

From Adulation to Persecution and Back: Australian Boxer Les Darcy in America 1916-1917

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Les Darcy departed from Australia in October 1916, determined to make his fortune in America and officially become middleweight and/or heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Until that moment, he was the darling of boxing fans in Australia, conqueror of all the top American imports, and the main drawcard for Snowy Baker's Stadiums Ltd. Literally overnight, public opinion and the Australian press turned against Darcy, and he quickly was branded a "shirker". He had left the country illegally as a stowaway the day before the first Australian conscription referendum and four days prior to his 21st birthday. It is this combination of factors which makes Darcy such an intriguing individual to examine against the backdrop of wartime Australia and America, and it is in this context that his experiences transcend sport and illuminate aspects of the social history of his time.¹ Darcy had unwittingly embarked on an emotional roller-coaster by leaving Australia, and during the last seven months of his short life he would experience both adulation and persecution outside the boxing ring.

Conscription was a bitterly emotive issue in Australia, and Darcy's failure to enlist when arguably the fittest and best known athlete of his day aroused considerable debate before he left for America, and made way for much condemnation after he had gone.² Darcy's experience provides an opportunity to examine the role of sport in two societies existing in a belligerent world. Australia entered World War I on 4 August 1914, and as the hostilities progressed, the country became increasingly divided in its enthusiasm and commitment to the great conflagration. For many middle-class opinion makers, Darcy and his departure epitomized a lack of commitment from the working

1. The authors wish to thank John O'Hara (University of Western Sydney-Macarthur) for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article. They also appreciated the constructive feedback offered by reviewers of the *Journal of Sport History*.

2. For a discussion of this issue in the Australian context, see Murray G. Phillips and Katharine Moore, "The Champion Boxer Les Darcy: A Victim of Class Conflict and Sectarian Bitterness in Australia During the First World War," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Volume 11, Number 1, April 1994: 102-114.

class and symbolized ambivalence by the Catholic community to the war. His death and subsequent funeral in Australia highlighted a society racked by class conflict and sectarianism. When he first arrived in America the country was still officially neutral in the Great War but, while Darcy was attempting to promote his boxing career, there was growing pressure to join the Allied cause. In April 1917, Congress formalized a state of hostility between the United States and the Central Powers. Against this background of changing political agendas, Darcy's fortunes in America will be examined.

James Leslie Darcy was born on 31 October 1895 at Stradbroke, New South Wales. He was the second child of 11 born to Edward Darcy and Margaret (O'Rourke) Darcy, both offspring of Irish immigrants. The family always struggled for money, and from an early age, Les was its principal breadwinner, eventually becoming an apprentice blacksmith while continuing with his boxing after hours. In a few years, Darcy was able to buy off his indenture and train full time. and by early 1915 he was the main gate attraction for boxing cards in Sydney. Like many in his sport in this era, Darcy fought often, usually every few weeks. By October 1916 he had had 50 contests, winning 46, and was Australian middleweight and heavyweight champion. Despite having beaten all the imported American claimants to the disputed world middleweight crown. Darcy's feats were not recognized in the United States, and he became convinced that larger purses and an official world title were waiting for him there. Events at home were also contributing to his restlessness.

The conscription issue provides a useful framework for understanding the various domestic influences acting on Les Darcy. After the costly Allied offensive in France in July 1916, the Australian government was desperate to fulfill its promised high quota of overseas volunteers. Because he was underage. Darcy required parental consent to enlist. During his visit to Brisbane for a bout in August, Darcy did offer his services, conditional on his mother agreeing. The Brisbane *Daily Standard* reported that Darcy had enlisted on 14 August and that this announcement had evoked ringing cheers when he and his manager, Mick Hawkins, appeared at a Stadium recruiting rally that night.³ This would have been a major propaganda coup for the Queensland Recruiting Committee since the Labor state government was anti-conscriptionist, but Margaret Darcy refused to give her permission for her son to enlist. The matter did not end there. Although it is unclear who made the suggestion, promoter Snowy Baker declared on 24 August that after Darcy's current three fight contract expired with Stadiums Ltd., he would be given no more contests until he enlisted. As Baker recalled it, "Darcy was not only agreeable, but anxious, that this condition should be made."⁴ Darcy's next bout was scheduled for 9 September, against the American George Chip. On 30 August, Australian Prime Minister Hughes

3. "Noisy Recruiting Rally," *Daily Standard* [Brisbane, Australia], 15 August 1916: 5. Darcy was under contract to Stadiums Ltd., and recruiting rallies were part of the company's contribution to the Australian war effort.

4. "Les Darcy—Ultimatum From Stadium Authorities," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* [Newcastle, Australia], 25 August 1916: 3.

announced that a national referendum on the conscription question would be held on 28 October. Thus began one of the most bitter and internecine debates in Australian history, and among the most vigorous campaigners was the prime minister himself. Darcy soon became a target for the wrath of the conscriptionists.

Although under no legal obligation to volunteer, Darcy had to endure psychological coercion from many people who believed it was his duty to do so. White feathers began to arrive along with his fan mail. Darcy was engaged in a lucrative profession, and his sense of urgency about placing his many dependents beyond want was clear in his oft-repeated statement that he would join up once he had secured his family's financial future. The only way he could do that was to box then—in his prime. But by keeping himself in the spotlight on Stadium Ltd. bills, Darcy remained a target for wartime propaganda. After his death, the Sydney *Truth* published a letter from one exasperated reader: "Really, to hear people speak, you would think Les Darcy was THE ONLY SINGLE MAN who did not go, and had he gone would have been able to do the fighting on his own."⁵ There were thousands of men in a similar situation, but Darcy was singled out and pursued with considerable enthusiasm by the pro-conscriptionist forces in Australia.

The year previously, 1915, the American promoter Jack Kearns had been very anxious for Darcy to box under his management in the United States. Kearns and others regularly wrote to Darcy offering him large sums of money if he would come to America. In response to this, Stadiums Ltd., which would have been badly damaged had Darcy left their employ, signed him to fight more often and began a series of short-term contracts with the boxer. On reflection, irony is a theme which permeates the last two years of Darcy's life, and his eventual departure for America in 1916 provides a good example. Had he gone overseas in 1915, he would have been able to leave the country openly, holding a passport. But within the year, the Australian government had legislated to restrict the movements of eligible men, and Darcy's application for a passport was refused on more than one occasion. So he decided to leave anyway, and had to stow away on a ship using an assumed name. It appeared to be the action of a desperate man. Darcy's imminent twenty-first birthday, when he would have no further protection from enlistment, appeared to be of greater concern to him than the result of the approaching conscription referendum. The proximity of these events to each other was conveniently noted by his detractors once Darcy had left Australia.

It is unclear with whom the boxer discussed his departure, but logically his longtime trainer and friend Mick Hawkins would have been aware of his plans. Yet he stowed away with E.T. (Tim) O'Sullivan, a man loosely linked with Sydney boxing and racing, not at all intimate with Darcy's circle. This curious decision, the first in a series which had such tragic consequences for the boxer, has never been thoroughly explained. Many years later, Hawkins told a newspa-

5. "Fairplay a Jewel," *Truth* [Sydney, Australia], 22 July 1917: 4.

per reporter he was on his way to join Darcy when he received word his father had died.⁶ Hawkins returned to Sydney, and Darcy left him the fare to travel as soon as possible. In early January 1917, Hawkins sailed for America,⁷ where he found Darcy in a situation which had become very confusing and in a country which was increasingly hostile towards the Australian. The reasons for that were quite complex.

The vessel containing Darcy and O'Sullivan had sailed from Newcastle, Australia to Chile, and from there the pair joined another ship bound for New York. They landed in America just before Christmas 1916, having had nearly 60 days at sea. Darcy's impressive ring reputation had preceded him, and there was considerable interest in his arrival. Having gained almost 30 pounds on the trip,⁸ Darcy was eager to get training and arrange some contests. But not all his publicity was positive. Once his disappearance from Australia had been confirmed, initial suggestions were made that Darcy had committed suicide, was being held for ransom on a pirate ship, or had been kidnapped by unscrupulous American promoters. When it was revealed he had left the country of his own free will, many Australians turned against him. The Sydney press generally condemned Darcy's action, but it was left to Hugh McIntosh's *Sunday Times*, a pro-conscriptionist publication, to launch the most vitriolic attack. Under the bold headline "Cold-Footed Les Darcy Bolts From Australia to Escape Home Defence," the paper suggested that his property should be seized by the government under the War Precautions Act. And it went further: "...the Commonwealth [federal government] might reasonably request that the United States will refuse permission to Darcy to land. He can be barred quite easily as an undesirable immigrant. If you can conceive an immigrant more undesirable than a disloyal pugilist with a yellow streak, your imagination is tine."⁹

This is the most extreme example of condemnation which appeared in the Australian press, but its impact was felt in America even before Darcy arrived. He had barely stepped off the ship in New York when he made this statement to the local papers: "Hugh McIntosh was arranging to take me out of the country [early in 1916]. When he thought others were going to do it, he set about preventing my going away."¹⁰ In spite of McIntosh's connection with Stadiums Ltd. as its previous owner, and his ability to influence Darcy's boxing future in Australia, this statement would indicate the boxer had a definite view of who was making things difficult for him at home. He also understood that news of his surreptitious departure had reached America, and he sought to refute the accusation that would haunt him to his death. "The first words out of Darcy's mouth formed a protest against the insinuation that he was a "slacker" or

6. "Darcy Died From Poisoning," *The Sporting Globe* [Melbourne, Australia], 13 January 1954: 5.

7. *Newcastle Morning Herald* [Newcastle, Australia], 4 January 1917: 3.

8. Raymond Swanwick, *Les Darcy: Australia's Golden Boy of Boxing* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1965): 198.

9. "Cold-Footed Les Darcy Bolts From Australia To Escape Home Defence," *Sunday Times* [Sydney, Australia], 19 November 1916: 3.

10. "Les Darcy Insists That He Is Not a Shirker," *New York World*, 24 December 1916: 13.

“shirker”.¹¹ He explained he wanted to have three or four bouts in America, and then go to Canada or England to enlist. While the purses in the United States would be more lucrative than those in Australia, Darcy was extremely wary of taking on any of the managers who now flocked around him offering their services.

There are many areas of confusion concerning Darcy’s months in America, but none more so than his relationship with Tim O’Sullivan. On their arrival in New York it was generally assumed that O’Sullivan was Darcy’s manager and trainer, but various newspaper reports offer contradictory evidence on this matter. O’Sullivan later insisted that he and Darcy had signed a contract while en route to New York, but that the document had been lost. The agreement allegedly guaranteed O’Sullivan one-third of Darcy’s earnings for three years.¹² This arrangement seems unlikely with Mick Hawkins due to come to America shortly; however it is clear that O’Sullivan saw himself in the role of Darcy’s manager and acted appropriately, adding to the confusion in several instances.

Tex Rickard, the well-known west coast promoter, had spent a considerable sum of money trying to locate Darcy while at sea, and he was eager to sign the boxer for a contest in Madison Square Garden. Offers were being thrust at Darcy from all directions, but he made it known he first wished to box Georges Carpentier, the heavyweight champion of Europe who was currently serving in the French forces. This was the bout Rickard was trying to arrange. At the same time, Darcy was listening to Jack Kearns, Jack Curley, and Grant Hugh Browne, among others, propose various opponents and purses. As the *New York Herald* explained it: “Challenges have been hurled right and left at the Australian, for all the boxers and managers realize that a loser’s end in the first bout with Darcy will be fatter than the ordinary winner’s guarantee.”¹³ It may have all been flattering for Darcy, but he was ill-equipped to cope with the hard-nosed factional world of boxing promotion in the United States.

The America Darcy had arrived in was still officially neutral in the Great War, but by late 1916 the United States was becoming convinced of the need for it to enter the conflict. As in Australia, American newspapers argued the pros and cons of involvement in the war as well as the merits of conscription. Some, like the *New York Tribune*, took a very strong stand on Darcy’s presence in the United States, and its reprinting, of articles from the Australian *Sunday Times* and *The Referee* indicates a link with McIntosh’s press. By contrast, the *New York World* expressed more support for Darcy, although it is obvious the exact circumstances surrounding his departure from Australia confused both writers and readers alike. But fans were eager to see Darcy fight. Many states had declared professional boxing illegal at this time, but New York was not one of them. Its governor had strong views on the sport, however, and the part played

11. "Tex Rickard Ropes Les Darcy, The Human Fighting Machine," *New York World*, 24 December 1916: 13.

12. "Darcy-O' Sullivan Compact—O'Sullivan's Story," *The Referee* [Sydney, Australia], 4 July 1917:8.

13. "\$20,000 Little to 'Les' Darcy," *New York Herald*, 28 December 1916:7.

by Charles Whitman was crucial in Darcy's failure to box anywhere in America. Whitman's actions, as well as his possible motives, require closer examination.

Circumstances beyond an individual's control can have a significant impact on a person's life, and, in Darcy's case, the situation in New York contributed directly to his short and unhappy stay in that state. With several interest groups trying to sign the boxer to a contract, a month passed and no progress was made towards a firm date for a contest. But there was growing concern that Darcy had deserted, and W.O. McGeehan's column in the *New York Tribune* contained regular articles which clearly indicate information was provided to him from a source in Australia. His offering of 26 December 1916 is most enlightening. Titled 'The Dutiful Grandchild or Les Slacker's Slick Side,'" McGeehan fabricated a five-reel movie script about Darcy's life; the opening scene sets the sarcastic tone for the piece:

Les Slacker, a poor but ambitious pugilist, is riding through the streets of Sydney, Australia, in his last year's limousine. He has tasted nothing but food all day and has nothing to protect him from the cold but a sealskin coat of simple cut. The thought that he has but a few hundred thousand pounds standing between himself and starvation causes him to register sorrow.¹⁴

With that single paragraph the paper ridiculed all of Darcy's reasons for being in America.

McGeehan continued to raise questions about Darcy's credibility in a series of fictitious letters home from Les Slacker to his mate 'Awkins—the real-life equivalents are obvious.¹⁵ Neither McGeehan nor the *Tribune* backed away from criticizing Darcy's actions, and while other elements of the press were less pointed in their attack, the question of the circumstances of the boxer's departure from Australia remained unresolved. It appears, however, that Governor Whitman had made up his mind on the matter, and he proceeded to act.

Whitman was not a fan of boxing, and he had attempted to get legislation passed which would prohibit the sport in his state. An event on 30 January 1917 in Albany strengthened the Governor's resolve to get rid of boxing. Forty seconds into his first professional bout, Stephen McDonald suffered a blow over the heart which killed him. His opponent was cleared of a manslaughter charge in the coroner's inquest, but the doctor who had examined McDonald before the bout was qualified although not licensed." Two members of the supervising State Athletic Commission had been at ringside, and had allowed the program to proceed following the fatality. Although he had personally appointed the members of the Commission.

14. "The Dutiful Grandchild or Les Slacker's Slick Side," *New York Tribune*, 26 December 1916: 12. The issue of Christmas Day 1916 reprinted sections of the condemnatory article from the Sydney *Sunday Times*.

15. See "A Slacker's Letter home (Dictated)," *New York Tribune*, 28 December 1916: 12; "A Slacker's Letter Home (Dictated)," *New York Tribune*, 17 January 1917: 14; and "A Slacker's Letter Home (Dictated)," *New York Tribune*, 22 February 1917: 12.

16. "Pugilist is Discharged," *New York Times*, 3 February 1917: 10.

Whitman had not been pleased with their performance, and he called for the prohibition of boxing and the abolition of the governing body.¹⁷

As the days passed and no word was received from Carpentier, Darcy decided to sign on for a vaudeville tour around the eastern states; he had previously undertaken similar activity in Australia. He joined Freeman Bernstein's Burlesque Show, agreeing to be paid \$2,500 per week for 15 weeks,¹⁸ with a clause allowing him to be released from his contract to box with one week's notice. For his part, Darcy was to spar with Freddie Gilmour at the various venues, and the tour began on 11 January in Connecticut. The troupe ran into trouble at its next stop, New Jersey, where its engagement was cancelled since it was against state law for a boxer to appear in any kind of stage show.¹⁹ Hardly having a successful tour, Darcy left the group on 11 February to train full time. By then, another piece in the complicated American scene had fallen into place: the question of who controlled Madison Square Garden, the most lucrative site for a boxing match.

One important factor which influenced Darcy but which he could not have anticipated involved the granting of a boxing license for the Garden. There was intense lobbying for the permit, which is quite understandable given the potential profits involved by securing it. On 30 December 1916, the chairman of the State Athletic Commission (also called the Boxing Commission), Frederick Wenck, was accused of soliciting a bribe of \$1,000 in connection with the granting of the license.²⁰ He demanded a public hearing over the allegation, but the credibility of the Commission was seriously damaged. Formal charges were filed on 2 January 1917,²¹ and the case was heard in February. Charles Whitman was of the opinion that many of the men promoting bouts in New York were allied with undesirable elements, and with the Governor calling for the repeal of the Frawley Boxing Law it was possible that Wenck could find himself legislated out of office before a decision was reached.²² As newspaperman George Daly saw it, "the administration of boxing has been loose, to say the least. Rules have been made only to be broken or evaded. The commission apparently is held in light respect by those who plotted and planned to share a dollar here and skim a dollar there."²³

Grant Hugh Browne, who had amassed a considerable fortune supplying horses for the Italian war effort and who was the athletic director of the Garden, was granted the license to hold boxing bouts in the venue at the end of January.

17. "Whitman Wants New Boxing Law," *New York Times*, 1 February 1917: 7.

18. "Darcy Not to Get \$5,000 a Week," *New York Times*, 2 January 1917: 12. Darcy had done similar work in Australia, where boxing or sparring was a regular component of vaudeville shows.

19. "Les Darcy Runs Afoul of the Law in Jersey," *New York World*, 16 January 1917: 6.

20. "Wenck, Boxing Head, Charged With Bribery," *New York Tribune*, 30 December 1916: 4.

21. "Chairman of State Boxing Commission Say That Public hearing Will Clear Decks," *New York World*, 3 January 1917: 8.

22. "Governor to Ask Repeal of Boxing," *New York World*, 31 January 1917: 1.

23. "Boxing Needs Guiding Hand, Not Tearing Out of All Props," *New York World*, 4 February 1917: 19.

Tex Rickard, who had hoped to break into the lucrative east coast market by gaining the lease, appears to have lost interest in Darcy at this point. since he only wished to stage the proposed bout between the Australian and Carpentier in the Garden. On 30 January, the *New York Times* announced Les Darcy would meet Al McCoy, generally recognized as the middleweight world champion. on 5 March. All seemed in readiness. But that very evening the death of Stephen McDonald in a ring in the state capital cast a dark shadow over the future of boxing in New York. It was only a few short weeks before Darcy learned through personal experience the gravity of the situation. One newspaper editorial tried to make the distinction between boxing as a sport, which it supported. and boxing as a business, which it condemned.²⁴ But in the end the New York authorities found it difficult to discern the difference, and the Governor had the final say on the Australian's fate in that state.

Darcy returned to New York in mid February and began training at Goshen, Browne's headquarters. In a postcard to his mentor in Sydney. Maurice O'Sullivan (no relation to Tim O'Sullivan), Darcy described both the facilities and the promoter in positive terms: it was "a dandy home and he is a swell fellow"²⁵ he wrote. He seemed in good spirits, finally getting ready for his American debut, but that did not go to plan either. Shortly after the announcement of the Darcy-McCoy bout, the managers of Jack Dillon argued that their boxer had a verbal agreement with McCoy which had to be honored before he faced Darcy. When this appeared to be the way events would proceed, it was announced that Darcy would box against Mike Gibbons over ten rounds in Milwaukee on 10 April.²⁶ Tim O'Sullivan had signed the articles of agreement on the boxer's behalf, so the sporting world was rocked the next day when Darcy declared O'Sullivan had no right to act for him. His explanatory letter to the local press concluded: "No one has authority to sign articles for me without my approval. Mr. E.T. O'Sullivan is no longer in my employ. either as trainer or otherwise, having been dismissed Tuesday Feb. 13."²⁷ The exact nature and conditions of the agreement between O'Sullivan and Darcy have remained a contentious issue to this day.

When the State Athletic Commission decided, on 21 February, that McCoy must box Dillon before he faced Darcy, Browne immediately signed Dillon to box Darcy in Madison Square Garden on 5 March.²⁸ The Commission then ruled that Dillon fulfill his contract with McCoy, so Darcy once again had no opponent. Browne claimed that McCoy's arrangement for a bout with Darcy was nullified with the first ruling of the Boxing Commission and insisted that Dillon would box the Australian.²⁹ With trainer Mick Hawkins preparing him

24. "Boxing for Money is Vicious." *New York Times*, 1 February 1917: 10.

25. Postcard to Maurice O'Sullivan from Les Darcy, 20 February 1917. From the collection donated by Hon. Maurice O'Sullivan, Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, Melbourne.

26. "Darcy and Mike Gibbons Matched to Box on April 10," *New York World*, 15 February 1917:10.

27. "Darcy Repudiates Match With Gibbons," *New York World*, 16 February 1917:8.

28. "Dillon Darcy's Opponent," *New York Times*, 21 February 1917:8.

29. "Darcy Opponent in Doubt," *New York Times*, 25 February 1917:3.

for the contest, Darcy looked to 5 March as the start of his campaign towards the world championship—whoever his opponent.

In order to make some sense of this ludicrous situation, legal opinion was sought, and in a lengthy letter to the State Boxing Commission on 1 March the Deputy Attorney General of New York advised that body not to interfere with the 10-round bout between Dillon and Darcy which was scheduled for Madison Square Garden on 5 March.³⁰ The Commission followed the advice, but Governor Whitman again sought information on Darcy's departure from Australia with a view to stopping the bout himself if necessary. As the *New York World* explained it: "There are two reasons why the Governor has undertaken to interfere in this battle. One is that Darcy is said to have run away from his home in Australia to avoid military duty; the other is that the Governor regards the arrangements for this bout as an open expression of contempt for his formal request to the legislature that the Boxing Law be repealed."³¹ Counsel for the Governor obtained a copy of the Australian Defense Act in an attempt to determine if Darcy was an absconder from military duty.³²

The blow fell on 2 March. Governor Whitman banned the Australian from boxing Dillon with these words:

...Darcy, so I am informed, is a runaway from his own country. In disguise and under an alias, he left his native land because he was afraid to fight in the cause for which his fellow-countrymen are sacrificing their lives. He prefers to give a brutal exhibition at some personal risk for a purse of \$30,000. I believe that the citizens of this State will support the Governor in his insistence that this thing shall not be permitted in New York.³³

Darcy was stunned by this development, and Browne immediately claimed that the Governor had been misinformed on several accounts. When asked to comment on his action, Whitman "emphasized the fact that he believed in these times a mistake would be made not only from a standpoint of boxing but from a patriotic sense if Darcy were permitted to box."³⁴ With Congress about to be recalled to vote on America's entry into the war, patriotism was running high. Whitman believed Darcy had misled the American public about the state of his finances at home, that his departure had adversely affected the number of voluntary recruits into the Australian forces, and that if he returned home he could be jailed for six months for evading military duty. The Governor's information was coming from someone with intimate knowledge about Australia, and, at various times. Prime Minister Hughes, Hugh McIntosh, Tim O'Sullivan and Snowy Baker have all been accused of sabotaging Darcy's plans in

30. "Darcy-Dillon Bout Legal," *New York Times*, 1 March 1917:10.

31. "Governor Now Lifts His Hand Against Darcy," *New York World*, 28 February 1917:6.

32. "Governor May Still Hold Up Darcy in Ring," *New York World*, 1 March 1917:10. This crucial question was never definitively answered at the time, and has been the subject of debate since.

33. "Ban Put on Darcy Bout by Governor," *New York Times*, 3 March 1917:10.

34. "Governor Brands Darcy a Slacker and Prohibits Bout," *New York World*, 3 March 1917:6.

America. Whoever it was, Whitman trusted the source. for when he met with Darcy, Hawkins and Grant Hugh Browne on 8 March to discuss the decision, he was adamant that it was irrevocable. The obvious singling out of Darcy as an example was commented on in the contemporary press. for many British actors continued to work in America. and Englishman Freddie Welsh was busy boxing regularly around the United States while his own country had enforced conscription. Yet only Darcy was banned in New York. Australian boxer Mick King is another study in contrasting treatment by the authorities. He left Australia as a stowaway in 1916, fought in the United States in 1917, was fined on his return to Australia in mid 1917, and then went back to America and boxed there and in Canada up to 1920. Years later, Mick Hawkins recalled that during their meeting with the Governor, Whitman said, "I haven't got anything against you, Darcy ...but there's a guy named McIntosh who must have a big pull back in Australia. I just can't allow you to fight."³⁵ Hawkins' obvious bias must be considered here, but it is certain that information supplied from Australia was having a significant effect on Whitman.

Although it occurred too late to affect Darcy's case, the reputation of boxing in New York sunk even lower when Frederick Wenck was removed from office by the Governor because he was unfit in "character and previous dealings with others."³⁶ This followed closely on the investigation of the validity of Browne's lease for Madison Square Garden. so overall, professional boxing in New York faced an uncertain future. There was nothing more Darcy could do about fighting in the state, so he moved on. The "thousand legged jinx"³⁷ which one sportswriter claimed dogged Darcy from the moment he got to America went with him. The euphoria of the boxer's arrival had worn off quickly, and the press became increasingly unsympathetic to his cause. The *New York World* prophetically observed: "In all the history of the ring there has never been a man in Darcy's predicament. One of the greatest boxers that ever visited America, and surely the greatest drawing card, he is compelled to pick up his traps and leave the very centre of fistiana to try his luck in other states. Should Governor Whitman's official disapproval spread beyond New York, then indeed will Darcy begin to wish that he had never stowed away out of Australia to avoid military duty."³⁸

Darcy's own thoughts on the events in New York are contained in two letters he wrote home: one to Snowy Baker on 15 March, and the second to Maurice O'Sullivan five days later. It is clear from the letter to Baker. which was published in *The Referee*, that Darcy was looking for an invitation from Stadiums Ltd. to return home and make amends: "If you thought it worth while. and the military authorities are not going to do anything. I would be glad to have an offer from you. I could box for you and give a percentage of my earnings to

35. "Darcy Died From Poisoning," *The Sporting Globe* [Melbourne, Australia], 13 January 1954:5.

36. "Whitman Removes Wenck," *New York Tribune*, 17 March 1917:16.

37. "Jabs and Jibes by Igoe," *New York World*, 4 March 1917:17.

38. "Jabs and Jibes by Igoe," *New York World*, 11 March 1917:17.

the different funds for the war while I was in Australia.”³⁹ Darcy’s long letter to Maurice O’Sullivan included a confused account of the bout scheduled for Madison Square Garden which was stopped by Governor Whitman, and contained a frank admission: “I would box anybody to get started... I have one ambition that is to get rich and get rich quick.”⁴⁰ To have any chance of doing that, Darcy had to set his sights on other states, but where he looked first, Wisconsin, also presented him with difficulties. Tim O’Sullivan had signed Darcy for two bouts in Milwaukee, an action which the boxer repudiated. The state boxing authorities were asked to untangle the affair for Darcy, and he agreed to face any opponent they named; the Board chose not to act on the matter. Despite this, a schedule devised by Darcy soon fell into place: Cleveland on 19 April, New Orleans on 4 May against Jack Dillon, and Milwaukee on 19 May. But on 25 March, the Governor of Ohio announced Darcy would be banned from fighting in his state. Passing through Chicago when the United States declared war on Germany, Darcy took the oath of allegiance and signified his intention of becoming an American. His comments were widely reported in the newspapers: “I like the United States, although I can’t say that the United States has shown any great liking for me ...and at the earliest opportunity it is my intention to become a naturalized citizen.”⁴¹

But even this was not enough to secure a bout. On 13 April Governor Pleasant barred Darcy from boxing in Louisiana, citing the receipt of numerous appeals for cancellation from patriotic persons throughout the state as his reason. The Governor’s telegram to the manager of the Louisiana Auditorium read: “Please cancel boxing match between Darcy and Smith. Make this request for public good. Let Darcy follow noble example of Georges Carpentier before seeking athletic engagements in Louisiana.”⁴²

In her enlightening reconstruction of Darcy’s movements in America, Ruth Park has effectively challenged the myth that the boxer spent the majority of his visit in a state of melancholy and depression, as only five weeks had passed since the ban in New York. She explains: “He must have been frustrated and infuriated at the injustice of it all, but he did not have his tail down. By environment and heredity, he belonged to a class which becomes with each knockback, more obstinate and bull-headed.”⁴³ Darcy moved on to Memphis. Here, at last, his fortunes seemed to change. Promoter Billy Haack had arranged a fight with Len Rolands, but before the mayor of Memphis moved to ban Darcy he granted

39. “Darcy Will Come Back—The Repentant Sinner,” *The Referee* [Sydney, Australia], 16 May 1917:8.

40. Personal letter to Maurice O’Sullivan from Les Darcy, 20 March 1917:5. From the collection donated by Hon. Maurice O’Sullivan. Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum.

41. “Darcy Would be U.S. Citizen,” *New York World*, 4 April 1917:8.

42. “Bars Darcy in Louisiana,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1917:11.

43. Ruth Park, “The Awful Day Les Darcy Died,” *The National Times* [Australia], 6 January 1979:31. This is the second of a two-part article which relates the trip Park and her husband D’Arcy Niland took through America in 1961 in search of the Darcy story. The latest person to retrace the Darcy trail is Peter Fenton, whose book *Les Darcy: The Legend of the Fighting Man* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia Pty. Limited) appeared in 1994. *Home Before Dark* (Australia: Viking, 1995) by Ruth Park and Rafe Champion, completes the documentation of the journey Park took with D’Arcy Niland in 1961.

the boxer a hearing. On 20 April, Darcy announced he would “enlist under the American colors if permission is given him by the military authorities to engage in several fights he has booked for next June and July.”⁴⁴ He joined the Reserve Aviation Corps of the United States Army, and was given two weeks’ leave to train for the bout. As the *New York World* observed: “No more can he be called a slacker.”⁴⁵

Darcy’s correspondence at this time reveals an admirable lack of vengeance, although he did admit in a letter to Maurice O’Sullivan, one of the last he wrote, that the opposition against him was organized. Darcy said of his banning in Missouri: “The Governor here is alright but Whittman [sic] got the Heads at Washington and got them to stop it the dirty dog.”⁴⁶ But when Darcy volunteered for military service, Whitman was quick to congratulate him, although for his own reasons: “I am very gratified that Les Darcy has enlisted, and I sincerely hope that others of the profession will follow his example, as I am quite sure that their services can be of greatest value to their country in her time of need.”⁴⁷ Whitman’s energetic attempts to prohibit boxing in New York stalled in the legislature in early May, which could only be cold comfort for Les Darcy who was then lying in hospital with infected teeth and tonsils. Virtually no information about Darcy’s condition was reported in the press until 20 May, by which time septicaemia and pneumonia had developed. He died in Memphis on 24 May.

Almost immediately, elements of the Darcy mythology appeared in the press. It was suggested that he had died of a broken heart, that he had caught a fatal cold while training with the aviation corps, that he was hounded to his death, and that he was poisoned in America before he could demonstrate his abilities in the ring. It seemed Darcy’s martyrdom was complete with a lonely death far from home, and a degree of social conscience in America resulted in unprecedented honours for a foreign sportsman. A committee was formed in Memphis to arrange for the embalming and transport of the body to San Francisco from where it was returned to Australia by ship on 5 June. “What a strange prank of fate that death should unexpectedly overtake this unhappy boy while his countrymen were setting up the cry that he was afraid to face death in the trenches.”⁴⁸ Always a paper which had shown some sympathy with Darcy’s plight, the *New York World* published this by way of summary of his time in America:

44. “Darcy Would Enlist Here,” *New York Times*, 21 April 1917:14.

45. “Les Darcy Now a Real Soldier,” *New York World*, 24 April 1917:10.

46. Personal letter to Maurice O’Sullivan from Les Darcy, 15 April 1917:1. From the collection donated by Hon. Maurice O’Sullivan, Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum.

47. “Whitman Determined To End All Boxing: Praise for Darcy,” *New York Tribune*, 24 April 1917:13.

48. “Jabs and Jibes by Igoe,” *New York World*, 27 May 1917:17.

Les Darcy was a child of misfortune. Cupidity, quite naturally, roused by golden bait and fanciful promises, added to inexperience and bad counsel, led to his putting himself in a false position from which there was no escape. He was no "slacker" at heart, else he would not have enlisted in the Aviation Corps: he was no physical coward, else he could not have reached the point he did in boxing. Barely have I heard such a general expression of sympathy on all sides at the death of a man, thousands of miles from his home, who only two months ago was so generally abused. It shows how quickly amends can be made by a straightforward act and how quickly anything which approaches persecution is resented. Darcy, a happy-go-lucky boy, with few advantages, was more to be pitied than condemned. His was a sad end.⁴⁹

Once word of Darcy's death reached Australia, recorded public opinion of him was transformed. During his months in America, only the *Sydney Truth* and *Sportsman* had stood up for the boxer. But as Australian writer Peter Corris has observed: "He was quickly forgiven by those who had sent him white feathers and elevated to hero status as if he had fought and died in the War."⁵⁰ Australia's premier sporting newspaper, the *Sydney Referee*, and in particular its boxing writer W.F. Corbett, had been critical of Darcy's departure and felt he got what he deserved in America by being prevented from boxing. Its issue of 30 May 1917 carried a front page write-up on the boxer's career and death, under the forgiving headline of "Inexpressibly Sad End."⁵¹ Ironically, Darcy was a wartime casualty, but he was not stopped by a bullet. It seemed in death, all was forgiven.

While this abrupt reversal of viewpoint was too much for some individuals to accept, praise and eulogies for Darcy poured forth from virtually all Australian newspapers. One reader of *The Referee* remarked: "How many of those who had a harsh word for the poor boy would have liked to withdraw it when they heard of his death?"⁵² Another way of doing penance appeared to be through explaining one's actions before the finger of blame was pointed. Tim O'Sullivan was the first to attempt to absolve himself in this manner. Knowing he was an obvious target for people's ire, O'Sullivan wrote a long letter to W.F. Corbett which was published in *The Referee* just after Darcy was buried in East Maitland in July. In it he blamed Darcy's so-called "friends" in America, and singled out sparring partner Freddie Gilmour as the main culprit. It is hard to comprehend Gilmour as a villain, but O'Sullivan had presented his side of the story clearly and logically.⁵³ Two other Sydney newspapers argued that the blame lay closer to home.

49. "Les Darcy," *New York World*, 28 May 1917:8.

50. Peter Corris, "A Winner Born To Lose," *The National Times* [Australia], 23 September 1978:19.

51. "Death of Les Darcy—Inexpressibly Sad End," *The Referee*, 30 May 1917:1.

52. "Tasmania and Darcy," *The Referee*, 27 June 1917:9.

53. "Darcy-O'Sullivan Compact—O'Sullivan's Story," *The Referee*, 4 July 1917:8.

As early as November 1916, the *Sydney Sportsman* had taken exception to the way elements in the local press, controlled by Hugh McIntosh, attacked Darcy's decision to depart. Its criticism of the *Sunday Times* and *The Referee* was steadfast. In January 1917 the *Sydney Sportsman* printed a front page article condemning the 'Putrid Penmen and Slimy Slanderers' who were persecuting Darcy. "While these denouncers of Darcy continue affirming that they are solely disgusted because Darcy did not enlist, it appears to us that they are more concerned because he did not stay in Sydney, and continue to be a meal ticket for the squealers and their friends."⁵⁴ Darcy's death brought the full force of the paper's vehemence on his detractors. "Not content with spitting their spleen locally, they cabled and wrote to America, where the prostituted pens of a pliant press were only too ready to 'yellow-journal' the foreigner, Darcy."⁵⁵ Once Darcy's body was back in Australia in late June, the *Sydney Truth* cancelled a regular column in order to publish correspondence concerning the boxer under the series title, "Only a Pug, and Only an Australian." It ran for a number of weeks and provides many examples of genuine public sympathy as well as continuing debate on the wisdom of Darcy's actions.⁵⁶ Many contributors sought to assign blame for Darcy's demise, and Snowy Baker's name figured quite prominently in this regard.

Baker had a great deal to lose by Darcy leaving Australia, and there is clear evidence that he was in contact with several newspapers in America. One of his first letters was published just as Darcy reached New York, and it provided plenty of fuel to the rumor mill which would plague the Australian. "There is talk, supposed to be in high authoritative circles, that something official will be done regarding a special order to have him returned to Australia, as they desire to make an example of a deserter who is so prominently before the public."⁵⁷ Articles printed in the *Truth* in July 1917 accusing him of obstructing Darcy in America led Baker to launch a libel suit, an action he dropped when the paper cleared him eight months later and an apology was printed in the *Sydney Sportsman*.⁵⁸

One person in particular tried to find out the truth about Darcy's fate in America—his mother. After corresponding with Margaret Darcy, Snowy Baker took the quite extraordinary step of asking to appear before an inquiry at Maitland to explain his position and answer questions about his influence in America. Baker had gone to Darcy's funeral, but as he related 30 years later, "on my arrival at the cemetery, boxer Dave Smith drew me aside and asked me not to go to the graveside as feeling was running so high against me that some of the unruly ones were threatening to dig a grave and bury me alive. I thought discretion

54. "Dingoes Snarling At Darcy," *Sydney Sportsman*, 17 January 1917:1.

55. "Death of Darcy—Butchered by Bunco-Steerers," *Sydney Sportsman*, 30 May 1917:1.

56. The column appeared each week from 1 July to 5 August 1917.

57. "Les Darcy Getting More Publicity Than He Wants," *New York World*, 27 December 1916:6.

58. "The Late les Darcy—Baker v. "Truth" Newspaper— "Apology," *Sydney Sportsman*, 2 February

1918: 4. The apology was also printed in *The Referee*, 30 January 1918:9.

the better part of valor and quietly withdrew.”⁵⁹ The Referee reported that Baker had tried to enlist in August 1917 for the third time and had been rejected once again due to injuries he had received in a car crash in 1915.⁶⁰ In October 1917, he travelled to Maitland to meet with the Les Darcy Memorial Committee and the boxer’s parents.

A detailed account of the proceedings appeared in *The Referee* on 31 October. Baker answered a series of questions, and proposed his own explanation of who was behind the campaign in America:

Mr. Baker admitted that he felt angry about the way that Darcy had left Australia, but that was forgotten, and he endeavored to assist him in every way possible in regard to getting matches in America. He was in no way responsible for the embargo that had been placed upon Darcy, but his idea was that Governor Whitman had his own reasons, and was not prompted by any person in Australia.⁶¹

The meeting ended inconclusively with a motion that the decision of the committee be held over until Baker had supplied copies of all letters and printed material sent from Stadiums Ltd. to the United States from the time Les Darcy left Australia until his body was brought back. No further reference to the issue has been located in *The Referee* but boxing writer Bill Lawless and Baker himself believed the outcome had been exoneration.⁶² In February 1918, Stadiums Ltd. closed its doors in Sydney, and in August, Baker left for America to seek his fortune in the motion picture business. By then, £320 had been collected by public subscription for the Les Darcy Memorial Fund and work began on the marble monument which was placed over the boxer’s grave.

Throughout these events. Hugh McIntosh remained a powerful figure moving in the background. The founder and owner of Stadiums Ltd., McIntosh sold his financial interest in the company in 1913 to a group of men headed by Snowy Baker. But his influence remained. By 1916, McIntosh owned the *Sunday Times* newspaper group and the Tivoli vaudeville circuit; he was eager for Darcy to box in the United States under his management. As Mick Hawkins recalled it, “just after the Chip fight [30 September 1916], H.D. McIntosh produced a contract for Les to go to America. It provided a guarantee of £6,000 for a six months’ vaudeville tour and three fights... It was chicken feed in my book. I wanted £6,000 for one title fight, and would have got it.”⁶³ Hawkins told McIntosh the contract was unacceptable. “H.D. [“Huge Deal”]

59. “Tragedy of Les Darcy,” *The Sporting Globe*, 6 September 1947:6.

60. “Snowy Baker Offers As Recruit.” *The Referee*, 1 August 1917:9. Baker had been an outstanding sportsman in his youth, excelling at rugby union, swimming, athletics and water polo. He won a silver medal in boxing at the 1908 Olympics.

61. “Darcy and the Stadium,” *The Referee*, 31 October 1917:9.

62. Solar Plexus (Will Lawless), *The Darcy Story* (Sydney: New Century Press. n.d.): 60: “Tragedy of Les Darcy,” *The Sporting Globe*, 6 September 1947:6.

63. “Darcy Died From Poisoning,” *The Sporting Globe*, op. cit.: 5.

was as mad as a hornet. Very few people bucked H.D. in those days. and he was sore. He threatened us there and then. Said he'd move heaven and earth to stop Les getting fights if he went to America under his own steam."⁶⁴ The fact remains that Darcy was prevented from boxing in America, and political influence played a significant role in that outcome. McIntosh's friendship with Labor politicians, in particular Prime Minister Hughes. must be considered here.⁶⁵

The pro-conscription stance of the *Sunday Times* reached its climax the week after Darcy's funeral, when an article of questionable taste entitled "Canonising Les Darcy—How Calm We Are when the V.C.'s Come Home!" was printed. In it the paper condemned the frenzied public reception Darcy's body had received while contrasting it with the inconspicuous arrival home of an Australian winner of the Victoria Cross. "With the splendid heroism of our stalwarts shining as a constant glory at the front, it is somehow sadly ludicrous to make heroes of professional boxers who prefer to evade the risks of war."⁶⁶ The article dismissed many people who viewed Darcy's body in Sydney as curiosity seekers. "For days it lay in a sort of state in a city undertaker's establishment, and people of all sorts flocked in their tens of thousands to see it. Before it was buried priests of Christ pronounced a panegyric above it. Had some passing stranger heard the things said he might easily have supposed that here lay dead some strong smiter of the oppressor, some heroic saviour of the people."⁶⁷ Even in his grave, Darcy was a target for this paper. But a reader of the *Truth* had the final say on the article: "Fancy Magnificent Macinstoush, the head serang of the 'Sunday Slimes', also ex-caterer, alleged bicycle starter, pug referee, company (ahem!) promoter, and finally M.L.C. (mainly loyal cringer), howling and crying because our late champion Darcy was accorded a decent and truly fitting funeral."⁶⁸

As Peter Corris has written, "wars are inconvenient events for prize fighters."⁶⁹ This certainly was true for Les Darcy. Although he unwittingly took with him to America the ultimate cause of his death—infection from two broken front teeth which had been riveted back in place—it has been the objective here to explore the many factors which combined to end Darcy's life in America at age twenty-one. It can be argued that Darcy's central place in the history of sport in Australia comes as much from what he might have achieved and the sense of injustice and guilt many people felt about the way he was treated in the last seven months of his life both at home and in America. as from the impressive record of his boxing achievements. Events in wartime Australia and America

64. *Ibid*

65. For more information on McIntosh. see Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (General Editor). *Australian Dictionary of Biography Volume 10: 1891-1939 Lat-Ner* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press 1986): 284-86.

66. "Canonising Les Darcy—How Calm We Are When the V.C.'s Come Home" *Sunday Times*, 8 July 1917:3.

67. *Ibid*.

68. "Deservedly Canonized." *Truth*, 22 July 1917:4.

69. Peter Corris, *Lords of the Ring* (Sydney: Cassell Australia Ltd., 1980):60.

had a profound effect on this boxer, and his experiences provide illumination about the social history of these two countries during a period of internal turmoil and division.

With its combination of conscription, controversy, political point scoring, and a degree of naiveté on the part of the boxer, Darcy's experience reveals the complex interaction of sport and social agendas in the First World War. The banning of the boxer in several American states indicates a degree of political influence at work, and further investigation about the level of organization behind this situation will prove valuable, as will additional analysis of the motives of Governor Whitman. Les Darcy faced a variety of obstacles—class conflict and sectarianism in Australia, and personal sabotage and political attacks on boxing in America—and a clearer picture of his experiences during 1916-1917 brings an increased understanding of the significant role sport played in America and Australia during World War I.