

Isenberg, Michael T. *John L. Sullivan and His America*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988. Pp. 465. Notes, index, bibliographic essay, photographs, appendix. \$24.95.

John L. Sullivan made a million dollars. This fact may fail to impress modern-day fans accustomed to athletes earning that sort of money, but Sullivan did it a century ago, when laborers earned perhaps six hundred dollars per year, and when the very idea of sport as a vocation was quite new. Sullivan was one of the best known, most beloved and most reviled men of his era. It is remarkable that until now there has been no reliable account of his life and times. Michael Isenberg's new biography of the "Boston Strong Boy" is therefore a very welcome new addition to the ongoing project of reconstructing American sport history.

As biography, *John L. Sullivan and His America* is a fine book. Isenberg was faced with the difficult task of writing the life of a man who did very little writing himself. A handful of letters, a ghostwritten autobiography, the absence of memoirs or diaries or reminiscences forced the author to rely on the impressions of others. Some of Sullivan's contemporaries commented on him in their private writings, but for the most part, we can only know him through what was left behind by the popular press. So Isenberg combed with incredible meticulousness the pages of journals like the *National Police Gazette*, the working class newspapers of New York and Boston where Sullivan spent most of his time, and eyewitness reports from New Orleans where his greatest fights were staged.

Such sources give an author only brief glimpses into the interior life of a man or woman, and it would be nice if we could know better the dynamics of Sullivan's personality, the demons that drove him, the loves and hatreds that structured his life. But the "champion of all champions," as one popular song called him, was the consummate public man, and it was his persona—the face he showed to the outside world—that made him interesting. Perhaps more than any American before him, Sullivan was a celebrity, one whose very existence depended on ratification by the popular media. It is the public Sullivan we come to know in Isenberg's pages, the man who beat all comers, starred in several horrendous stage productions, sparred before countless men in touring road shows, and had his personal life—including bankruptcy, alcoholism, wife-beating and divorce—paraded in the headlines.

As biography, this is a well-researched work. I suppose there are details to Sullivan's life that Isenberg missed, bits and pieces that some scholar somewhere will dredge up. But for telling the story of Sullivan and his career, Isenberg's scholarship is outstanding. Even those difficult to research sections on the champion's pre- and post-ring years are remarkably well fleshed out. Indeed, if Isenberg can be faulted, it is for occasionally threatening to get himself (and his readers) lost in a thicket of facts. At its worst, the author's unwillingness to spare us some of the more obscure details of the champion's life give his book a hagiographic tone, as if sheer volume of information proves his subject's importance.

For example, the chapters on Sullivan's sparring tours—in which he travelled with an entourage, hit a new town each night, and made a fortune challenging anyone in the house to stand before him for four rounds—give us remarkable glimpses into the development of the entertainment business in the late nineteenth century. This important achievement could have been strengthened, however, by placing these tours in a broader analytical context and using them to make statements about the commercialization of culture in this era. Instead, Isenberg becomes trapped into piling one example on another. He dutifully reports on virtually every stop along the way, even if nothing in particular happened, yet fails to emphasize sufficiently the larger point that Sullivan was an important player in a cultural process that turned leisure into consumable commodities. Boxing, in other words, became integrated into the "modernizing" process as depicted by Melvin Adelman; fights were becoming rationalized, repeatable, profitable spectacles. We need more analysis here on how this profound transformation of American popular culture came about, a transformation now discussed in a lengthy and growing secondary literature.

Moreover, although Isenberg acknowledges the cross-cutting tendencies of class, ethnicity and gender within American culture, he subordinates these to an assumed societal unity; America's social structure might have a few stress fractures, but no clean breaks. When Isenberg refers to "His (Sullivan's) America" in the title, it is to a nation that transcends particularistic divisions. The opening line of the book reads, "May, 1881: America was at peace, with the world and with itself." As an entire generation of social historians has shown, the two decades in which Sullivan strode across the national consciousness

were hardly ones of peace and unity in America, especially as class and ethnic schisms deepened. Yet Isenberg makes national harmony seem the dominant tone of the age, and his “life and times” approach transforms Sullivan into the embodiment of this colorful, upbeat era.

Sullivan *was* a national symbol; diverse individuals found in his deeds an expression of their lives. But his appeal was also more particularistic than Isenberg acknowledges. Women were only marginally interested in him; whatever he stood for, it profoundly had to do with defining masculinity for American men. Though a flag-waver, as Isenberg points out, Sullivan was also an ethnic champion, but the author might have plumbed a little deeper the wells of Irish resentment tapped by the champion, the ethnic sources of Sullivan’s racism, the meanings of patriotism for those on the margin, and the impact of Anglo-Saxon racism on the Irish. Finally, while the champion widened the audience for boxing as never before, he was from the working class, and his violent appeal was especially strong among men of his own social origins; it was the urban bachelor sub-culture that made and nourished Sullivan.

Isenberg’s interpretation of the champion is reminiscent of the old American Studies myth-symbol approach, which viewed great men or works of art as reflections of a holistic American culture. Sullivan thus becomes both the product and image of high-stepping times. But in light of recent scholarship in social history, it seems almost quaint to take cultural unanimity for granted, rather than seeing it as something at best tenuous, always threatened by struggle among classes, ethnic groups, men and women, and political constituencies, all of whom developed their own partially autonomous cultural world-views and ideologies. While Isenberg acknowledges important social divisions, he ultimately fails to make these part of his interpretation, thereby papering over the social dynamics that helped create modern sports.

So what is this judge’s decision? As biography, this is a fine work, well researched, and nicely told; the book achieves a good balance between Sullivan the boxer and Sullivan the man. As sport history Isenberg recaptures an extraordinarily important moment in the development of modern professional athletics. As social history, this is a valuable book, though not as innovative as it might have been, for it fails to place the champion in the largest contexts of meaning. In sum, *John L. Sullivan and His America* is a winner, not cute or fancy, but a contender who goes the distance.