

THIERRY DEPAULIS & JAC FUCHS

## First Steps of Bridge in the West: Collinson's 'Biritch'

The early history of bridge has recently been scrutinised by several authors<sup>1</sup>. In this reconstruction there is a crucial document whose importance cannot be denied: it is a small, anonymous, undated English pamphlet called *Biritch*, or *Russian whist*, of which a few copies with a registration date of 1886 have fortunately been preserved in British public collections. The text offers the rules of a game called 'Biritch' (or "Russian whist"), which is nothing but bridge in its earliest form, sometimes called bridge whist. Therefore *Biritch*, or *Russian whist* is by far the oldest printed account of bridge in the West. Due to this historic status the pamphlet has been reprinted in various forms in order to make it available to many interested readers. Under "BIRITCH, or Russian whist" an entry discussing "the historic four-page pamphlet" and giving a shortened version of its text appeared in the third edition of *The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge* (New York, 1976). This entry has been reprinted virtually unchanged in all subsequent editions (1984, 1994 and 2001). A sumptuous full-leather bound facsimile edition was produced in 1977 by David Rex-Taylor and published by the St George & Dragon Press in London in a limited number of 100 copies all signed by Victor Mollo and offered at an extraordinary price. In his 1997 *Histoire du bridge* Thierry Depaulis included the text of the pamphlet in an Appendix. It is also available on the Internet thanks to Mark Brader<sup>2</sup>.

### 1. The 'Biritch' pamphlet

The 'Biritch' pamphlet is a modest four-page booklet of a rather small size: 10 x 15 cm. Its first page – which is also its title page – is headed: "BIRITCH, OR RUSSIAN WHIST" below a rectangular engraved ornament. A simple line of tiny Maltese crosses separates this title from the beginning of the text. The only clue that is mentioned on the pamphlet is a small caption, at the bottom of page 1: "[Entered at Stationers Hall.]" We have traced four copies only, but this is not surprising for a document which today would have simply been photocopied. It is a small miracle that the originator of the booklet chose to copyright it. Of these four copies one is alas missing: the copy which was in the former British Museum "Reference Library" (now the British Library), shelfmark 7913.aa.51., was destroyed during the Blitz in 1940 or 1941.

<sup>1</sup> For example Giorgio Agostini, *Bridge story: dai tarocchi al bridge contratto in 140 smazzate*, Milan, 1982; David Parlett, *The Oxford guide to card games*, Oxford, 1990 (reprinted as *A history of card games*, Oxford, 1992), Chapter 17, "From whist to bridge"; Thierry Depaulis, *Histoire du bridge*, Paris, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davros.org/misc/biritch.html>.



## BIRITCH, OR RUSSIAN WHIST.

\*\*\*\*\*

### VALUE OF THE CARDS.

The value of the cards is the same as at short whist.

Tricks are taken in the same manner, and the odd tricks, over and above six, are counted as at short whist.

### METHOD OF PLAYING.

There are four players as at short whist, the cutting for partners, shuffling and dealing is the same, except that no card is turned up for trumps.

The dealer, after the cards have been looked at, has the option of declaring the suit he elects for trumps, or of saying "PASS," in which latter case his partner must declare a suit for trumps.

[Entered at Stationers' Hall.]

Fig. 1. Title page (first page) of Collinson's pamphlet *Biritch or Russian Whist* (1886).

discover who was behind this little rulebook. The first who made such an investigation was an English author called O. Paul Monckton. In his book *Pastimes in times past*, published in 1913 (London : The West Strand Publishing Co.; Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1913), Monckton devoted the first chapter to a short history of bridge (pp. 9-24), one of the earliest of its kind. He was so much aware of the historical importance of the *Biritch* pamphlet that he included a facsimile reproduction of the four pages (from the Cambridge University Library copy) in his book.

Monckton describes it as "a double sheet of buff paper about 6 in. by 4 in. It was published in February, 1886, by Messrs. Blandford Low [sic] & Co., of 34, Lime Street, E.C.—a firm whom the writer has been unable to locate [...] The author, supposing this individual to be identical with the holder of the copyright, was one Mr. John Collinson, whose address is given as 90, Cromwell Road, but who no longer resides there..." (pp. 12-3)

The three surviving copies that we know of are all kept in the United Kingdom: i) Bodleian Library, Oxford, shelfmark: Arch. AA f.50 (formerly 38474.f.12.) (library's date stamp: "23 OCT [18]86") ii) Cambridge University Library, shelfmark: Syn. 8.88.202. (library's date stamp: "29 SEP 1886") iii) Public Record Office, London, accession number: COPY1/696

The Public Record Office copy is of particular interest. Not only was it unknown so far, but it also is the very copy that its author registered on 14 July 1886. It is now part of the files of the Copyright Office at Stationers' Hall that have been deposited at the PRO. COPY1 contains the copyright applications that were entered at Stationers' Hall, and in part 696, containing the July 1886 application forms, the application form for the *Biritch* pamphlet, with a copy of the pamphlet attached to it, is to be found.

Early in the 20th century some bridge historians tried to

[Date of reporting Entry of Proprietorship]

IN THE STATIONERS' HALL ASSOCIATED AT THE STATIONERS' COMPANY.

I, *John Collinson* of 90. Cromwell Road London, S.W. do hereby certify, That I am the Proprietor of the Copyright of a Book, entitled *British or Russian Whist* and I hereby require you to make entry in the Register Book of the Stationers' Company of my Proprietorship of such Copyright, according to the particulars underwritten.

(Every particular given must be clearly written.)

| Title of Book.                  | Name of Publisher, and Place of Publication.                        | Name and Place of Abode of the Proprietor of the Copyright.       | Date of First Publication.       |
|---------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| <i>British or Russian Whist</i> | <i>Blandford Lowe &amp; Co.<br/>34. Lime Street<br/>London E.C.</i> | <i>90. Cromwell<br/>Road, London,<br/>S.W.<br/>John Collinson</i> | <i>July 9<sup>th</sup> 1886.</i> |

Dated this *14<sup>th</sup>* day of *July* 1886

Witness *James W. Boddard* (Signet *John Collinson*)

R.R.—In filling up the above form special care must be taken to insert the correct title of the Book, the name of the first publisher, and the exact day of first publication. All names should be written in full.

Fig. 2. Actual entry of Collinson's pamphlet in Stationers Hall's registers, dated 14 Jul. [18]86.

Not only Monckton knew the British Museum copy, but he "has himself held two of them in his hand at the same time — one in the possession of the Cambridge University Library, and the other in private possession." Frederic Jessel, a professional librarian at the Bodleian Library at Oxford and a game-book collector himself, had furthermore informed him of the Bodleian Library copy. So Monckton knew four copies, including a privately-owned one, to which we must add the PRO copyright copy. Chances are there are other copies which lie unknown in the darkness of some drawer.

Where did Monckton get his information? Most probably from the Stationers' Hall indexes and registers which were public. They are now kept in the Public Record Office in London. A recent visit to the PRO has allowed one of us to check all this information. It seems Monckton got it wrong since the entry on sheet 179 of COPY3/32 reads:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Time of making the entry.                                   | <i>July 14 1886</i>  |
| Title of book.  | <i>British, or Russian Whist</i>                             |
| Name of Publisher and Place of Publication.                 | <i>Blandford Lowe &amp; Co,<br/>34 Lime Street London EC</i> |
| Name and Place of Abode of the Proprietor of the Copyright. | <i>John Collinson 90 Cromwell Road<br/>London SW</i>         |
| Date of First Publication.                                  | <i>9th July 1886</i>   |

Of the printers little can be said. From a search through the catalogues of the

British Library we found only one document printed by them in 1888: it is a blank form entitled *Jute Delivery Contract*<sup>3</sup>. Thus Blandford Lowe & Co. appears to have been more engaged in "job printing" than in the book trade. This does not mean any careless printing: although the paper seems to differ from one copy to another, the typesetting is particularly well done if not elegant, and without errors. All this would confirm the private character of Collinson's initiative.

It has been questioned whether this "unidentified John Collinson" (Parlett, p. 225), owner of the copyright, was the real author of the little book. This question was in fact answered in 1894 by... John Collinson himself in a letter to the Editor of *The Field* magazine, which had just published a review of the earliest bridge manual, *The Pocket Guide to Bridge*, by "Boaz" (London: Thomas De La Rue, 1894). It seems no-one paid attention to what Collinson had to say. Here are his words as published in *The Field*, 4 August, 1894, p. 215:

*"Bridge, Biritch, or Russian Whist – My attention has been called to your notice of Bridge Whist. It may interest your readers if I enclose a copy of the rules of 'Biritch' which I published about ten years ago, at the request of some friends. You will notice that the rubber points are forty as against a hundred; four aces in one hand, eighty as against a hundred; and the biritch or without trump<sup>4</sup> value of tricks ten as against twelve. In case of a revoke slam (great or little) cannot be counted. – John Collinson."*

Not only did Collinson's pamphlet go unnoticed, but his claim of authorship was rapidly forgotten as well. The early bridge literature could develop – some fifty books in English published before 1905, about a dozen in French – without referring to *Biritch, or Russian whist*, although printed in 1886. It was apparently Frederic Jessel who first called attention to the *Biritch* pamphlet. In a note published in *Notes & Queries* (10th series, i, 1904, pp. 250-1), under the heading "BRIDGE: ITS DERIVATION.", Jessel wrote: "The rules of the game in English were printed in 1886, under the title *Biritch, or Russian Whist*."

From then on *Biritch, or Russian Whist* has been considered as the "incunabulum of incunabula" of bridge. The first writer who made use of it was William Dalton in his series "The Evolution of Bridge", which was published in *The Saturday Review* magazine from March 1905 to June 1906 and was reprinted with other articles in book form as "*Saturday*" *Bridge, reproduced with revisions from the "Saturday Review"* (London: West Strand Publ. Co., 1906, and later reprints). This formed the earliest serious historical approach of bridge.

On 19th of May 1906 Dalton could write: "The real origin of bridge is somewhat shrouded in mystery. The game is said to have originated in Russia, but there is no satisfactory proof of this statement. It was first known under the title of 'Biritch, or Russian Whist', and this, no doubt, gave rise to the idea that it was of Russian

---

<sup>3</sup> *British Library, 1882.d.2.(50.)*

<sup>4</sup> "No Trump" did not yet belong to the English vocabulary: nearly all early manuals use the French "Sans Atout", while Collinson kept to "Biritch".

origin, although, as a matter of fact, the word 'Biritch' is not to be found in any Russian dictionary." A careless statement, for we shall see that *birich* does exist in many Russian dictionaries! Further on, in the same article, Dalton said: "In the year 1886, a small pamphlet was printed in London, entitled 'Biritch, or Russian Whist'. There is said to be only one copy of this pamphlet in existence, and that is in the library of the British Museum [...]" (*The Saturday Review*, 19 May 1906, p. 618). Dalton was of the opinion that bridge had been invented in Greece. For this he referred to a letter "from an English gentleman of Greek extraction" who remembered having seen the game played among "a colony of Greeks, settled in Manchester"<sup>5</sup>.

Dalton's series had a particularly interested reader: John Collinson. The 19th of May article prompted a reply from his pen which was published in *The Saturday Review*, on 9 June 1906. But, before we come to Collinson's illuminating letter, we want to present a sketch of his life.

## 2. Who was John Collinson?

John Collinson was born on 7th November 1842, at Usworth (County Durham)<sup>6</sup>. We have found nothing on his youth and on his education. In 1863 Collinson went to Nicaragua with Commander Bedford Pim of the British Navy to advance the interests of Great Britain in Central America through the construction of a proposed railway across Nicaragua from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. The expedition gave rise to an official account: *Descriptive account of Captain Bedford Pim's project for an international Atlantic and Pacific junction railway across Nicaragua* (London, 1866) to which was added a *Report and estimate of cost* by John Collinson. On his return to England in 1866, John Collinson published two papers: "Explorations in Central America, accompanied by survey and levels from Lake Nicaragua to the Atlantic Coast", in *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* (Vol. 12, 1867, pp. 25-44) and "The Indians of the Mosquito Territory", in *Memoirs of the Anthropological Society of London* (Vol. 3, 1870, pp. 148-56; read 9 Aug., 1867).

From the Kelly's Post Office London Directories<sup>7</sup> and the City of London Electoral Registers<sup>8</sup> we know Collinson had definitely settled in London. From 1867 to 1872 he lived at 9 Clarendon Gardens. In the same years he had an office at 9 Westminster Chambers, Victoria Street where the directories mention him as "civil engineer". At this address, which was also referred to as 9 Victoria Chambers, there were dozens of offices, mainly occupied by civil engineers and railway companies.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting hint. But these Greeks proved to be from the island of Chios, not exactly from Greece. We owe this detail to Daphne and Mike Tregear who very kindly did some research in the Salford Local History Reference Library (Manchester).

<sup>6</sup> Family Records Centre, London. This birth certificate matches the 1871, 1891 and 1901 census data. The census data were consulted at the Family Records Centre and the Westminster Archives Centre.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Westminster Archives Centre and Guildhall Library. We have consulted many, though not all directories from the period 1865-1923.

<sup>8</sup> Guildhall Library. The City of London Electoral Registers provided the link between Collinson's private and business addresses during the years 1872-1922.

Thanks to the census records of 1871<sup>9</sup> we know the man John Collinson and his family. At 9 Clarendon Gardens, we find:

“John Collinson, head, male, 28, civil engineer, born at Durham [*i.e.* Usworth, County Durham]

Cecilia, wife, 29, born at Guernsey

Edward D., son, 5, scholar, born in Middlesex

Ellen C., do [= daughter], 3, born in Middlesex<sup>10</sup>

Marie Symes, servant, 34, cook/domestic, born in Dorsetshire, Stoke Abbott

Martha Want, servant, 30, born in Hertfordshire

Harriett Lovell, servant, 27, born in Somersetshire, Bath”

This establishes that Collinson was fairly well off by 1871, as he already had three servants. In the same years he added to his name “FRGS” (Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society), and “FASL” (Fellow of the Anthropological Society of London). From 1872 John Collinson had offices at 50 Old Broad Street, where he was styled “banker”, or “foreign banker”. The Collinson family moved to 37 Porchester Terrace in 1872.

In the 1870’s John Collinson was active in the United States. There he got involved in examining different railway projects. One of these resulted in *The Denver Pacific Railway: its present position and future prospects* (London : Denver Pacific Railway, W.J. Johnson, printer, 1870), a report published with William Abraham Bell. From around 1870 until 1876, John Collinson represented English and Dutch investors in a huge project in New Mexico that began with the purchase of lands from Lucien Bonaparte Maxwell (1818-1875). “In January 1870, the Maxwells made out a deed to John Collinson, a well-known English investor, and a joint-stock company doing business as the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Company for ‘two million acres more or less’ [...]. Collinson owned the majority (...) of the 50,000 shares of the company, with other well-known European and Eastern investors [...].” María E. Montoya explains that Collinson’s idea was to issue bonds to smaller investors across Europe and the United States, “redeemed at par on July 1, 1895, payable in either London in pound sterling or Rotterdam in Dutch guilders.”<sup>11</sup>

This is why we know of a report by John Collinson that was published in 1870, in English and in Dutch. Unfortunately the venture did not do well: people who actually inhabited the lands – Jicarilla Indians, Mexican farmers and Anglo miners – protested, rather violently, against this stronghold. “Within months [...] the company faced financial ruin.” In 1874 a reorganisation was felt necessary and a *Proposal* dated 20 Nov. 1874 was “handed to the committee in Holland of Maxwell bondholders”<sup>12</sup>. In July 1875, the company declared bankruptcy.

---

<sup>9</sup> Family Records Centre and Westminster Archives Centre.

<sup>10</sup> According to the 1891 census, a further son, Henry, was born in 1874 or 1875.

<sup>11</sup> See María E. Montoya, *Translating Property : The Maxwell Land Grant and the conflict over land in the American West, 1840-1900*. Berkeley, CA ; London, 2002. See also Jim B. Pearson, *The Maxwell land grant, Norman, OK, [1961] on which documentation Montoya’s history is based*.

<sup>12</sup> Proposal by John Collinson, to the stock and bondholders of the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Co[mpany] for reorganisation, etc. Amsterdam : Printed by Blikman & Sartorius, 1875.

Some years afterwards Collinson seems to have been involved again in an American project, that of the Atlantic, Mississippi & Ohio Railroad Company. A report by him provoked a reply from its president, General William Mahone. In 1879 Collinson was still dealing with American affairs. A *Report of Mr. John Collinson and Mr. E. R. Leland, to the Council of Foreign Bond Holders, and the Funding Association of the U.S.A. on the Virginia State Debt* was published and sent to investors. On 12 May, 1879 an article on the Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio Railway was published in *The Times* by John Collinson.

From all this, we can see John Collinson started his career in the railway construction business abroad. Having certainly been trained as an engineer, he appears to have gradually become a consultant, and eventually to have concentrated on financial activities. Railways were in full boom in the second half of the 19th century. British technology and know-how were particularly sought-after. And many British capitalists were ready to invest in railway companies. It is no surprise to hear John Collinson was offered to investigate railway possibilities in Turkey. The Ottoman Empire was dramatically under-equipped: a few short lines had been built in "Turkey in Europe", but none was seriously available in Asia Minor.

Was this the opportunity for incorporating? From 1879 the London trade directories mention Collinson's offices as "John Collinson & Co, (general) merchants, 20 St Helen's Place / Bishopsgate Street, London E.C.". John Collinson is not mentioned in the 1881 census records, possibly because he was abroad at the time. In 1882 his private address changed for 90 Cromwell Road.

According to Collinson's own words (in his letter of 9 June, 1906 quoted below), from 1880 to 1884 he "spent a considerable time in Constantinople and Asia Minor". He must have spent much of his time in the Mersin/Adana region where a group of British financiers, led by Sir Thomas Tancred (1840-1910), had planned to set up a railway. No doubt John Collinson was the "engineer on the spot" whom the *Times* correspondent in Constantinople referred to in an article of 1884<sup>13</sup>. We will see that Collinson did not waste his time in Constantinople, learning a new exciting card game called 'Biritch'.

Granted on 8 January, 1883 to an "Ottoman company formed under the name of the Mersina, Tarsus and Adana Railway Company", the concession was secured. In 1884 John Collinson was back to London and in December he could organise a first meeting of the company shareholders under the presidency of the Duke of Sutherland.

The Mersin/Adana railway track was finally opened in 1886, exactly when John Collinson was entrusting the firm of Blandford Lowe & Co in London with the task of printing a four-page pamphlet entitled *Biritch, or Russian whist*. At about the same time, the offices of John Collinson & Co moved to 8 Great Winchester Street. In 1887-8, while John Collinson was chairman of the Mersina, Tarsus and Adana Railway Company, there were difficult tax-refund discussions with the Council of Administration of the Ottoman Public Debt.

---

<sup>13</sup> "A Railway in Asia Minor", *The Times*, 12 Aug., 1884, p. 2c.

From 1894 to 1906 we have hardly any news from John Collinson. We know that the Collinson household moved again in 1891, to 21 Ashley Gardens. In 1906 the Deutsche Bank took over the Mersina, Tarsus and Adana Railway Company. We know that by 1899 John Collinson had resigned as chairman. But bridge player he still was. William Dalton had started his series on bridge in *The Saturday Review* in 1905; in May and June 1906 the articles dealt with "The Evolution of Bridge". The 19 May issue did not go unnoticed: a few days later Collinson wrote a reply which was published in the same magazine on 9 June. By then he was living at "21 Ashley Gardens, Victoria Street, S.W." He was still travelling much since he writes: "Absence from England prevented me from seeing yours of the 19th until now."

According to the London directories, Collinson vacated his house in Ashley Gardens in 1915 or 1916. On 27 January, 1915 "John Collinson of Number 21 Ashley Gardens in the County of London and Number 8 Great Winchester Street in the City of London Esquire" wrote his will<sup>14</sup>, whose sole beneficiary was Louis Leopold Marks, 8 Great Winchester Street, London. (Thus John Collinson's wife and children seem to have all died before 1915.) This done Collinson moved to the Russell Hotel, in Russell Square, where he lived for a few years, then he chose to go to the Midland Grand Hotel, in St Pancras, Middlesex, where he died on 21st April 1922. John Collinson & Co appears to have survived its founder: in 1923 it was located at 85 London Wall.

### 3. The 'Biritch' puzzle

The *Biritch* pamphlet has long been a puzzle for the historian. Not only all reports and memories pointed out to Constantinople – now Istanbul – or the Ottoman Empire as places of origin of the new game of bridge, but no Russian word had indeed been found in "any Russian dictionary" in spite of the second part of the title, "Russian Whist". Now that we know the author, can we tell more on his sources? Once again it was John Collinson who gave the answer by sending a letter to the Editor of *The Saturday Review*, in reply to William Dalton's article on bridge of 19 May. This letter, quite unnoticed, was published in the 9 June 1906 issue (p. 691):

#### 'BIRITCH.'

*To the Editor of the Saturday Review.*  
*21 Ashley Gardens, Victoria Street, S.W.*  
*28 May, 1906.*

Sir, -

*Absence from England prevented me from seeing yours of the 19th [May] until now. Between 1880-4 I spent a considerable time in Constantinople and Asia Minor, where I played what was then called 'Biritch or Russian Whist'. I was then living, while in England, at Cromwell Road and introduced the game to many of my English*

---

<sup>14</sup> Probate Department of First Avenue House (formerly Somerset House), London.

friends, who liked it so much that they asked me to have the rules printed. Hence the copy you have seen at the British Museum, which you will see catalogued there under my name, and it was entered at Stationer's Hall in 1886 or a little earlier.

I have only one copy left which I now send, but beg you kindly to return. I have no doubt many of my friends have still a copy and I sent one to the 'Field' in 1894, when 'Bridge' was being started in England.

I think 'Biritch' is a preferable game to its modified form of 'Bridge' – especially as regards to the rubber points. 'Biritch' was attributed to the Russian colony at Constantinople; in my time the dominating social and political element.

Yours faithfully,

John Collinson"

Collinson's letter is a full confirmation of the provenance of the game: Constantinople. Being there in the early 1880's makes Collinson an excellent witness, probably the only one whose account – *Biritch or Russian Whist* (1886) – was really contemporary to the facts. His claim about the role of the Russian colony must, however, be qualified: it does not seem there was any large Russian community in Constantinople. Numbering the population of the Ottoman capital is a difficult task but all reports say the Russians were a small group, much smaller than the Italians or the British (who included many Maltese), or even than the Austrians and the French. Remembering his stay at Constantinople during the first months of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8, A.J. Nelidov, the Russian attaché, had this remark: "pour nous, n'ayant pas de colonie proprement dite..." (for us who have no proper colony...)<sup>15</sup>. Another foreigner, Paul de Réglé (pseudonym of Dr P.-A. Desjardin), in *Les bas-fonds de Constantinople* (Paris, 1892), made a survey of the different communities. Of the Russians he says:

"La colonie russe, peu nombreuse à Constantinople, y fait plus de besogne que de bruit. Composée en général de marchands et de marins venus d'Odessa ou de Crimée, elle occupe quelques maisons de Galata..." (p. 148)

(The Russian colony, which is not large in Constantinople, does more work than noise. Generally composed of merchants and sailors from Odessa or Crimea, it occupies some houses in Galata...)

In fact it is more probable that John Collinson had in mind the period when the Russian embassy was particularly influential. From 1867 to 1876 the Russian ambassador Count Nicolai Pavlovich Ignatiev exerted a strong hold over Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861-1876). This influence reached a peak when Mahmud Nedim Pasha, a friend of Ignatiev, was promoted Grand-Vizier in 1871. It is indeed possible that 'Biritch' was introduced into Constantinople between 1871 and 1876<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> A.J. de Nelidov (Aleksandr Ivanovich Nelidov), "Souvenirs d'avant et d'après la guerre de 1877-1878", *Revue des Deux Mondes*, XXVII, 1915, p. 315.

<sup>16</sup> This would accord with Edoardo Graziani's recollection of his 'first game of bridge' played in Constantinople in 1873 (The Daily Telegraph, 5 November 1932).

That bridge had its ancestors in Russia is, however, a reality. A game called *vist-preferans* (whist-preference), described in a manual printed at Moscow as early as 1848, and later renamed *yerplash*, seems to be the direct forerunner of 'Biritch'. From Russia to Constantinople there are many direct and less direct routes which we have not yet investigated entirely. But things would have been simpler if we would have been able to find a Russian card game called *birich* or, as some sources suggest, *brich*.

Contrary to Dalton's statement, *birich* exists. Although this word is rarely given in the bilingual dictionaries, it belongs to any serious Russian lexicon, and is given full definition in Vladimir Dal's classic dictionary *Tolkovyj slovar zhivogo velikoruskogo yazyka* (St. Petersburg, 4 vols., 1863-6, and later reprints). It is strange that it took so much time to discover it. It is only in 1974-5 that extensive research by Robert True "found that earlier Russian dictionaries did include the term, defined as *herald*, town crier, announcer, making it a logical name for a game which introduced the new idea of announcing the declaration at which the hand was to be played."<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately this has nothing to do with the "no-trump" meaning of 'biritch'. Furthermore no such word appears in any Russian game manual of the 19th century: it does not belong to the Russian card-game vocabulary<sup>18</sup>. Finally Vladimir Dal presented *birich* as a variant of the more common *biriuch*, a word that was used "before Peter the Great". This leaves us with a new unsolved puzzle: if the game was Russian, as all evidence shows, why did it lose its name on its arrival at Constantinople and where does the word *birich* (or *brich*) come from?

## CONCLUSION

John Collinson was one of several people to pick up bridge in Constantinople, and to bring it to the Western world. But his letters shed a new light on the early steps of bridge in the West and fully confirm the direct origin of the game. They also bear witness of an early group of people who were playing bridge in London around 1885. However, appearances are that 'Biritch' as spread by Collinson was not the breakthrough for bridge in England. The breakthrough for bridge in England was its acceptance at the Portland Club. And there is no proof that any of the members of the Portland Club who knew bridge before Lord Brougham introduced it in 1894 got their knowledge of the game from John Collinson or from his pamphlet. Indeed: the fact that Collinson twice felt compelled to point out that he had published his pamphlet at an early stage and that nobody before Jessel acknowledged his merit in this respect does suggest that 'Biritch' as such did not catch on. When the first *bridge* manual was published in London in 1894, its text relied on other sources and already marked a small difference in scoring from Collinson's 'Biritch'.

<sup>17</sup> Our thanks to Alexey Lobashev who has kindly researched, translated and explained many Russian rulebooks and manuals, drawing on his extensive bibliography of such books to 1917 (Aleksy V. Lobashev, *Bibliograficheskij ukazatel' literatury o kartochnyh igrach, opublikovannoj na russkom yazyke do 1917 goda vklyuchitel'no, Ekaterinburg : the Author, 2001*).

<sup>18</sup> The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge. Third edition, new, revised, and expanded, *New York, 1976*, s.v. "BIRITCH". See also, in the same Encyclopedia, the biographical section ("Leading Bridge Personalities"), under "TRUE, Robert H."