

JAMES J. CORBETT: A BIOGRAPHY OF THE HEAVY-WEIGHT BOXING CHAMPION AND POPULAR THEATER HEADLINER. Armond Fields. McFarland & Company, \$45.00. 260 pages.

Considering the major impact he had on boxing, theater, and early motion pictures, the life of James J. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett (1866-1933) has been only lightly tapped by biographers until the meticulously researched *James J. Corbett: A Biography of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion and Popular Theater Headliner* by social historian Armond Fields.

More than 100 years after Corbett knocked out John L. Sullivan in New Orleans to become the heavyweight champion of the world, we finally have the definitive biography of a man who succeeded in two demanding professions – boxing and acting.

One of ten children born to Irish immigrants in San Francisco, James J. Corbett continually aspired to a better life and increased social status. He benefited greatly from a natural willingness to learn, particularly from famed Olympic Club boxing instructor William Watson. His good looks, easy charm, and awareness of the "value of a good tailor" provided a marked contrast to other boxers, especially Sullivan, who rampaged through life, numerous saloons, and many marginally skilled opponents.

Corbett's ring strategy also differed from boxers of that era. At 6'1" and often fighting at a superbly conditioned 185 pounds, Corbett is widely credited as the inventor of "scientific boxing." Not a knockout puncher, he tired an opponent by dancing away to evade punches that would have sent him through the ropes, and then counter punched with lightning-like jabs that eventually took their toll.

As Fields points out, boxing was moving toward greater social acceptance at the time Corbett's career was rising. Corbett's cultivated image of a well-dressed gentleman and a student of his sport helped engender a public acceptance of "scientific" gloved contests under the Marquis of Queensbury rules.

Aside from the nickname Gentleman Jim, which he did not care for, Corbett is widely known for his championship win over Sullivan in 1892, and his loss to Bob Fitzsimmons in 1897.

Although covering familiar ground on the road to the Sullivan fight,

the author provides a wonderful sense of the growing confidence of young Corbett. He outclasses slugger Jake Kilrain, draws with the powerful Peter Jackson (after 61 rounds), and then correctly calculates he could accomplish the unthinkable task of besting Sullivan. Fields' description of the Fight of the Century on a sweaty night in New Orleans is the soaring point of this biography.

The famous "solar plexus punch" as the real cause of Corbett's loss to Fitzsimmons gets little credence from the author. As detailed by Fields' research, by the time of the Fitzsimmons fight, Corbett still had enthusiasm for boxing, but his passion was for the stage.

While Corbett fought only three major bouts during his championship years from 1892 to 1897, he continuously toured the US, Canada, and Europe, starring in various theater productions. Fields concludes, with much evidence, that the hard life of a travelling 1890s actor must have been distracting for Corbett.

Fitzsimmons, on the other hand, bounced into the ring in Carson City, Nevada with only boxing in his heart and soul. His frustration at having recently lost a bout to Tom Sharkey focused Ruby Bob on one intention – winning the championship from Jim Corbett. Although James J. fought beautifully for most of the 14 rounds, he yielded his title to the devastating punching power of Fitzsimmons.

In this biography one senses Corbett's extraordinary ability to bob and weave through the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. Vaudeville declines and he capitalizes on his boxing fame and acting experience to enter silent films. When acting work is slim, Corbett opens a successful Manhattan saloon. His first marriage (at age 19) fails, so he creates a good second marriage with actress Vera Stanwood, lasting 38 years until his death at home in Bayside, Queens in 1933. Clearly, this is a man who could reinvent himself and always find a way to pay his bills at the same time.

Just as Robert Cantwell did for Kid McCoy in *The Real McCoy* and Michael T. Isenberg did for John L. Sullivan in *John L. Sullivan and His America*, Armond Fields provides the definitive work on James J. Corbett, putting the man in the context of his era. And a great era it was.

Richard T. Corbett