

Boxing's Interregnum: A Study of Tommy Burns, World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, 1906-1908

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Tommy Burns, the only Canadian ever to hold the world heavyweight boxing championship title, has been glossed over during the hiatus between Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson. This paper examined critically the boxing career of Burns in the context of his boxing times. Historians have relegated his significance to the renowned, precedent-setting fight between him and Jack Johnson on 26 December 1908 at Rushcutter's Bay, Sydney, Australia. Burns was soundly defeated, Johnson broke boxing's colour line and the event inadvertently set in motion the quest for the great white hope. Jack London's famous description of the fight in the *New York Herald* became a call-to-arms, a plea for the resurrection of a by-gone, boxing giant (Jim Jeffries): "Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson's face. 'Jeff, it's up to you'." Of course, inherent in the call was the implication that Burns was second-rate and London's article immortalized Burns as such. Our view is that Johnson was so much in a class by himself that no one would have beaten him in his prime. Burns was both a creator and victim of circumstance.

Utilizing American, Canadian, Australian, British and French newspapers as well as the extensive private newspaper collections of Mr. Bill Schuttle of Whitewater, Wisconsin and Mr. Gary Phillips of Yuta City, California, the authors examined the formative factors leading up to Burns entry into the ring; the business and athletic convictions by which he lived; the calibre of boxers he fought; the reasons for his success; the legendary shadows of four, former living champions all of whom were still idolized by the American press and public; the media treatment he received and his deportment as champion. Rather than a champion of mediocrity who somehow stole the title between Jeffries and Johnson, we view Burns as a significant fighter and businessman who defended his title more times than other champions before him and after him (until Joe Louis). Tommy Burns was significant for what he achieved largely by his own initiative; at the very least, he made a major contribution to boxing and to sport and race relations in general by deciding to break boxing's colour line.