanting him to be what he was claimed to be, like people who think that SOME magicians might actually be able to pull off real magic even if the majority work through tricks and suggestion. Of course the story was about far more than the machine itself; it was about the ability of a sequence of owners to keep its secret, a series of operators to keep mum without NDAs, the powerful people who wanted to play against it, the smart people who published studious guesses about how it worked. This was a real historical thriller, without a single murder!

On an autumn day in 1769, a Hungarian nobleman named Wolfgang von Kempelen attended a conjuring show at the court of Maria Theresa, empress of Austria-Hungary. So unimpressed was Kempelen by the performance that he declared he could do better himself. Maria Theresa held him to his word and gave him six months to prepare a show of his own. Kempelen did not disappoint; he returned to the court the following spring with a mechanical man, fashioned from wood, powered by clockwork, dressed in a stylish Turkish costume and capable of playing chess. The Turk, as this contraption became known, was an instant success, and Tom Standage's book chronicles its illustrious career in Europe and America over the next eighty five years. Associated over time with a host of historical figures, including Benjamin Franklin, Catherine the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles Babbage, and Edgar Allan Poe, Kempelen's creation unwittingly also helped to inspire the development of the power loom, the computer, and the detective story. Everywhere it went, the Turk baffled spectators and provoked frenzied speculation about whether a machine could really think. Many rival theories were published, but they served only to undermine each other. Part historical detective story, part biography, The Turk relates the saga of the machine's remarkable and checkered career against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, as mechanical technology opened up dramatic new possibilities and the

relationship between people and machines was being redefined. Today, in the midst of the computer age, it has assumed a new significance, as scientists and philosophers continue to debate the possibility of machine intelligence. To modern eyes, the Turk now seems to have been a surprisingly farsighted invention, and its saga is a colorful and important part of the history of technology.

From Library Journal The Turk was the name given to a chess-playing automaton created by Wolfgang von Kempelen in order to impress the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria-Hungary. In 1770, von Kempelen demonstrated the Turk and so began a series of performances that would continue for 85 years, throughout Europe and eventually in the United States. Technology correspondent for the Economist and author of *The Victorian Internet*, Standage details the appearance and seeming construction of the automaton, following its existence and influence up through its destruction in a fire. He also provides a fine description of the fascination with automata and magic that was so prevalent in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At the time, no one was able to determine how the Turk performed such feats; a fully operational replica was finally built by a Hollywood stage designer in 1971. Standage concludes this intriguing work by comparing the Turk with developments in computer chess playing in the latter half of the 20th century and also relates it to the broad artificial intelligence field. This book should appeal to a wide range of readers. Hilary Burton, Lawrence Livermore National Lab, Livermore, CA Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Booklist *Starred* It's a shame that most people these days have never heard of Wolfgang von Kempelen's magnificent machine called the Turk, because it really was a marvelous creation. In the middle of the eighteenth century, automatons were all the rage: mechanical ducks and elephants; pictures with moving parts; even human simulacra that could write, draw, and play musical instruments. And then there was the Turk, an automaton that could, it appeared, play chess--not just move pieces around a board, but also plan and execute strategies and outwit some of Europe's finest chess players. The Turk had a career that lasted more than eight decades: Benjamin Franklin played a match against it; Edgar Allan Poe wrote about it; Charles Babbage, the great-grandfather of the computer, was fascinated by it. But was it a genuine automaton? Or was it, as the Turk's many critics claimed, a hoax, a simple trick dressed up as a scientific wonder? Standage, who is also the author of the delightful *Victorian Internet* (1998), chronicles the life and times of the Turk, charting its ups and downs, showing the machine's impact on the world (the Turk was, in a way, the inspiration both for the computer and the modern detective story). Saving the best--the truth about the Turk--for last, he keeps us on the edge of our seats, wondering about the secret to this magical device. History as seen from an unusual angle; thrilling stuff. David Pitt Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved an absorbing historical yarn... -- Christian Science Monitor