

Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*. Robson, London, 1986. Bibliog., illus., index. pp.xiii + 274. £9.50.

A few years ago Bill Mandle suggested that Australian sports historians could explore profitably the theme of heroes in sport. Mandle himself pointed the way with some suggestive comments in his articles on the music hall and W.G. Grace and there have been some interesting short pieces by Chris Cunneen and Richard Fotheringham. But, so far, there have been no sporting biographies from within the academe since the pioneering study of Henry Searle by Scott Bennett which appeared way back in 1973. There has been a greater response outside universities, with many, such as Peter Sharpham, writing sports biography.

Texas historian Randy Roberts has written an excellent biography of Jack Johnson underlining Mandle's arguments about the great potential of this genre of sports writing. It makes, first of all, excellent reading. It is an absorbing account of the colourful, chequered and frequently stormy career of a significant black boxer before and after his historic fight in Australia against Tommy Burns, the context of which has been described elsewhere by Richard Broome. This is a book which takes the reader 'inside boxing' and will appeal both to the sports fan and to the serious researcher.

But the great achievement of the book is to combine a sensitive treatment of the world of boxing 'from the inside' with its links with issues 'outside': race relations, prostitution, corruption and politics generally. Roberts also excels in throwing much light on the world of boxing in this era: exploring the complex interrelationships between various themes about sport and society. In fact nowhere have I read a better account of the social ramifications of the fringe sport of boxing in the years up to World War I. During his trial Johnson, questioned about 'faked fights', candidly admitted that 'they are all crooked'. This phrase, Roberts adds, had a 'haunting quality, as if he realized that for all the ballyhoo his profession lacked substance, that in the end they were all whores' (p.176). There are also some fine passages on Johnson's status in the black community. Johnson's racial attitude was 'confused': 'his hatred of the white world was

almost as deep as his longing to be part of it' and 'his conquest of white women was in part a desire to humiliate the white race, it was also because he preferred white women to black women'; and, again, he was admired by thousands of blacks in his day but he 'refused the responsibility of leadership' (p.229).

There have been attempts in more recent times to elaborate the myth of Johnson and liken him to the Mohammed Ali of his time, but Jack Johnson was not a 'stereotype', nor was he a 'simple man'. Roberts avoids the temptation to romanticise Johnson, who was ideologically naive and often vacillated in his stance on numerous issues. Yet Roberts also writes from a sympathetic stance outlining the many ways in which this proud and forthright individual, who refused to accept most of the norms of black subservicence, was hounded by Federal officials and police, lawyers and churchmen alike yet how, in a confused way, he became a significant and uncompromising black symbol of his era.

In this fine biography Roberts has demonstrated that a sporting biography can yield much not only into the history of boxing and its complex and ambivalent status in society at that time but also provide many rich insights into race relations and the very nature of American society itself. North American scholars are now leading the way with some excellent writing on heroes, particularly black heroes: Roberts has also written a biography on Jack Dempsey, Mead has published a biography of Joe Louis, Baker has recently published his work on Jesse Owens and Jeff Samons' work on Mohammed Ali will appear soon.

Richard Cashman
History
University of New South Wales