

# Thematic Reviews

## *Les Darcy Birth Centenary*

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**Peter Fenton**, *Les Darcy: The Legend of the Fighting Man*. Ironbark Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1994. Illus., stats, pp. 203.

**Bob Power**, *The Les Darcy American Venture*. The Author, New Lambton NSW, 1994. Illus., stats, pp. 120.

**Raymond Swanwick**, *Les Darcy The Legend: Champion of Champions*. Topmill Pty, Sydney, 1994, Illus., stats, pp. 112.

The centenary of Les Darcy's birth (31 October 1995) provided the incentive for three new publications about the boxer to appear in Australia during the last twelve months. Each author has taken a different approach to his subject matter and all three books make a contribution, in various ways, to the growing body of literature on Darcy. Fenton's book is widely available, but those by Power and Swanwick are more difficult to find (I stumbled on Power's book in Melbourne Sports Books, and Swanwick's volume in Fyshwick Bargain Book Warehouse in Canberra).

Peter Fenton's original conception of his way to tell the story about Darcy was a documentary film, and he travelled extensively in the United States during 1993, tracing the boxer's movements and visiting libraries and archives in order to uncover appropriate visual material. The film never came about, and Fenton wrote this book instead, and in it he took the liberty 'of allowing Les to talk'. I found this aspect of the book distracting, as the reader is privy to numerous 'conversations' among the main characters interspersed with clear evidence of the author's use of primary sources. Fenton states in his introduction: 'I have tried to favour fact over fantasy', but he detracts from the strength of his research by putting words in the mouths of his subjects; this is a road fraught with danger for the writer of biography. Given the sources he has used, Fenton could have provided new evidence about the areas of Darcy's career which remain contentious—his relationship with Tim

O'Sullivan, his personal view on serving in the armed forces, and the political intrigue which contributed to his being unable to box in America—but at best the text remains unsatisfying in offering explanations about these issues. The book is full of chronological tracing of Darcy's life, from the family struggle for survival in the Maitland area to his death in the United States in 1917 (which actually occurred on 24 May, not 24 April as printed in the book), and has a very impressive list of individuals who contributed information to the author, including Les' younger brother Jack. The book has a page of suggested further reading which includes the standard biographical material available on Darcy, with the notable exception of Ruth Park's excellent two-part article, 'Death of A Hero: In Search of Les Darcy in America'. This is a book that is easy to read, but I expected more new insights about Darcy's experience.

Bob Power's *The Les Darcy American Venture* was the most interesting of the three books reviewed. Power focused on the story of Darcy and Tim O'Sullivan overseas in 1916-1917, and 'in a web of Prejudice, Jealousy and Intrigue woven during his short twenty-one week's residence in the United States of America, the idol of the Australian sporting world, was to lose in turn, his Happiness, his Liberty and finally his Life'. Not having travelled outside Australia when preparing the book, Power makes good use of American and English newspapers in the text, as well as extensive domestic sources, and he also lists a large number of individuals who knew Darcy and who granted the author personal interviews. The writing style is journalistic, and the text is somewhat disconnected at points, but the book is full of detail about the months in America. It is this time period which has defied conclusive analysis by many authors, and Power has made an important contribution to the literature on Darcy with his book. The epilogue on Tim O'Sullivan is very informative, and Power's discussion of the political issues affecting Darcy both in Australia and America is enlightening.

*Les Darcy: Australia's Golden Boy of Boxing*, which Raymond Swanwick produced in 1965, remains the most complete account of Darcy's life published to date. Swanwick's desire to rescue the boxer's story from 'repeated inaccuracies and too much sentiment' led him to publish *Les Darcy The Legend: Champion of Champions* last year which contains excerpts from the text of his earlier book. Its main appeal for this reviewer, however, lies in the excellent illustrations and photographs

contained on virtually every page. The meticulous photographic research by M E Kelly is to be commended, although once again Swanwick chooses not to acknowledge the sources for individual photos and illustrations. This is a sound publication which complements Swanwick's previous work following Darcy from birth to legend, and it adds a striking visual dimension to the boxing world of the early twentieth century in Australia.

These books have contributed to further understanding of Les Darcy, but they by no means have provided all the answers to lingering questions about his fate. For example, the motives underlying the actions of New York Governor Whitman need further investigation, and the extent of influence exerted in America by 'Snowy' Baker and Hugh McIntosh is still not certain. The three books are aimed primarily at the popular market but should be read by those interested in Australian boxing in the early years of this century, and by any serious student of Les Darcy. I do not think we have heard the last word on him yet.