

Roberts, Randy. *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979. Pp. 310. Index, bibliography, notes, pictures. \$14.95.

Boxing, despite its history of oscillating cross-class appeal, has always borne the mark of its origins in plebeian culture. As Robert W. Malcolmson (*Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850*, Cambridge, 1973, p.12) has argued, the seventeenth century witnessed a parting of ways between the godly culture of Puritans and the popular culture of working people. Puritans could be ferocious adversaries, and boxing, like other recreations and sports came under fierce ideological attack as profane, barbaric, licentious, paganish, undisciplined, disorderly, and immoral. But common folk, along with a few Tories chanting the virtues of a declining paternalism, resisted resolutely, and many of their leisure activities survived. In nineteenth-century England and America, boxing began to change as it was remade along explicitly capitalist lines. From the moment that advances in transportation and communication made a "heavyweight champion of the world" possible, boxing's best became a national and an international symbol. The champion's ways were transformed into images by eager bands of reporters and journalists, and presented to a diverse public. Randy Roberts, in *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*, has written about the shifting images of a popular champion during turbulent times. This book, perhaps the most sophisticated biography of a boxer ever written, must be reviewed on three fronts: as biography, as history of sport, and as history of America in the 1920s.

On the first front the book fares well. The author, trained as a historian at Louisiana State University, demonstrates a sure grasp of many of the arts of biography. He has reflected deeply and sympathetically (perhaps too sympathetically now and then) on his subject, and, most importantly, he maintains a necessary double focus, looking not only at Dempsey's place in his times, but at the times in the champion. Roberts is supremely confident while discussing the inner workings of boxing in the early twentieth century, and he makes fine contributions to its history. This book, as a study of Dempsey and his "Trade for the Hungry" (p. 18), is clearly a successful labor of love.

Roberts declares his general destination when he claims that Jack Dempsey's "popular image would mirror the different cultural shifts and schisms of the 1920s just as his personal life and boxing career would exemplify the age of heroes and the rise of modern, commercialized sports" (p. 66). Dealing with this latter theme, Roberts does disappointingly little on the "age of heroes," but gives an excellent, even if inadequately summarized, account of the commercialization of boxing. Dramatic change surrounded boxing in the 1920s: the boxer was in many ways transformed into a commodity, packaged by the media for popular consumption. Techniques of promotion changed, and an unrelenting effort endeavored to make boxing "respectable" by attracting

middle and upper class interests and by diverting the horrified weepings of moral reformers. Soon, Roberts argues, certain boxers made more money than the President, and cries of “cancerous commercialism” attested to boxing’s new status as big business. Dempsey, who had both his image and his nose remade between 1923 and 1926 in Hollywood, witnessed this transition from his champion’s throne. Although one may dispute Roberts’s statement that Dempsey was the “greatest single drawing card who ever lived” (p. 234), it is clear that the Manassa Mauler was instrumental in the establishment of boxing as a major American sport.

The efforts made by Roberts to read the Twenties through Dempsey are not entirely successful. He concludes that Jack Dempsey is our “most appropriate symbol for the age”: “Other heroes of the twenties gained as much notoriety and lived as glamorous lives, but few seemed as close to the common man as the Manassa Mauler” (p. 270). Boxing has been a common man’s sport for centuries, and this conclusion may well be true. Yet Roberts’s study does not probe the relationship between Dempsey and common folk sufficiently to warrant this judgment. Roberts should have made more of Dempsey’s class background: his father was a downwardly mobile westward wanderer, and Dempsey himself was a miner, a hobo, a poor man whose class origins were always part of his public image. And one wishes that Roberts had devoted as much time and sensitivity to Dempsey’s failure to fight worthy black contenders as were given to the champion’s unpopular exemption from wartime service. Both issues speak strongly—positively or negatively—to Dempsey’s relations with working people. Roberts does provide some intriguing glimpses at the symbolic meanings that attended several of Dempsey’s fights. In the match against Georges Carpentier, France’s war hero of aristocratic bearing, supporters broke along class lines and the “lowbrows” flocked to Dempsey. Nordic and Latin cultures, whose relations were dominated by imperialism, squared off when Dempsey met Argentine Luis Firpo. And against the urban, eastern and gentile Gene Tunney, Dempsey applied his western workingman’s toughness. Many fine insights of this variety can be culled from the book, but on the whole they regrettably lack closure. The study would have benefited from a stronger emphasis on the social relations of the period, the matrix in which meanings of this type are produced, and on the ways in which sport, willingly or no, often became an arena in which these social relations were dramatically enacted.

There is more to recommend this book. It is based on extensive research, using governmental documents, contemporaneous newspapers, articles, and books, interviews, boxing films, and a fairly broad secondary literature that includes theses and dissertations. The volume itself is handsomely produced and nicely illustrated. Roberts handles the chronology of Dempsey’s life deftly, and fortunately he conveys a fine sense of the dense psychologies and subtle mechanics of the major boxing matches of the era. Yet this book could

have used more rigorous editing: it is occasionally repetitive, the prose is tired in spots, and the narrative wanders into unnecessary and distracting issues and details. Roberts's analysis would also have profited by use of the growing literatures in history and anthropology on the social functions of heroism and symbolism, and the social implications of the growth of journalism, newspapers, and the enlarged public sphere of the early twentieth century. But, in all, Randy Roberts has done us a service by making it difficult for those historians, often present-day Puritans, who would write the history of the Twenties while paying no mind to popular figures like Jack Dempsey and popular culture like boxing. Anyone who has lived through the force-field of Muhammad Ali's personality should appreciate the significance of this analysis of sport.

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