

Beyond the *Abysmal Brute*: A Social History of Boxing in Interwar Nova Scotia

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the *Abysmal Brute*: A Social History of Boxing in Interwar Nova Scotia
By Gregory MacIntosh Ross

In his 1911 novel *The Abysmal Brute*, Jack London portrayed boxing as a corrupt sport, lacking honest competition. Fights were fixed, gambling was endemic and audiences were robbed of 'on-the-level' sport. A decade later, however, the *Halifax Chronicle* claimed that the Nova Scotian fight scene offered good, clean boxing to ring enthusiasts. Over the years, films, novels and popular histories have tended to repeat these generalizations. Scandal and corruption, on the one hand, or fame and financial success on the other, comprise the dominant themes of popular boxing history.

This thesis focuses on boxing in interwar Nova Scotia. It provides a more holistic understanding of the sport's social significance, moving beyond the easy generalizations of films, novels and popular histories. The thesis addresses three boxing constituencies – professionals, amateurs and racial and ethnic minorities – explaining the significance of the sport to a broad range of competitors, including journeymen and champions, collegiate and club boxers, Italian, black and Danish pugilists, in terms of gender, race and class.

September 15, 2008

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As always, my mother and father supported me every inch of the way. In particular, however, this thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Betty Ross, Frances Arnold, Gerald "Grump" Arnold and Hubert Ross. It was their stories of great fights and local heroes that inspired this thesis.

Finally, this study is dedicated to the late Dr. William Godfrey, Professor Emeritus, Mount Allison University.

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Introduction

“Beyond *The Abysmal Brute*: Representations of Boxing and its Place in Interwar Nova Scotia”

In 1911 *Popular Magazine* serialized Jack London's characterization of professional boxing as a corrupt sport afflicted by gambling, unscrupulous promoters and the brutal exploitation of those who participated in it. Appearing later in the form of a novel, London's *The Abysmal Brute* (1911) chronicles the career of fictional boxer Pat Glendon, bilked and manipulated by his manager Sam Stubener and other unscrupulous members of the boxing fraternity. When Glendon learns that many of his victories were not 'on the level,' he engages in a public denunciation of the sport, informing the crowd of the crooked fights he had unknowingly participated in and promising the audience "one of the few real fights you have ever seen."¹ Refusing his manager's demand to make sure that the upcoming fight not end too quickly, Glendon declares his independence from Stubener knocking his opponent out in the first round and retiring from boxing forever.

London's fervent denunciation of pugilism was the result of his own disappointment as a fan and boxer. As a school boy, he grew up amongst the "saloons and dives, drunkenness and violence" of nineteenth century California,² fighting often,

¹ Jack London, *The Game and The Abysmal Brute* (London: Arco Publications, 1967), 135.

² Robert Barltrop, *Jack London: The Man, The Writer, The Rebel* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 20.

and becoming known as “something of a delinquent.”³ At the same time his concerns about the plight of workers and the ‘underclass’ were beginning to develop into a more fully-formed class-conscious ideology. In 1896 London joined the local chapter of the Socialist Labour Party and learned to box from fellow member Herman Whitaker – formerly a certified boxing instructor with the British Army.⁴ Eventually, London was unable to reconcile his socialist beliefs with the corruption and exploitation he observed in professional boxing. *The Abysmal Brute*, London’s passionate critique of the ring, thus cultivates an understanding of boxing as an inherently corrupt sporting practice with few if any of the improving qualities of other sporting activities.

London’s earlier boxing novel *The Game* (1905) presents a different account of the sport’s social meanings. The story involves a boxer named Joe Fleming whose responsibilities to his elderly mother and six siblings, and a desire to provide for his fiancée Genevieve, led him to a career in the ring. Joe’s success as a boxer allowed him and his family to move up the class hierarchy, in the process becoming what London refers to as a “working-class aristocrat,” surrounded nonetheless by the “sordidness and wretchedness” that characterized working-class life. In these coarse environs, Joe’s accomplishments in the ring made him a hero to the “urchins and groups of young fellows on corners” and a favourite amongst gamblers. Fleming had just one more fight to earn a “nest egg” for himself and his fiancée, planning then to give up the ring for Genevieve. The final bout of Fleming’s career was a bloody, back and forth ordeal

³ J. Lawrence Mitchell, “Jack London and Boxing,” *American Literary Realism* 36.3 (2004), 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*

against John Ponta. The back of his skull crushed by Ponta's punches, Fleming was pronounced dead in his dressing room after the fight. The fairytale rise of Joe Fleming and all his dreams of self-improvement was over. "This, then, was the end of it all—of the carpets, and furniture, and the little rented house; of the meetings and walking out, the thrilling nights of starshine, the deliciousness of surrender, the loving and the being loved."⁵

Despite the story's bloody and tragic ending, *The Game* presents another common-place representation of boxing as a sport that can contribute to social mobility. In the end, however, London believed that the dream of escaping from poverty through boxing was illusory, and that the sport's brutality would ultimately triumph over its potential for emancipation. In popular literature, film, and even in the existing historiography of boxing, two themes stand out. The first sees boxing as an unsavoury activity that involves abysmal brutality or exploitation; the second presents boxing as a way to move up the social ladder, and to confront and perhaps overcome the experience of poverty, ethnic discrimination and racism. Unlike *The Abysmal Brute* which in 1936 was turned into a film starring John Wayne, films such as *Champion* (1949), *Rocky* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Cinderella Man* (2005) all present a 'rags to riches' boxing story. At the same time, reminiscent of London's *The Abysmal Brute*, the films *Champion* and *Raging Bull* clearly associate their protagonist's rise to prominence with corrupt, mob-associated behaviour. This last theme, moreover, was central to the most damning treatment of boxing on the silver screen, *The Harder They Fall* (1956).

⁵ London, 13-66.

Similar accounts of the sordid side of boxing can be found in numerous popular histories of the sport. Books such as Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights*, Thomas Myler, *The Sweet Science Goes Sour: How Scandal Brought Boxing to its Knees* and Jack Newfield, *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* all emphasize the corruption that haunts boxing at the championship level.⁶ Then there are the numerous biographies of heavyweight champions such as James J. Braddock, Jack Dempsey and Jack Johnson constructed on the 'rags to riches' premise. Admittedly, rising from the depths of poverty to the top of the boxing world represents an extraordinary achievement worthy of the telling, but the vast majority of boxers never got the chance to tumble from the heights of success; they were never there to begin with! Most rank and file boxers fought in smoke filled clubs, armouries, local gyms and athletic clubs, not the casinos of Atlantic City and Las Vegas or at New York City's Madison Square Garden. Most fought for tens or hundreds of dollars, not thousands or millions. Surely many of them knew there were no world titles in their futures, nor any great fortune to be made fighting in the boxing circuits of smaller cities and out-of-the-way towns. What motivated these men to box, then?

The purpose of this thesis is to navigate popular yet largely reductionist representations of boxing, either polemical denunciations of its violence and corruption, or Whiggish apologies that focus on the uncommon stories of the successful boxer. By looking closely at boxing in interwar Nova Scotia I hope to investigate its appeal to

⁶ Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), Bert Randolph Sugar and Thomas Myler, *The Sweet Science Goes Sour: How Scandal Brought Boxing to Its Knees* (Toronto: Greystone Books, 2006); Jack Newfield, *Only In America: The Life and Crimes of Don King* (New York: Harbor Electronic Publishing, 2003).

boxing participants and spectators alike. If boxing was merely a story of exploitation, how does one understand the willingness of so many people to participate in or watch it? And, if boxing is to be regarded only as an avenue towards social mobility, how do we explain the involvement of those boxers who had no illusions about future wealth arising from their participation, or of those that fought only on an intermittent basis. A second objective of the thesis is to provide a more holistic treatment of the boxing fraternity, covering the broad constituency of boxers ranging from amateurs to professionals, from run-of-the-mill boxers and journeymen to stars, champions and local heroes. Black boxers from rural communities, miner-boxers from the colliery districts, returning veterans from overseas who had honed their skills in preparation for the challenges of the battlefield, working class men from industrial towns like Amherst and cities like Halifax and Sydney, amateur boxers from college campuses, boxing clubs and the military make up the boxing world of interwar Nova Scotia. My intention is to deal as comprehensively as possible with all of them, to try and understand boxing's appeal in ways that transcend the prevailing representations of boxing that present themselves so dramatically in popular culture.

Another major concern of the thesis will be the boxing networks or circuits constructed and traversed by Nova Scotian pugilists on the provincial, regional, national and international levels. Within the province amateurs competed in identifiable circuits in Cape Breton, Halifax, Cumberland County and Pictou County. Although these were largely self-contained boxing constituencies, boxers nonetheless came together once a year for the Maritime amateur boxing championships. The latter was largely dominated

by boxers from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Professional fighters traversed these same parts of the province – Cape Breton, Halifax, Cumberland County and Pictou County – generally boxing most of their fights in one of the four circuits. On the national scene, amateurs participated in the Olympic trials but not the ‘Canadian’ championships which generally only attracted competitors from the host city and surrounding area. Professionals out of Nova Scotia rarely appeared in Central Canada, but did compete in western Canada in towns like Drumheller and Lethbridge, following traditional Nova Scotian routes of transient labour into the west during ‘harvest excursions.’ For the most part, however, like in other sports, competition occurred on a north-south axis, with pugilists from Nova Scotia travelling across the border, mainly into New England, reinforcing the notion that the interwar Maritimes regarded the northeastern states as a coherent transnational sporting community. This same phenomenon occurred in the amateur ranks as amateur boxers from Nova Scotia sometimes competed in the United States national amateur championships.

Newspapers will serve as the main sources for this study, especially the *Halifax Herald*, *Halifax Chronicle*, *Sydney Post*, *Glace Bay Gazette* and *Springhill Record*. American newspapers such as the *Lowell Sun*, *Portsmouth Herald*, *New York Times* and *Syracuse Herald* will also be used to trace the careers of Nova Scotian boxers who participated in boxing throughout the northeast. Similarly, the *Lethbridge Herald* and *Drumheller Mail* will be used to follow Nova Scotian boxers operating in Canada’s

western provinces.⁷ It is important, of course, to be cognizant of the limitations of newspapers as an historical source. Martin Johnes has observed that sources really tell us more about sources themselves than those they report upon, since “the material reality of the past can ...only ever be accessed through the distorting filters of the texts it leaves behind.”⁸ The information in newspapers has already been filtered, and should not be considered inherently accurate. The ‘facts’ historians uncover within any text must be compared with other evidence, whether it be from additional newspapers or other sources including novels, films, photographs, poems, diaries or interviews. It is often the case that certain things become clearer with more textual evidence, even if the overall context of the event remains obscure and difficult to decipher. For example, just who attended boxing matches can rarely be gleaned from newspaper coverage. Fictional accounts of boxing sometimes provide insights with respect to attendance, and into broader concerns involving race, gender and class.⁹ For example, John Steinbeck, well known for several novels including *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Winter of our Discontent*, discusses the predominantly male composition of the interwar Californian boxing crowd in “The Chrysanthemums” and boxing as an avenue for the development of masculine self worth in his novel *Of Mice, and Men*. Ernest Hemingway wrote about

⁷ The newspapers from the northeastern United States and western Canada were accessed via the internet on www.paperofrecord.com and www.newspaperarchive.com. Which papers were used was dependent upon their online availability, as I was unable to travel to either location while writing this thesis.

⁸ Martin Johnes, “Texts, Audiences, and Postmodernism: The Novel as Source in Sport History,” *Journal of Sport History* (hereafter *JSH*) 34.1 (2008): 123.

⁹ Martin Johnes comes to the same conclusion regarding Vernon Scannell’s *The Fight*, stating that “the novel has much to say not only about boxing in this period but also about race, gender and class.” Johnes, 125.

pugilism as a means for his characters to “display” their masculinity, in their dealings with other characters.¹⁰

The general social trends constructed in the work of Steinbeck and Hemingway can be supplemented with archival materials to decide “what is fiction and what is not,” or in our case, what is applicable to Nova Scotia and what is not.¹¹ While many novels and films provide one-sided treatments of boxing, focusing on either corruption and brutality or social mobility, some films like *Resurrecting the Champ* (2007) and *Poor Boy’s Game* (2008) endeavour to illustrate the social significance of pugilism, and can be used, like literary texts, as tools for understanding the social context of boxing. As is the case with the majority of non-documentary films, these sources must be used knowing that cinema tends to “prioritize entertainment over the truth,”¹² forcing us again to try and determine “what is fiction and what is not” through additional research.

Aside from the Maritime intercollegiate championships, boxing at the universities and colleges of Nova Scotia was rarely reported in the province’s newspapers. Other sources, including university and college newspapers, yearbooks and registrar’s records, however, can help determine who boxed at Nova Scotian post-secondary institutions and why. Finally, photographs from the “Tom ‘The Old Sport’ Connors Collection,” maintained by Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, were used. Although photographs appear regularly in the field of sport history, they are rarely subjected to

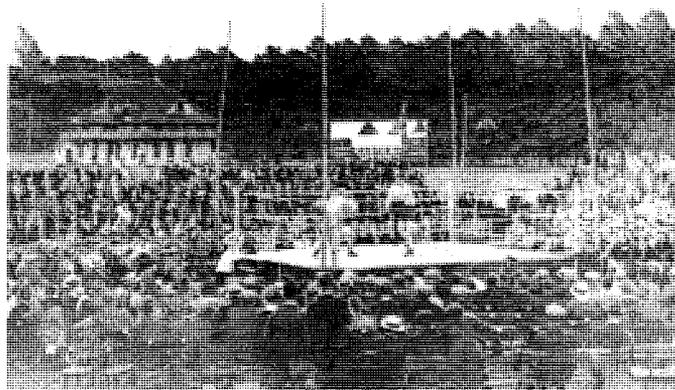
¹⁰ Thomas Strychacz, “Dramatizations of Manhood in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises*,” *American Literature* 61.2 (1989), 246.

¹¹ Johnes, 127.

¹² Murray G. Phillips et. al., “Broadening Horizons in Sport History: Films, Photographs, and Monuments,” *JSH* 34.2 (2007), 277.

serious analysis, serving merely to reinforce arguments made via other sources.¹³

Indeed, “opportunities abound for approaching photographs in more comprehensive, creative and critical ways.”¹⁴ In our case, for example, photographs provide evidence regarding the race and gender of boxing spectators that rarely appears elsewhere. Aside from a handful of newspaper articles that mention the presence of women, photos are the only sources that place women at boxing matches in interwar Nova Scotia.



A boxing match at the Wanderers' Grounds, Halifax. Source: Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

In 1920 a Halifax reporter claimed that the Nova Scotian fight scene no longer resembled London's portrayal of boxing in *The Abysmal Brute*.¹⁵ The *Halifax Chronicle* suggested much about the city's promoters, fighters and fans. A boxer was a “thinking athlete” not a brutish pawn in some greater, corrupt chess match that robbed the fans

¹³ *Ibid.* 278.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 279.

¹⁵ *Halifax Chronicle*, January 14, 1920.

of 'on-the-level' sport.¹⁶ "The boxer of today," said the *Chronicle*, "is a business man pure and simple, selling his ability to the highest bidder." This vindication of the professional fight game was, at its core, a repudiation of claims of brutality, intemperance and corruption that the middle class directed at the sport. To the Nova Scotian bourgeoisie the idea of a "thinking athlete" was irreconcilable with the term "professional." To compete in 'professional' sport was to abandon recreation as a 'rational,' character-building, enterprise. If Nova Scotian boxing transcended all of London's criticisms, it did so only temporarily, if at all. Boxing in Nova Scotia was like sport elsewhere in interwar North America, consisting of a combination of 'fixed' events and clean competition, corrupt athletes and 'on-the-level' competitors, rowdy crowds and well behaved audiences.

In *The Uses and Abuses of History* Margaret MacMillan writes that historians have an obligation "to raise the public awareness of the past in all its richness and complexity. We must contest the one-sided, even false, histories that are out there in the public domain."¹⁷ Yet, as Randy Roberts observed sometime ago, "the study of boxing has eluded the grasp of serious and conscientious historians. The task of writing boxing's history has instead fallen by default to hack historians and sensationalistic journalists...the true history of pugilism has remained cloaked in a shroud of popular

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 36-37. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, Trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957).

fantasies, traditional myths and ridiculous falsehoods.”¹⁸ Writing in 1997, Roberts was right to lament the dire state of boxing historiography, characterized as it was by uncritical biography and distorted popular conceptions of pugilism. Amidst the chaff, however, there were two important ‘national’ histories of boxing in America written during the 1980s, Elliott Gorn’s *Manly Art* and Jeffery Sammons’ *Beyond the Ring*.¹⁹

Gorn was the first scholar to present a social history of boxing in North America. In 1985 Gorn’s *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* was published, taking the history of boxing beyond the athletes and unveiling “the vast infrastructure of pugilism” – spectators, promoters, managers and others associated with the sport.²⁰ Gorn looked deeply into the class dimensions of the sport and differentiated between middle class and working class experiences and attitudes.²¹ He articulated the role of boxing in the social construction of masculinity, especially among members of a ‘bachelor subculture,’ and in some cases amongst married, working class men, who spent large periods of time in each other’s company to “seek companionship, garner one another’s esteem and compete for status.”²² In 19th century America, “being a good provider was the touchstone of being a man, so probity, dependability, and resistance to temptation defined a middle-class male ideal.” Some middle class men, however, felt “deprived the freedom and openness they perceived in working class culture,” and

¹⁸ Randy Roberts, “Eighteenth Century Boxing,” *JSH* 4.3 (1977), 246.

¹⁹ Stephen Reiss, “The New Sport History,” *Reviews in American History* 18.3 (1990), 315-317.

²⁰ Stephen Hardy, “Review: *The Manly Art* By Elliott Gorn,” *Journal of American History* 74.2 (1987), 525.

²¹ Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

²² *Ibid*, 142.

therefore joined their working class counterparts at the prizefights of the bachelor subculture.²³ As one can already begin to see, the 'bachelor subculture' was actually more of a masculine subculture, frequented by wed and unwed men, men of various levels of social standing and, as Peter DeLottinville has demonstrated, men of various ethnic and racial backgrounds.²⁴ As a term, therefore, 'bachelor subculture' is misleading and reductionist.

In 1988 Jeffery T. Sammons picked up where Gorn left off in *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*. Sammons traced the history of American pugilism from John L. Sullivan to Muhammad Ali, addressing issues of race, corruption and the nature of popular culture. Focusing largely on boxing 'heroes' like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali, Sammons' work is mostly a social history of the heavyweight champions and contenders. We learn little of the rank and file boxers. Furthermore, while Sammons effectively illustrates how society influenced the ring, he largely fails to demonstrate how boxing affected society.²⁵ In addition, his avoidance of the class question means that what boxing meant to different groups of people and in different regions of North America is lost. Even today the work of Gorn and Sammons remain the most significant treatments of boxing in America. This is a testament to the quality of their work. Nevertheless, academic historians rarely study boxing, and when they do

²³ Gorn, 140.

²⁴ Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869–1889," *Labour/Le Travail*, 8.9 (1981/1982), 9-40.

²⁵ Frederic Cople Jaher, "Review: *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*," *Journal of Social History* 22.4 (1989): 784.

their studies are biographical, often focusing on one of three American's: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis or Muhammad Ali.

The historiography of boxing in Canada is equally spotty. The one broad national survey of Canadian boxing, Murray Grieg's *Goin' The Distance*, accounts for boxers such as Sam Langford, George Dixon and George Chuvalo, but rarely exceeds biographical, punch by punch analyses of Canada's champions and contenders.²⁶ Beyond this, accounts of boxing appear only in article form. Don Morrow provides an economic history of Jimmy McLarnin's career in Canada and the United States, tracing the British Columbian's boxing earnings from western Canada, to California, to Madison Square Garden in New York. Kevin Wamsley and David Whitson focus on the controversial Pelkey-McCarthy heavyweight bout at Calgary, during which McCarthy lost his life.²⁷ This match was promoted by former heavyweight champion of the world Tommy Burns in Calgary, to provide a white contender for Jack Johnson's heavyweight crown. With Burns as the promoter, and two top contenders as principals, this match was far from representative of Canadian boxing. Once again, the article focuses on successful, heavyweight boxers and reinforces the 'corruption' motif so evident in popular histories, literature and film. Wamsley and Robert Kossuth have also addressed the social construction of masculinity in nineteenth century Upper Canada/Canada West, touching

²⁶ Murray Grieg, *Goin' The Distance* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1996).

²⁷ Kevin Wamsley and David Whitson. "Celebrating Violent Masculinities: The Boxing Death of Luther McCarthy." *Journal of Sport History* 25.3 (1998): 419-431.

on fighting/boxing on multiple occasions.²⁸ According to them, boxing was one of several ‘physical challenges’ that defined masculinity within the labouring community.

Sociologists have made contributions to our understanding of boxing as well. In 1952 S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond conducted a study that laid a foundation for future scholars, to build upon. According to Weinberg and Arond: 1) The vast majority of boxers come from the working-class 2) Specific ethnic groups, for example Irish, Italian and Jewish, are most likely to box 3) Boxing is an extension of a “juvenile and adolescent culture of the lower socioeconomic level”²⁹ that uses fighting to gain admiration amongst one’s peers 4) Within families boxing is often passed from one generation to the next. Since Weinberg and Arond, several other sociological studies have drawn similar conclusions. John Sugden’s ambitious, international contribution to the field, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*, combines three cases studies – boxing in Cuba, Ireland and America. According to Sugden, “boxing is the cultural product of a global political economy which determines considerable social inequalities.”³⁰

Berkeley sociologist Loic Wacquant has devoted the most time and effort to the study of pugilism in recent years, combining an academic interest in the sport with his own personal involvement in the ring. In the mid-nineties Wacquant sought to avoid “the externalist, top-down, individualistic perspective on the sweet science by taking

²⁸ Kevin Wamsley and Robert Kossuth, “Fighting it Out in Nineteenth Century Upper Canada/Canada West: Masculinities and Physical Challenges in the Tavern,” *JSH* 27.2 (2000), 405-430.

²⁹ S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond, “The Occupational Culture of the Boxer,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 57.5 (1952), 460.

³⁰ John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 195.

seriously what ordinary boxers have to say about their occupation.”³¹ He interviewed a broad range of pugilists and those immersed in the sport in various other capacities: corner-men, trainers and sparring partners. Wacquant’s experience was intriguing. The scholar-turned-boxer so thoroughly enjoyed pugilism that, at one point, he even considered quitting academia to become a professional boxer. After three years of boxing Wacquant completed *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* arguing that boxing was like an oasis in a violent, impoverished desert. It was an alternative to the harsh realities of the street. The gym provided security and camaraderie for the most vulnerable members of the social hierarchy, workers and recent immigrants.³²

Throughout this study, terms like ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ are used often enough to warrant a discussion of what exactly ‘class’ means in this analysis. This thesis understands ‘class’ as it has been defined by historian E.P. Thompson, that is as an “historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure.” According to Thompson, class is an ever changing relationship between all levels of the social hierarchy.³³ Raymond Williams has argued that it is from within the ‘class’ relationship that cultural production occurs, including the production of play, leisure and sporting practices. In every society a social negotiation takes place between the dominant beliefs

³¹ Loic Wacquant, “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade,” *Theory and Society* 24.4 (1995), 490. See also Loic Wacquant, “A Flesh Peddler at Work: Power, Pain and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy,” *Theory and Society* 27.1 (1998), 1-42.

³² Loic Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

³³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 8.

of the ruling class and the oppositional beliefs of other portions of society.³⁴ Within boxing this process of continuous negotiation reveals itself most particularly in debates involving amateurism and professionalism. In general, amateurism emphasizes the importance of the “mental, physical and social discipline sports provided,”³⁵ as opposed to professionalism which addresses issues of ownership, compensation and “athletics as work.”³⁶ What Richard Gruneau has called the “‘bourgeoisification’ of amateur sport,”³⁷ the exclusion of working-class individuals from amateur sport through a system of rules that were difficult for those outside the middle class to adhere to, is at the heart of this negotiated process of class conflict.

This thesis will be split into three chapters, which throw light on different realms of pugilistic experience in interwar Nova Scotia, professional boxing, amateur boxing and boxing involving racial and ethnic minorities. Chapter one will provide a comprehensive account of professional boxing in interwar Nova Scotia, going beyond stereotypes of abysmal brutality and the successful rise from rags to riches. This is not to say that the portrayal of boxing in the *Abysmal Brute*, with all its corrupt and unsavoury elements, had been entirely avoided in Nova Scotia. Nor was the hope that a big boxing pay day could help a working man overcome his difficult circumstances, something unheard of here. In a province that suffered through the post-war dislocations of the 1920s and the great depression of the 1930s, boxing purses were particularly alluring to working class

³⁴ Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 38.

³⁵ Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 46.

³⁶ Colin Howell, *Blood, Sweat and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 6.

³⁷ Richard Gruneau, *Class, Sports and Social Development* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 128.

boxers. Fixed matches commonly occurred as boxers in dire financial straits opted for more money, but in the process found themselves bartering away their own feelings of masculine self-worth. These fixed bouts, along with other undesirable aspects of the interwar fight game, like mismatches and brawling, ignited reform impulses throughout the province. Local police forces, took the initiative at times to impose temporary bans on the sport. Boxing commissions were established in Halifax and Cape Breton in order to dole out punishment for offences such as fixed fights, failure to 'make weight' and the failure of promoters to provide boxers with their purse. Reform-minded promoters also established boxing clubs that restricted attendances at matches to avoid rowdy behaviour, a clear instance of the gentrification of professional boxing.

The second chapter will focus on amateur boxing, its participants, governance, relationship with professional boxing and its role in the social construction of masculinity. Aside from studies of British amateurism and the work of Gerald Gems in the United States, amateur boxing has eluded the scope of boxing histories, academic or otherwise. In interwar Nova Scotia, amateur boxers could be split into two broad categories, collegiate and club boxing. As several historians have argued, definitions of masculinity were central to the amateur sporting ideal. According to Bruce Kidd, "it was the contribution that sports could make to the purposeful education of boys and men that mattered most to the middle-class patriarchs of the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada."³⁸ During the interwar period the AAU had a specific Maritime Provinces Branch (MPBAAU) for dealing with amateurism in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince

³⁸ Kidd, 44.

Edward Island. At Nova Scotian universities and colleges boxing mirrored the amateur rhetoric of the MPBAAU, encouraging boxing for its 'rational' physical and mental benefits, and as part of this "purposeful education of boys and men." Club boxing, however, was a thoroughly working-class pursuit, with a thoroughly working-class rationale for participation. Although like their collegiate counterparts working-class competitors understood boxing as an embodiment of appropriate manliness, their conceptions of 'manhood,' however, were markedly different from those laid out in the 'amateur code.' For the working class, masculinity was often reinforced through 'manly' displays in the workplace, enduring danger in the mines or steel plant, or exhibiting strength and high productivity on the job. Amateur boxing was a way in which young men displayed and performed masculinity. It permitted participants to prove their masculine worth in front of other men.³⁹ To many club boxers, amateur boxing was a path to professionalism. A kind of apprenticeship before moving on to the professional ring.

³⁹ In order to situate boxing within the social context of the Nova Scotian coalfields the following studies have proven helpful: Stephen Penfold, 'Have You No Manhood in You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926." *Acadiensis* 23.2 (1994): 21-44; David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton, 1922," *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, ed. G.S. Kealey and Peter Warrian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 161-184; David Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns," *Social History* 14.27 (1981), 177-196; David Frank, "Working Class Politics: The Election of J.B. McLachlin, 1916-1935," *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History*, ed. Kenneth Donovan (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1990), 186-219; David Frank, "Contested Terrain: Workers' Control in the Cape Breton Coal Mines in the 1920s," *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, ed. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 102-123; David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century, *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985*, ed. Kenneth Donovan (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton, 1985), 203-218; Ian McKay, "The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis* 16.1 (1986), 25-26.

Although the first two chapters have tried to provide a comprehensive understanding of amateur and professional boxing in Nova Scotia, they did not allow for a careful consideration of the experience of boxers of African-Nova Scotian ancestry. Chapter three will thus focus on the experience of racial and ethnic minorities at both the amateur and professional level. According to Gamal Abdel-Shehid, “the literature on ‘race and sport’ remains a discussion of racism facing male black athletes, without attention to more complex questions central to the topic.”⁴⁰ In Canada, the construction of racial stereotypes, and the influence of these stereotypes on boxers and spectators, for instance, has yet to be addressed. Thus, while this chapter will consider racist obstacles faced at all levels of competition, it will also consider the role played by historical practices of segregation and prevailing notions of ‘race,’ in pugilistic competition throughout the interwar period. By the 1920s and 1930s black participation in sport was becoming more common, as baseball and hockey teams emerged in black communities, competing against one another, and later against white sports clubs. Boxing was not included in this movement towards organized community recreation, as relatively few black pugilists competed against black or white opponents. It will be argued that the absence of significant black participation in boxing resulted from two main factors. First of all, racial discrimination in both amateur and professional boxing discouraged participation. For a black man to succeed in the interwar Nova Scotian boxing scene he had to display remarkable talent or would, as was often the case,

⁴⁰ Gamal Abdel-Shehid, *Who Da Man?: Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2005), 20.

remain an undercard performer for the majority of his boxing career. Secondly, the relatively low level of black participation in boxing was indicative of the lasting results of previous practices of segregation. In Nova Scotia “residential segregation was...practiced from the very beginning of black settlement in the province.” Since the middle of the eighteenth century, black settlers in Nova Scotia were given land far from the province’s white population on small, infertile portions of land.⁴¹ It will be argued that the segregated nature of black settlement influenced participation in boxing in two significant ways. First of all, opportunities to obtain waged labour or carry out effective agriculture were limited by the location of these settlements, forcing the inhabitants to conduct wage labour and small-scale agriculture in unison for survival. This time consuming struggle for subsistence meant many black Nova Scotians lacked the leisure time to travel from their rural communities to the urban stages of pugilism on a regular basis.⁴² Secondly, life in segregated communities fostered a strong sense of “neighbourhood identity,” leading African-Nova Scotians to prefer team sports over individual competition.⁴³

Although the segregated, rural black settlements of Nova Scotia supplied very few boxers, cities such as Halifax, Sydney and Saint John, New Brunswick produced considerably more African Canadian amateur and professional boxers. In most instances, the city’s labour market was unkind to black Nova Scotians, only hiring black labour in

⁴¹ Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks in Nova Scotia* (Don Mills, Ontario: Longman, 1973), 24.

⁴² A lack of money for sporting activities has been noted by Colin Howell in relation to baseball. See Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 179. Sheldon Gillis has also noted that hockey games were usually held locally. See Sheldon Gillis, *Putting it on Ice: A Social History of Hockey in the Maritimes, 1880-1914* (MA Thesis, Saint Mary’s University, 1996), 75.

⁴³ Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 180.

the absence of a Caucasian applicant. As Judith Fingard has demonstrated, from about 1870 to 1916, black Haligonian men were regularly employed in the transportation industry – cooking, cleaning and serving – and, according to Bridglal Pachai, continued to find employment in this industry until the mid-1970s.⁴⁴ These jobs, however, “resembled women’s domestic duties in the home,” leading these men to find masculine reinforcement outside the workplace in fraternal organizations and sports such as baseball, hockey and boxing.⁴⁵

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a holistic treatment of boxing in interwar Nova Scotia, making boxing champions and discourses about brutality and corruption merely a part of a broader story, not its emphasis. Newspaper reports, collegiate and club records, novels, films and secondary literature will help provide the full breadth of boxing experiences, from returning war veterans, touring professionals, miner-boxers and even the many aspiring lawyers, doctors and engineers that boxed at the collegiate level. It is to their stories, and not the stereotypical *Abysmal Brute*, that we now turn.

⁴⁴ Judith Fingard, “From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, c. 1870 – 1916,” *Acadiensis* 14.2 (1995), 50; Bridglal Pachai, *The Nova Scotia Black Experience Through the Centuries* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2007), 178-179.

⁴⁵ Fingard, 50.

1

“The Professionals: Money, Manhood and Moving About”

“The Cash Customer”

By J.L.M. White

Breathes there a man with soul so dead
 Who never to himself hath said
 This is my coin, my hard earned kale
 I will not pay for boxers stale
 And if I have to pay for fights
 I'm sure I want to get my rights
 I hate to see promoters stage
 A fight that gets me in a rage
 And sends me home to fret and smart
 At how my coin and I must part
 In future I will keep my jink
 The boxing shows can go to blink
 Unless they stage in every bout
 Two boxers both of whom can clout¹

J.L.M. White's adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's poem "My Native Land" entitled "The Cash Customer" reveals much about professional boxing in interwar Nova Scotia. During World War One the Canadian military employed boxing to prepare troops for hand-to-hand combat. Returning war veterans who had been schooled in the sport received the adulation of the general population and helped bring legitimacy to boxing upon their return. The connection between the post-war legitimacy of professional boxing and returning war veterans was clearly illustrated by Haligonian boxing fans during the Jack Dempsey-Jack Renault sparring performance of 1922. When Dempsey took center stage at the Halifax Arena on July 16, about a third of the audience was

¹ *Halifax Chronicle*, May 17, 1923.

admitted for free, as allegations of draft dodging circled the 'World' champion, leading some to refuse to pay for the exhibition.² For a time boxing seemed to escape the earlier reproof that surrounded the sport and which led Jack London and others to denounce it. White's poem, however, suggests that the good feelings of the immediate post-war period towards war heroes were short lived. Nova Scotia's professional fight scene, it would appear, had sunk back into the questionable practices associated with the sport – fixed fights, mismatches and 'rowdy' behaviour.

Boxers in the professional ranks were virtually all working-class men. Much of this chapter will focus upon who they were, where they came from and how their class circumstances related to their participation in boxing. When the professional fight game fell back into disrepute local police issued temporary bans and reform-minded promoters attempted to make professional boxing more palatable to its middle class opponents. Reformers established boxing commissions, opened private clubs, catered to restricted audiences and in general presided over the 'gentrification' of professional boxing events. During the 1920s the professional fight scene's popularity ebbed and flowed. As it did, some of the province's boxers explored opportunities outside the Maritimes. Beyond Nova Scotia, the main stage for the province's boxers was the northeastern United States, but many also followed traditional patterns of transient Nova Scotian labour, seeking employment in Canada's west, especially at harvest time.

² *Halifax Chronicle*, July 17, 1922. Halifax papers persistently perpetuated Jack Dempsey's draft dodger status. See *Halifax Chronicle*, January 16, 1920; *Halifax Chronicle*, January 30, 1920; *Halifax Chronicle*, February 24, 1920.

For those that stayed at home, especially in the Cumberland, Pictou and Cape Breton coalfields, boxing was subsumed into a “working class culture” that venerated physical prowess.³ Ian McKay has argued that the perilous nature of colliery labour nurtured “occupational separateness.”⁴ United by their common experience in the pits, moreover, colliers sculpted individual and class identities that reflected the inherent danger of work underground.⁵ Just as work in the mines involved an intimate relationship with danger and a sense of masculine camaraderie, the sport and leisure pursuits of Nova Scotian colliers drifted towards the perilous. Like rugby, which was a popular pursuit in industrial Cape Breton and Pictou County, boxing reinforced prevailing notions of masculinity. It did so for both winners and losers. In the ring, both victor and vanquished could lay claim to the respect associated with physical toughness and hardiness. While the victor demonstrated physical dominance over his opponent, the loser would compensate for his loss through perseverance, or ‘gameness.’ According to the *Sydney Post*, “gameness is the thing that wins, and where even gameness cannot win over overwhelming odds, there is as much credit in making a courageous fight as there is in winning.”⁶ If a fighter was ruthlessly pummelled – the more lopsidedly the

³ David Frank, “Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island’s Bicentennial 1785-1985* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1985), 204.

⁴ Ian McKay, “The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines,” *Acadiensis* 16.1 (1986), 54.

⁵ Steven Penfold, “‘Have You No Manhood In You?’: Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926,” *Acadiensis* 23.2 (1994), 21-44.

⁶ *Sydney Post*, December 14, 1916.

better – yet continued to come forward and trade punches with a superior boxer, he demonstrated what was considered real manliness.⁷

Throughout the coalfields the idolization of boxers was commonplace. Jack Munroe, a semi-successful pugilist from the pre-Great War period, who supposedly defeated Jim Jefferies in his first bout, was a celebrated figure throughout the coalfields.⁸ Boxers, however, didn't need to be stars to be idolized. During the interwar period what might be described as pugilistic genealogies emerged in the coalfields. This is not a new insight, nor was it uncommon elsewhere. In Weinberg and Arond's 1952 sociological study of boxers, familial influence was highlighted as a "recruitment" mechanism. Weinberg and Arond argued that "most boxers seem to have been influenced to become 'ring fighters' by a boxer in the neighbourhood or by a member of the family. One middleweight champion claimed that he 'took after' his brother, followed him to the gymnasium, imitated him, and thus decided to become a boxer before he was fifteen years old."⁹ The familial recruitment argument has been reiterated most recently by Kath Woodward in her 2007 study entitled *Boxing*,

⁷ There are many instances of this. For an example see description of Johnny Nemis versus Joe Hartnett bout at Halifax in: Power Collection, c. May 11, 1929.

⁸ Jack Munroe has reached an almost mythical status due to his possible defeat of Jim Jefferies. Other than second hand accounts, no creditable source exists for this bout. For the story of Jack Munroe see David Wayne McKay, "With a Strong Hand: The Jack Munroe Story," *Cast of Characters: Five Cape Breton Dramas* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1999), 3-75; Harry Bruce, "A Small Hand for A Heavyweight," *MacLean's Magazine*, May (1975), 88 and 90.

⁹ S. Kirson Weinberg and Henry Arond, "The Occupational Culture of the Boxer," *The American Journal of Sociology* 57.5 (1952), 461.

Masculinity, and Identity: The "I" of the Tiger, which attributed kinship recruitment to older male family members.¹⁰

In Cape Breton the Nemis brothers - Johnny, Dominic, Louie, Joe and Jimmy – of New Waterford all boxed in Nova Scotia throughout the 1920s and 30s. Johnny and Louie Nemis stormed the Maritime Canadian/North-Eastern American boxing scene at the time. Johnny belted his way through the Maritime Provinces, claiming the middleweight and welterweight titles of Eastern Canada in 1929. Later that year Johnny met "Red" Grange, middleweight champion of Maine, at Harbour Hall in Springhill, Nova Scotia. The young Canadian took a ten round decision, stretching his championship claim into the United States.¹¹ Louie Nemis laboured his way through Maine, making stops in Augusta and Bangor.¹² Unfortunately, in 1929 Louie failed to make weight for a bout with Al Forman of Montreal, in Glace Bay, and subsequently lost many "friends" – fans and promoters – in the process.¹³ Joe, the youngest of the three professional Nemis brothers, had only "one amateur fight, and just a quick eight to twelve pro fights" before he retired in the 1940s.¹⁴

From the Inverness coalfield emerged another set of boxing brothers. Mickey and Neiley McNeil, both proved themselves locally in Inverness against Island opponents

¹⁰ Kath Woodward, *Boxing, Masculinity, and Identity: The "I" of the Tiger* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 102-103.

¹¹ *Springhill Record*, November 8, 1929.

¹² For a fight in Bangor see *Sydney Post*, June 6, 1931. For a fight in Augusta see *Halifax Herald*, March 27, 1931.

¹³ *Springhill Record*, January 3, 1930.

¹⁴ Migliore, "A Split Decision," 252.

before eventually making their way to Halifax in 1923.¹⁵ Prior to their first appearance in Halifax the *Morning Chronicle* serenaded the McNeil brothers with the following poem:

Oh Inverness, town so very plain
 Where work a plenty is the biggest game
 Where smiling spring each year upon it steals
 To find again, the scrappers are McNeils.¹⁶

When all was said and done, Mickey McNeil was defeated by Nedder Healy via ten round decision, but his brother Neiley disposed of Arthur Sisco of Halifax by way of knockout.

The notion of getting one's 'money's worth' appeared in newspapers after virtually every card. Boxing was a commodity that – like a car, bike or radio – was measured in dollars and cents. The 'worth' of a boxing card was judged in several ways. First of all, a sufficient number of bouts had to be provided. When Harry Khron of Akron, Ohio and Jeff Smith of Bayonne, New Jersey, met at the Halifax Arena in 1923, for example, the *Halifax Chronicle* lamented that the promoters failed to give the fans their 'money's worth.' According to this newspaper a worthy evening of fights consisted of at least four to five preliminary bouts,¹⁷ plus a main event.¹⁸ But only two bouts were staged. This was not the only problem. The promoter of the Khron-Smith "fiasco" had staged an obvious mismatch, a consistent nuisance in the Nova Scotia boxing scene. When Mickey McNeil of Inverness knocked out Mike Quinn of Sydney Mines in the

¹⁵ *Halifax Chronicle*, May 12, 1923.

¹⁶ *Halifax Chronicle*, May 11, 1923.

¹⁷ Now commonly referred to as the 'undercard.'

¹⁸ *Halifax Chronicle*, May 17, 1923.

second round of their scheduled ten round affair sports writers cried foul. Ironically, in the contemporary post Mike Tyson era of boxing, of course, the knockout oozes entertainment value. Boxers like Vladimir Klitschko who regularly go the distance, are often criticized for their 'inability' to score the knockout by those who observe "fights to watch someone get flattened."¹⁹ In her now famous treatise *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates emphasizes that "no matter the mesmerizing grace and beauty of a great boxing match, it is the catastrophic finale for which everyone waits and hopes: the blocks piled as high as they can possibly be piled and then brought spectacularly down."²⁰ In interwar Nova Scotia, however, a knockout, especially early in a bout, was tantamount to an incomplete production. At the McNeil-Quinn bout at the Temple Hall in Inverness, fight fans had paid for and expected a ten round performance. What was advertised was not delivered. McNeil knocked out Quinn in the second round. To the fans, the knockout represented not quite a fifth of what was paid for. To avoid spectator disapproval, promoters were often left with the troubling task of finding two closely matched competitors, or convincing the more skilled of the two to "carry" the fight. To "carry" a fight simply implies that the more talented of the two competitors 'took it easy' on his opponent until the fans received their 'money's worth.' In these situations 'game' fighters earned accolades for their endurance. Although not necessarily at the 'top' of the talent pool, 'game' boxers increased the likelihood of a bout going the distance and

¹⁹ Vince Bagnato as quoted in Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 106.

²⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (New York: Harper, 1987), 73.

therefore drew well at the gates. These men absorbed punches, endured injuries, rose from knockdowns and limped to the finish.

Like in virtually all professional boxing circuits, 'fixes' often occurred in Nova Scotia. Mike "The Cyclonic Celt" McTigue, an Irish-New Yorker, was at the center of several scandals in the early 20s. McTigue came to Halifax for the first time in 1920 to face Roddy MacDonald. McTigue was never really viewed as an 'outsider.' After his first bout with Roddie MacDonald, in which MacDonald was disqualified for a low blow, McTigue received a huge ovation from the Halifax crowd. When the 'Cyclonic Celt' knocked out Eugene Brosseau of Quebec for the Canadian championship in Halifax, Haligonians stormed the ring and raised McTigue's hand in victory before the referee had even pronounced a winner.²¹ Shortly after the fight some unsettling claims were made by McTigue. According to the new Canadian champion he had been offered ten thousand dollars to take a dive against Eugene Brosseau.²² Although McTigue refused to take the dive, other boxers were willing to 'flop.' By 1930, the *Springhill Record* lamented that fixed fights haunted Nova Scotia and pulled boxing into decline throughout the 1920s. In fact, the paper suggests that only the "miners of Cape Breton, great lovers of knock-em-down and drag-em-out affairs, turned up regularly for fistic events."²³

'Throwing' a fight in Nova Scotia was about money. Prior to a fight, pugilists were presented with a 'win or lose' figure which could be increased if an athlete agreed to

²¹ *Halifax Chronicle*, April 9, 1920.

²² *Halifax Herald*, May 11, 1920.

²³ *Springhill Record*, December 29, 1929.

participate in a 'fix.' Often this guaranteed payment was enticing, especially to working class boxers. In many cases Nova Scotian newspapers identified individuals as boxer-miners, or told of a fighter's hardships on the docks. The more money a pugilist made the less likely he was to have to return to his 'day' job. 'Throwing' fights was a means scaling the class hierarchy. To do so, however, a pugilist had to put his sense of manhood up for sale. He would flop like a fish, clinch relentlessly and miss punches wildly. In some instances the fighter, like the opponents of the *Abysmal Brute*, would drop in a specific round. 'Gameness' was tossed out the window and substituted with manipulation. In short, the goal was to "dupe the public for profit."²⁴

The corruption and subsequent decline of Nova Scotian boxing led to a 'middle class' prescription to right the sinking ship of pugilism. This had worked previously, when boxing was dying an ugly death in Britain around the middle of the nineteenth century. The 'English Ring,' that is the bare-knuckle scene, was saved from extinction when several fighters and aristocratic fans, often referred to as 'the fancy,' implemented the rules governing sparring in the prize-ring. These were known as the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, which are in the main still adhered to today.²⁵

When Nova Scotian boxing came under fire in the 1920s the need for reform was obvious. Fixes, however, were not the only problem. In Nova Scotia boxing had grown into a particularly rowdy sport that, in some residents' eyes, desperately needed reform. In October of 1920 boxing was banned in Halifax due to an altercation between

²⁴ Don Morrow and Kevin Wamsley, *Sport in Canada: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75.

²⁵ Gorn, *Manly Art*, 166.

promoter Russell Leighton and boxers Vic McLaughlin and Mike McTigue. According to the *Acadian Recorder*, McTigue was sitting on a hotel veranda on Hollis Street in Halifax when Leighton strolled by. McTigue recognized the promoter and inquired as to the whereabouts of his payment for a previous fight. According to witnesses, Leighton replied "there is no money coming to you...what are you going to do about it?" When McTigue approached the promoter a skirmish ensued. Leighton pushed McTigue against a post before Vic McLaughlin, McTigue's training partner, moved to break up the ruckus. Before the two could be separated Leighton landed a punch on McTigue. McLaughlin then struck Leighton, forcing the promoter to retreat to the other side of the street. Leighton then beckoned for McLaughlin. When McLaughlin complied Leighton clubbed the boxer over the head with a chair he had obtained from a nearby taxi office.²⁶ When Leighton realized charges could be laid he offered McLaughlin a one hundred dollar bribe to withhold his evidence. For this he was also charged.²⁷

In the hope of gentrifying professional boxing a promoter named Mulcahy founded a private boxing club in Halifax that held pro bouts for the pleasure of club members and guests only. The goal was to exclude those individuals responsible for the corruption and rowdyism that surrounded the professional game. Despite this attempt to clean up the sport the fight game received another serious setback in Halifax. In August 1925 referee Ted Powers was involved in a fight with a fan following a bout between Nedder Healey and Teddy O'Brien. In addition, fisticuffs ensued between a

²⁶ *Halifax Herald*, October 6, 1920.

²⁷ *Acadian Recorder*, October 9, 1920.

police officer and a fan, and a near altercation arose between two women outside the venue. The *Acadian Recorder* reported that, while tensions were already running high, the impromptu fist fights were likely linked to consumption of alcohol.²⁸ Less than a month later a similar situation arose. After referee Frankie Marshall disqualified Roy Mitchell in a bout against Tommy Robson representatives of each fighter almost came to blows. According to the *Herald*, Dan Dowd, corner-man of Robson, and Frankie Burns, Mitchell's manager, "started to swing at each other" following the referee's decision, but the melee was diffused by police. A month later the Halifax Boxing Commission was founded in hopes of reducing corruption within the city's boxing matches. The effectiveness of the commission is debatable, as professional boxing matches failed to occur in the same numbers as in the pre-1925 era.

In Sydney the post-war professional fight game was afflicted with similar difficulties leading reformers to try and clean up the sport. According to the *Sydney Post*, because of "fake bouts and poor fighters" the "fistic art suffered a natural death" in the early 1920s, but former boxer Joe Uvanni and police officer James Cruickshank sought to revive it. In 1923, Uvanni and Cruickshank held a free card of fights at the Alexandra Hall. Spectators for the event were handpicked – only five hundred of the "elite sportsmen of Sydney" received private invitations. The results were pleasing to those trying to reform the sport. According to the *Post*, the evening's events were "conducted in a gentlemanly manner and there was none of the objectionable atmosphere noticeable in loosely

²⁸ *Acadian Recorder*, Aug 19, 1925.

managed boxing programs.”²⁹ Shortly after that, Uvanni and Cruickshank promoted a bout between Mickey McNeil of Inverness and Jack McKenna of North Sydney at the Alexandra Hall and spectators were once again admitted by private invitation. As McKenna and McNeil clashed in the ring a twenty-piece orchestra filled the air with classical music. As with the private boxing club that had been formed in Halifax, the efforts of Uvanni and Cruickshank had gentrified Sydney’s boxing. A ‘respectable’ environment and the exclusion of rowdy fans would revive the “almost forgotten sport” of boxing in Sydney.³⁰ After the Louis Nemis-Al Forman debacle, in which Nemis failed to make weight, the “annual cry for a boxing commission” was sounded on the Island. But, as one reporter asked, what good is a commission if it provides only the illusion of regulation? “Let us hope for the good of the game that it [the Cape Breton Commission] will prove more active than the one now in Halifax.”³¹

As the Nova Scotia boxing scene ebbed and flowed, many boxers found themselves seeking out alternative geographies, particularly across the border in New England. Politically constructed borders do little to impede the commonalities of homogenous regions. As Clarke Blais has stated, borders “do not define, they do not protect, they do not express a collective will.”³² Throughout the pre-confederation era – from the seventeenth century to the mid nineteenth – New England and what would become the Maritime Provinces of Canada established powerful “economic, social,

²⁹ *Sydney Post*, Mar 11, 1923.

³⁰ *Sydney Post*, Mar 19, 1923.

³¹ *Springhill Record*, Nov 13, 1929.

³² Clarke Blais, “The Border as Fiction,” *Borderlands Monograph Series 4* (1990), 9.

religious and cultural ties.”³³ The Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 further cultivated the New England – Maritime axis of trade. Consequently, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Maine sought mutual economic gain through the construction of a unifying rail system.³⁴ Confederation, however, dashed these ambitions by focusing the new nation’s transport development on the Intercolonial line. The economic flow, at least via steam engine, was redirected westward.³⁵ Despite this shift, professional pugilism continued as a regional commodity within the northeastern economic milieu. A transient pugilistic labour force circulated within a region that extended from Cape Breton to New York, the Atlantic coast to the northeastern inland states. As Colin Howell has clearly demonstrated, a northeastern “sporting region” spanned the Canadian-American border after World War One despite the economic recession of the immediate post-war period and eventually the Great Depression of the 1930s. Baseball players from Maine were found on teams in Cape Breton, players from Nova Scotia in Maine. Entire American baseball clubs “barnstormed” the region.³⁶ The Boston Marathon was vigorously pursued by Maritime Canadians and schooners of northeastern American and Maritime origin raced one another for prizes and bragging rights. Hunters and fishermen, hikers, golfers, and

³³ George Rawlyk, “The Maritimes and the Canadian Community,” *Regionalism in the Canadian Community*, ed. Mason Wade (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 106. See Also Graeme Wynn, “New England’s Outpost in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Northeastern Borderlands: Four Centuries of Interaction*, ed. Stephen Hornsby et al (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 64-90.

³⁴ John Reid, *Six Crucial Decades: Times of Change in the History of the Maritimes* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1987), 98-101.

³⁵ D.A. Muise, “The 1860s: Forging the Bonds of Union,” *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 30.

³⁶ Colin Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 146-170.

boxers all contributed to the development of a transnational sporting region in the interwar years.³⁷

The strongest north-south sporting linkages involved professional combatants. Sam Langford of Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia, was a remnant of the pre-war era in which a significant Maritime market for pugilism did not exist. Throughout his career Langford fought some of the sport's best including Jack Johnson and Harry Wills and was the first non-champion to be inducted into the *Ring Magazine* hall of fame. He and other Maritime boxers of the pre war period like George Dixon and "Mysterious" Billy Smith boxed almost exclusively in the United States. Langford immigrated to Boston at the tender age of fourteen, where he developed his reputation as a boxer and the nickname "The Boston Tarbaby."³⁸ In the Maritimes fight fans adjusted the moniker to emphasize his birthplace dubbing Langford "The Nova Scotian Tarbaby." Occasionally, he was called the "Bluenose Belter." Ironically, although Langford's career extended into the 1920s, when the Nova Scotia fight game had reached its pinnacle, the "Bluenose Belter" never fought in the province, except in carnival boxing exhibitions with the touring Bill Lynch amusement fairs.

³⁷For hikers and golfers see Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001). For hunters, runners and sailors see Colin Howell, "Borderlines, Baselines and Big Game: Conceptualizing the Northeast as a Sporting Region," *New England and the Maritime Provinces: Connections and Comparisons*, ed. John Reid and Stephen Horsnby (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2005), 264-279. For fishing see Bill Parenteau, "'A Very Determined Opposition to the Law': Conservartion, Angling Leases, and Social Conflict in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery," *Environmental History* 9.3 (2004), 436-463. For the conceptualization of North American identity see A.H. New, *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), 38.

³⁸ For general information on Langford see Alexander Young Jr., "The Boston Tarbaby," *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly* 4.3 (1974), 277-298.

Unlike Langford, Nova Scotian boxers tended not to relocate permanently to America during the interwar period. Perhaps the most active of all Nova Scotian boxers in the Northeast States was Johnny McIntyre. Johnny McIntyre's boxing career began at his home town of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia in November of 1914. The young miner went on to win numerous professional bouts before enlisting in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) during World War One. Serving the allied cause by no means interfered with the young Caper's development as a pugilist. In 1915, as a member of the CEF, the Cape Bretoner turned up as a headliner in numerous fights in France. In total, McIntyre had around sixteen bouts while enlisted with the CEF, winning 15 of them. McIntyre was wounded in 1917, which brought an end to his pugilistic exploits with the military, but not to his boxing career. He fought in western Canada and against local fighters in Nova Scotia like Charlie Guthro of Glace Bay and Kid Blaikie and Kid Williams of Halifax before eventually shifting his attention to the Northeastern United States. This foray into the American fight game lasted the better part of two years, spanning most of 1922 and 1923, during which McIntyre fought in various communities including Houlton, Presque Isle, Portland, Boston, Salem, Cambridge, Portsmouth, Bangor and Waterville. Misfortune, however, brought McIntyre back to Nova Scotia. While the lightweight was crushing opponents across the border his brother, a former Canadian champion named Mickey, was fighting his own battle with pneumonia, a battle the former champ eventually lost. Following this tragedy McIntyre stayed close to home, boxing in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia for most of 1924 before once again campaigning in America. The start of another stint in the American fight scene kicked off in Lynn, Massachusetts

with a win against Rubber Tummey. From Lynn, McIntyre fought all over the eastern seaboard, in Augusta, Revere, Portland and Providence in 1925. The 'champion of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and New England,' as McIntyre styled himself, spent from 1925 to 1928 in between New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and New England. He appeared in fights at Halifax, Glace Bay and New Waterford, in Nova Scotia; Saint John in New Brunswick, Portland, Portsmouth, Fall River, Lowell, and Lynn. In 1927, Johnny settled down, moved his wife and kids to Michigan, and took a job at a Ford plant – while boxing on the side, of course.³⁹



Johnny McIntyre. Source: Earle Pemberton, "The Uncrowned Canuck: John Alex McIntyre," *Punching With Pemberton* 12.2 (1963), 1. Part of an unaccessioned group of documents located at the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University.

³⁹ For Johnny McIntyre's boxing record see Nat Fleischer, *Ring Record Book 1943* (Norwalk, Connecticut: O'Brien Suburban Press, 1943), 312-313. Although McIntyre does not claim Fleischer's information is inaccurate, he does note that he had many more fights that are not listed in the *Record Book*. Earle Pemberton, "The Uncrowned Canuck: John Alex McIntyre," *Punching With Pemberton* 12.2 (1963), 3.

Roddie “Big Pay” MacDonald, born in Springhill and raised in Glace Bay, traversed the northeastern “sporting region,” fighting in Rhode Island, New York and Pennsylvania. Like Jack Dempsey, some fight fans considered MacDonald to be a slacker because he boxed at home during World War One.⁴⁰ MacDonald initiated his professional boxing career against Navy fighters, such as ‘Warrant Officer Kinch,’ and American fighters from New England.⁴¹ In 1916, however, ‘the Pride of Cape Breton’ left Nova Scotia in search of more promising opportunities in the northeastern United States. The interwar years boomed with pugilistic opportunities but they proved less than kind to MacDonald. According to Johnny McIntyre, MacDonald could have been great “if not for the booze.”⁴² Earle Pemberton, the late Nova Scotian boxing enthusiast, tells of MacDonald swigging rum between rounds, drinking himself into utter vulnerability.⁴³ By 1923 the one time Champion of Canada was in a sad state. A few years before, MacDonald had been a fan favourite, but a string of poor showings beginning in late 1920 promptly changed this. MacDonald had kicked off that year by squeaking out a victory over New Yorker Jack Savage at the Gaiety Theatre in Halifax. A local newspaper lamented that MacDonald’s victory was lack lustre because “Big Pay” had evidently “over trained.”⁴⁴ When MacDonald won a controversial decision over Leo Houck at the Halifax Armouries a month later fans cried foul and insisted that Houck was the victor, and “Big Pay’s”

⁴⁰ *Kokomo Daily Tribune*, Jan 8, 1917.

⁴¹ *Sydney Post*, August 3, 1916.

⁴² Johnny McIntyre as quoted by Earle Pemberton, “When Roddie Ruled the Roost,” *Punching with Pemberton* 3.2 (1963), 4.

⁴³ Earle Pemberton, “When Roddie Ruled the Roost,” 4.

⁴⁴ *Halifax Chronicle*, January 12, 1920.

career began to spiral woefully downward.⁴⁵ Two weeks after his questionable victory against Houck, MacDonald was disqualified against Mike McTigue in a fight at the Halifax Armouries. Interest in MacDonald was beginning to wane. The attendance at the McTigue bout was at least 700 spectators shy of the regular 1,500 that could be expected at a Great War Veterans' Association card.⁴⁶

Roddie MacDonald was afforded his chance of a life time when he was matched against Canadian champion Eugene Brousseau. Tickets sold steadily for Halifax's first Canadian Championship bout, and reached a whopping 3,000 sales by fight night. Brousseau disposed of MacDonald via knockout. In some ways this seemed the beginning of the end for MacDonald. Following the 1920 ban on boxing in Halifax, MacDonald was a sporting labourer without a job market. Unlike Johnny McIntyre, "Big Pay" had few prospects for fights in the northeastern States. His less than impressive record across the border had done little to endear "Big Pay" to American fight fans and promoters. With his options limited, MacDonald attempted to revive his ailing career in Quebec. And revive it he did, by stringing together wins against Vic McLaughlin, Tom Sharrock and Spike Sullivan. Riding his newly re-established credibility, MacDonald obtained a second shot at the Canadian Middleweight title. On 10 December 1921 he stepped through the ropes in Quebec City for a rematch with McTigue, who had taken the title from Brousseau. Once again the Irish-American proved too much for the feisty Caper, putting

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, February 15, 1920.

MacDonald to sleep in the tenth. This was the last bout of any significance for the once promising Nova Scotian middleweight.

Within Canada Nova Scotian professional boxers tended to gravitate towards the Western Provinces – Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan – conforming to a larger tradition of transient Nova Scotian labour seeking employment in Canada's west. Since the late nineteenth century, Nova Scotians hopped trains and headed west to partake in the 'harvest excursions.' Until the late 1930s, the western provinces represented a seasonal region of opportunity for Cape Bretoners in particular. Incredibly little, however, has been written about this sector of waged agricultural labour. In 1978 John Herd Thompson lamented that although harvest excursionists constituted at least thirty percent of the agricultural workforce of the prairies they were adrift in a "historiographical 'no man's land.'"⁴⁷ They were ignored or forgotten, almost completely overshadowed in Canada's history by labourers in the "transportation, manufacturing and extractive industries."⁴⁸ Part of the problem stems from a lack of primary documentation. Since harvest excursionists did not form a union, precious little documentary evidence remains that illustrates the harvesters' experiences. The vast majority of historical evidence consisted of letters, diaries and other personal articles, the majority of which have disappeared over time. Newspapers tell part of the story, as W.J.C. Cherwinski demonstrated in his 1980 *labour/le travailleur* article "The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908," but press accounts lack much in the way of personal

⁴⁷ John Herd Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves: Harvest Excursionists, 1890-1929," *CHR* 29.4 (1978), 467.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

recollection. With the burgeoning of oral history, however, the historiography of the harvest excursions took a significant leap forward.

In 1981 Gordon Hak completed his M.A. thesis at the University of Guelph on the harvest excursionists from North Huron – South Bruce, Ontario. The study was a departure from its predecessors, focusing more on oral accounts collected by the author than government or newspaper records. In 1985, Hak utilized this oral research to publish an article entitled “The Harvest Excursion Adventure: Excursionists from Rural North Huron – South Bruce, 1919-1928.”⁴⁹ That same year, A.A. Mackenzie, then a professor of history at Saint Francis Xavier University, published a similar article that focused upon the ‘adventures’ of Cape Breton harvesters. The article was followed by a book seventeen years later entitled *The Harvest Train: When Maritimers Worked in the Canadian West, 1890-1928*. As suggested by the title, Mackenzie’s book covered a broader scope than his previous publication. Oral accounts from New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia were compared and contrasted, providing multiple, often conflicting stories of the excursions. Wild claims of drinking and brawling were balanced with other recollections, more sedate in nature.

Regardless of whether the excursions were considered ‘wild’ or ‘tame,’ employment in the West represented a rite of passage and an adventure for transient Nova Scotian workers.⁵⁰ As Mackenzie has demonstrated, the western harvest

⁴⁹ Gordon Hak, “The Harvest Excursion Adventure: Excursionists from Rural North Huron – South Bruce,” *Ontario History* 4 (1985), 247-266.

⁵⁰ A.A. MacKenzie, “Cape Breton and the Western Harvest Excursions, 1890-1942,” *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island’s Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1986), 71-83.

excursions were an essential ingredient in ‘masculine’ development and identities for those that took part in them. The inhabitants of Cape Breton Island, for example, believed that the journey towards manhood was not complete until three milestones had been reached. An islander was expected to serve in the military, attend a harvest excursion and be bound in matrimony.⁵¹ Like the world of boxing, the harvest excursions of the 1920s were, for the most part, dominated by males. Large groups of men crowded onto trains, almost entirely free from female influence, where they drank, shot and fought until they arrived in the ‘wild west.’⁵² Fights, often arising out of alcohol consumption were frequent. Brawls between Prince Edward Islanders and Cape Bretoners were also regular occurrences – a fact that eventually resulted in the two groups being “locked and chained off from one another.”⁵³ Cape Bretoners were considered particularly feisty excursionists. For example, when one of the “New Brunswick boys” couldn’t find anyone to fight with on an excursion in the mid twenties (1925 or 1926) he headed for the car carrying the Cape Bretoners. According to one passenger, the rowdy New Brunswick harvester came “crawling back with his face smashed in,” ranting about the “wild men from Cape Breton.”⁵⁴ A harvester from the 1928 excursion recollected that “some Glace Bay boys were fond of scrapping,”⁵⁵ hardly

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 72. See also Gordon Hak, “The Harvest Excursion Adventure: Excursionists from Rural North Huron – South Bruce,” *Ontario History* 4 (1985), 263.

⁵² I say ‘almost’ because there are some examples of women heading west to teach on the same train as the harvesters. See. A.A. MacKenzie, *The Harvest Train: When Maritimers Worked in the Canadian West, 1890-1928* (Breton Books, 2002), 35.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁴ MacKenzie, *Harvest Train*, 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

surprising given the town's fascination with pugilism. In fact, several Glace Bay boxers appeared in the west during this very period.

In the popular mind there are two different conceptions of the west: the wild west synonymous with America's frontier and the 'mild' west which emphasizes the seemingly more orderly development of Canada's western provinces. The notion that Canada's west was somehow 'milder' than its American counterpart is rooted in a long standing tradition of 'pacification' stories centered upon the North West Mounted Police. According to Daniel Francis, "the narrative of the Mountie subduing the fiery spirit of the Indian and making the West safe for settlement is one of our basic cultural myths."⁵⁶ The myth has become a popular 'truth,' Francis argues, cultivated by various popular historians, including Pierre Berton, who represent it as such. Realistically, however, the Canadian West may not have been quite so different from its American neighbour. According to James Gray, Drumheller, Alberta, for example, the town to which the majority of Maritime boxers flocked, was the "wildest town on the prairies" in the 1920s. The landscape of this small mining town was littered with brothels, bootleggers, gambling halls and other establishments of ill repute.⁵⁷ It was also the locus for a healthy boxing culture, one which attracted boxers from the east coast.

Maurice MacDonald, a miner-boxer from Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, made his way west on the harvest excursions, working the fields before heading to Drumheller to work the mines. While in Drumheller MacDonald donned his boxing gloves and boxed with

⁵⁶ Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 30.

⁵⁷ James H. Gray, *Red Lights On The Prairies* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1995), 200-201.

some success. In 1925 he participated in a benefit boxing card, the proceeds of which were to be sent to Nova Scotia to “aid the starving miners and their families.”⁵⁸

MacDonald continued mining and boxing in Drumheller, winning the ‘Championship of Western Canada’ before returning to Nova Scotia “when the depression struck.”⁵⁹

Roddy MacDonald also went west during the 1920s. After his loss to McTigue in Quebec, MacDonald fell on tough times, his career in shambles, he battled alcoholism for the remainder of the 1920s. In 1923 the former champ was arrested in Halifax for public drunkenness and resisting arrest.⁶⁰ Going west to get a new start, MacDonald’s situation only worsened. While living in Drumheller MacDonald and a “transient harvester” named Jack McIsaac were accused of robbery. According to defendant Kias Holmberg, who was himself a “harvester,” he and the accused had been denied entrance to “one of the houses of ill-repute” and were on their way back to town when MacDonald violently “mauled” him. Jack McIsaac claimed that “Big Pay” would have killed Holmberg if it weren’t for his assistance and demanded in turn that Holmberg provide fifty dollars as a reward. Once in Drumheller the extortion continued. MacDonald and McIsaac forced the defendant to lead them to his lodgings where they proceeded to steal four hundred dollars. The judge found both men guilty. MacDonald, who appeared “helplessly drunk” in court, was incapable of supporting his plea of “not guilty.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Drumheller Mail*, April 2, 1925.

⁵⁹ MacKenzie, *Harvest Train*, 77.

⁶⁰ *Sydney Post*, March 17, 1923.

⁶¹ *Drumheller Mail*, November 29, 1928.



Roddie MacDonald, seated. Source: Earle Pemberton, "When Roddie Ruled the Roost," *Punching With Pemberton* 3.2 (1963), 1.

The "wild west" proved a tragic theatre for at least one other Cape Breton pugilist – John Hector Nolan. Like McIntyre, Nolan proved himself as a boxer in the CEF during the Great War before rising to fame in Canadian boxing circles, winning the "undisputed" championship of the CEF in France in 1918.⁶² Upon returning to Nova Scotia, Nolan competed as an amateur before turning professional and heading west. In the cold western winter of 1923, Nolan claimed the Canadian Championship by defeating West O'Brien at Calgary in December.⁶³ Like many of his working class counterparts from Cape Breton, Nolan fought not only in the ring, but for the rights of working men. During his years in the west Nolan established the Drumheller chapter of

⁶² *Halifax Chronicle*, April 27, 1920.

⁶³ *Halifax Chronicle*, December 1, 1923.

the United Mine Workers of America. Unfortunately, his life was cut short when he was shot and killed in Drumheller, Alberta in February of 1926.⁶⁴

Johnny McIntyre also plied the western Canadian boxing scene after the Nova Scotian fight game fell into decline due to several boxing related events. Most prominent among these events was the Leighton –McLaughlin – McTigue altercation. As previously noted, the sport had been plagued by fixed fights and inadequate matchups throughout much of the 1920s, and the number of boxing cards dropped. With provincial boxing opportunities in decline, McIntyre ventured west. Whether or not the Caper would have settled permanently is difficult to discern due to the rather unfortunate circumstances that befell this Maritime athlete. After an evening of indulgence, something common throughout McIntyre’s career, the Cape Bretoner was involved in a street fight in Saskatoon. The ‘wild west’ lived up to its name – McIntyre was stabbed in the abdomen three times, forcing doctors to remove a portion of his intestines.⁶⁵ The resilient Cape Bretoner would once again bounce back from injury and return to the ring, but in Nova Scotia, not the West.⁶⁶

The *Halifax Chronicle’s* earlier conclusion that “the day of the Abysmal Brute has [had] passed” was an optimistic description of the state of Nova Scotia’s professional fight game. It was a premature conclusion, as the post-war legitimacy afforded by returning veterans was supplanted by pre-war concerns about corruption and rowdiness. Rather than enjoying an age of legitimacy, professional boxing in Nova Scotia

⁶⁴ Power Collection, c. Feb 22, 1926.

⁶⁵ *Halifax Herald*, Dec 16, 1920.

⁶⁶ J. Earle Pemberton, “The Uncrowned Canuck: John Alex McIntyre,” 1.

experienced a time of persistent reform until the outbreak of World War Two. As the Nova Scotia boxing scene deteriorated, some of the province's pugilists sought opportunities in the northeastern United States and Western Canada. During the early 1920s, amidst the bans and reforms of professional boxing, and the movement of talented professional pugilists throughout the northeastern United States and western Canada, amateur pugilism became a popular alternative for fight fans. As we will see in the following chapter, amateur boxers generally belonged to one of two broad groups – collegiate or club boxing – which, together with class, shaped their understanding of the utility of amateur boxing.

“The Amateurs: Nova Scotia’s Forgotten Club and University Boxers”

Thus far much of this study has sought to articulate the social impact of professional boxing, examining the experiences of the athletes as well as their occupational and community identities. The objective has been to avoid a reductionist treatment of the sport, dismissing boxing as mere brutality or celebrating it as an avenue for social mobility. This has required us to look at the way different groups of boxers experienced the sport differently, concentrating not just upon successful boxers but all who participated and for whatever reason. The previous chapter followed professional boxers from the province as they developed popular followings at home and the difficulties that they experienced in building successful boxing careers. As the popularity of professional boxing in Nova Scotia waxed and waned during the interwar years, many boxers travelled outside the region to New England and to the Canadian west to follow their careers or find employment that was unavailable to them at home.

Our discussion in this chapter will look at two different boxing constituencies: collegiate and club-based amateur boxing. Collegiate boxing in the interwar years was carried on at Saint Francis Xavier University, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia Technical College and King’s at both the intramural and intercollegiate levels. Because a narrative has yet to be written that encompasses the history of amateur boxing in the region, the programs, the boxers themselves, and the results of their competitions will be presented

here as part of what can loosely be considered a class-based analysis. Where in the social hierarchy did these pugilists come from? Why did they choose to participate? Did their social origins affect their comprehension of the utility of boxing? We will raise the same questions when dealing with club-based and military-related amateur boxing activities.

Amateur boxing as we know it today was essentially an English invention. In 1867 John Graham Chambers initiated a strictly middle-class boxing competition entitled the Lillie Bridge boxing championship. The rules at this event were very similar to the amateur rules that have been more or less adhered to throughout Canada's own boxing history: gloves were mandatory, bouts consisted of three timed rounds, and winners were determined by judges. In Britain, strictly middle class boxing tournaments had ceased to exist by the mid-1880s. This decline has largely been attributed to the rise of the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA). Founded in 1880, the ABA permitted both bourgeois and working class competitors to vie for titles.¹ In boxing amateurism and professionalism remained separate in England until 1906, when Matt Wells used "amateur prowess as a stepping stone to success in the professional ring."²

Many studies of boxing in North America give scant attention to amateurism and concentrate their efforts on the professional side of the sport. The generalizations that arise from this are often misleading. For example, sociologists Weinberg and Arond

¹ Stan Shipley, "Boxing," *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 81. See also Derek Birley, *Sports and the Making of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 290.

² Derek Birley, *Land of Sports and Glory: Sport and British Society 1887-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 213.

concluded that “nearly all [boxers] are of a low socioeconomic background.”³ This was hardly true of intercollegiate boxing. In the United States, Yale University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, Cornell University, New York University, University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, University of Pennsylvania and Colgate University had flourishing boxing programs in the 1920s,⁴ and relied heavily on boxers of middle class origin. This was also true in interwar Nova Scotia.

Collegiate boxing provided a strictly regulated field of amateur competition for those able and willing to attend a post-secondary institution. The origins of intercollegiate boxing in Nova Scotia date to 1921 when L.J. Fanning of the Nova Scotia Business College became the first collegian to participate in the Maritime amateur boxing championships.⁵ The following year Dalhousie University initiated its boxing program and had a pugilist named Ernest Orr compete at the 1923 Maritime amateur boxing championships.⁶ Boxing classes were first organized at the Nova Scotia Technical College in 1926 under the supervision of a Professor Reid. The equipment needed for the class was provided by Captain Nicholls of the Canadian armed forces.

³ Weinberg and Arond, 460.

⁴ For Yale see *New York Times*, January 11, 1920; Harvard, *New York Times*, January 15, 1920; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *New York Times*, March 28, 1920;; Cornell, *New York Times*, January 9, 1920; New York University; University of Michigan, *New York Times*, December 3, 1920; Pennsylvania State University, *New York Times*, June 23, 1921; University of Pennsylvania, *New York Times*, January 9, 1920; Colgate University, *New York Times*, February 4, 1921.

⁵ *Halifax Chronicle*, April 27, 1921.

⁶ Report of the boxing program’s initiation, *Halifax Chronicle*, November 21, 1922; *Dalhousie Gazette*, December 6, 1922. Ernest Orr competes in the Maritime championships, *Halifax Chronicle*, April 24, 1923.

Collegiate boxing in Nova Scotia became an intercollegiate sport due to the efforts of the Nova Scotia Technical College. The intercollegiate competition itself seems to have been the brain child of Nova Scotia Tech's Professor Ball. It is not surprising, therefore, that the elimination portion of the first Maritime intercollegiate boxing tournament was held at the Nova Scotia Tech gymnasium. As the major sponsor of the event, the armed forces hosted the finals at the military gymnasium on Cogswell Street. In this first season of operation Sergeant Major Naish acted as head coach of both the Tech and King's College boxing squads. Dalhousie, on the other hand, was coached by local professional boxer Edward 'Nedder' Healey, while Saint Francis Xavier University was trained by Maurice MacDonald, a professional from Glace Bay.⁷ Dalhousie won the 1930 championship with a total of four titles, while Saint Francis Xavier and Tech tied for second with two titles each. Dalhousie had held their own school championships prior to 1930 which were well attended both by fans and competitors.⁸

After the initial boxing season Dalhousie, Saint Francis Xavier and Tech all reported having held championships for school titles. Tech took a page from the Dalhousie and Saint Francis Xavier playbooks and hired professional boxer Roy Chisholm as their coach. Chisholm taught the Tech pugilists the tricks of the trade by actually getting in the ring with the athletes and sparring with them. Which institutions attended the intercollegiate championships varied by the year. After 1930 Saint Mary's withdrew

⁷ *Tech Flash*, April, 1930, 62-64. The Tech Flash reported that Saint Francis Xavier was coached by a man with the last name 'Kenny.' *The Casket* (Antigonish) and the *Halifax Chronicle*, however, reported that the team was coached by Maurice MacDonald of Glace Bay, NS. See *The Casket*, February 26, 1931; *Halifax Chronicle*, March 3, 1931.

⁸ The boxing program began at Dalhousie in 1922 and by 1930 the school championships were described as a 'usual' occurrence by its year book. *Pharos*, 1930, 160.

from intercollegiate competition for the remainder of the decade. The Nova Scotia Technical College did the same in 1935. Saint Francis Xavier had perfect attendance, while Dalhousie University missed only the 1935 championships. By 1936 both the King's College and Dalhousie University boxing teams were struggling to survive. The schools, therefore, decided that the two teams be merged and compete under the banner of Dalhousie. Thus, Dalhousie's 1936 boxing squad includes at least two King's College pugilists: Tom White and Miller Ballem.⁹ In 1937 White and Ballem were joined by fellow King's fighters Norman McRitchie, Ted DeWolfe and Stewart MacDonald.¹⁰ It wasn't until 1935 that the University of New Brunswick made the intercollegiate championships more than just a Nova Scotian tournament dressed in 'Maritime' clothing. Mount Allison University followed suit and made its first appearance in 1937 and became the first non-Nova Scotian school to win the Maritime title in 1938.¹¹

The social 'class' of pugilists in collegiate boxing varied depending upon the institution. The registrar's records of Dalhousie University reflect the middle class nature of the school's boxing team. From 1930-1932 sixteen different Dalhousie students are known to have participated in on-campus boxing. Six of the Dalhousie Collegiate pugilists were the sons of professionals – lawyers, Engineers, accountants or medical doctors.¹²

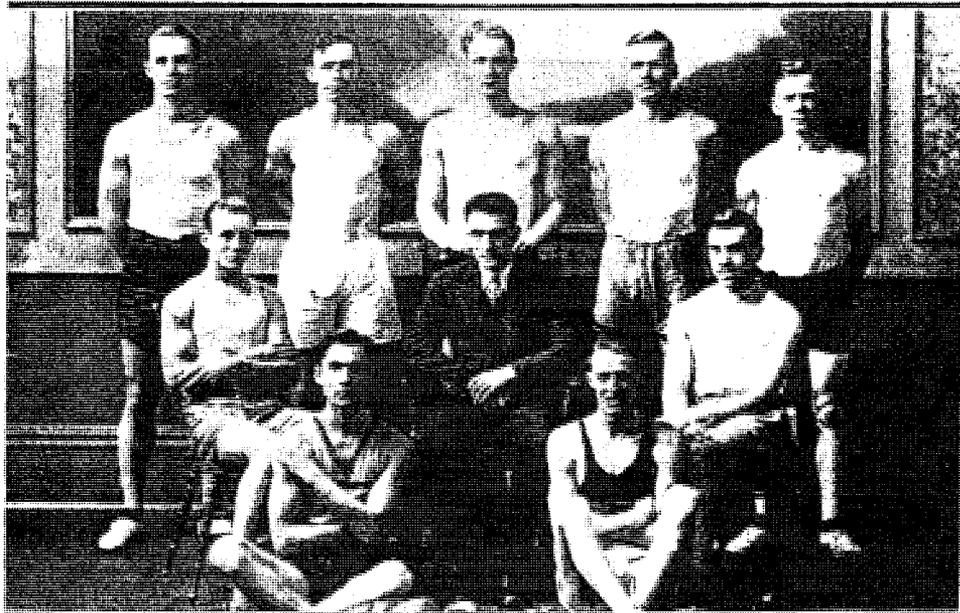
⁹ *Pharos*, 1936, 7; *King's College Record*, April, 1937.

¹⁰ *Pharos*, 1937, 96.

¹¹ For Mount Allison University's first appearance at the intercollegiate championships see *Halifax Herald*, March 15, 1937. For their first victory see *Halifax Herald*, March 16, 1938.

¹² James Harold Conrod was the son of an accountant, see Dalhousie Registrars Record, 1930, No. 767. Archibald Alexander MacDonald (DRR, 1930, No. 107) and Albert Victor Kyte (DRR, 1932, No. 314) were the sons of Lawyers. Douglas Kerr Murray (DRR, 1931, No. 44) and Daniel Phillip Wallace (DRR 1930, No. 726) were the sons of medical practitioners. James Andrew McLeod (DRR, 1930, No. 192) was the son of an engineer.

As Paul Axelrod had pointed out, the vagueness of many of the registration forms makes it difficult to discern exactly where in the class hierarchy certain students are situated. The father of John Alexander Glorioso, for example, is listed as a foreman. Was this a middle class or working class occupation?¹³ What about entries like ‘contractor’ or ‘real estate’?¹⁴ Students with ‘merchant’ fathers enrolled at Dalhousie, Axelrod tells us, could have incomes anywhere from five hundred dollars to several hundred thousand dollars.¹⁵ What are we to make of this? It certainly seems as though, given the depression of the 1930s, that merchants of meagre means would be less likely to have children enrolled at university.



Dalhousie Boxing Club, 1931. Source: *Pharos* (Dalhousie University Yearbook), 1931.

¹³ Axelrod posed the question “Is a ‘Foreman’ a supervisor or a skilled worker?” This question is misleading as a person could be both a supervisor and a skilled worker. Paul Axelrod, “Moulding the Middle Class: Student Life at Dalhousie University in the 1930s,” *Acadiensis* 15.1 (1985), 90.

¹⁴ Tegler West Bedwin (DRR, 1931, No. 648) listed his father as a contractor. Hyman Magoret (DRR, 1931, No. 38) listed his father’s occupation as “real estate.”

¹⁵ Axelrod, “Moulding the Middle Class,” 91.

King's College seems to have had a similar make up. Carl Holm was the brother of professional boxer Billy 'the Battling Dane' Holm. Holm's father is listed in the Dalhousie University registrar as an employee of Dominion Coal and Steel. Considering that he resided at New Waterford, it is safe to assume that he worked the mines. The Holm family lived in New Waterford, Nova Scotia. It seems likely that Carl's educational pursuits were financed in part by his brother.

The rosters of the Nova Scotia Technical College and Saint Francis Xavier University during this same time period did have individuals that appear to be of the working class. At Nova Scotia Tech, collegiate boxer Albert George Ley worked at the Sydney steel plant before going to college. At Saint Francis Xavier a large portion of the boxing team came from the colliery districts of Cape Breton Island. Allie McSween and 'Hooker' MacDonald, for example, were both from New Waterford. Their presence at Saint Francis Xavier University was likely a result of a social enrichment initiative known as the 'Antigonish Movement.' At its core the 'Antigonish Movement' was an initiative against "the exploitive nature of capitalist society and the elitist educational system it perpetuated."¹⁶ It sought to provide education to the farmers, miners, fisherman and workers in general. When considered in this context it is not surprising that individuals from predominantly working class towns appeared on the boxing roster of Saint Francis Xavier University. It does, however, raise questions about how these individuals understood their participation in boxing.

¹⁶ E.R. Forbes, "The 1930s: Depression and Retrenchment," *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Musie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 288.

At thoroughly middle class post-secondary institutions like Dalhousie University, boxing was explained in the typical rhetoric of amateurism. According to the sports writer for the Dalhousie year book, by participating in boxing students were “acting upon the principle that a ‘healthy mind in a healthy body’ is the foundation of normal men.”¹⁷ Amateur pugilism was described as a “man-building sport.”¹⁸ What is really meant by this is amateur boxing is a ‘middle-class man-building sport.’ Similar rhetoric can be found in the more working-class institutions as well. In the journal of the Nova Scotia Technical College, for example, one writer states that the school’s boxers perform with the “good sportsmanship which characterizes those who play for the love of the game.”¹⁹ These examples suggest that amateur pugilism had a purpose, but it wasn’t to win. It was for leisure and a healthy mind, not competition. Technically, therefore, it should not have mattered if the Nova Scotia Technical College won or lost. If this was actually the case, however, there would have been no need to hire a professional boxer to improve the quality of the boxing team after the school’s loss at the inaugural intercollegiate meet. As many previous authors have suggested, competitions in general are a contradiction of the universities’ ‘amateur’ endeavours for, inevitably, the goal is to win.²⁰ Boxers like McSween and MacDonald of Saint Francis Xavier clearly understood boxing as a competition. In Cape Breton boxing was *always* about competition. If not for

¹⁷ *Pharos*, 1938, 93.

¹⁸ *Pharos*, 1939, 88.

¹⁹ *Tech Flash*, December 1930, 56.

²⁰ Thorstein Veblen, for example, argues that “manifestations of a predatory temperament are all to be classed under the head of exploit...entered upon with a view to gaining repute for prowess.” See Thorstein Veblen, “Modern Survivals of Prowess,” *Sport and Society: An Anthology* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 47.

money or prizes, then for less tangible rewards like accolades and/or masculine reassurance. Outside the realm of collegiate amateurism, McSween and MacDonald both boxed on New Waterford's town amateur team against other communities. Surely they were more concerned about defeating the boys from Glace Bay or North Sydney than developing their body into a sturdy vessel for their mind. Glorioso of Dalhousie University and Carl Holm of King's College also competed outside the university circuit. Holm even boxed in the Maritime amateur championships at the Wanderers Grounds in July of 1931.²¹ Based on these examples it can be concluded that the explanations provided by universities regarding participation in pugilism, did not necessarily represent the motivations of the amateur boxers themselves.

At the campus level collegiate boxing was part of a broader middle class infatuation with social presentation. According to Paul Axelrod, sport was considered a component of a "socially successful" male university student. It earned respect amongst your own sex, and popularity amongst the opposite. Other characteristics of the 'socially successful' collegiate male included intelligence, modesty, ambition, sincerity and dancing skills. Of these five traits, dancing stands out as something that could certainly be improved through boxing. After all, the development of co-ordination and foot work were, and still are, important components of a boxers training. These skills came in handy at the many dances held regularly for university students in Nova Scotia. Dances were the main theatre of socialization between the sexes and were, therefore, an

²¹ For 1931 Maritime Amateur Championships see *Halifax Herald*, July 10, 1931; *Halifax Herald*, July 11, 1931.

important part of collegiate life. Carl Holm of King's College is the perfect example of a 'socially successful' collegiate pugilist. Holm was admired not only for his prowess as boxer, but for his dancing skills and the popularity of this combination of boxing and dancing amongst the opposite sex. He was a man envied by his peers.²²

Throughout the preceding discussion of collegiate boxers the question of how boxers understood the sport was raised. The same question must be posed with regard to the 'rank and file' amateurs of the province. Stephen Brunt has boldly, and incorrectly, stated that "almost no one fights for a living because they want to. That is the case now, and that has been the case almost since boxing for money became an option nearly 300 years ago."²³ Such a conclusion invokes an understanding of "work" and "leisure" as irreconcilable. This simply was not the case. The interwar amateur boxing scene that thrived in the colliery districts suggests that professional boxing could sometimes be an extension of a boyhood pastime rather than a financially motivated enterprise.

In chapter one it was argued that returning war veterans shone a positive light on the sport of professional boxing due to the sport's utility in training soldiers during the Great War. The heroic stature of returning soldiers in Nova Scotian society among the sporting fraternity brought a new respectability to boxing. More than any other community in Nova Scotia, Halifax encouraged the diffusion of boxing from the military to the general population. This occurred in other sports as well. During the nineteenth

²² *King's College Record*, May 1934.

²³ Stephen Brunt, "Boxing is Not to Blame," *Taking Sport Seriously: Social Issues in Canadian Sport*, ed. Peter Donnelly (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing Inc., 2000), 66.

century, Robert Day has argued, the Halifax garrison “added a dimension of skill that contributed to the development and promulgation of a particular sport in the community.”²⁴ In the years that followed the war the Great War Veterans Association took control of and provided leadership to the Halifax boxing scene. Spectators packed the Halifax Armouries to see professional bouts featuring veterans like Harry Hall, Tom Sharrock and Al Scott. These good feelings towards professional boxing began to recede in the early 1920s as the corruption evident in the *Abysmal Brute* again became apparent in Nova Scotia, drawing criticisms of the sport from the media, fans and others. The sordidness of professional boxing led the Maritime Provinces Branch of the Amateur Athletic Association of Canada to prohibit the GWVA from holding professional matches, threatening to ban the organization from all amateur sporting events. Although the GWVA would hold occasional professional bouts after the MPBAAU of C’s intervention, the organization largely operated in the sphere of amateur boxing for the remainder of the interwar period, organizing sporadic amateur cards, as well as an annual Army and Navy amateur championship. Boxers from the Canadian military, however, were not always members the GWVA, and often competed on amateur cards promoted by other organizations. For example, the Halifax Fire Fighter’s Association (FFA) regularly held amateur cards featuring Canadian soldier-boxers, as well as members of the American Coast Guard, Fire Fighters and employees of the Halifax Shipyards.

²⁴ Robert D. Day, “The British Garrison at Halifax: Its Contribution to the Development of Sport in the Community,” *Sports in Canada: Historical Readings*, ed. Morris Mott (Toronto: Copp, Clark and Pitman Ltd., 1989), 29.

Canadians were not the only soldiers to show their wares in the squared circles of Nova Scotia. The province's position in the Atlantic made Nova Scotia ideal for staging bouts starring active members of the American and British navies. In Pictou, for example, boxers from the US Reuben James and US Converse were principals on a boxing card in 1923.²⁵ The same year at Halifax, crew members of the HMS Capetown and HMS Westaria of the British Navy also participated in matches against each other and, in two instances, against local talent.²⁶ This trend continued into the 1930s as American and British military men performed at the open air Wanderers Stadium in Halifax.²⁷

In the industrial towns and colliery districts of the province, there were no military establishments comparable to the Halifax Garrison, making the military as an organization less active in boxing circles than in the capital city. The initial impact of returning war veterans on amateur boxing in these settings, however, should not be overlooked, as boxers like John Hector Nolan and Johnny McIntyre returned from Europe as war heroes *and* boxing heroes, having both obtained CEF titles during WWI. As noted in chapter one, the idolization of professional boxers was common throughout the colliery districts of Nova Scotia. Following in the footsteps of your favourite boxer, however, was a process, usually beginning with loosely organized boyhood fights, in some cases progressing to regulated amateur contests and perhaps thereafter to the professional ring.

²⁵ *Halifax Chronicle*, July 20, 1923.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Sept 21, 1923.

²⁷ Power Collection, c. Sept 8, 1937.

In this regard it is helpful to note the fine line between 'boxing' and 'fighting.' Anthony Rotundo argues that fighting was a component of American 'boy culture,' conducted for various reasons, including friendly amusement, settling scores between rivals, or to prove one's toughness to other boys. These same motivations were present in boxing, yet sociologists and historians often distinguish between boxing and fighting.²⁸ In tough, economically depressed, neighbourhoods like the colliery districts of Nova Scotia fist fights were not uncommon. Many children in Cape Breton, like Gordie MacDougall of South Bar, held their own informal boxing matches from a very young age. MacDougall and other neighbourhood boys staged these childhood showdowns in neighbourhood barns for pleasure and local bragging rights.²⁹ As young scrappers grew into teenagers and young men, those that enjoyed informal encounters in the backyards, barns and streets of the colliery districts often tried their hand in the amateur ring to continue their fistic education. Sydney's George McEachern, for example, trained on his own in the family barn for some time before approaching the local police constabulary for more formal training, and eventually dabbling in professional boxing. Childhood fights and amateur boxing were part of a "farm system which recruits and trains professionals."³⁰ In Nova Scotia's boxing history there are many instances of this process at work. Roy Chisholm and Edward Healey of Halifax were two

²⁸ My argument regarding the relationship between 'boxing' and 'fighting' is derived from an article by Frank Winer. Winer states "Fighting is a direct antecedent of boxing," a notion which is reinforced by our use of terms like "boxing match" and "prize fight," "boxer" and "fighter" interchangeably. See Frank Winer. "The Elderly Jock and How He Got That Way," *Sports, Games and Play: Social and Psychological Viewpoints*, ed. Jeffery H. Goldstein (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 1979), 208.

²⁹ Robert Chaplan ed. "Gordie MacDougall, Boxer: My Life," *Cape Breton Works: More Lives from Cape Breton's Magazine* (Wreck Cove, NS: Breton Books, 1996), 235.

³⁰ Sugden, 181.

amateurs with “large and loyal followings,” that eventually turned professional.³¹

Another example was Sammy Leonard of Joggins, who fought throughout the Cumberland colliery-Amherst amateur boxing scene, before launching his professional boxing career.³² Not all amateur boxers became professionals. Some lacked the skills to make the transition, while others simply chose different careers. For example, Maritime light heavyweight amateur champion Dominic Nemis of New Waterford worked in the mines at an early age to contribute to the family income, never becoming a professional fighter. Nemis’ experience suggests that amateur boxing could be something more than a stepping stone to professionalism, representing an opportunity to display prowess, pass the time or play out rivalries, not unlike boyhood fisticuffs. It was a sport with rewards of its own, not necessarily related to future financial remuneration in professional boxing.

By the mid 1920s, and throughout the 1930s, the colliery districts were a consistent supplier of quality amateur combatants. In addition to the Cape Breton coal towns, communities like Parrsboro, McCann, Joggins and Springhill in Cumberland County and Westville, New Glasgow and Thorburn in Pictou County were all active in Nova Scotia’s amateur boxing scene. In Cumberland County an amateur boxing circuit developed which included boxers from the colliery districts and Amherst; a center of industry and service. This athletic relationship was an extension of pre-existing ideological commonalities between Amherst and the coal fields. When the working class

³¹ Ace Foley, *The First Fifty Years: The Life and Times of a Sports Writer* (Windsor, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1970), 46. For Roy Chisholm and ‘Nedder’ Healey as amateurs see *Halifax Chronicle*, March 28, 1922.

³² For Sammy Leonard see *Halifax Chronicle*, June 28, 1924.

of Amherst revolted resulting in the general strike of 1919, the miners of Cumberland County proved a ready ally. The Springhill miners generated financial assistance for the striking Amherst proletariat through canvassing. Labour radicalism was encouraged in Amherst by the Cumberland County Branch of the United Mine Workers of America, which participated in meetings held by the labour radicals of Amherst.³³ Rather than a service outpost to the coalfields, Amherst was becoming rapidly integrated into the class consciousness, and particular working class oriented culture, of their coalfield neighbours. When the inhabitants of Amherst went to the voting stations in 1920 to select their representative in the Nova Scotia Assembly this relationship experienced a unifying political dimension. When the polls closed and the results were tallied, it became apparent that the Amherst proletariat had voted overwhelmingly in support of a Springhill miner named Archie Terris, an Independent Labour Party candidate.³⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that the community of Amherst embraced boxing, a traditional coalfield pastime, in the early 1920s.³⁵

Sydney and the Cape Breton coalfields exhibited a relationship comparable to that of Amherst and the Cumberland mines. The class consciousness of the Sydney steel workers was similar to and supportive of, the class consciousness of its coalfield neighbours. In 1923, for example, the coalminers of Cape Breton conducted a sympathy strike in support of a strike waged by the Sydney steel workers over the recognition of a

³³ Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst Nova Scotia, 1919," *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada*, ed. David Frank and Gregory S. Kealey (Saint John's, Newfoundland: ISER, 1995), 274-275.

³⁴ Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance," *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 54.

³⁵ *Halifax Chronicle*, June 28, 1924.

union, eight hour days and higher wages.³⁶ Like the united front against BESCO in 1923, colliery employees and steel workers were unified in their love of amateur pugilism. Clubs from Sydney regularly competed against clubs from Sydney Mines, Glace Bay and New Waterford. Inter-community competition was a popular manifestation of amateurism on the Cape Breton scene, as town 'teams,' not unlike those in baseball or hockey, emerged victorious based on a total wins versus loses scoring system like that used at the Maritime intercollegiate tournament.³⁷ There were also 'club' events that pitted members of the same club against one another.

In Halifax amateur boxing was somewhat different than in the coalfields. First of all, Halifax didn't have an inter-town circuit. The city's closest neighbours like Dartmouth and Bedford rarely participated in amateur boxing during the interwar years. Reports of boxing in Windsor did occur for a brief period of time. The cards held in this town were under the direction of the fire department and consisted exclusively of bouts between local fighters. These fighters, however, do not appear on Halifax amateur cards, nor are Halifax fighters reported on cards in Windsor.

Instead of inter-town competition, amateur boxing in Halifax operated on a club versus club basis. The majority of these boxing clubs were founded by Catholic young men's organizations and took typical Catholic names such as Saint Mary's, Saint Patrick's, Saint Andrew's and Saint Joseph's. A good example of one such event was a boxing card held at the Saint Mary's Amateur Athletic Club in February of 1922. At this

³⁶ David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography*, 294; George MacEachern, *George MacEachern: An Autobiography*, ed. David Frank and Donald McGillivray (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1987), 29.

³⁷ *Sydney Post*, June 8, 1931; *Sydney Post*, May 23, 1931.

particular event amateur talent from Saint Joseph's, Saint Mary's and Saint Patrick's competed against one another.³⁸ These events were often similar to what hockey fans call a 'home and home' series. After a card hosted by Saint Mary's in 1922, for example, another card of fights was scheduled at the Saint Joseph's Club the next Monday.³⁹

Other groups also had what can be considered boxing 'clubs' in Halifax at various times. In 1920, for example, boxers were listed as belonging to the Halifax Shipyards and Royal Artillery Park.⁴⁰ For the most part military boxers competed at the armouries under the GWVA. As the interwar period wore on and the economic situation of many Nova Scotians continued to deteriorate, amateurs from Catholic boys clubs became less and less represented. In the late 1920s and early 1930s amateur boxing had essentially become an extension of the Fire Fighters Association of Halifax. These bouts usually featured military men, firemen and orphans from Saint Patrick's Home. The boxers enlisted from the orphanage were trained in amateur boxing to prepare them for the realities of a world without family, and likely had little choice in the matter. The other group that consistently provided amateur cards in the early 1930s was the Shamrock Amateur Athletic Association.

Unlike its professional counterpart which saw boxers travel to the northeastern United States and western Canada, amateur boxing in Nova Scotia was conducted almost exclusively between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick throughout the 1920s. Nova Scotia's distinctly Maritime boxing circuit was part of a larger trend of regionalization. By

³⁸ *Halifax Chronicle*, February 24, 1922.

³⁹ *Halifax Chronicle*, February 17, 1922.

⁴⁰ *Halifax Herald*, April 27, 1920.

the mid 1920s the Maritime Rights Movement was in full swing, and “regional patriotism” in response to perceived injustices associated with the Maritime’s politically and economically vulnerable position within confederation, was on the rise.⁴¹ In the realm of pugilism Nova Scotian pugilists also felt excluded from the ‘nation.’ In 1920 the trials for the Canadian Olympic team were held in Toronto, Ontario. Technically, to compete in the ‘national’ trials Nova Scotian athletes had to win at the Eastern Canadian trials in Montreal. But since no notification of the Eastern trials was received, the AAU of Canada permitted Nova Scotia to send participants to the national finals despite their absence in Montreal. On short notice Nova Scotians attempted to fundraise enough money to send three boxers to Toronto: ‘Nedder’ Healey, Billy Gray and Arthur McAdam.⁴² Thanks to a generous donation by Dr. F.R. Little of Halifax enough funding was obtained to send all three athletes to Toronto. Billy Gray elected to sit out, claiming he did not have time to cut the necessary weight.⁴³ Both Healey and McAdam lost in the second round of their respective matches in Toronto. The *Halifax Herald*, however, claimed that McAdam had received unfair treatment from the referee, as “wrestling” and “football” tactics were used by his opponent, Hersovitch of Montreal. Furthermore, Hersovitch used a head butt which went unpenalized by the referee, blinding McAdam.⁴⁴ These claims are supported by the *Globe* which read, “Herscovitch was given a splendid reception by the crowd when he climbed into the ring, but the cheers turned to jeers

⁴¹ David Frank, “The 1920s: Class and Region, Resistance and Accommodation,” *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 252.

⁴² *Halifax Herald*, July 12, 1920.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, July 16, 1920.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1920.

when he used tactics that appeared unnecessary.”⁴⁵ In the end, the Olympic team’s roster consisted of five boxers from Toronto, two from Montreal and one from London.⁴⁶

In 1922 the national amateur boxing championships of Canada were held in Calgary, Alberta. The event, however, was hardly national in nature. Boxers that attended hailed from Calgary, New Dayton, Medicine Hat and Victoria. The central Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario, as well as the Maritime Provinces, were not represented. By 1922 amateur boxing in the Maritimes had begun to operate on a north-south axis of competition rather than east-west. Instead of travelling west to Calgary, Maritime boxers participated in America’s version of the National boxing championships at Boston, Massachusetts. It was there that Haligonian Roy Chisholm was introduced to fellow boxer George Fifield of Toronto. Later that year Fifield travelled from Toronto to Halifax for a bout with Chisholm. Fifield emerged victorious, but the result was lamented as “the worst decision ever rendered to a Halifax boxing audience.”⁴⁷ In the fall of 1922 the organizers of the annual Ontario invitational boxing tournament extended an invitation to Chisholm. This was the first time a Maritime boxer had been chosen to participate in the tournament. What could have been the beginning of an inter-provincial pugilistic relationship turned sour. Chisholm refused to participate, arguing that he was not given enough time to properly prepare for the rematch with Fifield. The Ontario Branch of the AAU of C reacted harshly and threatened to ban

⁴⁵ *Globe and Mail*, July 20, 1920.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1920.

⁴⁷ *Halifax Chronicle*, June 2, 1922.

Chisholm from competition within the nation – a punishment that could only be exacted by the national AAU of C. In the end Chisholm refused to participate, the Maritime Branch of the AAU of C balked at the Ontario Branch's threat of 'national suspension,' and Ontario-Maritime amateur pugilistic relations were struck a near fatal blow.

Once a year the various local amateur boxing circuits came together in competition. Maritime champions were crowned at a two day tournament that was held annually in either New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. Prince Edward Island was absent from these events throughout much of the 1920s. The 'Maritime' champion, therefore, was only truly the champion of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Depending on the year, the Maritime championships could represent a greater or lesser geographic area. In 1922, for example, several New England boxers entered the tournament and in 1937 Max Keeping of Harbour Grace, Dominion of Newfoundland, participated in the Maritime amateur championships at Wanderers Stadium, Halifax. Prince Edward Island was absent until the late 1920s and New Brunswick was absent for at least one competition. The skill and potential of Nova Scotian boxers, however, was difficult to gage within this isolated Maritime circuit. The only external competition available to Nova Scotian boxers, aside from their Maritime counterparts were the US and British naval boxers that periodically appeared on Nova Scotian amateur boxing cards. This problem was compounded by decreased interest in boxing, both amateur and professional, throughout the 1930s.⁴⁸ A dwindling pugilistic talent pool eventually led to Nova Scotian competition in New England. In 1931 team 'Nova Scotia,' comprised entirely of Cape

⁴⁸ *Springhill Record*, January 3, 1930.

Breton boxers, travelled to Somerville, Massachusetts, to compete in an amateur tournament, losing decisively.

The 'amateur' boxing championships overseen by the MPBAAU of Canada were at times more like semi-professional contests. As early as 1920 the MPBAAU was bending the amateur code to allow working class athletes that had fought as professionals to compete at the Maritime amateur championships. In the April 19, 1920 edition of the *Halifax Herald* the MPBAAU announced that it would permit boxers who had competed in preliminaries on professional cards to compete as amateurs as long as they hadn't fought against a 'recognized' professional. What exactly constituted a 'recognized' professional is not stated which in turn makes it difficult to determine exactly who could claim amateur status. In 1935 controversy ignited when the Maritime amateur championships at Sydney were infiltrated by professionalism. The following fighters were noted as 'professionals': Eddie Hanna, who previously boxed as a professional under the name Eddie O'Harra in Halifax; Johnny Odo and Ranie Gillis of New Waterford who had both boxed as professionals in Sydney; Binns of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, who reportedly fought well known professional Bobby Allen of Westville, not long before the amateur championships. Thus, some of the so-called 'Simon pures' of the MPBAAU championships moved seamlessly from professional back to amateur, without anyone noticing their infraction until after the 1935 amateur titles were decided. The fact boxers that *could* make money in the ring would return to amateurism further underlines the allure of amateur boxing as something more than a stepping stone to professionalism. If professional boxing was what *all* amateur boxers

aspired to, why did professional boxers return to the amateur ranks, where no money was paid and victories did little for their marketability? Because amateur boxing was worth pursuing in its own right, for amusement and accolades, to reinforce masculine prowess and earn local, provincial and regional respect.

Amateur boxing, then, was more than just a stepping stone to professionalism. To the founders of Nova Scotian collegiate boxing it helped students maintain a healthy physique, encouraging the holistic – mental and physical – development of a pupil. For the collegiate boxers it was a source of competition and improved campus social status, making boxers the envy of many of their colleagues. To the men that frequented the amateur clubs of the colliery districts, industrial towns and cities, boxing provided ample opportunity to perform one's masculine prowess, pass the time or settle a score with other fighters, or even other towns. If one wished to make money at boxing, a career in the professional ring was far more obtainable to boxers with an 'amateur pedigree' than other pugnacious individuals. For some individuals, of course, this was motivation enough to box as an amateur. Amateur boxing for some, however, was a discouraging experience. As we will see in the following chapter, black boxers sometimes faced discrimination in the amateur ring, costing the athletes not only victories, but championships, leading some African Nova Scotians to abandon the amateur ranks for its professional counterpart. As we will see, however, professional boxing in interwar Nova Scotia provided little in the way of racial equality, leaving most black boxers on undercards, regardless of their skill, gameness or showmanship.

“The ‘Others’: Placing Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Interwar Nova
Scotian Boxing Scene”

In Clement Virgo's film *Poor Boy's Game* (2008), Rossif Sutherland plays a white boxer named Donnie Rose, who at one point was imprisoned for beating and leaving Charles Carvery (K.C. Collins) with permanent brain damage. Set in contemporary Halifax, the film revolves around a subsequent match between the ex-convict and a more talented black boxer named Ossie Paris (Flex Alexander), who hopes to kill Rose to avenge his brain-damaged friend. Hoping to avert further tragedy, the father of the handicapped teen, played by Danny Glover, agrees to train his son's attacker. The fight ends up being far closer than anyone expected, both boxers having the advantage on numerous occasions throughout the contest. Late in the fight, Paris and Rose simply circle one another, both men having a new found respect for his opponent. The crowd hoots and howls in disapproval, leading Charles to climb into the ring to stop the fight. Charles' presence causes a tense calm to come over the crowd, fractured when a chair is hurled from the balcony, striking Charles and knocking him to the canvas. Pandemonium ensues. Angry fans leap into the ring, forcing Paris and Rose to defend Charles, slugging it out with both races as the handicapped teen cowers in horror. It becomes clear that for the audience the match has more to do with angry racial antagonisms, than with sympathy for the brain-damaged victim. Yet for the combatants and their entourage,

boxing represented a potential solvent for racial conflict, as a space in which racial antagonism and hatred can be overcome.¹

In interwar Nova Scotia the ring was by no means a place where racism and racial intolerance could so easily be surmounted. Even the most successful and celebrated of African-Nova Scotian boxers, Sam “the Boston Tarbaby” Langford, was unable to escape white hatred and its devastating effects. Langford was one of the most talented boxers in the history not only of Nova Scotia but the world. At the height of his career, he fought some of the best boxers in the world – Jack Johnson, Joe Gans, Joe Jeanette – travelled the globe in search of opponents, and won the Australian and Mexican heavyweight championships. As a contender for Jack Johnson’s heavyweight championship Langford was revered by black and white Nova Scotians. As his career wound down and his skills inevitably deteriorated, however, many of his white Nova Scotian ‘fans’ deserted him. Practically blind, Langford was reduced to travelling with the Bill Lynch amusement show, putting on boxing exhibitions against local boxers like Joe Hartnett of Halifax. Not long after his Bill Lynch days, Langford was found living blind, penniless and alone in a small apartment in New York City.

¹ *Poor Boy's Game*, Directed by Clement Virgo, Starring Danny Glover and Rossif Sutherland (Astral Media, 2007).



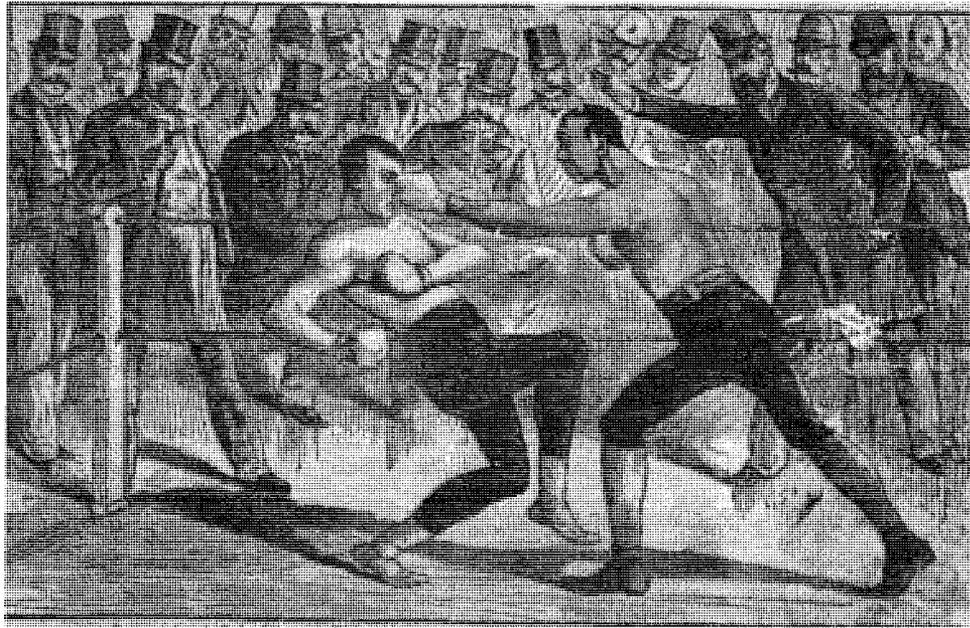
Sam Langford and Joe Hartnett with the Bill Lynch Shows. Source: Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

Although this thesis has provided an overview of amateur and professional boxing in interwar Nova Scotia, the African-Canadian experience has not yet appeared in a significant way, due to the considerably different experiences of black boxers. Throughout this thesis I have striven to avoid oversimplified approaches to explaining boxing commonly represented in popular history, fiction and film. This chapter will explore the careers of black amateurs and professionals, champions and journeymen, to provide a thorough understanding of different black experiences in the interwar Nova Scotian boxing scene. A common misconception is that boxing provided black fighters with an escape from racism and poverty. According to George and Darril Fosty, for example, boxing provided for African-Canadian “economic advancement.” In reality,

however, boxing is only “good for some black men, allowing them to escape the deprivation of the slums, but for many, it merely reflects and aggravates their basic oppression.”² If discrimination was even more acute in boxing than society in general, why then did black men participate in boxing at all? Boxing provided a few African-Canadian boxers like Langford and George Dixon with *temporary* social momentum, allowing them to live relatively lavish lifestyles. But we should be careful about romanticising boxing as the first bastion of black Canadian “economic advancement.” Often ‘advancement’ was fleeting, leaving black Canadian boxers like Langford and Dixon in utter poverty at careers end.³ A more useful approach would be to focus upon the exploitation and struggle. Why would African-Nova Scotians continue to participate in boxing despite this exploitation, and its well known effects on the lives of Dixon and Langford?

² Nathan Hare, “The Occupational Culture of the Black Fighter,” *Sport and Society: An Anthology*, ed. John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 326.

³ George and Darril Fosty, *Black Ice: The Lost History of the Coloured Hockey League of the Maritimes, 1895-1925* (New York: Stryker-Indigo, 2004), 43. The Fostys argue that “Black Canadians would first experience economic advancement, national and international success, notoriety through the sport of boxing.” I am somewhat less optimistic. Did George Dixon really have a ‘successful’ life? His national and international ‘success’ left him a penniless alcoholic. The significance of Dixon as a boxer resides not in Dixon himself, his record or titles, but in the effect of his achievements on the African Nova Scotian community. This is what I will argue in the following pages with regard to Sam Langford. For the details of Dixon’s later life, his alcoholism and poverty see “George Dixon,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?Bioid=40801>.



George Dixon fighting the "English Champion." Source: Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management

Born in Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia in 1886, Langford had a tough childhood.⁴ His father Bob Langford was a rough, violent seaman who, according to Belle Langford-Barnes, "beat up shipmates in fights,"⁵ and his son Sam at home. After a 'whipping' from his father, ten year old Sam fled his home and made his way to Boston,⁶ where he worked various jobs – including bartender and janitor – before making his boxing debut at age 16.⁷ A Boston druggist named Joe Woodman provided Langford's entree to the boxing world. Woodman told the story of his relationship with Langford as follows:

⁴ Charles Saunders, *Sweat and Soul: The Saga of Black Boxers from the Halifax Forum to Caesar's Palace* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1990), 36.

⁵ Bridglal Pachai, "Belle Langford-Barnes," *Traditional Lifetime Stories: A Collection of Black Memories*, vol. 1 (Halifax: Black Cultural Center for Nova Scotia, 1987), 23. Clay Moyle also suggests that Bob Langford was a violent man, stating: "There is evidence that a Weymouth heavyweight fighter named Michael McGowan died from a head injury suffered in a fight with Robert." See Clay Moyle, *Sam Langford: Boxing's Greatest Uncrowned Champion* (Seattle, Washington: Bennett and Hastings Publishing, 2006), 12.

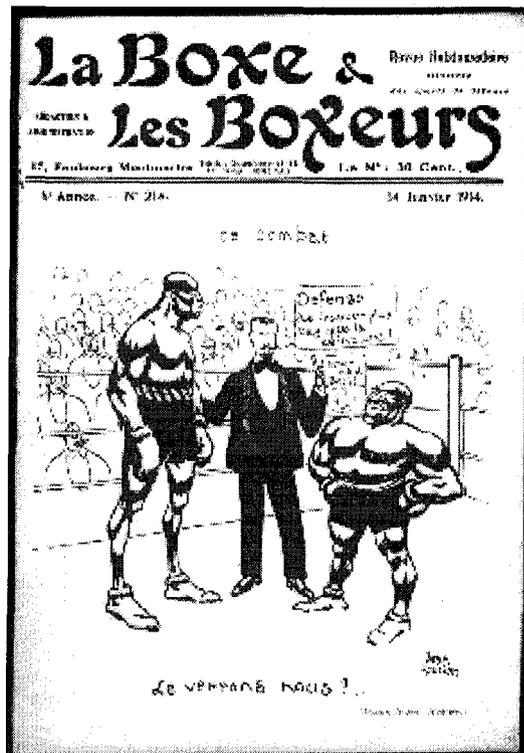
⁶ Saunders, 36; Pachai, "Belle Langford-Barnes," 23.

⁷ Saunders, 36; Pachai, "Belle Langford-Barnes," 23.

It was in November of 1902. The air was sharp. I was sitting at the backdoor of my little drugstore, when along came a lean hungry-looking Negro lad, shivering under a bathrobe and leading a yeller dog. Both dog and owner were looking for food. Each appeared to have gone without it for some time. The lad doffed his cap and asked 'Ain't you got some work I can do mister?' I had nothing, but for pity handed him a quarter and told him to be on his way. I left the store to go over to the Lennox Club to arrange a small card of bouts for the following night, and when I got back there in front of the store was the negro boy, with a load of doughnuts and broken cakes, feeding himself and his dog. The janitor told me that while I was gone, the boy helped clean up and washed the window. 'What's your name sonny?' I asked. 'Tham Langford' he replied with a grin. 'Well, you're a willing boy and maybe I can find something for you to do,' I told him. 'You can come down to my club and help keep it clean. I'm going to give you an extra quarter, Sam,' I told him, 'and I'll give you and your dog a warm place to sleep tonight.' Then came the chance for Sam. One of the boys in the preliminary bouts failed to show up and I asked Langford to go out and get me a substitute whom I named, and to my surprise Sam replied 'Why can't I fight for you, boss?' I couldn't put him in with a professional, so I gave him fifty cents and told him to enter an amateur tournament, with the promise that if I thought he looked good, I'd give him a chance to fight for my club as a pro. Well, he made good with a vengeance. He knocked out every opponent he faced except one.

From this humble beginning Langford matured into one of the greatest talents the professional ring would ever witness, facing 'all comers' from the lightweight division up to heavyweight. During his time in the lighter weight classes, Langford defeated lightweight champion of the world Joe Gans. Unfortunately, neither man made weight for the bout, making it a non-title affair.⁸ In 1904 Langford fought welterweight champion of the world Joe Walcott to a draw in Boston. In 1906 Langford had his famous bout with future heavyweight champion Jack 'the Galveston Giant' Johnson. The size differential was evident to all that witnessed the fight. Langford weighed around 156 pounds, while Johnson tipped the scales at 186. Their comical five inch height differential was later displayed on the cover of *La Boxer et Les Boxeurs*.

⁸ Unable to find enough bouts to make a living, Langford worked on the side as a manual labourer at the start of his boxing career. See A.J. Liebling, *A Neutral Corner* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 29. Moyle also notes that Langford had a tough time finding opponents during his early boxing career. See Moyle, 24-25.



Jack Johnson (Left) and Sam Langford (Right). Source: Cover of *La Boxe et Les Boxeurs*, 14 January 1914.

The Langford-Johnson bout went the distance and Johnson was awarded a controversial decision. ‘The Galveston Giant’ would avoid Langford for the remainder of his career, eventually becoming the first black heavyweight champion of the world after chasing white title holder Tommy Burns around the globe, finally fighting the Canadian in Australia in 1906. When the two squared off Johnson ruthlessly pummelled Burns, playing with the Canadian like a cat with a mouse.⁹ He allowed, even encouraged, Burns to hit him with his best shot, smiling when the Canadian landed. Eventually the police

⁹ There is confusion regarding Johnson’s victory. The following authors attribute the victory to police stoppage: Harry Carpenter, *Boxing: An Illustrated History* (New York: Crescent Books, 1982), 42; Greig, 28; Joyce Carol Oates, 253. Other authors refer to the victory as a KO victory for Johnson: Sammons, 36. John McCallum, *The World Heavyweight Boxing Championship: A History* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1974), 62.

stepped in to put a stop to Johnson's fun. From that day forward, Johnson would 'duck' Sam Langford, undoubtedly the best Canadian boxer and arguably the best heavyweight in the world.

There is a tendency – especially in sport – to lump the experiences of all 'black' North Americans together, thus reducing multiple cultural experiences and various African-American communities into a single narrative. In boxing the search for the so-called 'Great White Hope' has encouraged this generalization. Repetitions of the 'White Hope' trope created racialized images of 'white' versus 'black' in boxing which persist to the present day.¹⁰ In reality, many blacks, Nova Scotians included, disliked Jack Johnson and his public displays of rebellion – sleeping with white women, toying with white opponents, frivolously spending his money. These behaviours were at odds with what many African-Nova Scotians desired in their champion.¹¹ Some leaders of African-Nova Scotian communities encouraged peaceful, non-violent approaches to racial improvement, following the ideals of Booker T. Washington, discouraging actions that would "arouse antagonism." Some Nova Scotian blacks lamented that "our American brothers cannot understand our attitude. They say we should be more aggressive, assert our rights, demand recognition. They do not appreciate our British way of exerting

¹⁰ Floyd Mayweather Jr., for example, claimed in a 2008 interview that boxing commentators are racist, preferring white champions like Kelly Pavlik and Joe Calzaghe, and Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao, over black pugilists. <http://www.tsn.ca/boxing/story/?id=242586>. The comment regarding Pacquiao is interesting, as American boxing circles have been noted for their racism toward Filipino fighters in the past. Pancho Villa, for example, was dubbed a "demon" and a "monkey" during his reign as flyweight champion of the world in the 1920s. See Gerald Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 61.

¹¹ Kenneth L. Shropshire goes so far as to suggest that "Johnson partially instigated the disappearance of Blacks from the championship ranks by flaunting his romantic relationships with white women, perhaps the biggest social taboo of the era." Kenneth L. Shropshire, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 28.

pressure quietly..."¹² As Sheldon Gillis points out, reference to the British monarchy and the protection of minority rights was a preferred means of obtaining justice in Nova Scotia for the black population. Gillis argues that black sports teams often took names related to the monarchy, like the Truro Victoria's hockey and baseball clubs, Halifax Victoria's hockey club and the Amherst Royals baseball club.¹³ Another interpretation of these 'royal' club names is that they referred to "God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost, powerful symbols of the Baptist belief and a message to all that '*God was on their side.*'"¹⁴

Black Nova Scotians may have disliked Jack Johnson for a simpler reason. Sam Langford disliked him, and had at least two run-ins with Johnson. On the day of Johnson's bout with 'Gentleman' Jim Jefferies, Langford "jumped onto the running board of Johnson's automobile, slapped the champion's face, and dared him to come out of his car and fight."¹⁵ On another occasion Langford challenged Johnson following a bout between Jimmy Walsh and Young Britt in Boston. According to Clay Moyle, "ultimately Sam and Joe were either unwilling or unable to post the \$20,000 demanded by Johnson."¹⁶ Whether or not black Nova Scotians shared Langford's dislike for Johnson is difficult to determine. It was clear, however, that Langford was a local celebrity when he finally visited Weymouth around 1913. According to Belle Langford-Barnes, it was a "big day when Sam Langford returned" to Weymouth.

¹²Donald Clairmont and Fred Wien, "Blacks and Whites: The Nova Scotia Race Relations Experience," *Banked Fires: The Ethnics of Nova Scotia* (Port Credit, Ontario: Scribblers' Press, 1978), 167.

¹³ Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 179; Gillis, 90.

¹⁴ George and Darril Fosty, *Black Ice*, 95.

¹⁵ Saunders, 47.

¹⁶ Moyle, 179.

As the noted historian of the African-Nova Scotian community Bridglal Pachai has argued, “Langford fought at a time when Negro fighters battled not only their ring opponents, but prejudice as well, and he made a great contribution to the role of his race in the competitive sports world.”¹⁷ I would add that Langford fostered pride and hope amongst the black Nova Scotian community, demonstrating that it was possible to succeed – at least to a degree – in a thoroughly segregated society. Although he never attained the heavyweight title of the world, fighting in an era that largely denied blacks the opportunity to do so, Langford did win the Mexican and Australian heavyweight titles.¹⁸ To honour their hometown hero the inhabitants of Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia have since erected the Sam Langford Community Center.¹⁹

Unlike Jack Johnson, Joe Louis was an African-American champion black Nova Scotians could support.²⁰ In many respects Louis was the antithesis of Johnson. He was humble but confident; successful but frugal; proud but racially accommodating.²¹ In the

¹⁷ Bridglal Pachai, *The Nova Scotia Black Experience Through the Centuries* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2007), 165.

¹⁸ Before the Great War it was not uncommon for black boxers to leave the United States to fight for titles in other countries. Jack Orr, “The Black Boxer: Exclusion and Ascendance,” *Sport and Society: An Anthology*, ed. John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 245.

¹⁹ Pachai, *Black Experience*, 165.

²⁰ Joe Louis, like Sam Langford, was exploited and often forgotten after his boxing career. Instead of comfortable retirement, Louis spent his later years as a greeter in a Las Vegas Casino. See Gerald Early, “The Hero of the Blues,” *Signifyin[g], Sanctifyin’ and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 382. One of the only men to help Louis in his time of need was the infamous Sonny Liston, heavyweight champion and mafia puppet. Liston paid Louis to hang around his camp and gamble with him, while his mob ties provided Louis with drugs, fuelling his addictions. See Donald MacRae, *Heroes Without a Country: America’s Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 313. Nick Tosches also noted that Louis’ relationship with Liston, and all the criminals that surrounded him, led the ‘Brown Bomber’ to become a “smack and coke junkie.” See Nick Tosches, *The Devil and Sonny Liston* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 237.

²¹ Lane Demas, “The Brown Bombers’ Dark Day: Louis-Schmelling I and America’s Black Hero,” *JSH* 31.3 (2004), 254.

words of Charles Saunders, he did not ‘rock the racial boat’ as Johnson had done.²² White *and* moderate black sports fans alike admired Louis’ good nature, and more radical black activists considered his triumphs over white men like Jimmy Braddock and Germany’s Max Schmelling as steps toward equality.²³ Furthermore, Louis symbolized America’s struggle against Nazi Germany – a country that openly spouted Aryan notions of white supremacy.

Even though Jimmy Braddock was the official heavyweight champion from June 1936 to June 1937, the American public considered Louis the *defacto* ruler of the heavyweight division.²⁴ When he stepped through the ropes to face Max Schmelling in 1936, therefore, he was, for all intents and purposes, America’s champion. Sports writers were sure that Louis would crush Schmelling within a few rounds and contradict Nazi racial propaganda. America was shocked when Schmelling knocked out Louis. This was more than just a victory for Schmelling; to Hitler and his followers it was a victory for the Nazi party and Aryanism.²⁵ Although Hitler chastised Schmelling earlier for fighting an ‘inferior’ black boxer, he now befriended the boxer. Hitler’s minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels flew Schmelling, along with his wife and mother, to Berlin for a celebratory party in his private plane. When Schmelling arrived in Berlin he was

²² Saunders, 47.

²³ Allen Guttman puts it best when he states: “For the Black Bourgeoisie as well as for those trapped in the ghetto, for Afro-Americans as different as Maya Angelou, Ralph Bunche, Duke Ellington, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X, the sharecropper’s son was a hero.” See Allen Guttman, *Sports Spectators* (New York: Columbia University, 1986), 120-121. See also Erenberg, 80.

²⁴ A.J. Liebling puts it best when he states: “Louis was the champion, in the public mind, from 1935 to 1951.” See A.J. Liebling, *The Sweet Science* (New York: North Point Press, 1951), 30.

²⁵ Jeffery Sammons, *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society*, 108-109; Lewis Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation*, 97.

greeted by five hundred amateur boxers standing at attention.²⁶ To further underline the significance of Schmelling's victory, Goebbels had a movie entitled *Max Schmelling's Victory – A German Victory* shown throughout Germany. This movie consisted of the bout and Nazi political interpretations of the bout.²⁷

Louis became the first black heavyweight champion since Johnson by defeating Jimmy Braddock in a title fight. Hitler responded with a proposed match between Schmelling and Welshman Tommy Farr for the so-called European World Championship. This bout fell through, however, when Joe Louis' trainer Jack Blackburn convinced Farr to fight Louis instead. Louis won a fifteen round decision. On June 22, 1938 Louis convincingly defeated Schmelling in a rematch by first round TKO. Almost immediately the Nazis argued that Louis won on an illegal kidney punch, and claimed they had the x-rays to prove it. Rather than letting the German public watch the bout and decide for themselves whether Louis had fouled Schmelling, Hitler's government prohibited screenings of the fight tapes.²⁸

By defeating Schmelling, Louis immediately became an icon of racial equality. African-Nova Scotians took the new champ as their idol. By this time 'The Boston Tarbaby's' career had come to an end. Langford had lived wildly, neglecting to save for the future, and his six hundred plus fights had resulted in serious visual impairment. Despite his troubles, Langford found the time to visit Louis' training camp in Pompton

²⁶ Erenberg, 92.

²⁷ Who exactly worked on the film is difficult to determine from Erenberg, who simply states "Hitler and Goebbels transformed the individual achievement of a professional athlete into a German triumph by expanding the fight film, adding special inserts to give the bout a political interpretation, and releasing it commercially to enthusiastic crowds in movie houses across the country." Erenberg, 94. See also, Sammons, 109.

²⁸ Erenberg, 148-149.

Lake, New Jersey, watching as best he could Louis' sparring, while discussing the days of the colour bar with Blackburn, who Langford fought at least six times as a lightweight. The Louis camp had not accorded Johnson such a welcome. When Johnson attempted to visit Blackburn turned him away stating "You ain't wanted here."²⁹ When Langford was later found alone and penniless in his New York apartment, Louis, Dempsey, "Tiger" Flowers and others, spearheaded a trust fund for the uncrowned champ.³⁰

Throughout Langford's early career notions of black inferiority were hegemonic in a Gramscian sense: i.e. it was part of "the process whereby the ruling class imposes a consensus, its dominion in the realm of ideas, in largely peaceful means."³¹ Blacks were a minority in Nova Scotia's cultural mosaic, and confronted the racialized hegemony of the white, ruling elite. Within hegemony, however, "new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created."³² Langford represented one such 'new experience,' demonstrating that black athletes were not inherently inferior to their white counterparts, by defeating white opponents. Langford, however, would not usher in an era of equality in Nova Scotia or abroad. As men like Langford and Johnson defeated white opponents, white boxing enthusiasts rationalized African-Canadian victories, claiming that black boxers excelled due to a superior, innate physicality, found within the Black race.³³ American track and field star Jesse Owens is perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon. After Owens won four gold medals at the 1936

²⁹ Saunders, 67.

³⁰ Moyle, 380.

³¹ George Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 23.

³² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2005), 41.

³³ Mark Dyreson, "American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1950s: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism," *JSH* 28.2 (2001), 173.

Berlin Olympics, Americans were forced to re-think their racial beliefs. Instead of accepting Owens as a hard working, dedicated Olympian, his talents were compared to the innate abilities of animals and termed 'natural.' In other words, Owens' gold medals were rationalized: "White athletes triumphed through intelligence. Black athletes gained victory due to the dictates of biology."³⁴ Although a boxer of Langford's calibre would never again emerge from Nova Scotia, black participation in boxing grew throughout the interwar years. Prior to the 1920s, blacks were barred from competition with whites, leading to black hockey and baseball leagues. From 1895 to 1925, the Coloured Hockey League of the Maritimes provided African-Nova Scotians with organized play. Organized black baseball dates to roughly the 1880s, and by 1894 "a regional championship took place annually and usually received coverage in local newspapers."³⁵ It wasn't until the 1920s that African-Nova Scotians began to compete against whites. On the baseball scene, black activists fought for the inclusion of black ball teams in mainstream community leagues, leading to competition between white and black clubs. The exposure talented black athletes received in interracial competition led to further racial integration in Nova Scotian baseball. For example, in 1934 black catcher Freeman 'Pete' Paris of New Glasgow earned a spot on his town's white senior team.³⁶ As men like 'Pete' Paris broke down racial barriers on the ball field, other African-Nova Scotians did so in the boxing ring.

³⁴ Mark Dyreson, "From Civil Rights to Scientific Racism: The Variety of American Responses to the Berlin Olympics, the Legend of Jesse Owens and the 'Race Question,'" *Critical Reflections of Olympic Ideology*, October (1994), 49.

³⁵ Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 179.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

As Langford's career came to an end, another black Nova Scotian, Jesse Elroy 'Roy' Mitchell, captured the imagination of boxing fans. One of the most popular Nova Scotia boxers of the 1920s, Mitchell spent most of his career hopping between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts, traversing the same northeastern sporting territory as his white contemporaries. Early in his career Mitchell boxed on Cape Breton Island against local pugilists like Ernest Talbot of Whitney Pier and John Donovan of New Aberdeen.³⁷ Mitchell was very successful throughout 1925, defeating Dan Dowd on two occasions, and subsequently overcoming 'Battling' McCreary of Boston for the 'Negro' heavyweight championship of the world.³⁸ Like the Canadian and Maritime titles, the 'Negro' championship of the world was based on a 'claim': the title came with no belt or comparable symbol of supremacy.

Mitchell's early matches in Halifax were notable for a number of reasons, but particularly for his ability to attract significant female attendance. The reason for this is unclear, but two explanations seem probable. First of all, Mitchell's attractiveness may have resulted from the false characterization of black males as 'hypersexual' individuals.³⁹ African-Nova Scotian men were considered inherently atavistic, more animal-like and unable to curtail their sex drives. This was linked to racialized notions of deviance and a "historical linking of blackness to crime."⁴⁰ According to David Rowe,

³⁷ For the fight with Ernest Talbot see *Sydney Post*, June 20, 1924; For the fight with John Donovan see *Ibid*, June 25, 1924.

³⁸ Brian Lennox, "Nova Scotia's Forgotten Boxing Heroes: Roy Mitchell and Terrence 'Tiger' Warrington," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 12.2 (1992), 34.

³⁹ This could not be noted with Sam Langford because the 'Boston Tarbaby' did not fight in Nova Scotia.

⁴⁰ Gamal Abdel-Shehid, *Who Da Man?* 29. Jeanette Covington also writes on "how criminal behaviour has been racialized." See Jeanette Covington, "Racial Classification in Criminology: The Reproduction of Racialized Crime," *Sociological Forum* 10.4 (1995), 457-468.

“the male black body is simultaneously celebrated when associated with sport and feared and denounced when connected to violent crime.”⁴¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that African-Nova Scotians were socially unacceptable partners for white women, but eroticized in the realm of sport.⁴² As the only sport that displayed the male body in a virtually nude state, boxing witnessed the fetishization of the black body, making bouts hotbeds of “erotic desire.”⁴³ For the most part, scholars treat the erotic in boxing as strictly homoerotic, overlooking the experiences of female spectators.⁴⁴ For the women that attended Mitchell’s bouts, a match was an opportunity to view the black body in a controlled, and thus more acceptable way. It was a chance to gaze at the black male body, the ‘other,’ without crossing the socially constructed boundaries of sexual behaviour. And Mitchell was no ordinary physical specimen. In a fight scene dominated by the lighter weight classes, Mitchell was the most muscular and robust boxer Nova Scotia had ever seen. His large pectorals, broad shoulders and bulky biceps

⁴¹ David Rowe makes this statement in the context of Michael Jordan’s ascendancy to superstardom, but I feel it is applicable to the interwar period as well. David Rowe et al., “Panic Sport and the Racialized Masculine Body,” *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 249.

⁴² Allen Guttman notes that this was not uncommon: “When Jack Johnson became the first African-American heavyweight champion, in 1908, racist hysteria required a “great white hope” to reclaim the title and banish what was obviously felt to be a threat to white womanhood. This fear of Johnson’s irresistible erotic appeal was not wholly irrational. Women did, in fact, badger the ‘hypermasculine’ black boxer for sexual favours; like many African American athletes he was ‘sexualized and eroticized by women and men of all races.’” See Allen Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 71. Howell has noted this in a Canadian context: “Blacks were thought to be of limited intelligence and unable to overcome their passionate impulses. For black women this suggested immorality and loose behaviour; for Black men it suggested a threatening masculinity.” See Howell, *Blood, Sweat and Cheers*, 110.

⁴³ Don Morrow and Kevin Wamsley, *Sport In Canada* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.

⁴⁴ There are numerous works one can turn to for boxing as a homoerotic experience. See Robert Haywood, “‘Stag at Sharkey’s’: Boxing, Violence and Male Identity,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2.2 (1988), 3-15; Don Morrow and Kevin Wamsley, *Sport In Canada*; Jack London’s *The Game* is perhaps the best example of boxing fiction dealing with homoeroticism.

dwarfed past competitors of the Nova Scotian ring, making him in the *Halifax Herald's* words, "a fine specimen of humanity."⁴⁵

Another possibility is that women were encouraged to attend Mitchell's matches to serve as a form of crowd control, their attendance meant to suppress the rowdy impulses of their male counterparts. It has been argued that "in their attempts to 'civilize' sporting culture, promoters constructed an idealized image of the 'lady' spectator with the assistance of the middle class press. Sporting journalists suggested that the presence of 'ladies' would purify the moral atmosphere, inspire men to behave respectably, and restrain the 'unregulated passions' that might otherwise be released in the excitement of the moment."⁴⁶ This civilizing impulse was particularly useful at interracial boxing matches. Allen Guttman has argued that "white support for black fighters is a very recent phenomenon."⁴⁷ In interwar Nova Scotia, however, white fight fans often supported local black fighters against opponents from outside the province. Inter-racial matches were most likely to result in spectator violence, not because the "racial partisanship" of the crowd, but as a result of questionable, racially motivated refereeing.⁴⁸ The unsavoury, white favouritism of white officials led to violence on more than one occasion as fans railed against racism that prevented fair fights and robbed them of their 'money's worth.' Female fans, however, did not always guarantee a well-

⁴⁵ Power collection, c. July 29, 1925 and c. July 6, 1925.

⁴⁶ Howell, *Blood, Sweat and Cheers*, 90.

⁴⁷ Guttman, *Sports Spectators*, 118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 119. Guttman argues that "The worst outbreaks of sports-related violence in American history occurred when racial partisanship intensified the emotions of the fans." Guttman is writing about the white vs black violence that erupted following Jack Johnson's victory over Jim Jefferies. Violence of this nature does not seem to have erupted in interwar Nova Scotia.

behaved audience. According to Allen Guttman, “American women of the lower classes were hardly exemplars of restrained gentility. When New York slum dwellers fell out, the women ‘lit into each other, usually with their bare hands – scratching, pummelling and tearing each other’s clothes.’”⁴⁹ Nor were women in interwar Nova Scotia immune to rowdy behaviour, becoming embroiled in shouting matches with other female spectators over the outcome of fights. Thus, the notion of ‘lady-like’ women civilizing the sporting audience may not be as convincing in boxing as it might be in other sports like baseball.

On 23 April 1926 Mitchell met Jack Reddick of Toronto in Halifax. This would have been for the Canadian light heavyweight championship had not both men weighed in as heavyweights.⁵⁰ Despite the home town ‘advantage,’ many white Haligonians cheered for Reddick.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Mitchell knocked out the Torontonion in three rounds. Although the national light heavyweight title wasn’t up for stakes, Mitchell’s defeat of Reddick led many in the United States and Canada to consider him the Canadian champion. Furthermore, reports of his dominating victory over Reddick in American newspapers like the *Titusville Herald* (Pennsylvania) and the *Billings Gazette* (Montana) provided the Bridgetown native wide recognition despite not having set foot in the United States.

With his growing notoriety, Mitchell was given a shot at crafty New York veteran, and Halifax’s adopted son, Mike McTigue. McTigue’s popularity in Halifax was

⁴⁹ Guttman, *Women’s Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 100.

⁵⁰ Brian Lennox, 37; *Billings Gazette* (Billings, Montana) April 24, 1926; *Manitoba Free Press*, April 24, 1926.

⁵¹ *Manitoba Free Press*, April 24, 1926.

unquestionable. He had defeated all the contenders that Canada had to offer while fighting out of Halifax, before winning the light heavyweight championship of the world in Dublin, Ireland, against Battling Siki in 1923. The 'Cyclonic Celt' lost his title to Paul Berlenbach in 1925, and had since gone 6-1-1, including a victory over the highly touted contender 'Tiger' Flowers. Given McTigue's stature as a former world champion the results of the bout would be communicated across North America, giving Mitchell considerable publicity if he won. Unfortunately, Mitchell lost via decision, in a fight observers considered 'slow.'⁵²

Ridiculed by Halifax fans and sports writers alike following the McTigue bout, Mitchell decided to test the American boxing market, defeating Tex McEwan of Philadelphia in Boston.⁵³ Northeastern American fight enthusiasts admired the ability displayed by Mitchell in his victory over McEwan, referring to the Bridgetown native as the "colored sensation from Nova Scotia." Riding new-found popularity, Mitchell promptly signed for another bout in Boston. This time he was scheduled to face Mike Burke of Greenwich Village in an eight round preliminary on the Bobby Brown-Al Mello card.⁵⁴ As fight night neared, the *Lowell Sun* continued their promotion of Mitchell calling him the 'Halifax Wonder,' citing his 'thirty ring battles,' his victory over Tex McEwan and his tendency to burst the tape on his hands during matches.⁵⁵ At the last minute Mike Burke was replaced by the ill-prepared K.O. Sampson of Philadelphia. The

⁵² *New Castle News* (New Castle, Pennsylvania), September 30, 1926; *Salt Lake Tribune* (Salt Lake City, Utah), September 30, 1926; *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio Texas), September 30, 1926; *Billings Gazette* (Billings, Wisconsin), September 30, 1926.

⁵³ Power Collection c. August 29-31, 1927.

⁵⁴ *Lowell Sun*, September 8, 1927.

⁵⁵ *Lowell Sun*, September 10, 1927.

'Halifax Wonder' turned in a dominating performance, dropping Sampson for two nine counts before putting the Philadelphian pugilist away in the third.⁵⁶ In October, 1927 Mitchell secured a place in the main event of a card at the Boston Arena against Tom Sayers of Detroit. The bout was a replay of the McTigue affair. Once again Mitchell let an excellent opportunity for advancement slip away. He looked hesitant and wary of Sayers, boxing defensively throughout the majority of the match. Sayers was given a decision victory in a contest that the *Lowell Sun* considered "really painful to watch."⁵⁷ For Mitchell, the impact of this fiasco was huge. As Brian Lennox has pointed out, Jack Dempsey had been courting Mitchell for some time, hoping to manage the Nova Scotian's career. If Mitchell defeated Sayers, many believed Dempsey would take the Haligonian under his wing, using his connections to get Mitchell a fight with 'Tiger' Flowers.⁵⁸

Mitchell continued his losing ways in 1928. In April, Mitchell was disqualified and suspended for thirty days for fouling Nandu Tassi in Boston. The stoppage was suspicious and raises questions about regional or racial loyalties of the official, since Tassi "seemed quite willing to continue."⁵⁹ In September Mitchell lost to Jimmy Mendes of New Bedford, Massachusetts, and then promptly returned to Nova Scotia.⁶⁰ In his first return match in Nova Scotia Mitchell knocked out Vic McLaughlin in two rounds.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Lowell Sun*, September 13, 1927.

⁵⁷ This is in direct opposition to Brian Lennox's contention that American newspapers did not view Sayers as a poor fighter; See Lennox, 39. The *Lowell Sun* actually suggests that Sayers was a "big, green youngster who had plenty to learn about fighting." *Lowell Sun*, October, 18, 1927.

⁵⁸ Lennox, 39.

⁵⁹ Power Collection, c. April 3, 1928.

⁶⁰ *Dunkirk Evening Observer*, September 1928.

⁶¹ *Syracuse Herald*, September 28, 1928

Mitchell's impressive knockout of McLaughlin, however, was quickly over shadowed by a disappointing performance on New Year's Eve against Jack McKenna of North Sydney at Glace Bay's Savoy Theatre. Neither fighter was willing to mix it up, resulting in precious little offense and a disgruntled audience. To top things off McKenna was fouled by Mitchell causing the referee to halt the action. At this point enraged fans, suspicious of a fix, violently rushed the ring forcing police to cancel the remainder of the fight and disperse the spectators.⁶² After the McKenna fight the press was convinced that either Mitchell or McKenna was party to fixed bouts. With the Nova Scotian boxing scene growing inhospitable again, Mitchell returned to the United States. In June, 1929 Mitchell was disqualified for a suspicious 'lack of activity' in Rhode Island and denied half his purse.⁶³ He bounced back in October, scoring an impressive victory over Al Schooner in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. According to the *Portsmouth Herald*, Mitchell came out swinging and dropped Schooner for a nine count in the second round. Unfortunately, Mitchell's victorious performance was cut short by a foul from his opponent in the third, which forced the referee to disqualify Schooner and pronounce Mitchell the victor.⁶⁴ Despite some poor showings early in 1929, the *Portsmouth Herald* reported a few days prior to a bout between Mitchell and Marvin Shecter at Portsmouth in October, that Mitchell was still one of the best heavyweights in the game.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the bout did not live up to expectations and was declared a 'no contest' after three rounds of inaction. Although neither man was willing to exchange, Mitchell was winning by a slight

⁶² Lennox, 40.

⁶³ Power Collection, c. June 1929.

⁶⁴ *Portsmouth Herald*, October 3, 1929.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, October 17, 1929.

margin when the referee called the match due to lack of activity.⁶⁶ Brian Lennox has concluded that racism prevented Roy Mitchell from securing bouts in Nova Scotia at the end of his career. This is only part of the explanation. While racism caused Mitchell much grief throughout his boxing campaign, what dealt the final blow was the rash of suspicious fights that dotted his last few years in the ring. According to the *Springhill Record*, Mitchell's inability to perform in big matches made fans lose interest in him and led to his demise as a 'drawing' boxer.⁶⁷

As interest waned in Roy Mitchell, another talented black boxer emerged onto the Nova Scotia fight scene. Terrence 'Tiger' Warrington was a young, muscular boxer from Liverpool, Nova Scotia, who took on all that Nova Scotia had to offer including Jack McKenna, Joe Hartnett and Roy Mitchell, before heading to Boston for his American debut. At the Boston Gardens on December 7, 1934, 'Tiger' lost a controversial decision to Steve 'The Silver City Flash' Carr of Waterbury, Connecticut. A good portion of the Boston fight fans believed Warrington deserved the decision, while others believed a draw was appropriate.⁶⁸ Looking to capitalize on this controversial decision, Sydney and Halifax promoters rushed to arrange a rematch in Nova Scotia, but a Boston promoter beat both of them to the punch. When Carr and Warrington met in a rematch at the Boston Gardens on March 9, 1935 Warrington left no doubt about the winner, knocking Carr out in the ninth of a ten round affair.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, October 24, 1929.

⁶⁷ *Springhill Record*, January 3, 1930.

⁶⁸ *Halifax Chronicle*, December 15, 1934; *Ibid.*, December 8, 1934.

⁶⁹ *Lowell Sun*, March 9, 1935; *North Adams Transcript* (North Adams, Massachusetts)

It wasn't until 1939, however, that Warrington got a shot at his first big name opponent. This was a bout with Bob Pastor of New York in Boston. Pastor proved too experienced for 'Tiger,' defeating him via decision.⁷⁰ Shortly after his match with Warrington, Pastor was given a shot at Joe Louis' heavyweight title; a shot that likely would have been 'Tiger's' had he defeated Pastor in Boston. Warrington's next fight was with Roy Lazer of New Jersey, once again in Boston, on a card completely composed of heavyweights. The 'all pachyderm program' was staged to scout future opponents for Joe Louis. Lazer was a veteran boxer who had already lost to Joe Louis via third round KO. Because Louis had had such an easy time with Lazer, Warrington needed to turn in a dominating performance to convince American fans that he was of championship calibre. In the days leading up to the Lazer-Warrington fight the bout was billed as a contest between the 'Jewish heavyweight champion' and the 'Canadian champion.'⁷¹ Warrington boxed well against the more experienced Lazer, winning a ten round decision.⁷² Despite Warrington's good showing, the *Lowell Sun* concluded that no-one on the card was worthy of facing Louis.⁷³

Warrington's win over Lazer allowed him to keep pace with the contenders in the light heavyweight and heavyweight divisions, and he soon was matched with 'Tiger' Jack Fox of Spokane, Washington. Fox was another cagey veteran who earlier in the year had lost to Melio Bettina for the New York State Athletic Commission's version of the light heavyweight championship of the world. Fox was a big time boxer, and a victory for

⁷⁰ *New York Times*, January 20, 1939; *Lowell Sun*, January 20, 1939; *Dunkirk Evening Observer* (Dunkirk, New York), January 20, 1939.

⁷¹ *Lowell Sun*, March 7, 1939.

⁷² *New York Times*, March 9, 1939; *Lowell Sun*, March 9, 1939.

⁷³ *Lowell Sun*, March 9, 1939.

Warrington would resonate across the United States. Unfortunately, Fox proved too much for Warrington. The match should have ended in the first when Warrington was floored by Fox, but the referee and time-keeper miscommunicated, forcing the referee to help Warrington to his feet and restart the match. Warrington came back valiantly, scoring a knockdown in the sixth. Warrington's come back, however, proved too little, too late, and Fox was granted the decision victory. This was Warrington's last significant bout before World War Two.

At its highest level boxing was clearly riddled with racial bias. As Brian Lennox has pointed out, several of the disqualifications rendered against Roy Mitchell in the United States suggest racial prejudice on the part of the referee. "Suggest" is the key word here, for ultimately there is no means of knowing if this was indeed the case. That most of the questionable disqualifications occurred in the United States should not be overlooked, however. A plethora of popular and scholarly writing has been dedicated to illustrating the 'color line' evident in the heavyweight division; little attention has been given to lighter weight classes. During the 1920s there was only one black world light heavyweight champion – 'Battling Siki.' Siki, however, was crowned in Paris, France, not the United States.⁷⁴ Given the limited success afforded to African-American combatants in the interwar American boxing scene, Mitchell's experience was probably typical for the light heavyweight division of the 1920s. Change came slowly. From 1930 to 1952

⁷⁴ In his account of black athletes African-American activist James Weldon Johnson notes several black boxing champions, but states that 'Battling' Siki obtained his title in France. It can be inferred from the article that the location of Siki's title bout was of importance, as the locations of the title bouts of other champions are not listed. See "James Weldon Johnson on Sportsmen in *Black Manhattan* (1930)," *The Uneven Playing Field: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, ed. David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 145-149. See also John Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930).

only one African-American, John Henry Armstrong, was able to wear the light heavyweight crown. When Armstrong relinquished the title in 1939 Warrington sought bouts with Melio Bettina, Billy Conn and Gus Lesnevich in hopes of establishing a claim to the light heavyweight title, or at very least an appearance in a championship bout. Unfortunately for Warrington none of them would agree to a match.⁷⁵ The light heavyweight championship of the world was decided in a bout between Billy Conn and Melio Bettina the same year. The title remained in white hands until Archie Moore defeated Joey Maxim in 1952.

Although the experiences of Langford, Mitchell and Warrington are an important part of Nova Scotia's boxing history, they represent only a portion of a broader black experience. As mentioned before, one of the objectives of this thesis is to get beyond the stories of the most prominent boxers of the day. Admittedly, there were very few black pugilists in Nova Scotia during the interwar period, but beyond Langford, Mitchell and Warrington, there were several others that boxed on a regular basis. Among them were Gordon Paris, Os Meikle, 'Snowball' Barry, Reg Harper and Arthur McLaine.

In a number of instances black boxers were enlisted in somewhat disturbing encounters known as "battle royals," which placed them in demeaning circumstances. Battle royal bouts were symptomatic of prevailing racist attitudes throughout the Southern United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Andrew Kaye points out, these predominantly southern spectacles grew in popularity

⁷⁵ Lennox, 44.

and eventually spread northward to New England and eventually to Halifax after WWI.⁷⁶ When in 1921 the MPBAU of Canada prohibited the GWVA from holding professional boxing bouts the GWVA looked for ways to expand interest in amateur boxing. One of its earliest attempts to spark interest was the staging of a 'battle royal' on one of their amateur cards. In this match four black competitors were blind folded, placed in the ring and told to swing wildly for the amusement of the crowd. The competitors would skirmish until only one man was left standing. This overtly racist practice seems not to have found favour among Halifax fans, and appears to have been dropped from future programs. The 'battle royal' bouts were not the only example of the exploitation of the unfortunate in interwar Nova Scotia's boxing rings, however. It is also the case that orphans from Saint Patrick's Boy's Home in Halifax performed burlesque matches in which they did their best to fall realistically for the amusement of the audience.⁷⁷ In other sports, black athletes played upon their 'otherness' to appeal to white audiences. For example, in baseball "the need to attract an audience...encouraged clowning and buffoonery on touring black teams that sometimes played to the worst racial stereotypes."⁷⁸ In hockey, similar clowning occurred, often accompanied by fisticuffs for the amusement of the crowd.⁷⁹ Exploitation, however, cut both ways. Through clowning

⁷⁶ Andrew M. Kaye, *The Pussycat of Prize-Fighting: Tiger Flowers and the Politics of Black Celebrity* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 59-67; Andrew M. Kaye, "'Battle Blind': Atlanta's Taste for Black Boxing in the Early Twentieth Century," *JSH* 28.2 (2001), 217-232.

⁷⁷ Power Collection, c. September 30, 1925.

⁷⁸ Howell, *Northern Sandlots*, 173.

⁷⁹ Gillis, 77.

and 'battle royals' black athletes could exploit their 'otherness,' earning money for performing in ways that adhered to white racial sensibilities.⁸⁰

Gordon "The Saint John Coloured Mauler" Paris of Saint John was an interwar black boxer that avoided the lure of the northeastern boxing market. When Paris slugged out a draw with Maritime title claimant Nedder Healey of Halifax in his hometown Saint John, he instantly became a fighter of interest on the Maritime circuit.⁸¹ His draw with Healey was followed up with a draw against Western Canadian title claimant Billy Groff a month later.⁸² After these early successes, Paris got a taste of the racial favouritism afforded to up and coming white talent in the Halifax fight game. A week after the "Saint John Coloured Mauler" drew with Billy Groff, he stepped into the ring with former Maritime amateur champion Dick Hunt. According to the *Morning Chronicle*, Paris and Hunt appeared to be evenly matched through four rounds of action. In round five, however, referee Ted Power claimed Paris had fouled Hunt by striking the former amateur champ after an order to 'break.' Power disqualified Paris. The decision disgusted the audience, since Paris "was going at his best when the alleged foul

⁸⁰ Perhaps the most recognizable example of this is the all black Harlem Globetrotters basketball club. According to David Wiggins, "The Globetrotters perpetuated the black sambo stereotype with all its negative connotations, coming across as frivolous, somewhat dishonest children that were lazy and given to wild bursts of laughter. Running about the court emitting shrill jungle sounds and shouting in thick southern accents, the Globetrotters style of play reflected all the prejudices that the dominant culture had built up about Blacks in this country." See David Wiggins, "'Great Speed but Little Stamina': The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority" *JSH* 16.2 (1989), 165. Gerald Gems' description of the Harlem Globetrotters shows the positive effect of basketball on the players: "Travelling teams such as the Harlem Globetrotters or Chicago Collegians gave pretence to a level of sophistication, independence, opportunity and self-empowerment. Not only did they possess the means to escape the ghetto and demonstrate equality, or even superiority to the white man, at least on the basketball court..." Gerald Gems, "Blocked Shot: The Development of Basketball in the African-American Community of Chicago," *JSH* 22.2 (1995), 147.

⁸¹ *Halifax Chronicle*, August 7, 1923.

⁸² *Ibid.*, September 7, 1923.

occurred.”⁸³ In 1924 Paris shifted his focus to the Cape Breton fight scene, where he was welcomed as “a good man and willing fighter.”⁸⁴ Paris was matched with Jack McKenna of North Sydney and, despite being soundly defeated, managed to last the duration. The *Glace Bay Gazette* praised him for his “cleverness at defensive boxing” and “game” showing, observing that McKenna hit Paris “often enough – and dead on too – to win ten fights.”⁸⁵ The fight fans of industrial Cape Breton wanted to see more of Gordon Paris and did when Paris agreed to another bout less than a week later. Paris dominated Jack Cameron of Aberdeen at Glace Bay through four rounds, leading Cameron to refuse to go on, claiming a foul on Paris’ part. According to the *Gazette*, however, Paris had been “the master of all situations” up to Cameron’s submission. The referee ignored Cameron’s claim of a foul and declared Gordon Paris the winner by technical knockout.⁸⁶

Why a referee in industrial Cape Breton was more likely to display a racially neutral officiating style than in some other places needs elaboration. By the 1920s, racial tensions continued to exist in industrial Cape Breton, but a degree of racial and ethnic proletariat solidarity was becoming more common in the coal fields.⁸⁷ The exploitation that the inhabitants of the colliery districts had succumbed to in the form of long hours, poor working conditions and inadequate wages, promoted class consciousness and reduced cultural prejudice in turn. To labour leaders like J.B. McLachlan, conquering the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, September 13, 1923.

⁸⁴ *Sydney Post*, April 7, 1924.

⁸⁵ *Glace Bay Gazette*, April 8, 1924.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, April 14, 1924.

⁸⁷ Frank, *Tradition and Culture*, 207.

“spectre of racial divisions” was an essential component of class solidarity.⁸⁸ For them, division along racial lines inevitably meant the fragmentation of the working class and weakened worker resistance to capitalist exploitation. When Gordon Paris stepped into the ring in Sydney in 1924, it may have been this class-based racial tolerance that allowed him compete against white pugilists and be judged by his skill and perseverance, rather than his “colour.”⁸⁹

Further proof of racial tolerance can be found in the *Sydney Post* during the 1924 Maritime Olympic trials when an outraged reader wrote the *Post* claiming that Reg Harper, a black boxer from Saint John, was robbed of a berth in the National Olympic trials due to his “black skin.”⁹⁰ The disgruntled fan believed Nixey Kennedy of Halifax was granted the decision because he was white and Harper was black, not because he had bested the Saint John boxer. This was quite likely the case given the fact that amateur boxing was still controlled by the white, middle class officials of the MPBAAU of C. Harper turned professional later in the decade. Although he occasionally appeared in ‘main events,’ including a match with Vic Langille of Westville at Springhill in 1928, he was mainly an undercard performer.⁹¹

The same individual that denounced Reg Harper’s absence from the national Olympic trials, also commented upon the treatment of black boxer Arthur McLaine of Whitney Pier in the same letter to the *Post*. Race, however, was not at the heart of this objection. The disgruntled sports fan simply claimed that McLaine was the superior

⁸⁸ David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1999), 146.

⁸⁹ Lennox has suggested that Roy Mitchell’s “colour” was a serious obstacle in the way of his success. Lennox, 40.

⁹⁰ *Sydney Post*, June 10, 1923.

⁹¹ Power Collection, c. February 27, 1928.

fighter and that as reigning Maritime amateur champion he should be sent to the national Olympic trials despite losing to George Wright of Westville in the Maritime trials.⁹² Shortly after the publication of this letter, many in industrial Cape Breton rallied around their amateur champion, not because he had been dealt a racial injustice, but because his skill warranted a berth in the national championships. Without the support of the Maritime Branch of the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, however, McLaine was faced with the burden of his personal travel expenses. Although this problem was overcome through local fund raising efforts, McLaine elected not to attend the finals in Toronto after receiving a letter from A.W. Covey, President of the MPBAAU of Canada, informing him that his attendance at the National trials would be an infringement of MPBAAU policy. Shortly thereafter McLaine turned professional.⁹³

William Daye of Halifax, known in fistic circles as 'Snowball' Barry, appeared on boxing cards in Halifax during the early 1920s at venues like the Mayflower Curling Rink and the Halifax Arena. He regularly faced several opponents including Young Ferguson and Young Ahern, both of Halifax.⁹⁴ Despite a number of victories, and his crowd pleasing style of boxing, 'Snowball' remained stuck on low paying undercards in Nova Scotia. During his days as a fighter Daye also worked as a seaman to make ends meet.⁹⁵

Os Miekle was a moderately successful black boxer in Nova Scotia during the 1930s. Although Miekle was an undercard performer, he was praised for his scientific approach to boxing. He started his career as an amateur, fighting on cards put together

⁹² *Halifax Chronicle*, June 6, 1924.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, June 18, 1924.

⁹⁴ For matches with Ahern see *Halifax Chronicle*, August 25, 1923; *Ibid.*, September 4, 1923; *Ibid.*, July 4, 1924. For matches with Ferguson see *Ibid.*, September 13, 1923; *Ibid.*, June 24, 1924

⁹⁵ Saunders, 67.

but the Halifax Fire Fighters Association. In 1931 he participated in the Maritime amateur boxing championships at the Wanderers Grounds in Halifax, losing a controversial match to Joey Burchell of Glace Bay. The bout was 'controversial' because Miekle was clearly fouled and injured, yet the referee ignored the infraction.⁹⁶ Miekle would turn pro shortly after the tournament, fighting regularly on undercards. According to Charles Saunders, Miekle became a trainer following his boxing career, tutoring young men in the 'sweet science' all over North America until his retirement in the 1970s.⁹⁷

.....

Thus far I have argued that boxers – whether amateur or professional, black or white - viewed pugilism as something more than a paycheck, betraying the romantic distortions of popular culture commonly disguised as 'historical' treatments. In doing so I have presented a generalized view of 'white' boxers, focusing on what these combatants had in common to provide a broad understanding of professional and amateur boxing in interwar Nova Scotia. The white 'race' itself, however, comprises a massive range of cultural experiences rooted in various ethnic identities. The function of this section of the thesis is to provide a more nuanced understanding of white boxers, by examining the experiences of white non-Anglo-Celtic ancestry, particularly the Italian and Danish boxers of the Cape Breton colliery districts.

⁹⁶ Power Collection, c. July 7, 1931.

⁹⁷ Saunders, 67.

In his study of baseball in the Cape Breton colliery districts D. James Myers states: that “through common language, culture, work conditions and backgrounds, the coal communities of Cape Breton were formed.”⁹⁸ Myers underestimates the cultural diversity of colliery life, however, assuming homogeneity in a region occupied by numerous ethnicities with little in “common” with the Scottish majority. As Benjamin Rader points out, “the need for immigrant groups to form separate ethnic communities depended on a host of variables, including their nationality, religious beliefs, language and status.”⁹⁹ This was very much the case in the interwar Cape Breton colliery districts, where the majority of the population was both Scottish and Catholic.¹⁰⁰ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Scottish dancing and music, as well as the Gaelic language, persisted throughout the colliery districts during the interwar period as part of a dominant, Scottish, proletariat culture. While other Anglo-Celtic groups like the Irish, Welsh and English were culturally similar to the Scottish majority, groups of Germans, Ukrainians, Belgians, Italians and other continental Europeans were isolated from the dominant Scottish culture by religious, linguistic and other cultural differences.¹⁰¹ In

⁹⁸ D. James Myers, *Hard Times – Hard Ball: The Cape Breton Colliery League, 1936-1939* (Saint Mary’s University, MA Thesis, 1997), 58. My rebuttal is rooted in the cultural theory of Raymond Williams. Williams argues: “I would say first that in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective.” Williams goes on to state: “No mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention.” Myers has failed to address the culture of the coal towns holistically, reducing the colliery districts to the dominant Scottish culture. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, 37-43.

⁹⁹ Benjamin Rader, “The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sport,” *American Quarterly* 29.4 (1977), 357.

¹⁰⁰ David Frank, *Tradition and Culture*, 204. See also Del Muise, “The Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900,” *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, ed. Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1980), 76-94.

¹⁰¹ Frank points out that in addition to Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English inhabitants, the colliery districts were home to groups of Belgians, Italians, Germans, Blacks and Ukrainians. Frank, *Tradition and Culture*, 205. Del Muise notes the existence of French, Indian, Greek, Dutch and Swiss inhabitants. Del Muise, “The

order to cope with their largely Scottish society, ethnic minorities tended to settle amongst their own, maintaining ethnic traditions in small communities.¹⁰² In the colliery districts continental Europeans received lower wages, undesirable jobs and verbal abuse, leading some ethnic groups, like the Italians, to participate in boxing and other tests of strength to demonstrate the equality they were denied as labourers.¹⁰³

The Italian population of Cape Breton Island produced two exceptionally talented boxers during the interwar period in Johnny and Louie Nemis of New Waterford. Johnny, the oldest of the 'fighting Nemises,' was born in Udine Province, Italy.¹⁰⁴ Johnny's parents, Giuseppe and Enrica Nemis, moved from Italy to Cape Breton's Caledonia colliery district in 1905, so Giuseppe could make a living in the mines. Louie was born there in 1907, and Dominic in 1908, before the family relocated to No. 14 yard, New Waterford.¹⁰⁵ Johnny began boxing in Whitney Pier at Joe Uvanni's boxing club. Whitney Pier was a portion of Sydney inhabited by various racial and ethnic groups including

Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900," 87. A.A. MacKenzie shows how the Irish in Cape Breton often took on the traditions of the Scottish Highlanders. See A.A. MacKenzie, *The Irish in Cape Breton* (Wreck Cove, Nova Scotia: Breton Books, 1999), 115.

¹⁰² These isolated communities were essential for the preservation of a particular culture. As MacKenzie points out, the Irish in Cape Breton did not settle in homogenous groups, which MacKenzie suggests led them to abandon Irish traditions in order to be accepted by their predominantly Scottish neighbours. See MacKenzie, *The Irish in Cape Breton*, 115.

¹⁰³ Max Weber refers to the process by which certain groups in society are denied the 'economic opportunities' of the dominant culture as 'closed social relationships.' According to Frank Parkin, "Weber suggests that virtually any group attribute – race, language, social origin, religion – may be seized upon provided it can be used for the monopolization of the specific, usually economic opportunities." See Frank Parkin, "Social Closure and Class Formation," *Classes, Power and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*, ed. Anthony Giddens and David Held (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982), 175. See also Max Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, Trans. H.P. Secher (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), 97-102.

¹⁰⁴ During this time period the Dominion Coal Company sent agents with interpreters to Italy to recruit employees. See Esperanza Maria Razzolini, *All Our Fathers: The North Italian Colony in Industrial Cape Breton* (Halifax: International Education Center/Saint Mary's University, 1983), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Joe Nemis, "A Split Decision: Italian Boxers of Cape Breton," *Italian Lives*, ed. Sam Migliore (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1999), 250.

Italians, Blacks, Hungarians and Poles, and was considered 'the other side of the track' by English speaking residents.¹⁰⁶ Within Whitney Pier was a neighbourhood known as 'Shackville,' 'Cokovia' and 'Cokeville;' the home of many immigrant bachelors and the most destitute portion of the city.¹⁰⁷ Uvanni's boxing gym, therefore, was ideally situated to draw from the poor sons of newly settled immigrants, and the struggling bachelors of 'Cokovia.'¹⁰⁸ Throughout his professional career, Johnny was a fan favourite in the coal town of Springhill where the "Little Italian" – as he was affectionately named by the *Springhill Record* – was praised for his ability to give the crowd their 'money's worth.' The *New Waterford Times* proudly claimed him as the town's hometown hero, claiming: "We make champions in New Waterford...New Waterford is the leader of the Maritimes in producing boxers of merit" and claimed that the town's boxers "use brains in their fisticuffs" more so than the boxers of rival towns.¹⁰⁹ As for Louie Nemis, he also received considerable accolades in Maine, where he was credited with reviving boxing in the 1930s.¹¹⁰ Younger brothers, Dominic, James and Joe were also formidable boxers, but in a family of eight, sacrifices had to be made.¹¹¹ Dominic Nemis, born in 1908, was the amateur light heavyweight champion of the Maritime Provinces. His brother James 'Cookie' Nemis also fought as an amateur. Both these men, however, headed to the

¹⁰⁶ Angela Giacomantonio, "Memories of Whitney Pier," *Italian Lives*, ed. Sam Migliore (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1999), 25.

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904," *Acadiensis* 24.2 (1995), 82. See also Ron Crawley, "Off to Sydney: Newfoundlanders Emigrate to Industrial Cape Breton, 1890-1914," *Acadiensis* 17. 2 (1988), 44.

¹⁰⁸ The tendency for immigrants to turn to boxing is noted in Sugden...This is also noted in a Jewish context by Allan Bodner, *When Boxing was a Jewish Sport* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997), 28.

¹⁰⁹ *New Waterford Times*, January 8, 1937.

¹¹⁰ Joe Nemis, 250.

¹¹¹ It is difficult to tell from the secondary sources whether or not these eight children included Rena Nemis, a daughter left in the care of her grandparents in Italy when Giuseppe and Enrica Nemis left Italy.

mines instead of the professional ring. 'Cookie' went into the mines at age fifteen to contribute to the family income.¹¹² The youngest of the five Nemis brothers was Joe who fought as an amateur and a professional before quitting the ring for the mines as well.

Feisty Italian boxer Nicholas Del Vecchio of Whitney Pier started boxing when his father Tony, a grocer, urged his son to stop fighting in the neighbourhood for free, and "box in the ring." In 1921 twelve year old Del Vecchio started boxing as an amateur, going undefeated in 28 bouts before turning professional at age fifteen. He won the Maritime bantamweight championship, before retiring from the ring, working at the Sydney steel plant and eventually moving to Ontario.

In Cape Breton, workers of Italian descent often experienced verbal abuse and workplace segregation, which was compounded by a persisting language barrier that prevented many from standing up for themselves on the job.¹¹³ Rather than reply in broken-English to insults and injustices, the Italian workers demonstrated their worth in contests involving tests of strength. Tug-o-wars, for example, were a popular way to demonstrate their "great strength and stamina" as a group. In Dominion a strictly Italian tug-o-war team was formed in 1938 that competed against the Caledonia miners, Glace Bay police officers and a fleet of Glace Bay sword fisherman. The Nemis brothers contributed to a similar sense of physical self worth for the Italians of Cape Breton. Johnny Nemis contributed to the embodiment of ethnic identity by training boxers throughout the 1930s and 40s. Johnny Nemis' contribution extended even beyond the

¹¹² James Nemis, "Worklife Sketches from James Nemis," *Italian Lives*, ed. Sam Migliore (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1999), 64.

¹¹³ John DeRoche, "In Others' Eyes: Pit Talk About Italians," *Italian Lives*, ed. Sam Migliore (Sydney, NS: University College of Cape Breton Press, 1999), 75.

Italian community. He took kids of various ethnic backgrounds who the local police thought were trouble makers and taught them discipline and work ethic through boxing. One such troubled youth, Gordie MacDougall, who had been brought to Johnny by the "cops," later stated that "Johnny Nemis changed my life."¹¹⁴

Danish brothers Billy and Carl Holm of New Waterford also impressed many in the Nova Scotian fight scene. Like Giuseppe Nemis, the Holms' father worked for the Dominion Coal Company. Billy 'the Battling Dane' Holm was a talented middleweight with an intense rivalry with Johnny Nemis and, like Nemis, was especially popular in Springhill, NS. After defeating Nemis for the 'middleweight title of the Maritime Provinces,' Billy Holm made Springhill his home by moving there from Cape Breton in 1930. The miners of Springhill were fiercely devoted to the 'Battling Dane.' When Holm fought Billy Sparks of Amherst, in Amherst, the Springhill miners flooded into town for the fight. When Sparks was announced as the winner all hell broke loose. Backers of Holm traded punches with supporters of Sparks in a brawl that spread out into the street. According to the *Halifax Herald*, fights occurred all over Church Street causing "many a sore head carried home as a memorial to the encounter."¹¹⁵ Billy's younger brother Carl followed in his footsteps, boxing for King's College, while at the same time serving the club as a trainer.

On the provincial level black boxers were clearly discriminated against, especially outside of industrial Cape Breton. Roy Mitchell left Nova Scotia in search of greener

¹¹⁴ Gordie MacDougall, "Gordie MacDougall, Boxer: My Life," Cape Breton Works, ed. Robert Caplan (Wreck Cove, NS: Breton Books, 1995), 238.

¹¹⁵ *Halifax Herald*, March 17, 1937.

pastures in America only to be dealt similar injustices in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Newspaper reports make it clear that Mitchell's white opponents were consistently received the benefit of the doubt when it came to infractions, while Mitchell was rigorously penalized both in Nova Scotia and America. As Charles Saunders has noted, boxers like William Daye and Os Mickle were unlikely to receive the 'breaks' necessary to develop into top contenders. They were kept on the undercards regardless of their wins. In the middle class controlled realm of amateur athletics black boxers received outrageous treatment. Fouls were called quickly on black boxers, while white boxers received leniency from referees. For Arthur McLaine, Reg Harper and Os Mickle, this discrimination contributed to their prompt abandonment of the amateur sport in favour of the professional version.

Although racial groups received fewer opportunities to succeed in boxing than ethnic fighters, the two groups shared a similar rationale for participation. In both cases, the pursuit of physical self worth emerged from a sense of inferiority in the workplace and society at large. Boxing provided a stage upon which men like Os Mickle and Johnny Nemis could perform their masculinity and demonstrate their equality, not just to the audience, but to the thousands of Nova Scotians that read newspapers across the province. For those rare talents that plied the northeastern borderlands, greater accolades and recognition were possible but not probable, as discriminatory officiating, and perhaps the allure of the 'fix,' spoiled opportunities for international stardom. Fame in the boxing game, in any case, was a temporary experience for racial and ethnic minorities. As we have seen with Sam Langford, talented black boxers were

commoditized, loved at the peak of their careers and marketability, but forgotten as they aged and lost their edge.



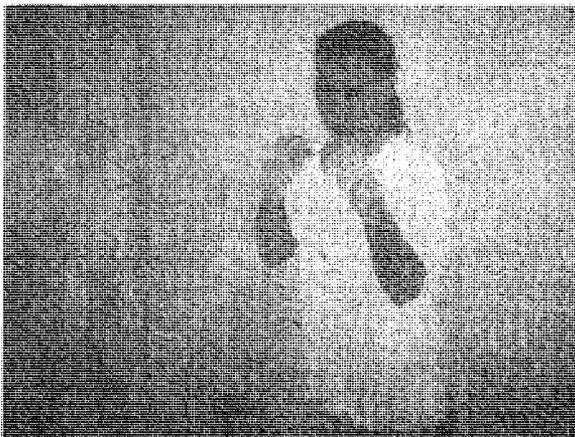
Kent Jones, "Chris Hayes," Canada Games Bronze Medalist 1999, Corner Brook and Bay of Islands Boxing Association, Corner Brook, Newfoundland, Canada. Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 40 inches.



Kent Jones, "Joey Smart," Twin Cities Boxing Club, Mount Pearl, Newfoundland, Canada. Color Drawing, 20 x 26 inches.



Kent Jones, "Samuel Harvey," Good Shepherd's Athletic Club, Akron, Ohio, U.S.A. Color Drawing, 20 x 26 inches.



Kent Jones, "Tamika Hill," Good Shepherd's Athletic Club, Akron, Ohio, U.S.A. Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 40 inches.

"Conclusion: Considering Boxing Holistically"

In the catalogue of his exhibition entitled *Boxing*, artist Kent Jones' states:

"Boxing's had its share of clowns and bad guys. Even some of the good guys have been

bad guys at times. However, I was never interested in this aspect of the sport.”¹ Instead, Jones’ art displays a world of boxing that is foreign to much of the public. Unlike the many films, novels and popular histories dedicated to pugilism, his work is not a dedication to the great champions, nor does it dwell upon the scandals associated with the sport. Instead, Jones presents his audience with a broad range of boxers – amateur and professional, male and female, white and black, veteran and newcomer – illustrating the diversity of boxing experiences. Jones’ broad portrayal of boxing achieves what I wished to accomplish from the outset – a holistic view of boxing, that encompasses a more complete range of experiences than usually presented to the public – a view of boxing as something more than *Abysmal Brutes* and ‘rags to riches’ heroes.

Professional boxing in Nova Scotia had little in common with the champions and the titillating scandals presented in publications like *Ring Magazine* and *The Police Gazette*. While Jack Dempsey and Tex Rickard became millionaires, squeezing every penny out of boxing enthusiasts, Nova Scotia was crawling with boxers with simpler, less extravagant motives. In Nova Scotia boxing was less about economic advancement, and more about displaying manhood by defeating opponents or gamely fighting on with the odds stacked against them. Once established as drawing professionals, many of Nova Scotia’s professionals plied the northeastern North American sporting region, fighting in New Brunswick, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York. Canada’s west was also a popular labour market for Nova Scotia’s boxers, as men like Maurice and

¹ I am indebted to Kent Jones for lending examples of his artwork to this project. Kent Jones, *Boxing: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*.

Roddie MacDonald followed traditional Nova Scotian patterns of seasonal employment, taking part in the harvest excursions in the fields of Alberta, or working in the mines of Drumheller, itself a hotbed of boxing activity. Canada's west, however, was far from the idealized, peaceful setting depicted by many authors. Like its American counterpart, western Canada had its share of debauchery and crime. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the shady world of western boxing, we see Nova Scotian boxers arrested, brutally assaulted outside the ring and – in the most extreme case – shot dead in the streets of Drumheller.

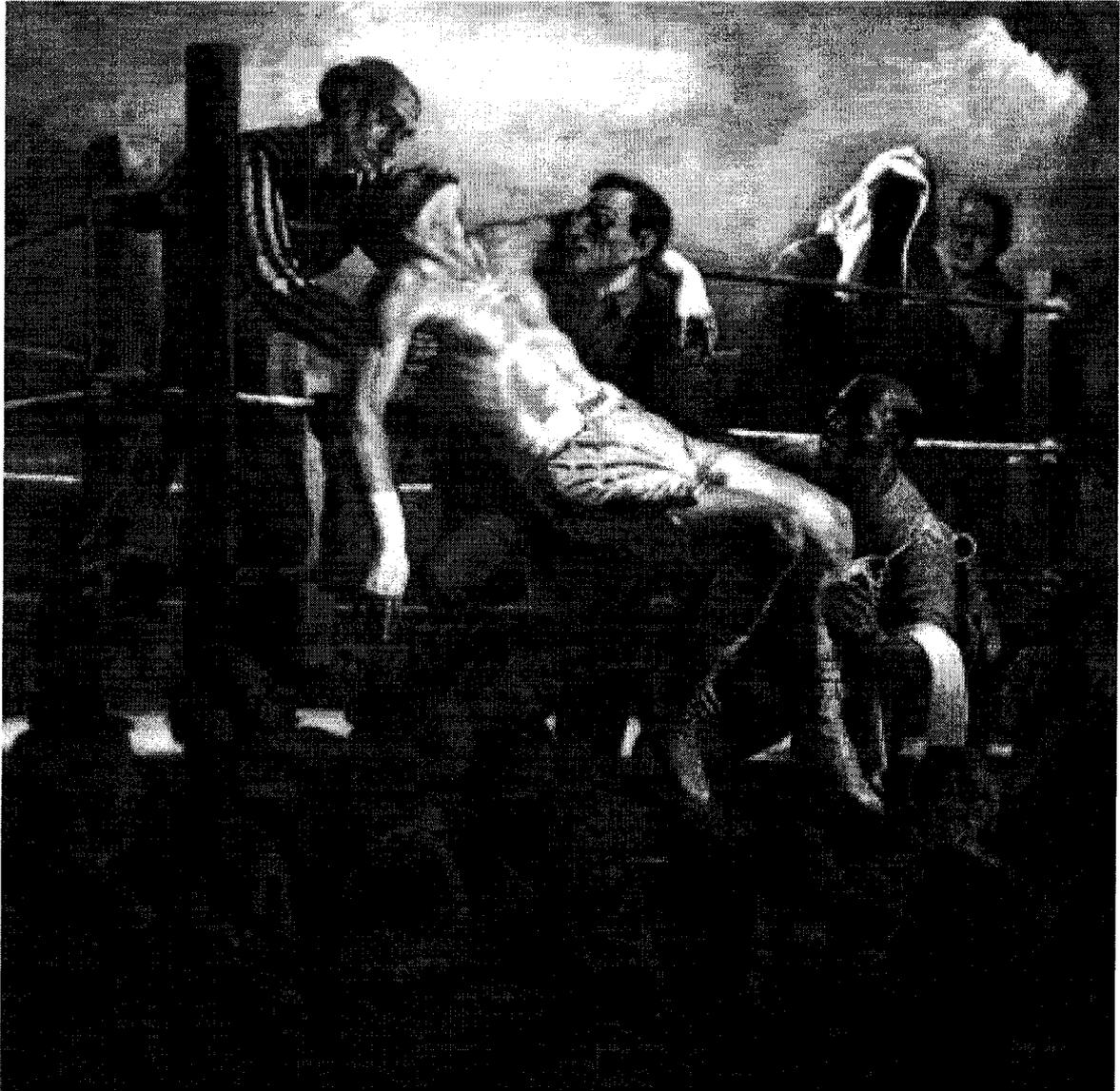
By focusing on champions and crooks many representations of boxing have also overlooked the single most essential part of the sport – the audience. In interwar Nova Scotia, boxing fans were a fussy lot. Boxing was more than just sport; it was a social gathering where men, and eventually women as well, could enjoy a night out amongst their peers. When a bout was scheduled for ten rounds, spectators wanted a hard fought decision, or a late knockout. Early knockouts meant considerably less action than was paid for, and often led to disgruntled cries of 'fixes' and 'mismatches.' The unsavoury side of boxing – especially fixes – has almost exclusively been dealt with as a symptom of 'big time' boxing, the influence of the mob and unscrupulous promoters like Don King. Even the corruption of the *Abysmal Brute* is tied to the career of an up and coming heavyweight, who eventually fights for the championship of the world. To find a broad statement about corruption in boxing, not only on the championship level, but throughout the sport as a whole, it is again helpful to turn to an artistic portrayal of the

sport. Joseph Sheppard's painting "Descent From the Ring," based on the "Descent from the Cross" motif, depicts a deceased fighter being lowered from the ring, in a smoked filled and jam-packed boxing venue, not unlike that displayed in George Bellows's now famous "Stag at Sharkey's."² By tailoring his painting from the "Descent from the Cross," Sheppard associates the boxer's death with the sins and corruption of the boxing world, just as Christians believe the death of Christ was for the sins of mankind.



Pieter Pauwel Rubens, 1616-17, Oil on canvas, 425 x 295 cm - Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France.

² Thank you to Joseph Sheppard for allowing me to use "Descent from the Ring" in this project.



Joseph Sheppard, *Descent From the Ring*, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

Like the scene portrayed by Sheppard, boxing in Interwar Nova Scotia was afflicted with corruption at all levels of competition. As we have seen, fight fans routinely sounded the alarm all over the province when they felt they had been denied their money's worth due to suspicious matches. In other instances, things turned ugly and violence erupted

throughout the audience. As such activities became more common, promoters attempted to gentrify Nova Scotia's fight scene, placing restrictions upon those who could attend matches.

By focusing on the 'champions of the world' much of the day by day history of boxing has fallen by the wayside; this is especially true of the amateur version of the sport. In interwar Nova Scotia amateur boxing was significant for several reasons. First of all, it provided a controlled environment for the continuation of boyhood 'fight culture.' Like adolescent fights in the yards and streets of Nova Scotia, amateur boxing was a means of settling scores, between friends, enemies and inter-town rivals. Secondly, it was the logical starting point for those emulating their heroes. Some young men emulated brothers, fathers and other family members, making boxing a sort of inheritance – a pugilistic genealogy. Others followed in the footsteps of the numerous boxing talents like Jack Munroe, Johnny Nemis, Johnny McIntyre or Roddie MacDonald, who emerged from the colliery districts.

Club-based amateurs were only part of a broader amateur boxing scene in interwar Nova Scotia. On the campuses of Saint Francis Xavier University, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia Technical College, King's College and, for a short time, Saint Mary's University, boxing teams were formed that competed in an annual Maritime intercollegiate championship. The rationale behind the boxing programs was significantly different from that of amateur club boxing. On the collegiate scene, boxing programs were founded to contribute to the 'healthy body, healthy mind' enterprise

associated with amateur athletics throughout North America. Although largely of middle class origin, the collegiate fighters likely competed for reasons similar to those of working-class club amateurs. Like their club-fighting counterparts, collegiate boxers fought to display their masculine prowess over other young men. Unlike the club scene, however, the manly displays of collegiate boxing part of a broader fascination with 'social presentation.' The foot work required of boxers led collegiate pugilists to be considered some of the best dancers on campus, while their well maintained bodies were admirable and aesthetically pleasing, considered beautiful vessels for their developing intellect.

The African-Nova Scotian boxing experience was considerably different, and worthy of analysis on its own terms. Like baseball and hockey, boxing contributed to community pride and a measure of racial integration, in a society characterized by white hegemonic dominance. The existing historiography involving African-Nova Scotian boxers generally focuses on Sam Langford, Roy Mitchell, and Terrence Warrington; three of the most successful boxers in Nova Scotia's history. With Mitchell, the first world-class African-Nova Scotian boxer to actually fight within the province, came reports of significant numbers of female spectators, serving to moderate crowd behaviours or as passive voyeurs or, perhaps, both. But, as we have seen, it is dangerous to conclude that women were always passive. As Guttman has argued, women were quite capable of starting or contributing to rowdiness at sporting events, being carried away by the

intensity of a fight like some of their male counterparts.³ Besides Mitchell, other black Nova Scotian pugilists received less attention. This was due more to discrimination than lack of talent. For a black boxer to get the opportunities to fight top opponents he had to first prove that he was exceptionally skilled. This was the case with Mitchell and Warrington, both of whom had stellar careers in Nova Scotia before boxing in the northeastern United States against top North American boxers. Boxers like Arthur McLaine, Reg Harper and Os Miekle, however, faced discriminatory refereeing, and were kept on the undercards of Nova Scotia despite their considerable talent as boxers.

In the Italian communities of Cape Breton Island we have seen how employers and co-workers could rob Italian miners of their masculinity in the workplace through lower pay rates, less desirable jobs and verbal abuse. As the Anglo-Celtic majority relegated them to second class citizenry, the Italians of the colliery districts pushed back, engaging in leisure activities that demonstrated their physical and masculine prowess. Boxing became a way of dispelling notions of inferiority stemming from discrimination, and several notable Italians stepped through the ropes and traded punches with talented boxers from the Maritime Provinces and the northeastern United States. Johnny and Louie Nemis, for example, both proved their talent in the Nova Scotia boxing scene, before turning to the United States for further fistic opportunities. Unlike black boxers, who developed a significant following only if they were of world-class calibre,

³ Guttman, *Women's Sports*, 100.

Johnny and Louie were embraced by Nova Scotians as examples of smart, scientific pugilists, who could be expected to win, but who were always 'game' in defeat.

In the course of examining the role of boxing in interwar Nova Scotian society, it became clear that the portrayal of boxing in Hollywood films, in novels and popular histories was only a snippet of a much larger story. If boxing was merely a road to economic advancement, why did so many Nova Scotians, whether amateurs or professionals, white or black, Italian, Danish or Scottish, compete as boxers for little, or no, financial remuneration? It is important to recognize that boxing was more than just a pastime for "men with no alternative life choices."⁴ It was a means of developing one's body, displaying physical prowess and competing for enjoyment. It nourished racial hope, pride and was part of a broader movement towards racial integration. For those discriminated against as a result of their race or ethnicity, boxing allowed for the demonstration of equality through fistic superiority. It is my hope that the findings presented in this thesis will provoke deeper consideration of boxing, for its social significance rather than for its scandals and stars.

⁴ Stephen Reiss generalizes professional, arguing that: "Only men with no alternative life choices would embark on such violent and brutal occupation. Stephen Reiss, "Sport and the American Dream," *Journal of Social History* 14.2 (1980), 297.

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