

Gorn, Elliott J. *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. Pp. 316. Illustrations, Notes, Index.

Elliott Gorn's *The Manly Art* is a book of great insight and intellectual depth. Gorn, a graduate of Yale University and director of the American Studies program at Miami University, Ohio, has filled an important gap in the sport history literature by tracing the development of bare-knuckle prize-fighting in America from the days of Tom Molineaux up through the reign of the Boston Strong Boy, John L. Sullivan. Combining exhaustive research with lucid writing, Gorn has produced a book that is at once instructive, thought-provoking, and fascinating to read.

Perhaps the initial thing that stands out in the book is the methodological approach taken by Gorn. As he states in the book's preface, "The Manly Art is of mixed academic parentage and deliberately eclectic." Similar to another well-known American studies scholar, Allen Guttman, Gorn does not resign himself to one disciplinary method but chooses instead to utilize elements of such diverse fields as folklore, anthropology, sociology, and labor history in his study. He draws on a plethora of historical sources and the most contemporary theories in the aforementioned fields to chart the rise of boxing during America's transformation to an urban-industrial society and to explain the cultural significance of this violent yet fascinating sport. Gorn convincingly illustrates how boxing was transformed from an unauthorized activity of the urban bachelor sub-culture to a more respectable pastime within the entertainment industry of the late nineteenth century. In the process, he reveals how boxing dramatized the differences between Irish and Anglo-Saxon Americans, working and middle classes, wrongdoers and Christians, and perhaps most significantly, between men and women.

While there are several sections of the book that could be singled out for praise, I found Gorn's chapter on "The Meanings of Prize Fighting" to be especially enlightening. Skillfully utilizing the seminal works of such scholars as Clifford Geertz and Richard D. Brown, Gorn explains the role of bare-knuckle prize fighting in America's working class culture amidst the new forces of entrepreneurial capitalism, specialization of tasks, and industrialization that marked life during the Antebellum era. He points out that sportsmen of the urban streets "were united by disruptive change in their patterns of work, alienation from bourgeois or evangelical ways, and shared attitudes toward wealth, labor, leisure, masculinity and honor." These men embraced their own distinctive culture, and boxing symbolically validated their individual ethos. Perhaps more than anything else, says Gorn, prize fighting furnished an alternative to the Victorian view of progress, emphasizing instead a continual "balance between victory and defeat." The prize ring celebrated the love of combat and barefaced bravado while simultaneously holding up the highest

human ideals of loyalty to one's communal group and honorably defending one's good name. While the prize ring could be alarmingly frightful, it dramatized nevertheless "a world of victory for the socially downtrodden." Boxing offered gratifying rituals that incorporated the most serious human undertakings yet "always presented them in mercilessly unsentimental terms."

In essence, what Gorn explores in this chapter and throughout much of the rest of the book is what it meant to be a man in nineteenth century America. One of the obvious yet praiseworthy features of *The Manly Art* is that while boxing always assumes center stage in the study, Gorn is careful to place the sport within the context of male culture. He renders the world of boxing so much more understandable because he chooses to deal directly with such notions as masculinity, honor, physical prowess, rites of violence, and male bonding. He describes, for instance, how working-class men in Antebellum American cities were compelled to find evidence of their masculinity in the saloon-centered bachelor subculture rather than in the home or workplace. The changing nature of labor in the nineteenth century had undermined masculinity and forced many workers to seek "a more elemental concept of manhood" (One that stressed toughness, ferocity, prowess, and honor) in boxing and other leisure-time activities. Tellingly, Gorn notes that around the turn of the century the middle and upper classes also "turned to leisure as a source of masculine identity. Sports for both participants and spectators became a realm of manly self-assertion, a closed male world that initiated them into the life of action, a place to escape from demanding women."

Gorn's analysis of the cultural significance of boxing is counterbalanced by an unusually vivid and compelling account of some of the sports most famous fighters and well-known bouts. In fact, another strength of the book is Gorn's ability to blend solid historical/sociological interpretation with more popular and colorful descriptions of those boxers who became household names in prize fighting circles. Gorn brings nineteenth century prize fighting alive with his knack for storytelling. He furnishes a delightful synopsis of the career of "Yankee" Sullivan, one of the three great champions of the Antebellum era who suffered a tragic death in a California jail cell at the age of forty-five. He charts the rise and fall of Tom Hyer, the great native-born American champion who fought Sullivan in one of boxing's most famous bouts at Still Pond Heights, Maryland in 1849. He also gives a fine account of John Morrissey's triumphant boxing career and future success as one of America's wealthiest gambler-businessmen. Last, and perhaps most importantly, he provides an insightful analysis of America's first great sports celebrity, John L. Sullivan. Relying to an extent on Michael T. Isenberg's forthcoming biography on Sullivan, Gorn details the mythical-like hold Sullivan had on the American populace and how the champion's reign coincided with the larger commercialization of sport during the late nineteenth century. Gorn is at his absolute best, I think, when explaining the reasons for Sullivan's enormous popularity. He points out that Sullivan's mass appeal was a result, among other things, of the champion's natural and instinctive personality. The Boston Strong Boy typified the gilded

Age's love for high living and ostentatious displays of wealth in that he was passionately attached to "elegant clothes, expensive jewelry, the finest foods, the best cigars, and free-flowing champagne."

In all, *The Manly Art* is an extremely well crafted book that furnishes much-needed insights about bare-knuckle prize fighting in nineteenth-century America. Gorn artfully reveals the simultaneous fascination and disgust that people felt towards boxing, and the deep-seated emotional responses engendered by the sport. He captures the various meanings that prize fighting had for its participants and carefully details the ceremonies, rituals, and pageantry of the sport. *The Manly Art* is pure delight.

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