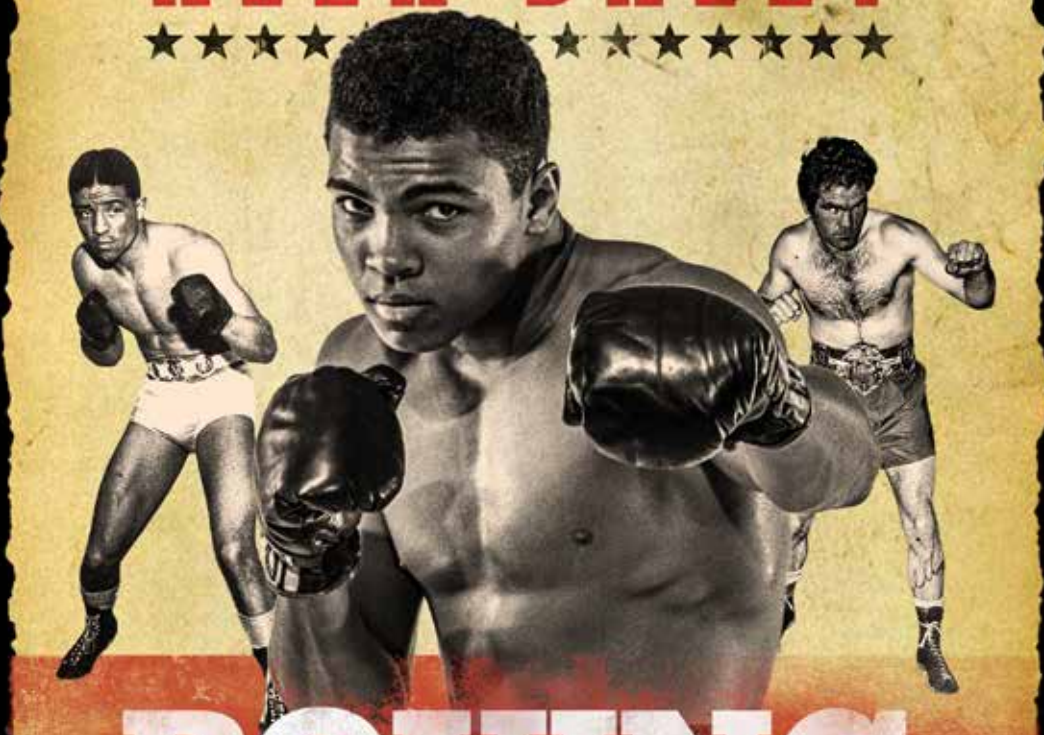
ALEX DALEY



BOXING NOSTALGIA

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE WEIRD

Contents

Author's Note

Unwittingly, I began writing this book in September 2015, after receiving an email from *Boxing News* editor Matt Christie. Matt wanted to reintroduce a regular boxing history column to the magazine, and wondered if I'd like to be the author.

I had two boxing books to my name but no real journalistic experience, so Matt was taking a chance on me. For me, though, it was an offer too good to turn down, an opportunity to write for British boxing's 'trade magazine' about a subject I love; a subject curiously overlooked by boxing scribes, yet one that provides a rich vein of stories and personalities.

The articles in this book, published in date order, appeared in the magazine's 'Yesterday's Heroes' column between 2015 and 2018. For two years I penned the weekly column alone, after which my friend, boxing historian Miles Templeton, became a co-contributor, and he and I write for *BN* now on alternate weeks. You'll notice, therefore, that the pieces in this book are dated weekly from October 2015 to October 2017, and fortnightly thereafter.

The articles, like *Boxing News* itself, have a distinctly British flavour. There are certain pieces centred on overseas fighters, but invariably these focus on their British contests or British opponents. I can't claim this is a comprehensive history of British boxing – that would be impossible inside a single volume. It does, however, showcase some of the most colourful and intriguing tales you'll ever hear – involving well-known fighters, forgotten names and others whose stories warrant retelling even though they never made it 'big'.

For consistency, *Boxing* (the pre-1940 version of *BN*) is referred to as *Boxing News*. Boxing records are mentioned frequently. Pre-war records, which were compiled through newspaper research, can seldom be considered entirely complete, though for most records the majority of the fighter's bouts are there.

For those unfamiliar with the shorthand, wins appear first, losses second and draws (if any) third. So a fighter with a 32-5-2 record had 32 wins, five defeats and two draws. In most cases, fight statistics were kindly supplied by Miles Templeton.

Alex Daley

Foreword

Upon taking over as editor at *Boxing News* in 2015, the first thing I wanted to do was find a writer who could bring the past to life every week. Someone who could do the rich history of boxing justice, a history decorated with epic characters and stories. That writer turned out to be Alex Daley.

The world of journalism is ever changing. The internet opened the gates for all manner of writers and broadcasters to emerge and the sport of boxing, adored by millions of people all over the world, now receives more coverage than ever before. The pressure on *Boxing News* to keep evolving in an increasingly cluttered landscape is immense. Not so long ago one of just a handful of regular reporters on the sport, we now fight for survival in this age of immediate coverage in which consumers are spoilt for choice.

And to survive, I believe, *Boxing News* must do things differently than all the rest. It must do things better than all the rest. My philosophy in that regard has always been quality storytelling. To give our readers, young and old, a taste of the sport that they will not find on any of the myriad websites competing for space. To deliver them into the heart of stories they have never heard before, stories they will not find anywhere else, and stories that have long been forgotten. And the astonishing efforts of great athletes should never be forgotten. It is thanks to that philosophy that *Boxing News* continues to thrive.

I had read Alex Daley's book, *Fighting Men of London: Voices From Inside The Ropes*, and knew he would be the perfect fit for my vision for *Boxing News*. I was truly delighted when he agreed to come on board and provide a weekly column. It is no exaggeration to say his copy – every single time – is a joy to read. It educates and enthrals and, in a job in which I am sent countless articles to sift through, Alex's writing stands out from the rest. Our readers, who regularly praise his work, certainly agree.

If this is the first time you've read the following stories, you're in for a treat. If you've read them before, I'm sure you, like me, are looking forward to reading them all over again.

Matt Christie, Editor, *Boxing News*

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to *Boxing News* editor Matt Christie for the lucky break. Without that opportunity, this book wouldn't exist.

A big thank you also to Miles Templeton and Larry Braysher for their unstinting support, and to Harold Alderman MBE, Derek O'Dell, Richard Ireland, Dick Modlock, John Harding, Stephen Powell, Ray Caulfield, Raymond Lee, Jim Jenkinson, Tony Gee and Andrew Fairley for their help during my time delving into boxing's past.

I'm grateful to the various ex-boxers' associations, the numerous interviewees who shared their boxing experiences and to Paul and Jane Camillin, of Pitch Publishing, and their first-class team for making this book a reality.

I'd also like to acknowledge the late Ron Olver, Gilbert Odd and O. F. Snelling, whose articles about the sport's history proved invaluable to my research.

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Introduction

Boxing News (*BN*) is the world's longest-running boxing publication and the 'Bible' of British boxing. Like the sport it covers, it has an interesting past.

Boxing News first hit newsstands on 11 September 1909, as a newspaper simply called *Boxing*. Its first editor, John Murray, had convinced its owner, William Berry (later Lord Camrose), that there was a market for a weekly paper solely devoted to boxing.

Any doubts Berry may have had were quickly quelled. All 77,500 copies of issue one sold in under two hours, and Murray published an apology to the many people who complained that they could not get a copy. The cover stars of that first issue were ring legends Jim Driscoll and Owen Moran. The price was a penny.

Over the years the paper changed size, format, title, editor and owner. Murray left in 1931, when *Boxing* was sold to a syndicate of London sportsmen. Sydney Rushton, a long-time London fight reporter, then became editor, and within a few years the paper was sold again. Other editors (Godfrey Williams, W.H. Millier, Sydney Ackland and Stanley Nelson) came and went, and in 1940 the newspaper was re-titled *Boxing News*.

Gilbert Odd, who joined *Boxing* as a young reporter in 1922 and served two spells as editor, worked at the newspaper during the Second World War, when paper shortages, postal delays, travel restrictions and war service call-ups made weekly publication at times impossible. One morning in 1941, Odd arrived at the *Boxing News* office (then in Emerald Street, Holborn) to discover it had been blitzed during the night.

'The shock brought tears to my eyes,' he remembered. 'I stumbled around over the debris trying to realise that everything had come to an abrupt halt. A kindly policeman told me, "This

place is cordoned off because it's highly dangerous. Anyway, what are you looking for, mate?"

'"My fountain pen," I told him.'

When Odd said it was on the sixth floor, the policeman replied, 'Well, you're a bloody optimist. The sixth floor came down with the rest last night, so I think you're wasting your time.'

British boxing's trade publication was down but not out. As boxing eras passed, champions came and went, and the sport was reshaped as society changed, *BN* was there to cover it all. Gilbert Odd, Bert Callis, Jack Wilson, Tim Riley, Graham Houston, Harry Mullan, Claude Abrams, Tris Dixon and Matt Christie are the men who've sat in the post-war editor's chair, as prized in boxing journalism as a championship belt. Three editors – Odd, Mullan and Houston – have been inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

One hundred and nine years after its launch, the world's oldest boxing publication – today a glossy colour magazine – is still going strong. Long live *Boxing News*!

Alex Daley
October 2018

The Incredible Mr Reeve

When former British light-heavyweight champion Harry Reeve walked into the *Boxing News* office in January 1919, editor John Murray was stunned by what he saw.

Instead of making excuses for his loss the previous night – a fifth-round retirement against future British heavyweight champ Joe Beckett – Reeve rolled up his right trouser leg and showed Murray the cause of the defeat.

Reeve had just returned from fighting in France, where his leg had been damaged by shrapnel. During the bout with Beckett, in which Harry had his man down twice, the wound burst open, forcing him to quit with blood pouring from his leg.

The injury required months of hospital treatment and permanently hampered Reeve's mobility. He had handed back his Lonsdale Belt and relinquished his title after being told he would never box again. But financial needs, and a hungry family, had compelled him to try.

On seeing the injury, Murray summoned a photographer and placed a photo of the leg on the cover of *Boxing News*.

Reeve's injury was, in fact, the lesser of two notable incidents from the ex-champion's war service. The other was extraordinary, and tragic.

After turning pro in 1910, Reeve, who was born in east London in 1893, established himself as a top title contender within four years. He challenged the talented Pat O'Keefe for the British middleweight title in February 1914 but was outpointed over 20 rounds.

Thereafter, Reeve, a 5ft 8in beer-lover, drank his way into the light-heavyweight class, where he was forced to tackle naturally

bigger men. Nevertheless, in October 1916 he captured the British light-heavyweight crown with a 20-round points win over Dick Smith. Harry also beat titlists Jim Sullivan, Joe Beckett and Bandsman Blake before war service intervened. Frustratingly, the call-up came just as Reeve looked set for a lucrative spell as champion.

He was posted to France as a military policeman at Étaples, a notorious army base where appalling conditions had the men close to mutiny by the time Harry arrived. On 9 September 1917, a large crowd of angry men gathered outside the camp's guardhouse to protest about the arrest of a New Zealand Artillery gunner, but after he was released they did not disperse.

Private Harry Reeve attempted to move an Australian soldier and when the soldier refused to budge Reeve punched him. Incensed, the crowd charged at Harry, who amid the chaos drew his gun and fired several shots. One struck and injured a French woman and another killed a Corporal Wood of the Gordon Highlanders, who was innocently passing and not part of the mob.

Reeve's actions sparked a mutiny as the furious soldiers turned on the military policemen, who were forced to flee for their lives. It took several days to restore order and Reeve was court-martialled for manslaughter and sentenced to a year's hard labour. After his release in 1918, Harry was sent to the front line, where he sustained his awful leg injury.

Although the injury had cut short Reeve's post-war comeback fight with Beckett, eventually he was well enough to return.

Harry never recaptured his pre-injury form but had many more fights, taking on heavyweights as his beer consumption and waistline grew. He boxed draws with British heavyweight champions Phil Scott and Reggie Meen, and twice took the future world light-heavyweight titlist Battling Siki the distance. In 1928 Reeve retired, but he made a brief comeback six years later, aged 41.

After retirement, Reeve worked on the docks and served as a boxing instructor. He died at the Coach and Horses pub in Plaistow, with a pint in his hand, while picking horses for a bet. He was 65.

8 October 2015

The Genius of Jimmy Wilde

'I have nothing to declare but my genius.' So supposedly said the famous Mr Wilde while passing through New York customs. That's Oscar Wilde, the famous writer, not Jimmy Wilde, the famous fighter. They were two very different men but here's one thing they shared. Neither was shy about his brilliance.

Jimmy Wilde passed through New York customs for a US fight tour 37 years after Oscar Wilde, but I doubt Jimmy made any such remark. However, in the late 1950s, several *Boxing News* readers were aggrieved by a similarly bold statement Jimmy had made in a TV interview.

Apparently, he'd been asked to predict the outcome of a fantasy match-up against fellow flyweight legend Benny Lynch, with Wilde declaring that he would have beaten Benny inside a couple of rounds.

Perhaps Jimmy truly believed this, or maybe he said it for a bit of devilment. Either way, you could make a good case for him beating Lynch, although I don't think such an early demolition would have been likely.

Both men were exceptional but there was something extra special about Wilde, who many claim hit harder than any flyweight in history. In his booth days, he had reputedly KO'd heavyweights and later, as a *bona fide* pro, he had little trouble dismantling the best flyweights and bantams around. They called him 'the Tylorstown Terror', 'the Mighty Atom' and 'the Ghost with a Hammer in his Hand', for his frail appearance belied his destructiveness.

Seeing the little Welsh legend on film, though, can be an anticlimax. First, there's the quality of the fight footage. Shot from distance with a single static camera, it is grainy and indistinct. I wonder how much better Wilde would look with multiple camera angles, slow-motion replays and close-ups?

And then there is Jimmy Wilde himself. I admit, when I first saw him fight, I was a little disappointed. With his fists dangling at his side and his footwork often messy, he could hardly be termed a textbook boxer. But as I now realise, this unorthodoxy is part of what made him the force he was.

So what exactly was Jimmy Wilde's genius? That very topic was discussed in *Boxing News* back in June 1951, when people who'd witnessed his fights were still around.

'Speed plus timing did the trick,' wrote *BN* contributor Bill Evans. 'Of course, he was unorthodox. He could bring across a punch from an unexpected angle and take an opponent unawares. For this reason, he was neither a good coach nor a good example to the young — in a boxing sense only, I mean. He could show you just how he punched but he alone could punch that way.'

But *BN* reader Norman Allen-Jones disagreed on the point of speed, writing, 'Jimmy definitely did not speed, except with eye and brain.' Allen-Jones also observed that Wilde moved 'flat-footedly' inside the ring and 'rarely maintained his stance throughout a round'. So what about his genius?

'I saw him first in 1913,' Allen-Jones recalled. 'He had ducked very low and his opponent sent a left over his shoulder. A friend said to me, "Now watch two uppercuts." "Uppercuts!" said I, scornfully. "Where from?" Then they came, a left and a right neck stretch under the chin, while Jimmy was still "in two doubles" underneath. Where the power of those strokes came from I still cannot understand. He made it look so easy and natural.'

26 January 2017

Conteh's Longest Round

One of the highlights of attending the London Ex-Boxers' Association's annual awards is to meet big-name fighters from days gone by. This year's guest list featured the usual host of ex-world, European and British champions. Among them, former WBC light-heavyweight titlist John Conteh cut a particularly impressive figure. The 66-year-old Liverpudlian looked in excellent shape and on excellent form. Much of his time there seemed to involve talking to fans.

I didn't get to speak to Conteh but if I had done, I would have asked about one of his early fights. It was July 1972 and only John's 11th pro contest. He was then a heavyweight.

The show took place in Croke Park, Dublin. The headline match featured Muhammad Ali and Alvin 'Blue' Lewis. It was Ali's only bout on Irish soil. An eccentric publican and ex-circus strongman called Michael 'Butty' Sugrue had lured him there to face Lewis, a fearsome ex-convict who had apparently given Muhammad many hard spars. But Butty had only dabbled in boxing promoting and the fight was a financial flop.

Fewer than 19,000 showed up at the 82,000-capacity Croke Park and thousands without tickets clambered into the arena for free. The show's organisation was so poor that boxing gloves had to be flown in at the last minute. Apparently, no one had thought to supply them.

Conteh, who had sparred with Ali while in Dublin, had his own problems. In his dressing room, an official tried to force both of Conteh's hands into left-handed gloves, despite his protests. By the time the situation was resolved, the bout was running late. But the crowd, including film director John Huston and former world

light-heavyweight champs Billy Conn and Jose Torres, certainly got their money's worth from round one.

In the heat of battle, time can appear to travel differently but for Conteh and his opponent, Chicago's Johnny Mac, that opening round seemed to last forever. The Liverpudlian had the Chicago boxer in trouble almost from the off. A right to the jaw made Mac cling on and as Conteh ripped in shots, blood streamed from the American's nose.

Suddenly, matchmaker Mickey Duff began screaming at the timekeeper. It turned out that more than three minutes had passed but the timekeeper hadn't realised it as both his clocks had stopped. Conteh closed the show in the delayed second round, flooring Mac twice to force the ref to step in.

Graham Houston, reporting for *Boxing News*, wrote of Conteh, 'He is a colourful and attractive fighter, but a lack of body weight could still be his biggest problem. There are those who feel Conteh would do better to trim down to light-heavy — but it is in the heavyweight class where the biggest money is to be made.'

At the time there was no cruiserweight division, but the suggestion to trim down to 12st 7lb was a good one. Finally, after Ali told him, 'Get out of my division. You're not big enough!', John took the advice. In March 1973, he won the European light-heavy crown from Rudiger Schmidtke and two months later captured the British and Commonwealth titles from Chris Finnegan.

Conteh won the vacant WBC crown, beating Jorge Ahumada in one-sided fashion in October 1974. Three successful defences followed before the WBC stripped John of his title after a dispute.

I once asked the late veteran referee Sid Nathan who he felt was the best boxer Britain had produced. 'I think John Conteh was the best British boxer since World War Two,' he declared. Sid, who refereed several Conteh fights, was well placed to judge.

12 April 2018

Miracle Men

The fight game is hard enough without the hindrance of a physical impairment. So anyone determined enough to box professionally despite an inherent bodily weakness must have an abundance of heart.

Modern fans will know about Robin Deakin, the Crawley super-lightweight born with two club feet. Deakin recently retired after 11 years and 55 fights as a pro. Admittedly, he lost 53 of these, but the fact he became a prize-fighter at all could be called a minor miracle.

But Deakin wasn't the only boxer with lower-leg disabilities to enjoy a long career in the paid ranks. Harry Legge of Bournemouth was born in September 1919. At age five he contracted polio, which withered his right leg. He had an operation to set his right foot on tip-toe to compensate for a size difference between the legs. To help build his confidence, Harry turned to amateur boxing in the 1930s and amazed local sportsmen by winning most of his fights.

Eager to turn pro, Legge approached Bournemouth boxing impresarios Bob and Jack Turner to see if they would manage him. But he was told they were already oversubscribed with fighters. Several years passed and Harry kept up his amateur boxing until finally an offer from Jack Turner arrived. By 1943 fighters were in short supply, with many called up to serve in the war, so Turner was willing to take a chance on Legge, who made his pro debut aged 23 in June that year.

'I'd been rejected by the Services because of my deformed leg,' Harry recalled. 'As things turned out, boxing restored my shattered ego. I took as many fights as Jack could get me. Licensed fights in the winter and the booth circuit all summer. Sometimes,

from Easter to October, proper fights clashed with booth fights, so my form suffered. It was a crazy way of pursuing a boxing career and no way to get to the top. But I truly thought I'd get to the top anyway.'

Legge crammed 165 official fights (84-54-26) into his ten-year pro career, along with many unofficial booth bouts. From October 1944 to November 1945 he was unbeaten in 19 contests, including three draws. In 1945/46, he had 44 bouts and in 1947 a staggering 35 fights. In 1951, he won the Western Area lightweight crown and despite his busy schedule, he was never KO'd and only stopped four times. At one stage, Legge was set to box on a Jack Solomons bill at Harringay Arena but his hopes were dashed. 'I'm sorry, Harry,' Solomons said. 'I can't use you on my big shows — I've got too many enemies. The world press are at ringside and if you slipped and broke your leg, I'd be crucified.'

'I spent too many years of my mid-20s fighting little fights,' admitted Harry. 'Too many small venues; too many trips with my little bag; too many journeys to the well. It was ironic that I enjoyed it so much.'

Two other men who deserve a mention are pre-war pros Harry Jennings and the colourfully named Al Capone. Jennings (real name John James Gentleman) was born in Bethnal Green, east London in October 1908. As an infant, his left leg was withered by polio and his right foot damaged by a fall. For several years he couldn't walk and for several more he relied on crutches.

Yet eventually he grew strong enough to box and turned pro at 17 under Johnny Sharpe. Remarkably, Jennings notched 153 fights (84-47-22) between 1926 and '36, facing some of Britain's best welters and middles.

Capone (real name Alfred Dickinson) of West Hartlepool had less success than Legge and Jennings but nevertheless made his mark. Despite being born with a club foot, Al fought 80 times as a pro (39-35-6) between 1932 and '42 and beat two Welsh champions.

A final nod should go to 19th-century bare-knuckle pugilist William Perry, 'the Tipton Slasher', who in spite of a withered leg became champion of England.

7 June 2018