
HIETALA, THOMAS R. *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2002. Pp 386. Photographs, bibliographic references, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Thomas Hietala's *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* positions the championship careers of the first two African-American world heavyweight boxing titleholders within a historical context that previous scholarly literature on these men has ignored. This focus will both excite and frustrate various readers, depending on their backgrounds and interests. Hietala's book is probably the first in the vast body of work on professional boxing that is appropriate for use as a textbook in an African-American history class. By foregrounding history rather than the fighters, Hietala argues that boxing can be an important gauge of American cultural phenomena like race relations. However, an expanded focus on the boxers and their careers, rather than the circumstances that gave rise to them, would have strengthened Hietala's claim that pugilism is, at the very least, a vital symbol of American life, if not a harbinger of change and social transformation. Overall, the parts concerning the fighters make up less than half of the book and are rarely synthesized within the larger historical accounts.

To construct his narrative, Hietala relies extensively on the black press, autobiographies and memoirs, collected documents and papers, and contemporary periodicals. Although boxing scholars have done this kind of work previously, such repetition does not prevent Hietala from coming to new conclusions about events that have already been studied. In reconstructing Jack Johnson's 1913 trial and conviction for violating the Mann Act, Hietala retraces the steps of Al-Tony Gilmore's *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (1975) which similarly explores the black press, and Randy Roberts' *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (1983), which makes use of the same legal documents, files, briefs, and correspondence. However, because his book presents in detail the contemporary debates on "white slavery" which led to the Mann Act's creation, Hietala illustrates how this law fulfilled larger American cultural needs than only to harass Jack Johnson, an idea implied by both Gilmore and Roberts.

Another highlight of the book is Hietala's portrayal of the 1938 rematch between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling, the German heavyweight who defeated "The Brown Bomber" in their first bout two years earlier. In this section, Hietala entwines his narratives about World War II, Nazism, and American white supremacy with those about the ballyhoo and hype surrounding this fight. Hietala's storytelling in this part is bolstered by his use of unique sources, including a 1950 biography of boxing promoter Mike Jacobs. Scholarly accounts of Joe Louis have not tapped into this book, which gives perspective on protests surrounding the fight. Also important is Hietala's emphasis on the personal and professional rivalry between Louis and Schmeling, which was often downplayed in later descriptions of the fighters' eventual friendship.

The strength of this section notwithstanding, several aspects of it deserves challenging. Hietala criticizes Schmeling for promoting Nazi racism. This element of the rematch

between Louis and Schmeling is obscured in a number of sources covering the fight, especially since Schmeling did so much later in his life to distance himself from Hitler. Perhaps it would be fair to attack Schmeling for not being more vocal in his criticism of the Third Reich during this period of his career. However, while Hietala stresses Schmeling's Nazi trainer Max Machon to reinforce this perspective, he barely states that for all fourteen of his American bouts, Schmeling employed Joe Jacobs, an American Jew, as his manager. Although Hietala doubts the accuracy of white newspapermen in their portrayals of Louis as a country bumpkin, he fails to question these same writers in their depiction of Schmeling as a Nazi. Also, while Hietala describes Schmeling being pelted by debris when entering the ring for the rematch with Louis, he fails to mention that films of the bout reveal loud cheers for Schmeling's introduction to the Yankee Stadium crowd.

Overall, one's reception of *The Fight of the Century* will hinge upon what one expects the book to accomplish. For people who have longed for academic sports literature to be situated within a larger historical context, Hietala's work will be deeply satisfying. In this regard, it is the most detailed piece to grace the vast body of scholarly work on boxing. However, for those who would have liked the book to foreground Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, their biographies, and their boxing careers, it will be disappointing.

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