

BOOK REVIEWS

Gilmore, Al-Tony, *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*, (Kennikat Press, Port Washington, N.Y., 1975). 162 pp.

Al-Tony Gilmore has made a worthy contribution to the historiography of Afro-American life during the first quarter of the twentieth century and has added a fine character study of the first black heavyweight boxing champion to the rapidly growing list of sport history books.

Not intended to be a study of Johnson himself or a traditional biography, *Bad Nigger!* focuses on an examination of American racial attitudes originating from the successes and triumphs of a black man at a time when blacks were supposed to be subject to the white man's world. Gilmore's thesis that Johnson was indeed a "bad nigger" — "the personality type who adamantly refuses to accept the place given to blacks in American society, and who frequently challenges the outer perimeters of expected behavior" (p. 12) — is acceptable and is clearly substantiated by Johnson's utter disregard of death and danger, his label as an "uppity" and "smart nigger," his achievement of a degree of economic security and independence from whites, and by his insatiable love for having a good time. Additionally, Johnson's championship illustrated the possibility that nonwhites could triumph in life's struggles, a very real illustration which directly interfered with the popularly used "natural laws" of Social Darwinism to justify white supremacist policies and practices.

Gilmore chose the highlights of Jack Johnson's career to exemplify his "national impact." Beginning with Johnson's victory over Jim Jeffries on July 4, 1910 and devoting special attention to the nationwide race riots following the fight, the politically motivated suppression of the fight films, Johnson's

relationships with white women, his indictment under the Mann Act, and finally his controversial defeat in Cuba in 1915, Gilmore masterfully exposes the image of the black champion in the eyes of black and white and rich and poor. He devotes particular attention to an analysis of black folklore and deals realistically with the rationale why Johnson was hated and loved by both whites and blacks.

Evidence illustrating the “national impact” of Johnson surrounding each of the major events mentioned, is assembled in different sections within each chapter, usually differentiated by those for or against Johnson or, a classification of black versus white reactions. Gilmore relies quite heavily on earlier biographies of Johnson but this is not a fault. The author’s major contribution is his sweeping geographic analysis of the newspaper and magazine press while at the same time focusing on both white and black publications. The “national impact” of Johnson is therefore determined by an analysis of the printed accounts.

Perhaps we do not have a “true” account of Jack Johnson’s impact on America, but Gilmore does provide the “real” impact by analyzing Johnson as he was perceived in the American mind — both black and white. The American “idea” of Johnson is aptly portrayed, one which is probably a more valid reflection of existing race relations during the Progressive Era than any to date. Gilmore is to be commended for pointing out the many interrelationships between sport and race relations issues and for showing by example the value of studying sporting pursuits as an important index to the American character and the American mind.

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