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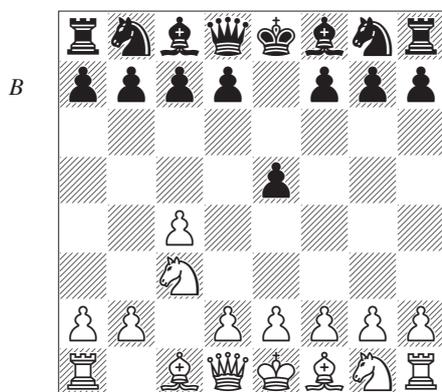
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3 Introduction to 2 ♘c3: Black Plays Flexibly

1 c4 e5 2 ♘c3 (D)



Having looked at some other moves in the last chapter, you can see how 2 ♘c3 might be favoured. It controls the key squares e4 and d5, yet doesn't commit White to a central pawn-structure. For example, 2 ♘c3 leaves open the possibilities of playing d3, d4, e3 and e4, which is not the case with 2 d3 and 2 e3 (at least not in one move). Nor does it create a hole (as does 2 e4), or allow for an answer which renders it slow or irrelevant (for example, 2 a3 lets Black use a ...g6 solution, and most of the moves we considered in the last chapter were vulnerable to 2...c6).

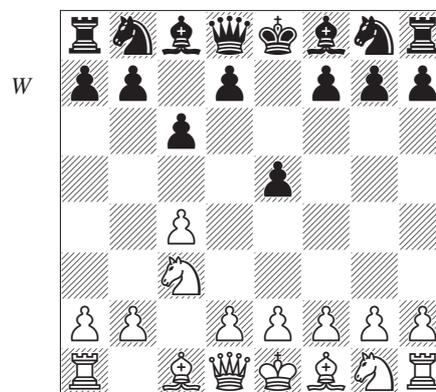
After 2 ♘c3, Black's traditional main lines begin with 2...♟f6 and 2...♟c6. But masters and grandmasters are very fond of some other replies, especially 2...d6 and 2...♟b4, ultra-flexible moves which have been proven to give good counterplay. The assorted variations stemming from them contain an astonishing number of themes and ideas which are common to the rest of the English Opening. Furthermore, the elastic nature of 2...d6 and 2...♟b4 allows Black to have an equal say in the pawn-formations that result out of the opening, something he

may not be able to do in variations growing out of 2...♟f6 and 2...♟c6. At the same time, White has exceptional leeway in picking his own way through the opening. Some would say this is chess as it should be.

Before turning to those moves, let's continue to pursue the philosophy that less frequently played alternatives can be as instructive as the normal ones. I think that a glance at rare and even inferior moves will help us understand what White wants from these positions, and what it is that Black should avoid. Following these moves I shall take a fairly close look at 2...f5, a periodically-played move which is useful to understand because of the typical structures that it leads to.

a) 2...b6?! doesn't go well with ...e5 (better with ...e6, to add to the bishop's influence along the long diagonal). 3 ♟f3 is the simplest reply: 3...♟c6 (3...d6?! 4 d4 exd4 5 ♟xd4 gives White space and superior development while weakening Black's light squares to boot) 4 e3 with d4 next is an excellent course for White. Naturally 4 g3 is also good, if unassuming.

b) 2...c6 (D), which is perfectly fine after 2 d3, 2 e3 and 2 a3, gives White two good responses.

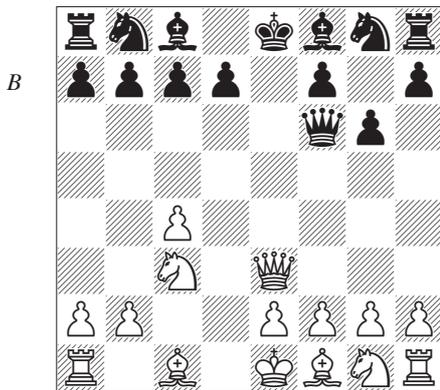


First, according to the ideas discussed in the first two volumes, the move ...c6 should be a red flag for 3 d4, since a queen on d4 cannot be attacked by a knight on c6. Thus, should Black play 3...exd4 4 ♖xd4, he ends up short of space; e.g., 4...♗f6 (Black achieves nothing after 4...♗a6 5 e4 ♗b4 6 ♖d1 and 7 a3; 4...♖f6 may be best, although even the exchange of queens by 5 ♗f3 ♖xd4 6 ♗xd4 is awkward for Black because of his weakness down the d-file and White's greater command of territory) 5 e4 d6 6 ♗f4 followed by 0-0-0, when the pawn on d6 has to be tended to.

Instead of 3...exd4, 3...d5! may be best. Perhaps you remember the line 1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♗c3 e5 from Volume 2, the so-called Winawer Counter-Gambit (and also mentioned on page 17 of this volume). By strange means, we've transposed to it! I believe that White gets some advantage here; theory also leans that way, but isn't definite on the point.

Finally, the most obvious move after 2 ♗c3 c6 is 3 ♗f3. There follows 3...d6 (the alternatives are uninspiring) 4 d4, when Black does best to go for a type of Old Indian Defence by 4...♗d7 5 e4 ♗gf6. That position is of course playable, but White is generally thought to stand better with his space advantage.

c) 2...g6 runs into a similar problem: 3 d4! exd4?! (3...d6 4 ♗f3 ♗d7, but again, not everyone wants to play a set-up with so little space) 4 ♖xd4 ♖f6 (best, in view of 4...♗f6?? 5 ♗g5 and ♗d5, winning) 5 ♖e3+! (D) (this may be the best of many moves that have been played here).



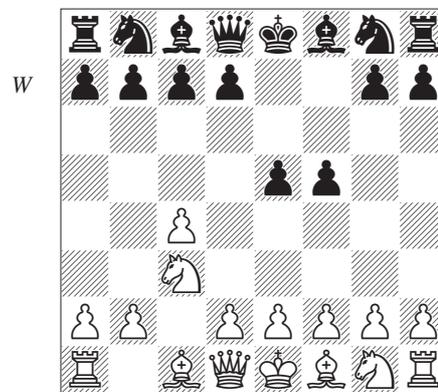
5...♖e6 (5...♖e7 6 ♗d5 transposes; after any other move, 6 ♗d5 is too strong, the best try

being 5...♗d8!? 6 ♗d5 ♖g7 7 ♗d2! ♗e7 8 ♗c3 ♗xd5 9 cxd5 f6 10 ♖d4 ♗e7 11 e4, etc.) 6 ♗d5 ♖xe3 (but 6...♗a6 7 ♖d4 f6 8 ♗f3 c6 9 ♗f4 is very pleasant for White) 7 ♗xe3 ♗a6 8 ♗d4! f6 9 0-0-0 ♗f7 10 ♗f3 c6 11 ♗f4 with a clear advantage for White.

Now let's move on to some more important answers to 2 ♗c3.

Advancing the f-Pawn

1 c4 e5 2 ♗c3 f5 (D)



In many variations that stem from 1...e5, Black can contest the centre and grab space with the move ...f5. Generally, Black would like to maintain his e- and f-pawns on the 4th rank for a while, building up with moves like ...♗f6, ...d6, and perhaps ...g6, ...♗g7 with ...♗c6 or ...c6; we'll see that in several lines. The immediate 2...f5 has been played by some strong players, but it requires that Black shift strategies if White makes a direct challenge.

3 d4!

This seems to lose a tempo after 3...exd4 and ...♗c6, but note that Black's ...f5 is a non-developing move. In addition, advancing the f-pawn creates weaknesses, with the result that Black's control of e4 comes at the cost of a certain looseness. Compare 2...d6 3 d4!? exd4 4 ♖xd4 ♗c6 below.

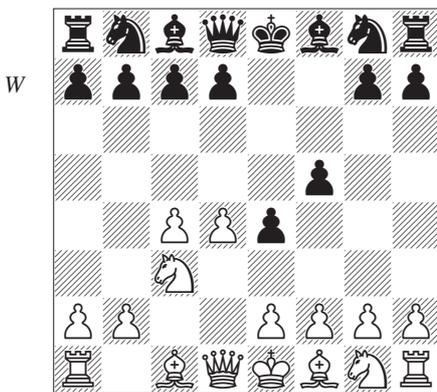
3 e3 followed by d4 is less pointed but reasonably effective. This may afford White a small advantage (although that's not clear), simply because Black has to respond to d4-d5. The

classic game Réti-Romih, London 1927 shows model play versus a kind of ...e4 structure that we'll see repeatedly in variations to come: 3...♘f6 4 d4 e4 5 ♘h3! ♙b4 6 ♖b3 ♙xc3+ 7 ♖xc3 ♘c6 8 ♙e2 d6 9 0-0 0-0 10 b3 ♙d7?! 11 ♙b2 ♖e7 12 ♘f4 ♗ae8 13 ♗ac1 ♙c8 14 ♘d5 ♖d8 15 f4! a6 16 ♘xf6+ ♗xf6 17 d5 ♘b8 18 c5 c6 19 ♗fd1 ♗e7 20 cxd6 ♖xd6 21 dxc6 ♖xc6 22 ♗d8+ ♗f8 23 ♖b4 ♗xd8 24 ♖xe7 ♖d7 25 ♙c4+ 1-0.

After 3 d4, we'll look at two game excerpts expressing different philosophies by Black:

Duczynski – R. Novak
Czech Team Ch 1995

3...e4 (D)



This is a standard pawn-structure, but normally Black's e-pawn advance either comes with tempo (attacking a knight on f3) or when White's c1-bishop is shut in by a pawn on e3. Here White has a number of good moves (such as 4 ♘h3), two of which directly exploit Black's slightly overextended pawn-structure.

4 g4!?

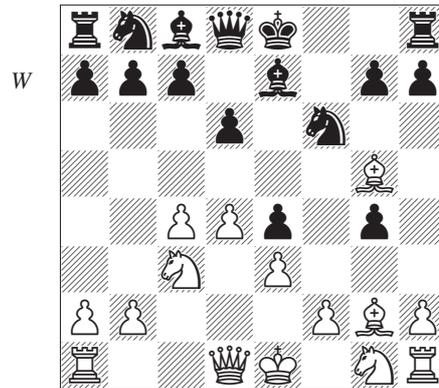
White plays the most radical (and fun) move, undermining Black's structure immediately. 4 f3 is also promising, because 4...exf3 surrenders the centre; White can choose between 5 ♘xf3 and 5 exf3, having in mind ♙d3, ♘ge2, etc. Nor does 4...♘f6 5 ♙g5! look desirable for Black. Maybe 4...♙b4 is best, when 5 ♘h3! introduces the idea of ♙g5, as well as planning ♘f4.

4...fxg4

Upon 4...g6 5 gxf5 gxf5 6 ♘h3!, f4 becomes a pure outpost for occupation by White's knight

or other pieces; he is better developed and can easily exploit the g-file and Black's weak king-side squares.

5 ♙g2 ♘f6 6 ♙g5! ♙e7 7 e3 d6 (D)



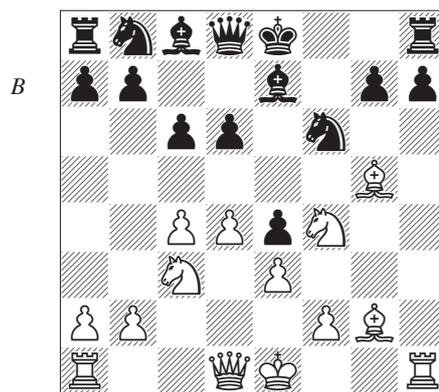
8 h3! gxh3

8...g3, preventing the opening of the h-file, is often the way to cut down White's attack in such positions. Here, however, after 9 fxg3, Black's e-pawn won't last long and he'll end up with no compensation.

9 ♘xh3

Even 9 ♙xh3 ♙xh3 10 ♘xh3 would be good. The point of White's pawn sacrifice is to take over the light squares, with a few important side benefits such as accelerated development and the open h-file.

9...c6 10 ♘f4 (D)



Threatening ♙xf6 and ♖h5+, as well as simply ♘g6.

10...♙f5 11 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 12 ♙xe4! ♙xe4 13 ♘xe4

White has a winning advantage. Black can hardly defend against ♖h5+, whereas White also has ideas such as ♗g6, ♗e6, d5, etc. The idea of the h3 sacrifice is one that recurs in various environments, notably in the Dutch Defence.

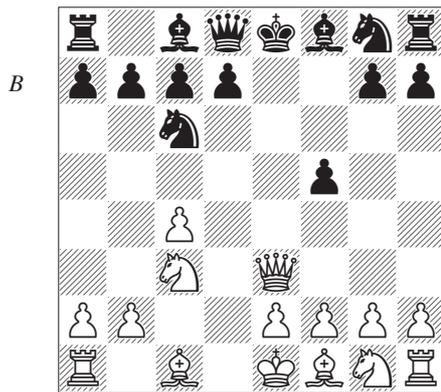
Banas – Westerinen Gausdal 1988

3...exd4 4 ♖xd4 ♗c6

Instead of 3...e4, Black more often tries to gain time by this means.

5 ♖e3+ (D)

Among several options, this check is the most awkward for Black to meet, because it doesn't accede to a pure loss of tempo and delays his desired development by ...♗f6.

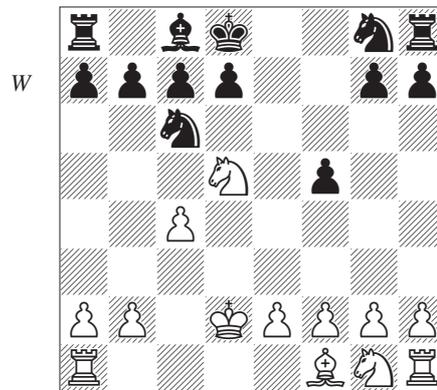


5...♗f7!?

Black's king sidesteps; this is the standard solution to his problems, logically hoping for ...♗f6, ...♗b4 and ...♗e8 with rapid development and counterattack. Instead, 5...♗e7?! 6 ♗d5 leaves Black tied up, when White has ♗f3/♗h3 and ♗d2-c3 as plausible follow-ups. Furthermore, 5...♗ce7?! is strongly met by 6 ♗f3 ♗f6 7 ♖d3; White intends ♗g5 and 0-0-0.

But 5...♖e7 is playable, and only mildly in White's favour after 6 ♗d5 (6 ♖g3!? ♗f6!) 6...♖xe3 7 ♗xe3 ♗b4+! 8 ♗d2 (8 ♗d1 ♗d6! has done all right in a few games) 8...♗xd2+ 9 ♗xd2 ♗d8 (D).

This position is noteworthy: the pawn-structures are mirror images of each other, both sides have one knight out, and both kings have moved!

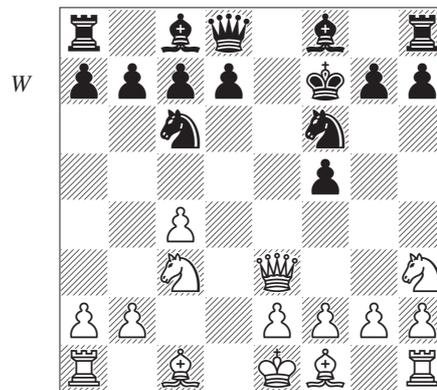


Black's bad bishop, restricted by the pawn on f5, is analogous to White's on f1, blocked by c4. Of course, White's knight is already on d5, whereas Black will have to work to get his on e4. Play might go 10 ♗f3 ♗ge7 11 g3 d6 12 ♗g2. Here White can reorganize in various ways (for example, ♗f4, ♗hd1 and ♗c3) and maintain some pressure.

6 ♗h3!

Naturally there are other moves. This one keeps both the options of ♗g5+ and ♗f4 (further controlling d5) alive.

6...♗f6 (D)



7 ♖d2!?

White both increases control over d5 and gets out of way of ...♗e8. 7 ♖d3!? is another way of doing the same thing.

7...♗b4 8 a3 ♗xc3 9 ♖xc3

Now White has the two bishops, so Black should develop quickly and try to play dynamically to open things up:

9...d5