

**Manliness, Masculinity, Manslaughter  
and the State:  
Pelkey vs. McCarty in Calgary, 1913**

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It has long been argued that sports have sustained and reproduced particular types of masculinity, and have served to naturalize a variety of forms of male violence (Messner, 1992, Whitson, 1990, Young, 1993). The sport of boxing is arguably a paradigm case of such arguments and boxing injuries have repeatedly raised pointed questions about the 'legitimacy' of violence that takes place in sanctioned sporting contests, as well as public attitudes towards violence as entertainment. Boxing has a long history as a popular form of male entertainment. However from the late nineteenth century, with the growth of national media and especially popular tabloids,

national and world ‘championships’ became objects of widespread popular fascination, even in the remotest outposts of the ‘world of sport’ (Rutherford, 1978). Some bouts, especially in the heavyweight class, became national -- even international -- ‘events.’ Meanwhile, the social meanings that could be attached to boxing, and the popular identifications that were mobilized around particular fighters, became the stuff of considerable public debate. This paper considers some of these meanings and examines some of these debates, with reference to a fight that took place in Calgary in 1913 - a fight that was supposed to produce a white challenger for Jack Johnson’s world title, but ended in the death of one contestant and manslaughter charges against the winner. One of the debates that ensued from this event was about the place of the law and the courts in the regulation of sporting violence. However we hope to show that attitudes to this question, and attitudes to boxing more generally, were closely connected with social agendas having to do with gender, race, class, and civic status, as well as with ideas about science and modernity. We argue that an examination of the public discourses that surrounded the Pelkey-McCarty match and its aftermath can offer some insights into the social climate of the early 20th century and the ideological campaigns that characterized this period.



**“The Prez” Nancy L Struna**