

Lloyd, Alan. *The Great Prize Fight*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1977. 188 pages.

On April 17, 1860, near the tiny hamlet of Farnborough, Hampshire, American John C. Heenan fought Englishman Tom Sayers to an amazing and bloody 42 round draw. Had not the police disrupted the contest, the fight might well have continued for another 42 rounds, even though Heenan battled without the aid of sight and Sayers had lost the use of one of his arms. Both men had exhibited considerable “pluck” (or, if you prefer, “bottom”), and although a champion did not emerge after over two hours of fighting, the fight must certainly rank as one of the ring’s greatest contests. In his book *The Great Prize Fight*, Alan Lloyd recaptures the ambiance of the memorable day—the sights, sounds, and

smells of the Victorian ring. For a time, he transports his readers back to the middle years of Victoria's reign so that they can watch two men try to kill each other with their bare hands.

Lloyd's forte is mood: he admirably recreates the entire atmosphere of the epic battle. The bars and bordellos that the "fancy" frequented the night before the fight, the clandestine early morning train ride to the site of the bout, the damp London fog, the fresh Farnborough heather—all this and much more is described in great detail in Lloyd's account of the fight. Of course, the central event is the bout itself, but Lloyd places almost as much emphasis on the background to the bout and the intricate machinations of boxing during the middle of the nineteenth century. When Sayers remarks to Heenan's seconds before the start of the fight, "if a man can't fight [on] such a day as this, he can't fight at all," the reader already has been informed about exactly what kind of day it was (p. 139).

The reader of *The Great Prize Fight* is reminded of Michael Crichton's novel *The Great Train Robbery*. Much of Crichton's novel is devoted to describing things which have become obsolete in the twentieth century. So, too, Lloyd seeks to instruct his reader on the different and curious aspects of nineteenth-century pugilism. He tells how fights were fought, which punches were most prevalent, and which wrestling throws were most often used; he details how a boxer trained, what a fighter ate, and how a pugilist dressed; and he examines the complicated workings of police, spectators, referees, trainers, seconds, and boxing writers. After reading Lloyd's book, one is aware that special trains had to be commissioned to carry the spectators to the secret place where a fight was to be staged, that it was illegal to spike an opponent, and that it was common to lance the flesh around a fighter's eyes to allow him to see his opponent better. Lloyd is at his best when discussing the rules, strategy, and fine nuances of bare-knuckle boxing.

Where Lloyd disappoints his readers is in his discussion of how boxing was related to and reflected Victorian society. He fails to reconcile the popularity of boxing with the rather circumscribed manners and morals of Victorian society. Why, for example, was the lust for blood so strong in an age which was offended by an exposed piano leg? In addition, Lloyd hints at the political uses of pugilism but never explores this important topic. The reader would be interested in how John Morrissey went from boxing ring to political ring and what role Heenan played in the Tweed organization. Lastly, the book would have been enhanced by a glossary; then the reader could distinguish between the "thick ears," "bubukles," "knobs," and "whelks" of the boxing game.

Despite these shortcomings, Lloyd's book is still worthwhile to the student of sport history. His central thesis that the Heenan-Sayers bout restored the prestige of prizefighting—a notion which runs contrary to the traditional theory—is amply defended. And although the book lacks the usual scholarly apparatus, it is clear that Lloyd has examined a wide range of primary and secondary material relating to Victorian boxing. In the final analysis, however, the sheer readability of the book is enough to recommend Lloyd's account of the major bout in the nineteenth century.

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