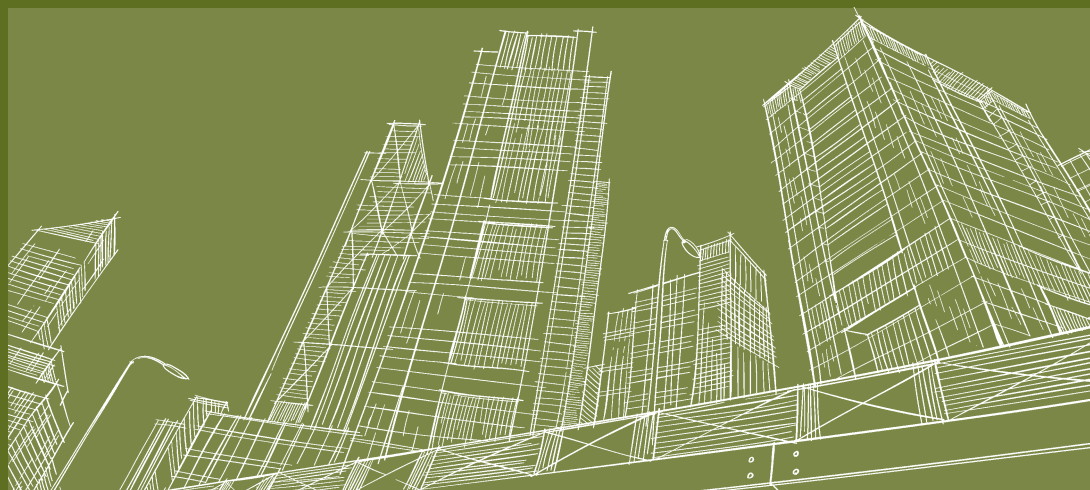




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A Social History of Sheffield Boxing, Volume II

Scrap Merchants, 1970–2020



Matthew Bell · Gary Armstrong

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Palgrave Studies in Urban Anthropology

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Sheffield in July 2020 (This image used with permission of [Matthew Bell])



Sheffield in July 2020 (This image used with permission of [Matthew Bell])

FOREWORD

It was whilst reading this work that I realised how much boxing was a background hum to my Sheffield upbringing. I'm not by any means from what might be called a 'boxing family' but the sport was always present in my family home by virtue of my dad Brian, who boxed in the Army. He was a light-heavyweight and won regimental titles. An uncle called Tom Clarke, who often visited our house, had won amateur fights in Sheffield and when I was aged about ten he bought me some junior boxing gloves. That started me off in a way; boxing gloves give anyone who puts them on an automatic inclination to raise their fists to their jaw, hunch their shoulders, crouch a bit and begin throwing punches towards an imaginary opponent. Then each Sunday morning a family friend called Jack Hudson—known in the boxing world as Jackie, but he was Jack to us—who had been a very good local-born boxer, would come round to the house for a bun and a cup of tea and talk boxing with my dad. Strangely enough, our house backed onto the garden of a family related to world flyweight champion Walter McGowan; sometimes I'd talk with him over the fence.

Talk gave way to action in my early teens. Jack and my dad would shape some benches in our yard into a square and, pretending it was a boxing ring, sort of sparred with me. I could never hit them and occasionally they'd clip me when I dropped my guard. My mum and sister would sit 'ring-side'—cheering for me! Like just about everyone I knew I was interested in the big fights in the 1970s and watched boxing on TV.

In the 1980s I liked world middleweight champion Alan Minter, who died recently, and world featherweight champion Barry McGuigan, and in fact all those who fought in the lighter weight categories because they always seemed to throw more punches than the heavyweights. My dad liked the underdogs, preferring Joe Frazier to Muhammad Ali. He never liked show-offs and enjoyed the victories of the industrious over the show-boaters. It's interesting how we project ourselves in a way onto those we favour in boxing contests.

There were no favours given in neighbourhood adolescent street fights but that's another story. In school we'd occasionally have a PE lesson when the teacher would declare, 'Today we're boxing' and give out the gloves. We'd all start punching each other and it usually got out of hand, so they stopped it! I suppose it was inevitable that with all this background I'd try out a boxing club. I went to the Croft House club near Sheffield city centre when I was 15. I'm not sure why I chose that club; maybe it had a good reputation. I never dreamed of being a champ—I just wanted to get fit. I got welcomed by the trainer Bob Biney, who was a good man I got to know well. I remember him always wearing a grey tracksuit and being keen on exercises with a medicine ball. Circuit training progressed to gloves and pads. I went two or three times a week. There was a small café there where I'd reward myself with a milkshake after training. The people there were from all over Sheffield, down-to-earth and unpretentious.

I was fascinated by the area where the Croft House club was. There were these three-storey buildings with metal adornments and old gaslights. It was like a scene out of the 1950s film *A Streetcar Named Desire* set in New Orleans; it made a big impression on me. Then someone made a few impressions on me with punches and I decided boxing was not my future. I also went to the St Vincent's club—I think Croft House was closed for renovations. I'd done a few low-key three-minute mini-sparring 'rounds' but at St Vincent's it was the first time for me in a ring against this bloke—I never knew his name—who knew his way round. After letting me have a couple of easy rounds the fellah gave me a good hiding. I realised I had no ambition to go higher. I hadn't the passion to take it to the next level. I was 17, starting work and had a girlfriend. I had enough to cope with without getting thumped in the name of leisure.

I'm glad I did the two years though. I learned a lot. The training taught discipline and the need to find some sense of staying power in the hardest moments. The boxing environment taught me that for elite performance

you need total commitment in what you are tasked with, and an ultra-focus on the present. I took this attitude with me when I left Sheffield and began studying at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 1980. What I might best call 'the boxing ethos' has stayed with me all my acting career. This might require a leap of faith in some readers, but whilst acting is not a battle with an opponent it is an activity that is often physically very demanding and requiring indestructible self-belief. If you don't have that you're floundering. Self-belief is a precious commodity; top boxers have to have it and those who can act need it. Possession of it can derive from various aspects of an individual's upbringing; boxing played no small part in my self-belief.

When I returned periodically to Sheffield to see my family I loved to go with my dad when he met with ex-boxers and Sheffield's East-End scrap merchants in a pub midway between Attercliffe and Darnall. Sheffield-born one-time contender Billy Calvert would be there, as would Jack Hudson, and the scrap men they hung out with came from the same districts of the city. Well-dressed, confident, not short of opinions and ever ready to ridicule life, their respective pursuits had parallels. Neither the boxers nor the scrap men lived by the factory clock; they were self-made in their respective ways, mutually living off their wits and aware that one bad move could ruin them. They were men who knew that life would punch them actually and metaphorically, and maybe for this reason they enjoyed the moment.

I admire everyone who has ever stepped into a boxing ring, or even aspires to. For many boxers I got to know it wasn't about money, it was about putting on a show and maybe resolving some matter they had to live with but could not always articulate. I admire also the unpaid hours that so many give to providing those in the ring with a chance to perform and in many cases offer a second chance at doing something useful with their lives. I'm glad the city I was born and raised in respects and—when it can—rewards the unique talent of its boxers and understands the pain and dedication required of the individual seeking a championship. This admiration is founded in the workplaces that defined Sheffield. It was a place that employed tens of thousands in the dangerous and often painful work of mining coal and forging steel. This made for incredibly tough and resilient people, hard but not violent. Many had an innocence about what life might be available elsewhere but meanwhile showed kindness towards the less well-off amongst them. There were fall-outs but there was always

the sense of a ‘proper’ fight, which would see two men having a ‘one-on-one’, after which they were expected to shake hands and forget the issue that caused the fight.

I attended club fights in Sheffield and when I moved to London I’d go to the famous York Hall in Bethnal Green. I went a few times in 1988 when I was cast to be part of a TV series written by Barry O’Keefe called *Betty*. It was a brilliant script and I was to be the boxing character, playing alongside Christopher Lee and the model-turned-actress Twiggy. I trained for the role with the one-time world middleweight champion Terry Downes. Then there was a dispute in the industry and not one episode was ever made. I’d consider *Raging Bull* the best boxing film ever. I also rated the 2017 film *Jawbone*, starring Ray Winstone and Johnny Harris, and there’s another American production made in black and white, which sees a boxer pursue a dream but he dies in the end. I can never remember the title but it was a moving story.

I’ve met a few boxers in my time and know a good few whose lives are profiled in these two books. I presented an award to Naseem Hamed, found myself a couple of times in the same room as Clinton Woods and Dennis Hobson and I carried Kell Brook’s IBF International welterweight belt as he entered the Sheffield Arena ring before his 2012 fight against Carson Jones. In London I frequented a pub that former European champion Spencer Oliver visited, and got to know him. I watched a few of his fights ring-side. More recently I have got to know world champions Darren Barker and Joe Calzaghe. I entered their world in a small way when I did a film in 2015 called *Any Day* with Eva Longoria. I played a boxer called Vian McLean, just out of prison trying to resurrect his career but realising he’s not what he was before his conviction. I trained hard for the part in the famous *Wild Card* boxing gym in Los Angeles. I met Freddie Roach, who trained Manny Pacquiao, Miguel Cotto and Julio César Chávez, and spent days getting into shape. The place was full of tough fighters who were nonetheless welcoming of this thespian, all having seen the *Lord of the Rings* film!



Kell Brook and Sean Bean prior to Brook's fight against Carson Jones in July 2012 (This image used with permission of [Gary Armstrong])

I've known the co-authors for decades now—we all share a mutual interest in Sheffield United FC. One of them—Matt—lived a couple of miles from our house; Gary once lived on the same road. I've been to many a game with the pair and I've been known to have a few pints with them as well. Matt once got me into trouble with the local press, printing a cartoon I drew for his *Flashing Blade* football fanzine. They claimed my daft scribbles were inciting trouble between rival fans in Sheffield! Gary has got me out of trouble a few times: enough said. I've read all Matt and Gary's previous collaborations; they're good at what they do. And in this collaboration they have produced a unique piece of work combining their respective personalities. Neither would make any claims to being a bit handy in a 'straightener' in a Darnall pub car park at kicking-out time, nor do they give out the 'thousand-yard stare', but what they lack in menace they make up for in insight. It's obvious from reading what follows that

they can walk into a gym, look who's in there in the eye and hold their own in any ensuing conversation. They can listen and make sense of often chaotic lives and careers. They are well considered in Sheffield. A love of their home city is very evident.

This is a great read. The stories that follow pack a punch. They're about exceptional people in an exceptional British city. No book I know of explores place and boxing like this one. Sheffield has much to be proud of but has always been modest about its achievements. Let's be proud of our fighting heritage.

Enjoy your read.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SB' followed by a stylized flourish.

London, UK

Sean Bean

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction



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These fights are frequented, it is well known, by all the rabble of London; who, instead of worshipping their God and rejoicing in the birth of a

Saviour, so recently assembled on a day devoted to holiness for the indulgence of vice and the subversion of order.—Mr Justice Burrough, Surrey Winter Assizes, December 1824¹

There can be no reasonable objection to boxing as ordinarily understood. It is a manly, healthful and vigorous training, and encouraged in some of our most respectable institutions.—Mr Justice McEnergy, Louisiana Supreme Court, 1895.²

It is a mistake to suppose that the boxing glove is less injurious to the person with whom it comes in contact than the bare fist is. The fist cuts, but the glove stuns like a sand club or a piece of lead pipe, and is more apt to produce congestion of the brain and other internal injuries.—The *Cosmopolitan*, 1887.

People will pay good monies to watch a man hit another man. This being the reality of boxing, the sport has always sought to maintain a veneer of civility. The boxers' weigh-in and the customary pre-bout touching of gloves are designed to go some small way to making respectable what is to follow. Good manners from the spectators are appreciated, if not always apparent. Those in attendance dress well. Some events provide for fine wine and dining to accompany the punching. The event enjoys a winner but also—in various degrees of gratitude—appreciates a loser. The popularity of boxing comes and goes but never goes too far. It is a practice that has proven lucrative for a variety of people and businesses.

Professional boxing today exists in a golden triangle of broadcast networks, boxing promoters and boxing talent. It needs television for its survival and is made for television, and indeed Hollywood, as the number of boxing-themed movies testifies. Broadcasting has implicitly supplied the fight game with income for the past 100-plus years³; it has also provided legitimacy. In return, the broadcaster has a money-making product that does not have a sporting season. It is no exaggeration, however, to state that just a handful of men control boxing at the elite level; the broadcasters buy rights and sell advertising and in return demand entertainment and viewing figures. They negotiate with promoters, who negotiate with fighters' managers. In putting on a show, great boxing skill is not the broadcaster's to promise, but great fighters are needed, ideally with both 'attitude' and charisma. The 'big men' who contest the heavyweight division have always attracted the biggest purses and the most attention.

THE TALKING GROUND

Volume One of this work concentrated on the history and development of boxing from the unregulated—but well-connected—era of bare-knuckle contests to the grudging acceptability the fight game had gained by the second half of the twentieth century. By this time, there was a new player in town: television, a platform that facilitated the arrival of a new breed of men willing and able to voraciously market the event and arguably exploit both fighters and viewers. Boxing needs people who can grasp what is required for a show and put it on successfully. Such individuals are called promoters. Although people had *de facto* performed such a role for nearly 200 years previously, the term ‘promoter’ is believed to have first appeared in print in 1910 when George ‘Tex’ Rickard offered a \$10,000 purse for the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries fight. Promoters are boxing’s fixers; they match opponents, agree the purse, liaise with the sanctioning authorities, negotiate a television deal and arrange the ticketing, venue, site fee, advertising, catering, weigh-in procedures, press and stadium security. American promoter Bob Arum, who came to the fore in the 1960s, is widely credited with being the first to comprehensively understand how to package and promote boxing for television. This period was the turning point in the promotion of the game to such an extent that by the early 1970s a new wave of consortiums and confident individuals—none more so than the theatrical, garrulous, spiky-haired ex-convict Don King⁴—was able to shift the biggest heavyweight fights from the traditional American and British centres to fresh audiences in Kingston, Caracas, Jakarta, Kinshasa, San Juan, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Munich.

British boxing also dragged itself out of the parochial. From the mid-1950s, *BBC* and *ITV* shared the broadcasting rights to domestic fights. The first advertisement on British television was broadcast between the rounds of a live boxing match.⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, big fights—both domestic and from the USA—could attract large British television and radio audiences. Managers and promoters such as Terry Lawless, Harry Levine and Mickey Duff became as high profile as the boxers they controlled. The arrival of satellite television in the 1990s brought new faces in the shape of Frank Warren, Barry and Eddie Hearn, Frank Maloney, Dennis Hobson and others. These individuals sometimes settled their disputes publicly. The backrooms, boardrooms and courtrooms they

met in at times evidenced as much conflict and trash-talk as the pre-contest press conferences they promoted. They knew that any publicity was good publicity.

THE TALKING GAME

To make an income, boxers need promoters and the television deals—and viewers—they bring. They also need spectators ring-side. For big shows, tickets are sometimes gone in minutes—they sell themselves in a sense—but for smaller events the boxer has to take some responsibility for ticket sales. Whether big or small, fighters have to talk up the contest. This sees displays of *braggadocio* and insults to the extent that the pre-fight hype has become a ticket-selling event in itself wherein thousands attend to witness the verbal (and sometimes physical) shenanigans.⁶ The men in suits standing in the background of such occasions have made the match using methods of ranking and rating. Governing bodies—domestic and global—decide rankings informed in part by promoters, in part by boxers' past records and in part by their own observations and—perhaps—bias. These 'movers and shakers' sometimes take a large cut of the purse and last longer in the business than the fighter. A boxer's ranking should determine who he will next fight and when. In theory, the 'Number One' contender is in position to challenge a champion, but sometimes promoters leapfrog a lower-ranked boxer over him; a contest that will prove a bigger draw can subvert the system. Sometimes contracts with rival television networks preclude two boxers entering the same ring, despite the obvious attraction of a contest between them. Nothing is ever straightforward when it comes to negotiating fights and deals.

IT ALL FIGURES

Today, more fights can be viewed on television and on-line by virtue of the proliferation of boxing governing bodies. In the 1960s, there were just two global boxing organisations; by 1988, this number had grown to four, not including various alternative bodies set up to try—usually unsuccessfully—to grab a piece of the action. This provoked more than one boxing writer to speak of their multifarious acronyms as 'alphabet soup'. The current four main governing bodies and 17 weight categories mean it is theoretically possible for there to be 68 world boxing champions. In this plethora of titles, the quality control of opponents is at

times questionable. Such entities, however, have the selling power of broadcasters on their side. A British television audience of 27.3 million watched the 1975 world heavyweight title fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier—their third and deciding contest—dubbed the ‘Thrilla in Manila’. This was also the first live broadcast on the American *Home Box Office* (HBO) channel.⁷ The 1980s heralded what became known generically as the ‘Super-Fight’ and the era of the ‘Four Kings’—Roberto ‘El Diablo’ Durán, Thomas ‘The Hitman’ Hearns, Sugar Ray Leonard and ‘Marvelous’ Marvin Hagler. Thanks to television, these men were global names. The mercurial talents of Leonard, the ruggedness of Durán, the punching power of Hearns and the relentlessness of Hagler filled the void left by the retirements of former heavyweight champions Ali, Frazier and George Foreman. Even contests involving lesser-known names attracted huge audiences: the 1985 WBA⁸ featherweight title fight between Irishman Barry McGuigan and Panamanian Eusebio Pedroza at Loftus Road Stadium, London, was watched by 26,000 in the stadium and a BBC television audience of 18 million. Herol Graham’s 1986 European title contest against Ayub Kalule at Sheffield City Hall was watched live by over 10 million television viewers. If arena audiences are the measure, today’s boxing promoters are doing something right. The six biggest post-war live boxing attendances in the UK have occurred since 2007: 90,000 for Anthony Joshua v Wladimir Klitschko at Wembley Stadium in 2017; 80,000 for Anthony Joshua v Alexander Povetkin at Wembley Stadium in 2019; 80,000 for Carl Froch v George Groves at Wembley Stadium in 2014; 78,000 for Anthony Joshua v Joseph Parker at the Principality Stadium in 2018; 57,000 for Ricky Hatton v Juan Lazcano at the City of Manchester Stadium in 2008; 50,000 for Joe Calzaghe v Mikkel Kessler at the Millennium Stadium⁹ in 2007.

Such figures tell of the fight game’s fascination. Consequently, the richest pay-days in sport come from boxing. The recipients are, however, often troubled. In 2015, the world’s highest-earning sports star was boxer Floyd Mayweather Junior, who in that year alone accrued over \$300 million, four times more than the highest-earning non-boxer, Real Madrid footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. Mayweather’s ring brilliance was matched by his belligerence and self-aggrandisement out of it, accompanied by a long history of violence beyond boxing. In 2001 and 2002, Mayweather pleaded guilty to two charges of domestic violence, serving 48 hours of community service and two days of house arrest. In November 2003, he was convicted of misdemeanour battery, resulting

in 100 hours' community service. According to Mayweather's criminal record, these charges were 'dismissed per negotiation' in 2008. In 2011, he admitted one count of misdemeanour battery domestic violence and no contest to two counts of harassment for assaulting the mother of three of his children. Sentenced to 90 days in prison, he was released after 60 days. However, Mayweather has largely avoided any sense of public outrage that other high-profile sportsmen accused of domestic violence have faced. Despite its popularity, boxing is something of a niche sport that lacks a single authoritative body that in other sports might firmly put its foot down on the careers of miscreants.¹⁰ Such individuals are more than tolerated in boxing. The headlines they create outside of the ring are all part of boxing's narratives, drama and indeed metaphors.

REDEMPTION, JOURNEYS AND INEQUALITIES

As Volume One of this work emphasised, any urban inquiry must address the political, the social and the cultural aspects of place and people (Weber 1958), in other words the *urbs*, the *polis* and the *civitas* (Prato 2018, pp. 1–11). This means being cognisant of the built-up environment, the social associations within it and the political community that organises it (Prato and Pardo 2013). Reflecting on where boxing might reside in this context, we can consider that boxing gyms contain what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed 'a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions' (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 82–83), which provide for practical relationships (Bourdieu 1990) and embody particular 'scenes' (Hebdige 1979; Thornton 1995). Such gatherings permit the exposition of bodily capital via muscular torsos that evidence the rigours of training (Downey 2010). What Bourdieu called *habitus* concomitantly provides for motivating structures, based as it is in cognitive perceptions that categorise and predispose situations (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 72–97). The celebration of a shared history and the emotions encompassed in that history inform interpretations and responses, giving all who share such sentiments what might be termed a 'feel for the game' (Katz 1988; Bourdieu 1998, p. 25). Boxing is renowned for placing particular importance in such indefinable qualities.

In his work titled *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, British anthropologist Victor Turner argued that any society could best be understood as host to a series of social dramas played out in locations he termed *fields* or *social domains* surrounded by rituals and symbols (*i.e.* metaphors)

(Turner 1975, p. 17) inculcated through *habitus*, a quality that makes ‘thinking outside the box’ difficult. Thinking is the issue here; if we apply to boxing the arguments British anthropologist Mary Douglas made in her seminal tome *Purity and Danger* about the constructs of the permissible, then we can consider how the normally proscribed and prohibited (unthinkable) becomes operatively possible (thinkable) via the cultural acceptance and even celebration of—in this case—extreme forms of violence (Douglas 1966). We might then include Douglas’s later work *How Institutions Think* (Douglas 1986) and consider the boxing gym as the institution that facilitates the practices of both ‘purity’ and ‘danger’ that are taught and celebrated therein by virtue of the wisdom of what American anthropologist Margaret Mead termed the metaphorical ‘Big Man’ status (Mead 1935), a concept expanded upon by American anthropologist Rena Lederman in her work *Anthropology of Big Men* (Lederman 2015).

Usually not holding any accepted formal social standing but acknowledged as having leadership qualities, the ‘Big Man’ concept was mooted by Mead in her study of the South Pacific regions of Polynesia and Melanesia. Such men, she and subsequently others argued, are influential and act as a guiding force to others. They are appreciated in what American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins called ‘achievement-based societies’ (Sahlins 1963). Recognition for such a status can come from—variously—feats, enhancing events, gift-giving, garnering support and contributing to the local economy. Boxing fits this *schema*; at one level, it is about champions but on another it is about redemption and—to use a recently fashionable term in practices of self-reflection—it is about ‘journeys’.

When it comes to boxing the most obvious ‘Big Men’ are promoters, managers and trainers. Such men can attain global fame; think of Don King and Muhammad Ali’s trainer Angelo Dundee. In Sheffield, the metaphor can be applied to individuals examined later who rose from nothing to get things done, organising and promoting boxing shows that brought in the crowds and made wealth for themselves and the boxer and furthermore provided a profile for the city. The ‘Big Man’ terminology can also be applied to the home-town boxing champion who of his own volition makes things happen. This achievement is admired and also contributes to the local economy; he can via acts of generosity become a gift-giver to those less well off. Nevertheless, the ‘Big Man’ must be aware of the court of reputation and has to both do things right and be seen to be doing things right. It is a precarious title.

TIME AND PLACE

To return to Victor Turner, we must understand that any social dramas have temporal and spatial dimensions that are usually known and understood by the protagonists without too many reflexive processes. The Turnerian notion of *field* is enshrined in metaphors of domain, locale and place. The domains that constitute ‘home’ and the ‘local’ are places of embellishment and succour, usually accompanied by various elements of control. Activities in both have their timings, expectations and signals. This trilogy is crucial in boxing. Time is the essential metaphor of life, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and we can note how traditionally male-on-male working-class violence in Sheffield (and elsewhere) has temporal dimensions, so any study of violent male culture needs assessment, interpretation and a consideration as to why boxing is regarded as a form of salvation from ‘street-level’ practices.

The art of boxing, as we might call it, differs from mainstream male-on-male public violence. The centuries-old spontaneous *fracas* between two antagonists (often around licensed premises) can be of short duration (‘punch-kick-flee’) but can create an antagonism that lasts months or years when gaps of no action give way to retaliation. In the same cultural context, we might consider the five decades of football match-day ‘punch-up’, which for those involved could be the first and last in a simple process of arrival and recognition (‘confrontation-punch-home’) never to be repeated, no insult taken. This changes when—possibly—the same young men translate their pugilism into the boxing gym. In boxing, the time metaphor is very relevant; it is ‘bell led’ and the ultimate count is to ten. Staying with this theme, we can consider the boxer in the gym as doing time; the aspirant bides his time before moving on to learn more complex ideas and techniques under the guidance of the venerated gym ‘Big Man’. Trainers are forever the judge and in that role decide the appropriate sentence. Time is thus taught; aspirants need to use it correctly, which means living with purity, fending off life’s potential pollutants, the dangers waiting to kill the cleanliness, order and redemption that the young men are learning and living in the structures of their new existence.

HAIL THE REDEEMERS

The notion and processes of redemption are crucial here. The word has its roots in the Latin *redempti*, meaning ‘to buy back’. In Ancient Rome, redemption might involve a bribe to an authority figure to overturn an unfavourable decision. In the early Roman Catholic Church, *redemptio* was the act of giving money to a priest or bishop to receive in return forgiveness for one’s sins. In the Christian sense, redemption is a process that seeks deliverance from sin via the suffering and death of Christ and his incarnation. The Christian Church has thus a continuous and incessant need for its rituals to pursue atonement, not least because it teaches that God allowed his only son to die for our salvation. Crucial to any process of redemption is a sense of atonement for guilt. The concept is valid without the accompanying contemplation as to whether or not God exists: it is a path taken—usually a hallowed one via continuous and continual social sets—with some sense of salvation as a destination and some sense of achievement that might be equated to the notion of godliness. This suits—and indeed describes—boxing training. And, we might ask, are not world champions deified by many?

Away from the celestial, we might consider the existence—since the founding of the city of Sheffield—of a bounded domain of tough, working-class men who for decades have lived lives with basic levels of education, were economically poor and possessed of limited life chances. In this domain, ‘hard-man’ dramas have a long and well-attested history. The collective industries and near universal employment evidenced in Sheffield from the 1950s until the 1970s produced a sense of ‘occupational culture’ that fashioned a host of institutions and leisure time and underpinned both family values and notions of identity and inclusion. Whilst never well paid, tough work in tough industries was a badge of masculine identity—honour, even—to which young Sheffield men aspired. In leaving school and working and earning, they therefore assumed the capacity to indulge in leisure-time intoxication but enjoyed concomitantly a general sense of self-determination; the legacies of male working-class culture were passed on through generations. When the industries that sustained this legacy declined or disappeared, the culture they sustained fragmented, turning out what some sociologists have termed ‘consumerist narcissists’, with some individuals pursuing an attendant reputation for street violence, or at least enjoying the reputation of violent potential. Such potential (and indeed actual) violence

might be lucrative in some entrepreneurial scenarios. The issue was bound up in performative scenarios—what we might call the ‘codes of the street’—which required both expressive and instrumental violence. The consequences were the decline of the ‘hard-man’ of the factory or the ‘hard-man’ in the pub to a more instrumental ‘hard-man’, in the sense that being considered ‘hard’ was his primary identity.

This social format such scenarios provide is, at face value, illegal and criminal as it slips into *melee* and assault utilising fists, feet, heads and even weapons. We can add to this the opprobrium of those who pursue the upkeep of law and order and fear the activities of the ‘dangerous classes’ and their propensity for drink. When culture and substance are combined with both testosterone and sometimes limited decision-making abilities or choices, the inability to rationalise or take a philosophical view of the social dramas in which they become involved makes for incomprehension in the onlooker as to why some violent acts are perpetrated. Immediate or unreflective responses are too often the resolution of the issues at hand. It is, in the eyes of the protagonists, the right thing to do. Brawling might be a *rite de passage* for thousands but it is not always conducive to that we might best term the ‘social good’.

Some young men seek a way out of this life via the boxing gym. Their pre-gym physicality and, for want of a better term, ‘street skills’ might be utilised in the gym to achieve a degree of wealth and recognition and gain access to a social world outside of that in which they were born and raised. In becoming contenders and aspiring and actual champions, they depart the well-understood *fields* to enter the more ambiguous and liminal *fields* that very few can attain. The domain of the boxing gym becomes both the locale of their transformative education and their liminal space in which they ideally emerge as a different man.

This redemption process must not be threatened. The gym demands rules, regimes and practices that become implicit in the individual. A new purity is pursued and practised through dedication and renouncing that which will fail them. If danger intrudes—some neophyte might infiltrate—the trainer needs to step in and restore order via the language of paternalism and (slight) menace. The end product is an individual who, fully conversant with the codes of the street, does not wholly pass from what he once was to the social other, but having lived for years in the liminal and marginal domain of a professional fighter is able—should he so want—to return to that he came from as a new man, changed but still

‘one of us’. As we shall see, boxers are well versed in buying into the notion of being ‘saved’.

THE BOXER: THE GYM AND THE QUASI-RELIGIOUS

Floyd Mayweather and others like him would not have got where they did without being able to repress the personality traits that led to trouble outside the ring. For this, the gym environment can take credit. Author Thomas Hauser suggested that entering a boxing gym implied a willingness to abide by rules previously ignored, stretched or avoided (Hauser 1987). Many others have argued that the boxing gym acts as a sanctuary, a place where individuals are accepted because of (not despite) their background. Boxers thus carry a capacity for violence that is appreciated, even revered.

The gym has long given a semblance of order to the psyche of sometimes flawed men and is thus host to a sense of transformation, allowing the pursuit of a ‘better place’—in other words, ‘redemption’. That journey requires denial, devotion and introspection; so, if we accept that religion is more about practices than beliefs, we can see how the gym carries a sense of the sacred and the quasi-religious. In order to keep themselves at peak performance, boxers implement diets and training regimes that demand fasting in pursuit of salvation. This saintly abstinence sometimes extends to a fighter’s conjugal relations. A degree of faith—not least in oneself—is necessary to handle the ordeal and the life-threatening possibilities of the forthcoming contest. As sociologist Loïc Wacquant argued, such training regimes drew from the Benedictine notion of *magistra vitae* that collectively sought to control behaviour, enabling an individual to ‘know himself’ (Wacquant 2013). However, this is not only a Catholic concept. The mantra ‘no gain without pain’ is as integral to the gym as it is to the Protestant work ethic and to the Catholic concept of atonement.

Like the altar of a church, the boxing ring is a lonely place loaded with communication. At its most critical moment, it is populated by three men whose actions and gestures are understood by the believers. This brings complications. The ring self is not the social self; the ring self has to comprehend shapes and tell lies. As American writer Joyce Carol Oates explained, the ring is square but the winner has to control the action in the taken-for-granted circle that the protagonists move around. In this morality play, grace is needed, but so are cunning, irreverence

and subterfuge (Oates 1987). Oates reasoned that boxing exemplifies the fact that although we believe ourselves to be essentially spiritual beings, the most profound experiences of our lives are physical events. She also submitted that fighters are liars whose defence strategies exhibit astuteness, ingenuity and deceit. A punch misses because of deceitful movements, whilst the deceiver disappears only to reappear milliseconds later in a better position to inflict pain on the duped opponent. As Oates concluded, if there is a 'play-fair book' for boxing, the text must be very brief (Oates 1991).

Similar to any religious practice, boxing has its own language, knowledge sets and social spaces. It also has ministers and mediators. The role of the trainer—a position akin to a priest—is crucial to the body and soul of the fighter. Such men bark instructions that do not invite negotiation. They nurture via clichés of wisdom-wrapped paternalism that develop both boxing skills and masculine identities. The advice offered suggests the means required to get by both in the ring and, implicitly, in society. Such teachings perhaps differ little from those narrated to pugilists in ancient times and are called by Wacquant 'a practical form of wisdom' that ideally induces a calmness and self-acceptance. This is a fundamental skill in the unpredictable, sensorial and emotional universe of one-on-one combat. In proximity to the trainer and boxer when the fight begins are other men who say little but are vital to the task at hand. Such acolytes know that their respective roles are to provide in just 60 seconds a degree of respite and sustenance and to patch up the damaged skin of the fighter who returns to their space every three minutes.

CITY ON THE MOVE

This practice of patching up and giving words of reassurance might perhaps be used as a metaphor for the city this research is based in. The final decades of the twentieth century were not always kind to Sheffield's citizens; much of the industry that sustained the city was no longer needed. In some respects, Sheffield took a count of ten. Some of its people never fought again. Others rose and fought on. Yet others played another game; lost jobs in heavy industry were replaced in part by white-collar employment. Somewhat ironically, as the work became less *macho* the city attracted a pugilistic reputation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Sheffield did not have a boxing profile. Meanwhile, its national profile saw it branded a dirty place of heavy

industry and hard graft, characteristics not regarded as fertile ground for the creative and the visionary. The year 1971 saw Sheffield City Council's first concerted effort to cast off this dowdy image, commissioning a film and marketing exercise titled *Sheffield: City on the Move*, in which the city's smoke-free air, its innovations in the manufacture of special steels, its history, its picturesque surroundings and its civic pride were unashamedly championed. The film looked forward to a glorious decade ahead. However, it could hardly have gone more badly.

Instead of an economic boom, the 1970s was a time of nationwide strikes by, amongst others, power workers, car workers, print workers, lorry drivers, railway workers, steelworkers, ambulance drivers, miners, dockers, refuse collectors and even gravediggers. There were three-day working weeks, electricity blackouts, petrol rationing and ever-growing piles of rubbish left to rot in the streets. Inflation was at record post-war levels.¹¹ The 1978/1979 'Winter of Discontent' brought about the fall of the Labour Government and the rise of 'Thatcherism', which heralded mass unemployment, swathing financial and job cuts and the subsequent de-industrialisation of the 1980s. Sheffield took a beating. In South Yorkshire, the steel and miners' strikes of the first half of the 1980s further demoralised the region, which was—according to European Union figures—on a par with parts of southern Italy and Greece for poverty and destitution. Throughout Thatcher's iron grip, Sheffield remained a Labour stronghold; it was one of the most class-segregated cities in Europe in terms of the disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

There were, however, some good things to be had in South Yorkshire. The region had what was at one time the cheapest public transport system in Europe until the processes of deregulation and privatisation took hold in the late 1980s. Household and business rates were also low, until the 'rate capping' saga (explained later) put paid to that particular policy. Employment prospects were boosted by the relocation of the Manpower Services Commission¹² to a new-build headquarters in Sheffield city centre. Opened in 1981, the 11-storey building housed some 1800 local government officials handling national employment and training services.¹³ The banking and financial sector also offered thousands of new employment opportunities when in 1976 the Midland (later HSBC) Bank moved some of its national departments into a large office block in the city centre.¹⁴ These were rare positives.

A CITY OF SPORT

Sheffield's citizens could always not look to their sports teams for solace from the travails of the prevailing economic uncertainty. Both the city's professional football clubs were at the lowest ebb in their histories in the late 1970s, whilst Yorkshire County Cricket Club was forced out of Sheffield in 1973, having been formed in the city 110 years earlier. Sheffield managed to find one world-class sports star in track athlete Sebastian Coe, but he had arrived from elsewhere. If there was one field in which Sheffield was amongst the world leaders, it was in popular music. From heavy metal to electronic genres, the city produced (and rightfully boasted about) some of the most sought-after acts in the business in the shape of Def Leppard, ABC, Heaven 17 and the Human League. Other niche groups such as the Comsat Angels and Cabaret Voltaire had their own loyal (if smaller and more underground) followings around the country. Rather like in boxing, why so varied an array of talent developed in the same place in such circumstances defies simple explanation, but that's another story.

Sheffield's rising boxing fortunes from the early 1980s were another bright spot, which from the 1990s became a flood as Brendan Ingle's gym (see later)—founded in the 1960s—became increasingly successful. At the same time, the city's left-wing governors, wearied by their continued futile resistance to the economic strictures imposed by central Government, succumbed to the inevitable and jumped aboard the bandwagon of private investment and capitalist doctrines. They had little choice, and the city reaped the benefits with the construction of acres of retail, leisure and office space and the attendant infrastructure. Of course, this meant that jobs—good ones—for life in manual employment were replaced by a service economy, of which the 280-store Meadowhall shopping mall was the glistening temple, standing as it did on a site that once employed thousands in steel production.¹⁵

Some decisions of the city's leaders led to monumental 'cock-ups'. The 1991 World Student Games debacle,¹⁶ the loss-making *Supertram* system,¹⁷ the short-lived National Centre for Popular Music,¹⁸ the ill-fated city-centre *Sevenstones* retail development¹⁹ and the failed Sheffield airport²⁰ together cost the city untold sums with little or no return. Nevertheless, these expensive setbacks should not disguise the notion that Sheffield possesses (according to the tourism website www.welcometosheffield.co.uk), 'a friendly, independent and alternative spirit that you won't

find in other cities'. This rather vague statement is, however, a sentiment recognised by Sheffielders. The city's 'spirit' is manifested by the tens of thousands of students who attend its two universities, its unrivalled reputation as an 'outdoor' city (the Peak District National Park with its hundreds of miles of footpaths and bridleways and its multitude of prime rock-climbing locations is less than half-an-hour's drive from the city centre),²¹ its continued standing as the 'real ale' capital of Britain²² and its newly earned status as the 'hipster' centre of the north, likened by some to north-western American cities Portland and Seattle.²³ Sheffield may not be as glossy and strutting as nearby Manchester and Leeds but it enjoys its comparative modesty, its small-town feeling and the insularity afforded it by the surrounding topography and geography, as summarised by German-British art and architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner: 'None of the big cities of England has such majestic surroundings as Sheffield' (Pevsner 1959). In a similar vein, in the 1950s Sheffield was described as 'a flourishing industrial city with over half a million inhabitants and a world-wide reputation [which] still retains many of the essential characteristics of the small market town of about five thousand people from which it has grown in the space of two and a half centuries' (Hunt 1956). And as journalist Jonathon Foster wrote in *The Independent* in 1993: 'Sheffield is a uniquely insular city, the least cosmopolitan of all the large cities in Britain'.²⁴ Indeed, such is the sense of connection that locals refer to their city as 'the largest village in the world', a notion recognised as long ago as the late nineteenth century when physician Frederick Barry wrote:

The population of Sheffield is, for so large a town, unique in its character, in fact it more closely resembles that of a village than of a town, for over wide areas each person appears to be acquainted with every other ... a state of things leading to an amount of intercommunication such as is not, I believe, met with in other towns of similar size. (Barry 1889)

One of the enduring success stories of this 'village' since the late twentieth century is its boxing achievements. In attempting to discover the reasons for this, we interviewed people in the fight game whose stories were not always well known. This is therefore not intended to be a series of mini-biographies of high-achieving individuals, but a biography of a city and its boxing people. We located two dozen possible individuals who we considered able to add something to this project. Space saw us interview half that number; the profiles are thus strategic. An obvious

place to start was ‘The House of Ingles’, and we were lucky enough to speak to Brendan on four occasions before his death. We spoke also to his sons Dominic and John and daughter Bridget. There was often an Ingle connection in other interviewees, such as the Ingle-trained British champion Brian Anderson, one of the first black fighters out of the city and a man who had a remarkable post-fight career. Others trained at the Ingle gym before taking up training themselves: the activist and catalyst Glyn Rhodes; the modest and knowledgeable Ryan Rhodes; the resilient and persistent Dave Coldwell. We also were privileged to visit the unique community hub founded by Reagan Denton, which is the current base of the fascinating trainer Howard Rainey. Then, there was the Attercliffe-born one-time crockery seller and scrap merchant Dennis Hobson, whose indomitable self-belief saw him rub shoulders with mega-bucks American promoters and refuse to accept any crap from them. Time and words were exchanged with Grant Smith, the kitchen-fitter-turned-trainer-of-champions, and the late Jackie Hudson, still punching bags in his 80s. Collectively, all carry a sense of redemption and frequently a desire to overcome a sense of inequality. They make for a motley crew, but they constitute the heart and soul of boxing in twenty-first-century Sheffield.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *The Times*, December 29, 1824, 12536.
2. Quoted in *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, May 7, 1895, 59, 103.
3. The first boxing match to appear on film was a 100-minute documentary of the Bob Fitzsimmons v James J. Corbett world heavyweight title bout in Carson City, Nevada, in 1897. Also the first ever to be shot in widescreen, the film was considered so significant that British Library media historian Luke McKernan declared ‘it was boxing that created the cinema’.
4. In 1967, King was convicted of non-negligent manslaughter for stamping one of his employees to death. He served almost four years in prison before in 1983 being pardoned by the Governor of Ohio.
5. This occurred on the first day of British commercial television (September 22, 1955) when an estimated 658,000 viewers (watching on 188,000 television sets), mainly in the London area, tuned in. During the first ‘natural break’, an advert for *Gibbs SR* toothpaste became the first ever shown on British television. It was significant that *ITV* chose live boxing as its second-ever broadcast programme. As an indication of boxing’s popularity, a professional boxing broadcast in February 1956 was the sixth-highest watched programme that month on *ITV*.