

Book Reviews

Roberts, Randy. *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. New York; Free Press, 1983. Pp. xiii, 274. Notes, bibliographical note, index. \$16.95 (cloth)

Randy Roberts has written a thoroughly engrossing, albeit slightly flawed psycho-socio-historical study of Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Roberts' biography reconstructs a detailed historical portrait of Johnson, attempts to penetrate this complex Afro-American hero's smiling, gold-toothed sangfroid and reveal his true thoughts regarding the social storm swirling about him, as well as plumbs the impact of the deceased boxing champion's life upon the psyche of contemporary America. Beginning with Johnson's ex-slave parents, Henry, a "reputed . . . bare-knuckle fighter" (p. 2) while a Maryland slave, and Tiny, "a woman nineteen years his junior" (p. 3) who bore him six living and three still-born children, Roberts' striking biographical study chronicles the battles royal of Johnson's Galveston youth, the worldly wanderings of his manhood quest of the heavyweight boxing crown, the championship good times of wine, white women and song, the agony of European exile because of a trumped up Mann Act conviction, the physical and psychological pain of losing the title, the shame of prison, the degradation of spending his final years eking out a living in side shows, and the resurrection of his defiant spirit in Muhammad Ali's flamboyant career and Howard Sackler's play, *The Great White Hope*.

In these periods of Johnson's life, Roberts introduces a tragically flawed Johnson, a superior boxing champion whose drive, defiance, and pride would later ironically become the cause of his demise. Roberts interpreted Johnson's defeat of Jim Jeffries in 1910 as "both his greatest triumph and the actions that led inexorably to his fall." (p. 86) At another point in his book, Roberts commented further on the American quality of this tragedy.

[Johnson] was wrong in his assumption that the crown carried with it some sort of immunity against the dictates of whites and traditions of white society. Now more than ever Johnson was expected to conform. And now more than ever Johnson felt he did not have to. The collision course was set. (p. 67)

Roberts, a professor of history at Sam Houston State University, reconstructs this tragic collision course by ferreting out an impressive array of little-known historical documents. Refining the research skills that he initially used in writing his first book, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler*, Roberts mined a mother lode of primary data from various university libraries and such national repositories as the National Archives, the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. His most important find was the National Archives

file on Johnson, which was not available to earlier Johnson biographers because it was not finally declassified and released until the spring of 1981.

Roberts' accessibility to these formerly censored government documents allowed him to write a much more intimate behind-the-scenes account of Johnson's trial. He was able to document in their own words, such principal characters as Attorney General George W. Wickersham, whose apprehension in the matter was revealed in a letter that he wrote to United States District Attorney James H. Wilkerson the day after Johnson was arrested urging "the greatest care in the Johnson investigation, 'so as not to involve Federal authorities in [a] mere question of abduction or anything not within [the] general scope of evils sought to be reached by [the] white slave act.'" (p. 146) The chief of the Chicago bureau of the Bureau of Investigation, Charles DeWoody, is caught pointing two "smoking guns" of governmental bias at Johnson. Before the trial he wrote to A. Bruce Bielaski, the acting chief of the Bureau of Investigation, "I believe we all agree . . . on the advantage to the country if Johnson were to be exiled from it. . ." (p. 166) And during the investigation DeWoody wrote Bielaski, "If the attitude of the grand jury . . . can be taken as any criterion of the jury trial, there will be no difficulty in convicting Johnson." (p. 169) Roberts' study also provides a step-by-step account of the Bureau of Investigation's cloak-and-dagger activities to keep Belle Schreiber, Johnson's former lover and their star witness, undercover until she testified. Bureau agents catered to Belle's every whim because, as Special Agent P. Pignuolo noted, "she needs 'constant humoring and pampering if thwarted in the slightest wish, immediately 'went up in the air' and threatened not to testify." (p. 164)

Roberts' literary style is reminiscent of John Dos Passos' *American Trilogy*. Like this American novelist, Roberts weaves historical events and personalities into his study of Johnson. Natural events like the 1900 Galveston storm and 1910's Halley's Comet are cited as the respective symbols of Johnson's passage into manhood and reign as the heavyweight champion of the world. Roberts, like Dos Passos, also cites newspaper headlines of the times. Like *The Chicago Defender's*, "MRS. JOHNSON WAS NOT HATED BY NEGROES" (p. 141) printed after the suicide of Etta Johnson, and such trial headlines as *The Philadelphia Tribune's*, "JACK JOHNSON, DANGEROUSLY ILL. VICTIM OF WHITE FEVER," (p. 146) and *The Cleveland Daily News'*, "BLACK PUGILIST WILL BE MADE AN EXAMPLE." (p. 178). Roberts' penchant for showing how Johnson's career intersected with other world figures of that time is another Dos Passos ploy. He shows the young Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, reluctantly banning one of Johnson's fights in England in 1911 (p. 129); Cuban dictator General Mario Menocal sponsoring Johnson's ill-fated bout with Jess Willard (p. 199); Spain's King Alfonso XIII taking boxing lessons from the exiled champ (p. 206); a pre-baseball commissioner, Kennesaw Mountain Landis, revoking Johnson's bail (p. 155); and Johnson publicly rebuffing Booker T. Washington's private efforts to get Johnson "to soften his assault on white society." (p. 114). The

sum effect of this literary collage clearly reinforces the fact that Jack Johnson was one of the dominant world figures of his era.

Unfortunately, Roberts' psychological profile of Johnson is not as clear as his socio-historical portrait. After developing Johnson as a highly complex human being, Roberts seeks to explain the boxer's motivation in this simplistic manner: "Sexuality was the essence of Jack Johnson, the driving force behind his success. . . ." (p. 74) For Roberts the essence of this major twentieth century personality is reduced to the white women that he loved and hated. "He [Johnson] made love to his white women, but he also beat them up. At once, he wished to elevate and defile them. They provided both a badge of his advanced status and reminder of his inferior position." (p. 75). William Styron gives a similar profile of Nat Turner in his historical novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Just as John O. Killens rejected Styron's portrayal of Turner's obsession with white women occupying his thoughts even as he mounts the gallows (John Oliver Killens, "The Confessions of Willie Styron" in John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, p. 40), I reject Roberts' fixation upon miscegenation as the sole dynamic in Jack Johnson's life. From my vantage point, Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion, like the slave revolutionary, Nat Turner, was driven first and foremost by the human desire to be free. Johnson clearly saw this freedom manifesting itself in his right to consort sexually with white women. On one occasion he declared: "I want to say that I am not a slave and that I have the right to choose who my mate shall be without the dictation of any man." (p. 149).

Roberts would have been wiser to stress in greater detail the impact of American and Afro-American cultures on the shaping of Jack Johnson's personality. For example, Johnson's fascination with fast cars and fatalistic attitude about life, "I always take a chance on my pleasures. We gets in this world what we're going to get." (p. 81), has deep cultural roots in the American daredevil tradition. Bridge jumper Steve Brodie (p. 4) and race car driver Barney Oldfield (p. 119) were two American daredevils that Johnson admired and sought to emulate. Johnson's exciting espionage and self-serving explanations of how he threw the Willard fight place him squarely within the American tall tale tradition. Likewise Johnson's persistent boxing boasts are firmly rooted in the pre-fight taunts of the American frontier's ringtailed roarers which were uttered long before John L. Sullivan claimed, "I can lick any man in the house.," or Muhammad Ali cried, "I'm the greatest!" (William H. Wiggins, Jr., " 'I Am the Greatest!': The Folklore of Muhammad Ali," *Black Lines*, pp. 56-61)

Roberts does a much better job of exploring the impact of traditional Afro-American culture on Jack Johnson's personality. He discusses the dozens of influences on the development of "a defensive style" of boxing among Johnson and other black boxers. (pp. 25-26) The bad nigger (pp. 69-70) and Sambo trickster (p. 8) lifestyles are also discussed. However, the triumphant note about Jack Johnson missing in Roberts' biography is that, like the black

trickster, he survived. And much more credit for this fact must be given to the traditional elements of Afro-American culture that Johnson learned growing up in Texas. What the old junkman told the young protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three." (p. 134). is a better psychological explanation of how and why one Arthur "Papa Jack" Johnson rose from obscure poverty to win the world's heavyweight boxing championship, spend a fortune, travel the world, consort with royalty, marry beautiful white women and survive his country's racist era of great white hopes.

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