

CASINO FROM NOWHERE, TO VAGUELY EVERYWHERE

Franco Pratesi - 09.10.1994

“Fishing games form a rich hunting ground for researchers in quest of challenge”, David Parlett writes in one of his fine books. (1) I am not certain that I am a card researcher, and I doubt the rich hunting-ground too. It is several years since I began collecting information on these games, without noticeable improvements in my knowledge of their historical development. Therefore I would be glad if some IPCS member could provide specific information. Particularly useful would be descriptions of regional variants of fishing games which have – or have had – a traditional character.

Within the general challenge mentioned, I have encountered an unexpected specific challenge: the origin of Casino, always said to be of Italian origin, whereas I have not yet been able to trace it here. So it appears to me, that until now, it is a game widespread from nowhere in Italy.

THE NAME

As we know, even the correct spelling of the name is in dispute. The reason for writing Cassino is said to be a printing mistake in one of the early descriptions. The most probable origin is from the same Italian word *casino*, which entered the English vocabulary to mean “a pleasure-house”, “a public room used for social meetings” and finally “a public gambling-house”. So the name of the game would better be written Casino, as it was spelled in the earliest English descriptions (and also in German) towards the end of the 18th century. If the origin has to be considered – and assuming that information about further uses of Italian Casino is not needed – it may be noted that Italian Cassino does exist too: it is a word seldom used and its main meaning of ‘box-cart’ hardly has any relevance to our topic. So I shall use the spelling Casino in the text which follows. I agree, however, that there may be grounds to keep separate the two English words. After all, it might not be very wise for a foreigner to comment on the accepted English spelling!

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GAME

Casino belongs to the family of ‘fishing’ games (as first called by Michael Dummett). This keeps it apart from the games mostly played in Europe, which generally belong to the trick-taking or – if we take recent years into account – the Rummy family. The objects of the game are several, in addition to the typical one of finally having won more cards than the opponent, such as capturing specific cards, or counting points for ‘sweeps’, that is for taking all the cards on the table. Typically, 3 points are awarded for having the most cards, 2 for the ten of diamonds or great casino, 1 for the two of spades or little casino, 1 for the majority of spades, and 1 for each ace. Thus there are 11 points to be gained to which 1 point is added for each sweep. Apart from the particular details, which may be different from one variant to another, cards are commonly captured from the pool by adding their pip values and covering the same total with a single card played from one’s hand. Thus there are no trumps, nor is there any difference between the four suits (except that one of them may have a higher value when counting points at the end of the game).

Generally one is told that the game is very simple and quite suitable for children, so that they may improve their counting ability. Not surprisingly, Casino has always been considered as one of the very few games admitted to every environment, family included. On the other hand, it seems to be – or to have been – one of the games preferred by great gamblers, since it is unavoidable that the best skill will be duly rewarded in the long run.

ORIGIN AND EARLY SPREAD

In looking for a reconstruction of the origin and early spread of Casino, one has to distinguish between the game of Casino itself and other common games of the same family. If we had to reconstruct the origin of European games belonging to the fishing family, we should probably have to go back at least two or three centuries earlier. In particular, with respect to older games, such as Calabrace in Italy or Culbas in France, Casino appears to be a more evolved member. A distinctive character of ancient games of this family is that attention is exclusively or preferentially given to the player having the greatest number of cards. With the course of time, other objects of the game have been added to the number of cards, which however remains an essential item everywhere. Among other members of the same family are games popular in individual countries, such as Scopa and Scopone in Italy (which however are both documented later than the earliest references to Casino).

Experts confirm that the international game of Casino had an Italian origin! It rather abruptly entered the European scene from a place where we would expect it to be traditionally played. It was a great surprise to me when I learned that this use of the word 'casino' as the name of a specific card game has left no traces in Italy, neither in old handbooks of games, nor in dictionaries. A possible explanation is that a game, which was commonly played in Italy (probably without written descriptions or known under a different name), was first introduced in England and later modified in America. Except for this Anglo-American version, very few other countries seem to have developed a lasting tradition of Casino or regional variants of it.

As for the initial spread of the game, we shall discuss the early London witnesses later; however, Casino appeared very early also in German literature on games. I have not yet been able to check German books of the time in a satisfactory way, and probably further evidence will be gathered in the future. Anyhow, Casino is already quoted in a book printed in 1795 in Vienna and Prague. (2) Its initial position in the title is indicative of an actual fashion for the game. Some years later, we have information from the North of Germany, (3) and German books must be quoted for another witness too. In some works, reference can be found to an Italian, and in particular Florentine, origin of the game. (4) I could myself read that: *Die Benennung dieses Spieles führt von einem Spielhause in Florenz her, worin der Adel sich versammelte* (the name of this game derives from a gaming-house in Florence, where the nobles gathered). (5)

As a consequence, I have investigated many manuscript books of Florentine Casino dei Nobili, kept in the Florence Archivio di Stato. In particular, the "Conversazione del Casino de' Nobili di S.Trinita" was established in 1640, even if some similar academy existed earlier in other premises. The number of fellows was initially limited to 30, but it slowly increased beyond this limit. A remarkable enlargement occurred in 1761, when two other academies, Accademia dei Vaganti (former "dei Resoluti") and Accademia degli Affinati (or Casino di San Marco) joined it giving origin to Istituto dei Nobili consisting of Accademia and Casino. Its main location remained in Lungarno, near Santa Trinita, until the 20th century. My research has not been successful, since the games mentioned are known ones, as Piquet, Minchiate, Trentuno, and Whist.

EVOLUTION OF THE VARIANTS

Casino is known under several variants and the first of these are documented in Britain. From the middle of the 19th century other variants were developed in the USA, a fact which favoured the spread of the game in that country (and in other countries starting from there) thus delaying its gradual disappearance. Here, we can only briefly recall some of the main variants.

Calling and building are important additional features absent from other games of the family and from traditional English Casino. In building, one adds a card from one's hand to one on the table, announcing the combined value; but an intervening player may either capture them or add another card from his hand to increase the value. In calling, one plays a card to the table, earmarking one or more combinations of cards having that value; an intervening player may capture all if he, too, has a card of that value.

Royal Casino, the taking power of the court cards is no longer limited to cards of equal rank: jacks are now considered to be worth 11, queens 12 and kings 13. In the most recent descriptions of Casino, this variant – provided with the calling-building procedure – appears practically everywhere as the standard game.

Among other variants one can note: Spade Casino, in which all the spade cards contribute to the counting points; Draw Casino, where, after the first distribution of cards, the pack is set on the table and each player takes the uppermost card from it on his turn; Give-away Casino, in which the player gaining the fewest points wins.

CASINO IN ENGLAND

Let us begin with the dictionary: (6) Casino has four meanings recorded, out of which the third refers to Cassino, also Casino, a game at cards. As for literary references, the following are quoted: Roberts (1792) mentioning a party based on Pharo and Cassino; J.Austen (1800) quoting tables of Whist and Cassino; Lady Middleton (1811) who proposed ‘a rubber of Cassino’; E.Neres (1811) stating that ‘two tables of Whist, Cassino or Quadrille are suitable for four pairs’.

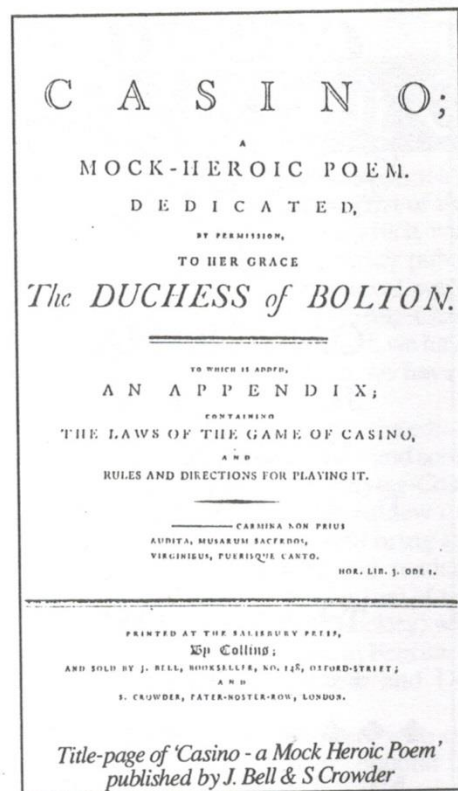


Figure 1 – Front page of the London 1793 edition.

Actual treatises on the game had however been published too; on the whole, these early booklets, practically forgotten now, represent a collection of specific works that was never known by variants of this family, until recent Italian books on Scopone.

- Long (Robert), *Short Rules for Playing the Game of Casino*. London: J.Owens and others, 1792, 11 pp.
- *A Mock-Heroic Poem, dedicated by permission to Her Grace the Duchess of Bolton. To which is added an Appendix, containing the Laws of the Game of Casino, and Rules and Directions for Playing it*. London: J.Bell and S.Crowder, (1792), 30 p.; reprinted one year later with additions and amendments, London, 1793, 32 pp.

- *Rules for Cassino. Humbly Inscribed to Her Grace the Duchess of Marlborough, by whose Indulgence, and frequently at Her Grace's own Cost, the Inventor was permitted to make repeated trials of his System at Her Grace's Card-table at Marlborough House, Sion and Brightelmstone.* London 1795, 8 pp.

It may be of interest to note that two of the treatises were probably printed in the same year of the first quotation mentioned in the Oxford dictionary. The impression derives that a craze for the game occurred in London in the early years of the 1790s, a craze confirmed by several subsequent editions and reprints. Counting was then somewhat different from later variants: in particular there were not yet sweep points. The name itself of sweep was limited to the clearing of the table at the end of the game – bringing no points – by the player who had been the last to take cards.

In the British *Hoyle's* Casino appears to have entered already in 1796, (7) whereas it was absent from the previous edition of 1790. Not only did the game enter *Hoyle's* treatises; later, it was also reported in other works, for instance, starting from 1834, in the many editions of Short Whist, (8) among the games described in its final part.

Thus Casino certainly was widespread in Britain, also due to its familiar character. In Bohn's *Hand-Book* of 1850, (9) we have two and a half pages describing classical Cassino as the first among the "Minor card games", after the seven evidently major ones (Whist, Piquet, Quadrille, Écarté, Cribbage, Boston, Reversis). In the course of the second half of the 19th century, most of the "complete" handbooks go on reporting the rules for Casino, even though it appears at the time as an old traditional game on the way to dying out. Several authors recall when they played Casino in their youth, many years before quoting it in their works.

As an example we may consider its treatment in *The Popular Recreator*. (10) It is true that Casino is present among the very few card games described here, but this happens on pp. 367 and 368 of the second volume, in the last article devoted to card games, written by Geo. Tindall, together with the peculiar game of "Albert Smith" (said to be particularly common in the northern counties of England). Even the beginning of the text is typical: "Cassino is a very pleasant and agreeable game, especially for young people." A clearer indication derives from one of the most comprehensive English treatises, *The Handy Book of Games for Gentlemen* by Captain Crawley. (11) After two pages of description, we finally get the plain truth, "The above I borrow entire from a little treatise published a few years ago, written by I know not whom. Of this game I, personally, know nothing – *Non omnia possumus omnes.*"

Such being the case, it is not surprising that works devoted specifically to Casino no longer appeared. Worth noting is a booklet in which Casino was the first of four games shortly described. (12) The situation does not become much better in the 20th century and Casino is only described in the most complete collections of game rules printed in England. In a book of the Bell Club Series, (13) Casino is described according to the old rules of play without calling or building. In the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910, the rules of the main variant described include building and some detail is also provided on "the popular variation called Royal Casino, now almost universally played". In other cases, the game is only briefly described or defined with English humour, as does (before actually providing the essential rules) the *Encyclopedia of Sports Games and Pastimes*, (14) "The game consists in the capturing of certain cards for certain purposes, and points are scored according to the ways the cards are captured."

CASINO IN AMERICA

In the second half of the 19th century, Casino begins its "second life" in America. That was due in particular to several interesting new variants introduced there. In order to follow the development of the game, we can examine some of the many editions both of the *American Hoyle's* and the *Official Rules of Card Games*.

Among *American Hoyle's*, it may be noted that an appendix dated 1850 contains the "old English" rules. (15) A book of 1857 does not contain Casino, (16) which was instead introduced by

additions to its 1875 edition, (17) with the rules already present in old *Hoyle's*. However, in the meantime calling and building had already been developed somewhere in the United States. The date of the earliest description in print may be tentatively indicated as New York 1866. (18)

At the time, the “old” game had become so unusual that it was called by a specific name: “The European game is the favorite with those who play merely for recreation, and is known as Set-Back or Rounce Cassino.” In the *American Hoyle* edition of 1892, (19) we find several useful pointers. It is stated that the game was played to a number of points to be fixed before the play. 21-Point Casino is dealt separately, with a discussion about the ways of counting out and the suggestion to score sweeps as soon as they occur instead of awaiting the end of the play. The name of Royal is not yet used for “An Interesting Variation”, dealt separately, as the games among three and four players.

All the “new” features of the game and its variants are present, as it could be expected, in the excellent *Hoyle* published by R.F.Foster in 1897. (20) Here we find Royal and Spade Casino described under these names. It may be noted that Casino is inserted here among the national games, together with Skat-Germany, Cribbage-England, Piquet-France, Conquian-Mexico, Calabresella-Italy. The pair is just Cassino-America.

In the *Official Rules* of 1900, (21) the preference in America for playing to 21 points is confirmed. A rather curious variant of the variant appears – Royal with card decks, recently introduced for Poker, with additional cards of 11 and 12 pips: jacks are thus worth 13, queens 14, kings 15 and aces either 1 or 16. This monster variant is mentioned in some later sources, but does not seem to have turned out a success.

In the big treatise by Ostrow, (22) Casino is introduced with a sentence that can also be found in several other books: “This game is a hardy perennial whose popularity never wanes”. In addition to common variants, one finds Spade Royal, a combination of the two kinds, and Diamond Casino in which three cards are dealt instead of four and counting occurs by 1 point for cards, for a majority of diamonds, for the 7 of diamonds and for each sweep, whereas 2 points are due for capturing either the four 7s or 6s or Aces.

One thus reaches Morehead, who (alone or later together with Mott-Smith) was one of the most prolific writers on game rules. The works of these two authors were widespread, having been printed under the names of bridge stars Culbertson and Goren. In *Modern Hoyle*, (23) the game is introduced thus: “In the average home Casino is known as a children’s game, but among gamblers it is known as the finest two-handed game of skill, and it is often played for high stakes.” In *Hoyle up-to-date*, (24) we first find some puzzling information: “Casino descends from French gambling games of the 15th century”. The same authors somewhat amend their opinion in the editions printed under the names of Culbertson and Goren: (25) “One of the first references to it in English is found in *Hoyle's Games*, edited by Charles Jones, London, 1808. But several very similar games are described in earlier French and German manuals, as Papillon and Callabra”.

Scarne, a well-known authority on gambling in the USA, introduces the game in his turn with a phrase we have already encountered and which provides a further witness to the popularity of the game: “Casino is a hardy perennial two-handed game which was greatest in popularity prior to the advent of Gin Rummy”. (26)

CASINO IN OTHER COUNTRIES

In Great Britain Casino had the more traditional Cribbage as a rival, with a somewhat similar application of counting skill. In America it finally lost many of its followers after the spread of games of yet another family, that of Rummy. In any case, its success in these countries at a time when their habits were already much imitated abroad had a remarkable result: in the countless books on card games printed in various countries and languages no other variant among fishing games has obtained so many descriptions. It is now a difficult task for us to ascertain whether Casino really became a traditional game, even when descriptions are found in the conventional books of these nations. A difference may always be present between the games described in the

books and those actually played in the same countries. Thus, apart from the books and some cases of exceptional play, where did Casino join the number of traditional card games of a given region?

I don't have a ready answer. German peoples were among the first to include the game in their handbooks, but the descriptions in later sources generally follow the Anglo-American variants, without specific local contributions, except for some marginal cases. Thus, to the East, it was in part of Austria (and in Hungary) that new variants entered the repertoire of ordinary players. We know that they used to deal cards by three instead of four (a not unusual feature among Casino variants), and to allow a card on the table to be captured by two in their hands (this being a unique feature). (27) Towards the Northern border, the rather similar game of Zwicker has had some popularity in Schleswig-Holstein. (28)

France and Spain had other games to develop. But what about Italy, the country of origin? Descriptions of Casino can be found in some rather recent Italian handbooks, but it is clearly indicated as an Anglo-American game. As we know, the traditional members of the family are here Scopa and Scopone – they are the result of an evolution which started from Calabre and probably earlier games. I can imagine – as in the selection of a single frame from a whole film – that one of the intermediate variants, played at a given place and time, was taken by foreign visitors as the source for Casino, a game to become vaguely known worldwide. I would be much happier if I could add an exact date, as for instance Florence 1790, but I cannot – yet.

Notes

1. D.Parlett, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
2. *Gesetzbuch der modernen Spiele Casino, Whist, Boston, Billard, Schach, Toccategli, Taroc, l'Homme, Imperial, und Triomphe*. Wien und Prag, 1795.
3. *Der Meister in allen kartenspielen... Casino...* Hamburg und Altona, 1810. Here Casino is only the last of the ten games quoted in the title. *Das Whist, Boston, Casino und Imperial spiel,...verbessert von G.W.von Abenstein*. Berlin, 1810.
4. V.Omasta, S.Ravik, *Hràci karti. Karetnì hry*. 1969, maintain on p.138 that the name derives precisely from Florence Casino as attested in a German book of 1821.
5. Emanuel Schreiber, *Album für den beliebsten Kartenspiele. Zweite Auflage*. Weimar, 1854, p. 267.
6. J.A.Simpson, E.S.C.Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary 2.nd edition. Vol. II*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
7. *Hoyle's Games Improved. Revised and corrected by Charles Jones*. London: R.Baldwin and others, 1796.
8. C.B.Coles (under the pseudonim of Major A.) *Short Whist: its Rise, Progress and Laws*. London: Longman, 1834, with many reprints until 1865.
9. *The Hand-Book of Games. Edited and published by Henry G. Bohn*, London 1850, 617 pages.
10. *The Popular Recreator. A Key to In-door and Out-door Amusements. 2nd vol*. London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, (1874). D. Parlett (*op.cit.*) informs us that the edition of 1881 reports the new rules of calling and building.
11. [G.F.Pardon] *The Handy Book of Games for Gentlemen by Captain Crawley*, London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, 1876, a book of 640 pages. The author was a prolific columnist on games.
12. "Trumps", *Guide to Cassino, Vingt-un, Brag and All-Fours*. London: Milner and Sowerby (1870). I am wondering whether the pseudonym is used by the same W.B.Dick of *American Hoyle's* and, in this case, whether "English" or "American" rules are reported.
13. Baxter-Wray, *Round Games with Cards*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1908.
14. *Encyclopedia of Sports, Games and Pastimes*. London: At the Fleetway House, ca.1935.
15. *Hoyle's Games, containing the established rules and practice of whist, qudrille, ..., cassino, etc*, Philadelphia: H.F.Anners, copyright 1845. (Indicated to me by Thierry Depaulis.)

16. Thomas Frere, *Hoyle's Games*. Boston: Locke and Burier, ca. 1870, after the first edition by Thomas W. Strong, New York 1857.
17. Thomas Frere, *Hoyle's Games*. Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske, and Co. 1875. (with additions due to J.S.Locke).
18. D.Parlett, *op. cit.* writes on p. 137, "Its earliest description known to me occurs in Dick and Fitzgerald's *New York "Hoyle" of 1868*". I have found these rules clearly stated in an edition by the same publishers, *The American Card Player*, at pp. 128-133; it should be dated New York 1866, but the copy I could examine may be a later reprint.
19. "Trumps", *The American Hoyle*. New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1892 (perhaps already existing in some previous edition which I could not examine).
20. *Foster's Encyclopedia of Games*, including all the indoor games played at the present day. New York: Stokes, 1897.
21. *Card Games and How to Play Them*. Cincinnati: USPCC, 1900.
22. A.A.Ostrow, *The Complete Card Player*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1945.
23. A.H.Morehead, *Modern Hoyle*. Philadelphia: Winston, 1944.
24. A.H.Morehead, G.Mott-Smith *Hoyle up-to-date* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1959 (I could not check the first edition of 1946).
25. E.Culbertson *Culbertson's Hoyle. The new Encyclopedia of Games with Official Rules* (Morehead and Mott-Smith co-authors and editors) New York: Greystone Press, 1950; H.Goren *Goren's Hoyle. Encyclopedia of Games* New York: Greystone Press, 1961.
26. *Scarne on Cards. Rev. augm. Edition*. Crowns, 1965.
27. S.Ulmann, *Das Buch der Familienspiele*. Wien, Pest, Leipzig: Hartleben, ca.1890.
28. C.D.Grupp, *Schafkopf, Doppelkopf...* Niederhausen/Ts:Falken, 1983, pp. 144-149, absent from more recent reprints. (See Parlett's *Dictionary*.)