

THE MANLY ART: BARE-KNUCKLE
PRIZE FIGHTING IN AMERICA
Elliott J. Gorn/Cornell University Press/\$24.95

Diana Schaub

With what appears to be academic pugnacity, Elliott J. Gorn asserts in the preface to *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* that "This is 'men's history.'" Gorn, however, is not taking a swipe at the practitioners of "women's history" or, in feminist jargon, "herstory." In fact, he regards the women's studies movement as in his corner, so to speak, for it is the movement's insights into gender consciousness and the malleability of gender roles that inform his understanding of "the manly art." When a book about boxing, especially one that seeks to "interpret" the ring, acknowledges such ideological training, there is cause for concern. Gorn states that "the same biases that rendered women voiceless in the writing of history simultaneously excluded the majority of men, in particular workers, ethnic minorities, and the poor." Thus, he too has a history of oppression to relate: the history of the outlawed pastime of the urban proletariat.

But Gorn has a degree of sympathy with pugilism's opponents—progressives of all types, from the respectable bourgeois who thought boxing kept the lower orders from work and self-improvement to the labor radical who thought it kept the dispossessed from protest and social reform. Although he says he tends "to take the part of the lions over the Christians," he remains ambivalent about prize fighting and the particular male ethos underlying it. He believes that the "Sweet Science of Bruising" (Pierce Egan's fond epithet) is both noble and barbarous, the one quality inextricable from the other. Perhaps surprisingly, this ambivalence improves, maybe even redeems, the work for it enables Gorn to reconstruct, colorfully and faithfully, both the culture of the ring and the culture of its critics. His "simultaneous attraction and repulsion" serves in lieu of true scholarly disinterestedness, and may be what raises Gorn's "men's history" above most "women's history."

Once safely past the preface (wherein authors so frequently simplify

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the critic's task by making overly revealing confessions about their biases, their method, and their intellectual and moral debts), this book becomes an intelligent contribution to boxiana. Since fisticuffs were an English import, Gorn first takes the reader to the London prize ring (September 28, 1811 for the second Crib-Molineaux fight), there to meet the "fancy," the whole sporting fraternity which drew its members from the highest and the lowest ranks of English society. Although illegal since 1750, boxing flourished in England from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries because of aristocratic and even royal patronage. Gentleman and player, Corinthian and commoner alike subscribed to what Gorn calls "a male aesthetic." "Bloodletting artfully performed, violence within explicit rules, brutality committed with style—the ring articulated an ideal of manhood that bound displays of sanguine passions within an aesthetic of restraint and decorum." While decorum may have prevailed within the ropes, outside the "magic circle" license was the rule. Pickpockets, professional gamblers, and prostitutes were sure to be part of any boxing crowd, and as "the English claret" streamed and spouted from the fighters, the "blue ruin" (gin) flowed liberally into the spectators.

Among the burgeoning middle class, all leisure activities were suspect; such gladiatorial events as boxing, bear-baiting, cockfighting, and cudgel-play were especially condemned as atavistic and degrading. Dedication to property and family (the bourgeois shibboleths) meant steady habits: caution, calculation, productivity, sobriety, fidelity, and moral earnestness. In sum, the old sports and leisure traditions produced men who were at once too high-hearted and too self-indulgent. The new liberal order required men to be less courageous and more moderate. The Victorian reformers, a coalition of capitalists and evangelicals, were largely successful in their domestication of manliness. From the late 1820s on, bare-knuckle boxing gradually lost its upper-class supporters; it survived, but only furtively, among working men.

During the era of its ascendancy in England, boxing barely existed in America. Republican sentiment was firmly against it, seeing it as a symbol of Old World corruption. Nonetheless, there were occasional bouts here, which increased in frequency as Irish and English immigrants arrived; among them, especially after the suppression of the English prize ring, were many "milling coves" seeking, one might say, freedom of combat. These early matches, less structured than their mother-country antecedents, often dissolved into ethnic brawls. Such incidents of disorder and riot contributed to fears of boxing's socially disruptive influence. As a sign both of boxing's spread and of its failure to gain respectability, newspapers made it a practice to publish an editorial disclaimer condemning prize fighting in conjunction with a round-by-round account of the latest set-to.

The appearance of sparring masters, billing themselves as "professors of

pugilism," did much to make boxing acceptable in fashionable circles. The professors offered "scientific" instruction in the art of self-defense to gentlemen interested in a humane and honorable alternative to duelling. They also gave exhibitions of their science—exhibitions that bore deliberately little resemblance to prize fights. The combatants donned gloves and demonstrated their skills for a mere three rounds with no purse at stake (by contrast, bare-knuckle contests sometimes lasted upwards of 100 rounds). So despite opposition, by the 1850s, boxing in both its plebeian and refined varieties seemed firmly established in America.

Gorn is a fine storyteller. His sketches of the antebellum champions—James "Yankee" Sullivan, Tom "the Chief" Hyer, John "Old Smoke" Morrissey, and John C. "the Benicia Boy" Heenan—capture not just their

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individual personalities, entertaining though these are, but the entire street and saloon subculture in which they moved, and which overlapped in predictable, and not so predictable, ways with the world of big city politics. He mixes in a fair bit of fight footage, clipped from the penny dailies, the sporting magazines, and *American Fisticiana*. It is gorier stuff than nowadays:

Round 70th.—McCoy was now indeed a most unseemly object: both eyes were black—the left one nearly closed, and indeed that whole cheek presented a shocking appearance. His very forehead was black and blue; his lips were swollen to an incredible size, and the blood streamed profusely down his chest. My heart sickened at the sorry sight. When he came up he appeared very weak, and almost gasping for breath, and endeavored, while squaring away, to eject the clotting fluid from his throat.

Unbelievably, this fight would last thirty-nine more rounds before McCoy finally collapsed and died, drowned in his own blood.

This first fatality—so clearly avoidable had the referee, the seconds, the other fighter, or even the crowd behaved responsibly—invigorated the anti-prize fight crusade. Nonetheless, the ritualized violence of the ring continued, albeit with greater circumspection. Meanwhile, the nation moved inexorably toward its own paroxysm of

violence. The Civil War, whatever its meaning for the country, Gorn shows to have been a great boon to boxing, nationalizing its appeal. Boxers-turned-soldiers introduced their fellows to the sport and many officers encouraged it as a suitably martial camp recreation. But soon after the war, the rottenness of the Gilded Age infected boxing. Because it was never legal, and hence had no regulatory body to standardize and enforce rules, prize fighting was more susceptible to underworld infiltration than other sports. Fixed matches, toughs who guaranteed their man's victory with a pistol to the referee's head if necessary, and renewed police interference discredited the ring once again.

Perhaps the most fascinating chapters are those that trace prize fighting's final redemption—a redemption made possible in part by the Marquis of Queensberry Rules (providing a ceremonious end to the bare-knuckle era) and in part by the craze for "the strenuous life" that dominated the century's concluding decades. Through the movement known as "Muscular Christianity," evangelical piety reached a compromise with the sporting world. By means of institutions like the YMCA, athletics, including amateur sparring, was enlisted in the service of a new understanding of religious mission. Similarly, the well-to-do developed a new sympathy for vigorous

exercise, in response to widespread fear of the effeminizing effect of modern life. Rough sports, particularly boxing with its uniquely elemental quality, were the natural antidote to the threat of "neurasthenia" (the loss of vital "nerve force"). So thought Teddy Roosevelt and many with him.

With the way thus prepared for the ring's rejuvenation, all it took was a sanitizing rule change (disallowing wrestling holds and throws, requiring gloves, establishing the three-minute round, one minute rest, and ten-second count, and permitting the ring to be pitched indoors) to transform boxing into first-rate commercial entertainment. Gorn gives an insightful analysis of the effect of the new rules: As befits such a kinetic age, they quickened the tempo (in the process, depriving fighters of control over the pace of the action), put a premium on clean, dramatic blows and knockouts (decreasing the importance of "bottom" or endurance), made boxing look less rough and tumble but in no sense made it less dangerous, and perhaps most significantly, by moving boxing indoors, made effective crowd control possible. As a result, boxing became safe for the spectators and lucrative for the promoters. Moreover, in the garish and grand John L. Sullivan, the rehabilitated prize ring found its first

celebrity. Although he is now venerated as the last of the great bare-knucklers, "the Boston Strong Boy" or simply "the Boy" was in fact responsible for popularizing the Queensberry rules (according to Gorn, he fought only two true bare-knuckle matches, one to gain the title and one to defend it).

In the epilogue, Gorn shows himself plainly saddened and discomfited by the absorption of boxing into the mainstream. Whereas in the preface he had voiced certain classically "liberal" reservations about the morality of the ring, his reflections on the end of the bare-knuckle era express an entirely different sort of reservation, one that seems profoundly conservative, not to say reactionary. He laments the marketing of "the male aesthetic," and the accompanying transformation of "the fancy" into fans. What pretended to be the re-masculinization of America turned out to be a new dispensation in which Americans became consumers of an image of manliness. While he does not state it so boldly, the conclusion is there to be drawn: The nineteenth century offered competing, and perhaps equally choice-worthy, understandings of "manliness" (self-reliance and self-control versus honor and valor); in the twentieth century, both understandings have been undermined. "The manly art" may still be with us, but manliness seems to have disappeared. □



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THE CATHOLIC CLASSICS
Dinesh D'Souza/Our Sunday Visitor/\$6.95 paper

Michael A. Scully

In his book *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953), R. W. Southern quotes the account of an eleventh-century French abbot concerning Scots come to France to assemble for the first Crusade. Not only had the French never seen such men (it is thought that this is the earliest description of Scottish dress), the Scots and their more refined allies spoke not a word of each other's tongues. The abbot described the strangers:

Drawn from their native swamps, with their bare legs, rough cloaks, purses hanging from their shoulders, hung about in arms, ridiculous enough in our eyes but offering the aid of their faith and devotion to our cause.

This is, I think, one of history's moving scenes: the rough Scots, in their primitive dress, marching up some French hillside to a monastery, unable to communicate with their hosts, except to announce their intention by crossing their fingers to make the sign of the cross.

I do not know whether Evelyn Waugh was familiar with this incident, but when I reread Southern's description recently, I could not help thinking of the closing passages of *Brideshead Revisited*. At the end of the last chapter, Waugh describes Lord Marchmain's deathbed repentance, which Charles Ryder narrated this way:

I suddenly felt the longing for a sign, if only for courtesy, if only for the sake of the woman I loved, who knelt in front of me, praying, I knew, for a sign. It seemed so small a thing that was asked, the bare acknowledgment of a present, a nod in the crowd. . . .

Then, as Ryder describes, the priest anointed the head of the dying Lord Marchmain, whose hand began to move, perhaps, Ryder feared, to wipe away the oil.

"O God," I prayed, "don't let him do that." But there was no need for fear; the hand

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moved slowly down his breast, then to his shoulder, and Lord Marchmain made the sign of the cross. Then I knew that the sign I had asked for was not a little thing, not a passing nod of recognition, and a phrase came back to me from my childhood of the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom.

The reader of such magnificent passages will be hard pressed to remember that there are more illiterates in heaven than literates—even proportionately more. We know this because, among other things, the tradition tells us as much. (The Word that was in the Beginning was willed, not written, and certainly not read.) Yet because we humans are as we are, most of us seek not only to believe, but also to understand. In this endeavor books, though not absolutely necessary, are of immense value. Thus it follows that one mark of a robust religious tradition is that it produces writings that inspire and explain, and preferably both.

It comes as no surprise, for example, that the dynamism of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism in our day should exhibit itself in book writing and publishing, as in so many other ways. (There are over 7,000 evangelical bookstores in the United States.) Of course, at great expense of money and effort, evangelical preachers offer scores of hours of weekly nationwide television programming, which in some cases includes telephone "hotlines" for counseling (anti-suicide, pregnancy, family disputes, and the like) and some remedial social services. Typical of its current doldrums, America's Roman Catholic Church not only seems to be having a hard time offering more than a few weekly syndicated hours of anemic programming, but the one person, a spunky Alabama nun, who has successfully entered the field of religious broadcasting had to overcome considerable resistance from members of the hierarchy. As it is with television evangelism (a field pioneered, let it be remembered, by Catholic clerics such as Bishop Fulton Sheen), so has Catholic publishing declined relative to its own past and the publishing efforts of other religious groups.

No one walking into a Catholic bookstore today, not to mention the typical commercial bookstore, would think that within living memory there existed a notable Catholic literary tradition. I have before me a reprint of a 1935 book, by a Jesuit priest, called *The Catholic Literary Revival* (Calvert Alexander, S. J., Kennikat Press, 1968). The book is a survey of the most prominent writers on Catholic subjects from 1845 to 1935, and its acknowledgments require over a page of tiny print to thank 16 publishers of 37 books by 22 authors for permission to quote copyrighted material. A half century later, hardly any books, even by the most prominent authors, are in print in popularly priced editions: a few of Chesterton's, besides his Father Brown stories, and somewhat over a dozen among all the works of Cardinal Newman, Hilaire Belloc, Christopher Dawson, Ronald Knox, and Jacques Maritain.

In his preface to Dinesh D'Souza's new book, *The Catholic Classics*, New York's Cardinal John J. O'Connor recalls wistfully the high point of Catholic publishing, the 1930s and 1940s, its vibrancy, and the hopes for a spiritual renaissance it inspired:

New editions of G. K. Chesterton began to proliferate at the time, side by side with portable Cardinal Newman. Publishers Frank and Maisie Ward were becoming household names. Hilaire Belloc, Paul Claudel, Francois Mauriac, Leon Bloy, Georges Bernanos, Evelyn Waugh, Eric Gill and even, for the more mystically oriented, Gerard Manley Hopkins—all became known, all evoked to a greater or lesser degree some sense of what Frank O'Malley called "the integrating power of a real faith and truth."

Both a knowledge of what has been, and thus might be again, and an awareness of the current condition of American Roman Catholicism make D'Souza's book very welcome indeed. Here is an echo from that vibrant earlier time: a writer of impressive gifts, illuminating ten great books of Christianity, so that we might understand and appreciate the books and their authors' quests for faith or sanctity. One mark of D'Souza's success is that *The Catholic Classics* can be read with profit by precocious high school sophomores and adult readers alike. Most surveys lose one or the other audience through pedantry on the one hand, or oversimplification on the other. D'Souza avoids both failings with a performance intelligently planned and executed virtually without flaw.

The Catholic Classics comprises ten essays, each concerned with a great writer and his most famous work. From Augustine's *Confessions* to Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Moun-*

tain, each of D'Souza's studies attends as much to the writer and his search for faith, or the sufferings demanded of him because of his faith, as to the particular work discussed. For example, D'Souza begins his chapter on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* with a brief discussion of its interest as a book of philosophy, but shortly begins to tell us about Boethius himself, his birth to a prominent Roman

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