

'My Fighting is My Business': Towards a Biography of George Barnes, Australian Boxer¹

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There is no consensus on George Barnes's standing in Australian sports history. In his influential *Lords of the Ring* Peter Corris gave a less than flattering portrait of Barnes. Although admitting his popularity, fearlessness, independence and honesty Corris denigrated his boxing skills and achievements. He described Barnes as 'the last of the old-style of Australian fighters starting young, indifferently managed, relatively unsuccessful overseas, going on too long and displaying courage in excess of his skill'.² Other commentators have been more generous. An entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Sports* presented him as a 'tough, rugged fighter who refused to give an inch in the ring' and underlined the precedents he created, the first son of a national boxing champion to emulate his father and the first Australian to win the British Empire welterweight title.³ In a profile subtitled 'Son of an Anvil', Grantlee Kieza highlighted Barnes's capture of the Australian and Empire welterweight championships and his high earnings, a considerable proportion of which were won overseas.⁴ Ron Casey a leading sports journalist and contemporary of George Barnes summed him up him as 'a wonderful fighter and great friend . . . so tough and durable'.⁵ Another journalistic contemporary of Barnes, writing in the mid-1950s, distinguished him from the more numerous 'pussyfoot fighters' of the time, marking him as 'a man not frightened to go in and mix it'.⁶ Bernie Pramberg's recent profile of Barnes was similarly positive, identifying him as the 'iron man' of Australian boxing when the sport was at its pinnacle. He had no hesitation in nominating him 'one of our all-time greats' in view of the length of his career, with sixty-six professional bouts over fifteen years, and his performances against world-rated opponents.⁷

If one puts aside Corris's bleak appraisal there are indications that Barnes's biography would be atypical. A collection of boxers' biographies

is likely to overwhelm the reader with the number of lives cut short or impaired. There is a familiar pattern of events in the lives of many boxing subjects. Elements include a poor family, little formal education, and a career forged out of a mixture of physical gifts, aggression, and more or less fortunate management. The pattern often follows the wheel of fortune with the career apogee succeeded by decline as the boxer's physical strength wanes. The glamour which accompanies him in victory gives way to penury, drug addiction and ill-health unless an early death preserves him, in company with Les Darcy, among those who shall not grow old. Sometimes, as in the case of Muhammad Ali, the physical deterioration is so pronounced, and in such contrast to the athleticism which made him a champion, that the vocabulary of high tragedy is called into service. The American writer Joyce Carol Oates described Ali in his 'dark brooding', damaging, later fights as 'the closest analogue boxing contains to Lear himself'.⁸

His last fight apart, George Barnes is no antipodean Lear and his biographer will have to find another analogue. His career reflects only some elements of the conventional rise and fall pattern of the tragic hero's or boxer's life. It offers an a different trajectory for he largely escaped the bleaker half of the wheel of fortune's rise and fall. His success in the ring was mediated into a long and prosperous post-boxing career. He used his boxer's skills to win economic independence and add to his social experiences and status.

His considerable earnings from fighting were invested astutely. Wray Vamplew's observation that Australian boxers typically failed to achieve financial security⁹ does not apply to Barnes. Indeed this aspect of his life calls for attention as his image incorporated not only his working-class origins, with its associations of male camaraderie and violence but also the middle-class values of family, property, and independence. At sixty-eight years of age in 1995 a well-preserved Barnes nominated the Australian tax office as his toughest opponent.¹⁰

Born into a Boxing Family

George Barnes and his twin, Joan, were born into a boxing family in Temora, New South Wales, on 20 February 1927. His Jewish mother, Cecilia, born in Blackpool, England, cared for a family of four boys and two girls. She was a boxing fan and passed her enthusiasm on to her children." Her father, Ben Rice, had fought at the National Sporting

Club in London and one of her brothers fought professionally. George Barnes's paternal uncle, who fought as Don Burns, was a promising Australian middleweight prior to his early death. His father, Eric, was a blacksmith born in Hay, New South Wales. A graduate of Jimmy Sharman's travelling troupe, he won the Australian middleweight championship in 1921 under the name of Frank Burns by knocking out Tommy Uren. He boxed overseas with a notable win over Jimmy Clabby, a former world welterweight champion in Seattle and a eleven-round loss to another former world champion, Ted 'Kid' Lewis, in an Empire middleweight championship bout in London. He retired in 1928 after a loss to the formidable Jack Haines. He subsequently worked as a farrier and, after moving his family from Temora to Sydney, had responsibility for shoeing the Colonial Sugar Refinery's hundred draught horses at Pymont. Eric Barnes was a 'hard man' who tried to dissuade his sons from following his footsteps. He told George as a young boy that 'the fight game's too tough, son. Forget it.' But the boys persisted, with fifteen-year old George going to the North Sydney Boy's Club to acquire boxing skills. After he took a severe beating his father bowed to the inevitable and became boxing instructor at the Boys Club in order to teach his son. Eric Barnes took enormous pride in his sons' boxing achievements describing the day on which George won the Australian welterweight title as the happiest in his life. Three of his other sons were also boxers of note. Bill became New South Wales amateur champion in 1959, Ron was a National Service middleweight champion and his twin, Don, was a main event (twelve-round) fighter. The eldest son, Eric, was the only one not to box as an adult. This was not so much out of deference to his father's wishes but because as a young boy, Eric 'had a big nose and every time he got a straight left on the nose he cried'.¹²

George Barnes began fighting as an amateur welterweight in 1942 at the age of fifteen, losing his first two bouts on points. He moved down to the lightweight division and unsuccessfully contested the New South Wales finals. War intervened, George was called up and served with the AIF in Papua New Guinea. Discharged in Sydney in 1947 he worked for twelve months as a blacksmith's striker in order to prepare himself for a boxing career. He turned professional in 1948 having decided to marry Betty Barker.

Money, family tradition and love of boxing were important considerations. His motives, he explained in 1951, were the love of

boxing that had drawn him into amateur fighting as a youth and his determination 'to try and make what I thought would be easy money and try to follow in Dad's footsteps as an Australian titleholder'.¹³

Although no graceful boxing stylist, George Barnes manifested enormous physical resilience and determination. 'Bulging muscled', stocky and appearing shorter than his five foot six inches (167.6 cm) in height, he was noted for walking up to his opponents.¹⁴ Instead of holding his left hand conventionally at the side of his face he carried it low at his hip for a speedier delivery and guarded his chin with his left shoulder. It was an offensive, rather than defensive, posture that defied imitation.¹⁵ He had an unquestioned capacity to take a punch, to absorb destructive physical punishment over a fighting career spanning eighteen years: the only time he was knocked out was in his last fight in 1962. There is considerable truth in his own self-deprecating verdict that 'I was an awkward bugger. I can't even say I was a really fit fighter, I used to wear 'em down.'¹⁶

Among the boxers who found Barnes formidably awkward were the world ranked Americans Freddie Dawson, Wallace 'Bud' Smith and Ralph Dupas. He won the Australian welterweight title in 1953 and was Empire/Commonwealth welterweight champion in 1954-6,

1956-8 and 1958-60. He defended his Australian welterweight title in Sydney in November 1953 by knocking out Tommy Burns before a crowd of 13 000 people. Similar numbers were attracted to the three fights between Barnes and Darby Brown in the mid-1950s. In these 'classics of the Australian ring',¹⁷ Barnes lost and then regained his Australian welterweight title, a sequence he repeated with the South African Johnny Van Rensburg for his Empire welterweight title. He finally surrendered the latter title to the Welshman Brian Curvis in May 1960. Corris used this defeat to reinforce his image of Barnes as a boxer lacking talent, citing one unspecified report of the fight which claimed that Curvis inflicted on Barnes 'punishment that would have destroyed a heavyweight'. This cannot be taken at face value since Pat Tennison's eyewitness account of the fight was headed 'Barnes Glorious in Flying Fists Title Loss' and made it clear that though Curvis, eleven years younger than Barnes, merited his victory through more skilful boxing, he had to overcome first the awesome 'staying power of hammer-fisted Barnes'. Barnes has read Corris's account of this fight and merely commented he knew 'nothing about the fight game'.¹⁸

By February 1962 Barnes's retirement was overdue and he made the mistake of one more defence of his Australian welterweight title fight against Gary Cowburn. Ray Mitchell, a noted chronicler of Australian boxing, was present at Sydney Stadium and realised before the first punch was thrown that an era in Australian boxing had ended: 'when George removed his gown we saw not the iron muscles we used to see, but softness'. He mourned his beating that night, and more so the passing of 'the tough Barnes who had become an institution'. His defeat was the saddest he had seen in boxing since Freddie Dawson knocked out Vic Patrick on 1 September 1946.¹⁹

Barnes's body was tested by more than his opponents in the ring. He had to counter the debilitating legacy of malaria contracted during the Pacific War. This was one of three major physical handicaps he had to overcome. He suffered serious burns to much of his body when a home-made methylated spirits lamp ignited during a blackout in March 1951, hospitalising him for a month. Unable to work for over two months or box for eight, his weight shot up some three stone (19 kg). He damaged his left hand fighting in 1952 and for the rest of his career often boxed with the hand broken, using injections to deaden the pain. Frequently the hand swelled during fights to the extent that his glove had to be cut off.²⁰ After this injury so early in his career 'he could only throw the left with half the power it once carried and no longer was his hook the weapon it had once been'.²¹

Mastery of such physical challenges points to the strength of the will that drove George Barnes's body. St Vincent's Hospital staff told him that he was unlikely to box again after burns left his right hand bent claw-like from his wrist and his body bent forward from the waist. His response was 'I'll fight all right because I intend to be the lightweight champion'. He repaired his flame-ravaged body with a splint to correct his right hand, rigorous back exercises, and a labouring job lumping bags of sugar.²² His campaign for the lightweight championship recommenced within months when he knocked out the Filipino Little Paras in Melbourne. His metabolism and diet caused him to gain weight quickly; when fighting in the lightweight division with its limit of nine stone and nine pounds (61.2 kg) he used to go up to eleven stone (69.9 kg) between fights and induced rapid weight loss through exercise, dieting and time in the 'sweat box', shedding up to sixteen pounds (7.26 kg) a day in tropical gym work. He dehydrated his body in the

fortnight before a fight in the belief that it would prevent his face swelling and bruising after a punch. This precaution was to prevent a recurrence of the 'eyes closed drum tight' he suffered after his 1952 victory over the future world lightweight champion Bud Smith.²³

Barnes's success in disciplining and punishing his body was the greater given his inclination towards hedonism rather than asceticism. Indeed his physical durability and relative longevity give pause for thought to a later generation attuned to more spartan health regimes. His pronounced weight fluctuations followed pendulum swings between discipline and gratification. He alternated long periods of physical self-indulgence with much shorter intervals of intensive physical preparation immediately before an important fight. Underpinning both at crucial periods in his career was heavy manual labour, an ideal means of preparing his body for the ordeal of the boxing ring. In between fights he drank at least 'a gallon of beer a day, smoked heavily and thought nothing of devouring eight eggs at a sitting. Such periodic indulgence along with his thirty-five years aided his 1960s metamorphosis from an iron man to the vulnerably soft target battered into insensibility by Gary Cowburn. There is a confessional note in Barnes's recent comment that 'I'd have fought a lot longer if I'd drunk less'.²⁴

The Social Context of Boxing

Barnes's social milieu, particularly after he became a successful boxer, was Sydney's sporting and racing elite along with their admirers from the media, the police, the professions, and others attracted to the glamour and money which circulates among top sports people. This was a world where weigh-ins for big fights were held before large crowds in well-established city clubs. It was before such a gathering at Sydney City Tattersall's Club in Pitt Street for the weigh-in for Barnes's 1954 fight against the formidable black American Freddy Dawson that a prominent bookmaker Tom Powell called out 'I've got money here to say Barnes won't go the distance with Dawson'. Barnes's father-in-law, Jim Barker, a successful horse trainer, replied 'I've got money here to say he will'. At that Powell put £5000 (\$10 000) in notes on the bar with the words 'There's five thousand quid he won't go the distance'. The Barnes clan collected the money after George knocked Dawson down with a left hook in the first round then uncharacteristically boxed to lose on points while safely surviving the fifteen rounds.²⁵

Such free flow of money and the subsequent revelations of Royal Commissions into police corruption and organised crime in New South Wales and Queensland raise inevitable questions about Australian boxing and corruption. Corris commented that a degree of corruption fixed fights, fraudulent injuries, and 'ring-ins' has been a permanent feature of Australian boxing, though never on an American scale.²⁶ The prism of George Barnes's boxing career provides little evidence of corruption. Certainly his recollections include the offer of a bribe overseas and his acquaintance with men who from the vantage point of a later decade might be deemed connected to the shadowy world of organised crime. But there is Barnes's unquestioned reputation for honesty. To this must be added his own verdict, delivered perhaps only half in jest, that 'the boxing game's never been dirty in Australia . . . [perhaps because it has] been run by thugs who wanted the game to be clean'.²⁷

Most references to Australian boxing as business focus on the activities of such ventures as Stadiums Limited, acquired by John Wren in 1915, which held a near monopoly of boxing in the eastern states until 1975. Inevitably the perspective tends to be from the top down. George Barnes, in a view from below, saw himself operating a small family business. His trade was boxing and his returns had to be maximised against the competing claims of other boxers and more particularly against those of boxing promoters, managers, trainers and government. Barnes's individualism, enlightened pursuit of self-interest, and informed family network enabled him to defy Stadiums Limited when he believed his own well-being or financial returns were at stake. In 1950 he was banned from fighting by John Wren after he failed to attend a bout in Brisbane with Max Skinner for which a large crowd had assembled. Barnes defied Stadiums Limited because he believed that the fight was a mismatch, with Skinner too heavy an opponent for him and because of the promoter's failure to insist on a weight limit.²⁸

In 1954 Barnes again defied Stadiums Limited and his manager-trainer Em McQuillan by accepting an invitation to box under the auspices of Art Mawson's rival Australian Boxing Club. The inducement was \$6000 for an Empire title fight and any legal costs his defection might bring. Stung by Barnes's challenge Stadiums Limited unsuccessfully applied to the New South Wales Equity Court for an injunction to restrain him from fighting outside the company's promotion. It was an important legal victory for the sportsperson who seeks to

maximise his or her returns from sport. Barnes had detected a conflict of interest between McQuillan's association with Stadiums Limited and his role as manager-trainer. A sharp sense of business acumen as well as natural justice underpinned Barnes comment that 'I engaged McQuillan as my manager and I expect him to act on my behalf. Instead he has been acting for Stadiums Ltd and making decisions . . . without even consulting me.'²⁹ Barnes was atypical in overturning boxing's power hierarchy of promoters, trainers and boxers³⁰ which deprived so many of the latter of dignity and livelihood.

Four years later Barnes had the opportunity to travel to the United States for a series of elimination contests to fill the world welterweight title vacated by Carmen Basilo. Mindful of Les Darcy's American fate he declined this risky prospect of a career pinnacle in the United States in favour of less glamorous but more assured returns. With the assistance of Jim Barker he negotiated a series of South African bouts, including defences of his Empire title which provided returns well above Stadiums Limited maximum rate of 25 per cent of gross takings. For his successful title defence against Benny Nieuwenhuizen in Johannesburg in April 1956 he received 35 per cent of the gross gate less entertainment tax and expenses, providing a return of some \$12 500 tax-free in Australia. Barnes's stand was 'I'll fight anywhere as long as I'm offered the right money. Boxing is my living.'³¹ The seriousness with which he took his judgement that his boxing was his business showed in his successful campaigns in Australia and South Africa to end the issue of complimentary tickets, a practice which diminished gross takings and boxers' incomes.³²

Writing the Biography of George Barnes

George Barnes's biographers will have to place his business values and practices within the wider context of Australian society and culture. This can be attempted by considering his multiple images. There is the iron man of Australian boxing, the handsome son of a fighter, hardened by the labour of sugar lumping and swinging the blacksmith's hammer. He has the relentless stoicism of the mythical Australian male, the man who refuses to give an inch, not frightened to go in and mix it. This was the image that even in defeat and title loss could command from an observer words like 'force', 'power' and 'hammer-fisted'. Occasionally the image was harnessed to the racist underside of Australian nationalism.

One commentator was able to find a sardonic reassurance in Barnes's defeat by the formidable black American Freddie Dawson by highlighting his survival of the fifteen punishing rounds, the first time an Australian had accomplished this feat. He concluded somewhat smugly that Barnes was 'a plucky Australian champion . . . too tough for the negro to knock out'.³³

It must be said that Barnes himself, throughout his career and in recent reminiscences, never identified fellow boxers by race or nationality. He defined them rather in terms of their boxing prowess and, if opponents, the contribution they made to his income stream.

A second image of George Barnes, carried prominently by the popular press, was familial, domestic, bourgeois; a nurturing yin to complement the yang of the iron man. This image was framed in the nuclear family, home, garden and neighbourhood of 1950s Australia. Here George was depicted with his wife, attending to one or both of his sons, sometimes with a family pet in attendance. At other times, he was presented helping out an elderly neighbour or a local scout troop, mowing his lawn, or tending his poultry, even getting up from his sick bed one night to comfort sick ducklings with hot water bottles. This image accommodated the Barnes's nuclear, suburban family as consumers, gradually furnishing their \$7400 Drummoyne home, carpeting it for \$950 and experiencing 'the kick we got out of adding to our belongings gradually'.³⁴

The boxer as small businessman was the image Barnes himself projected most readily. With considerable realism he interpreted his career as the marketing of his body and boxing skills. The market was as predatory an arena as any boxing ring. He was vigilant against exploitation by promoters, managers, trainers and governments. He stands out in Australian boxing history for his readiness to dispense with unsatisfactory managers, including early in his career his father, and his successful defiance of Stadiums Limited attempt to curtail his autonomy and income. His decisions about whom and where to fight were primarily and consciously business decisions. His own estimate of himself and his calling was of the mundane, analogous perhaps to the farmer and the motel proprietor which he became through investing his earnings from the ring. Joyce Carol Oates's grandiloquent meditation on his craft, 'a Dionysian rite of cruelty, sacrifice and redemption',³⁵ failed the test of Barnes's own experience and interpretation.

There are other images of George Barnes including the usefully provocative but excessively negative and unidimensional portrait which Corris has already embedded in the historiography of Australian boxing. In our planned biography of Barnes we sense that the three images we have outlined are the most useful vehicles with which to explore his career and context. Our challenge is to deepen our understanding of them and of the processes which formed them. We must also tease out the subtle relationships among them. Above all we must do justice both to George Barnes and the art of biography.

NOTES:

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Australian Society for Sports History's Sporting Traditions X Conference, 27 June 1995, at the University of Queensland. The authors thank George and Betty Barnes for their generous assistance and hospitality.
- 2 Peter Corris, *Lords of the Ring: A History of Prize-Fighting in Australia*, Cassell, Sydney, 1980, pp. 172-3. In the year of its publication the sports historian, Bill Mandle, nominated *Lords of the Ring* as one of the 'three good books of Australian sports history'. Mandle, 'The Future of Australian Sports History' in Ray Crawford, ed., *First Australian Symposium on the History and Philosophy of Physical Education and Sport, Proceedings: Influences and Innovators*, School of Physical Education and Leisure Studies, Preston Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 1980, p. 179.
- 3 Malcolm Andrews, *The Encyclopaedia of Australian Sports*, Golden Press, Sydney, pp. 19-20.
- 4 Grantlee Kieza, *Australian Boxing: The Illustrated History*, Gary Allen, Sydney, 1990, pp. 162-3.
- 5 Ron Casey, *Confessions of a Larrikin*, Lester Townshend Publishing, Sydney, 1989, p. 73.
- 6 Sid Barnes (no relation), *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Feb. 1956.
- 7 Bernie Pramberg, 'Barnes one of our all-time greats', *Courier-Mail*, 14 June 1995.
- 8 Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Cruellest Sport', *New York Review of Books*, 13 Feb. 1992.
- 9 Wray Vamplew, 'Boxing', in Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart, eds, *Sport in Australia: A Social History*, CUP, Cambridge, 1994, p. 52.
- 10 Pramberg, 'Barnes'.
- 11 The material on George Barnes's family background is drawn from interviews by Rodney Sullivan at Ashmore on 29 Jan. 1994, 29 April and 21 May 1995 and George Barnes, 'Cuttings Book', p. 78.
- 12 Barnes, 'Cuttings', pp. 69, 75; Kieza, *Australian Boxing*, pp. 162-3.
- 13 Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 78.
- 14 'How good is George Barnes?', *Sports Novels Ring Review*, Jan. 1950, p. 43.
- 15 Kieza, *Australian Boxing*, p. 162.
- 16 Cited in Pramberg, 'Barnes'.
- 17 Kieza, *Australian Boxing*, p. 164.
- 18 Barnes, interview, 29 Apr. 1995; Corris, *Lords of the Ring*, p. 173; Pat Tennon 'Barnes Glorious in Flying Fists Title Loss', in Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 85.
- 19 Ray Mitchell, 'What Happens When a Fighter Softens Up', *Sports Novels*, April 1962.

- 20 Barnes, interviewed by Barbara Erskine at Ashmore, 4 Sept. 1994.
- 21 Kieza, *Australian Boxing*, p. 163.
- 22 Barnes, 'Cuttings Book', pp. 77-8.
- 23 Barnes, interview, 4 Nov. 1994; Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 75.
- 24 Pramberg, 'Barnes'; 'How good is George Barnes?', *Sports Novels, Ring Review*, Jan. 1950.
- 25 Barnes, interview, 29 Apr. 1995; Casey, *Confessions*, p. 74.
- 26 Corris, *Lords of the Ring*, p. 174.
- 27 Barnes, interview, 29 Apr. 1995.
- 28 Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 77.
- 29 Barnes, interview, 29 Jan. 1994; Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 40.
- 30 Vamplew, 'Boxing', p. 43.
- 31 Barnes, 'Cuttings', pp. 33, 50.
- 32 Barnes, 'Cuttings', pp. 37, 51.
- 33 Barnes, 'Cuttings', p. 49.
- 34 Barnes, 'Cuttings', pp. 33, 36, 41, 43, 69, 75.
- 35 Oates, 'The Cruellest Sport', p. 3.