

The Gentleman Boxer: Boxing, Manners and Masculinity in Eighteenth Century England

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Abstract

Prize fighting was enormously popular during the second half of the eighteenth century in Britain. It became a fashion, arguably even a cult, perhaps experienced as keenly by contemporary men of all classes as the “culture of sensibility” that describes this period of increasing politeness in society. This juxtaposition illustrates one of the vexing issues of the eighteenth century: could a man be both polite and manly? This article argues that men across the social spectrum found in the figure of the “gentleman boxer” a resolution to this issue. The “gentleman boxer” synthesised traditionally held views of manliness with the civilising effects of modern consumerism, acknowledged the concerns and aspirations of men of all classes, and responded to the political imperative for fighting men capable of forging a new nation bent on empire-building. The gentleman boxer was both polite and manly, and a fine example of a masculine identity negotiated between individual conceptions of the self and the material circumstances in which that self is found.

Introduction: Can a man be at once polite and manly?

HUMPHRIES' nose was much disfigured, and appeared as if cut with a sharp instrument: his right eye was completely closed, and his forehead was dreadfully lacerated over the left; he had also received some heavy body blows, and a few ugly touches were observed under his left arm; and his upper left was split; in fact, he was so exhausted as to be carried by his friends to a carriage, which soon conveyed him away to obtain medical assistance. MENDOZA, who gained some strength by the exhilarating sounds of victory, sported his figure upon the race ground for a short time after the combat, was not without symptoms of uneasiness – his head was much bruised, and his left eye and ear portrayed the vigour of his opponent's fist. His ribs were also in a tender state. —
Pierce Egan, *Boxiana*, 1812 (266)

It was the 29th September 1790. This was the third match between Richard Humphries and Daniel Mendoza. Betting was fierce with odds of five to four on Mendoza. The large yard of an inn at Doncaster, flanked on one side by houses and on the other by the river, was cordoned off by a strong paling so that the five hundred or so subscribers who had paid half a guinea each would not be subject to the “interruption of the populace.” This was not a large enough obstacle, however, for John Bull. Hundreds of people were rowed across the river and pulled the paling down (Egan 1812, 262-264). The Duke of Bedford, Lord John Russell and their large party had seen the two champions fight in 1788 (*The Times*, 9 January 1788). The Prince of Wales had attended a Mendoza match in 1787, which was stopped by the “praiseworthy interference” of a Justice of the Peace and a party of the Light Dragoons who read the riot act to some ten thousand spectators (*The Times*, 29 March 1787). Boxing was, after all, illegal¹ (*The Times*, 15 January 1788).

The eighteenth-century in England is often characterized by historians as a period of increasing politeness in society, many of whom concur with a contemporary essayist (1792) that, “NEVER were fine feelings in greater estimation, nor more generally adopted, than in our time” (*Of Sensibility* 1792, 181). Nevertheless, this period also witnessed widespread interest in prize fighting, which was perhaps experienced as keenly by contemporaries as the so-called “culture of sensibility” (Ford 1971, 9). How

¹ There is some question about the illegality of boxing and prize fighting, whether the activity itself was illegal or that it promoted other criminal activity such as breaching the peace, creating an affray and, occasionally, manslaughter. It is certainly the case that fights were organised in secret to avoid the interference of local magistrates who were also called upon in the pages of *The Times* to do their duty when fight organisers were successful. Historians such as Dennis Brailsford (1988) and Peter Radford (2002) accept the illegality of prize fighting, although sometimes qualify it with the term “technically illegal”.

can the blood and bruises of boxing be reconciled with an increasing attention to manners, courtesy and sensitivity of feelings? How was this tension experienced by the men of the time? And will an investigation of the institution and activity of boxing illuminate what Michèle Cohen calls the “vexing issue” and “preoccupation for most of the eighteenth century”: could a man “be at once polite and manly”? (Cohen 2004, 11; 1996, 41; 1999, 47)

This article argues that, in addition to the sparring that took place within the ring, the issue of boxing provided a rhetorical arena in which men from different classes debated the very nature of masculinity in an era when the rise of manners and luxury consumption challenged traditional representations of the hardy and pugnacious Briton. This argument will be supported by: 1) an examination of the changing social and cultural contexts that shaped the boxing debate; 2) an analysis of the different views on boxing proposed by men from various class backgrounds; and 3) an inquiry into the “gentleman boxer” as representing a bodily ideal thought capable of negotiating tensions between competing class-based models of masculinity.

Amongst the vast historical analysis of the eighteenth century, there is no work that explicitly explores boxing at the intersection of gender, culture, class, nationalism and civilisation. Scholars who consider these issues (without engaging with boxing) often place considerable emphasis on the role of prescriptive literature as a means of accessing the attitudes of the period. Marjorie Morgan, for instance, acknowledges that her investigation of conduct books, etiquette manuals and professional codes emphasizes “the realm of aspirations”, but she is working on the assumption that “ideals reveal as much or more about a society as does reality” (1994, 2). This approach may be found wanting, perhaps, if that reality includes the enduring popularity of physical violence in practices like boxing and dueling. Philip Carter looks more particularly at the experience of men in the emergence of polite society, but also relies on prescriptive literature (2001). Despite the lively sense of lived experience he gives us for at least three men, his argument is “predominantly concerned with representations of the gentleman” (p. 9). Although Carter finds that eighteenth-century thinkers described modern styles of restrained manhood that were both compatible with traditional values and able to be reconciled with a modern commercial society (p. 55), he rightly points out that men were still enjoined to restrain themselves, suggesting a “natural male personality” that was characterized as much by aggression and selfishness as it was by reason (p. 74).

Defending one's honor with one's fists was a traditional notion of manhood that, according to Elizabeth Foyster, retained currency in eighteenth-century working-class culture, though seemingly in conflict with emerging middle-class values (Foyster 1999, 211-218). There were other enduring expressions of manhood. For example, Karen Harvey describes an account of British club's and societies before 1800 as evidence of the continuing presence of traditional forms of male culture and sociability, "holding out as politeness and sensibility came and went" (Harvey 2005, 309). Boxing might be thought of as one of those enduring forms of male sociability that coexisted with the cults of politeness and sensibility. Boxing might also be thought of as a form of popular dueling which was itself an enduring practice. Although public violence was well and truly on the decline by 1750, the number of reported duels peaked in the 1790s and the practice did not end in Britain until 1852 (Shoemaker 2001, 190).

Changing attitudes towards violence were reflected in changes in the nature and significance of duels. Robert Shoemaker finds that new rules and conventions and the changing role of seconds led to fewer injuries and fatalities (Shoemaker 2002, 525-535). Boxing practices underwent similar changes. Norbert Elias calls this process of civilizing pastimes "sportization", a concept which encapsulates an increasing emphasis on fairness, rules, orderliness and self-discipline, and a balance between "high combat-tension" and "reasonable protection against physical injury." Although there seems to be a parallel pattern in the effects of industrialization on both work and sport (1986, 150-151), the question of real interest for Elias is why the self-controlled restraint of violence through social rules developed first in England, specifically among the English upper classes, during the eighteenth century (p. 24). He proposes that a "process of pacification" aligned with the emergence of parliamentary government was a significant factor (p. 30). Yet during the eighteenth century, England was at war for around 37 years², leading Linda Colley to conclude that British national identity was formed through combat. This, she says, "is a culture that is used to fighting and has largely defined itself through fighting" (1992, 1, 9).

Forging a collectively shared notion of "Britain" was certainly assisted by having enemies against which to define the nation, but neither military failure nor military success was devoid of dilemma for an emerging nation. Military defeats in the 1730s and 1740s may have intensified fears about English masculinity and given rise to alarmist comments about effeminacy and male fertility (Harvey 2005, 311). Of course,

² Between 1702 and 1713, 1743 and 1748, 1756 and 1763, 1778 and 1783, 1793 and 1802, and 1803 and the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 (Colley 1992, p. 1).

winning the Seven Year's War (1756-1763) boosted national pride, but it also raised troubling questions about national identity and purpose. As Terence Bowers points out, the "core myth" of Britain as a land of liberty founded on peaceful commerce was seriously undermined by the acquisition of territories through "bloody conquest rather than peaceful trade." Britain now seemed similar to France and earlier empires like Rome and Spain, which had been built by force. And if Britain was like them, there could be no guarantee that it would not in turn decay (Bowers 1997, 3). Responding to these anxieties, the work of eighteenth-century antiquarians strived to provide a basis for a national past that did not look to the ultimately flawed classical empires (Sweet 2004, 350).

Michèle Cohen draws together many of these threads – the short-lived nature of politeness as a mark of masculinity, the creation of a British national identity, antiquarian inquiry, progress and civilization – in her recent discussion of the construction of masculinity between 1750 and 1830. In the mid-eighteenth century, she says, the culture of male politeness began to be questioned, not because it failed to fashion the gentleman, but because of its incompatibility with a masculine national character. In this debate, an alternative mode of conduct centered around chivalry simultaneously refashioned the gentleman as masculine and integrated national identity with enlightenment notions of progress and civilization. Above all, it was chivalry's martial system of education that held enduring appeal. "It promised the construction of manly males" (Cohen 2005, 314-322).

In eighteenth-century England, "manly males" were under threat: the dissipating effects of luxury, and their particularly effeminizing consequences for men, were widely noted. Increasing consumerism was not accepted as unambiguously beneficial and was thus as much of a conundrum as war. Wealth, "splendor and power" came from vigorous commerce but were "sown with the seeds of corruption" (Sheridan 1756, 63) – the potential to move "from virtuous industry to wealth, from wealth to luxury, from luxury to total degeneracy and loss of virtue" (*The Times*, 13 October 1809). The consumption of luxury was not the only concern; mere participation in its trade increased the amount of men in sedentary occupations. William Buchan was one of many physicians who spoke out against sedentary occupations as contributing to physical weakness: "nothing can be more contrary to the nature of man than a sedentary life..." (1774, 51).

This article focuses on the period between 1750 and the turn of the century, the period that is most strongly identified with the culture of sensibility, and arguably the time during which the nation of Great Britain was being forged administratively, culturally, and militarily (Harvey 2005, 308). This period is framed by wars and is notable for its

military conflict and the consequent need to both man and finance a British army and navy. At the beginning of the period, boxing's association with other traditionally popular pastimes such as cudgeling and backswords waned and its first set of rules was introduced. For the following fifty years or so, boxing was characterized by the aristocratic patronage of individual fighters, the interest of gentlemen in learning from champions how to fight and popularity among large audiences across the social spectrum. It was also one of the main ingredients of an intense public debate centered around the feminizing effects of consumer luxuries and polite society and the political imperative to find men capable of fighting. Underlying this exposition is the idea that, while the debates surrounding boxing are culture-dependent symbolic constructs (Walker 1997, 146) the experience of boxing was inescapably physical. An investigation of boxing may help us to bridge the gap between Marjorie Morgan's "realm of aspirations" (1994, 2) and the lived experience of many eighteenth-century British men.

**“Courage to oppose our natural enemies”³:
Bodies, manhood and the nation**

THE dexterous use of the fist is a truly British exercise, and the sturdy English have been as much renowned for their boxing, as their beef, both which are by no means suited to the watery stomachs and weak sinews of their enemies the French. — Connoisseur, “Boxing: A British Exercise”, 1772 (p. 179)

The second half of the eighteenth century in Britain was book-ended by two significant wars: at one end by the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the most successful ever fought by the British, and at the other end by the protracted French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1802 and 1803-1815), the most expensive British campaigns fought to date. The Seven Years War positioned Britain as the dominant European power and provoked a great deal of national pride. It also improved access to foreign luxuries, left an inflated national debt and consequent rising taxation, and brought home 200,000 demobilized men, most poor, some mutilated, all trained in violence. Faced with economic distress, social upheaval and the appeal of French Revolutionary doctrines, it took more than civil order and obedience, sermons and patriotic propaganda to persuade large numbers of men from a wide range of social backgrounds to take up arms against Napoleon, whose army was the most formidable invasion force ever assembled against Britain. But take up arms they did – after 1789

³ Amateur of eminence, *The complete art of boxing*, p. 44

Britain's armed forces grew faster than those of any other European power (Colley 1992, 101, 150, 286-287; Bowers 1997, 3; Dudink and Hagemann 2004, 14). These events were significant to British society and representations of British manhood in a number of ways. This section will explore the tensions and ambivalence created by this political imperative to have men capable of, and willing to, fight for their country in an age of increasing commercial activity and refined sensibilities, a debate often expressed in terms of the fear of "effeminacy."

The creation of polite men was the aim of a plethora of advice literature during the eighteenth century which focused on speech, conversational skills and deportment. By the end of the century, "sensibility" was a more popular term to describe refined behaviour: sentimental men were expected to be more emotionally expressive than politeness allowed for and these emotions were expected to arise from genuine feeling. Both politeness and sensibility were woven into a common conception of "true and manly courage" that was "determined by self-control, consideration and ultimately compassion." But, as Philip Carter points out, in promoting this "refined manliness", both polite and sentimental commentators were faced with the potential of creating "not manly role models but effeminate fools" (Carter 2001, 108, 116).

Effeminacy was a late eighteenth-century preoccupation. As early as 1757, John Brown concluded in his popular book, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, that "the character of the Manner of our Times" was "a vain, luxurious and selfish EFFEMINACY" (Brown 1757, 29, 67, 159). Part of the problem was the increased availability and higher levels of consumption of "luxury" goods. Access to Asian consumer societies and their manufactured goods saw foodstuffs like tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar and tobacco added to European diets (Berg 2004, 98). Yet eighteenth-century Britons did not unanimously embrace the accoutrements of this revolution. In *The Times*, editorials, advertisements, and reports of parliamentary debates invariably linked luxury to physical and moral degeneration: even tea was described as "a most pernicious luxury" (5 July 1786): pernicious because the consumption of luxury led down an inevitable path to loss of virtue and degeneracy (Sheridan 1756 p.63) for both individuals and nations, just as Edward Gibbon described in his very popular *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* published between 1776 and 1788 (Bowers 1997 p.3; Pocock 1985 pp.145-148). The consumption of luxury was not the only concern; participation in its trade increased the amount of men in sedentary occupations and this, said popular physician William Buchan, would "render men weak and effeminate" (1774, 40). So, being manly was more than a two-

handed challenge between being polite and being able to fight: it involved personal choices and those choices carried social status and moral weight.

Competing imperatives were as much a problem for the state. It had a vested interest in reducing levels of violence in society to ensure stability for commerce, a role made difficult by resistance to both the replacement of the citizen-soldier with a paid soldiery and to the creation of a professional police force. Such a prospect was associated with tyranny: “the road to curtailment of... “manly” independence” (Barker-Benfield 1992, 80). The state was also building an empire and waging wars, enterprises that were simultaneously beneficial for and detrimental to commerce and they required men to be armed and skilled in violence. Fortunately for the state, familiarity with violence was not at issue. Public executions were still a popular spectacle and toleration of interpersonal violence was upheld by the law – property theft was punishable by hanging, but manslaughter carried a maximum penalty of only a year’s imprisonment (Wiener 1998 pp.202-203). And although attitudes to violence were changing, it was difficult to dislodge its association with the notion of ‘honor’: specifically the belief that honor should be defended by violence. For Europe’s elite this was the role of dueling and the practice continued in Britain until 1852 (Shoemaker 2002, 525). However, although at the heart of traditional elite masculinity, a shared meaning of honor was becoming established during the eighteenth century across the social spectrum as the idea spread that individual virtue could be earned through deeds rather than heredity. In Britain, defending one’s honor invariably involved fisticuffs. So common were impromptu boxing matches settling disagreements that involved, and were enjoyed by, men of all classes, that by the late eighteenth century it appeared to be obligatory for foreigners to report on a boxing match, whether on the streets or in a prize fight (Langford 2000, 149-150).

That boxing could be seen as a quintessentially British activity was one of its most attractive attributes, as it could be prescribed as a remedy for the ills of a nation in seemingly perpetual conflict with France. Using both contempt and fear of the French to incite patriotism, broadsheets, pamphlets and cartoons constructed this external enemy as the polar opposite of the British character. The French were depicted as frivolous, unstable, deceitful, thin through inadequate diet, and guilty of excesses of all kinds – they were portrayed as essentially effeminate (Cottrell 1989, 265-269). In this context, “spindle-flanked beaux” willing to give up “the gauntlet for scented gloves” (Boxing 1772, 179-180) were not merely weak, they were un-British.

It is not surprising therefore, that “THE STATE OF THE NATION” was much debated (e.g., Westminster Forum, 28 January 1789).⁴ During this time of military conflict and conquest the inability to make good leaders, soldiers and sailors out of “men of fashion” was a lowering of “national capacity” (Brown 1757, 71-87), thus a national problem. Despite the potential that sedentary employments would make men weak, Britain’s commercializing economy only increased the number of sedentary occupations. The pursuit of luxury and adherence to fashion were considered effeminizing; yet they were the outward markers of sensibility which indicated status and refinement. And none of this was conducive to creating men capable of upholding British honor in battle and colonizing far-flung territories. Was a nation of shopkeepers robust and virile enough to realize an emerging nation called “Great Britain”? It almost seemed that a “new man” was needed for the job (Bowers 1887, 20).

In this context, the representation of the prize fighter in the popular press could be seen as instructive and therapeutic. The prize fighter was portrayed as mild and sociable in demeanor, conducting himself with discretion and civility, displaying respectable manners; in short, combining the good nature and civil conduct that “proclaimed him a MAN.” But when called upon in the ring, he was steady in his strategy, cool of temper (quickness to temper and submission to unrestrained passions were the cause of failure), capable of giving and taking powerful blows, and had unquestionable “bottom” (e.g., Egan 1812, 113, 120, 226, 186, 203; Fewtrell 1790, 87-90). Importantly for a warring nation, he was never afraid and always ready to fight (Egan 1812, 210). When fully clothed, the best of the prize fighters did not draw attention to their superior bodily strength, but when stripped to the waist, when all artifice was removed, their form was both muscular and elegant (Egan 1812, 120). One would almost think them conscientious followers of the advice of conduct manuals and perhaps they were familiar with such publications. In his survey of “very useful manuals” published between 1660 and 1730, Lawrence E. Klein finds that politeness was “marketed in books to an audience wider than the gentry and pseudo-gentry” (1995, 363). Similarly, Mark Philp highlights the accelerated growth of the popular press during the 1790s and the procedures for multiple readerships which brought texts even to illiterate and semi-literate people (1991, 5).

In its intermittent interventions, the state was certainly ambivalent about the practice of boxing and this was widely noted: why do magistrates “attend to the duelist” and

⁴ London debating societies 1776-1799. 1994. Compiled and introduced by Donna T. Andrew. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/source.aspx?pubid=238>. Date accessed: 26 October 2007.

“neglect the pugilist”?, asked a writer called “HONESTUS” in a letter to *The Times* (1 June 1789). Many *Times* readers understood that boxing, as a diversion of “the vulgar”, allowed “popular feelings and prejudices to discharge themselves in the *least hurtful* way to the community at large” and were certainly “better than a disposition to insubordination” (*The Times*, 4 February 1804). But boxer Thomas Fewtrell⁵ preferred to think of it as acknowledgement of the national benefit of boxing: an exercise that promoted courage amongst the men of a nation so prone to war must be of “public utility.” The inattention of the legislature, which was usually so “attentive to the interest of the people”, was prudent in this circumstance. It was better to let pass unnoticed that “which though occasionally productive of some private mischief, must ever promote the common good” (Fewtrell 1970, 12). Perhaps it did promote some good. On 13 October 1803, *The Times* was able to confidently declare of Napoleon:

The Corsican has, for some time, discovered that he reckoned without his Host. “The Nation of Shopkeepers” is not *yet*, like *Athens*, *Rome*, or *Carthage*, so sunk in luxury, so degenerated by wealth and commerce, or so lost in a false sense of their own security, as to surrender their country and themselves to the first nation of robbers and murderers that chose to invade them.

The rhetorical strategy of the gentleman boxer may have served to ease some of the tensions between a political imperative for men capable of fighting and a societal expectation for men of more refined sensibilities. This emerging British nation, however, was composed not only of shopkeepers but of men of all classes. The next section examines perceptions of class-based models of masculinity and why individually they were inadequate as the basis for a British national identity.

“Abolishing every distinction of rank”⁶: Contesting class-based models of masculinity

Noblemen, gentlemen and clergymen have certainly a right to divert themselves in what manner they think fit, nor do I dispute their privilege of making butchers, cobblers or tinkers their companions, provided they are gratified to keep them company. But I very much doubt whether they have any right to invite

⁵ Thomas Fewtrell was the first of the popular boxers to have his name put to a book, but he was almost certainly not the author (Ford 1971, 168-170).

⁶ ‘Lord BARRYMORE, we understand, means to set an example of the *levelling* system in this country, by abolishing every distinction of rank, and is qualifying himself for sparring at the *Lyceum*.’ (*The Times*, 25 August 1790, p. 2).

thousands of people to be the spectators of their agility. —
Gentleman's Magazine, September 1743⁷

All of the characteristics of organized prize fighting were in evidence early in the eighteenth century when boxer James Figg was brought to London from an Oxfordshire village by the Earl of Peterborough. Figg made his reputation by issuing challenges at fairs, where he put up a booth and took on all-comers. In 1719 he set up an “academy of arms”, which he promoted with a business card designed for him by a young admirer, William Hogarth. At a 1727 contest between Figg and Ned Sutton, a pipe-maker from Gravesend, the thousand seats around the raised circular platform and another hundred in the gallery were full and included among the spectators Whig politician Robert Walpole, and the poets Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and Colley Cibber (Birley 1993, 109-110). Although the venues varied – from fields on noble estates, courtyards beside inns and racecourses, to the stage between acts at the theatre – the common characteristics of boxing matches for the rest of the century were these: lower class fighters with aristocratic patronage entertaining large audiences from across the social spectrum. Boxing was obviously the “site of a complex encounter between different social groups” (Griffin 2005, 15). For this discussion, the most important encounter was between class-based models of masculinity as they vied to be the basis for an emerging notion of a “British” man.

It is tempting to think of boxing in eighteenth-century Britain as popular culture of the lower orders, patronized by some members of the aristocracy as a fetish⁸, and condemned by evangelical moralists who were shaping the values of the emerging middle classes. But this view can only be maintained if one ignores the contemporary attempts to articulate a British national identity and pervasive fear of effeminacy. There is certainly much evidence for the popularity of boxing among the lower orders: from the size of the crowds that were attracted to matches, the distances that they were prepared to travel and the widespread areas in which the sport was observed, to the increasingly regular news reports that *The Times* felt obliged to make while expressing its distaste (e.g., 23 October 1789). Boxing was especially popular in the west Midlands where the south Staffordshire collieries had their own championship (Griffin 2005, 151-153): barefist prize fighters were even celebrated in Staffordshire ornamental ware (Samuel 1989, vx). However, most fighters were found in towns

⁷ Quoted in Birley 1993, 120.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu observes that ‘symbolic goods’, like art and sport, are destined to end up as ‘fetishes’ in the hands of the ‘dominants.’ Bridget Fowler, ‘Reading Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination*: Notes towards an intersectional analysis of gender, culture and class’, *Cultural Studies*, 2003, 17(3/4), p. 477

where boxing was organized and promoted. Talented rural men would be tempted into town, or down to London (Ford 1971, 41) where the thousands that attended a prize fight could create an event that might be “compared to the Jubilee of Stratford upon Avon” where “neither horses, carriages, nor bed” could be had (*The Times*, 11 & 15 January 1788).

There were pragmatic motivations for rural laborers and their urban counterparts in London and the new industrial towns to step into the ring. If paid employment could be had, it was often insufficient to support a family. Rural labourers were paid by the day and were unlikely to be employed for the 300 or so available working days a year. Many moved from occupation to occupation as seasonal and other demands for labor dictated (Hibbert 1987, 471) and few of these labourers’ families could survive without the wages of their women and children (Hibbert 1987, 468). Moreover, the possibility of being beaten insensible in a boxing match may have seemed no worse than the physical strain involved in most work that they could find. Many fighters came from the lowest paid trades – Tom Tring, the Prince of Wales’ chairman (i.e., sedentary chair carrier) was the lowliest of all – and occupations like coal heaving where the job requirement for physical strength was an asset in the ring. The bulk of fighters came from the largest single group in the population – artisans and labourers. The occupation associated above all others with boxing was butchery – which may account for the frequent declaration that the British were as much renowned for their boxing, as their beef (e.g., *Boxing*, 179-180). The financial opportunities in boxing were not insignificant (Ford 1971; Colley 1992, Egan 1812). Tom Johnson reputedly made £1,500⁹ for one fight at a time when a porter might earn an annual income of £16, an experienced draper’s assistant in London £25 and a clergyman could live very comfortably on an income of £400 a year (Hibbert 1987, 503, 520, 312). Jack Broughton was said to have been worth £7,000¹⁰ when he died (*The Annual Register* 1789, p197) which Dennis Brailsford calculated to be “well over a half million pounds in late-twentieth century values” (Brailsford 1988, 11).

For those lower-class boxers who could amass money and fame, a move into the middling classes as proprietor of an inn was a real possibility: by 1820 there were at least a dozen London taverns run by well-known ex-boxers (Ford 1971, 44-47). Peter Radford tells us that although social class cannot be “easily wished away”, ‘gentleman’

⁹ In 2006, £1500 0s 0d from 1790 was worth £134,398.37 using the retail price index, using calculator at <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/>

¹⁰ Using the same calculator, in 2006, £7000 0s 0d from 1789 was worth £667,943.97 using the retail price index.

fighters like Daniel Mendoza, Richard Humphries and John Jackson showed that “sport was ushering in new possibilities” (Radford 2002, 29-30). John Gully took social mobility further than business ownership. From master butcher to Champion of England, Gully pursued his upward climb after retirement from the sport – from publican to commission agent, bookmaker, coal merchant and investor until he had enough money to buy Ackworth Hall, near Pontefract, and become the town’s MP. When he lost his seat he became a mine-owner and founded a racing syndicate. However, the middling sort did not seem to respect this social mobility. Gully’s appearance in the lower circle at Drury Lane drew indignant comment (Egan 1812, 185-186; Birley 1993, 160; Butler 1972, 23). Perhaps Gully did not pay as much attention to his manners as Richard Humphries: he was described as “more conversant and attractive in Society than fighting men, perhaps, think essentially necessary.” He worked at “portraying the gentleman – and his friends were not diminished, but materially increased by such conduct” (Egan 1812, 109; Brailsford 1988, 24). Bill Hooper, on the other hand, was not “strong enough to sustain the sudden transition from obscurity to a more prominent situation in life.” Instead of appreciating, as Humphries did, the improvement that he might have derived from association with his noble patrons, “who, amid all their foibles and eccentricities, it should never be forgotten, ... manifest the behaviour of gentleman,” Hooper became conspicuously vain, “much attached to dress,” arrogant and presumptuous. Eventually he extended his patron’s patience. Perhaps Hooper had extenuating circumstances. His patron was one of the Lords Barrymore, whose “propensity to *larking*” found Hooper often obliged to “settle the difference” – to sort things out with his superior boxing skills. It was not uncommon for the young aristocratic men to hire boxers as bodyguards on their rampaging nights out (Egan 1812, 187-194; Birley 1993, 145). While Lord Barrymore’s behaviour attracted condescending reports in *The Times* (e.g., 26 July 1790) Hooper’s resulted in “repeated intoxication” and an inglorious death in the work-house (Egan 1812, 6; Brailsford 1988, 29). The distinctive quality of these stories is that men were lauded for their manners and gentlemanly behavior rather than their wealth or class: being a ‘gentleman’ appears to have been an aspiration shared across the social spectrum.

The employment of boxers as bodyguards was a very small aspect of boxing patronage by men of wealth and position. These patrons ranged from royalty through the various grades of aristocracy down to businessmen and other prize fighters, often those who had retired as publicans. The Duke of Cumberland sponsored Jack Broughton. His great nephew George IV, when still the Prince of Wales, backed his own chairman, Tom Tring, and perhaps Daniel Mendoza. The Prince of Wales’

brothers, the Duke of York and the Duke of Clarence (later William IV), and his friends the 7th and 8th Earls of Barrymore and George Hanger (later 4th Baron of Coleraine) were also enthusiasts. The Duke of Hamilton and the Earl of Surrey at various times sponsored Tom Johnson. Colonel Harvey Aston introduced John Jackson to the ring. Captain Barclay, an eccentric and very fit sparrer himself, supported John Gully and Tom Cribb. Mr Fletcher Reid backed Jim Belcher, Tom Belcher, John Gully, Bill Ryan and Bill Richmond. And Alderman Harvey Christian Coomb, four times returned as MP for the City of London, was umpire for the Humphreys versus Mendoza match in 1789. Fighters depended on the financial backing of patrons and were often employed on their patrons' estates. (Ford 1971, 66-75; Brailsford 1988, 23-32; Radford 2002, 75-76.) Patrons too saw financial opportunity in boxing: more than £30,000 was wagered on one occasion in 1786 (Egan 1812, 103), and in a Hyde Park boxing match in 1790 "his Grace HAMILTON won an hundred guineas on the *first black eye!*" (*The Times*, 21 June 1790).

However, the higher orders also participated physically by using boxing as exercise, often looking to popular boxers for tuition. Boxer John Jackson's pupil, the poet Lord Byron, was explicit about the physical exertion of boxing being an antidote to the enervating effects of contemporary life. Sparring at Jackson's Rooms alleviated his tendency to ennui, that melancholy which is the result of over-refined sensibility (Porter 2004, 455). An over-refined sensibility was just one sign of effeminacy attributed to aristocrats. The "Frenchified" manners and dress that they brought back from their indispensable "grand tour" marked them out as not only unpatriotic but also effeminate and degenerate (Cohen 2005, 324; Newman 1987, 63-86). And lack of virility was more than an imaginary concern for Britain's landed gentry. From the late seventeenth-century to the 1770s, aristocratic families in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were experiencing a "major demographic crisis" in which many landowners did not marry and those who did failed to produce male heirs (Colley 1992, 156-164). Contemporary political cartoons often portrayed the scandalous Duchess of Devonshire in such a way to imply that aristocratic men had become so effete that only stout-hearted plebians could satisfy her desires. (Brewer 1986, 37).

Aristocratic participation in "the manly art of BOXING" (e.g., *The Times*, 15 January 1791) may therefore have seemed prudent despite the exhortations of boxing's most vehement detractors who were invariably of the moralizing middling sort. One of the most vociferous was Edward Barry. In his well known "Letter on the Practice of Boxing" (1789), Barry can find no justification for boxing: not on the grounds of being uniquely British and of ancient heritage; or of being necessary for self-defense; or as a "proof of

courage.” If the lower orders need exercise and amusement, wrote Barry, then let them adopt other “good athletic games” because boxing will only lead to callous feelings and dissolute manners, not to mention idleness as the potential of prize money tempts men away from useful work. Barry’s opinions were shared by *The Times*, often considered a voice of the middle classes, which viewed boxing as: an encouragement to spend, or lose, money that should be supporting wives and children; a lure for prostitutes, vagrants and pick-pockets; an inducement to idleness and drunkenness; and “degrading to the dignity of man” in its physical brutality (e.g., *The Times*, 3 July 1787; 15 January 1788; 26 May 1789).

Disagreement over boxing extended to the many London debating societies active in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, these debating forums cannot be fully justified as expressing the voices of the middling sort. They were noted as a “rage” which seemed to “inflare all ranks of people” and many critics bemoaned their “level[ing of] all distinctions [of rank]” which led to the indiscriminate jostling together of “wits, lawyers, politicians and mechanics” (*Morning Chronicle*, 5 April 1780; *Harum Scarum*, 1780). The questions discussed by these societies were as diverse as their audiences, but issues surrounding sensibility, national identity and effeminacy were regularly raised and often conflated when boxing was the focus of the debate. At the Westminster Forum in 1789, “Advocates for the Advantages of Refinement and Civilization in Society” were offered the opportunity to “declaim against a Practice repugnant to the Feelings of Humanity”, while the “Amateurs of Boxing” might “argue in Favour of the Science, as a constant Means of Self-defence, consistent with the naturally bold and hardy Characters of the ancient Race of Britons” (*Morning Post*, 15 April 1789). In a more pointed enquiry of the affects of civilization on manliness, City Debates in 1790 asked: “Which is the greater Deviation from real Manhood, the Effeminacy of a Man-Milliner, or the Brutality of the modern Boxer?” (*Daily Advertiser*, 25 September 1790).¹¹

Not surprisingly, unambiguous proponents of boxing were often participants in the sport; however, they defended it on differing grounds. A writer known only as an “amateur of eminence” believed that the higher orders should be skilled in boxing to guard against “the insults of inferiors” who took advantage when they thought “genteel” men could not defend themselves (1788, v). Boxer Thomas Fewtrell felt instead that, for common people, boxing “inspired a manly emulation” and provided a recreational activity that was spent “in the acquisition of strength and grace [rather] than in the

¹¹ London debating societies 1776-1799. 1994

indulgence of the senses, which must enervate the body” (Fewtrell 1790, 37-40). However, for the higher orders to acquire boxing skills meant the mingling of classes, another cause for concern among boxing’s detractors. *The Times* openly acknowledged the need to increase the “vigour and hardiness of the people”, but wondered if there were not other activities more suited to this purpose – like fencing which was a genuinely gentlemanly pursuit which brought men into contact with other gentlemen, rather than the “illiterate, unintelligent men... totally unacquainted with politeness” that one would find at a boxing match or academy (8 January 1788). Although a solution to the predicament was proposed by the “amateur of eminence” in *The complete art of boxing* (his instructions could be read in private) (1788, vii), boxing academies like those run by John Jackson and Daniel Mendoza proved popular. Jackson's Rooms in Old Bond Street, which became “enshrined in boxing history as the social centre of the sport” (Brailsford 1988, 70) must have made the distinction between physical pursuits for the elite and those of the middling and lower orders even less clear. These rooms were actually part of a fencing academy that had been run for thirty years by the D'Angelo family. Harry D'Angelo was fencing “professor” to a significant portion of the aristocracy, many of whom knew him from their Eton and Cambridge days. Jackson shared D'Angelo’s views on the character-forming nature of combat sports and his aim of promoting gentlemanly behaviour in sport. The academy’s gentlemen pupils were encouraged to practise with the foils one day and take a turn with the muffers the next (Brailsford 1988, 70-71). The fighter’s aspiration to gentlemanly status and the gentleman’s desire to be able to fight created much common ground.

In all the debates surrounding boxing, determining the qualities of the “true” man were central. Should he be cosmopolitan, unpatriotic and conspicuously consumerist (and probably effeminate) like the city aristocracy and the fashionable set who aped them? Should he be cosmopolitan, educated, self-controlled and sensitive (but perhaps effeminate) like others of the aristocracy and gentry? Perhaps he should be hardworking, virtuous and polite (but possibly effeminate) like the evangelising middling sort, or hardworking and aggressively mercantile like some of their peers? Or should he be frank, fearless and crude, but seemingly British, like the lower orders? It seems that for men at the end of the eighteenth century the demand for a distinct masculine identity was as potent as the need for a definitively British one. In this context, the representation of the “gentleman boxer” – hardworking, fearless, polite and uniquely British – was attractive. As all national identities do, the idea of the gentleman boxer glossed over the divisions between classes (Samuel 1989, xv), but it also drew together traditionally held, shared notions of manliness with newer aspirations arising

from a politer, commercializing society.

For a brief historical moment, the “gentleman boxer” was held up as a possible masculine and national ideal. The final section of this article investigates how dreams of a “new man for a new nation” (Bowers 1887, 20) may have been projected onto real men’s bodies, and considers the prize fighter who epitomized the “gentleman boxer.”

“Virtue and learning”¹²: forging the new man

A thousand nameless little things, which nobody can describe, but which everybody feels, conspire to form that *whole* of pleasing... —
Lord Chesterfield, Letter to his Son, 15 May 1749

It is not enough to “imagine” a nation. The “imagined” must become “second nature”, “embodied in material practice and lived experience” (Anderson 1983; Alonso 1994, 382). This is why societies, especially emerging nations, “that seek to produce a new man... set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners*” (Bourdieu 1977, 94; Bowers 1997, 2). Eighteenth-century conduct manuals bristled with admonition over the small details of dress, deportment, conversational skills and acceptable manners. Many boxing texts lavished similar attention on the minutiae of bodily movement. Both types of texts prescribed the training required to attain that degree of “ease” where bodily control feels and seems completely natural (Noble and Watkins 2003, 532-533). Both emphasized the attainment of balance which perpetuated older, Galenic, understandings of bodily functions. Both acknowledged changing understandings of anatomy and the role of the senses in the development of habits. Importantly, both highlight that the eighteenth-century emphasis on bodily carriage, external appearances and behavior was not simply a matter of fashion: men were actively engaged in the acquisition of what Bourdieu terms “social capital” and the redefinition of what was of value in that capital. Valuable social capital was successfully achieved in the representation of the most gentlemanly of gentleman boxers, John Jackson. This model may have been beyond the reach of most men, but it does go beyond aspiration: men literally put their bodies on the line in the attempt to approximate these ideals. This section considers the role of diet, exercise, dress and bodily movements in the creation of the boxer and the many respects in which these prescriptions mirrored the kinds of body work advised to

¹² ‘For virtue and Learning are not born with us, but acquired by us; they are not a gift of nature, but a reward or a purchase of pains and industry’ (Jean Gailhard 1678, unpaginated).

gentleman and those aspiring to be gentleman. It also considers real men's responses to these prescriptions.

When the socially dominant habitus is in flux and therefore less coherent, as we observe in eighteenth century Britain, the adaptation in practices and strategies necessary for inculcation of that habitus needs to be learned. Bourdieu often uses sporting examples to illustrate the inculcation of habitus. More precisely he chooses the "second nature" experience of sport during a game to enhance his argument about the practical sense of everyday life – but he neglects the tedious processes of learning that second nature. To continue the sporting analogy, the "bodily attention" that is sub-consciously managed during a game has to be learned through consciously repeated practice (Noble and Watkins 2003, 527-532). In Peter Mewett's examination of the origins of modern sports training, which he finds in eighteenth-century Britain's prize-fighting, he explicitly links industrialization, modernity and national character with the body. He argues that "while skills acquisition mirrored the increasing complexity of production in an industrializing society, fitness training reflected the need to remain tied to the job for long hours." The development of skills and endurance for sports embodied the requirements of a modernizing society but also projected "an imputed national character." It was in the sportsperson that "the crowd witnessed the new, modern British body – one that reflected the disciplinary requirements of the new social order" (Mewett 2002, 97).

The "science" of boxing was the result of concentrated effort on the control and use of the body – from the correct starting stance to the inclination of the head in a defensive maneuver and even down to the optimum way to form a fist. This science was the subject of many pamphlets, newspaper reports and books (e.g., *Amateur* 1788; *Fewtrell* 1790; *Mendoza* 1789). For boxers the carriage of the body was all important: "your stage walk", said the amateur of eminence, "will always enable you to advance or retreat at pleasure, and afford you a superiority over those that may be double your strength." (*Amateur* 1788, 8). The role of eighteenth-century conduct manuals was similarly instructive, exhorting men to, for example, speak without heat and violence, keep their word, and allow time for business and recreation every day; and to avoid drunkenness, the company of gamblers, the reading of "Romantic Adventures" and audible laughter (e.g., *Gailhard* 1678; *Chesterfield* 1890; *Lingard* 1671; *Chapman* 1773). These guides were very exact in their directives on comportment: on bowing, giving and receiving, and the correct way to behave at the dinner table, in the drawing room and walking in the street (Carter 2001, 77; Klein 1995). Because these texts, both conduct manuals and boxing guides, were available to the growing proportion of the

literate population, deportment took on new significance for men of all descriptions: it could express not just social rank, but character as well. For boxers it indicated the possession of "science" rather than simply brute strength (e.g., Pancratia 1812, 79).

A well-carried body also needed to be clothed appropriately: a man's bearing and dress marked out social borders and identified one's proper place in the world (Bowers 1997, 7). With the habitus of all classes in flux under the pressure of increasing industrialization, consumerism and fashion, clarity in social distinctions was increasingly difficult (Morgan 1994, 75, 81). The standard male apparel of the three piece suit, introduced in 1666 by Charles II, was affordable for the middling sort and apprentices and available even to servants in the form of employer's cast-offs (Kuchta 2002, 1, 38, 118). Boxers seemed as proud of their appearance as men of fashion. For his fight against Mendoza in 1788, Humphries wore a pair of flannel drawers and white silk stockings with gold-colored clocks, pumps and black strings, although a return to worsted stockings was needed when both shoes and silk stockings proved slippery on a stage wet from rain (Pancratia 1812, 248). Jem Belcher gave his name to a form of knotted tie, popular among aristocratic patrons such as Captain Barclay (Radford 2002, 267). Prize fighters' accessories took on new significance when the fighters' adopted personal colors in the form of ribbons or handkerchiefs. The loser's colors were brandished by the victor and spectators wore the fighters' colors in support of their favorite. (Pancratia 1812, 248; Brailsford 1988, 31-32; Radford 2002, 176). Clothing was no longer merely a marker of social status, it could indicate inclusion in a group other than class.

Body shape itself was another source of confusion. After 1750 British bodies became thinner: increasing consideration of diet, exercise and the necessary behaviors that expressed sensibility appears to have led to a desire for slenderness which was associated with delicacy and fineness of sensibility (Porter 2004, 243). In the 1780s, poet William Cowper expressed the view that the physical refinement of men's bodies came before men's capacity for sensitivity: that men in an unspecified, earlier age had been known for the "sturdiness of their frame" but "had little feeling" since "a very robust athletic habit seems inconsistent with much sensibility." By contrast, the feelings of today's men "have been render'd more exquisite as our habit of body has become more delicate" (Carter 2001, 91). This association of robustness with rudeness and physical vulnerability with intelligence was not the view of all eighteenth-century Britons: many associated thinness with weakness, both physical and moral, as well as poverty. Masturbators were said to be thin and consumptive, while stoutness was taken as a sign of wealth. The ever-corpulent "John Bull" (the caricaturists' common

man) was emblematic of the majority of British visions of the male body and the image of John Bull gorging on beef and ale in vivid contrast to onion-nibbling French peasants and effete Versailles' courtiers, succinctly expressed the patriotic and manly fears of British men. Unfortunately he was not a fighter so contemporary cartoonists drew the gallant and trim sailor Jack Tar to defend the British nation (Surel 1989, p11). Boxers too were affected by tendencies to curtail the body. Whereas brute strength may have been enough for success in earlier times, extended matches (the result of new rules) called for greater endurance, and paying spectators demanded skilful performances. The more popular boxing became, the higher the stakes. Under such conditions a champion like Tom Cribb found it necessary to undertake Captain Barclay's regimen of physic, walking, shooting, running and sweats in order to drop from sixteen to thirteen stone in nine weeks for an upcoming match (Ford 1971, 127-128). The resulting well-developed musculature made boxers ideal as models for historical paintings (Hyde 1996, 96; Egan 1812, 299) and their portraits in cheap prints were highly popular (Ford 1971, 10; Barry 1797, 274). John Jackson's body was familiar to the British gallery-going crowd: his naked body, at twice life-size, was used by artist Thomas Lawrence in *Satan Summoning His Legions*, hung at the Royal Academy in 1797. The painting illustrated the lines from *Paradise Lost*, 'Awake, arise, or be forever fallen' and viewers would have been aware of the obvious boxing pun (Radford 2002, 42-46). In the confusion surrounding body shape, the boxers' body avoided both John Bull's rude robustness and the man of fashion's effete vulnerability, and was able to simultaneously convey strength, refinement and self-control.

The necessary bodily control for effective boxing, for gentlemanly comportment and for the preservation of personal and national health itself, was to be achieved by paying attention "to a number of customs and habits, or *minute particulars*, which, taken singly, appear trifling and unimportant, although, when combined, and habitually followed, they are of the utmost importance" (Sinclair 1818, 453). Such customs and habits were particularly effective when learned early and continued conscientiously (Brown 1757, 99-100). These lessons were fully acknowledged by the boxing fraternity. Preparation guidelines for prize fights included instructions on bathing, diet, exercise, temperate living, regular sleep and cold baths. Even amateurs had instructions for a ten-day regimen of diet and exercise in preparation for "a good battle" (Amateur 1788, 9-11; Mendoza 1789, 24-27; Ford 1971, 127-128). Instilling habits early meant beginning the process in childhood, and the "care to be taken of the bodies of children" (male children, that is) included breast feeding, a diet of plain food, cold baths, hard beds, "manly" exercises like hand-ball, bowls, walking, riding and, if finances permitted, dancing and fencing (Brown 1757, 134, 191, 120-121). Because care of one's body

was of national, not simply personal, import, it is not surprising that something as fundamental as diet took on patriotic nuances and revealed the pervasive fear of effeminacy. The degeneracy of the times could be put down to a “shameful neglect of that support of our national strength, old English roast beef”: how were modern warriors to be created if men were afraid of plunging a knife into a sirloin? (Boxing 1772, 179). Early and continued good habits were important for personal health, and thus national strength. A balanced and healthy body was better placed to avoid the potential afflictions of an increasingly urbanized society – the disorders that arise from “foulness of air, grossness of food, and the habits of luxury and intemperance” (*The Times*, 11 July 1786) – and a healthy public body depended on the vigor of its individual citizens. It was of particular consequence that aristocrats and gentry be of good physical and moral health: a nation’s common people may be hardy and honest, but if its leaders were not, the nation would then “resemble a large *Body*... [with] an... effeminate *Soul*” (Brown 1757, 134).

The claim to success made by both boxing guides and conduct manuals was predicated on new understandings of the relationship between the workings of the body and its expressive behaviors. Anatomists such as Thomas Willis gave the nerves sole responsibility for sensory impressions and, consequently, for knowledge. Such ideas were pursued by John Locke, a student of Willis, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) – which was published in English ensuring accessibility to a literate audience not schooled in Latin – and given application by doctors like George Cheyne, who articulated sensibility as a hierarchy of feeling for humans similar to a hierarchy of intelligence. This physiology of sensibility was also the substance of a model of habit development outlined by David Hartley that justified the obsession with the minutiae of bodily control conveyed in conduct manuals and boxing guides. The senses, according to Hartley, were key to a model of developmental psychology. He used the learning of a musical instrument to illustrate his theory of the development of habits, wherein conscious motions of the hands, in time and with practice, become automatic. Thus the practice of sparring was “absolutely necessary” to the success of boxers, for “one who considers a thing before its performance, must... have an advantage over him, who thinks consideration unnecessary” (Fewtrell 1790, 14-16). With practice many types of actions, like the skills of the boxer and, hopefully, like those required of a gentleman, would become secondary and automatic (Hartley 1801, 108-109; Priestley 1775, foreword; Porter 2004, 348-360).

Struggles to maintain physical health and psychological well-being were recorded by many men of the time. George Cheyne (1671-1743) battled his own corpulence, as

well as a tendency to melancholy, the result of excessive luxury on a person born with a “great Sensibility” (Barker-Benfield 1992, 9-15). William Windham (1750-1810), member of the House of Commons from 1785 and of the Cabinet at the turn of the century, well-known for both his “charm in conversation” and his enthusiasm for boxing (Windham 1913, ix; Egan 1812, 284-285; Ford 1971, 79-82), was also disposed to melancholy and a preoccupation with his health. Windham’s diaries record his sleep patterns as often as his mathematical musings and regularly rebuke himself for “careless intemperance.” Self-doubt is a running theme in his daily reflections. (e.g., Windham 1866, 4, 6, 52, 82, 23-24, 155, 303). Other men struggled to form and reform themselves in the light of the expectations of polite society, castigating themselves on their failures. Lawyer Dudley Ryder (1691-1756) kept a “book of conversation” in order to hone his conversational technique and a self-scrutinizing diary to measure his social improvement. The memoirs of author James Boswell (1740-1795) illustrate his self-conscious efforts to be a man of sensibility. Both Ryder and Boswell commented on the character and behavior of other men, continuously measuring themselves against it. None of the men, however, conveyed a sense of success in their endeavors. Captain Barclay’s biographer concludes at one point that the Captain learned a tough lesson when realizing that although a gentleman by birth and an athlete by choice he had to also work at being a gentleman and perhaps had not worked hard enough (Radford 2002, 191-192). These men’s struggles capture what Stefan Dudink, Karen Hageman and John Tosh describe as the “the compulsive retelling of narratives of masculinity – narratives that never manage to perfectly construct male subjects after their own image” (2004, xv). Whether it was dividing time between solitary pursuits and polite society, or taking the right amount of exercise or expressing the appropriate amount of sentiment, these men strove for balance and never quite achieved that spontaneity that made the behavior of a gentleman feel natural.

Boxers too were faced with the challenge of balance. The “first principle” of boxing, said champion Daniel Mendoza, was “to perfectly master... the equilibrium of the body” (Mendoza 1792, 1). Balance was as necessary for the fighter’s correct stance and posture as it was for his success in the fight. Without self-control he could break rules and give the game to his opponent, but if too restrained he lost the drive necessary for victory. He had to find a middle way between following rules, and dodging or stretching them and playing near the breaking-point (Elias 1986, 157-158). In an echo of their own grapples with self-control, the internal struggle of the boxer may have been as much of an attraction for eighteenth-century audiences as was his battle with his opponent. There was great appeal, therefore, in a boxer who seemed to have found a self-controlled equilibrium: one that embodied not only the characteristics of a

champion but also those of a gentleman. Without a doubt, John Jackson was the gentleman boxer *par excellence*.

The poet Lord Byron was a pupil of Jackson's, Windham was a great admirer, and boxing luminaries like Pierce Egan (author of *Boxiana*) and Vincent Dowling (editor of *Bell's Life*) were effusive in their praise of him (Birley 1993, 156; Porter 2004, 455; Ford 1971, 17, 136). Recent historians have been similarly complimentary. Jackson had "acquired considerable proficiency in his manners and address" which put him at ease in respectable society. He was compassionate and patriotic, raising money through boxing benefits for charitable causes. (Egan 1812, 286-296) On retirement from the ring, Jackson opened "rooms" at 13 Bond Street where the "elite of the fashionable world", noblemen, and gentlemen, could take up the mufflers against boxers of the day (Ford 1971, 132). His elegantly proportioned limbs and symmetry of form provided a superb athletic physique and his athletic interest was not confined to boxing. He was a first-class sprinter and jumper and held a life-long interest in new developments in fencing, horsemanship and pedestrianism. Jackson was "virtually the national spokesman on all 'manly sports'" (Radford 2002, 63). In an 1869 essay on athletic training and health, John Harrisson observed that the training associated with the rise of boxing in the eighteenth century was copied from the curriculum of the racing-stable and reduced to a system by the "celebrated 'Gentleman Jackson'", a system that was still being faithfully followed by many boxers (Mewett 2002, 109).

By 1810 Jackson was established as the prize ring's master of ceremonies and was secretary and manager of day-to-day affairs of the Pugilistic Club when it formed in 1814. He was asked to organise a boxing display for the allied monarchs visiting London in 1814 and to supply uniformed ushers from the fraternity to keep order in Westminster Abbey at the coronation of George IV in 1821. Jackson's record in the prize ring and his services to the sport outside the ring earned him respect, prestige and authority. Brailsford concludes that although the gap between prize fighting and respectability was necessarily wide while the sport operated outside the law, "the man who came nearest to bridging the gap, the only man in the whole history of the sport who might have done so given more consistent support, was John Jackson" (Brailsford 1998, 68-74). J.C. Reid comes to a more cynically conclusion, saying that Jackson "quite frankly used his position as Champion and his knowledge of boxing as a stepping-stone into society, cultivating the nobility and assuming the airs and dress of an aristocrat himself," but he does agree that "[w]ith the advent of Jackson, pugilism came wholly out of the shadows; the great era of the ring began, which lasted until his retirement in 1824. Jackson gave the sport a certain respectability" (Reid 1971, 15-16).

Jackson was not the only gentleman boxer: Richard Humphries earned that moniker before him and many boxers were credited with the attributes of gentlemen. However, few combined Jackson's refined physique and manners with a background among the lower ranks of the middling sort and success in business as both the proprietor of an inn and a boxing teacher (Ford 1971, 48). For eighteenth-century men of the upper orders and middling sort who were seeking a solution to the apparent dissonance between sensibility and manliness, this combination was reassuring. In short, Jackson had acquired social and cultural capital that men across the social spectrum valued in common. In this he was uniquely placed to be an ideal of British manhood.

Conclusion: "The Gentleman Boxer"

Reader, have you ever seen a fight? If not, you have a pleasure to come... — William Hazlitt, "The Fight", 1822

"The Fight" is one of the most celebrated essays by the prolific William Hazlitt. Hazlitt's vivid descriptions bring to life all the elements of boxing that I have discussed: an eventful journey to Newbury with hundreds of other carts, gigs and carriages carrying a mixed crowd that included butchers, brokers and gentlemen; a night of convivial conversation (beds were "out of the question") with a fine example of that true British breed, a yeoman with "sense, wit, and spirit, a hearty body and a joyous mind, free-spoken, frank"; and an admiration for the boxers, both in and out of the ring. The cool and sensible John Gully is placing bets, compassionate John Jackson offers to collect a purse for the loser. There is a "sentimentalist" friend reading the "New Eloise" on the journey home, whom Hazlitt recommends to his lady readers as an example of boxing's compatibility with the "cultivation of sentiment." And there is the unflinching description of the fight itself, similar to, though more readable than, newspaper reports. (Hazlitt 1913, 72-86)

Hazlitt's essay, however, gives some insight that newspaper reports, reformers' rhetoric, Pierce Egan's hyperbole and even Windham's diaries fail to do: he tells us how it *feels* to watch a fight. We feel with him the easy, relaxed camaraderie among men as they anticipate the fight and as they relive it on the homeward trip. We sit with him through the "trying time" of waiting for the fight to begin, when "the heart sickens, as you think what the two champions are about", and "after the first blow is struck" we lose our "nervous apprehensions" and are "swallowed up" with Hazlitt "in the immediate interest of the scene." He describes the "shock" of watching "two men smashed to the ground, smeared with gore, stunned, senseless, the breath beaten out of their bodies" and the "astonishment" at seeing them rise again with "new strength and courage."

Although the tone of the essay is at times gently mocking, Hazlitt's response to the fight itself seems genuine, as does his challenge to those who "despise the Fancy" to show "as much *pluck*, or as much self-possession as this" before they claim a superiority for which they have never through any of their actions shown proof. It is this melding of pluck and self-possession that defines an ideal of manliness that many men across the social spectrum stubbornly aimed for despite the efforts of reformers to convince men of the irrelevancy of physical mettle in an age of politeness. However, men needed situations in which to find, hone, and demonstrate their courage and self-control. As violence receded from the streets and was significantly reduced in daily life, it was in the boxing academies and the network of informal bouts and formal prize fights that many men found this opportunity.

The state's ambivalent attitude to this activity, their intermittent responses to what was considered an illegal pursuit, may be seen as acknowledgement that those in authority shared the fears of effeminacy that threatened to undermine Britain's capacity as a warring nation. Boxing appeared to be tolerated because of its ability to "infuse Strength, Hardiness, Courage, or Honour" (Brown 1757, 87-88). For a short time the endeavor seemed successful. Windham made the connection between "the native valour of our troops" and "all the practices and habits which tend to keep alive the same sentiments and feelings" (Windham 1913, 351; Egan 1812, 284; Ford 1971, 82). The Duke of Wellington described the Battle of Waterloo to Viscount Beresford using the changing style of boxing as a metaphor (Ford 1971, 121). The emphasis in public school and university rhetoric on physical toughness, vigor and virility can be taken as an attempt by the elite to counteract an influential accusation that it was the "leading People" that gave Britain its effeminate character, as perhaps can the increase in the number of peers and sons of peers serving in the armed forces after 1800. However, the surge in membership of volunteer and militia regiments after 1793 meant that men of the middling sort too were responding to the urge to demonstrate manliness (Colley 1992, 170, 184). Peter Radford concludes that boxing and the prize ring were "almost by definition, the antithesis of effeminacy" such that association with prize-fighting or sparring was both "a public demonstration of your manliness" and support for "those virtues that would save the country." "Although fighting was technically against the law," says Radford, "by 1800 supporting it had somehow managed to become the patriotic thing to do" (2002, 61-62).

Boxing continued to be popular in the early nineteenth century, in fact it flourished after the defeat of Napoleon (Ford 1971, 26), but its nature changed. Around 1805, boxing reports in *The Times* became recognizable as sports reports and the earlier hesitancy

about publishing such accounts disappeared. The establishment of the Pugilistic Club in 1814 replaced individual aristocratic patronage, moved the promotion of boxing into the hands of entrepreneurs and continued the professionalization of the sport (Birley 1988, 38; Ford 1971, 189). The ability of champion fighters to pull huge crowds anticipated the modern popularity of sport, prompting Peter Radford in a recent article to nominate boxer Tom Cribb as perhaps Britain's first national sporting hero (2005, 249-270). The first prize fight in America under London Prize Ring Rules in 1816 began the decline of boxing's repute as uniquely British. Although, the practice continued as an increasingly commercialized sport and as a point of honour among young gentlemen in public schools (Birley 1993, 193), boxing was no longer at the heart of debates about what it meant to be a British man.

In response to the demands of war, the traditional association of men with the ability to fight was reinvigorated and expressed in the enthusiasm of men across the social spectrum for a particularly British form of fighting – boxing. In being able to play down potentially divisive class divisions and accommodate both traditional views of manliness and newer sentiments of sensibility, the figure of the “gentleman boxer” was, for a short time, an appealing ideal of manliness. Jackson was literally flesh and blood, vulnerable to bruising and bleeding, and that made emulation of him far more attainable than the goals offered by the prescriptive advice of conduct manuals. For many men, for a brief historical moment, John Jackson showed that it was possible to be both polite and manly.

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