

Smith, Toby. *Kid Blackie: Jack Dempsey's Colorado Days*. Ouray, CO: Wayfinder Press, 1987. Pp. 168. Photographs, bibliography. \$7.95.

It is difficult to write a full biography about almost any athlete. Few keep diaries, write letters or engage in the world of pen (or word processor) and paper (or floppy disc). For most of their lives they live in the present tense. Action not introspection is their strong suit. Deeds not words delineate their existence. This is especially true for professional boxers. Their literacy rate is probably the lowest, and their craft seems bent upon knocking down that low rate a bit more. To trace their glory years is to try to nail quicksilver to the wall. It involves the difficult process of untwining fact and myth. To recover a boxer's early years-his years of poverty and obscurity-is even more arduous. I sometimes think that training in archeology rather than history would be more appropriate. Perhaps Toby Smith is an archeologist-or has the soul of one-for in *Kid Blackie: Jack Dempsey's Colorado Days* he has written a thin book on the early years of the great heavyweight champion.

In some ways the book is rather unique. When I wrote my biography of Dempsey I treated Dempsey's Colorado days in one chapter. I was interested in bigger fish-the making of a legend. In areas where I rushed ahead, Smith lingers, taking time to look at the lay of the land and smell the mountain flowers. He believes that it was this land that shaped the character of Dempsey. He says so repeatedly: "Sportsmanship, courage, pride, patriotism, resourcefulness and determination all were characteristics that Dempsey acquired in Colorado's Rockies" (pp. 9-10). And: "To understand Jack Dempsey, one must understand his early days in Colorado . . ." (p. 10). I'm sure this second statement is true; how could one doubt that any person's childhood is important to his development. As for the first statement, it also may be true, although Smith does not deal much with those characteristics after his brief introduction. The statement serves more as a justification of his biography than as an organizational theme. Actually, the book does not need that elaborate and unprovable justification. As it stands, it is a wonderful tour of old Colorado replete with railroad and mining towns and dusty, faded memories.

Like an archeologist, Smith digs deeply into Colorado's and Dempsey's past. He unearths some interesting nuggets. Concerning Cripple Creek, for example: "In 1895 the only bullfight ever staged in the United States took place nearby. Groucho Marx once drove a grocery wagon in Cripple. And Texas Guinan . . . played the organ at an area church" (p. 77). Even more interesting are the people Smith found who knew Dempsey during the fighter's Colorado days. They are

old now, and their remembrances are more quaint than revealing. The Dempsey they recall has the sheen of his championship years. Still it is nice to hear their voices as they remember their brush with greatness. One voice, however, has the ring of truth. Joe Vanderwalker of Victor remembered a less than stained-glass Dempsey: "I think most people here felt he was kind of a spoiled kid. At least back then. Dempsey may not have been like that later, but I do know that son of a gun never came back to Victor."

The stories of old Colorado and the interviews comprise the heart of *Kid Blackie*. Much of the rest is filler from several older biographies of Dempsey. How much truth there is in the stories would be impossible to say. Like much of Dempsey's life, it is beyond recovery. This is not to take anything from Smith's fine book. It is not aimed at scholars; it is meant for the curious reader. And next time I drive across Colorado I plan to have the book by my side. I hope to see the places and hear the voices that Smith writes about.

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