

The First Sable Heroes - Blacks and the Regency Prize Ring

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Black pugilists, usually from the Americas, made their first appearance in English prize-rings in the 1790s. The two best known, Bill Richmond and Tom Molyneux, were both highly successful in totally different ways - Richmond by establishing himself in a respected role within the organization of the ring, and Molyneux, much more fleetingly, by his rapid rise to championship standard and his two famous fights with Tom Cribb in 1810 and 1811. Among others to gain some reputation were Kendrick, two Robinsons, Jem Johnson, Bristow, and Tom Sutton.

In terms of general racial prejudice in Regency England the black population fared less well than the Irish and better than the Jews, the other minority races producing prize-fighters. In economic terms they fared worse than either, with few occupational routes open to them and no financial backing available from compatriots. Richmond was a rarity in having relatively lucrative long-term employment. These broader social and economic disadvantages worked, sometimes heavily, against blacks in their ring careers.

By the standards of the day (that is, in comparison with comments made on the Irish, Jews, fighters from Lancashire or the Royal family!) attitudes towards black boxers were tolerant and even liberal. "Sable hero" was a common epithet of affection. Claims that pugilism was free from racial prejudice were common, and unease was likely to be expressed if bias seemed to have influenced a result. At the same time, the usual tone adopted towards black boxers was patronising and condescending, and they rarely attracted consistent enough backing to achieve their potential. Molyneux was an exception, as an outstanding fighter. His rapid decline, after his second fight with Cribb, can hardly be ascribed to his colour as it was exactly paralleled in the later career of the earlier white champion, Tom Johnson.

While the careers of Richmond and Molyneux show that it was possible for blacks to rise to, their experience has to be set against the more typical fate of such as Harry Sutton, who was a match for the strong Ned Painter but whose other fights had all to be pick-up affairs after other matches, or arranged impromptu at race-meetings, where he was always on hand in search of opponents. Steady support could well have brought him near to the top.

The pugilist as hero became a frequent Regency theme. If blacks were accorded less than their fair share of the hero-worship on one side of the Atlantic, they received none at all on the other, where even Molyneux's brave assault on the championship passed with hardly a word of commendation.