

PULLEIN-THOMPSON AND THE FIRST GO SET IN THE UK

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In earlier articles we wrote about 1929 as an important year in the history of Go in Britain. In that year 'The Game of Wei-chi' by Pecorini and Tong Shu was published by Longmans, Green and Co. in London. In the same period, Mr. Liu of the Chinese embassy in London taught Commandant Lancelin a better way to play the game¹.

Also in 1929, a certain John Barrs learned about the game and started a small club which lasted a few years. He later, of course, founded the British Go Association. In 1965 he wrote an article on the 'UK History of Go' in the Go Review. He says: "I myself learnt of Go in 1929, when there was an attempt to sell commercial sets through the big London stores and sport shops. It was published under its Chinese name of Wei-chi. Although I had virtually no instruction material, I became very interested in the game and on the 1st March 1930 founded the Linton House Wei-chi Club. This had about 15 members and continued until 1936." The club was short-lived and I haven't found any information on its members.

I often wondered about the game set and its possible relation with Pecorini's book, but the set was very hard to find, so I had to leave it until I could recently buy it.

The set I found consists of a playing board and a separate box, with two blue cups containing black and red counters to complete the game. The outside of the box has a black and

white snakeskin print. The playing board measures 50 x 52 cm and the box with the stones 24x12x7 cm.

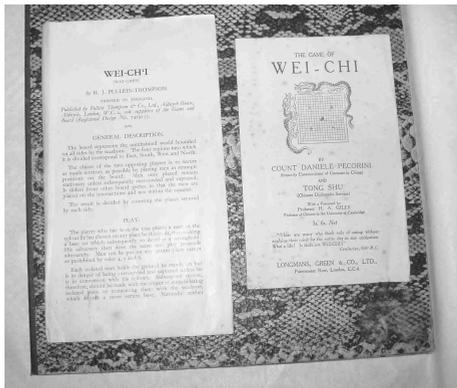
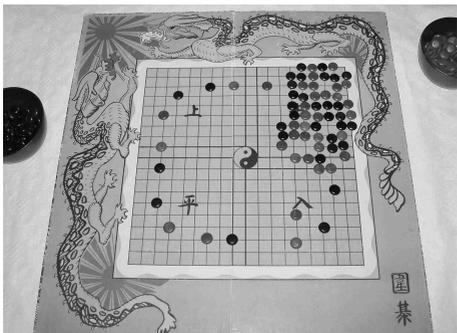


The playing board has a wide margin in which two dragons surround the actual game board of 31x31 cm. Its layout has a clear relation with Pecorini's book. Both the Italian and English edition have a dust jacket with the same illustration of dragons.

The board has heavier lines that divide the board into four squares, and coincide with those Pecorini and Xu use for notation. The squares have the Chinese characters for East, South, West and North on them. The centre point is a yin-yang sign. The small print on the board says that it is published by Pullein Thompson & Co. Ltd., Aldwych House, Aldwych, London, WC2.

Included are two leaflets: one is short, a four-page description of the rules; the other is a four-page advertisement for Pecorini's book. The rules leaflet with the title "Wei-ch'i (Way-chee)" is the more interesting and written by the publisher of the game, H.J. Pullein-Thompson.

¹See [BGJ 155](#)



It was quite easy to find more information about Mr. Pullein-Thompson. On searching on his name, I found that his wife, and even more so his daughters, were well-known writers.

His full name is Harold James Pullein-Thompson (1885-1957). He studied in Oxford and taught at King's College School in Wimbledon. In the first World War he served as an Infantry Captain.

He married Joanna Cannan² (1898-1961) in 1918, a daughter of the Dean of Trinity College. She was a writer, and since marrying produced one book every year, 49 in total. The family obtained most of their income through her books.

They had four children; Denis (1919-2011), Josephine (1924), Diana (1925) and Christine (1925-2005). The girls³ became world famous in the UK in the 50's and 60's, especially with girls, for their books about ponies and horses. They produced easily more than 150 books between them.

The daughters wrote an intriguing autobiography about their youth and upbringing. In this book⁴, I found information about their father's working life and his leisure activities.

'Cappy', as his children called him, was wounded in the War. His shoulders and arms were injured and he had shrapnel in his hip that could not be removed. Later in life, this caused him great pain and gave him a limp and a dependency on painkillers.

After the army he got a job with a film company, where he wrote scripts for silent films. When the company failed, he took various jobs and wrote plays in his spare time. Those plays were neither published nor played.

The family was reasonably well to do; they had a live-in maid, a cleaning woman and a gardener. The upbringing of the children was a bit unorthodox, in an artistic environment with writers and poets. Most of the family investments were lost in the Depression and they had difficulties adjusting to the new circumstances.

They moved to the country to Peppard, near Reading, where the girls taught themselves to ride and train ponies and horses. Pullein-Thompson then worked for Chad

²en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joanna_Cannan

³en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pullein-Thompson_sisters

⁴"Fair Girls and Grey Horses: memories of a country childhood", Josephine, Diana and Christine Pullein-Thompson, London: Allison & Busby, 1996.

Valley⁵. The girls remember they had some dolls, which Cappy probably gave them while working there. Chad Valley is a long-established brand of toys in the United Kingdom. They produced bears, dolls, cast iron toys and also board games. This was probably at the end of the twenties. (Though the book is written in chronological order, dates are not abundant.)



Mamma and Cappy soon after their marriage

Harold Pullein-Thompson and his wife, Joanna Cannan

He also worked for Frigidaire⁶, probably selling refrigerators, which were a novelty at that time. The name 'Frigidaire' became synonymous with any kind of refrigerator, and is probably the origin of the term 'fridge'. In 1926 he was managing director of Vultex Products, Ltd. Vultex is vulcanised latex or rubber.

The London branch made 'Vulpro waterproof sheeting' for surgical purposes⁷ and provided the Vulpro rubber tissue used for balloons made for the India Meteorological Department⁸.

In 1928 he acted as the liquidator for this firm in voluntary liquidation, using the same Aldwych House address as for the game of wei-chi. In 1928 he also obtained a patent for a board game simulating the game of golf⁹. In the 1930s, Pullein-Thompson was running the Public Schools' Employment Bureau. In this capacity he drove across the country, staying with careers teachers or headmasters, and lecturing to pupils about their career possibilities.

It is clear from the book that 'Cappy' was fond of sports and games. He played rugby in his youth, had two centre court seats at Wimbledon during the tournament and often watched the Oxford-Cambridge boat race with the family. Upon marrying he had to give up playing bridge. "Cappy kept his pre-marriage promise to Mamma to give up bridge, but he taught us to play vingt-et-un and poker".

However I found no mention of the game of Go in 'Fair Girls...'. It would have been so nice if they had written about huge stacks of unsold games somewhere in an attic, but unfortunately this was not the case.

It is still something of an enigma how this game came to be put on

⁵en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chad_Valley

⁶en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frigidaire

⁷British Medical Journal, March 28 1925, p. 610,

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2226354/pdf/brmedj05702-0026b.pdf

⁸Nature, Volume 124, Issue 3134, pp. 793-794 (1929),

adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/1929Natur.124R.793C

⁹patent.ipexl.com/GB/GB322221.html

the market. In 1929 there were no Go players whatsoever in Britain. The famous Professor of Chinese at Cambridge, Herbert Giles, had published about the game around 1890 in a scientific magazine, and Horace Cheshire from Hastings had published a book about it in 1911. But these publications had little or no success.

We know nothing about the game being played in the 1920s, so it is quite a surprise that, out of the blue and on the eve of the Great Depression, suddenly this game was being sold in London shops.

So in 1929 we find a book and a game set being sold more or less together. Who persuaded the publishers that this could be a profitable investment?

'The Game of Wei-chi' had been published earlier in Italian and translated in English. (See: 'A Milestone from Far Abroad', Franco Pratesi, BGJ 129, Winter 2002, p. 30-32¹⁰.) Who was the translator? No translator is mentioned as such in the book.

Probably Pecorini was responsible. He had, after all, been in the English Diplomatic Service between 1897 and 1910, and we must assume that his command of the English language was more than adequate. Pecorini's novel 'Japanese Maple' was earlier first published in English, then in Italian, so he must have had connections in the publishing world.

The foreword in the book is by Giles, which also contains Giles' article on Wei-chi, published in Temple Bar in 1877. So there may be a connection

between Giles and Pecorini or Tong Shu. Pecorini probably had to sit courses in Chinese before being sent to China, and the only university professor in Chinese was Giles.

Was Giles involved in the publishing of the book? Was he asked by the publisher if a book on the game was worth publishing? If so, he could have added the foreword and his own earlier article as a good way to sell the book, thinking that his name would act as a stamp of quality on these things Chinese. Another possibility is that Pecorini knew him and asked him to write the foreword.

The relationship between the book and the game set is clear; the game is based on the description in the book. It is unclear, however, how a family man with four small children and a modest income was persuaded to invest his money in an unknown, albeit an intriguing, game.

It seems likely that someone taught him the game and that he was convinced of its depth, its potential for growth and its profitability. It seems possible that he knew the publishers, Longmans and Green, through his wife. Maybe through his relationship with Chad Valley (where he might have worked in precisely that period), he could produce the game set in an economical way. Anyway, this whole project must have cost him lots of money.

I feel we have to honour this early wei-chi entrepreneur; maybe not for his commercial insights but for his courage in producing this very attractive and beautifully made game.

¹⁰www.britgo.org/bgj/bgj129.html