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## Murder, the “Sporting Man,” and the Struggle to Establish the Sporting Press in Antebellum America

Writing in 1842 of the fraternity of sporting men known as “The Fancy,” Washington Irving observed: “What is The Fancy itself but a chain of easy communications, extending from the peer down to the pickpocket, through the medium of which, a man of rank may find he has shaken hands, at three removes, with the murderer on the gibbet?” Irving, an American writing of a cultural phenomenon of Regency London, had no way of knowing at the time of writing that his words would apply to his beloved New York City in the decades before the Civil War. Irving’s comments linked three elements that would play key roles in the struggle for the growth and public acceptance of sport in America: sporting men, a chain of communication, and murder, or a larger association with crime.

This essay examines the formative years of the sporting press in America, focussing on two decidedly different yet specialized publications: William Trotter Porter’s *Spirit of the Times*, established in 1831; and Frank Queen’s *New York Clipper*, established in 1853. When both weeklies began publication, the very term “sporting” denoted the camaraderie of drinking establishments, betting in gambling houses, and the use of prostitutes. Moreover, these activities also came to be associated with certain competitive athletic events, and what many people thought of as the “sporting press” included such lurid papers as *The True Flush*, *The Weekly Rake*, and *The Sporting Whip*. The latter, in particular, advertised itself as “devoted to the Sports of the Ring, the turf, and city life—such as sprees, larks, criminal conspiracy, seductions, rapes.”

For Porter and Queen, attempting to function as the primary media of communication for a sporting ethos they saw as socially beneficial meant engaging in a battle of cultural values involving sporting men and ‘polite’ society. Equally, it meant countering the sporting press’ deservedly dubious reputation. Precisely how did these two editors wage their cultural wars in print? How successful were they in arguing their case? Especially, how did they attempt to counter polite society’s identification of the sporting life with crime? To answer these questions, I study coverage in the *Spirit* and the *Clipper* dealing with the crimes of “sporting men.” Two murder cases, in particular, are significant: the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett and the 1855 murder of Butcher Bill Poole. The first involved Richard Robinson, a “sporting gentleman,” and resonated throughout

the antebellum period, making the establishment of a legitimate sporting newspaper a difficult undertaking. The 1855 murder implicated John Morrissey, then the bare-knuckle prize-fighting Champion of America, and with it, resistance to sporting men and the sporting press grew more pronounced.

The essay begins with antebellum America’s cultural resistance to sports, or at least certain “unsavory” sports, and society’s twin fascination with and revulsion from murder. It then attempts to shed light on how sporting editors associated themselves with the values of the sporting life, but disassociated themselves when those values became intertwined with murder. Given this difficult situation, Porter and Queen took different paths to making their publications socially, journalistically, and financially viable.



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