

Challenging the Grünfeld

By Edward Dearing

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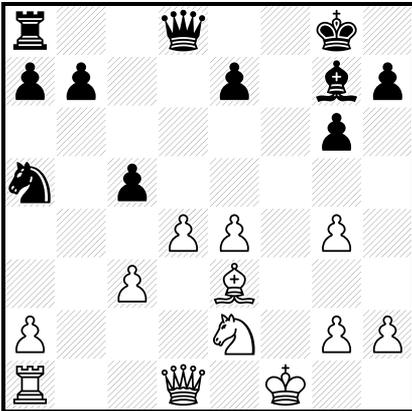
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Introduction

The Background to *Challenging the Grünfeld*:

In early 1997 I sat down to do some serious work on my White opening repertoire, in preparation for the World Under-18 Championship. In general, I was happy with my openings – I had found some good lines against the King's Indian Defence, the Nimzo Indian, and most of the mainline Queen's Gambit and Slav lines – however one large hole in my opening repertoire remained: the Grünfeld.

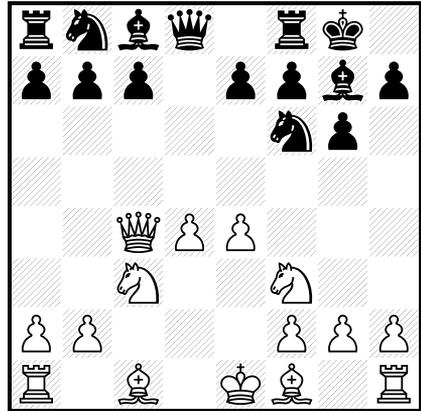
In the past I had enjoyed mixed experiences when facing the Grünfeld. Originally I relied exclusively on the Seville Variation (1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.e4 ♘xc3 6.bxc3 ♙g7 7.♙c4 c5 8.♗e2 0-0 9.0-0 ♘c6 10.♙e3 ♙g4 11.f3 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♗a5 13.♙xf7 ♗xf7 14.fxg4 ♗xf1 15.♙xf1)



I had seen Karpov use this line to good effect in some games from his 1987 World Championship match with Kasparov, and the notion of rapidly firing out 20 moves of established theory at the board very much appealed to me. Initially my results were quite positive, however the positions I reached were highly imbalanced, and as I improved I faced more experienced opponents

who handled the Black side of the Seville Variation with understanding and precision that was quite beyond my own powers. I soon discovered that without serious study the resulting positions were simply too volatile to work out in practical play.

Subsequently I switched to the Russian System (1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5 4.♗f3 ♙g7 5.♗b3 dxc4 6.♗xc4 0-0 7.e4)



which was popular at that time. As with the Seville Variation, my initial results were good, however I was never entirely comfortable with bringing my queen out so early. Furthermore, although I enjoyed sharp and tactical positions, I didn't much care for entering situations where I was behind in development – the potential for things backfiring was simply too high.

It was with some frustration, therefore, that I set out to discover a suitable and durable line against the Grünfeld; one that offered good winning chances but did not risk burning down the house in the process! At around this time my old friend Andrew Brett stopped by my home for some blitz chess. Andrew was in law school then, and is now an experienced lawyer.

He rarely has time to play chess, but follows the top tournaments and occasionally studies sharp mainline theory. We began playing, and I made a point of playing the Grünfeld as Black to see if I would discover anything that I disliked playing against. With a smugness befitting Andrew's lawyerly nature, he convincingly beat me three games in a row with the 8.♖b1 line.

Although I tried not to let it show, this annoyed me intensely: I was substantially higher rated and usually won at blitz too! Nevertheless, I was intrigued by how well he handled the 8.♖b1 system, and requested a crash course on its intricacies. For the next hour Andrew demonstrated the lines he knew, repeated some old games and explained which lines were currently popular or problematic for White. Needless to say, I was impressed and horrified that he knew all this, never mind the fact that he could remember it too!

Later that day I flicked through some copies of *Informant* and those *New In Chess* Yearbooks which I owned, and it quickly became clear that White scores excellently with the 8.♖b1 line. However, perhaps even more impressive than White's results was the calibre of player that employed this line: Kramnik, Khalifman, Ivanchuk, Gelfand, Yusupov, Shirov, Beliavsky, Sakaev, M.Gurevich, Bacrot and even Kasparov and Karpov have played this line as White! This line definitely held some appeal, so I set out to study it quite thoroughly. Unfortunately there were no books on it (*The Complete Grünfeld*, by Alexei Suetin, and Anatoly Karpov's *Beating the Grünfeld*, offer some limited coverage, but much of this was rather dated) so I had to pull together what I could from various issues of the *New In Chess* magazines and yearbooks, *Informant* and *Chessbase Magazine (CBM)*.

That was 1997. In 2004 I decided to play at the FIDE Chess Olympiad in Calvia, Mallorca, Spain. My preparation for the Grünfeld was a complete mess, so I again had to do some serious work on the 8.♖b1 variation, however to my disappointment there were still no books

on it! Consequently I had to go through the same arduous task of examining numerous journals and gathering notes on each line and sub-variation so that I could update my opening folder. Having gone through this process a second time, and kept detailed notes, it occurred to me that anyone else who wants to play this variation must encounter the same difficulties, which is largely why I put together this little book.

The 8.♖b1 variation (or 'The Modern Exchange Variation' as GM Bogdan Lalic dubs it in *The Grünfeld for the Attacking Player*) offers White superb winning chances, is theoretically sound, has been played by most of the best players in the world, and is much easier to play as White than to defend against as Black!

But really, what's the point?

When I decide to undertake any project I like to have a specific purpose in mind. I have written one other chess book (*Play the Sicilian Dragon*, by GAMBIT Publications) and the purpose of that book was largely to detail my experiences with the Sicilian Dragon, discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of the opening, as well as providing a detailed survey of the theory in the most popular variations. The sheer size of that project required that I use a 'tree of variations' format, with relatively little room for complete games and explanatory content. *Challenging the Grünfeld* was a project that gave me more flexibility in terms of approach. Although I wanted to provide White with a thoroughly reliable opening repertoire against the Grünfeld, I also appreciated that most people have neither the time nor the patience to wade through line after line of dense theoretical sub-variations. In light of this consideration I decided to present the book as a set of 50 annotated games between strong grandmasters, which I consider to be particularly instructive or helpful. It is my hope that the process of playing through these games will illustrate the themes, niceties and strategies of the Modern Exchange Variation in a relatively pain-free manner.

For those readers who desire more detail, or who require a more expansive knowledge of the theory surrounding the Modern Exchange Variation, this can usually be found in the 'alternatives' notes to the illustrative games. Obviously a tree format had to be used for this, and at times the theory can become rather dense, and I must apologise for this. It was my original intention to avoid dense theoretical variations wherever possible, however I approached this project on the basis that I was preparing the Modern Exchange Variation for my own use, so the level of detail included here represents the level of detail which I myself would desire from a book purporting to present a comprehensive repertoire against the Grünfeld.

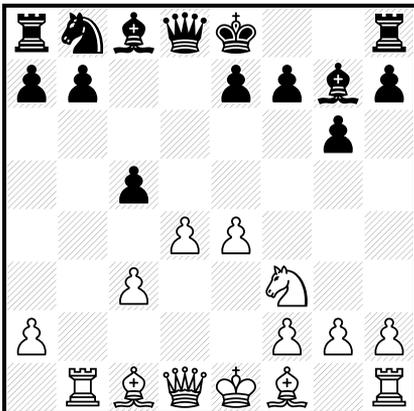
The Themes and Ideas of the Modern Exchange Variation:

The opening moves of the Modern Exchange Variation proceed as follows:

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5 4.♗f3

4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.e4 ♗xc3 6.bxc3 ♗g7 (6...c5 is also possible. Notably White avoids this move with the 4.♗f3 move order, although I am not sure how much difference it really makes.) 7.♗f3 is also possible, however my preference has always been to play 4.♗f3. before capturing on d5.

4...♗g7 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.e4 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 c5 8.♞b1!

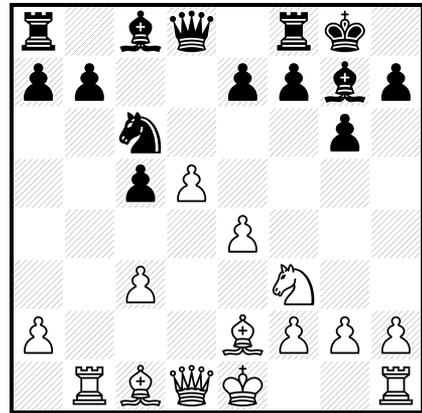


8...0-0 9.♗e2 cxd4

9...b6 is a sideline that has now become very popular at all levels on account of Black's solid yet potentially dynamic formation. In general White can obtain a small opening advantage against this system on account of his greater space and superior central control, however actually converting that slight edge to anything more is another matter entirely. In practice Black's position has proved extremely resilient and results have been good.

The 9...b6 system will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

9...♗c6 is perhaps Black's most logical move: the c6-knight coordinates with the g7-bishop and d8-queen to put substantial pressure on the d4-pawn. If White defends the d4-pawn with 10.♗e3, Black could try to undermine White's centre with 10...♗g4, or play 10...cxd4 11.cxd4 ♞a5†, when White must choose between 12.♞d2 ♞xd2 13.♗xd2, and 12.♗d2 ♞xa2, both of which are probably better for Black. White is therefore forced to play 10.d5!.



Black now has two lines:

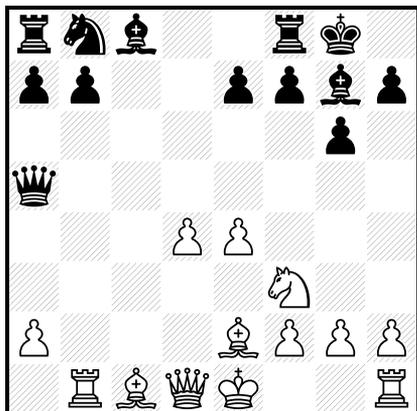
The most obvious choice is 10...♗xc3† and this is examined in Chapter 6. Play continues 11.♗d2 ♗xd2† 12.♞xd2 and now 12...♗d4 13.♗xd4 cxd4 14.♞xd4 ♞a5† 15.♞d2 ♞xd2† 16.♗xd2 leads Black into a difficult ending. This is examined in Game 37, Kasparov – Natsis 1980.

The main alternative is 12...♘a5!? when Black attempts to hold on to the extra pawn, but in return White gains excellent attacking chances against the black king. Theory now recommends 13.h4 ♘g4! when White can choose between 14.h5!, which is the mainline and is considered in Game 38, Halkias – Lputian 2000, or 14.♘g5!?, which has scored enormously well for White and is considered in Game 39, Bacrot – Popovic 2002.

Black's primary alternative to 10...♙xc3 is 10...♘e5 which has become something of a mainline unto itself in recent years, and is considered in Chapter 7. Play continues 11.♘xe5 ♙xe5 12.♚d2! (12.♚c2?! is less accurate, but is included for illustrative purposes (Game 40). 12.♚b3!?) is a relatively new idea that has hitherto scored well for White (Game 43).) 12...e6 13.f4 and now 13...♘g7 is the traditional mainline of this variation (examined in Game 41), and 13...♙c7! is perhaps best described as the modern mainline of 9...♘c6, although perhaps this is something of a misnomer given that Khalifman – Tseitlin 1999 (Game 42) seems to have put most Grünfeld players off this line in recent years.

Occasionally Grünfeld advocates try the old 9...♚a5!?! line, however nowadays this variation is considered unduly risky, if not invariably disadvantageous for Black. We will take a quick look at this system in Chapter 9, Games 48 & 49.

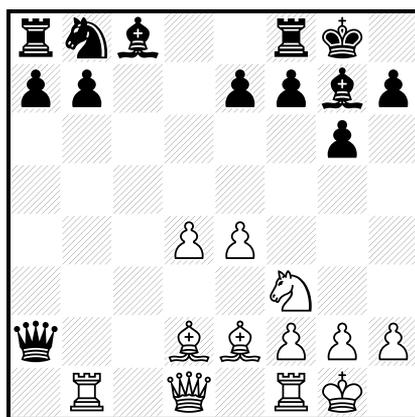
10.cxd4 ♚a5†



11.♙d2

In the past 11.♚d2 has enjoyed brief spells of popularity because the endgame after 11...♚xd2† 12.♙xd2 was thought to hold some dangers for Black. Nowadays Black's handling of this system has been refined to the point where White has little (if any) hope of an advantage, and consequently 11.♚d2 has fallen into widespread disuse at IM and GM level.

11..♚xa2 12.0-0



The position above represents the starting position of the mainline Modern Exchange Grünfeld. Black is a pawn up, has two connected passed pawns on the queenside, and has no visible weaknesses to speak of. Oh, and it is Black to move as well!

When one puts it in those terms I would hope it is easy for the reader to understand why I was initially somewhat sceptical of this variation. After all, where is White's compensation? This is not an easy question to answer in abstract, but I will give it a try.

The first point to note is that White is ahead in development: all of his pieces bar the f1 rook (and perhaps the d1-queen) are developed quite actively. Although neither of White's bishops can threaten anything without moving again, the point is that they are only a move away from creating a serious threat. For example, the d2-

bishop can lunge to b4 or g5, in either case hitting the e7 pawn. If White recovers his sacrificed pawn material equality will be restored, but White will retain his strong centre and formidable lead in development. The e2-bishop also enjoys hidden potential: consider the continuation 12...b6 13.♖c1 ♘b7. Now 14.♙c4! hits the black queen and puts pressure on the tender f7-pawn. Indeed at this stage White already has the option of forcing a draw via 14...♖a4 15.♙b5 ♖a2 16.♙c4, not that he would want to!

The second point to consider is Black's development. At present only Black's g7-bishop is well-placed, and even then its scope is quite restricted by the d4-pawn. Black's queen feels as though she is on the wrong side of the board, and is in the path of Black's queenside pawns¹. Whereas White's pieces are ready to create immediate threats, Black's pieces remain undeveloped and unprepared to generate immediate counterplay.

An additional aspect to White's compensation is what Black cannot do: Black would like to play 12...♗c6, however 13.d5 ♗e5 14.♗d4 (intending 15.♙c3 and 16.♖a1 trapping the queen) is already very good for White. Black would also like to develop the c8-bishop, however at present the bishop seems to be tied to the protection of the b7-pawn².

A further consideration is each side's pawn structure. White enjoys a strong and mobile pawn centre that is already eager to advance with d4-d5 and e4-e5, restricting Black's forces and creating threats as they go. Black, on the other hand, will have trouble organising an effective pawn break that does not create serious weaknesses within his position. 12...a7-a5 is one mainline (Chapter 1), however this substantially weakens the b5 and b6 squares, and also does nothing to challenge White's centre or improve Black's development. 12...b7-b6 (Chapter 2) is another obvious choice, however this weakens Black's control of the queenside light squares.

One final point that I would like to mention is borrowed from Jonathan Rowson's work, *Understanding the Grünfeld*. Rowson notes that, having essentially exchanged the g8-knight for the b1-knight, Black has potentially left his kingside a little vulnerable. The problems that this exchange gives rise to are compounded by the difficulties that Black will experience in bringing his remaining minor pieces over to the kingside. Although this element doesn't really form a big part of White's compensation at this stage, I wanted to mention this observation because I had never thought of this position in those terms. I was, of course, aware that Black's kingside often comes under fire from White's minor pieces in subsequent stages of this variation, however before reading *Understanding the Grünfeld* I had never thought of Black's kingside as being 'weak' at this stage.

In conclusion, I believe that White's large lead in development, well-placed pieces and mobile pawn centre guarantee excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

Recommended Repertoire:

Although this book includes fifty illustrative games (and I shudder to think how many ancillary notes, variations and sub-variations!), not all of them are strictly necessary to the repertoire which I am going to recommend. However, the games are there for a reason, and I firmly believe that a thorough knowledge of the concepts that are explored in these games will prove beneficial to those who wish to play the Modern Exchange Variation.

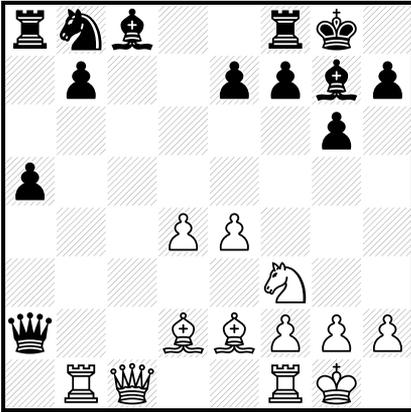
Chapter 1

Here we consider the variation arising after:

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.e4 ♗xc3 6.bxc3 ♙g7 7.♗f3 0-0 8.♙e2 c5 9.♖b1 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♖a5† 11.♙d2 ♖xa2 12.0-0 a5!?

¹ However the queen does perform some useful functions on a2, in particular in terms of restricting the movement and coordination of White's forces within their own camp. We will discuss this theme in more detail as and when it occurs throughout the book.

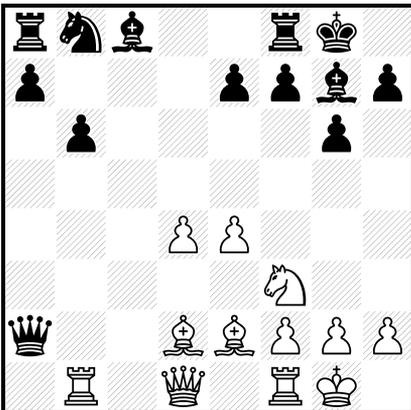
² This comment is made on a purely superficial level only. In actual fact 12...♙g4! is probably Black's strongest move, and this will be considered in Chapter 4.



against which I am recommending 13.♘g5 a4 (13...h6 is also playable, but probably bad for Black. This is examined in Game 6) 14.♞e1! which is relatively unexplored, but has scored excellently in practice and is a favourite with GMs Boris Gelfand and Yuri Shulman, both of whom are renowned experts on the Modern Exchange Variation. This line is discussed in detail in Game 8.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2 the line 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.e4 ♘xc3 6.bxc3 ♘g7 7.♘f3 0-0 8.♙e2 c5 9.♙b1 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♙a5† 11.♙d2 ♙xa2 12.0-0 b6!? is discussed.

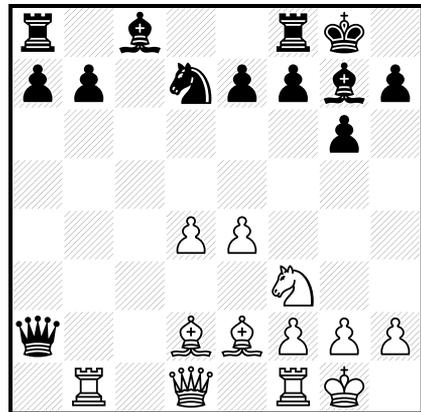


My recommendation against this line is 13.♙c1! when Black has two moves. In my opinion Black's best option is 13...♙e6!?, against which White has several dangerous options, but none which seem to guarantee a knock-out blow or even a definite advantage. My recommendation here is Chernin's 14.♞e1!?, which gives rise to unclear positions in which White enjoys enduring positional compensation and excellent practical chances (see Game 12).

The normal move is 13...♙b7, when White should play 14.♙c4 ♙a4 15.♙b5 ♙a2 16.♙c4 ♙a4 17.♙b5 ♙a2 18.♞e1 (Games 13 and 14).

Chapter 3

In this chapter we deal with one of Leko's favourite lines, 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.e4 ♘xc3 6.bxc3 ♘g7 7.♘f3 c5 8.♙b1 0-0 9.♙e2 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♙a5† 11.♙d2 ♙xa2 12.0-0 ♘d7!?



which has proven quite resilient over the last few years. 13.♙b4! a5?! is shown to be good for White in Game 15, however much better is 13...♘b6, which is considered in Games 16-19.

White then has a choice: 14.♞a1!? ♙e6 15.♙b1 is considered in Game 18. White seems to have good chances in this line, however with precise play Black is able to hold the balance. Consequently it may be worth trying GM Boris

Avrukh's 15.♔d3!?, which is discussed in the notes to Game 18 and may well be promising for White. Avrukh is a respected expert on Grünfeld defence and, in particular, on the Modern Exchange Variation, so his ideas deserve consideration.

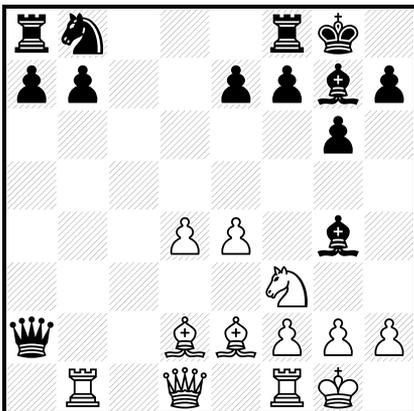
In Game 19 we examine Boris Gelfand's interpretation of the 12...♖d7 variation: 13.♙b4 ♜b6 14.h3!?. Gelfand is considered the foremost authority on the Modern Exchange Variation, and his ideas have done much to shape my understanding of how this system should be played. 14.h3 has scored excellently in practice, but unfortunately remains relatively unexplored.

Game 20 sees the Indian GM Viswanathan Anand causing GM Peter Leko some serious problems with another fresh idea: 13.♞e1!?. In the main game Leko manages to hold the balance, however the notes to move 16 take into account Stohl's recommended improvement, 16.♔d3!?, which also looks promising for White.

Conclusion: You are spoilt for choice here! If I was forced to choose between these systems I think I would probably play Gelfand's 14.h3, but that is just personal preference speaking.

Chapter 4

In this chapter we deal with Black's most reliable line, 12...♙g4!.



Black has been close to equality in this system for some time, however White has continuously been able find refinements that pose fresh problems. My recommendation against this system is

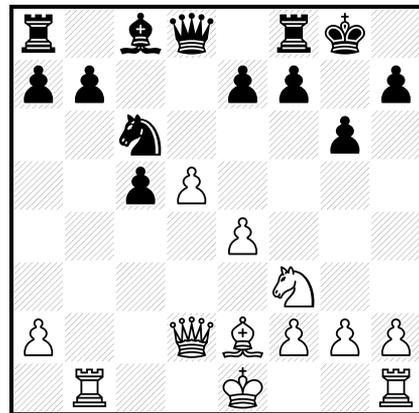
13.♙g5 h6 14.♙e3 (considered in Games 26-29). White has also played 13.♙g5 h6 14.♙h4, however I believe that Black has now solved his problems here (see Game 25). White has one other option in 13.♙e3 (considered in Games 30-32), which is still posing Black some problems. However I am recommending 13.♙g5 h6 14.♙e3 because it has been the choice of true experts like GM Khalifman, GM Krasenkov and, most recently, French GM Etienne Bacrot.

Chapter 5

This chapter is just a round-up of Black's dodgy sidelines, the recommendations against which are obvious (they are pretty much the only thing discussed!).

Chapter 6

In this chapter we deal with the line 1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 g6 3.♙c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♖xd5 5.e4 ♖xc3 6.bxc3 ♙g7 7.♖f3 c5 8.♞b1 0-0 9.♙e2 ♖c6!? 10.d5 ♙xc3† 11.♙d2 ♙xd2† 12.♞xd2



and now 12...♖d4!?, just leads to a bad ending for Black (see Game 37), so Black has to try

12...♖a5!? 13.h4 ♕g4, when White's best is probably 14.h5! with a dangerous kingside attack.

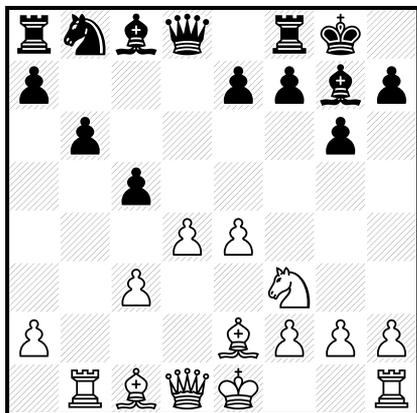
[Editor's note: Very recent developments suggest that 14.♖g5! is also promising (see Game 39).]

Chapter 7

This chapter deals with Black's alternative to capturing on c3, i.e. 1.d4 ♖f6 2.♗f3 g6 3.c4 ♕g7 4.♗c3 d5 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.e4 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 c5 8.♞b1 0-0 9.♗e2 ♗c6 10.d5 ♗e5!? against which I recommend following the mainline with 11.♗xe5 ♗xe5 12.♞d2! (Games 41 & 42), although those who wish to avoid all the theory have a reasonable alternative in 12.♞b3!? (Game 43).

Chapter 8

Here we deal with 1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗f3 ♕g7 4.♗c3 d5 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.e4 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 c5 8.♞b1 0-0 9.♗e2 b6,



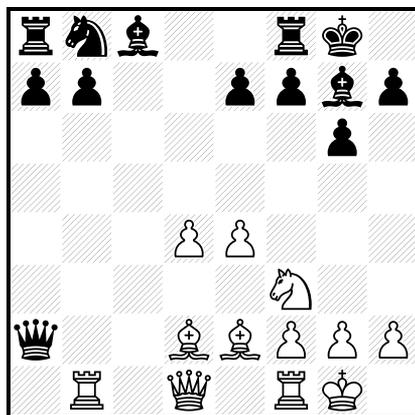
which tends to be more about ideas and understanding than long variations. Play continues 10 0-0 ♗b7 11.♞d3 and now 11...e6!?

is Game 44. Instead, 11...♗a6 12.♞e3 ♞d7 13.d5! is Game 45, and 11...♗a6 12.♞e3 ♞c8 13.d5! is Game 46, both of which are better for White on existing evidence. 11...cxd4 is considered in Game 47, however exchanging on d4 at this stage just enhances the mobility of White's pieces and leaves Black with inferior versions of the positions reached in Games 44-46.

Chapter 9

Here we just consider Black's dodgy alternatives, such as 9...♞a5, which should be met by 10.0-0!. The recommendations here are all pretty self-explanatory.

The mainline of the 8.♞b1 Grünfeld commences after 1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.e4 ♗xc3 6.bxc3 ♕g7 7.♗f3 0-0 8.♗e2 c5 9.♞b1 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♞a5† 11.♗d2 ♞xa2 12.0-0 with the following position:



The general ideas associated with either side's play were considered in the Introduction, and in this chapter we are going to examine one of Black's most aggressive treatments of the position, 12...a5, in greater detail.