

The Language of Bridge IV

1936 was a significant year in the history of the world; it saw the founding of the EBU and the publication of three important bridge books: Ely Culbertson's *Contract Bridge Complete* (known as *The Gold Book*), Charles Goren's *Winning Bridge Made Easy*, and Agatha Christie's *Cards on the Table*. Elsewhere that year, Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics and the King of England abdicated (see pages 8-9).



Simon Cochemé

AUCTION Bridge had all but disappeared as Contract Bridge became all the rage (although one author doubted whether the female mind would be able to cope with the transition). The literature of the time illustrates the change, gradually moving to the terminology we use today. The knave, hitherto abbreviated as 'Kn', was becoming known as 'J'. The player designations A, B, Y and Z on hand diagrams were being replaced by the more intuitive West, East, North and South. (A was also known as the *Eldest Hand*.) Tables of the bidding were infrequently used, the writers preferring to put the bids in narrative form, with the bids themselves in inverted commas, as though spoken.

Quick tricks and honour tricks (more complicated and sophisticated than quick tricks) still dominated hand evaluation, with the Milton Work point count being used, but only for balanced hands. Lieut-Col. Walter Buller, C.B.E., an authority of the day and virulently against all things American, considered Culbertson's table of honour tricks to be faulty. He argued that the king should be worth two-thirds of a trick, not a half, since it would take a trick if the ace were with partner or right-hand opponent, and only be worthless if the ace were with left-hand opponent.

The opening bid was known as the *original bid* and overcalls were known as *overbids* (we all have partners like that). Game-forcing jump responses like 1♥ – 2♠ were called *forcing overbids* (my partner does those too). The *demand bid*, for example a strong two, was also forcing.

Rose Henniker Heaton and Phyllis Bosworth, authors of *Contract with James*, provide a delightful selection of phrases, writing of hands that are *misfitters* or *no-trumpers*, and hands that should be *held-up* (not go down as dummy, they meant, rather

than not be visible to the opponents). I also spotted *game without trumps* where we would say 'game in no-trumps'. Lovely; I have started using it.

One of the most debated topics was the *informatory double*, described by *Emporos* in *Contract – Its Charm and Principles*, as one of only two conventions that were needed (the other was the high-low peter). He was writing before the acceptance of Blackwood and well before the discovery of Stayman. The *informatory double* was just a strong hand (three honour tricks) to some, and an embryonic form of today's take-out double to others. The anonymous bridge columnist in the *Times* suggested that 2♣ should be used as a negative response.

What is it with whist and bridge authors and their anonymity? The late 18th and early 19th centuries have more than thirty pseudonyms, including *Revoke*, *Goulash* (actually Canon Basil H. Davies), *Major Tenace*, and *Yarborough*.

What surprised me most about the bridge writing of 1936 was the coverage given to psyches; books had whole chapters on how and when to use them, and the press regularly reported them as an acceptable tactic.

Chapters were also written on behaviour at the bridge table, my favourite tips being: '*Post mortems are anathema*', '*Don't, when you are dummy, read the newspaper at the table*', and '*Don't scold partner*'.

The aforementioned Colonel Buller gave this as an interesting deal from a duplicate tournament of thirteen tables (*diagram in next column*):

Buller's commentary began: "*The correct bidding is B, 'One diamond'; Z, 'Four Hearts'; and all pass. A opened the king of diamonds . . .*"

Y-Z Vulnerable. B dealt.

♠ 9. 5. 4. 2 ♥ 7 ♦ K. 9. 5 ♣ 9. 8. 6. 5. 3	♠ Q. 10. 3 ♥ 5. 3. 2 ♦ 7. 2 ♣ Q. Kn. 7. 4. 2	♠ K. Kn. 8 ♥ Kn. 8. 6 ♦ A. Q. 10. 6. 4. 3 ♣ 10
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♠ A. 7. 6 ♥ A. K. Q. 10. 9. 4 ♦ Kn. 8 ♣ A. K		
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Thank you, Colonel, I'll take over now. West led king and another diamond. Modern Easts would return a third diamond, expecting West to be able to trump it, but our ancient Easts were aware that partner might still have a diamond (top of partner's suit was the standard lead in those days). They played the ten of clubs. The declarers won and drew two rounds of trumps, getting the bad news. Had trumps broken, they could have unblocked the club king and crossed to dummy's five of hearts to enjoy the clubs.

Most declarers drew a third round of trumps and played a spade to the ten. The Easts won, returned a diamond and waited for their king of spades. Two declarers, Buller tells us, played the hand well. After two rounds of trumps, they led the other top club. One East fell for it and ruffed. The other East saw through declarer's plan, declined to ruff and so defeated the contract.

Colonel Buller was not a modest man and I am sure that he was neither Z, the successful declarer, nor B, the perspicacious defender. If he had been, he would have mentioned it. At least once. □